

INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

Journal of Interreligious Studies

Issue 46 | July 2025



AN OPEN-ACCESS, PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATION OF HEBREW COLLEGE,
HARTFORD INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION AND PEACE,
BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, AND INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES MEDIA

THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

AN OPEN-ACCESS, PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATION OF HEBREW COLLEGE,
HARTFORD INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION AND PEACE,
BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, AND INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES MEDIA

Editor-in-Chief

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.

Senior Editor

Lucinda Mosher, Th.D.

Design and Production Editor

Sze-Long A. Wong

Publishers Emeriti

Mary Elizabeth Moore

Or N. Rose

Board of Advisors

Russ Arnold

Whitney Bauman

John Camardella

Thomas Cattoi

Andrew Davis

Adam Dyer

Lailatul Fitriyah

Alon Goshen-Gottstein

Adam Gregerman

Rachel Heath

Soren Hessler

Won-Jae Hur

Celene Ibrahim

Khyati Y. Joshi

Joel Kaminsky

Jeffery Long

Kristin Johnston Largen

Venu Mehta

Heather Miller Rubens

Rachel Mikva

Mary Elizabeth Moore

Martin T. Nguyen

Jennifer Peace

Hussein Rashid

Monica Sanford

Brahmachari Sharan

Sarah Snyder

Bin Song

Varun Soni

Jerusha Tanner Rhodes

Javier Viera

Funlayo E. Wood

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.

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM). The JIRS, JIRS publishing partners, and ISM disclaim any responsibility or liability for the accuracy, completeness, or validity of the content published herein. The publication of any article or contribution does not constitute an endorsement by JIRS or ISM of the expressed views, opinions, or positions.

Author and submission guidelines can be found on our website at irstudies.org.

RIA

Publishing Partners



Interreligious Studies Media

Our Mission

Interreligious Studies Media provides spaces for the distribution of critical, constructive, and cutting-edge scholarship and pedagogies related to the field of interreligious/interfaith studies and its adjacent disciplines. These spaces include the Journal of Interreligious Studies, Interreligious Studies Press, webinars, and other digital and print learning materials.

Support for Interreligious Studies Media (ISM) is made possible by the following:

Founding Partner



Full Partners



Members of the ISM Board of Directors

Or Rose, Hebrew College | President
Heather Miller Rubens, Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies | Vice President
Soren Hessler, Emory University Candler School of Theology | Treasurer
Lucinda Mosher, Hartford International University for Religion and Peace | Secretary
Peng Yin, Boston University School of Theology

Editor-at-Large

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University

THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

ISSUE 46 | JULY 2025

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

From the Editor-in-Chief

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

1

ARTICLES

A Paradigm of Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Spiritual but not Religious

Joseph Kelley

4

Identity Transcendence as a Response to Religious Conflict: Understanding Effective Student Engagement with Israel and Palestine

Cameron Howes and James Walters

30

Resisting Oppression Creatively: Counter-stories as Expressions of Resistance among Religious Minorities in Finnish schools

Milena Parland and Nora Repo-Saeed

52

The (Im)Possibility of Measuring Interfaith Learning Outcomes

Hannah J. Visser, Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost, Marianne Moyaert, and Anke I. Liefbroer

88

Constructive Problematizing Dialogue: A New Model for Abrahamic Exchange

Aaron R. Dunn

110

BOOK REVIEWS

Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story. By Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

Reviewed by Katie Mahowski Mylroie

148

A Companion to Comparative Theology. Edited by Pim Valkenberg et al.

Reviewed by Reid Locklin and Stephanie M. Wong

151

Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Theory and Practice. By M. Ben Mollov

Reviewed by Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish

156

Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions. By David Thang Moe

Reviewed by Yex Nang Shwe Rong

161

The Global Mystical Tradition. By Bruce Stephen Naschak

Reviewed by Preeta M. Banerjee

165

Grounding God: Religious Responses to the Anthropocene. By Arianne Conty

Reviewed by Jerome Bump

168



FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

The editorial team, publishers, and sponsorship partners of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* are amid exciting changes. Longtime advocates of the journal have established Interreligious Studies Media (ISM), a Delaware charitable corporation, to support the JIRS's operations and broaden public and scholarly engagement with the journal. Issue 46, a collection of rolling submissions articles and book reviews, represents a transitional issue. As you'll note in the masthead and partner page, ISM joins Hebrew College, Boston University School of Theology, and Hartford International University for Religion and Peace as a publisher of JIRS. The Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies joins JIRS's current institutional publishers as a founding partner of ISM. In addition, ISM is actively establishing new institutional partnerships to steward the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* and its sibling media: Interreligious Studies Press, Inter/Sections podcast, State of Formation blog, and more.

We will have more to share in the coming months. However, for now, let me introduce this current issue, which features five articles.

In "A Paradigm of Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Spiritual but not Religious," Joseph Kelley explores a framework for interfaith dialogue with those who identify as spiritual but not religious. Drawing on social science, Christian theology (notably, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner), and Sandra Schneiders' hermeneutical approach, Kelley proposes four sensibilities to foster hospitable engagement across religious, nonreligious, and spiritual differences.

Cameron Howes and James Walters, in "Identity Transcendence as a Response to Religious Conflict: Understanding Effective Student Engagement with Israel and Palestine," evaluate the London School of Economics Faith Centre's Interfaith Encounter Israel and Palestine program (2014–2019), which brought over 100 students to the region to explore the

conflict's religious dimensions. Through participant surveys and interviews, the authors identify "identity transcendence"—a capacity to empathize with opposing views while retaining one's convictions—as a key outcome, offering lessons for interfaith engagement in polarized contexts.

In "Resisting Oppression Creatively: Counter-stories as Expressions of Resistance among Religious Minorities in Finnish schools," authors Milena Parland and Nora Repo-Saeed explore how teachers from religious minorities in Finland employ creative and artistic methods to challenge marginalization in educational settings. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the article highlights counter-narratives that foster resilience, visibility, and inclusion for minority students, offering insights into the transformative potential of art and storytelling in multicultural education.

In "The (Im)Possibility of Measuring Interfaith Learning Outcomes," authors Hannah J. Visser, Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost, Marianne Moyaert, and Anke I. Liefbroer critically examine the challenges and implications of quantifying interfaith learning. Drawing on interdisciplinary debates, they argue for a balanced approach that integrates stakeholder involvement, contextual sensitivity, and mixed methods to capture the nuanced, often intangible outcomes of interfaith initiatives, while cautioning against overreliance on metrics that may distort their complexity.

Finally, "Constructive Problematizing Dialogue: A New Model for Abrahamic Exchange" by Aaron R. Dunn explores the pitfalls of interreligious dialogue—harmonization, doctrinal avoidance, and slow relationship-building—and proposes a character-based Scriptural Reasoning method to center religious differences constructively. Dunn introduces a typology of shared scriptural figures, such as Jesus and Ishmael, to foster deeper engagement and theological honesty among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The article argues that embracing conflict as a skill can transform interreligious encounters into opportunities for cooperation and mutual appreciation.

The issue closes with six book reviews:

- *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story*, by Francis X. Clooney, S.J., is reviewed by Katie Mahowski Mylroie.
- *A Companion to Comparative Theology*, by Pim Valkenberg et alia, is reviewed by Stephanie M. Wong and Reid Locklin.

- *Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Theory and Practice*, by M. Ben Mollov, is reviewed by Ron Kronish.
- *Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions*, by David Thang Moe, is reviewed by Yex Nang Shwe Rong.
- *The Global Mystical Tradition*, by Bruce Stephen Naschak, is reviewed by Preeta M. Banerjee.
- *Grounding God: Religious Responses to the Anthropocene*, by Arianne Conty, is reviewed by Jerome Bump.

I remain forever grateful to our Senior Editor, Lucinda Mosher, for her copyediting work. In addition, we are pleased to welcome S. Aaron Wong as our Design and Production Editor.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Interreligious Studies

ARTICLE

A Paradigm of Hospitality: Theological Reflections on Spiritual but not Religious

Joseph T. Kelley

Abstract

This article constructs a paradigm for religious leaders, teachers, or members for dialogue with people for whom traditional or institutional religious doctrine, moral teaching, or worship have little or no efficacy. The paradigm consists of four sensibilities. The first is the value of social science analyses of the tectonic shifts affecting religion and spirituality today. William James offers an early 20th-century example of the social science approach. The second is consideration of theological resources from the Christian tradition that may enrich such dialogue. So called “universal spiritualities” are identified in the Christian anthropologies of two Christian theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner. These are explored for their appeal beyond an explicitly Christian context. Sensibility to the complexity of religion is a third consideration, with emphasis on its constitutive elements of creed, moral code, and liturgical cult. Finally, Sandra Schneiders’ hermeneutical approach to the study of spirituality and religion is recommended as an essential sensibility for hospitable dialogue across difference.

Keywords

spirituality, religion, theology, methodology, hermeneutics, Christian anthropology, William James, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Sandra Schneiders, SBNR

In recent decades, most religious leaders, teachers, and members have encountered individuals or groups that identify as spiritual but not religious. That designation can mean many different things, even among those who claim it as their own.¹ However interpreted, this identity and the growing demographic associated with it present pressing questions.²

While this phenomenon impinges on many religions, this article proposes a paradigm for hospitable dialogue across difference from a Christian perspective. How should one respond to people of good will who lay claim to a spiritual life but find Christian creed, cult, or moral code to be irrelevant, unhelpful, or even antagonistic? Does the separation between spirituality and religion inevitably lead to divorce between the two?³ Will dismissal of doctrine, disregard of moral teaching, and disaffection from regular forms of worship continue to spread, especially among younger generations? Do all those who use the acronym SBNR necessarily subscribe to a totally secular worldview that no longer sees human purpose or fullness in a transcendent reality, but only in a closed or immanent frame?⁴ Or, rather, have they simply lost faith in traditional religions as trustworthy paths toward the transcendent?

The social sciences have shed light on many aspects of the spiritual but not religious phenomenon.⁵ Theology is another resource for enriching

-
- 1 In their 2023 survey, the Pew Research Center found that 22% of Americans identify as SBNR, 21% as neither spiritual nor religious; 58% identify with an organized religion. <https://www.pewresearch.org>.
 - 2 For a thorough study, see Linda Mercandante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Mercandante's research reveals generational differences across the SBNR demographic regarding their engagement with doctrine, morality, worship and other religious categories. Also, Mercandante, "Do the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR) Want a Theology Without Walls?," in *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (January 2022), 77–82. See also Michael Horton, *Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual but Not Religious" in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024).
 - 3 Kwok Piu-Lan uses the terms "post-Christians" and "latent Christians" in "Interfaith Encounter," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 538.
 - 4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Taylor analyzes post-Enlightenment, Western culture as presenting a stark choice between increasingly discredited belief in a transcendent reality and a secular humanism that seeks human fulfillment in immanent experience. See also his recently published *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2024).
 - 5 For a study of the complex relationship between spirituality and religion that draws from the social sciences, see Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual*

contemporary conversations about spirituality and its relationship with religion. To that end, this paper is an exercise in practical theology insofar as it focuses on the interplay between theory and practice.⁶ It explores the usefulness of theology for dialogue among those who approach spirituality from different points of view and conviction. Often, it is assumed that theology's only purpose in these conversations is apologetic, defensive, and/or ultimately dismissive of the "but not religious" position. That assumption can foreclose dialogue across difference. The aim of the theological reflections proposed in this article is to foster a hospitable environment for communication and mutual understanding about the relationship between spirituality and religion.

Part One emphasizes awareness of methodology in the study of spirituality. It provides an overview of the methodologies of social science studies of spirituality, highlighting the American psychologist and philosopher of pragmatism William James as a prototype of non-theological interest in spiritual experience.

Part Two reviews the nature of theological methodology and its embrace of faith as a part of method. It examines the theological anthropologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner and suggests that there are nascent universal spiritualities nestled in their understandings of what it means to be human. Their theologies of spirituality are proposed as possible points of convergence or shared horizons in conversations with spiritual but not religious persons.

Part Three offers a brief theological perspective on religion. Noting that neither spirituality nor religion is a univocal concept, it discerns three basic elements of institutional religion: creed, cult, and moral code. It takes note of how spiritual but not religious persons may accept, reject, or negotiate among these three elements. Finally, Part Four presents theologian Sandra Schneiders's hermeneutical approach to the study of spirituality, with her emphasis on the importance of listening over theory to make room for manifold methods and perspectives.

Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

- 6 Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). Osmer's work is among the most compelling presentations of the methodology of practical theology, emphasizing the reflective interplay between doctrine, theology and lived experience. The four methodological tasks he identifies are the descriptive-empirical, the interpretive, the normative, and the pragmatic. While not traced explicitly in this article, they inform its approach.

Part One: Methodology in the Study of Spirituality

Scholar of Christian mysticism Bernard McGinn once quipped that a quick and cursory search of the term *spirituality* provided him in short order with 35 different definitions.⁷ The very number of definitions is evidence of the growing interest in spirituality in recent decades. McGinn suggests that to understand the nature and extent of this interest, and to bring some order and direction to the study of spirituality, it is important to identify different methodological approaches in the field, which produce different understandings of the term.⁸ This article focuses on theological understandings of spirituality in order to explore its relationship with religion. However, given that today's interest in spirituality extends beyond the bailiwick of theologians, we begin by taking a brief look at social science approaches.

The social sciences use a variety of methodologies and assumptions in the study of spirituality. Disciplines such as the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion, the anthropology of religion and other social sciences bring their own distinctive methods, sets of assumptions, and bodies of literature to examine the topic. Likewise, the philosophy of religion exercises its own rational approach to understanding spirituality as a dimension of human experience. In recent decades, neuroscience has also shown interest in spiritual practices such as meditation, contemplation, and yoga, as well as possible correlations between brain function and general neurological activity.⁹

7 Bernard McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," in *Minding the Spirit*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 29. In addition to this valuable anthology, a classic text in the contemporary study of spirituality is Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, second edition (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

8 McGinn, "The Letter and the Spirit," 30–35. He names three general approaches: the anthropological, the theological, and the historical-contextual. The latter, although of interest in the history of spirituality, is not invoked here. Papers presented at the September 2019 "Evolving Methodologies in the Study of Spirituality" conference at the Antonianum in Rome can be found in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 20, No. 1 (Spring 2020). The articles by Frolich, Villegas, and Dubois survey and critique new approaches in method.

9 For some resources see Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, Fifth Edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 2018); Peter B. Clarke, ed., *The Oxford Handbook on the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For an example of neuroscientific studies see, see Judson A. Brewer, Patrick Worhunsky, Jeremy R. Gray, Yi-Yuan

All these approaches prescind from any transcendent realm and make no truth claims about the existence of God. Faith is not a constitutive factor in their methodologies, although it may be an object of study. In addition, they generally attend only to what can be observed, measured and predicted, and they thereby draw our attention to important facts and trends. In addition, the lexicons of such approaches to the study of spirituality brim with words and phrases like authenticity, inner life, depth dimension, becoming a person in the fullest sense, a way of handling the human condition, purpose of existence, and so forth. If the word transcendence appears, it is transposed into the key of self-transcendence, understood as generous consideration of, and response to, others, society, and the earth. While individual scholars in these fields may themselves be believers or adherents of a religious tradition, in their academic study of spirituality they bracket faith and eschew theological categories in favor of elucidating the effects of spirituality and spiritual practice on human experience and behavior.

At the turn of the 20th century, the American philosopher and keen observer of human psychology William James pioneered much of what characterizes today's popular approaches to spirituality. He introduced a "non-theological" but sympathetic study of what he called personal religious experience, which today would more likely be labeled spiritual experience. He set many of the parameters and established a new ethos for analyzing such phenomena as religious conversion, spiritual dryness or depression, happiness, virtue, asceticism, and mysticism.

James's book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, surveys different examples of religious or spiritual experiences of historical religious figures, examined in light of James' distinctive philosophical-psychological approach. The subtitle of the book, *A Study in Human Nature*, signals that this is not a theological effort. He states up front that he does not intend to proceed "out of religion in the sense of which we take it, theologies, philosophies and ecclesiastical organizations."¹⁰ He makes it clear that "the immediate personal experience will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all."¹¹ His interest is to explore "the feelings,

Tang, Jochen Weber, and Hedy Kober, "Meditation experience is associated with differences in default mode network activity and connectivity," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108 (November 2011). See also, Chapter 28, "The sense of the sacred," in Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, Vol. II (Perspectiva Press, 2021), 193ff.

10 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 42.

11 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42.

acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.”¹² While subsequent studies have significantly improved on James’ methodology, his approach presaged the kind of interest in spirituality that is popular and accessible today. He provided a proleptic analysis of what has eventuated into today’s spiritual but not religious phenomenon.¹³

While approaches to spirituality such as that of James avoid metaphysics and make no claims about the reality of transcendent Being, they do not necessary dismiss the value of belief. James himself is a good example of someone who strove to affirm the healthiness of belief from the point of view of his philosophical pragmatism and his interest in human psychology.¹⁴ Despite methodological differences, social scientific and theological approaches need not be in opposition. They can enrich each other. Depth, interiority, authenticity, purpose, self-transcendence, the ground of existence, and other such categories also name dimensions of Christian spiritualities and of the spiritualities within other religious traditions. Indeed, such interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary study and dialogue is crucial to advance the contemporary study of spirituality.¹⁵ A fulsome environment for contemporary dialogue about the relationship between spirituality and religion benefits from the kind of sensibility fostered by social science methodologies. Such studies, as modeled by James over a century ago, can

12 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42. James provides as good a definition of spirituality as one might find in the social science fields today.

13 Mary Frolich, “Spirit, Spirituality, and Contemplative Method,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 20. No. 1 (Spring 2020), 31–44, especially 39–41. Frolich provides a valuable overview of recent developments in methodology for the study of spirituality. See also Claire Petitmengin, ed., *Ten Years of Viewing from Within: The Legacy of Francisco Varela* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009), in which she elaborates six approaches in method.

14 James’ other important work on religious experience, *The Will to Believe* (1897), exemplifies a sympathetic and incisive analysis of belief. He does not reduce spirituality to psychology, as Freud would later do. For contemporary critiques of James’ work see Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), and Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

15 Pope Francis’ *Motu Proprio Ad theologiam promovendam* (On Promoting Theology), 1 November 2023, encourages theologians to enter “transdisciplinary dialogue” in order to enrich theology with the insights of the arts, humanities and social sciences, as well as dialogue with other faiths and with non-believers. www.vatican.va.

afford respect for religious conviction and spiritual experience, without appeal to doctrine or dogma.

Part Two: Theological Approaches to Understanding Spirituality

Theological approaches to spirituality, which honor the assumptions of faith and examine perspectives of religious commitment, bring a different sensibility to the paradigm for hospitable dialogue. In past centuries, the theological study of spirituality was called ascetical-mystical theology.¹⁶ It focused on the objective study of more remarkable aspects of the mystical experience and ascetical practice of exceptional Christians, such as the testimonies of medieval and post-Reformation mystics. Contemporary theological approaches to spirituality devote more attention to the existential, affective, and social dynamics that constitute a life of faith, as well as the complexity of the quest to understand a transcendent reality that ultimately eludes the endeavors of reason.¹⁷

The classic definition of theology, from the works of Saint Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century, is “faith seeking understanding.”¹⁸ The exigencies of modern life have brought both variation and caution to Anselm’s definition. Jürgen Moltmann reflects the wider concerns of contemporary theology by defining it as “hope seeking understanding.”¹⁹ Thomas Williams notes that our present perspective allows us to discern even in Anselm’s incipient scholasticism “an active love of God seeking a deeper

- 16 Especially in Catholic circles. See Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 148–49. See also Dreyer and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit*, chapters 11–15.
- 17 Diana L. Villegas, *The Christian Path in a Pluralistic World and the Study of Spirituality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), argues that theology should not take second place to social science studies of spirituality, but rather is especially equipped for that study because of its rich, long history of attention to spiritual experience. The present article follows her lead by elaborating a theological paradigm for engagement with the SBNR. See Mary Frohlich’s review of Villegas’ book in *Spiritus* 11, No. 2 (Spring 2012), 143–45.
- 18 This phrase was the original title of his work *Proslogion* (1077–1087), and it expresses the underlying quest in all of his writings. Anselm was indebted to Saint Augustine of Hippo who 600 years earlier wrote, “So then, do not try to understand in order to believe, but believe in order to understand.” See Homily 29.6 (regarding John 7:14–18) in Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John, 1–40*, Vol. III/12, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009).
- 19 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, trans. James E. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 33.

knowledge of God,” which suggests subjective, affective, and volitional elements implicit in early medieval theology.²⁰ Contemporary theologies of spirituality allot more space to explore those same elements. Kwok Piu Lan opens the theological lens even wider in order to locate theological inquiry in its social, economic, historical, and cultural contexts. Her writing, informed by Asian perspective and history, provides compelling, comprehensive arguments for methodological recognition of the milieu from which any theology emerges.²¹

There is also the question of language. Gerald O’Collins ended his book *The Case Against Dogma* with the bon mot that theologians do not speak for God; they must simply watch their language in the presence of God. “Theologians,” he writes, “no less than philosophers are bound by Wittgenstein’s charge ‘to battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.’”²² Methodological and semantic diligence are important dynamics in any contemporary theological study of spirituality.

With these provisos in mind, we turn to two twentieth-century Christians to discover theological ideas to enrich our understanding of spirituality. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner both developed a Christian theological spirituality. Each did this by building upon a distinctive Christian anthropology, that is, a theological understanding of what it means to be human. Hence, their understandings of Christian spirituality arose from their understanding of what it means to be human. Each identifies an inherent and constitutive spiritual dimension of human nature which is open to transcendent reality. Each finds the goal of human life and the fullness of human purpose to lie beyond the quotidian concerns and material limits of our experience.

First, a methodological question related to this study: can one find in their Christian anthropologies what we might call “universal spiritualities” that could also appeal to and enrich those beyond the Christian community. The term “universal spirituality” does not imply a comprehensive theory meant to supplant anyone’s spiritual practice or understanding, be it

20 Thomas Williams, “Anselm of Canterbury,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu>), 2.1.

21 Kwok Piu-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021). Regarding method, she advises a “double suspicion and reclamation” in “Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3:2 (Fall, 1987), 121–24.

22 Gerald O’Collins, *The Case Against Dogma* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 100.

traditional or alternative. Rather, it suggests the possibility of a shared standpoint about what it means to be human and, in particular, about what it means to be spiritual, a standpoint that can be shared across differences among those who identify as religious and those who identify as spiritual but not religious. Theology offers insights about human meaning and purpose that have emerged in its long history and substantial debates. Its wisdom, when offered with methodological humility, can contribute substantially to conversation among all manner of religious believers and spiritual seekers.²³

The theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner offer particular promise to dialogue across difference for two reasons. The first is that among 20th-century theologians, their Christian anthropologies, as we shall see, are particularly suited to wider humanistic dialogue—both theologians engaged in such dialogue beyond the ecclesiastical boundaries that James had eschewed earlier in the century, though each is also grounded in Christian faith. Second, each of them emphasized the importance of a deep connection between theology and spirituality, that is, between intellectual exercise and affective, volitional practice.

The following brief overviews of their theologies are in no way complete. Rather, each section surveys a key idea from the theological anthropologies of each author—beauty and being from von Balthasar, and the supernatural existential from Rahner—to illustrate how certain theological ideas can enrich conversation between Christian believers and those who identify as spiritual, but not religious.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Any theological affirmation that spirituality is common to all people and thereby constitutive of human nature rests upon a theology of creation. Based on the biblical belief that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and made for relationship with God (Deut. 6:4-9), a

23 One might invoke the hermeneutical theory of Hans Georg Gadamer and situate such common standpoints in the “fusion of horizons” that emerge amidst open and hospitable dialogue. See his *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinscheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 282. His hermeneutics is not a method for achieving an idealized, objective empathy. It is rather a call to awareness of one’s own position, and the multiple reasons behind it, both rational and affective. See also Mariah Terey Cushing, “Gadamer’s Philosophical Concept of ‘Prejudice’ and its Use in Comparative Theology,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 29 (March 2020), 19–37.

theology of universal spirituality seeks to discern evidence of desire for, and orientation to, God at the very heart of being human. Balthasar finds this universal desire and orientation in our innate love of beauty.

By beauty, Balthasar does not mean culturally relative aesthetic standards. Rather he affirms the beauty of being itself. The natural forms of the physical world and our experience of them are beautiful epiphanies of mystery, the mystery of their own being, and the infinite mystery of the creator above, beyond and within every being. All elements at all levels of God's creation are vessels of light attracting and drawing us into ever-deeper engagement with them and their natural beauty.²⁴ He describes this process as "the mysterious character inherent in the knowable."²⁵ He criticizes Platonic theory and its Christian descendants who assess the physical world as a pale reflection of a non-material sphere of perfect forms, beautiful but remote. He extols the physical world itself as "epiphanic," revealing the beauty of its own being, and potentially the beauty of the Creator.²⁶

Balthasar argues that beauty is a transcendent experience, inherent in human sensibility and operative in every culture.²⁷ He is clear that his understanding of beauty is not that of popular culture. However, to bring his theological aesthetics into wider conversation, further clarity is helpful. Though beauty can be thought of as a transcendental or universal category, we experience it immanently, in a particular work of art, piece of music, presence of a person, scene of nature, balance and order of thought, and so on. Our experiences of beauty, even though they can transport us beyond ourselves, are in the first place particular to our time, place, and culture.

24 Hans Urs von Balthasar's theory of beauty closely follows Wolfgang von Goethe's theory of natural forms, which espouses a unity between outward expression and inward spiritual truth in all things and persons. Both authors react against Platonic dualism and Enlightenment rationalism. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. O. Davies et al (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 339–86.

25 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory I: The Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 17.

26 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory II: The Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 59. This approach produced a theology of aesthetics in Balthasar's work.

27 In this sense, Balthasar's theology of aesthetics is an existential development of the medieval theological/philosophical transcendentals of being and beauty. See Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011), especially chapter 1: "Balthasar and the Transcendentals."

The particular context of Balthasar's theologizing is mid-to-late-twentieth-century Europe, and specifically the German Catholic intellectual and religious world. To appropriate his theology of beauty for conversation with those who come from very different worlds, it is important to maintain a certain vigilance about his theological methodology, to ensure that it does not limit his concept of beauty to his particular, post-colonial European Christian world. Does his theology allow and encourage epiphanies of transcendent beauty in other very different forms of Christianity across the globe and throughout its history? Furthermore, does his theology allow and encourage the same openness to alterity beyond Christianity? To keep the conversation hospitable for others, the theologian must maintain a certain heuristic or (to invoke Kwok Piu-lan) suspicious stance toward the theology under discussion.²⁸

Balthasar locates the genesis of transcendent beauty in an archetypal, universal encounter: an infant's relationship with its mother. It is the original symbol and nascent grace of our pervasive, lifelong experience of the mystery of being. A mother's love, or the love of a primary caregiver, co-creates the child's awareness and emergence of self and thereby stirs its innate capacity for knowledge and love. This *agape* love slowly transforms potency to act, orienting the child to an ever-unfolding discovery of the world. "[So] does love awaken love; it is in the movement toward the 'Thou' [the mother] that the 'I' [the child] becomes aware of itself. By crossing over from itself into what is other than itself, into the open world that offers it space, it experiences its freedom, its knowledge, its being as spirit."²⁹

This original movement, the experience of being loved into being human, is paradigmatic for our ever-evolving selves. Just as love is at the origin of our becoming a self, so, too, love is at the origin of every act of knowing, as the beauty of the known draws us into relationship with its being. "Herein lies the aesthetic reality of all things: in being truly themselves

28 Anne M. Carpenter, "Balthasar Beyond European Modernity: Rethinking *Herrlichkeit* through its Precursors," *Modern Theology* 37, No. 3 (July 2021), 616–36. Carpenter traces the tension in Balthasar's writings between the limitations and the advantages of his late modern, Eurocentric German theology and his openness to non-European cultures. She finds his standpoint "open—in its own terms, by its own logic—to a standpoint other than Europe (636)." This question extends to all manner of theologizing: what is its relationship to culture, both to the culture from which it has arisen and by which it has been formed, as well as to the alterity of other Christian and non-Christian cultures?

29 Hans Urs von Balthasar "Movement Toward God," *Explorations in Theology, III: Creator Spirit*, trans. B. McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 15–55.

in their naturalness they become numinous vessels of worldly beauty as it reveals and conceals itself, playfully enticing us into an exploratory relationship with its depths.”³⁰

Although Balthasar’s spirituality of beauty remains attractive for dialogue across religious and spiritual difference, it arises out and remains deeply rooted in his Christian faith. His description of the universal human potential for a spiritual life builds upon two Christian doctrines: Incarnation and Trinity.³¹ The beauty revealed and concealed in every instance and at every moment of creation is the beauty of the Eternal Logos through whom all things were made and have their being (Jn. 1:1-4; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:3). The revelation of God in Christ discloses this truth about the world; reason on its own struggles to apprehend it. Faith surpasses logic, inviting us to adoration and obedience to the divine that pervades all creation with its beauty. Inspired by faith, we come to know that our encounter with the world and its divine origin is an encounter with the Trinity, and an invitation into its inner life of infinite love. This is Christian spirituality, or as von Balthasar called it, Christian mystagogy.³²

Balthasar insists that theology and spirituality must be intricately linked. Rightly conceived, they both open the heart to God.³³ Theology brings “the infinite riches of divine truth into the finite vessels in which revelation is given to us, so that the believer may be made capable of encountering this infinity in adoration and active obedience.”³⁴ The spiritual or mystagogical life of the Christian is lived in light of the existential implications of the core

30 Kevin Mongrain, “Hans Urs von Balthasar” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, eds. Lewis Ayers and Medi-Ann Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 735.

31 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” *Explorations in Theology, I: the Word Made Flesh*, trans. A.V. Littledate and A. Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 197–201.

32 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 197–201.

33 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 208. Balthasar laments that “scientific” theology became more and more divorced from prayer, and so lost the accent and tone with which one should speak of what is holy, while “affective” theology, as it became increasingly empty, often degenerated into “unctuous, platitudinous piety.” He understood Christian spirituality as “the subjective aspect of dogmatic theology.” See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Spirituality,” in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 211. The four volumes in Balthasar’s *Explorations* provide a valuable summary of his theology of spirituality.

34 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Place of Theology,” *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, 152.

Christian doctrines of creation, revelation, incarnation, resurrection, and trinity. Scripture, sacrament, and charity inform the inner life and devotional practices of the Christian. Meditation on the Word of God enlightens the mind, heart, and soul of the believer and is an ever-unfolding invitation at the heart of Christian spiritual life. The sacraments provide regular ritual expressions that celebrate and effect divine grace for the sanctification of the person. In von Balthasar's understanding, the fullness of a spiritual life is lived within the Church, its scriptures, sacraments, and its communal service of love and justice to the needs and challenges in the surrounding world.³⁵

Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner's approach to spirituality reflects his own theological anthropology, which differs from von Balthasar's.³⁶ His transcendental method locates the heart of being human not in a personal encounter with the mystery of creation and its inherent beauty as von Balthasar elaborates. Rather, he describes what he calls a pre-conceptual awareness of our capacity to know and to love. In Rahner's analysis of human knowledge and volition, before we "know" something, that is, before we can name, objectify, categorize, and explain any part of our experience, we have an *a priori* awareness of our very capacity for knowledge, of our potential to know. Before we "love" something or someone, that is before we affirm the being, goodness, and value of any object of our knowledge, we have an *a priori* awareness of our capacity for love, our potential to affirm.³⁷

35 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Gospel as Norm and Test of All Spirituality of the Church," *Spirituality in Church and World*, Concilium Vol. 9, trans. Theodore Westow, ed. Christian Duquoc (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), 7–24.

36 The similarities and differences between Rahner and von Balthasar are well known. Those very differences recommend them as two different exemplars of spirituality in this study. Cf. Karen Kilby, "Balthasar and Karl Rahner," *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, S. J. and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 18. Also, Vincent Holzer, "Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Twentieth-Century Catholic Currents on the Trinity," *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, eds. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 22.

37 I realize that my use of the term "aware" or "awareness" to describe Rahner's *a priori* dimension of our human experience is equivocal or ambiguous. Rahner's *a priori* "awareness" is a "pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual, and un-thematic experience of the openness of the human person toward absolute mystery," to quote from Daniel P. Horan, "A Rahnerian Response to Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age,'" *New Blackfriars*, 95:1055 (January 2014), 21–42, especially

Rahner's idea of *a priori*, pre-categorical awareness requires some elaboration. When something comes within the range and scope of our senses, our imagination, or our mind, it stimulates and invites us to perceive, acknowledge, and understand the reality before us: to know it, name it, and think about it, and at the same time to value it and cherish our knowledge of it. When we encounter an object, that is, anything outside of ourselves, it activates our potential to know and love.

Rahner invites us to reflect on our readiness, our capacity which precedes any encounter, namely, our *potential* for knowledge and love, what he calls the subject's *Vorgriff*, a German word best translated as "pre-apprehension." He affirms and names that nebulous, but ubiquitous, passive potential for knowledge and love as a constitutive dimension of our human nature, an essential part of who we are. Even though Rahner names it or "categorizes" this aspect of our human nature with the word *Vorgriff*, he advises that we cannot objectify it and "know" it as we know everything else. However, it is constitutive of our human nature. In that *a priori* awareness, we dwell at the very limit of our existence. We stand on the frontier of our human experience, where the horizon of our potential for knowing and loving extends endlessly in every direction.³⁸

In that ceaseless "pre-apprehension" of all knowing and all willing, Rahner locates and identifies our pre-reflexive encounter with Infinite Mystery. Our limitless and nameless openness to knowing and to loving constitutes the mystery of our humanity, which by its very nature is oriented to Infinite Mystery, which Rahner identifies with God.³⁹ In this pre-reflexive openness to infinite knowing and loving, our human nature encounters God. Rahner calls this the "supernatural existential," the *a priori* graced experience of being human that is intrinsic and constitutive. It is a constant offer of grace, universal among all human beings. It is ever prior to God's

41, note 70. However, to be at all useful, this *a priori* experience must involve "awareness" at some level of the human person. My approach suggests a Jamesian reading of Rahner.

38 For later presentations by Rahner of his notion of *a priori* awareness and its constitutive role in human experience see Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 34–5, 52–8.

39 Rahner elaborated this universal dynamism of the intellect toward God in his first work *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). Our capacity for endless knowing and loving remains always *in posse*, that is, as potential. God's love and knowledge are *in esse*, that is, as actual and infinite. We are limited creatures who are, nonetheless, in God's image.

self-communication insofar as it is received and expressed in the testimonies of sacred texts and religious traditions.⁴⁰

Rahner’s theological anthropology, then, claims that our human nature is constitutively open to relationship with Infinite Mystery, with God. In that sense, we are all “naturally religious.” Our primordial encounter with the divine is conceived in the womb of our human capacity to know and to love. Divine grace, or the loving-self donation of God is the hidden life within us, to which scriptural revelation and the incarnation of the Word of God in Christ give voice and affirmation.⁴¹ Religion, with its words, symbols, rituals and narratives, names a deeper spiritual reality hidden in the origins of human consciousness and the structure of human existence, which by nature is “spirit in the world.”

The heart of Rahner’s theology can be described as “apophatic,” that is, a theology that admits the Divine is transcendent to any human words, names, or categories, religious or otherwise. For we do not encounter God directly, as one categorical object among others, but only “in the mode of withdrawal, of silence, of distance, of being always inexpressible, so that speaking of it, if it is to make sense, always requires listening to its silence.”⁴² This is a difficult, ascetical theology, requiring much disciplined study, meditation, and contemplation. It identifies a “mysticism of everyday life,” in that the Divine pervades and sustains all dimensions of human experience.⁴³ Those who interpret and comment on Rahner’s spirituality often do so through the categories and practices of Ignatian spirituality in ways that provide more hospitable access to the spiritual implications of his theology.⁴⁴

His value as a theological participant in conversations with those who identify as spiritual but not religious is self-evident. Rahner affirms that the Absolute Mystery we call God extends Itself in Infinite Love to every human in the human transcendent experience of pre-conceptual awareness,

40 Horan, 33–4.

41 One could also claim the voices and affirmations of other religious traditions as revelatory, though each in different ways. See Stephen Duffy, “Experience of Grace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, Declan Marmion and Mary Hines, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On page 46 he writes, “...the grace of God’s self-offer is not the exclusive privilege of Christians.”

42 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 64.

43 Harvey D. Egan, “The Mystical Theology of Karl Rahner,” *The Way* 52:2 (April 2013), 43–62, especially 45.

44 For an extensive commentary see Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also, his *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

of our abiding potential as knowers and lovers.⁴⁵ God, as it were, meets all human beings in their infinite potential for knowledge and love. For Rahner God's grace is "always and everywhere present at the very heart of human existence."⁴⁶

Many Christians find Rahner's supernatural existential too amorphous or too universal, such that it detracts or distracts from the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Christ.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Rahner's understanding of spirituality is rooted in his faith in Jesus Christ, the self-communication of God in history and creation, the "Logos in the act of uttering itself into the non-divine."⁴⁸ According to Rahner, to be human is to be radically oriented to God, to the Infinite Mystery beyond all knowing and loving. This mystery of radical orientation to the Divine is fully realized and revealed in Christ, the Eternal Word made flesh. Amidst the universal pneumatology of the Absolute Mystery in all creation and history, Christians respond to the final and full revelation of the Divine in Jesus. Faith in Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, inspire a holistic spirituality that affirms the union of the divine and human, and that affirms the remarkable diversity of world Christianity with humility and openness to God's prevenient Spirit in so many cultural and linguistic expressions.⁴⁹ Scripture, sacrament, prayer, and loving service for justice and peace characterize the lived spirituality of Christian believers. Rahner predicted that beyond cultural identification, legal observance, and church membership, a deep spirituality born of faith in Christ as Encounter with Infinite Mystery would become more and more essential for the Christian of the future.⁵⁰

45 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 144–48.

46 Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Worship," *Faith and Ministry: Theological Investigations* 19, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Herder and Herder, 1983), 143.

47 Henry Shea, "Internal Difficulties in the Theology of Karl Rahner," *Modern Theology* 37:3 (July 2021), 637–661.

48 Karl Rahner, "Christology in the Setting of Modern Man's Understanding of Himself and His World," *Theological Investigations: Confrontations* 11, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 220.

49 Robert Masson, "Spirituality for the Head, Heart, Hands, and Feet: Rahner's Legacy," *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*, Marquette University, Winter 1984, 207. Available at https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1206&context=theo_fac

50 He famously wrote, "The devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic"... or will cease to be anything at all." Karl Rahner "Christian living formerly and today," *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life: Theological Investigations* 7, trans. David Bourke (New York: Dartner, Longman/Herder, 1971), 15. See also "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future," *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations* 20, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Herder and Herder, 1981), 143–53.

The writings of von Balthasar and Rahner provide two theological approaches to spirituality. Building on the foundation of their Christian anthropologies, each examines spirituality as a lived response to divine revelation in history and creation. We might note a significant difference between the potential “universal spiritualities” that abide in their anthropologies. Rahner’s God is experienced in the “withdrawal, silence and distance” of pre-conceptual, *a priori* awareness. The spirituality associated with his anthropology suggests an affinity with apophatic mysticism that finds no words or categories adequate to name encounter with the Divine in *a priori* experience. His *Vorgriff* seems more at home in the spirituality of the anonymous medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

By contrast, von Balthasar’s God lovingly confronts one with inexpressible, overwhelming beauty in created things, and in our direct, objective encounter with them and their categorical beauty. Two very different kinds of Christian anthropologies that potentially offer two different kinds of universal spirituality.⁵¹

Both theologians, in different ways, situate Christian spirituality in the wider context of the universal human search for meaning. Whether confessional or universal, theological definitions of spirituality assume faith in a transcendent being, which serves as the foundation for theory. The assumption of a transcendent Divine Being who has reached out to offer love and relationship is operative for both von Balthasar and Rahner. To ascribe an emergent universal spirituality to either one of these theologians requires the assumption of a personal God who self-discloses. Despite their different interpretations of the spiritual *Ursprung* for humanity—beauty or *a priori* awareness—they both affirm that divine revelation provides the foundation upon which they build their theologies of spirituality, and the ends toward which a spiritual life is directed.

Anticipating conversation with those who identify as spiritual but not religious, one might expect that James’ philosophical-psychological approach to spiritual experience would have greater appeal to them. We might assume that James’ explicit avoidance of “theology or ecclesiasticism” offers a sensibility they find more hospitable, less judgmental. One might also

51 One might be tempted to compare Rahner’s spirituality with that of Jnana Yoga, and von Balthasar’s with that of Bhakti Yoga; fruitful topics for exploration in Comparative Theology. See Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 24–40; also “The emerging field of comparative theology: a review of recent books (1989-95),” *Theological Studies* 56:3 (1995), 521–50.

imagine that spiritual but not religious persons would prefer and prioritize what we have called the universal spiritualities inherent in the anthropologies von Balthasar and Rahner, over the more confessional underpinnings of their theologies. But not necessarily. Much depends on how people who see themselves as spiritual but not religious understand religion and its various components, and whether they have foreclosed any consideration of a transcendent reality.⁵²

Part Three: Religion

A search for definitions of religion yields at least as many results as one for spirituality.⁵³ There are some well-known definitions. As we have seen, James understood religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.”⁵⁴ Alfred North Whitehead also emphasized solitude: “Religion is what the individual does with his solitariness.”⁵⁵ In his definition, Emil Durkheim elaborated the more social and ecclesial or communal elements of religion: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.”⁵⁶ Paul Tillich opted for a more existential definition of religion that could also serve as a definition of spirituality. In his classic text, *Dynamics of Faith*, he described religion as the state of “being grasped by an ultimate concern,” a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life.⁵⁷

52 Robert C. Solomon, *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) explores “naturalized” spirituality, which draws from philosophical and religious ideas, but eschews any hint of divine revelation or relationship.

53 See Anna King and Paul Hedges, “What Is Religion, Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?” in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, vol 1, ed. Paul Hedges (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2014), 1–30, especially 22–4.

54 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1961), 42.

55 Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham University Press; 2nd edition, 1996), 17.

56 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: Oxford World Classics*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.

57 Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith: Perennial Classics* (New York: Harper One, 2009), xvii, 1–4, 11.

In his classic text, *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith teased out several “understandings” of religion: “the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos enter human life;”⁵⁸ “a way of life woven around a people’s ultimate concerns;”⁵⁹ and “the world’s wisdom traditions,”⁶⁰ among others. In their definitions and descriptions of religion, Paul Tillich and Huston Smith both advocate more generous integrations of religion and spirituality. Indeed, Smith’s life project, one could argue, was to promote that integration by exploring the mystical and spiritual dimensions of religious practice around the world. That project distinguished his work among scholars of religion.⁶¹

In a dated but still compelling article, Thomas Idinopulos expressed his frustration with the definitions of religion produced by his fellow social scientists in the field of the History of Religions. Such definitions, which focus on the observable elements in religion such as “historical knowledge of the rituals, mythologies, religious communities, ideas, teachings, institutions, arts, architecture,” are inherently limited because they fail to recognize that “religion is not exhausted by the observable.”⁶² In addition, the sheer number and diversity of the cultural, linguistic, and geographical aspects of religions, cults, sects, denominational variations, and spiritual movements are “bewildering,” when one strives to arrive at a satisfactory definition.⁶³ There is another dimension to the reality and the experience of religion, which Idinopulos, like Smith, considered essential. He identified it as “the unobservable, which is the source of religion’s purpose and meaning.”⁶⁴ If Idinopulos were writing today, he might call it the spiritual dimension of religion. However, his question remains. Is it possible to capture the inexhaustible essence of religion amidst such diversity of form and expression and reach a satisfactory definition?

Richard Comstock questioned the usefulness of any essential definition of religion that professes to be complete, closed, self-contained, and a final description or delineation of the topic. As an alternative, he proposed what he called “open” definitions. This approach to definition assumes “an open process that not only allows but requires connections and clarifications with

58 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 9.

59 Smith, 183.

60 Smith, 5, 386–90.

61 Smith, 2–11.

62 Thomas A. Idinopulos, “What Is Religion?” *CrossCurrents* Vol. 48, No. 3 (Fall 1998), 366.

63 Idinopulos, 367.

64 Idinopulos, 367.

other texts to achieve specificity.”⁶⁵ Open definitions or descriptions remain heuristic or provisional. They invite other perspectives, engage in continuous dialectic, and expect the unfolding of successive syntheses that allow ever-greater understanding. As such, they require a certain asceticism in practice and humility in method.⁶⁶

To achieve that aim, and to avoid any “closed” definition of religion that might discourage dialogue, it is more helpful to identify three major elements of religion, elements which can help illustrate the various ways in which people embrace, ignore, or object to its teachings and practice. They are creed, code, and cult: what to believe; how to behave; and what and how to worship.⁶⁷ These three elements do not have equal importance in every religion, and they may be quite uneven in the religious practice of individuals at different times in their lives. However, they can function as axes that expose various reasons people distance themselves from religion today. When a person says, “I am spiritual but not religious,” does that declaration involve a wholesale dismissal of all three of these elements of religion? Or, upon reflection, might the skeptic admit the value of one or two of the elements—and their covert influence or even occasional overt practice in their lives? Let us take a brief look at each of these three elements.

Creed, Cult, and Moral code

Christianity is a creedal religion. Over the centuries, it has evolved a set of doctrines or teachings that it asks its adherents to embrace. Indeed, in many denominations, worshippers proclaim the essential doctrines of their faith every week in the liturgical recitation of a creed. For many who identify as spiritual but not religious, the latter half of that label refers specifically to their rejection of one or more doctrines. The doctrines they cannot accept may be among those most central to faith in the Mystery of Christ, such as Incarnation, Resurrection, and Trinity. Or, their objection may be to teachings that are important but not central, such as certain passages in

65 W. Richard Comstock, “Toward Open Definitions of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (1986), 514.

66 Von Balthasar also counseled humility in any attempt to define either religion or spirituality. “No mission, no spirituality, is capable of being defined in its living center. They all come from the infinite variety of the divine life, which always exceeds the compass of the human.” Von Balthasar, ‘Spirituality’ (1989), 226.

67 Sandra Schneiders elaborates these three elements in “Religion vs. Spirituality: a Contemporary Conundrum,” *Minding the Spirit*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2005), 169–70.

Scripture, questions about evolution, devotion to saints, veneration of sacred objects, the role of Mary Mother of Jesus, certain liturgical practices, a clerical priesthood or ministry, and so forth. Because their religious education has not provided them with any insight about the nature of doctrine, they do not discriminate among the hierarchy of truths.⁶⁸ Deprived of the opportunity to learn more about authentic teaching, people default to the designation “not religious,” even though they may continue to believe in the existence of a loving, personal God who has revealed Himself in Christ. With regard to creed or doctrine, then, there can be a great variety of church teachings that former or struggling members find untenable, and for a variety of reasons.⁶⁹

Moral teachings may also lead people to leave a religion. A church’s ethical teachings send them fleeing into the “spiritual but not religious” camp. As with doctrine, there is a hierarchy of ethical teachings that can vary across different denominations, and even within the same denomination depending on national and local ecclesiastical emphases.⁷⁰ The 1968 Vatican

-
- 68 Avery Dulles, “The Hierarchy of Truths in the Catechism,” *The Thomist* 58:3 (July 1994), 369-388. Also, Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Revelation” chapter 9 in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*. Richard R. Gaillardetz, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020). In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. See Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism-Unitatis Redintegratio*, #11. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #36; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)
- 69 In Judaism and Islam, doctrine plays much less of a role, even no role depending on how one parses the difference between faith and law. Each of these two Abrahamic religions affirms a foundational belief in the oneness of God, an adherence to certain prophetic revelations, and the all-important observance of revealed Law—Torah or Sharia. Affirmation of the One God transmutes immediately into moral code, which holds the primacy. Consequently, Jewish or Muslim spirituality is always in relationship to divine law. Even the mysticisms of the Kabbalists and Sufis evolved from Torah or Sharia respectively, although in different ways and with different emphases.
- 70 The recent Vatican permission for non-liturgical blessings of gay couples is a good example of how different local and regional churches accept and interpret what is perceived as morally acceptable. Cindy Wooden, ‘Doctrinal Dicastery explains how, when gay couples can be blessed,’ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, December 2023. <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/doctrinal-dicastery-explains-how-when-gay-couples-can-be-blessed>.

document, *Humane Vitae*, prohibited birth control and caused many Catholics to leave the church for other denominations, or to abandon religion altogether. Others remain in the church but disagree with the teaching.⁷¹ The cultural and political turmoil around abortion, assisted dying, in vitro fertilization, and other health care issues sends many people toward the exit of the church. Alternatively, teachings on social justice, immigration, women's issues, and sexual difference have alienated other members of many denominations. As with doctrine, a lack of discrimination regarding the relative weight of moral teachings leads to confusion and alienation, and often the adoption of the "not religious" trope.

Cult can be the primary religious identification for many people. Christians may be ambivalent or ignorant about questions of doctrine. They may disagree with particular moral teachings. However, if they continue to attend worship regularly or even occasionally, that involvement may be enough for them to remain identified with their religion. Because they engage at important times and on poignant occasions with their religious community's ritual and worship, they may continue their religious and spiritual lives within their community of faith.

Mapping spirituality onto the religious grid of creed, cult, and code may provide helpful distinctions for the spiritual but not religious regarding their actual relationship with religion. However, this is not an easy exercise. The spiritual color, texture, or ethos identified with a religion emerge organically from the many ways creed, cult, and code intertwine in religious observance. How one's religion integrates or identifies with local, regional, or national culture is another factor in how people negotiate relationship with their religious community.⁷² For those who remain members of a religion, these three elements will take on different levels of importance at different stages of their lives. One or another of the three elements may also be an important part of an adherent's spiritual life. Whatever the particular

71 Caryle Murphy, "What is a sin: Catholics don't always agree with their church," Pew Research Center, September 25, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/2eh7rf2f>.

72 In Asian cultures, there is more fluidity in religious identification and practice, where people "...did not belong to any specific 'religion' (itself not a native term) but moved freely between the utilization of resources and ideas by each of the main and lesser traditions (i.e. Confucian social mores, Daoist rituals, Buddhist death rites, folk religion practices)." See Paul Hodges, "Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation," *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (January 2022), 30. Hodges speaks of a "shared religious landscape" across Eastern cultures. Such religious and cultural fluidity seems to be growing in the West.

circumstances, conversations across difference will remain hospitable and more fruitful when participants continue to take account of the complexity of what people on all sides of the issue understand by the terms “religion” and “religious.” Sensibility to that complexity is essential to the paradigm of hospitality developed here.

Part Four: Listening to the Spiritual but not Religious: A Hermeneutical Approach

Theologian Sandra Schneiders suggests an approach to the study of spirituality that is not only beyond the social science and theological approaches as elaborated above, but also beyond different understandings or definitions of religion. She describes her approach as hermeneutical.⁷³ Her primary focus and starting point is the experience of the person. That experience informs and guides her hermeneutical methodology. Questions are primary, not theories, traditions, communities, categories, or definitions. What has emerged in a person’s life that they might identify as spiritual? As religious? What was the experience like? In what did it consist? What has led a person to consider themselves spiritual, but not religious? What do those terms mean to them? The hermeneutical method is more inductive. It starts with the experience of the subject, not with any explicit sociological, theological, or religious classification, or even with the very distinction between spiritual and religious. It does not employ theory in a way that preempts experience. Nor does it rush to conclusions that foreclose conversation.

A hermeneutical approach involves a patient, careful process of reflecting on the various aspects and dimensions of a person’s experience, allowing description to emerge in conversation and dialogue.⁷⁴ Guided

73 Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2005), 49-60. Schneiders’ emphasis on the methodological importance of experience in the study of spirituality is developed by Rossano Zas Friz De Col, “Christian Spirituality and Spiritual Theology in a Pluralistic World,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16:2A (Fall 2016), 118–135.

74 To elucidate this approach, Kwok Piu-Lan invokes the meaning of dialogue in Chinese as “mutuality active listening, and openness to what one’s partner has to say.” Kwok Piu-Lan, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, 537. Schneiders acknowledges the contributions of feminist scholars to her elaboration of the hermeneutical approach, specifically Elizabeth Johnson. See Schneiders, “A

by careful attention and attentive care, this method moves slowly, even hesitantly, in the attempt to understand an experience through thoughtful analysis and heuristic applications of language, ideas, and perhaps theories. Abstractions are consistently tested against experience for their adequacy in understanding the experience. After extended listening and tentative critical analysis, the third step in Schneiders' hermeneutical approach is constructive. It builds a description, an understanding, an interpretation of experience that allows the experience to be appreciated, discussed, and shared, enriching all involved. Nonetheless, the theoretical categories or distinctions arrived at and agreed upon remain provisional, more like a nomad's tent than a settled dwelling.⁷⁵

Hermeneutical sensitivity can be integrated into both theological and social science methods. It can entertain theology's embrace of faith as well as social scientific humanistic categories. It can help sort through religious questions about doctrine, morality, and forms of worship. In any case, the distinctive contribution of the hermeneutical method is to insist on the precedence of experience, and to mitigate a deductive process that involves a haste to name and tame experience by premature imposition of theory or category. Theologians bring theological language, categories, and theories into the conversation. Psychologists bring psychological language, categories, and theories. Sociologists their own, and so forth. Hermeneutical sensitivity moves theory, definition, and categorization into the background, and invites people to bring their lived experience to the foreground.

The hermeneutical approach is not naïve or agnostic about theory or assumptions. It calls for keen awareness of definitions, language, and categories that always attend and inform the work of any scholar or conversation partner. No one enters conversation theoretically, culturally, or linguistically denuded. Even as we struggle through the initial step of listening to the other, no effort to bracket theory or concept is ever completely successful. Complete objectivity in the study of spirituality or any phenomenon is unrealistic and undesirable, as Gadamer has demonstrated.⁷⁶

Hermeneutical Approach," 54. See also Susan Rakoczy, "Trusting Experience: The Foundation of Feminist Spirituality," *Religion and Theology* 18 (2011), 32–55. There are strong parallels with Heinz Kohut's understanding of empathy in psychoanalytic self-psychology. Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* ed. Arnold Goldberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

75 Note the similarities between Schneiders' hermeneutical approach and Comstock's "open definition."

76 Gadamer, 282. Gadamer himself was a 20th philosopher who while not religious in any conventional sense prized the spiritual dimensions of the person. He provides

However, Schneider's use of hermeneutics in her approach to the study of spirituality opens the door to a more in-depth consideration of conversation across spiritual and religious difference and ensures a deep hospitality of mind and heart among participants.

Conclusion

The conversation about spiritual but not religious is part of the contemporary changes which the Church is witnessing in most if not all its denominations. We might even call the extent and nature of these changes epochal.⁷⁷ They include significant shifts in how the church understands and teaches doctrine, how it applies moral principles amidst scientific progress, and how it worships in a shrinking world where intercultural and interreligious encounter is more the norm than the exception. Radical changes in society, such as those wrought by information technology, artificial intelligence, social media, and virtual presence inevitably impinge on creed, moral code, and cherished cult, and propel many people, both religious and not, into existential crises. We cannot ignore the acceleration of both societal and ecclesial changes, with their pervasive consequences on rising generations who are the church's future.⁷⁸

Nostalgic retreat to the comfort of familiar religious observance and doctrinal security may provide temporary and occasionally necessary respite from the "future shock" of contemporary change and challenge. However, there is also need for creative, constructive paradigms for engaging in dialogue with the many people for whom religious doctrine, moral teaching, or worship have lost their efficacy. This article proposes such an approach, characterized by the four sensibilities elaborated above to create abiding hospitality to all participants in the dialogue.

an early and erudite example of the contemporary "spiritual but not religious" philosopher. See Jessica Frazier, *Gadamer on Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2023). Also, Paul Hedges, "Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 4 (2016), 5–26.

77 Phyllis Tickle presents an interesting analysis in *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

78 Jean M. Twenge, *I-Gen* (New York: Atria, 2017), 119ff. Twenge warns that those born since 1995, identified as Gen-Z, who have grown up with smartphones as a part of their daily lives, present as "neither spiritual nor religious." The generational characteristics of Gen-Z are a worldwide phenomenon, given the ubiquity of the technology. Research on Generation Alpha, born since 2010, is just beginning.

This paradigm acknowledges the value of social scientific analyses of change. William James offered an early example of such an approach. At the same time, it encourages theological wisdom to discern what might be useful from “what is old and what is new (Matt. 13:52) in the Christian tradition.” What we have called “universal spiritualities” nestled in the Christian anthropologies of theologians such as von Balthasar and Rahner can enrich the dialogue in two ways. They can help religious adherents deepen their religious devotion as well as increase their understanding of the faith they profess. At the same time, these theologies can serve as invitations to spiritual but not religious persons to reflect on existential questions and quotidian struggles in light of useful insights drawn from the reflections of serious Christian thinkers. Such “universal spiritualities” can provide a common language for dialogue across difference and a vocabulary more adequate to the complexity of religion and the many ways it intersects with spirituality.

The fourth sensibility of the paradigm is the appeal for hermeneutical humility. The importance of questioning over arguing, of seeking over assuming, and of learning over teaching sets a context within which social-psychological changes can be considered, theological reflections entertained, and the complexity of religion recognized, without losing respect for the deeply felt experience that participants bring into the encounter.

Joseph T. Kelley is Professor Emeritus of Religious and Theological Studies at Merrimack College where he also served as dean and provost. He has authored books and scholarly articles on the thought of Saint Augustine of Hippo, the psychology of religion and pastoral theology, and is a clinical psychologist. He is president of the Augustinian Heritage Institute, which oversees English translations for the New City Press project The Works of Saint Augustine—A Translation for the 21st Century, and abridged a study edition of City of God for the Augustine Essential series. His more recent work and a forthcoming book address Augustinian spirituality and its relevance in contemporary contexts and cultures. He is co-founder of “Augustinian Days in Carthage,” an interfaith and intercultural initiative in Tunisia.



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

ARTICLE

Identity Transcendence as a Response to Religious Conflict: Understanding Effective Student Engagement with Israel and Palestine

Cameron Howes and James Walters

Abstract

From 2014 to 2019, more than one hundred students at the London School of Economics took part in an interfaith program designed to improve their understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict and to meet religious and regional interfaith leaders who demonstrate how faith can be the inspiration and vehicle for peace-making. This article seeks to evaluate that program and to investigate the meaning of an effective interfaith intervention in the context of this conflict. It identifies the notion of “identity transcendence” as an increased capacity to empathize with an opposing view while retaining fidelity to one’s own convictions and community commitments. We consider its features and the conditions needed to foster it in order to learn lessons for the future of interfaith engagement in this and other religion-related conflicts.

Keywords

interfaith, conflict, dialogue, encounter, higher education, Israel and Palestine, identity,

In the months following October 7, 2023, university campuses across the world saw angry protests that highlighted and exacerbated the religious divisions within their student bodies. Even prior to the Hamas attacks against Israel and the ensuing Israeli military response in Gaza, few issues had greater capacity to divide academic communities than the Israel-Palestine conflict. As universities seek to contain these tensions and improve their engagement with the conflict going forward, educational programs that bring interfaith groups together around this issue will need to be appraised and their lessons learned for possible future interventions. One such program was run by the Faith Centre at the London School of Economics between 2014 and 2019, taking over 100 students from diverse religious backgrounds on a week-long shared encounter in the region. Sensitive to accusations of “faithwashing” the conflict, the program pursued the dual educational aim of (1) better understanding the religious dimensions of a complex multi-dimensional conflict and (2) meeting religious and interfaith leaders in the region who demonstrate how faith can be the inspiration and vehicle for peace-making.¹

This article seeks to evaluate and learn key lessons from LSE’s *Interfaith Encounter Israel and Palestine* program. The authors are the founder of the LSE Faith Centre who set up the program in 2014 and a program participant who went on to work as a program manager in the center. Here we share the research we have conducted among former participants since the conclusion of the program in 2019. We begin by setting out, in primarily descriptive terms, the aims, ethos, and shape of the program. We then move to consider its pedagogy, recognizing the limitations of many encounter-based programs and identifying our core purpose as having been to instill a posture of *identity transcendence* that equips participants with the awareness to identify a *conflict ethos*, the confidence to challenge it, and the imagination to envisage pathways to alternative realities. We then go deeper into the nature of this identity transcendence and how it is fostered through our analysis of participant surveys and interviews. We consider the ways in which participants converge and diverge as they are brought together for this intense shared journey and then return to their communities continuing to process the experience. Finally, we identify some core insights that we hope may apply across similar interfaith and peacebuilding interventions.

1 “Faithwashing” is used to describe the appeal to interfaith dialogue and harmony as a means of deflecting from real political injustices. Accentuating the need to overcome religious differences is viewed as a distraction from the “real” political and economic causes of the conflict.

The Aims and Ethos of the Program

Interfaith Encounter Israel and Palestine ran as an extracurricular program that took six cohorts of 18 students to the region for a week-long educational visit. Interfaith interventions can be made with a number of motives. Our objectives make clear that the purpose of the program was principally educational in building participants' understanding of the ambivalent role of religious narratives within the conflict. These narratives fuel the conflict with competing, perhaps irreconcilable, claims about land, divinely instituted statehood, and sacred sites. But they also resource actors on the ground with motivation and common language to build bridges across the divides. The specific context of the program we have set out points to other motivations: our desire to promote more cohesive relations on LSE campus and our belief that LSE students can use their experience of religious diversity among their peers to equip them with skills to address religious conflict after graduation.

The program was heavily oversubscribed (often five applicants to a place), owing in part to significant subsidy from a range of sources.² Four selection criteria were, therefore, adopted to help identify those most likely to benefit and maximize impact. These were: (1) a clear interest in religion and its impact on the world today; (2) active involvement in your religious (or other) community; (3) a demonstrated commitment to reconciliation and conflict resolution work; and (4) a readiness to engage in further interfaith activities. However, participants did not need to meet all four criteria. In particular, many candidates were selected due to strong evidence of one of the first two criteria, with no previously expressed interest in interfaith relations.

While these criteria helped identify appropriate participants, none of them (including the fourth) committed students to any specific further actions beyond the experience itself. This was deliberate and made the program distinctive among similar initiatives which frequently seek to demonstrate impact through mandating the delivery of a specified tangible outcome. On an issue as divisive as Israel and Palestine, we were keen to allow students to engage as much as possible on their own terms and avoid the feeling of an agenda being imposed on them. These criteria, as well as selecting

2 These included internal university funding, government grants, a Jewish family foundation, and a Muslim philanthropist. We were transparent with students about these funding sources and, while making clear that no funder had exercised control over the content of the program, we included funding as part of the conversation with students about the practical and cultural pressures on the parameters of such a program.

from a highly international student body (LSE students are drawn from 150 countries), allowed for very diverse cohorts in almost every sense. We had a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate, including some older students. In each cohort around half originated from outside the UK, and over the duration of the program participants were drawn from nearly every continent. The majority were adherents to one of the three Abrahamic faiths, and political opinions covered the full spectrum from Zionist students who had previously taken part in pro-Israel “Birthright” trips to active pro-Palestine campaigners.

To accommodate this diversity and allow students to engage authentically, we adopted what might be described as a “modally plural approach” that sought not to impose any set of assumptions about engagement with the program that would compromise strongly held political or religious stances.³ This modally plural approach was established through a preparatory workshop encouraging students to consider different modes of leadership and engagement. To do this, the students explored four archetypes developed by Carl Jung. We suggested that students might identify their mode of participation in the program with any (or all) of the archetypes: king (monarch), friend, warrior, or wizard (sage).

Kings are participants who may find their personal interest or political views about the conflict are constrained by their leadership obligations and the demands of a constituency. They may be office holders in the Students’ Union or a campus faith society, and their engagement may be characterized by a pragmatic collaboration for shared interests, particularly the cohesion of the LSE community. The *friend* is the participant who seeks to build empathy before forming political views. Their focus is learning where different people are coming from in order to build understanding. Legitimizing this “open” position is important on a topic where students are often told that not taking a side is a collusion with injustice.

Wizards are those who reframe the problems, bringing fresh perspectives and complexity that open up new possibilities. These were often the most effective bridgebuilders since peace between opposing groups is significantly advanced by those able to break and imaginatively reframe the entrenched polarities. Nonetheless, we also welcomed the category of *warrior*. These are

3 Sergey Melnik identifies four types of interfaith dialogue, which he labels polemical, cognitive, peacemaking, and partnership. These modes map loosely onto the four Jungian archetypes we come on to set out here of warrior, friends, wizards and kings; Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31, no. 1 (2020): 48–72.

people with strong views about the conflict and an activist orientation. It was important to legitimize this stance since we maintain that strong advocacy on either side need not preclude a genuine engagement with and respect for opponents. This marked ours out from similar programs in which activism can be viewed as necessarily creating “a battleground dynamic that impedes learning by shutting down alternative or competing perspectives essential to critical thinking.”⁴ We do not believe this is necessarily the case and did not want to narrow our participation to more “moderate” participants by sending the message that acting on strongly held convictions is antithetical to our ethos.

Using these archetypes, we encouraged students to identify their positionality and understand the approach of other participants within the overarching framework of the program. We also sought to avoid the imposition of any single understanding of the conflict, or any one justification for the role of interreligious engagement with it. For the warrior, for example, better understanding opposing views might be a vehicle to better advocacy for your view. For the wizard, it will be the means of finding new paradigms for peacebuilding. Students were invited to reflect on the different scenarios in which they might adopt these different roles.

The Shape of the Program

The time and financial constraints of an extracurricular program inevitably made this a limited engagement with a very complex situation. Over the years, the program was refined to maximize its effectiveness, curating a representative range of encounters with adequate preparation and opportunities to debrief. The preparatory workshops included the work on Jungian archetypes discussed above, teaching from LSE colleagues with a reputation for balanced scholarship on the history of the conflict, and discussion of how we might consider the religious entanglements of a geopolitical conflict.

The itinerary of trip itself was developed in partnership with the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue who coordinated our stay in the region.⁵ Typically, it began with two days in Jerusalem, visiting the major

4 Daniel Brunstetter and Daniel Wehrenfennig, “Teaching about Intractable Conflicts: An Approach to Peace and Conflict Studies,” *APSA Teaching and Learning Conference Paper* (2013); Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2206732>.

5 <https://rossingcenter.org/>

religious sites and learning about contested histories. We then took in the north of Israel, visiting Nazareth and the archaeological site of Sepphoris before staying in Tiberias to visit the Biblical sites around Galilee. The return south would enter the West Bank, spending a night with families in Bethlehem, visiting the Aida Refugee Camp and learning about life under the occupation. Participants would encounter each other's worship, attending a mosque in Nazareth that permits non-Muslim visitors, an Arabic-speaking Roman Catholic church, and a synagogue in West Jerusalem which arranged for our students to be hosted in the homes of its members for a Shabbat meal. Throughout the trip, the group met with individuals and organizations who are seeking to build bridges across religious divides such as the Parents Circle, which brings together bereaved families on both sides of the conflict, and Roots, an organization in the West Bank striving for coexistence.⁶ Time was allocated each day to the sharing of reflections in diverse groups. The whole group would meet around one month after return to the UK for a facilitated debrief on their experience.

The curating of a program such as this is both an enormous responsibility and an impossible task. Accusations of imbalance or “normalization” of unjust political realities are unavoidable. The constraints are multiple, from where it is physically safe to take a group of young people, to questions about what meetings might be reputationally too risky for the university. A longer, more ambitious program would engage participants in co-creation of the itinerary. Unable to do this, we sought to engage students in an active interrogation of the program itinerary, maintaining the conversation about whose voices were not heard, what logistical or political realities might have led to that, and how we could address these absences.

Encountering Difference within Asymmetries of Power

In line with most peacebuilding educational programs, our program adopted an encounter-based pedagogy. This approach expresses faith in the process of people coming together face to face, deconstructing mutual prejudices, and developing trust and empathy through affinity and shared dignity rooted in their common humanity. This is indeed what programs hope for, and sometimes it is realized; but too often this hope translates into a naïve optimism that attributes intrinsic transformational properties to interpersonal and intergroup contact.⁷ Proponents of a more realistic contact hypothesis

6 www.theparentscircle.org; www.friendsoroots.net

7 This view is often characterized as the naïve lay representation of Allport's Contact

assert that for personal group-based prejudices to be deconstructed rather than reinforced, certain conditions must be met: equal status, ongoing interaction, mutual dependence, and institutional support.⁸

Attempts to employ contact hypothesis insights within the context of Israel-Palestine have been identified as problematic as its power asymmetries and seeming intractability violate necessary conditions for effective and ethical contact.⁹ This is not to say that it is impossible or without merit, but greater attention should be paid to form and context. In his investigation of various contact models within the Israel-Palestine context, Maoz argues that the narrative-storytelling model, one that combines interpersonal interaction with a mutual exploration of social identities and power, is associated with increased trust, empathy, and appreciation for complexity.¹⁰ A primary purpose of our program was to expose, through direct encounter, participants from a range of religious, national, and political identities to people and places that challenged their own simplified narratives of the conflict, encouraging more expanded and complex ones.

Choosing to apply this model to a student educational program from an elite global north institution is not without its complications. First, as Christine Hong cautiously notes, “designing interpersonal interreligious and intercultural experiences can be tenuous. If educators are not careful, student learning can occur on the backs of minoritized people”.¹¹ If a program like this is to be ethical and of value, at the bare minimum all participants and educators must reflect on the effect they have on those that they encounter and consider behaviors and interaction norms that mitigate harm. Ideally, they should also have a clear vision for how learning positively contributes to an ecology of peace. Second, programs that pursue *appreciating complexity* as an explicit objective can fall foul of colluding with existing

Hypothesis; Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

- 8 Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 49, no. 1 (1998): 65–85.
- 9 John Dixon, Kevin Durrheim, and Colin Tredoux, “Beyond the Optimal Contact Strategy: A Reality Check for the Contact Hypothesis,” *The American Psychologist* 60, no.1 (2005): 697–711.
- 10 Ifat Maoz, “Does Contact Work in Protracted Asymmetrical Conflict? Appraising 20 Years of Reconciliation Aimed Encounters Between Israeli Jews and Palestinians,” *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no.1 (2011): 115–125.
- 11 Christine Hong, “Experiential Learning and Skills Transfer: An Anticolonial Response to Jones and Meyer,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 36, no. 1 (2022): 97–103.

system justifications and inertia. This is the criticism implied in accusations of “faithwashing.” Just as interpersonal exchange must incorporate “a more structural approach that challenges and unsettles normative thinking,” appreciating complexity must be complemented with tools to navigate it and reimagine action informed by expanded realities.¹² Third, exposure to narrative-disrupting voices must be taken seriously from a practical, pastoral, and political perspective. If students are exposed to situations in which they feel physically or psychologically unsafe, then this has been shown to entrench worldview defense and become self-defeating.¹³ Related to this, educators retain a duty of care to participants, mitigating risks and a responsibility to respond to distress appropriately. Finally, even though encountering fringe and extreme perspectives can be instructive, legal prohibitions and power considerations place necessary limits on who can be encountered and where, as discussed in the previous section.

In light of these considerations, the program’s vision of equipping participants with the skills to lead across difference points to two important concepts: the identification of *conflict ethos* and the cultivation of *identity transcendence*. Through experiential encounter, the program hoped to equip students to identify and subvert a *conflict ethos*. Bar-Tal conceptualizes and lists the societal beliefs that shape the reality of a conflict ethos, including the goal of self-justification, the delegitimization of opponents, and an idyllic framing of peaceful resolution.¹⁴ In our program, we focused on reflective practices that encouraged our participants to identify when these social scripts were being employed by themselves, their cohort, and their interlocutors. Through building deep relationships across faith and other identity intersections, the program hoped to instill a sense of *identity transcendence*. Hamack defines his concept of identity transcendence as discovering “a way to integrate both in-group and out-group¹⁵ into the life story narrative in such a way

12 Marianna Moyaert, “Towards a New Program for Interfaith Learning: Reflections from an Interreligious Educator Working in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 38, no. 1 (2023): 3–15.

13 Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, “The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: a Terror Management Theory,” in *Public Self and Private Self*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Springer, 1986), 189–212.

14 Daniel Bar-Tal, “From Intractable Conflict Through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: a Psychological Analysis,” *Political Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2000): 351–365.

15 We understand in-groups and out-groups here within the framework of Social Identity Theory expounded by Tajfel and Turner; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Hall Publishers, 1986), 7–24.

that does not threaten the in-group and his or her identification with it.”¹⁶ Our program deliberately chose to foreground the faith identities of our participants and their interlocutors to meet a recognized absence in most programming and discourses on the conflict.¹⁷ Identity transcendence here does not equate to multiple religious belonging.¹⁸ Participants are invited to deepen their own religious convictions through a fuller understanding of other religious beliefs and experiences, described by Awad as “acquiring an inherently critical and reforming self-examination; an in-depth fathoming of one’s own religious identity.”¹⁹

It is through the integration of these two concepts that we arrived at a more specific articulation of our program objective: *to invite and instill a posture of identity transcendence, through encounter with diverse religious and political interlocutors, that equips participants with the awareness to identify a conflict ethos, the confidence to challenge it, and the imagination to envisage pathways to alternative realities.*

Evaluating Identity Transcendence

After each *Interfaith Encounter* program, participants were invited to follow up with an immediate evaluation. Hammack identifies three key indicators of identity transcendence: (1) cognitive ability to understand the identity needs of out-groups; (2) willingness to challenge in-group master narrative; and (3) integration of in-group and out-group narrative that does not threaten in-group membership.²⁰ In our immediate post-program evaluations, most participants exhibited these key indicators of identity transcendence through narrative reflections and follow up conversations. They would exhibit a clear understanding and recognition of out-group narratives, and they would express critical concerns of their own in-group’s position having seen for

16 Phillip Hammack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: the Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 272.

17 Peter Dziedic, “Re-approaching Interreligious Engagement in Israel/Palestine: Moving Beyond Questions of Religious Identity and Experience,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 11, no. 1 (2013): 34–41.

18 Rachel A. Heath, “Multiple Religious Belonging and Theologies of Multiplicity: Confluences of Oneness and Porosity,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): 23–36.

19 Najib G. Awad, “The ‘End of Dialogue’ and Christian-Muslim Interrelations: Dialogue as Self-Perception Venue,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 32, no. 1 (2021): 5–20.

20 Hammack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity*, 272.

themselves inconsistencies between distant representations and the realities they experienced.

Examples of participant reflections from past contemporaneous evaluations include: (1) “The trip exposed me to many different viewpoints, realities, life experiences, and histories. There is no clear-cut, black and white way of looking at the conflict;” and (2) “Some of the opinions and assumptions that I held were confirmed and verified, while others were challenged. I was faced with facts that were incredibly difficult to accept, but I also left with a higher sense of understanding and therefore a stronger ability to make sense.” However, evidence suggests that the sustainability of such identity transformations cannot be taken for granted. In his own research, Hamack found that identity transcendence had somewhat faded for his studied program participants on return to their original contexts.²¹ Our research set out to investigate how much our program was affected by this phenomenon and, for those who retain a sense of identity transcendence, how it manifests in their lives years afterwards.

We designed a time-intensive qualitative online survey for all 108 program alumni. They were asked to complete written narrative responses to question prompts based on the three indicators of identity transcendence. Additionally, alumni could participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview with one of the researchers. Given the complexity of what we were measuring, we opted to gather responses exhibiting depth and nuance rather than surface level measures facilitating a larger sample size. We received twelve completed surveys (average response length 622 words) and conducted seven in-depth interviews (average length 48 minutes) with contributions from all cohorts except the 2013–14 pilot program.²² There was balanced faith and gender representation amongst respondents. Our survey yielded three Jewish, four Muslim, and five Christian responses with these equally distributed amongst gender (F=6, M=6). Our interviewees were similarly distributed with two Jewish, two Muslim, and three Christian respondents (F=4, M=3). In total, eleven different national identities were represented in our samples.

Assessing impact in this way brings with it positionality and ethical considerations as well as the risk of inherent selection bias. As educators

21 Hamack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity*, 310–320.

22 Retaining contact information and details of this and other cohorts was significantly affected by General Data Protection Regulation legislation and reduced our pool of prospective research participants. All student participation was informed and voluntary.

with continuing relationships with alumni, residual power dynamics and politeness norms risked limiting the honesty of feedback. In our data collection we took measures to invite and encourage critical reflections and anonymous methods for doing so. In addition, the time-intensive nature of our survey and interviews make it likely that our respondents were largely drawn from a sub-set of participants who retain positive affect for their experiences and alignment with the program ethos. Despite these limitations, we believe investigating the extent and manifestation of identity transcendence within this subset provides valuable insight into what can be achieved with the most engaged participants, who themselves attest to the transformative impact of the program.

Extent and Retention of Identity Transcendence

Our survey data suggest that our respondents exhibit and have retained a substantial sense of identity transcendence. In the hand-coding of prompt responses, all exhibited high or medium expressions of each indicator with none demonstrating low or negative associations.²³ Indicators would be categorized as low if there was no explicit mention of or negative association with relevant semantic content. Explicit reference to indicators would be categorized as high if it was repeated or exhibited similarity to exemplar definitional statements—for example, Indicator 3: “I can validate and recognize the pain the other group experiences and that should not negate my own group belonging” (Jewish female respondent). This has been summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

	Indicator 1 Cognitive ability to understand identity needs of out-group			Indicator 2 Willingness to challenge in-group master narrative			Indicator 3 Integration of in-group and out-group narratives that doesn't threaten in-group membership		
	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low
All respondents (12 of 108 eligible)	8	4	-	6	6	-	9	3	-

23 A qualitative coding framework was developed to evaluate survey transcripts on the three indicators of identity transcendence using a method of content analysis developed by: Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (California: Sage, 2013).

When assessing prevalence of identity transcendence as a core impact indicator, we must be skeptical of the direct effect our program has had on participants. This could be affected by program selection criteria, with a potential skew for participants who already exhibit identity transcendence to some degree, and independent events and experiences since the program. As such, accompanying each identity transcendence indicator question, participants were directly asked to reflect and attribute relevant impact for this position to their program experience. The majority of participants attributed their identity transcendence either to a great or partial extent to the program (75% Indicator 1; 58% Indicator 2; 92% Indicator 3). The results of this are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

	Indicator 1			Indicator 2			Indicator 3		
	Program attribution			Program attribution			Program attribution		
	Great extent	Partly	Not at all	Great extent	Partly	Not at all	Great extent	Partly	Not at all
All respondents (12 of 108 eligible)	4	5	3	3	4	5	7	4	1

Our survey analysis indicates that our subset of alumni continue to exhibit a strong level of identity transcendence and that a substantial majority of them attribute this greatly or partially to their program experience. Even though we cannot make unfounded inferences about the wider alumni cohort, our ongoing engagement with our program network indicates similar positive impact through testimonies and correspondence. Even if this experience is not shared more broadly, the extent of this impact on 11% of the cohort is a highly positive finding.

How Identity Transcendence is Cultivated and How It Is Manifesting

Having established the existence and durability of identity transcendence within our program participants, we next sought to understand how this had been cultivated in the program, how it was now manifesting in their lives, and what this indicates about the program and wider implications for peace education more generally. In our thematic analysis of the narrative survey submissions and interview transcripts, we noticed three areas of convergence

amongst our respondents and two areas of divergence that are indicative of a program that gathers people from diverse identity experiences into an intense, time-limited shared experience.

Convergence 1: Safe-Stretch Container

The program invited students of widely diverse perspectives on a journey (literal and metaphorical) to explore what is perhaps the most divisive issue on university campuses today. For many participants, some encounters were not merely intellectually challenging but emotionally destabilizing, even frightening. The fundamental responsibility of the program leaders was, therefore, to enable the development of an ethos of trust and mutual support within the cohort that can allow for worldviews to be stretched, while supportively containing the reactions to difficult experiences and allowing them to be received positively. An example was given by one of our Jewish interviewees as he recounts the experience of visiting the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem:

Refugee camps are places that many Jews are made to fear because of the place they hold...as the forefront of resistance to Israeli occupation. That carries a lot for people who are brought up in Jewish/Zionist frameworks and who visit Israel in those frameworks. So it was a bit of an opening up of a black box of something I hadn't been exposed to before, been shielded from. And it was the perfect environment to do that in, in a group and an environment that I felt very safe in and then going to a place that at least psychologically I had been made to feel was not safe for me.

Many elements go into creating the safe-stretch container. The preparatory sessions establish boundaries and are designed to build relationship across the different groups. Crucially, they also allow participants to build their trust in the leadership so that they can enter the program with confidence that it has been thought out and will not place them in situations of unrealistic emotional labor or danger. Nonetheless, challenging and provocative encounters are integral to the experience, and regular sharing circles allow difficult experiences to be aired through the course of the trip. The informal sharing and support across difference within the cohort is perhaps most important. One Muslim participant remarked on the importance of the coach journeys: "It was in those rides I had really deep conversations with

everyone and properly got challenged on my views and the fact that we were able to connect with each other on a human level, which I think is the first step before you can consider changing your view.”

These coach journeys, with their sense of travelling together as a group in time that was unregulated by the program, instilled the feeling of “equal status” and “common goals” that Allport identified as two of his four conditions of effective encounter across difference.²⁴ For our participants, being together in the shared space of the coach reinforced their mutual bond as LSE students. One participant remarked, “I think the one thing that tied it all together is having something in common, there has to be something in common at the beginning, and all of us were LSE students, and we had that shared approach to learning, that brought us together in a way.” This was literally signified in the LSE logo-emblazoned hoodies which most participants wore throughout the trips. These were a visual manifestation of the joint identity creation that was taking place underpinning the formation of the safe-stretch container.

Convergence 2: Firm-Listening

Identity transcendence involves building the confidence to challenge a conflict ethos by hearing, engaging with, and integrating the perspectives of the out-group. This is very countercultural on the topic of Israel-Palestine, where positions are entrenched and people frequently told that activism is a moral imperative. We invited participants to listen to the voices of those with whom they disagree in a way that perhaps recognizes the limits of their own agency but deepens their understanding as the basis for a new kind of engagement with this and other conflicts.

Central to that is the realization that understanding a position with which you disagree does not make you complicit in it or even any less opposed to it. A female Muslim student who acknowledged growing up in an antisemitic environment where Zionism was viewed as an unjustifiable evil, described the profound impact of the program on her approach to disagreement through the simple experience of listening: “I feel like I want to listen now. I want to listen more... Just in the way I see the world, it transformed it, in a lot of ways. The way I see people. Maybe before I used to demonize people or dehumanize people. Now I don't. The biggest evil I ever knew, I've been able to understand it.”

²⁴ Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*.

Nonetheless, within the shrill campus debates about free speech, this listening is not without conditions, hence the term “firm listening.” Our participants felt that they benefited from being exposed to positions they found objectionable, but they in no way wanted to legitimize them or support the general promotion of these views in uncontrolled contexts. A female Armenian Christian remarked, “I think free speech is a fundamental right, and real reconciliation only comes after hard, messy and honest conversation. But, without the right format and common goals, perpetrators of social injustice can ignite violence and more injustice with their stories.”

Both these examples illustrate the sophisticated integration of narratives that takes place in identity transcendence. Alternative narratives are far from simply accepted. Rather, they are held in tension through a sensitive description of limits and norms. Luce Irigaray describes this as a “double listening. . . to the language in which we already dwell, but also to the saying that the other addresses to us.” The voices are not conflated but held in critical tension, “taking the risk to open one’s own world in order to move forward to meet with another world.”²⁵

Building the courage and confidence to listen to an opinion that angers or disturbs us is central to the program. It seeks to replace certainty with a curiosity that grows as we learn to calm our emotional responses and pay attention to our opponents. As one Pentecostal Christian participant said, “we were there as a group of people who had a curiosity.” Another commented, “The program showed me that everyone has their story. All have their narrative and reasons behind their views and perspective.” But our firm-listeners were keen to avoid the relativization or equivalence of any opinion expressed.

Convergence 3: Strategic Empathy

This firm listening is clearly not oriented towards conclusive resolution of disagreement. Empathy was built, but it did not equate to agreement and was often viewed within a wider framework as a necessary condition of achieving just goals. This we are calling *strategic empathy*, a crucial vehicle for identifying a conflict ethos and illustrative of our first indicator: cognitive ability to understand the identity needs of out-groups.

There was evidence of a genuine empathy that participants developed with people of opposing views, both within the group and among those they

25 Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008), 11

met on the trip. A female Muslim described the Israeli occupation saying, “I can both firmly oppose it, and even take actions to undo this act, whilst placing myself in the head of the perpetrator to try to understand why this might have been done.”

There was, therefore, more pragmatism than sentimentality about this empathy. Interviewees described how this limited form of empathy has not led them to a place of agreement, but might be harnessed to foster peaceful relations. A male Muslim student with strong pro-Palestinian sympathies recognized this limited empathy as a tool for moving things forward: “I did understand the Israeli-Zionist perspective much more than I had before, not that I agreed with it, but I could understand where they were coming from.” Again, the needs of the out group are understood, but not condoned.

An Evangelical Christian participant identified the building of empathy as a project of building relationships rather than resolving disagreement. Asked in general terms about how we should engage with perpetrators of injustice, he responded:

Of course, often there is a clear perpetrator and a clear victim. But even in these situations it is worth asking, why did the perpetrator commit the crime? Is he simply evil? Or, while still guilty, were there forces outside of him that urged him into that action? Without these questions, without hearing all perspectives, our understanding of a situation will be limited, and therefore our ability to achieve justice hampered.

A female Muslim participant placed a similar emphasis on the necessity of understanding for sustainable justice: “It is counter-productive to ignore the perpetrators. Their justifications need to be effectively counteracted in order to ensure an enduring peace. Their fears need to be understood.”

Divergence 1: Balanced or Normalizing?

Depending on social group membership, some participants faced obstacles in maintaining an integration of out-group narratives without having their in-group status questioned. Representatives from some groups spoke about a phenomenon of resistance from within their communities to their insights and a perception that they were now somehow “compromised.” This was true in communities suspicious of interfaith initiatives more broadly:

I was surprised at some of the negative comments that I got from some of my evangelical colleagues at the time who effectively criticized me for engaging in an interfaith trip. They said that the very fact that the word *interfaith* was used was an admission that all faiths are equal and that there's no absolute truth. And here I am thinking that's not what it means and not what we were taught.

This was also experienced by those whose co-religionists felt they had been duped by more political agendas in the trip, whether they were perceived to be pro-Zionist or pro-Palestinian. A male Muslim reflected on his return, "People thought I did have that sort of opinion, that's much more pro-Israeli and much more empathetic towards Zionists than I really did...the suspicion was that it's Israeli propaganda."

Not only was the experience of returning to reality after the program heavily influenced by group identities and associated knowledge systems, participants' own personal reflections on the program framing and ethics also somewhat correlated with religious worldviews. Some students themselves looked back uncomfortably on elements of the trip that they now felt masked the reality of the conflict from view. A female Muslim student remarked, "There was so much that was normalized that should not have been normalized." Another Muslim participant remarked simply, "Academically and emotionally, I felt uneasy about the program." A female Christian student felt that it was easier to feel positive about both sides since the most extreme positions in the conflict were absent from the program. "It kind of makes you feel like there's no issue. If everyone you meet seems reasonable, where is it coming from?" Multiple Christian participants shared this reflection on the lack of extreme voices and even a wish for greater exposure to them so as to understand the conflict more fully.

In contrast, a male Jewish participant reflected "I don't think the program shied away from anything, which a lot of programs do...there are always more pieces of the puzzle to put together, but for a [short] trip it did a pretty good job and I'm not sure what I would take out to put something else in." Another female Jewish participant remarked "I thought it was a really good range [of voices that we met] we got kind of as radical as we could without endorsing violence on both sides...So I feel like all different perspectives were offered and I was quite pleased with it."

This perception divergence in the grain of religious worldviews raises an interesting dilemma for the program: how to maintain a safe-stretch container for all participants and their social identities without colluding

with or reinforcing problematic perceptions through exposure and omission. Different groups have different perceptions about who they feel equipped to hear, who is beyond acceptable bounds, whose absence is deafening, and what all of that implies about the conveners' positionality.

There is no program that can satisfy these competing and irreconcilable perceptions. Nor should there be. Discomfort is one of the tools necessary to expand and develop worldviews as it loosens and challenges core foundational assumptions. Who bears the burden of discomfort and to what degree? The approach of this program is to hold divergent perceptions and build trust through transparency by directly encouraging participants to engage with and critique the program's master narrative to further develop the identity transcendence competency. Participants are encouraged to be firm in their listening and strategic in their empathy, with the organizers as much as with each other and their interlocutors. In particular, the program was annually adjusted in collaboration with alumni challenges to our approach.

This method appears to be supported by the fact that none of our students who expressed robust and critical challenges to the program regretted taking part. One student in fact strengthened in her interfaith commitments as a result: "It also helped to shape my own interfaith work afterwards. I wish perhaps I had been doing more interfaith work before going on the trip to understand the religious dimension of things, more than just the political...I had many lovely memories and made good friends as a result of the program."

Most recognized the constraints within which such a program operates (security, counter-terrorism law, limits of time, and feasibility) and felt it had been a formative experience, shaping how they view this conflict and life more broadly. Even those who had become more engaged in activism on one side since returning understood the balanced approach of the program and saw its benefit: "The Faith Centre understands what a high stakes issue it is and it wants to help people engage with it in a healthy way rather than taking any particular position on things."

Divergence 2: Optimism, Pessimism and Hope?

A second aspect of post-trip divergence was the differing views participants developed of the possibilities for the region based on the same experiences. Common among participants was a sense that the intractable complexities they had encountered had taken away any optimism they may have had

about sustainable peace in the near future. This was particularly true among participants who had previously been shielded from the scale or strength of an opposing view. Having engaged with Palestinians for the first time, one male Jewish participant reflected that, “I had become much more pessimistic and anxious about the future.” A female Muslim participant felt that the experience “made me feel more hopeless about there being a meaningful way to bring about change.”

This kind of confrontation with reality is, of course, no bad thing. Recognizing the extent and embedded nature of a conflict ethos is an important antidote to hubristic peacebuilding attempts, arguably the most harmful form of intervention. It also can provide a reorientation for the site of meaningful action. If a student has an acute sense of realism about what can be achieved in the region and on what timescale, this fundamentally challenges many campus activism approaches that can reinforce appetites for simplistic and one-sided solutions. Three of our participants, one from each Abrahamic faith, who had adopted this more pessimistic outlook after the program, set up a student society on campus dedicated to engaging student activists from different campaigning positions to consider the unintended consequences of simplistic activism inspired by the repeated message they received from interlocutors in the region that “it doesn’t serve us, or you, to import our conflict onto your campus.”

However, if these “easy answers” were lost, most participants expressed the sense that they had encountered—in each other and in those whom they had met in the region—new modes of engagement that presented possibilities for a shared future. If conventional liberal peacebuilding methods were deemed to have failed, the centering of the interreligious encounter represented a new approach that did offer hope for the future which motivated participants themselves to new kinds of action beyond the partisan campus activism. A female Armenian Christian participant said of the program, it “makes me hopeful by reminding me that at our core, in our most innocent state, we want to find kinship not adversaries...I have so much hope and inspiration for action fostered by this program.”

In summary, we can say that the program was destructive of the easy answers and political naivety that participants previously encountered on campus. It cannot be said, therefore, that the majority came back optimistic about peace between Israel and Palestine. But what they do seem to have experienced is an expansion of imagination, such that they were no longer constrained to operate within the social imaginary of their in-group but could see potential for constructive interaction between different, even

competing, social imaginaries.²⁶ We might hope that graduates from the London School of Economics might one day use these insights to bring about peace in the Middle East. But more immediately, we have seen how this expansion of imagination has contributed (at least until October 2023) to the strengthening of cohesive pluralism on the LSE campus, and in the interfaith and peacebuilding work graduates of the program have gone on to engage in.

Conclusion and Key Findings

Our research sought to understand the multifaceted expressions of identity transcendence that emerge from an intense encounter program in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict and to assess its durability. Our data confirm the persistence and development of identity transcendence over time in our alumni respondents, and that they themselves attribute this significantly to the program. Our research has also shown that, when provided with a carefully curated container, identity transcendence can flourish and manifest as firm listening and strategic empathy—behaviors that can be drawn upon as effective tools and competencies that further peaceful and productive dialogue outcomes. The more expansive imagination and understanding that results from identity transcendence seeded internal and interpersonal tensions. In particular, they experienced narrative-disrupting encounters that questioned foundational positions on program balance and prospects for peace. While our participants necessarily continue to navigate these in divergent ways, all demonstrated a commitment to, and capacity for, dialogical reasoning with an expanded nexus of positions and persons that informs their evolving understandings.

Finally, with interfaith practitioners particularly in mind, we offer the follow core insights that we learned through the running of this program and our subsequent research that may be of benefit to those attempting to undertake similar work within Higher Education or other community settings.

First, we are concerned that much interfaith work becomes unnecessarily limited by the setting of too strong an ideological agenda or narrow modes of engagement. Our modally plural approach allowed students to participate for a number of different reasons and from a range of perspectives, even more close-minded/sectarian ones. Some took part because they wanted

26 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

careers in peacemaking. Others may have seen it as their one opportunity to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque. Our refusal to impose expectations for specified outcomes when they returned meant that any initiatives that did happen arose organically. This built trust in us as leaders and reinforced our belief as a center that engagement in dialogue and peacebuilding does not need to come from a place of political neutrality or equivalence of positions. Clearly, some expectations need to be imposed, not least in terms of acceptable conduct. But we believe many interventions, particularly on Israel and Palestine, fail to engage as broadly and effectively as they should because of the implicit or explicit imposition of liberal, dialogical modes of engagement that fail to take into account the totality of participants' beliefs and commitments.

Second, we favor the pursuit of identity transcendence over the idea that participants should develop hybrid or multiple religious belonging. Crucial to the idea of identity transcendence is that you can develop empathy, even solidarity, with an out-group while not impairing your sense of belonging to an in-group. For example, it is perfectly possible to be “a good Jew” while building a strong identification with a Muslim perspective, and so on. This builds on the principles of the modally plural approach. To engage in dialogue and peacebuilding is not to enter a new category of belonging; it is to build a new set of skills, capacities, and insights that enhance your current identity and set of commitments. This idea needs to run through an interfaith intervention, particularly if it is to be an enduring transformation. Accusations from co-religionists that “you’ve sold out” need to be met with the confidence that your identity has expanded, not contracted, as you have listened and built empathy with opponents.

Third, in line with our understanding of “expanded imagination,” we believe that this kind of engagement with intractable religion-related conflict will not be oriented towards consensus-building around shared political aims. Perhaps all this kind of work can do is lay the foundation for a new political paradigm. Our research showed that it is possible to expand imagination from in-group to out-groups, and that this requires an expanded skillset. An attention to the conditions within which these skills of listening and empathy can be cultivated should be the focus of any interfaith intervention. Improving the quality of our listening is perhaps the only goal worth pursuing.

Our program had many particularities, not least the particularities of the LSE and the center out of which we ran this program. It may be impossible for another institution to replicate it. Indeed, the devastating events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military response in Gaza,

may make it impossible for us to replicate it in the future. Nonetheless, this research has demonstrated that we continue to learn from the experiences of these trips, and these insights resource the ongoing work of our center on the LSE campus and beyond. We share our findings in the hope they may also contribute to the wider academic and practical debates about effective engagement with intractable religion-related conflict. In an age where such conflicts appear to be spreading, there are few more important areas of inquiry.

***James Walters** is the founding director of the LSE Faith Centre and a professor in practice in the London School of Economics International Relations Department*

***Cameron Howes** is a former programs manager at LSE Faith Centre. He is now a senior international policy adviser at the British Academy.*



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

ARTICLE

Resisting Oppression Creatively: Counter-stories as Expressions of Resistance among Religious Minorities in Finnish schools

Milena Parland and Nora Repo-Saeed

Abstract

Pessimism regarding our ability to address problems such as the exclusion of, or hatred towards, minorities persists in today's world. This article explores tangible methods to counteract this pessimism, particularly in educational settings where children are involved. We present a case study from Finland that examines the role of religious minorities in Finnish schools and their strategies for resisting social pressure and overcoming experiences of exclusion. Our study draws on material from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine teachers who provide Religious Education (RE) to students belonging to religious minorities aged 7 to 18. It focuses on their narratives concerning instruction, creativity, artistic endeavors, resistance to marginalization and, in some cases, oppression, within the confines of the school milieu. These accounts are scrutinized through the lens of Critical Race Theory. In the analytical sections, we investigate the visibility of religious minorities in public schools, the incorporation of religious celebrations in the school milieu, and the burgeoning determination to assert one's rights as a member of a religious minority. We conclude that this kind of counter-storytelling and artistic events organized by the minorities themselves have fostered a collective sense of achievement, meaningfulness, and inclusion within the schools.

Keywords

religious minorities, Critical Race Theory, counter-storytelling, Finland, public schools

This article investigates approaches that appear to enhance respectful coexistence. We explore the day-to-day experiences of religious minorities in Finnish schools through the prism of counter-storytelling, a method derived from Critical Race Theory. Our inquiry seeks to determinate whether artistic and creative activities can positively impact the daily experiences of religious minorities in Finnish schools.

In Europe, racism and racist policies build on a long and influential historical legacy that colors contemporary history of science, literature, popular culture, societal norms and attitudes, everyday thinking, and political practices.¹ The era of Crusades in the Middle Ages contributed to Europe's construction of stereotypical images of what was understood as Other and the question of religion was centrally placed in this, as it meant increasing antisemitism and anti-Muslim attitudes.² This process of creating an idea of the "Other" is a politically important tool that could be and still is used to exclude and include.³ The year 1492 represented a major turning point, when Europe became aware of indigenous lands across the Atlantic. This launched a development that connected the continents and made emerge a cultural framework through which people, places, and phenomena were seen, described, and represented.⁴

The voyages of "discovery" were closely linked to early history of racism, colonialism, subjugation of indigenous people, slavery, and the greatest genocide known to human history as the European expansion to other continents was an extremely violent process. The voyages of "discovery," European expansion, and the threat that Ottomans represented for Europe contributed in a crucial manner to the formation of Western

1 Pekka Isaksson and Jouko Jokisalo, *Kallonnmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa* (Helsinki: Rosebud/Rauhanpuolustajat, 2018), 7; Minna Seikkula and Pauline Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," in *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja koloniaalisuus Suomessa*, eds. Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula and Faith Mkwasha (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021), 160.

2 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonnmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa*, 48–53.

3 Paul Lappalainen, *Det blågula glashuset – strukturell diskriminering i Sverige. Betänkande från Utredningen om strukturell diskriminering på grund av etnisk eller religiös tillhörighet* (Stockholm: Statens Offentliga Utredningar SOU 2005:56), 192.

4 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonnmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa*, 45.

mentality. Europeans started to perceive the representatives of other cultures as potential conquerors and oppressors. Hidden and open racism permeated the ways in which the populations of European colonial powers reacted to indigenous populations in the territories under their control.⁵ European enlightenment philosophers contributed to outlining the idea of modern racism that was used to justify exploitation and enslavement by placing the white man above nature.⁶

Finland is often perceived as an outsider in this colonial history and history of racism, and aspects related to these two are placed on some faraway locations outside Finnish territory. However, racism is not unknown to Finnish society, on the contrary it is deeply rooted in its structures, policies, and practices.⁷ Historically and geographically important for the Finnish racial system have been interactions and identity construction in relation to Sámi (on Finnish territory) and Russians (outside and inside Finnish territory), for example. In the framework of this system, the Finnish white majority holds a dominant position and aims at racializing other groups.⁸

Finnish state, population, and enterprises have abused their positions of power, participated in the creation and maintenance of global inequalities, and oppressed minorities such as Sámi and Roma present on Finnish territory. The history of Finland includes involvement in colonialism, production of hierarchical classifications based on race and culture, and assimilation policies aiming at fading out minority cultures.⁹ An individual who lives in a society built on the oppression of some groups of people cannot somehow place racism outside herself, which means that she inevitably is part of it.¹⁰ A person born in Finland becomes part of its racial system, in which the white majority forms the dominant group that aims at racializing other groups and keeping them outside of positions of power by

5 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa*, 45–47.

6 Riina Tanskanen and Samu Kuoppa, *Kapitalismin suuri illuusio*, (Helsinki: Into Kustannus, 2023), 127–129.

7 Suvi Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin," in *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja koloniaalisuus Suomessa*, eds. Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula and Faith Mkwesha (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021), 69; Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 150.

8 Vesa Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press, 2011), 268–269; Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 149.

9 Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin," 70.

10 Tanskanen and Kuoppa, *Kapitalismin suuri illuusio*, 152; Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 268.

implementing diverse racist practices.¹¹ However, racializing hierarchies in Finland have been understood as something unaffiliated with Finnish society, and racism as a phenomenon that concerns marginal groups and manifests only in exceptional occasions.¹²

Thus, the processes of organizing people into categories based on their presumed features are firmly integrated into the history of Europe—and Finland makes no exception. These categories are often used in justifying the attitudes that people have towards the groups that they consider to be “differing” from the norm, such as minorities.¹³ In Finland, the norm, or access to the majoritarian culture, which could also be expressed as the representation or understanding of Finnishness or the “Finnish race,” is often linked to language, place of birth, ancestry, and religion. In the Finnish context, religion mainly refers to the Protestant Evangelical Lutheran Church, which has been present in the country since the Reformation in the 16th century. There is also a strong tendency to perceive Finnishness as a quality that unites inseparably nation, territory, and culture. This tendency refers to Finnishness as something that defines Finns as people who are born and grow up in Finland, who through bloodline and culture can be “recognized” as Finns.¹⁴ To temper the nationalistic edge of such view, researchers have pondered alternative ways in which to understand the question of citizenship, and through that also the question of belonging in a broader sense, as a more neutral state granted right, not in such an emphasized manner connected to territory, origin, culture, or bloodline.¹⁵ Due to this strong connection, social inclusion and social privileges that follow them seem often to be granted only to those who belong to the majority and can share majoritarian characteristics. Additionally, one can observe that being part of these tends to be accessible only by birth and therefore they cannot be acquired.

11 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 268–269.

12 Seikkula and Hortelano, “Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa,” 150–151.

13 Cf. Lappalainen, *Det blågula glashuset – strukturell diskriminering i Sverige*, 99; Anna Pöysä, *Portugalin pimeä puoli*. (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2018), 11–12.

14 Erna Bodström, “Welcome to Fantasy Finland”: *Integration as a Cultural Process in Information Packages of Finnish Ministries in years 2000–2018*, (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2020), 15; Laura Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen: marginalisoiva kategorisointi ja maahanmuuttajien vastastrategiat,” in *Puhua vastaan ja vaieta. Newottelu kulttuurisista marginaaleista*, eds. Arja Jokinen, Laura Huttunen and Anna Kulmala (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2004), 134–154, 135. Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 69.

15 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 136.

Unity or Diversity: The Idea of Multicultural Finland

In 2024, Lutheran Christians represented 63.6% of Finland's population, Orthodox Christians 1%, others 1.8%, and secular or unknown groups 33%. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these statistics had been: Lutherans 98%, Orthodox 1.7%, and others 0.2%.¹⁶ The category of "others" includes Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and other believers registered in parishes or religious groupings in Finland. We can perceive two parallel Finnish historical discourses connected to faith and nation. One discourse underlines unity in one faith and one nation; the other stresses acknowledgement of religious diversity.

The Peace Treaty of Westphalia brought religious tolerance to the European mainland in 1648, but it did not reach the Nordic countries. In Finnish territory, Catholicism was prohibited by law from 1599 to 1783; practicing Catholicism led to a death penalty.¹⁷ In the 17th century, some 50,000 Orthodox Christians fled from Finland to Russia because of Lutheran propaganda and conversion campaigns run by the authorities.¹⁸ Jews were not allowed to enter the territory unless they converted, at least formally. Yet research indicates that the reality was more polyphonic. In the region of Karelia near the Russian border, the authorities had to maintain a balance between the ideally purely Lutheran country and the reality of a multireligious state—or at least a religious duality. In Karelian areas with Orthodox dominance, some Lutherans converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 17th century, even though it was forbidden.¹⁹

From a minority perspective, this demonstrates that cultural and religious blending might occur on the local level, contrary to official state policies. In 1809, Finland was annexed to the Russian Empire. Under the rule of the Russian czar, Jews, Muslim Tatars, and Orthodox Christians

16 Statistics Finland, *Finland in Figures 2024* (Helsinki: Statistics Finland), <https://toolbox.finland.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/09/finland-in-figures-2024.pdf>.

17 B. Boëthius, 'Zacharias Olai Anthelius', *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon*, urn:Sbl:18738. <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Start.aspx>.

18 Veijo Saloheimo, *Pohjois-Karjalan historia. 2. 1617–1721*, (Joensuu: Karjalaisen kulttuurin edistämisseätiö Joensuun korkeakoulun kirjasto, [jakaja] Joensuun korkeakoulu, 1976).

19 Teuvo Laitila, "Coercion, Cooperation, Conflicts and Contempt: Orthodox-Lutheran Relations in Swedish-Occupied Kexholm County, Karelia, in the Seventeenth Century," *Entangled Religions* 11 (1) (2020).

established their communities.²⁰ Development of the school education system started in the 1860s. An important figure in this development was a Lutheran clergyman Uno Cygneaus, who is also known as the father figure of Finnish elementary education. Clergymen—pietists, especially—were active in the framework of Finnish nationalist and in the twentieth century far right and fascist movements. After the peace treaty with the Soviet Union in 1944, these movements were abolished, but they started to show signs of revitalization again in the 2010s.²¹

In the immediate post-war period, ideas about the purity and excellence of the Finnish nation and race influenced the educational system. Finland had sterilization laws in force from 1935 to 1970 that affected minorities and were implemented more eagerly in the 1950s and 60s. Public schools had the task to sort out children and report to the municipalities on children, who did not comply with the desired standards. Susanna Agge observes that a child with a linguistic background that differed from the mainstream could be sorted out in this way.²² In Finland, conformism is highly valued and the schools have continued to place children in segregated special education in the 2000s. Furthermore, special education has tended to show signs of medicalization. Reasons for placing children there are often due to diagnoses such as dysphasia or neurodiversity.²³ What has this culture of classification meant for religious minorities in Finland? Until now there is no comprehensive research conducted on the matter—contrary to Sweden, where research focusing on minorities, religious affiliation, and forced sterilizations has been published.²⁴

It can be challenging to discuss religious minorities in the Finnish educational context, as many want school to be a space perceived as

-
- 20 Ruth Illman, Kimmo Ketola and Riitta Latvio, *De många religionernas och åskådningarnas Finland*, ed. by Jussi Sohlberg (Kuopio: Kyrkans forskningscentral, 2017), 109, 121.
- 21 Aapo Roselius, Oula Silvennoinen and Marko Tikka, *Svart gryning: Fascismen i Finland 1918–44*. Translated by Mattias Huss. (Stockholm: Lind & Co, 2018).
- 22 Susanna Agge, "Heikkomielisyyden levenemisen ehkäisy – Sterilointilain vaikutukset Turun kansakouluissa," *Kasvatus & Aika* 8, No. 4 (2014): 55–67.; Markku Mattila, "Suomalainen rotuhygienia," *Tieteessä Tapahtuu* 15, No. 8 (1997); Markku Mattila, "Sterilization Policy and Gypsies in Finland," *Romani Studies* 28 (June 2018):109–39.
- 23 Timo Saloviita, "Inclusive Education in Finland: A Thwarted Development," *Zeitschrift Für Inklusion* 3, No. 1 (2009).
- 24 Terry-Lee Marttinen, "Eugenics, Admixture, and Multiculturalism in Twentieth-Century Northern Sweden: Contesting Disability and Sámi Genocide," *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, No. 2 (2022).

“neutral.” The influences of Western Christianity tend to remain unnoticed, because the entire epistemology is constructed within its domination. Christian normativity is thus dominating educational settings. The attempt by schools to be neutral, staying silent about other religions and religious minorities, might result in “overlooking their value to contribute to knowledge sharing and onto-epistemic diversity.”²⁵ This, for its part, might result in the Western Christian norm dominating and conformism flourishing.

Similar to many European nations, Finnish schools provide Religious Education (RE) to their students. The Finnish non-denominational model for RE has its roots in a historic alliance between the state and the Protestant Evangelical Lutheran Church, with dominant Lutheran instruction evolving over time.²⁶ For example, the two largest churches, Lutheran and Orthodox Christian, differ in fiscal status from other religious groups. Muslim and Jewish communities have been present since the 19th century; religious freedom was introduced in 1923.²⁷

Even though the Nordic countries often are described as secularized and modern, religious traditions exercise a considerable influence. Ingrid Storm points out that European, predominantly Protestant Christian, countries such as Finland, are places where “religion is used to identify with national traditions and ethnic heritage rather than with faith.”²⁸ In this way, affiliation with the Protestant Christian Evangelical Lutheran tradition constitutes a benchmark for being Finnish, even though faith per se is not considered part of Finnishness. This paradox is possible when religious tradition is assimilated into a paradigm of Finnish exceptionalism—a discourse in which Finland has no links to European colonialism and is regarded as permeated with rationalism and modernity. Thus, the dominant religion can be socially deemed “neutral,” while minority religions are problematized as being too

25 Sachi Edwards, “Christian Normativity in Global Higher Education Policy and Practice,” *Comparative Education* 61, No. 1 (2025): 83–101, 13.

26 Silvio Ferrari, “Teaching Religion in the European Union,” in *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. A.B. Seligman (Oxford University Press, 2014), 26, 29.

27 Ruth Illman, Kimmo Ketola, Kimmo, Rütta Latvio and Jussi Sohlberg, *De många religionernas och åskådningarnas Finland*, Kyrkans forskningscentralers webbpublikationer, 51, (Tammerfors: Kyrkans forskningscentral, 2017).

28 Ingrid Storm, “Christian Nations’ Ethnic Christianity and Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Four Western European Countries,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 24, No. 1 (2011): 75.

connected to faith.²⁹ In this article we will use both terms religion and faith. We use the first referring to the religious traditions we focus on in this study, and the second referring both to a tradition and to an inner conviction or belief.

In Finnish schools, the law safeguards religious minorities, providing spaces where they can convene. Consequently, minorities are afforded the opportunity to receive instruction in their respective faiths within public schools.³⁰ If there are at least three students from the same faith community in the same municipality, the instruction should be made available, if the guardians so wish.³¹ “Religious education is a compulsory subject at Finnish schools. Education is non-confessional, and teachers do not have to belong to any denomination.”³² Thus, the curriculum is academically oriented, encompassing human rights education and the study of world religions. The entitlement of specific religious instruction dates back to the early 1920s and has since undergone significant evolution. As of 2021, the Finnish National Agency of Education has sanctioned curricula for fourteen different religious traditions.³³

Multiculturalism can be understood as an idea that the dominant political culture grants recognition in the society to diverse groups, such as minorities, cultural, religious, or ethnic groups. It also “raises important questions for citizens, public administrators, and political leaders about balancing recognition of groups with the interest of the entire society.”³⁴ When one speaks about multicultural society, one can refer to diverse understandings of what it comprises. It however usually gravitates around problematics of having cultures that differ from each other present in one society, and examines what is the importance of these cultures in relation to the concept of citizenship.³⁵ In Finland, the concepts of multiculturalism

29 Harriet Zilliacus and Arto Kallioniemi, “Supporting Minority Belonging: Finnish Minority RE Teacher Perspectives on the Significance of RE,” *Religion & Education*, 42, No. 3 (2015): 350–351.

30 Pasi Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism: The Politics of Diversity in Finland,” in *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, eds. Peter Kivisto and Östen Wahlbeck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 278.

31 Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism”, 280; Finlex, *Perusopetuslaki 21.8.1998/628*, <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980628>.

32 Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism,” 279.

33 Opetushallitus, *Uskonnon oppimäärät*, (Helsinki: Opetushallitus, 2021).

34 Britannica, *Multiculturalism*, *sociology*, 2025.

35 Outi Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi. Monikulttuurisuus, kansalaisuus ja suomalaisuus 1990–luvun maahanmuuttopoliittisessa keskustelussa*, (Helsinki: Suomalaisen

and multicultural society became part of administrative language used in the 1990s.³⁶ As a phenomenon it was mainly considered to be connected to immigration and often detached from other minorities.³⁷ More generally these concepts seemed to be anchored in ethnic groups, and are not used when one referred to just any kind of culture. The concepts were, for example, understood as disconnected from subcultures and not materializing on individual level.³⁸

Otti Lepola argues that even though multiculturalism is appreciated, it is also clearly limited and framed by what is understood as Finnish values and norms.³⁹ Multiculturalism is impregnated with elements that aim at managing and controlling the diversity instead of engaging in a more radical dialogue with others and listening to differing points of view. Thus, multiculturalism is defined and implemented on the terms of Finnish culture and governance.⁴⁰ Differentiated multicultural policies have created in Finland societal circumstances in which members of different minorities hold unequal positions.⁴¹

Multiculturalism that opposes itself to cultural assimilation tends to represent groups as more unified than they actually are. Therefore, it might be that minority groups are put into positions in which they need to somehow show proof of their authenticity, which can be an obstacle for border-crossing and interaction between different groups and in turn offer fertile ground for stereotypes.⁴² Furthermore, the member of a minority group might be perceived only through his or her culture, or religion, which also creates a distorted and, in the worst case, racialized image of an individual.⁴³ Explaining, for example, behavior with culture means racializing a person to be non-white. Furthermore, those who are not white tend to be perceived as shackled prisoners of their own culture.⁴⁴ The experiences of minorities, including religious minorities, within the Finnish educational framework have been comparatively under-researched. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and counter-storytelling present new and promising

Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), 200.

36 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 203.

37 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 258, 266.

38 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 266.

39 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 269.

40 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 270.

41 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 263.

42 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 264–265.

43 Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 153.

44 Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 155.

perspectives within Finnish academic circles. A handful of previous studies have explored a range of religious minorities in Finnish schools.⁴⁵ Previous research has typically focused on a single minority—be it religious⁴⁶ or ethnic, such as the Roma⁴⁷ or Sámi.⁴⁸

In this article, we present narratives from teachers representing diverse religious minorities and examine their strategies for fostering resilience and

-
- 45 Milena Parland and Martins Kwazema, “Looking for Hidden Notebooks: Analyzing Social Exclusion Experienced by Teachers of Minority Religions in Finnish Schools,” in *Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion*, eds Aminkeng Atabong Alemanji, Clara Marlijn Meijer, Martins Kwazema, Francis Ethelbert and Kwabena Benyah, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 91–118; Milena Parland, “‘When somebody tells you who you are:’ Religious education and fraudulent appropriation in Finnish Schools,” in *Approaching Religion* 13, No. 3 (2023): 82–98; Harriet Zilliacus, “Key challenges in supporting identity development in segregated instruction about worldviews,” in *Contextualising Dialogue, Secularisation and Pluralism: Religion in Finnish Public Education*, eds Martin Ubani, Inkeri Rissanen and Salla Poulter, (Religious Diversity and Education in Europe, 40), (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2019); Harriet Zilliacus, *Supporting Students Identities and Inclusion in Minority Religious and Secular Ethics Education: A Study on Plurality in the Finnish Comprehensive School* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2014); Zilliacus and Kallioniemi, “Supporting Minority Belonging.”
- 46 Risto Aikonen, “What is the purpose of religious education in the Finnish context?,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 57, No. 1–4 (2012): 63–79; Mercédesz Czimbalmos, *Intermarriage, Conversion, and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Finland: A study of vernacular religion in the Finnish Jewish communities* (Doctoral dissertation, Åbo Akademi University, 2021); Pekka Metso, “Making minority faith (in)visible through religious education: Parents’ experiences of the identification of their children’s Orthodox identity in Finnish public schools,” *Journal of Religious Education* 67, No. 1 (2019): 61–76; Inkeri Rissanen, *Negotiating identity and tradition in single-faith religious education: A case study of Islamic education in Finnish schools* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2014, Münster: Waxmann Verlag; Inkeri Rissanen, Kirsi Tirri and Elina Kuusisto, “Finnish Teachers’ Attitudes About Muslim Students and Muslim Student Integration,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, No. 2 (2015): 277–290; Inkeri Rissanen, Martin Ubani and Tuula Sakaranaho, “Challenges of Religious Literacy in Education: Islam and the Governance of Religious Diversity in Multi-faith Schools,” in *The Challenges of Religious Literacy: The Case of Finland*, eds Tuula Sakaranaho, Timo Aarrevaara and Johanna Konttori (New York City: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 39–53.
- 47 Marko Stenroos and Jenni Helakorpi, “The Multiple Stories in Finnish Roma Schooling,” in *Social and Economic Vulnerability of Roma People: Key Factors for the Success and Continuity of Schooling Levels*, eds Maria Manuela Mendes, Olga Magano and Stefânia Toma (New York: Springer, 2021), 99–116.
- 48 Rauna Rahko-Ravanti, *Saamelaisopetus Suomessa: Tutkimus saamelaisopettajien opetustyöstä suomalaiskouluissa*, (Doctoral dissertation, University of Lapland, 2016).

crafting counter-narratives with their students in public schools. We begin by detailing the collected interview material gathered and our methodological approach. Subsequently, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of Critical Race Theory, specifically counter-stories, before analyzing the qualitative interview material. We conclude with our final observations.

Compiling Interview Material

The participants in this study all belong to religious minority groups and represent their faiths within schools predominantly influenced by the majority Christian Evangelical Lutheran tradition. Although most teachers in minority Religious Education (RE) are adherents of the religions they instruct, the law permits anyone with the requisite academic qualifications to teach, regardless of personal religious affiliation.⁴⁹

The interview data consists of semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine educators who instruct in Islamic, Jewish, Catholic, or Orthodox Christian religions. Each informant has served, or currently serves, in public schools administered by municipal authorities, with many having taught across ten to seventeen different schools in various municipalities concurrently in different parts of the country. Parland recruited the teachers through non-governmental channels such as the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (CORE Finland), owing to the difficulty of locating these teachers through municipal channels. This choice was also influenced by documented challenges associated with accessing schools for research purposes in fields related to social exclusion and anti-racism in Finland.⁵⁰

This study deliberately excluded RE teachers from the Evangelical Lutheran tradition to center the perspectives of minority groups. It also omitted educators who are not members of any religious community. The selected informants averaged seventeen years of work experience in religious education, which provided a comprehensive view of the situation across Finnish municipalities. Among the interviewees was one retired teacher. Two of the interviewees had moved to Finland as adults, but most had been raised in the country as children within minority communities. Five of them carried personal school experiences of minority religious life, which included also experiences of exclusion and racialization linked to religion and ethnicity.

49 Saukkonen, "Multiculturalism and Nationalism," 279.

50 Aminkeng Atabong Alemanji, personal conversation, March 2021.

This could even have intergenerational dimensions. Some informants had also converted to minority religions. The informants hold higher academic degrees, as is the requirement for being a teacher in Finland, and all are well-established teachers. They chose to take part in this study, being highly motivated, and participated in it outside their work context. The impression was that these informants from minorities appreciated that somebody listened to them and was interested in their viewpoints when their narratives got challenging and critical.

The interviews were carried out by Parland during the pandemic lockdowns from October 2020 to February 2021, utilizing digital video-conferencing platforms to facilitate communication with teachers across different regions of Finland. Conducted in Finnish or Swedish, the interviews were individualized, and the transcripts were subsequently archived in the Cultura Archive of Åbo Akademi University. Parland translated the Finnish and Swedish interviews into English. In this article, interviewees are referred to by the initials B, K, M, O, P, Q, T, U and Z. We elected to use the gender-specific pronouns when referencing the informants, recognizing the importance of considering the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion, and their potential influence on a teacher's role within the school community.

Both authors, Parland and Repo-Saeed, hold positions of relative power and privilege within Finnish society. However, Parland's affiliation with a minority faith likely engendered trust among the interviewees, as she shared details about her own religious identity and related experiences of family members who faced marginalization in school due to their faith. Repo-Saeed, who did not directly interact with the informants, contributed to the analysis and writing stages of the research. Repo-Saeed has developed an understanding of the struggles faced by minorities in Finland through both professional support work with migrants and other minority groups, as well as academic research.⁵¹ Both researchers have actively engaged in the area of minority rights in Finland for numerous years.

Recognizing that all knowledge production is inherently subjective and influenced by the scholars' social positioning, our methodological choices aim at challenging (re)production and perpetuation of existing hierarchies

51 Nora Repo-Saeed, "Toivo on ihmisoikeus. Paperittomien auttaminen vallankäyttöön liittyvänä, eettisenä ja diakonisena kysymyksenä," *Journal for the Study of Diaconia* 1 (2020):25–50. Nora Repo-Saeed, "Manifestations of social exclusion in qualitative interview material. Experiences of people with a foreign background in Finland," *International Journal of Minority and Group Rights* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

and inequalities.⁵² Critical Race Theory (CRT) inherently includes an activist dimension, aiming not only to analyze and understand social realities but also to effect positive change.⁵³ This kind of “[a]ctivist scholarship provides us with a unique opportunity to learn from errors and to recognize the highly contextual, political and conditional nature of knowledge production.”⁵⁴ In the field of arts research, this approach enables us to contribute to expanding the horizons and understanding.

CRT as an Analytical Starting Point

In this article we apply the framework of Critical Race Theory through Critical Race Methodology (CRM), which operationalizes CRT. CRM employs “counter-storytelling as an analytical tool for understanding discourses on race and the intersections of other forms of oppression.”⁵⁵ Bryan Hubain and his co-authors regard counter-storytelling “as a form of resistance to standard and majoritarian-stories.”⁵⁶ The application of CRT, particularly in the Nordic research contexts, is rare.⁵⁷ Moreover, a philosophical exploration of racism and of race is rather recent.⁵⁸ In the European context, there exists a tendency of denying the importance of race as a social marker of difference, shifting “the focus from ‘race’ to ‘culture’, and [building] hierarchies in which some cultures would be superior to others”.⁵⁹ Given its origins in North American critical legal studies, this

52 Angéla Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders. Challenging Racist and Sexist Epistemology,” in *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*, eds. Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 111–128, 114.

53 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Third Edition (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 8.

54 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 124.

55 Bryan S. Hubain, Evette L. Allen, Jessica C. Harris and Chris Linder, “Counter-stories as representations of the racialized experiences of students of color in higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 29, No. 7 (2016): 946–963, 948.

56 Hubain and others, “Counter-stories as representations of the racialized experiences,” 949. See also Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, No. 1 (2002): 23–44, 23.

57 See Koko Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus kriittisen rotuteorian näkökulmasta: Teemoitteleva sisällönanalyysi* (Master’s thesis, University of Helsinki, 2020).

58 Jani Sinokki, ”Esipuhe,” in *Rasismi ja filosofia*, ed. Jani Sinokki, (Turku: Eetos, 2017), 7–9.

59 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 116.

theory has plenty to tackle within a research landscape like Finland's.⁶⁰ We posit that CRT provides valuable insights into the study of religious and other minorities in Finland. The interconnectedness of race and religion in the European context has been previously explored by Anya Topolski, for example.⁶¹

Pekka Isaksson and Jouko Jokisalo point out that, since 1945, forms of racism have started to focus on ethnicity, culture, and religion instead of biological characteristics, or have placed those characteristics alongside biological ones.⁶² For instance, anti-Islamic stances became central questions in European home affairs policies in the 2000s.⁶³ Anti-Muslim racism fuses together ethnic origin, religion, ethnicity, and culture and sets as the defining denominator religion for all Muslims. Anti-Muslim and antisemitic attitudes build on a long historical legacy that represented the Jewish population as Europe's internal foe and the Muslim population as the external one.⁶⁴

In this paper, we do not intend to replace the concept of race with religion; rather, we investigate how religion may be used for the purpose of racialization. Assuming that religious affiliation serves as an instrument of racialization, we can apply CRT as a theory for our analysis. Due to the historical legacy of racism in Europe that has linked questions of religion to race by giving Christianity often a dominant, normative, and privileged position in the European societies, we find that Critical Race Theory fits particularly well into this study context. It may render possible perception that crystallizes the interaction as well as inclusive and exclusionary practices between dominant religious group and minorities in the Finnish educational system. Even though race as concept often builds on external assumptions made on individual's appearances and religion can be something that does not necessarily manifest that way, assumptions made on confessional affiliation might still be racializing and promote hierarchization.

As a theory, CRT "critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers. CRT also recognizes that race intersects

60 Cf. Mathias Moschel, "Color Blindness of Total Blindness – The Absence of Critical Race Theory in Europe," *Rutgers Race & the Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2007): 57–128.

61 Anya Topolski, "The dangerous discourse of the 'Judaeo-Christian' myth: Masking the race–religion constellation in Europe," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54(1–2) (2020): 71–90.

62 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 351.

63 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 359.

64 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 361–362.

with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past.”⁶⁵ CRT has six fundamental tenets:⁶⁶

- 1) Racism should be understood as an endemic part of the society, embedded and present in the societal structures.
- 2) Interest convergence or material determinism refers to the fact that the currently prevailing situation benefits materially and psychologically the white population regardless of their social class.
- 3) Race as such is a social construction produced by social thinking and social relations. Therefore, race can never be an objective question or find ground in natural sciences.
- 4) Even though race is a social construction, people are exposed daily to differential racialization. This means that such perceptions and stereotypes are imposed on people, which have a concrete impact on their everyday lives and often place them in subordinate positions.⁶⁷
- 5) Anti-essentialism and intersectionality point out that people’s identities are always tied to context and time and, therefore, are constantly changing. Intersectionality underlines that a person’s societal positioning is influenced by many factors such as gender, race, origin, social class, and family background. These factors also influence each other and can create “a system of multidimensional domination”.⁶⁸
- 6) The importance of actively including voices of color in epistemologies is recognized.⁶⁹ This tenet is a call to enable wider

65 Janel George, “A Lesson on Critical Race Theory,” *American Bar Association*, 2021.

66 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*; Moschel, “Color Blindness of Total Blindness”; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology”; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*.

67 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8–11; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*, 30–31.

68 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 111; Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 10–11; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*, 31–32; Leena-Maija Rossi, “Intersektionaalisuus – kun sukupuoli ei riitä,” *Niin & Näin* 1 (2021): 74–75.

69 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 11; George, “A Lesson on Critical Race

access to “[e]pistemic privilege [which] is a flexible, temporal, and spatial position, conditioned by those who possess material and symbolic power over knowledge production”.⁷⁰

Our study examines qualitative interview material on the basis of these six tenets, with a focus on elevating *voices of color* and *counter-storytelling* to amplify the narratives of minorities in academic discourse and society. The process of othering minorities in Finland is often linked to Finnish and Nordic exceptionalism, used strategically to bypass ethical responsibilities toward those excluded. This can manifest as a perception of other as infecting the “purity” of Finnishness, deemed “the best of best.”⁷¹

We examine the *voices of color*, adapting the concept to the Finnish context by equating it to *voices of minorities* such as religious groups, ethnic groups, and indigenous people who claim their own identities within the Finnish societal framework. As Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso highlight, the experiences of people of color can be regarded “as sources of strength.”⁷² Counter-storytelling is based on a premise that there is a prevailing narrative that silences the voices of racialized people, often minorities. This implies that a counter-narrative is not merely a story, but an active process. These narratives help us understand the world and how the stories that “we believe in and adhere to affect our lives, how we interact with others, and how we interact with our environment.”⁷³ Majoritarian methods claim to be neutral and objective, yet they implicitly make assumptions that reflect negative stereotypes. Counter-stories bring to light voices that challenge the dominant narrative about the majority’s excellence, thereby amplifying the voices of the minorities. Counter-stories, therefore, can offer strength and hope of social justice for minorities, as they enable us to hear stories that break the silence, teaching us to listen.⁷⁴ Subsequently, these

Theory”; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*, 32; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology”.

70 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 123–124.

71 Aminkeng Atabong Alemanji, *Is there such a thing...?: A study of antiracism education in Finland* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2016).

72 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 24.

73 Margaret M. Zamudio, Caskey Russell, Francisco A. Rios and Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman, *Critical Race Theory Matters. Education and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 124.

74 Lisa C. Ikemoto, “Furthering the inquiry: race, class, and culture in the forced medical treatment of pregnant women,” *Tennessee Law Review. Spring* 59, No. 3 (1992): 487–517; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 32.

“stories can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice.”⁷⁵

As “[c]ounter narratives often derive from the voices and experiences of oppressed, the liminal, and the disenfranchised,” counter-storytelling is apt for exploring the experiences of minorities, which are often racialized in the Finnish societal context.⁷⁶ The counter-story responds to the prevailing narrative it opposes, as Critical Race Theory (CRT) counters ahistoricism by emphasizing the importance of understanding racism within its social, economic, and historical contexts.⁷⁷ In societal debates, the attention often centers on those in marginal positions. However, it is more often those in the center who are given the platform to speak and are heard. This results in understandings and perceptions being shaped by those who are at the center, rather than by those in liminal positions.⁷⁸ CRT-related approaches are thus necessary and have even been advocated by many scholars in the European context.⁷⁹ Silenced voices need to be amplified, and methodologies that have often been used to silence can, conversely, be employed to give voice and create space for transformative resistance at the margins.⁸⁰

CRT also provides powerful tools for analyzing educational institutions.⁸¹ In the following analytical sections, we explore narratives shared by teachers of minority Religious Education (RE) as expressions of Critical

75 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 23.

76 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 124.

77 Mari J. Matsuda, Charlers R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *Words that wound. Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, (Portugal Cove: Boulder Books, 1993); Mari Matsuda, “Looking to the bottom: Critical legal studies and reparations,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, eds Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Thomas Kendall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 63–79; David Gillborn, “Intersectionality, critical race theory, and the primacy of racism: Race, class, gender, and disability in education,” *Qualitative inquiry* 21, No. 3 (2015): 277–287; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology.”

78 Arja Jokinen, Laura Huttunen and Anna Kulmala, ”Johdanto: neuvottelu marginaalien kulttuurisesta paikasta,” in *Puhua vastaan ja vaieta. Newottelu kulttuurisista marginaaleista*, eds Arja Jokinen, Laura Huttunen and Anna Kulmala, (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2004), 19.

79 See David Gillborn, “Critical Race Theory and Education: Racism and anti-racism in educational theory and praxis,” *Discourse* 27, No. 1 (2006): 11–32, 19.

80 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 37.

81 Jessica T. DeCuir and Adrienne D. Dixson, “So When It Comes Out, They Aren’t That Surprised That It Is There”: Using Critical Race Theory as a Tool of Analysis of Race and Racism in Education,” *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 2004: 26–31, 26.

Race Theory's voices of color and as counter-stories. In the first analytical section, we examine how teachers of religious minorities negotiate the visibility of their minority within the public space of the school. Next, we investigate how the religious celebrations of minority groups are introduced and positioned within schools. In the third and final analytical section, we investigate expressions of claiming one's rights as a religious minority in the school environment, as emerged from the teachers' narratives.

Resisting Oppression through Artistic Activity

Informant M, a teacher of Islam in a small town, initiated Islamic RE in the local public school and integrated art as a fundamental part of her teaching methods. Teacher M shared a narrative about her and her students creating colorful, beautiful paper mosques and decorating the school corridors with these artworks. The majority of the school's students, most of whom were Lutherans, referred to these creations as castles, not recognizing the spiritual significance of the mosques. The choice of teaching methods led to the inclusion of visual representations of the minority religion in the school space, but it failed to foster respect for their spiritual aspect, which disappointed the teacher. Subsequently, M organized an exhibition about Islam at the local municipal library with her students, dismissing the idea of hosting it within the school due to a perceived lack of genuine interest in Islam among her colleagues. However, the library exhibition was a significant success, inspiring M to plan for a new exhibition at a small village school where she also taught, in collaboration with the teacher of Evangelical Lutheran RE, who supported the initiative.

In this counter-story the teacher of Islamic RE highlighted how she empowered her students to take pride in their religious tradition by providing them with a visible and creative space for self-expression in the school. Through art, the teacher enhanced her students' positioning by granting them visibility and the opportunity to utilize their voices of color as a counter-narrative to the prevailing norms. The acquisition of space can also be perceived as a material advantage. Teacher M challenged stereotypes commonly associated with Muslims as conservative and backward, presenting Islamic architecture and art in a playful and new manner to the audience. The activities adopted an anti-essentialist perspective, portraying Finland as a diverse nation of multiple identities and beliefs. Voices of color were amplified both within the schools and at the municipal library through vibrant mosques and exhibitions. As art exposes the tensions of the social

world, it can also render them “inhabitable, providing a sense of welcome instead of repulsion.”⁸²

This narrative highlights the challenges of gaining space on equal terms with the majority faith. Teacher M encouraged her students to create an exhibition, persevering despite the school’s lack of concrete support for the minority culture, its celebrations, and traditions. When the minority gained space in the school environment, they were not immediately welcomed and supported, leading to diminished experiences, as noted by Teacher M. The endemic nature of racism became apparent in the narrative when other students, unaware of the presence of Muslims or lacking basic information about Islam, referred to the mosques as castles. Furthermore, Teacher M initially did not consider the school as a viable venue for an Islamic exhibition to promote the presence of Muslim culture in the school space.

The counter-story revolves around expanding perceptions of who has the right to space through art. Central to this discussion are questions about visibility, and the ability to express one’s belonging and viewpoints through art.⁸³ Art can enact “small-scale resistances against the status quo” in social domain, and while individual acts may be limited, they can have a potentially powerful impact.⁸⁴ Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro emphasize that art can create political spaces that, while visible, allow the spectator to “experience and participate in the tensions of a nonconsensual society.”⁸⁵ Art also makes these tensions visible by providing them a stage, thereby offering viewers an opportunity to experience these tensions differently.⁸⁶

In her interview, Teacher Q recounted how the school did not allow her and her students to leave any traces of their existence and RE classes in the classroom. She sought to create space for the Catholic Christian religious tradition by transporting a small wooden theater from school to school, enhancing the students’ artistic experiences and visualization of their religious tradition within their in-group. This theater was used to visually narrate the life of Saint Mary, and the method was accessible to

82 Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, eds Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 17.

83 Kaisa Hiltunen, Nina Sääskilahti, Kaisa Ahvenjärvi, Saara Jäntti, Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Tuija Saresma and Antti Vallius, “Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” in *Kuulumisen reittejä taiteessa*, eds Kaisa Hiltunen and Nina Sääskilahti (Turku: Eetos, 2019), 10.

84 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 9.

85 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 11.

86 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 17.

all the students attending the classes, taking into account also those facing challenges with the Finnish language. The materiality of art makes it “tangible, and thus brings it closer to the social agents that interact with it,”⁸⁷ fostering participation due to its proximity with the spectator. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro state, “no art can exist without its audience; therefore, art is by definition performative,”⁸⁸ with its agency “embedded in its display and in its audience’s participation.”⁸⁹

Q’s narrative reveals that public schools often did not allow religious minorities to leave traces in the school space. Interviews indicated that minority groups were frequently denied specific spaces within schools for storing their items or visualizing their work and tradition in shared spaces. Minority teachers were often unable to use standard classrooms for teaching, being directed instead to the school’s library, canteen, or even storage room.⁹⁰ A recent investigation by the Finnish government into RE and ethics tuition in schools, addressing questions of equality and equity, found that the marginalization of minority students and teachers is a common issue, with no easy solutions.⁹¹ Research also delves deeper into the reasons why Finnish schools seem to create structures that produce and reproduce the othering of religious minorities and others, highlighting that the legal protection of children in schools seems to fail, empowering local administrators and leaving families and children vulnerable.⁹²

Studies also suggest that well-intended assimilative policies may pose greater risks than exclusion for minorities.⁹³ Teacher Q’s counter-story illustrates how visualization of religious tradition and creatively enlarging one’s own space can be achieved through theater, used in classrooms despite the wider prohibition against visualization in the school context.

87 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 11.

88 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 11.

89 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 12.

90 Parland and Kwazema, “Looking for Hidden Notebooks”.

91 Eero Salmenkivi and Vesa Åhs, *Selvitys katsomusaineiden opetuksen nykytilasta ja uudistamistarpeista*, Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisuja 13, (Helsinki: Opetus- ja kulttuuri-ministeriö, 2022).

92 Niina Mäntylä, Ville Karjalainen, Maria Refors-Legge and Hanna-Kaisa Pernaa, *Pukki kaalimaan vartijana – kuka valvoo peruskouluja?* Kunnallissalan kehittämissäätöön Tutkimusjulkaisu-sarjan julkaisu, no. 111, (Helsinki: Kunnallissalan Kehittämissäätö, 2021), 67–70.

93 Jon A. Levisohn, “Rethinking the Education of Cultural Minorities to and from Assimilation: A Perspective from Jewish Education,” *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education (DIME)* 7, No. 1 (2013): 54–68, 54.

Visualization was accessible only to in-group members, possibly indicative of a significant influence of the majoritarian discourse in public spaces. From an intersectional perspective, it is noteworthy that Teacher Q, a female with a migrant background, might have faced challenges in making her theater project visible to the majority, potentially due to her gender and background. Interviews with female teachers often featured themes of creative activities with the children (K, M, Q, T), while male teachers' narratives included also confrontations with the directors (B, P, Z). More research is needed to draw definitive conclusions about gender-related patterns in these contexts.

Art distinguishes itself from other educational forms by enabling minority voices to be heard and their presence to be visible through creativity. Art can be perceived as a place within which social identities can be created and shaped, facilitated by the forms of art and related technologies. This suggests that art can generate methods to organize social categories.⁹⁴ Furthermore, art can serve as a means to foster a common identity or a sense of belonging.⁹⁵ Research indicated that not only do teachers of minority religious education find artistic activities in schools positive, but students and their families, especially those conducted by minorities themselves, also view these activities as benevolent.⁹⁶

In her interview, Teacher K reflected on alternative solutions to challenges faced in schools. She devised a "hide-and-seek" game for the children in her Orthodox Christian student group in response to the school's prohibition against leaving RE materials in the classroom. This prohibition was transformed by Teacher K into an engaging game, where children were invited to hide their books in high places, such as on a cupboard or shelf. The next lesson would begin with the children climbing to retrieve their items, checking their presence. This narrative serves as a counter-story, transforming an oppressive restriction into a delightful game for the children.

Teacher K, having grown up as a member of the Orthodox minority and navigated the same public education system, demonstrates remarkable ingenuity in addressing ongoing marginalization, creating her unique counter-story. Sharing this strategy became part of her teaching, raising student awareness of the challenges minorities face in Finnish society. Her narrative illustrates the power of creativity and art in constructing, deconstructing, and redefining established meanings.⁹⁷

94 Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 16.

95 Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 17.

96 Parland, "'When somebody tells you who you are'".

97 See Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 12.

Teacher K also mentioned the indirect role her faith tradition could play. Upon entering the school premises, she audibly greeted three other teachers, who did not return her greeting. She laughed, noting that the day was the joyful Orthodox feast of Theotokos often unrecognized by the majority population.⁹⁸ The Nativity of Theotokos, celebrated on September 8th, holds particular significance for Orthodox Christian women, commemorating Mary, who, as a three-year-old child, was greeted and honored by everybody upon her entrance into the temple. Attachment often manifests something through stories and performances.⁹⁹ Teacher K's counter-story highlights her reliance on her religious tradition for support, when feeling excluded from the school community. The struggle for visibility of minority religious traditions remains evident, as they often face restricted access to public space. Interviews suggest that teachers became more proactive in creating space for the minorities in their unique ways.

Viewing these interview excerpts through the lens of CRT reveals that all teachers incorporated self-expression methods into their teaching, thereby producing their own voices of color and actively utilizing their agency. These voices emerged as stories of generational survival drawing inspiration from their religious traditions. Endemic majoritarian narratives failed to equip majority students with the understanding of the significance of mosques, the subject of Muslim students' artworks. Nonetheless, teachers' agency adeptly broadened the space allotted to Muslim students.

Teachers' narratives express a desire for visible space in public schools and recognition of their religious traditions as socially valid. The validity of different Christian traditions' having their own RE tuition groups, for example, may be questioned. However, instances of internalized oppression were also observed, with teachers often choosing not to confront diminishing treatment and finding solitary coping mechanisms. The interviews clearly delineated diversity and diverse identities, suggesting that individuals in Finland should not be viewed homogenously, and minority group members should also be recognized as individuals.

Visualization of Religious Celebrations

Religious diversity and freedom of faith may raise considerations within the school environment, related to taught subjects other than RE, the use

98 Greek for "God-bearer," a title given to Mary as "Mother of God."

99 Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 14.

of religious symbols, and annual events and celebrations. The lack of official national guidelines grants schools a significant degree of interpretive freedom.¹⁰⁰ Interviews with teachers revealed narratives about religious feasts that not only brought joy, but also countered the dominant narrative of the Finnish feast canon, which often prioritizes the Lutheran celebration of Christmas, thereby limiting the visibility of a more diverse range of religious celebrations. This scenario exemplifies how the predominant narrative “distorts and silences the experiences” of racialized people.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the Finnish National Agency of Education’s guidelines also support this colorblind approach, promoting a nationalist(ic) celebration canon¹⁰² potentially facilitating cultural assimilation.¹⁰³ This leads therefore to the question of whether schools should merely reproduce the existing social order or act as “equalizers” in society, thereby fostering a more democratic society.¹⁰⁴

In her interview, Teacher O recounted an event where Jewish students sang a Hanukkah song in front of the entire school, receiving applause from students of other faith traditions. This event highlighted Hanukkah celebration, the Festival of Lights, celebrating the Jewish struggle for religious freedom. The story of Hanukkah commemorates the Jewish revolt against Greek rulers who attempted to desecrate their temple and enforce the worship of the Greek god Zeus. Despite the depletion of oil needed for the lamps, a miraculous event allowed the temple light to continue burning, symbolizing the preservation of Jewish faith and resilience against cultural domination. Teacher O’s narrative about the young Jews’ singing can serve as a powerful counter-story, illustrating the significance of maintaining one’s religious traditions and the potential for minority survival under oppressive conditions. It demonstrates how personal and political can merge in artistic expression, allowing personal experiences to gain symbolic and political significance.¹⁰⁵ According to Teacher O, this performance marked the first recognition by many in the school community of the Jewish presence, effectively breaking down their previous invisibility through a celebratory act.

100 Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism,” 280.

101 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 29.

102 Opetushallitus, Anvisning om anordnande av undervisning i religion och livsåskådningskunskap i den grundläggande utbildningen och åskådningsfostran i förskoleundervisningen samt om gemensamma fester och religiösa evenemang, (Helsinki: Opetushallitus, 2022), 6.

103 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 95.

104 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 96.

105 Hiltunen et al., ”Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” 15.

Muslim Teacher U detailed how she annually organized events related to the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan at her school, providing Muslim students an opportunity to be visible and heard within the school environment at least once a year. When the school director, adhering to the Lutheran tradition, prohibited fasting for Muslim students under the age of twelve, Teacher U intervened. She described the director's prohibition as a *fatwa*, using the term to highlight her opposition to the director's decision, thereby advocating for the children's right to observe their religious practices.¹⁰⁶ Teacher U emphasized that the director lacked understanding and sensitivity towards the lived experiences of faith and the social significance of Ramadan for Muslim children. This account serves as a counter-narrative, challenging the dominant discourse and asserting the rights of the minority within the educational system.

Teacher U reappropriated the term *fatwa*, usually connected to Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and mostly portrayed as exotic and frightening in mainstream narratives, employing it to describe the inflexible attitudes within educational institutions towards RE. This reinterpretation of *fatwa* as a descriptor for the director's actions illustrates the frustration experienced by those advocating for minority rights and underscores the need for persuasive storytelling to illuminate and address the marginalization and oppression faced by Muslims in educational settings. Racism often arises from ignorance of minority practices rather than from deliberate discrimination.¹⁰⁷ Despite the intent, ignorance regarding religious practices, attire, or social customs can be perceived as demeaning or injurious by the affected individuals.¹⁰⁸

Teacher U, knowledgeable in anti-racist educational practices, employed the term "spiritual abuse" to describe the majoritarian approaches to interacting with Muslim children. She highlighted the issue of appointing teachers from the dominant culture to teach Islamic RE, despite their lack of experience with the lived Islamic faith. Such experiences are often crucial for children and their families for a deeper understanding of their religion. This situation mirrors challenges in the Turkish educational context, where secularist public education, including RE, failed to serve as a bridge, instead excluding conservative believers and minorities and leading to a forgetfulness

106 Fatwa is formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar (Britannica, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fatwa>).

107 Helena Siipi, "Kulttuurinen rasismi ja aito puhdas ruoka," in *Rasismi ja filosofia*, ed. Jani Sinokki (Turku: Eetos, 2017), 73–88, 76.

108 Siipi, "Kulttuurinen rasismi," 76.

of Islamic traditions.¹⁰⁹ The director at Teacher U's school may have relied on the notion that the Lutheran cultural tradition, perceived as neutral, rational, and progressive, contrasts with other religious traditions like Islam. Further research is needed to explore racialization processes through this form of othering, termed "religification" and spiritual abuse.¹¹⁰

Teacher T, who provides Orthodox Christian RE, recounted how a Muslim minority teacher assisted Orthodox Christian students with fasting, presenting a counter-narrative to the prevalent story that religious individuals inherently tended to struggle to coexist. This prevalent narrative often positions the secularized Finnish version of Lutheranism, considered rational and tolerant, as "safe," while minority faiths are viewed as undeveloped and emotional. The interview excerpt challenges the notion that majority members, assumed to act neutrally, are solely qualified to guide minorities, initiate dialogue, and solve problems objectively.¹¹¹ Both Islamic and Orthodox Christian RE teachers emphasized that minorities are experts on their own issues and that religious minorities are capable and willing to help each other.

Teacher T also organized a camp for her Orthodox Christian RE students, where they baked traditional Karelian pastries and listened to stories from elderly Karelian refugees. The Karelian minority, primarily Orthodox Christian and traditionally living in the Eastern Finland, was displaced westwards during the Second World War when parts of Finnish territory was annexed to the Soviet Union, resulting in over 400,000 people becoming refugees within Finland.¹¹² As a member of the Karelian minority, Teacher T created a cultural space for her students, introducing them to survival strategies developed within this Finnish minority. This experience

109 Ahmet T. Kuru, "Secularism(s), Islam, and Education in Turkey. Is e pluribus unum Possible?"; in *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. Adam B. Seligman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150–167, 163–164.

110 Cf. Tuomas Martikainen, "Muslimit suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa," in *Islam Suomessa. Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, eds Tuomas Martikainen, Tuula Sakaranaho and Marko Juntunen (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2008), 62–84, 66–68.

111 Cf. Michael Gray and Ronda Gray, *Stew That Grew* (Melbourne: Walter McVitty Books, 1990); Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Abingdon-on-Thames, England; New York, NY: Routledge, 2000 [1998]) 118–123.

112 Frode Ulvund, *Religious Otherness and National Identity in Scandinavia, c. 1790–1960: The Construction of Jews, Mormons, and Jesuits as Anti-Citizens and Enemies of Society*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

brought joy to the students, who seldom heard stories that affirmed their traditions and heritage.

In Finland, public discourse often promotes a unified narrative of a country characterized by a singular traditional faith and a uniform tradition of celebrations, rendering the dominant religious tradition so self-evident that it scarcely needs naming.¹¹³ However, this type of consensus is inherently exclusive.¹¹⁴ Teacher T shared experiences of Orthodox Christian students visiting their churches, having lunch there, and inviting friends from different religious backgrounds to join them. In the context of cultural racism, the significance of food as a vital aspect of culture and individual identity becomes apparent, serving as a tool for resisting racism, and acting as a counter-narrative.¹¹⁵

Viewed through the lens of CRT, it is clear that the teachers were actively using their own “voices of color” to craft counter-narratives. Their initiatives within the school community allowed for religious traditions to gain visibility and space, altering the material balance of realities. Some minorities adopted confrontational stances to defend their traditions and religious freedom. These efforts also demonstrated a desire among minority religious traditions to share communal spaces, extending invitations to other to join in their spaces, share meals, and offer mutual support. This approach facilitated discussions on topics that united minorities such as fasting. Being uncommon in the Lutheran tradition, fasting remains relatively unfamiliar to the majority population.

Making religious celebrations visible in the shared school environment not only highlighted the minority presence, but also allowed diverse identities and “voices of color” to emerge within the school community, challenging prevailing norms. These actions provided opportunities for minorities, which might even have a long history in Finland, to be acknowledged. Several informants voiced concerns over attempts by authorities to exert complete control over RE and to dictate the version of Islam taught in Finland, for example. Additionally, instances of antisemitism were reported, despite the positive reception of a Jewish song performed by the students. Particularly in confrontational scenarios, proficiency in the Finnish language and an

113 Cf. Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-Existence*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, imprint: London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23.

114 Cf. Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 10.

115 Siipi, “Kulttuurinen rasismi,” 74.

awareness of one's rights and antiracist strategies empowered teachers to pursue inclusive objectives within the educational setting.

Standing Up for One's Rights

In the interviews, numerous teachers discussed how the school directors were reluctant to provide assistants for teachers of minority RE groups. Teacher Z, who teaches Orthodox Christian RE, recounted opposing the director, when the latter was unwilling to assign him an assistant. The director assumed that the teacher's request for an assistant stemmed from a lack of teaching skills. However, the teacher, humorously challenging the director, suggested that he teach the class himself, implying superior skills. Subsequently, the director acquiesced, assigning an assistant to the class without further remarks. From an intersectional perspective, it is notable that this teacher was a male belonging to the Finnish majority ethnicity, which seemingly strengthened his position, enabling him to confront the director more directly. Conversely, Teacher Z also shared a story about his departure from a school where he failed to earn respect as a teacher.

Muslims, as a religious minority, encounter discrimination in Finland.¹¹⁶ The interview narratives, however, consistently reveal that all religious minority groups experience oppression and exclusion, each being racialized uniquely. Legal and social science scholars have highlighted how the "dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs."¹¹⁷ While it is not feasible to quantitatively compare the levels of oppression experienced, an intersectional analysis of the interviews reveals that female teachers with migrant backgrounds tend to report more instances of oppression. In contrast, Finnish ethnicity teachers, particularly males, appear more capable of resistance. Focusing on these intersectionalities of oppression allows for a deeper understanding of its complex layers.¹¹⁸

The narratives suggest that minority religions are marginalized and othered in Finnish public schools, facing prejudice. Mattias Gardell observes

116 Huttunen, "Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen"; Parland and Kwazema, "Looking for Hidden Notebooks"; Katarina Pettersson, "The discursive denial of racism by Finnish populist Radical right politicians Accused of anti-Muslim hate-speech," in *Nostalgia and hope: Intersections between politics of culture, welfare, and Migration in Europe*, eds Ov Christian Norocel, Anders Hellström and Martin Bak Jørgensen (New York: Springer, Cham, 2020), 35–50.

117 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8.

118 Solórzano and Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology," 31.

that the prejudice against Muslims in Sweden mirrors the historical bias against Catholics in the Lutheran kingdom.¹¹⁹ The interviews reveal that overt discrimination against Muslims occurs alongside the exclusion of other religious groups. They also hint of a heightened focus on discrimination against Catholics, especially concerning females with migrant backgrounds.

Teacher B reported feeling significantly more respected as a French language teacher compared to his experience teaching Islamic RE. While teaching French, he found that other teachers were more inclined to engage with him. He shared a narrative about his colleague, another Muslim teacher, who had openly challenged the school director for using the derogatory term “small Isis soldiers” (in Finnish, *pikku isikset*) to describe students in the Islamic RE class. This act of defiance resulted in Teacher B being compelled to leave the school, with the director continuing to use the offensive term.

In the Finnish context, Muslims are often viewed as outsiders and others are frequently relegated to the cultural periphery.¹²⁰ The discourse around Islam and Muslims in Finland, and Europe more broadly, frequently intersects with debates over gender and gender roles. Muslims have long been cast as the “other” against which European identity and boundaries are defined, a dynamic that intensified post-9/11, leading to accentuated associations between Muslim identity and terrorism.¹²¹ Additionally, certain physical appearances have been linked to specific cultures, especially in the context of Muslims, leading to a conflation of cultural discussions with appearance-based hierarchies, an inherently racist practice.¹²² Teacher B’s narrative, while ending in humiliation, offers a counter-narrative that, despite its lack of optimism, might encourage minority groups to preserve their dignity by leaving hostile environments where the prospects for addressing racism and prejudice are bleak.

Furthermore, Teacher B emphasized the significance of support from his peers and community for his work, presenting a narrative that challenges the assimilation-focused mainstream discourse. This discourse suggests that children from minority groups should assimilate into the majority by interacting with and emulating majority members, learning the language, and adopting their habits. In contrast, Teacher B’s students, who came from various ethnic backgrounds, spoke different languages, and practiced

119 Mattias Gardell, *Islamofobi*. (Stockholm: Leopard förlag, 2011).

120 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 152.

121 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 146–147.

122 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 146.

diverse cultural traditions, formed a close-knit community within the school, demonstrating solidarity as if they were siblings.

Teacher P, a male educator, actively engaged in creating counter-narratives that challenged the dominant historical narratives presented during history lessons, particularly those containing negative stereotypes associated with the Catholic Church. The religious homogeneity in Sweden, which Finland was part of for several centuries, was solidified by the establishment of the 1634 constitution following prolonged conflict between Protestants and Catholics. This constitution, foundational to the administrative traditions still referenced today,¹²³ recognized only the prevailing Lutheran State Church, fostering tight links between state governance and the Lutheran Church, notably in education. Although Finland formally ceased this exclusivity with the 1923 introduction of religious freedom, the constitution's indirect effect on contemporary attitudes and policies might persist.¹²⁴

Given this backdrop, the portrayal of church history or the Lutheran reformation in educational settings may retain biases. Therefore, Teacher P seized the opportunity within the educational framework to construct counter-narratives that disputed the dominant narrative perpetuating antiquated anti-Catholic sentiments. He introduced viewpoints that supported students in minority religious education, particularly Catholics, who faced biased instruction during history classes. Central to all educational, schooling, and classroom practices are epistemological questions, inquiries into “how knowledge is constructed, whose knowledge counts, what knowledge is valued, how knowledge is shared and acquired, how we assess what someone knows, and how we know what we know.”¹²⁵ These considerations indicate that epistemologies are both racialized and gendered.¹²⁶

Analyzing the interview excerpts through a CRT lens highlights that the teachers consistently utilized their unique perspectives, voices of color, to counteract their marginalized status within the educational system. They sought to alter the prevailing conditions and reconfigure the distribution of resources by advocating for space, public discourse, and their rights.

123 Sveriges Riksdag, *Sveriges grundlagar och riksdagsordningen, Med inledning och sakregister*, (Stockholm: Riksdagens tryckeri, 2020), 9.

124 Pirjo Markkola, “The Long History of Lutheranism in Scandinavia: From State Religion to the People’s Church,” *Perichoresis* 13, No. 2 (2015): 3–15, 12–14.

125 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 99.

126 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 99.

This involved demanding assistance when necessary, presenting alternative historical analyses, and addressing derogatory language directed at religious minorities. The interviews suggest that Lutheran education was regarded as the standard, endemic norm, with minorities facing bias and prejudice in the examined contexts.

The counter-narratives that emerged from the interviews showcased an anti-essentialist and intersectional framework, emphasizing the importance of diversity over uniformity. Differential racialization could, however, perpetuate norms to the extent that members of religious minorities were sometimes labeled as terrorists within the educational setting, contributing to Islamophobia. The narratives explored the socially constructed perceptions of religious minorities and the acceptable language used to describe them, while also shedding light on their resilience, resistance, and the creation of cross-cultural bonds.

The narratives revealed that experiences of exclusion were common among all religious communities in Finnish schools. Previous research has documented that children from these groups face exclusion, including name-calling, lack of access to space, diminishing, spiritual appropriation and harassment.¹²⁷ Thereby the need to investigate processes of exclusion, and even hate, present in the thinking of the dominant group toward minority groups is obvious. In the schools there is a pressing need for hopeful and practical measures to support children, their families, and educators. Our research suggests that artistic endeavors could offer solutions, proposing that art introduces elements that go beyond historical internalized narratives and could foster respectful coexistence in educational settings. This article also demonstrates the applicability of CRT in understanding the day-to-day experiences of religious minorities within educational institutions.

Processes of exclusion, hatred, and racialization may target multiple groups simultaneously, with minorities frequently subjected to these dynamics. Current debates within the anti-racism movement concerning polarization and the promotion of binary thinking, focusing solely on the colonizer/colonized or white/black dichotomy, are being critically examined. This kind of binary perspective might obscure the recognition of exclusion experienced by groups such as Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Catholics in Finnish schools, while these minorities might be perceived as “white, privileged, and colonizers.” Muslims on the other hand are often considered

127 Parland and Kwazema, “Looking for Hidden Notebooks,” 102–114; Parland, “When somebody tells you who you are,” 88–92.

as “non-white,” yet religious identity can be overlooked as a basis for exclusion and racialization.

While transferring CRT to Europe, the European history with its racial laws and Holocaust must be considered. “Europe’s history in fact is filled with religious wars, pogroms, and persecutions. Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and other religious minorities have to some extent and at some point all been or become victims of this reality.”¹²⁸ A pluralistic understanding of the various forms and manifestations of racism is crucial in the context of schools where children from diverse backgrounds spend significant time together. This study shows that CRT can be applied to analyze the minority narratives inside a specific societal context. It also demonstrates that processes of exclusion, hate, and oppression are flexible and can target a variety of groups. Thus, these processes should be confronted also at the ontological and a historical level in the aim of generating spaces for dialogue. There is a risk for the dominant voice to take over the space. As Veli-Pekka Lehtola points out, this dominant voice has prevented progress and even the implementation of law promoting Sámi language and culture, as the voice has been “commanding paternally/paternalistically” (in Finnish, *sanelivat isällisesti*) instead of being in dialogue.¹²⁹

Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed narratives shared by teachers of minority RE in public schools in Finland. We looked for an answer to the question: can artistic activities improve the experienced daily life of religious minorities in Finnish schools by analyzing stories shared in semi-structured interviews by teachers who taught Judaism, Islam, Catholicism or Orthodox Christianity in public schools run by municipalities in various parts of the country. We leaned on Critical Race Theory and Methodology as a conducive analytical framework with an emphasis on counter-storytelling, since it “offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and...focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences” of people of color.¹³⁰ The choice of counter-storytelling was

128 Mathias Moschel, *Law, Lawyers and Race: Critical Race Theory from the USA to Europe* (Oxfordshire: Taylor and Frances, Routledge, 2014), 92.

129 Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *Entiset elävät meissä saamelaisten historia ja Suomi* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022), 178–179.

130 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 24.

made as we wanted to emphasize that the voices of the minorities and their narratives are important and worthy.

In the interview material gathered, the teachers of minority RE stood up for the children belonging to minorities by successfully creating counter-stories. They often spread these stories throughout the whole school community, thereby also creating bridges with the students belonging to the majority. In Finland, the space shaped by the law that grants religious minorities their own religious tuition gives minorities an opportunity to raise their voices of color and tell their own stories, even though this does not materialize in every local context. In the narratives of all nine informants, we could detect counter-stories as means to stand up against experienced marginalization and oppression. The teachers were personally motivated to support their students to become stronger persons, and to encourage them to dare to express their own religious tradition in the school environment. The narrative of each teacher expressed individual strength and creativity. These examples of how to counter the majoritarian narratives might support the students and help them to survive and thrive as members of minorities in Finland in the future.

Minority students exhibited a propensity to gravitate toward minority teachers, even to the extent that Orthodox Christian students were said to trust a Muslim teacher more than the teachers belonging to the majoritarian Lutheran tradition. They sought support from the Muslim teacher when their own Orthodox Christian teacher was absent. It appeared that resistance of the minorities through arts was successful and inspiring for the students. Furthermore, it was evident that the members of the majority welcomed, accepted, and even enjoyed the visibility and activities of the minorities expressed creatively. Examples of such occasions were the Jewish children singing Hanukkah songs, the Muslims spreading artworks of mosques around the school, and the Orthodox Christian students having friends from other religious traditions joining their trip to an Orthodox Church.

All informants pointed out the diversity of their own group. The tuition groups of minority RE often bring together children with various mother tongues, ethnic and social backgrounds, and ways of interpreting and living their religious tradition. Thereby art was important for these students, as it could have the function of creating cohesion. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro discuss, the imagination can “contribute to the possibility of becoming visible.”¹³¹ Art can offer opportunities for crossing linguistic, timely,

131 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 16.

material, and imagined boundaries.¹³² Art helps the students of the minority groups to cross borders inside their own community, and simultaneously art can promote reshaping of the spaces in the entire school and reorganization of social categories that contribute to the visibility of the religious tradition of every child. For example, Teacher M, who promoted Islamic culture by visualizing it creatively, joyfully, and attractively, shaped new concepts for Islamic tradition and its place in the social categories of the school.

The narratives showed that belonging is important, and that the minority RE groups created and shaped spaces of togetherness and art within Finnish educational system. Experience of belonging takes various forms, which can be situated in societal structures or even in approaches implemented through art aiming at expressing belonging.¹³³ From the minority perspective, the marginality and marginal position can be “much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance;”¹³⁴ counter-storytelling “can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance.”¹³⁵ When majoritarian narratives tend to fuel social exclusion, one way to stand up against oppression is to create counter-stories that some teachers already were doing successfully. By spreading these stories within the whole school community, they created contact also with the members of the majority.

In the universal and individualistic legal tradition that is predominant in Finland, “collective group-differentiated rights easily seem to become far more controversial and complicated questions than is the case with individual rights.”¹³⁶ Even though the Finnish constitution (17 §) guarantees minorities the right to preserve and maintain their language and culture, the wording of the law remains ambiguous.¹³⁷ The law may seem to prohibit coercive assimilation, but there still is a visible lack of political will, as well as administrative and financial means to really ensure that minoritarian languages and religions would become more sustainable elements of the society.¹³⁸ Thus, “[n]ationalism and multiculturalism are

132 Hiltunen et al., “Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” 12.

133 Hiltunen et al., “Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” 9.

134 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 149.

135 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 32.

136 Östen Wahlbeck, “*Multicultural Finnish Society and Minority Rights*,” in *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, eds Peter Kivisto and Östen Wahlbeck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 295–324, 313.

137 Finlex, *Suomen perustuslaki*, 11.6.1999/731.

138 See Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism,” 291.

in the Finnish case paradoxically intertwined;¹³⁹ multiculturalism is often used as a tool to implement control instead of aiming at creating ground for a non-discriminative society. When cultural differences are continuously produced and maintained, one creates opportunities for hierarchization and inequality.¹⁴⁰ Multicultural activities and policies in the worst case scenario can reproduce racializing hierarchies and racism.¹⁴¹ In Finland, building a non-racist, inclusive, and culturally diverse society is first and foremost subject to rejecting unequal and inequitable social policies.¹⁴² Dismantling colonial and racializing structures of power requires knowledge of how they have been formed and whose voices have been marginalized in the process.¹⁴³

Vesa Puuronen mentions that even until recent decades one has enforced laws and maintained practices that weaken the minority rights in Finland.¹⁴⁴ Until now minority groups such as Sámi, Roma, and Karelians do not have the same rights to instruction in their language on a national level as religious minorities have. Minorities without legal protection and rights to their culture might more easily disappear or face assimilation, and the opportunity of religious minorities to have their tuition within the educational framework is therefore important for identity shaping.¹⁴⁵ In order to tackle racism and the structures that produce it in Finland, one would need to dismantle the prevailing myth of one homogenous Finnish nation;¹⁴⁶ to stop whitewashing the historical narratives connected with it;¹⁴⁷ and to challenge the Finnish exceptionalism that seeks to detach Finland from the colonial legacy.¹⁴⁸ Finland has always been culturally heterogenous, and its history and cultural legacy should therefore be represented in this light, decoupling these from

139 Saukkonen, "Multiculturalism and Nationalism," 291.

140 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 267–268.

141 Seikkula and Hortelano, Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 154.

142 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 270.

143 Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin," 84.

144 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 69.

145 Zilliacus and Kallioniemi, "Supporting Minority Belonging," 355.

146 Miika Tervonen, "Historiankirjoitus ja myytti yhden kulttuurin Suomesta," in *Kotiseutu ja kansakunta: miten suomalaista historiaa on rakennettu*, eds Pirjo Markkola, Hanna Snellman and Ann-Catrin Östman, (Historiallinen arkisto; Vuosikerta 142) (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2014), 137–162.

147 Marko Stenroos, *Osa 4: Rasismien historiaa Suomessa* (Helsinki: Terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus, 2023), <https://thl.fi/aiheet/maahanmuutto-ja-kulttuurin-moninaisuus/tyon-tueksi/verkkokoulutus-antirasismista-ammattilaisille/osa-4-rasismien-historiaa-suomessa>.

148 Laura Eklund Nhaga and Nia Sullivan, *Kansan valtaa! Neljä näkökulmaa Kansanvalta-elookuvaan* (Helsinki: Amnesty International Suomi, 2023).

the hypothetic national identity characteristics that nurture racism. In these processes minorities and their cultural legacies play important roles.

Aja Martinez stresses the importance of counter-storytelling inside institutions and how these narratives support students of color, influence the institutions, and even improve their ways of functioning while dismantling negative stereotypes and bias.¹⁴⁹ We can conclude that “schools are structured, policies are adapted, and practices are implemented to serve broader political, social, and economic purposes.”¹⁵⁰ This often means that policies and practices that are considered to be objective might actually legitimate the disadvantage of some students belonging to minorities.¹⁵¹ Finnish minorities—such as Jews, Tatars, and Swedish-speakers—who have had opportunities to establish their own schools, now have a rather well-established status in the society and are active societal contributors. One can note that when the educational system grants spaces to minorities, they can begin to flourish—or, at least, can begin to move towards visibility, strength, and societal contribution.

***Nora Repo-Saeed** is a Docent of the Study of Religions at the University of Eastern Finland and a visiting researcher in the School of Theology with an expertise focused on Islam in Europe and Islam and gender. Repo-Saeed’s research interests have gravitated around Islam and women especially in North Macedonia. She also holds a bachelor’s degree in social services and diaconal work. Her scientific publications in this field have examined themes such as migration, minorities, non-discrimination, undocumentedness, and racism in the European context. Her working career has led her to work with diversity and minority questions in Finnish society as well as in the contexts of North Macedonia and Serbia.*

***Milena Parland** is a doctoral candidate in the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi University. Her dissertation explores the experiences of religious minorities in Finnish schools. She has pursued advanced studies at the Central European University in Vienna, focusing on public policy, European antidiscrimination law, and Romani studies. Parland is actively involved in promoting interreligious dialogue as a member of the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland. In addition, she contributes to cultural and artistic engagement through her work with the NGO Ad Astra.*

149 Aja Y. Martinez, A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story vs. Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra’s “Fit” in the Academy. *Composition Studies* Vol. 42 (2), 2014:33–55, 33, 52–53.

150 Zamudio and others., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 95.

151 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 95.



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

ARTICLE

The (Im)Possibility of Measuring Interfaith Learning Outcomes

Hannah J. Visser, Gardien D. Bertram-Troost, Marianne Moyaert, and Anke I. Liefbroer

Abstract

Despite the growing number of quantitative studies on interfaith learning outcomes, any reflection on the motivations and implications of such measurement has remained notably absent. This article argues that such reflection is necessary if we do not want quantitative measurement to misrepresent or even impair what is happening in interfaith initiatives. Drawing on debates in neighboring disciplines such as the educational sciences and peacebuilding studies, the article explores why we should—or should not—measure these outcomes. It then identifies other possible ways of measuring interfaith learning outcomes that still do justice to the complex reality of interfaith learning. Based on interdisciplinary literature, it suggests that at least three imperatives should be taken into consideration when measuring interfaith learning outcomes: 1) involve multiple stakeholders, 2) describe and include the context, and 3) use methods other than, and in addition to, quantitative measurement. The implications and challenges of these suggestions are explored through our own experience of evaluating the outcomes of an interfaith leadership program. The article demonstrates how quantitative measurement can provide helpful insights but cannot capture all aspects of the messy, complex, and multifaceted nature of interfaith learning. It is intended to stimulate reflection on the why and how of measuring “what works.”

Keywords

interfaith learning, quantitative measurement, evaluation, learning outcomes

In light of the rapid increase in interfaith initiatives over the past few decades, interfaith scholars and practitioners have questioned whether these initiatives are achieving their goals. They have asked themselves which activities are most effective in bringing about the desired change. To answer these questions, a growing number of studies have recently considered which quantitative instruments are best suited to assess the impact of interfaith learning;¹ there have also been several recent attempts to quantitatively evaluate interfaith initiatives.² However, although most of these studies have focused on the *outcomes* of interfaith learning and the *empirical tools* used to assess these outcomes, there has been a remarkable lack of reflection on the *underlying assumptions* and *practical implications* of quantitatively measuring these learning outcomes. We argue here that such reflection is necessary if we do not want quantitative measurements to misrepresent or even impair what is happening in interfaith initiatives.

The assumptions and challenges of measuring learning outcomes and its impact on educational practice have been fiercely debated in neighboring disciplines such as educational sciences and peacebuilding studies.³ While

-
- 1 See, for example, Alyssa N. Bryant, “Assessing Contexts and Practices for Engaging Students’ Spirituality,” *Journal of College and Character* 10, no. 2 (2008); The Woolf Institute, *How to Measure Success: A toolkit for the evaluation of interfaith engagement* (2021); Matthew J. Mayhew and Alyssa N. Rockenbach, “Interfaith Learning and Development,” *Journal of College and Character* 22, no. 1 (2021/02/01 2021). Also see the IDEALS survey (<https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/ideals/>) and the INSPIRES Index (<https://www.inspiresindex.org/>)
 - 2 See, for example, Assumpta Aneas and Ruth Vilà, “Evaluation of Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Competencies. Identification of Factors Related with Its Performance among Adolescents in the City of Barcelona,” *Religion & Education* (2023); Evelyn Schnauffer et al., “Developing a Research Tool for Investigating Religious Knowledge as Part of Religious Literacy: The Questionnaire – First Results – Possibilities for International Comparisons,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 35, no. 2 (2023); Lucy Peacock, “Contact-based interfaith programmes in schools and the changing religious education landscape: negotiating a worldviews curriculum,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 44, no. 1 (2023).
 - 3 See, for example, Izaak Dekker and Martijn Meeter, “Evidence-based education: Objections and future directions,” Conceptual Analysis, *Frontiers in Education* 7 (2022); Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson, eds., *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue: Methods and Frameworks, KAICIID – Beyond Dialogue Series* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021); Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost, “Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools for secondary education: a challenging but necessary exercise,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 33, no. 2 (2011); Tobias Denskus, “Challenging the international peacebuilding evaluation discourse with qualitative methodologies,” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 35, no. 1 (2012).

measurement is commonly accepted as standard practice in these fields, it has also faced increasing criticism, such as Biesta's critique of the "age of measurement" in education, or Van der Kolk's reference to the individual and societal "costs" of performance measurement.⁴ It is our impression that these debates have not yet been engaged in the emerging field of interfaith learning even though the call for measurement is sounding louder here too. With the rapid increase of quantitative measurements of interfaith learning outcomes, the field now appears to be at a crossroads, and we must choose between prioritizing quantitative outcomes and evidence-based practice on the one hand, or moving towards more narrative, qualitative approaches to understanding the processes of interfaith learning on the other. We therefore believe that now is the time to start reflecting on the assumptions and challenges of measuring interfaith learning outcomes.

The purpose of this article is not to advocate for or against measuring interfaith learning outcomes. Rather, it is intended to initiate a conversation among interfaith program organizers and researchers in the field of interfaith learning about the underlying assumptions and practical challenges of measuring interfaith learning outcomes. The terms "measure" and "measurement" in this article refer to measuring the outcomes of an initiative using *quantitative* methods. When discussing "evaluation," we refer to the broader process of trying to understand participants' experiences, learning outcomes, and the impact of an interfaith initiative.⁵ An "interfaith initiative" is understood as an organized activity that intentionally and actively brings together individuals or communities who orient around religion differently for a variety of learning objectives.⁶ These activities can be organized in (post-)conflict societies, thus overlapping with the field of (inter-)religious peacebuilding studies.⁷ However, they can also be organized

4 Regarding Biesta's critique, see *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, ed. Michael A. Peters and Colin Lankshear, Interventions: Education, Philosophy & Culture, (New York: Routledge, 2010). Regarding the costs of performance measurement, see "Numbers Speak for Themselves, or Do They? On Performance Measurement and Its Implications," *Business & Society* 61, no. 4 (2022).

5 See Donald L. Kirkpatrick and James D. Kirkpatrick, *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*, Third edition ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006).

6 Regarding this working definition of an interfaith initiative, see Kusumita P. Pedersen, "The interfaith movement: an incomplete assessment," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 79. Regarding learning objectives, see Hannah J. Visser and others, "Categorising Interfaith Learning Objectives: A Scoping Review," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 44, no. 1 (2023).

7 For example, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion:

in educational settings in other contexts, such as the influential initiatives on U.S. campuses. In this article, the term “field of interfaith learning” refers to the body of scholarship surrounding interfaith initiatives. Our work draws on three key subfields: 1) *interreligious/interfaith studies*, which has made significant contributions to the organization and evaluation of interfaith initiatives, though building a strong empirical foundation remains a challenge;⁸ 2) *religious education*, which has focused more extensively on empirical research, particularly on fostering students’ beliefs, religious literacy, and attitudes towards religious diversity in institutional education settings;⁹ and 3) *(inter) religious peacebuilding*, which examines how religious actors can support or hinder sustainable peace efforts, along with methods for evaluating these initiatives.¹⁰

In the next section, we discuss the question of *why* (not) to use quantitative measures to evaluate interfaith initiatives. We will draw on debates from related disciplines to provide insight into this question. Based on this interdisciplinary literature, we propose taking into account several suggestions when measuring interfaith learning outcomes while also addressing critiques of such measurement. In the second part of this article, we will discuss *how* to measure interfaith learning outcomes in a way that reflects the complex realities of interfaith learning. As we, too, have attempted to evaluate an interfaith initiative, we will draw on our own experiences of designing and applying an evaluation approach, including a pilot measurement tool, to illuminate these underlying challenges and tensions.

Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 6 (2001).

8 For example, Rachel Mikva, *Interreligious Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Hans Gustafson, ed., *Interreligious studies: dispatches from an emerging field* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020); Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds., *Interreligious/ Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

9 For example, Friedrich Schweitzer et al., “Current Debates about (Inter-) Religious Literacy and Assessments of the Outcomes of Religious Education: Two Approaches to Religion-Related Knowledge in Critical Review,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 44, no. 2 (2023).

10 For example, Peter Woodrow, Nick Oatley, and Michelle Garred, *Faith Matters: A Guide for the Design, Monitoring & Evaluation of Inter-Religious Peacebuilding*, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Alliance for Peacebuilding (2017).

1. Why (Not) Measure Interfaith Learning Outcomes?

Various scholars and practitioners in the field of interfaith learning have emphasized the importance of evaluating interfaith initiatives, particularly through quantitative measurement tools.¹¹ According to them, measuring the outcomes of interfaith learning can tell us more about “what works.” This knowledge could help to improve practices and attract more funding when potential funders gain more insight into the foreseen outcomes of an interfaith initiative. Relying solely on narrative or qualitative approaches does not seem to be sufficient, as these approaches are seen as subjective and incomparable to other contexts, whereas “a more robust design...can increase the ability of evaluators to accurately assess results and enhance the credibility of the final product.”¹² Before discussing the arguments against measuring interfaith learning outcomes, we will first examine the arguments in favor of quantitative measurement.

1.1. Motivations for Measuring Interfaith Learning Outcomes

Scholars in various disciplines, but particularly in the field of peacebuilding, generally cite two main motivations for measuring program outcomes: learning and accountability.¹³ The “learning” argument suggests that measuring interfaith learning outcomes can provide insight into what the program is achieving, which can guide improvement of the program. This argument appeals to the intrinsic motivation of organizers and facilitators of interfaith initiatives, who seek concrete feedback to improve the program’s relevance and impact. Advocates of using quantitative measurement to

11 For example, Renee Garfinkel, *What works? Evaluating interfaith dialogue programs*, United States Institute of Peace (Washington DC, 2004); Jennie Vader, *Meta-review of inter-religious peacebuilding program evaluations*, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2015); Conor Seyle et al., *Some Credible Evidence: Perception about the Evidence Base in the Peacebuilding Field*, One Earth Future Foundation; The Alliance for Peacebuilding (2021); Richard McCallum, “Towards a framework and methodology for the evaluation of inter-faith initiatives,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 27, no. 1 (2018).

12 Vader, *Meta-review of inter-religious peacebuilding program evaluations*, 38.

13 For example, Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson, “Introduction: Evaluating Religious and Interreligious Peacebuilding: Meeting the Challenge,” in *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue. Methods and Frameworks*, ed. Abu-Nimer Mohammed and Nelson Renáta Katalin (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021); Seyle et al., *Perception about the Evidence Base in the Peacebuilding Field*.

evaluate interfaith learning argue that this information ultimately benefits participants, who thereby take part in a relevant and effective program.¹⁴

More specifically, quantitative measurement has the potential to facilitate learning by providing standardized measurements that can be compared across groups. This can be done in several ways, such as comparing pre- and post-program outcomes over time within the same context in order to assess the impact of an initiative on participants' competencies, comparing initiatives in a similar context to understand progress and differences, or comparing initiatives and practices in different contexts to help identify best practices.¹⁵ Using such standardized approaches, the idea is that "we could see genuine, generational progress instead of the usual pendulum swings of opinion and fashion."¹⁶

In addition to the motivation to learn and improve, there is another reason that is often given: the 'accountability' argument.¹⁷ This argument claims that the quantitative measurement of program outcomes is necessary in order to prove an initiative's worth, both literally and figuratively.¹⁸ Interfaith initiatives, which are often dependent on donor funding or accreditation, are now required to provide tangible results on whether and to what extent they are bringing about the intended changes. Donors and policymakers also seek positive impact with limited resources, and "the reality of conducting interfaith engagement in the modern world is that it almost always relies on funding. And funders rely, to an extent, on evidence of impact, and answers to questions such as: Has the money been well-spent? Was the grant given to the right organization?"¹⁹ One could see this motivation for measuring as a loss of autonomy and as a willingness to conform to the normative ideas of funders and policymakers.²⁰ However,

14 Friedrich Schweitzer, "Researching classroom processes and outcomes in religious education: the need for intervention studies," in *Researching religious education: classroom processes and outcomes*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Reinhold Boschki (Münster: Waxmann, 2018), 196.

15 Consider Philip Davies, "What is evidence-based education?," *British journal of educational studies* 47, no. 2 (1999): 114.

16 Robert E. Slavin, "Evidence-based education policies: Transforming educational practice and research," *Educational researcher* 31, no. 7 (2002): 20.

17 Abu-Nimer and Nelson, "Introduction."

18 Hippolyt Pul, "When My Peace Is Not Your Peace," in *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue: Methods and Frameworks*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

19 The Woolf Institute *A toolkit for the evaluation of interfaith engagement*, 38.

20 See Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost, *Menswording in een laag-vertrouwensamenleving: Kansen en uitdagingen voor onderwijs.*, 2022, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Reina

despite these critiques of the “era of accountability”,²¹ as we will discuss below, the perceived need for quantitative evaluation tools to measure interfaith learning outcomes is understandable because it can attract the necessary financial support. Thus, from this perspective, a first step in professionalizing the field and attracting funding would be to develop and apply more quantitative tools.²² Quantitative measurement can help to prioritize this work for funders and policymakers and to underscore its importance in building peaceful societies.

Both these arguments seem understandable and at first sight more or less convincing: who would not want to improve initiatives and show the results of interfaith learning? However, on closer inspection of ongoing discussions about measurement in neighboring disciplines, it becomes clear that these arguments are not self-evident.

1.2. Reasons to Be Cautious About Measuring Interfaith Learning Outcomes

To explore the reasons for caution in measuring interfaith learning outcomes, we will focus on three interrelated concerns. The first concern, which has been raised primarily in debates in the educational sciences, is that measurement can contribute to a pervasive ‘culture’ of prioritizing accountability and results.²³ The second and third concerns are often raised in discussions of measurement and evaluation in the field of (religious) peacebuilding as well: the challenge or even impossibility of measuring intangible learning outcomes and the difficulty of doing justice to a specific context.²⁴

C. Neufeldt, “Vying for Good,” in *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue: Methods and Frameworks*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

- 21 Jill Anne Chouinard, “The Case for Participatory Evaluation in an Era of Accountability,” *American Journal of Evaluation* 34, no. 2 (2013).
- 22 For example, Bryant, “Assessing Contexts and Practices for Engaging Students’ Spirituality.”; Jeremy T. Snipes and Benjamin Correia-Harker, “Revisiting the Assessment Context: A Call to Interfaith Assessment,” *Journal of College and Character* 18, no. 2 (2017/04/03 2017); Vader, *Meta-review of inter-religious peacebuilding program evaluations*; The Woolf Institute, *A toolkit for the evaluation of interfaith engagement*, 38.
- 23 For example, Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*; Van Der Kolk, “On Performance Measurement and Its Implications.”; Chouinard, “The Case for Participatory Evaluation in an Era of Accountability.”; Bertram-Troost, *Menswording in een laag-vertrouwensamenleving*.
- 24 For example, Woodrow, Oatley, and Garred, *Faith Matters*; Pul, “When My Peace Is Not Your Peace.”

The first and most substantial concern about measuring learning outcomes is directed towards the ‘culture’ of accountability and evidence. As educational philosopher Gert Biesta has warned, measurable learning outcomes are often assumed to be the only and most important indicator of learning.²⁵ According to him, measurement narrows the understanding and organization of educational practice. It leads to a situation where measurable outcomes are valued more than the nuanced, intangible educational achievements. This focus on measurable results can make measurement an end in itself, whereby “we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure.”²⁶ This situation can have significant implications for educational practice, which may then be organized to prioritize the attainment of measurable outcomes over other considerations of what entails “good” education.²⁷ The concept of “indicatorism” sheds light on the potential negative consequences of this situation:

Overly stressing the importance of performance measures may trigger behavior that is aimed at improving performance indicators, while losing sight of the actual goals. I call this *indicatorism*. (...) Indicatorism also includes improving an indicator for the short term (at the expense of the long term), ignoring “unmeasured” tasks, and manipulating numbers.²⁸

Consequently, the centralization of quantitative measurement can have a detrimental impact on the practice of interfaith initiatives, diverting attention, time, and funding away from what the values and ideals of teachers and organizers consider to be ‘good,’ and toward the outcomes of interfaith initiatives that are merely measurable.

A second reason for caution in measuring interfaith learning outcomes is the difficulty, if not impossibility, of accurately representing the reality of interfaith work in a standardized way. The process of measuring the outcomes of such a program is “intrinsically complex” because it is

25 Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*.

26 Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, 13; For a reflection on these dynamics in the context of (inter)religious education, also see Bertram-Troost, *Menswording in een laag-vertrouwensamenleving*.

27 Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*.

28 Van Der Kolk, “On Performance Measurement and Its Implications,” 814–15. Emphasis in original.

inherently intertwined with the lived experiences of participants.²⁹ This complexity is further compounded by the fact that interfaith initiatives focus on outcomes that are difficult to measure, such as mutual appreciation, leadership, and self-awareness.³⁰ Due to the intangible nature of interfaith learning outcomes, and the additional observation that these outcomes are defined and understood differently by each individual, the risk that a quantitative measurement will not accurately measure what it is intended to measure is considerable.³¹ As Neufeldt describes in her analysis of different positions in the debate around measurable peacebuilding indicators, critics often argue that because peacebuilding programs are inherently intangible, messy, and highly contextual, any attempt to standardize outcomes is doomed to failure. Instead, the critics are “interested in the uniqueness of interventions and communities—they focus on the stories and lessons that emerge from specific cultural, geographic and temporal contexts and do not expect these to be generalizable.”³²

A third concern regarding the measurement of learning outcomes is that it may fail to account for the changing and multifaceted contexts in which interfaith learning occurs. The socio-political factors that influence initiatives make it difficult to capture anything other than the outcomes at a specific point in time and in a particular place.³³ Each initiative is situated within a distinct context and timeframe, characterized by specific attributes. These include recent political developments (for example, the rise of far-right political parties in our Western European context), historical legacies of colonialism, religious hegemony and oppression, and national legal

29 Jennifer C. Greene, “The Inequality of Performance Measurements,” *Evaluation* 5, no. 2 (1999): 163. no. 2 (1999)

30 Hannah J. Visser, “Evaluating the Impact of Interfaith Learning: Definitions and Challenges” in *From Interreligious Learning to Interworldview Education*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2023).

31 Khaled Ehsan, “Exploring Power Dynamics of Religious Leaders: The Need for Objectivity,” in *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue. Methods and Frameworks*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson, KAICIID—Beyond Dialogue Series (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 129; Bertram-Troost, “Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools,” 274.

32 Reina C. Neufeldt, “‘Frameworkers’ and ‘Circlers’—Exploring Assumptions in Impact Assessment,” *Advancing conflict transformation: The Berghof handbook II* (2011): 486.

33 Mohammed Abu-Nimer, “Challenges in Peacebuilding Evaluation. Voices from the Field,” in *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue. Methods and Frameworks*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson, KAICIID—Beyond Dialogue Series (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

frameworks of religion and secularism. So, whereas comparison is one of the key objectives of measurement, it is inherently difficult to compare the outcomes of interfaith initiatives in different contexts or at different points in time because these outcomes are influenced by such a wide range of political, historical, and legal factors. Consequently, the outcomes of interfaith initiatives cannot be attributed solely to the pedagogical approach of an initiative itself.³⁴ This concern raises the question of whether quantitative measurement provides any useful information at all.

1.3. Suggestions When Measuring Interfaith Learning Outcomes

In sum, certain aspects of interfaith learning are intangible and difficult to measure.³⁵ This may seem self-evident, but as critiques by scholars like Biesta show, there is a pervasive tendency to present and interpret quantitative measurement as the essential truth of what is happening in education.³⁶ These critiques raise awareness of the potentially harmful tendencies of quantitative measurement and emphasize the importance of recognizing the unmeasurable aspects and the contexts of the people involved. However, while it is crucial to heed these critiques, it is equally important not to dismiss the merits of quantitative measurement entirely; some of the concerns about measuring interfaith learning outcomes can be avoided, at least to some extent, by taking certain considerations into account. Quantitative measurement, when implemented correctly, can provide valuable information about participants' development over time, help compare different approaches and activities, and enhance the visibility of interfaith work among policymakers and funders. The solution, then, may be not to abandon measurement altogether or to rely exclusively on it, but rather to "insist that definitions and measures of program quality honor the inherent complexity, plurality, and dynamic intersubjectivity of human experience."³⁷

Drawing on the concerns and recommendations discussed above, we propose that *if* one wants to quantitatively measure interfaith learning

34 McCallum, "Towards a framework and methodology for the evaluation of inter-faith initiatives," 71; Friedrich Schweitzer, "Religionsunterricht erforschen: Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten empirisch-religionsdidaktischer Forschung," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie* 60, no. 1 (2008): 72; Bertram-Troost, "Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools."

35 Visser, "Evaluating the Impact of Interfaith Learning."

36 Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*.

37 Greene, "The Inequality of Performance Measurements," 171.

outcomes, one should consider these three suggestions: 1) involve multiple stakeholders, 2) include the context, and 3) use other methods in addition to quantitative measurement. We will now briefly explain each of these suggestions before discussing their practical implementation in the second part of this article.

The first suggestion, involving multiple stakeholders, addresses the risk of having quantitative measurements “assess” participants’ performance or facilitators’ responsibility without considering their experiences and perspectives. Quantitative measurements often focus on indicators defined by researchers or evaluators who have administered a final questionnaire to participants.³⁸ These indicators may not always reflect the lived reality of the participants or other stakeholders. This gap can lead to (a double) misunderstanding, with participants interpreting researchers’ questions differently than intended, and vice versa.³⁹ As Pul notes, this issue concerns the validity of a measurement instrument—that is, whether it accurately measures what it intends to measure—but it also involves the ownership of defining what is to be measured.⁴⁰ Involving different groups of participants and facilitators in identifying what constitutes “success” ensures that measurement reflects each of their realities as much as possible.⁴¹

Secondly, quantifying learning and its outcomes inevitably reduces a complex reality to measurable metrics, often neglecting the specific context in which a program is organized, whereas “politics and community dynamics play crucial roles in every aspect of the program.”⁴² As a response, many researchers and evaluators emphasize using an approach that is more sensitive to the way contextual factors shape the experiences of those involved.⁴³ Context-sensitive measurement examines a program’s context in addition to its outcomes, which is especially important in interfaith learning initiatives addressing societal challenges. Understanding the context is essential to comprehending learning outcomes such as leadership skills, contextual knowledge, and awareness of injustice.⁴⁴

38 Pul, “When My Peace Is Not Your Peace.”

39 Bertram-Troost, “Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools,” 277; Saville Kushner, *Personalizing Evaluation* (London 2000), 10.

40 Pul, “When My Peace Is Not Your Peace,” 78. cf. Neufeldt, “Vying for Good,” 56.

41 Bertram-Troost, “Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools.”

42 Garfinkel, *Evaluating interfaith dialogue programs*, 22.

43 Jeremy T. Snipes and Benjamin P. Correia-Harker, “Implementing Inclusive Interfaith Assessment: Considerations and Challenges,” *New Directions for Student Services* 2020, no. 169 (03/01/2020): 22.

44 Visser et al., “Categorising Interfaith Learning Objectives: A Scoping Review.”

The third suggestion we would like to consider is to use multiple methods—that is, not to rely solely on quantitative methods. Scholars in educational sciences, peacebuilding literature, and interfaith studies tend to advocate for the inclusion of qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups in addition to quantitative methods.⁴⁵ There are several reasons for bringing together qualitative and quantitative methods, such as data-triangulation, complementing insights, and using outcomes of one method to develop another.⁴⁶ Overall, this approach captures both a breadth of data on the differences between programs or groups and participants’ learning over time, as well as a depth of insight into the “when, why and how” behind changes (or the lack thereof) in participants’ attitudes and behaviors.⁴⁷ Thus, using multiple methods to understand the process and outcomes of an interfaith program allows for a more comprehensive view than relying on just one method.

2. How (Not) to Measure Interfaith Learning Outcomes

In this second part of our article, we discuss how, in practice, to measure interfaith learning outcomes based on the three suggestions proposed above. Our insights stem from our experience with a study evaluating an interfaith leadership program in Belgium and the Netherlands. We will begin with an introduction to the research project.

In 2020, we started a research project on the impact of interfaith learning, focusing on the Emoena interfaith leadership program in Belgium and the Netherlands. Originally launched in France in 2015, Emoena has been organized in Belgium and the Netherlands since 2019. This year-long program aims to enhance the interfaith leadership of professionals by improving dialogue skills, expanding (inter)religious literacy, developing leadership skills, increasing knowledge about societal challenges, and training participants to organize community projects.⁴⁸ Our study analyzed two

45 Abu-Nimer, “Challenges in Peacebuilding Evaluation,” 33.

46 Jennifer C. Greene, Valerie J. Caracelli, and Wendy F. Graham, “Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 11, no. 3 (1989).

47 David Steele and Ricardo Wilson-Grau, “Transcendence and the Evaluation of Faith-Based Peacebuilding,” in *Evaluating Interreligious Peacebuilding and Dialogue: Methods and Frameworks*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Nelson (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 153.

48 See: Hannah J. Visser et al., “Learning Orientations in Interfaith Initiatives: A Case Study of the Interfaith Leadership Program Emoena,” *Religious Education* 118, no. 4 (2023): 371–72.

cohorts in Belgium and the Netherlands during the 2021–2022 academic year using a mixed methods approach and included three methods.⁴⁹ First, we analyzed participants’ reflection reports during their participation in Emoena in the Netherlands in order to deepen our understanding of the interfaith learning process.⁵⁰ Second, we interviewed participants at the end of the Emoena program to understand the way in which they evaluated their experiences, learning outcomes, transfer, and ideas for the future.⁵¹ Third, we conducted a pilot quantitative study with seventeen participants, to measure their skills and societal awareness.

For the quantitative pilot study, we collaborated with participants, facilitators, and interfaith experts to develop case stories that presented real-life dilemmas related to interfaith leadership. Unlike common attitude-scales (for example, “How open are you towards Buddhists, on a scale of one to ten?”), these scenarios required action-based responses, reflecting the complexity of real-life situations.⁵² Participants responded to eight case stories with closed-ended options linked to indicators such as “listening to others” or “self-reflection on biases.”⁵³ We measured changes in participants’ skills and awareness by collecting responses before, immediately after, and six months after their participation in the Emoena program. An example case story goes as follows:

During a day on worldview for high school students, people with different worldviews were invited to come and talk about their perspectives. They took turns talking about their worldview. Leon, a presenter from a Reformed Christian background, presents his worldview first. Next, Sita speaks about rituals and customs within Indian Hinduism. Leon begins to sigh deeply. He gets up and leaves the classroom

-
- 49 See www.emoena.be for a description of the Emoena Belgium program and www.vu.nl/emoena for a description of the Emoena Netherlands program.
- 50 The methods and results of this approach have been published elsewhere: Visser et al., “Learning Orientations in Interfaith Initiatives.”
- 51 Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, *Evaluating Training Programs*. The methods and results of the interview study have been conditionally accepted for publication elsewhere: Hannah J. Visser et al., “Beyond Interfaith Harmony: How Participants Perceive the Impact of an Interfaith Leadership Program in Flanders and the Netherlands,” (forthcoming).
- 52 This approach was inspired by the vignette study conducted by Martin Losert, Heinrich Merkt, and Friedrich Schweitzer, “In Search of Interreligious Competence: An Empirical Study in the Context of Training Caregivers Through Religious Education,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 28, no. 1 (2015).
- 53 Visser et al., “Categorising Interfaith Learning Objectives: A Scoping Review.”

without saying anything. Only after Sita's presentation is over, during a short break, does he re-enter the classroom. As the teacher, you are responsible for this day. You stay in your seat and see Leon again during the break. In this situation, would you do the following? (Mark each possibility: 1 = definitely not; 2 = probably not; 3 = not sure/neutral; 4 = probably; 5 = definitely)

1. I would talk to the students about how these encounters are sometimes confronting and discuss their importance;
2. I would consider whether any inequalities between Sita and Leon come into play in this situation;
3. I would consider how I feel about this situation;
4. I would take Leon aside and ask if he would tell me why he left the classroom;
5. I would ask myself if there was anything I could have done differently prior to the day to prevent this from happening;
6. I would ask Leon to leave altogether because he is not contributing to the purpose of this day (reverse scaled item).

We will now turn to further reflection on the practical implications and challenges of measuring interfaith learning outcomes according to the three considerations described above, using our research project as an illustration of the practical challenges and opportunities.

2.1. Involving Multiple Stakeholders

In our pilot study, we involved multiple stakeholders for several reasons: it not only enhances the validity of quantitative measurements but also fosters a broader sense of ownership regarding the definition of "success."⁵⁴ Given the diverse definitions and interpretations of interfaith learning outcomes among stakeholders, there is always a risk of misinterpretation. Stakeholder

54 Pul, "When My Peace Is Not Your Peace."

involvement underscores the importance of bridging the gap among researchers, facilitators, and participants.

In practical terms, stakeholder involvement can range from full collaboration throughout the process to consultation at specific stages. Cousins and Whitmore identify three dimensions of such collaboration. First, control over the evaluation process can rest solely with the researchers or be shared with a diverse group of practitioners. Second, the scope of stakeholder involvement can vary, including only the primary “users”—such as program participants—or expanding to encompass a broader range of potential stakeholders. Third, the level of participation can differ, from minimal consultation to deep, continuous engagement throughout the evaluation process.⁵⁵ Through our research project, we gained insight into this principle. We began by analyzing participants’ reflection reports from the Emoena program and conducting interviews with program coordinators, gaining insights into their perspectives on successes and challenges. For instance, our analysis revealed diverse expectations and orientations for interfaith learning, ranging from gaining theoretical knowledge to developing concrete competencies for organizing initiatives.⁵⁶ Consequently, we concluded that interfaith learning outcomes would be bound to vary among participants and could not be held to a single standard. Such input could be used for interpreting our quantitative outcomes, as it highlights potential differences between participants.

We integrated these perspectives from participants and coordinators into the development of our measurement tool, which includes brief case stories of lived interfaith leadership. To ensure broader stakeholder involvement, we invited experts in the Dutch interfaith landscape to respond to the case stories, guiding the formulation of measurement items. This process allowed us to identify indicators of successful or challenging interfaith encounters that we might have overlooked using solely an academic or external lens. For instance, it highlighted different interpretations of “leadership”; some stakeholders focused on organizational skills, while others emphasized personal leadership.

Moreover, engaging multiple stakeholders can enhance the validity of a measurement tool, ensuring it measures what it intends to measure. Scholars recommend involving participants in a pre-test or pilot-test. This is especially important in fields where terms such as “religion” or “worldview” are

55 J. Bradley Cousins and Elizabeth Whitmore, “Framing participatory evaluation,” *New Directions for Evaluation* 1998, no. 80 (1998).

56 Visser et al., “Learning Orientations in Interfaith Initiatives.”

subject to diverse interpretations.⁵⁷ As Bertram-Troost notes in the context of research on religious diversity in secondary schools: “[I]n the whole research process, methods also need to be found to check how questions are interpreted by pupils and to ascertain what pupils think about the ways researchers interpret their answers. Therefore, it is very important to make use of a pilot test prior to the final data collection. A short oral interview or a group discussion with the persons who filled in the questionnaire should be part of this.”⁵⁸ This recommendation applies to other populations as well. In the development of our measurement tool, we included a pre-test with participants through post-interview interviews, where participants provided feedback on their understanding of the items immediately after completing the measurement tool. This feedback was incorporated to make the tool understandable and realistic for participants.⁵⁹

By involving multiple stakeholders throughout the measurement process, from conceptualization to validation, we learned about the perspectives on, and experiences with, interfaith leadership of the participants with whom we interacted, ensuring that they understood our questions as we intended them. This collaborative approach enhances inclusivity and validity when measuring program outcomes and defining indicators of “success.” It enhances the credibility of research findings and promotes a deeper understanding of the realities experienced by participants and facilitators in interfaith contexts.

2.2. Context Sensitivity

When measuring the outcomes of interfaith learning, context sensitivity is paramount, as it reflects changes in participants behaviors within their own sociocultural contexts.⁶⁰ Researchers and evaluators emphasize the importance of approaches that account for how contextual factors shape experiences, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all methodologies.⁶¹ This

57 Bertram-Troost, “Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools,” 280.

58 Bertram-Troost, “Investigating the impact of religious diversity in schools,” 280.

59 Johnny Blair, Ronald F. Czaja, and Edward A. Blair, *Designing surveys: A guide to decisions and procedures*, Third edition ed. (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), 261.

60 Garfinkel, *Evaluating interfaith dialogue programs*, 6.

61 Snipes and Correia-Harker, “Implementing Inclusive Interfaith Assessment,” 22; Dekker and Meeter, “Evidence-Based Education,” 6; Debra J. Rog, “When background becomes foreground: Toward context-sensitive evaluation practice,” *New Directions for Evaluation* 2012, no. 135 (2012).

recognition is especially important in interfaith learning, where the societal and behavioral dimensions of learning are influenced by specific contexts.

Several practical recommendations can enhance context sensitivity in the quantitative measurement of interfaith learning outcomes. These include considering contextual factors during data interpretation, mapping out the stakeholders and the contextual factors that influence the implementation of findings into practice, and explicitly integrating context into each aspect of the research process.⁶² Our strategy of being sensitive to the context involved incorporating case stories into our measurement tool and situating items within realistic social circumstances rather than in an abstract “vacuum.”⁶³ This approach allowed us to acknowledge inherent power imbalances in interfaith initiatives and recognize the varying perceptions of the religious other depending on the specific identities of this other in different contexts.⁶⁴ For instance, the case story above illustrates a situation where a teacher has to make a quick assessment of the individual and societal influences at stake when Leon, a Reformed Christian speaker, leaves the room during Sita’s presentation about Indian Hinduism. Instead of asking whether participants would be prepared to listen to others in general, adding such a scenario makes the question of whether, when, and how to listen more realistic.

However, while integrating context into a measurement tool offers benefits in terms of sensitivity and relevance, it also poses challenges. One such challenge is the potential for the tool to become overly context specific. In our study and others in the field of interfaith learning, this challenge manifests itself in the difficulty of applying, generalizing, or comparing outcomes and factors across various contexts.⁶⁵ In the example of our case story where Leon, the Christian speaker, walks out while Sita is talking about Indian Hinduism, it is essential to consider that this event is taking place in a European context of Christian/secular privilege and small Hindu

62 Regarding contextual factors, see Dekker and Meeter, “Evidence-Based Education,” 6. Regarding implementation, see Taryn Moir, “Why Is Implementation Science Important for Intervention Design and Evaluation Within Educational Settings?,” Review, *Frontiers in Education* 3 (2018:July 25-2018). Regarding integration, see Rog, “When background becomes foreground,” 26.

63 Janet Finch, “The vignette technique in survey research,” *Sociology* 21, no. 1 (1987): 106.

64 cf. Najeeba Syeed, “Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality,” in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge*, ed. Pui-lan Kwok (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020); Stephanie Burrell Storms, “Using Social Justice Vignettes to Prepare Students for Social Action Engagement,” *Multicultural Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2014).

65 Losert, Merkt, and Schweitzer, “In Search of Interreligious Competence,” 108.

minorities when deciding how to respond. Therefore, integrating attention to the context comprehensively often requires compromising on the cross-contextual applicability of measurement tools.

Thus, despite the recommendation that any measurement approach should carefully consider the contextual setting of a program to avoid maintaining religious assumptions and biases and to ensure that participants do not respond in a social vacuum, integrating the context in each aspect of the process may require compromising on the cross-contextual applicability of a measurement tool.⁶⁶

2.3. Using Other Methods in Addition to Quantitative Measurement

Integrating other methods alongside quantitative measurement is essential for capturing the complex reality of interfaith learning. As noted by Abu-Nimer in the context of interreligious peacebuilding, “we must not rely exclusively on quantitative data collection or analysis; such data often fails to capture the nuances of peacebuilding work, especially on sensitive change issues.”⁶⁷ Combining different methods can range from mere comparison to full integration of methods throughout the process.

The choice of a methodological design depends on the specific purpose of using a mixed methods approach. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham identify five such purposes: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion.⁶⁸ While all of these purposes can be applied to enhance the evaluation of interfaith learning, we elaborate on the practical implications of three of these purposes that were used in our research project.

In our research project, we used qualitative methods, interviews, and reflection report analysis to develop the case stories and items that made up our quantitative measurement tool, with the intention of making the tool realistic and comprehensive for participants. This approach aligns with the mixed methods purpose of “development,” with one method informing the design of another. For example, insights derived from our qualitative data

66 Consider J. Cody Nielsen, Sachi Edwards, and Matthew R. Sayers, “Interfaith?: A Critical Examination of the Interfaith Learning and Development (ILDT) Framework for Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Identities,” *Journal of College and Character* 23, no. 4 (2022).

67 Abu-Nimer, “Challenges in Peacebuilding Evaluation,” 33.

68 Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, “Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs.”

facilitated the development and refinement of items and questions for our quantitative tool. Another common approach to this is to use quantitative results to identify which participants to invite for follow-up interviews.⁶⁹ The practical goal of using mixed methods in this situation is to guide the development of one method, tool, or topic list using findings from another, thereby improving the overall design and validity of the study and making the results more meaningful to participants' lived realities.

A key purpose of using mixed methods, often central when scholars such as Abu-Nimer advocate the use of diverse methods in interfaith learning, is to complement the information that can be provided by quantitative tools alone with narrative descriptions using qualitative methods. The use of complementarity allows one to go beyond surface-level findings and address the underlying factors that influence the data. In our study, quantitative data on participants' leadership skills showed no significant development over time, with participants generally agreeing on all items. At first, we were unsure how to interpret these findings: perhaps the "correct" answers were too obvious, leading to a social desirability bias, or participants' leadership skills may have been cultivated before the program began. By using qualitative methods in addition to quantitative ones, we could identify potential underlying reasons. Our qualitative data suggested that participants did indeed feel that their leadership skills were largely developed before the program began since they had already been working as professionals in the field for a long time.⁷⁰ In this way, the results of one method can complement the interpretation of the results of another by providing a different perspective. To achieve this complementarity, different methods should focus on overlapping indicators, such as leadership skills in our example.

Mixed methods can also facilitate the "expansion" of the research scope and breadth of a study.⁷¹ By employing mixed methods to expand a study, different levels of participants' experiences can receive attention, thereby broadening the focus of the study. For example, in our study, the quantitative pilot tool and interviews focused on the outcomes of the Emoena program, while the analysis of reflection reports focused on participants' development and expectations during the program. This approach allowed us to gather information on different aspects of the same topic—that is, participants'

69 Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, "Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs."

70 Visser et al., "Beyond Interfaith Harmony: How Participants Perceive the Impact of an Interfaith Leadership Program in Flanders and the Netherlands."

71 Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, "Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs."

development during the program as well as their (perceived) learning outcomes at the end of the program, thus broadening the scope of our understanding of interfaith learning.

Despite these benefits, mixed methods research does pose challenges and it demands a diverse skill set from the researchers: from analyzing the reliability and validity of a measurement tool so as to avoid drawing invalid conclusions, to conducting and coding qualitative interviews while remaining self-reflective. Additionally, mixed methods research requires more time and resources than using a single method, from planning, transcription, and data collection to analysis and integration or comparison.⁷² In our pilot study, for example, conducting interviews with participants about their evaluation of the Emoena program took months to prepare, conduct, and analyze, time that may be scarce for researchers and practitioners in the field of interfaith learning. Therefore, while using multiple methods can be an effective way of addressing the story behind the numbers, it requires skills and time that may not always be available to interfaith initiatives. When done correctly and intentionally, the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods can be an effective response to the risk that quantitative measurement does not capture the complexity of interfaith learning.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored some of the complexities of measuring interfaith learning outcomes, including its underlying purposes, challenges, and implications. While the field of interfaith learning has seen a proliferation of quantitative studies on the outcomes of interfaith initiatives, the questions around why and how to measure them have received little attention. We have argued that there is a risk of misrepresenting or even compromising the complex reality of interfaith learning in the absence of reflection on its underlying purposes and practical implications. This article initiates a conversation about *why* and *how* to measure interfaith learning outcomes.

When done thoughtfully, measuring learning outcomes can provide valuable insights for program improvement; it can foster collaboration by allowing for comparison across initiatives. Quantitative measurement can stimulate self-reflection about what we do and why we think it matters.

72 John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2007), 181.

However, it can also oversimplify the work of practitioners and reduce it to metrics for funding or performance reporting. Such oversimplification can then have a negative impact and shift the focus of what is considered important. Therefore, we should carefully consider why and when measurement is helpful and how to prevent it from overshadowing the underlying ideals and content of interfaith learning.⁷³

Any attempt to measure the outcomes of interfaith learning should recognize that quantitative measurement can provide helpful insights but cannot capture all aspects of the messy, complex, and multifaceted nature of interfaith learning. We have proposed three considerations for measuring interfaith learning outcomes: involving multiple stakeholders, remaining sensitive to the context, and using other methods in addition to quantitative ones. These suggestions stimulate reflection on finding an appropriate balance between more resource-intensive, dialogical processes that involve multiple stakeholders and integrate mixed methods at different stages of the process, and less intensive and more outcome-oriented approaches. It is crucial to avoid reducing the richness of interfaith learning to mere numbers and to appreciate its unmeasurable aspects.

This article has brought together insights from the educational sciences, peacebuilding studies, and other disciplines in order to stimulate reflection and prompt discussion about the (im)possibility of measuring interfaith learning outcomes among scholars and practitioners of interfaith learning. The dynamics related to measurement that we have described here are not unique to interfaith initiatives, but our field can be seen as a good example of the challenges involved because of its inherently contextual, intangible, and socio-political nature. Our response to these dynamics can also be used for other disciplines. By initiating a conversation about the challenges, assumptions, and implications of measuring interfaith learning outcomes, we aim to promote unassuming, realistic, and nuanced approaches to understanding the outcomes of interfaith learning.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Ineke Nagel, assistant professor of Sociology at VU Amsterdam, for her assistance in analyzing and interpreting the data from our quantitative pilot study.

73 Consider Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*.

Hannah J. Visser is a postdoctoral researcher and facilitator of the *Emoena interfaith leadership program* at the *School of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*. She is also a postdoctoral researcher at the *Research Institute for Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam*. Her research focuses on religion, diversity and dialogue in educational settings. She obtained her PhD in January 2025 with a dissertation on the impact of interfaith learning

Gerdien D. Bertram-Troost is full professor of *Religious Education* at the *School of Religion and Theology* at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*. Her main research interests lie in the fields of education, developmental psychology, theology, and their overlap.

Marianne Moyaert is full professor of *Comparative Theology of Religions* at the *Research Unit Systematic Theology and the Study of Religions, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies* at the *KU Leuven*. She specializes in the (comparative) theology of religions, interreligious hermeneutics, and Jewish-Christian relations

Anke I. Liefbroer is endowed professor of *Interconnection Psychiatry and Theology* and associate professor of *Psychology of Religion and Spiritual Care* at *Tilburg School of Catholic Theology*. Her main research interests lie in the fields of (interfaith) spiritual care and psychology of religion.



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of *Interreligious Studies Media (ISM)*.

ARTICLE

Constructive Problematizing Dialogue: A New Model for Abrahamic Exchange

Aaron R. Dunn

Abstract

Interreligious exchange, particularly within the Abrahamic family, often risks three pitfalls: First, Harmonization, where interlocutors assimilate characteristics of other religions to that of their own. Second, Doctrinal Avoidance, where issues of belief are omitted for fear of conflict. Third, an inability to form relationship bonds quickly enough to warrant deeper exchange. To address these issues of exchange, this essay proposes the Constructive Problematizing Method, suggesting a typology of shared scriptural characters for conversation in a Scriptural Reasoning format. Using this typology, interlocutors can explore the nuances of their traditions with varying degrees of conflict engagement based upon desired outcomes for the exchange. The result is a means of dialogue that centralizes religious differences in hopes that such differences, rather than commonalities, may become the means for interreligious cooperation and affection.

Keywords

Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology, Abrahamic, John Kaltner, conflict, characters, dialogue

A Case for Character-Based Dialogue as a Means of Constructive Problematizing

In the Spring of 2022, I had the privilege of facilitating a session of Scriptural Reasoning (SR)—a methodology to be discussed at length

later in this article—on the campus of Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. About fifty participants were present, largely Christian seminarians, with a healthy representation of Muslims, and a smattering of Jewish participants. During this session, excerpts from the Tanakh, the Christian New Testament, and the Qur’an were communally discussed and explored, as is typical for most SR sessions. Here, participants had the opportunity to be guests in the scriptures of their Abrahamic interlocutors. It was a thoughtful discussion, marked by civility, enthusiasm, compassion, and interest, all the qualities of a successful exchange.

Following that conversation, I spoke with several participants about their experience. While no one denied the cordiality of the evening, for many, several key factors seemed to be absent. First, participants noticed that those outside the discussed faith tradition seemed to be doing a kind of scriptural harmonization, meaning that participants were taking a text from outside their tradition and assimilating its meaning into their own theological framework.¹ The result was a kind of misrepresentation of the discussed scripture’s parent tradition as looked upon through the lens of another participant’s differing faith tradition and practice.

Second, in conversation with a colleague, I realized there was significant apprehension in the room concerning the level of honesty and transparency that a participant would be willing to risk for fear of dialogic transgression. This colleague, a Palestinian Christian, expressed reticence around expressing a high Christology of Jesus when discussing an excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew. His context had taught him that such assertions in the presence of Jews and Muslims were not only inhospitable; they were dangerous.

These concerns are by no means isolated. Authentic interreligious discourse is often hindered by a two-fold problem: harmonization and doctrinal avoidance. While interreligious theorists such as Leonard Swindler and Catherine Cornille have contributed much with their frameworks for interreligious dialogue, their work focuses largely on the spirit one brings to dialogue, as well as the protocol for civil engagement within the encounter.²

1 Catherine Cornille gestures to this phenomenon as a symptom of “The Problem of Hegemony” or the “instrumentalization or domestication of the other religion for one’s own religious purpose.” See Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 104–108.

2 See, for instance, Leonard Swindler’s “Dialogue Principles,” versions of which have been published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* since 1978 (<https://dialogueinstitute.org/>); or Catherine Cornille’s “Conditions for Inter-Religious

Less attention is given to the actual programmed content of interreligious dialogue and its capacity to aid as pedagogical tools in fostering genuine exchange.³

This essay strives to contribute a pragmatic solution to help fill a programmatic void within interreligious dialogue. Utilizing a taxonomy of my own creation, based upon my own experience within interreligious conversations and the methods used to frame dialogue, I craft a methodology of Abrahamic dialogue that holds contestation at the center in order to foster reconciliation and understanding among religious interlocutors. In this essay, I assert that the key to constructive interreligious dialogue is thoughtful engagement of fundamental hermeneutic differences within the zone of proximal development.⁴ This is a methodology I refer to as Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. I further assert that the most effective means of engaging with these differences is through Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue. Whereas Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue focuses on ideas or themes shared within the text, Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue focuses on characters as they are represented in the respective scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions. This essay argues that, although the thematic approach has its value and can be geared toward Constructive Problematizing Dialogue, the character-based methodology is predisposed to bring interlocutors into a place of revelatory tension.

“Who do you say that I am?”—a Biblical Inquiry

For a primary example to illustrate the inherent potency of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue, we turn to the figure of Jesus. Jesus will be discussed later, not only as a specific type of scriptural figure, but also as a point of departure for Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. For now, it will suffice to feature Jesus as a way of directly addressing the apprehensions of my

Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2013), 20–33.

- 3 A significant exception to this is found in Cornille’s *Meaning and Method*, where she describes the different kinds of learning within comparative theology and identifies, in different language, similar side effects to religious dialogue that I describe in this article. Cornille still, however, does not offer programmable solutions to these issues and reflects on them philosophically rather than pragmatically (see pages 114–141 in particular).
- 4 Zone of proximal development (ZPD) was popularized by early twentieth-century psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. For a summary of ZPD and Scaffolding theory, see <https://www.simplypsychology.org/zone-of-proximal-development.html>.

Palestinian colleague, exploring how Jesus is presented within each of the three Abrahamic spheres.

In the Western Christian liturgical calendar, January 18th marks the feast of the Confession of St. Peter. This biblical event is recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels. Mark, commonly regarded as the earliest of the synoptics, details the event thusly:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him (Mark 8:27–30 NRSVUE).

Whether anyone intended it, be it Jesus, St. Peter, or St. Mark, this passage illustrates an early example of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue. True, and important to remember, everyone featured is a committed Second Temple Jew. Christianity, according to Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin, would not crystallize as its own separate religion until as late as the fourth century with the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.⁵ Still, this pericope provides the groundwork for what would eventually become defining doctrinal differences between Christianity and Judaism.

In asking “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus is asking an initially intrareligious question. He is asking how his ministry fits within the Jewish context. The disciples respond by bringing up figures from their recent (John the Baptist) and distant (Elijah) past in attempts to make theological statements on the nature of Jesus. However, Catholic scholars John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. note that “while there is some truth in each of these... identifications, there is [according to St. Mark] much more to Jesus’s identity than any one of them conveys.”⁶ It is not until

5 Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 13. Boyarin’s claim is one of many concerning the Jewish-Christian “parting of the ways,” although such a summary is beyond the scope and focus of this essay. For a survey of this topic, see Kim Doosuk, “The Parting of the Way: A survey of the Relationship between Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries,” *Themelios*, 46 no. 1 (2021), 79–98.

6 John R. Donahue, SJ and Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, “The Gospel of Mark,” *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SJ (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 260.

St. Peter asserts that Jesus is in fact “the Messiah” that St. Mark’s assertion has been made. St. Matthew’s rendering of St. Peter’s Confession offers additional layers to consider:

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that *the Son of Man* is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the *Son of the living God.*” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:13–19 NRSV).

Here, additional figures beyond John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets are brought into the dialogue to further explain Jesus’ status. First, St. Matthew (through Jesus’ self-identification) links Jesus to “The Son of Man.” Peter, upon responding, names Jesus as “the Son of the living God.” Boyarin explains, at great length, that “‘Son of God’ referred to the King of Israel, the earthly king of David’s seat, while ‘Son of Man’ referred to a heavenly figure,” especially as described in the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel.⁷ Assigning these two preconceived titles/characters to Jesus solidifies St. Matthew’s assertion that Jesus is the Christ, both human and divine. While Boyarin asserts that all of these labels for Jesus are still within strictly Jewish terms, at the same time it is the naming of *Jesus* as the Son of God/Man that forms the crux of what would become the Jewish/Christian divide. Simply put, those who would become Christians would name Jesus as the Son of God/Man, and post-second temple Jews would not.⁸ Already, in this passage from a single faith tradition, character-based dialogue reveals problematizing interreligious differences.

7 Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, 26. For a survey regarding the Son of Man, Boyarin recommends Delbert Royce Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

8 Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, 70.

“Who did you say that you are?”—a Qur’anic Response

Islam’s emergence in the 7th century brings a third voice to the question of the nature and personhood of Jesus. John Kaltner notes “the Islamic understanding of Jesus presents some unique theological and interreligious challenges because the Qur’an does something regarding him that it does not do in its interpretation of Hebrew Bible Characters and stories—it flatly denies central Christian beliefs about Jesus.”⁹ This is seen in several locations within the Qur’an, most notably in a setting of dialogue between Allah (God) and ‘Īsā (Jesus):

When God says, “Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, ‘Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God?’”¹⁰ He [‘Īsā] will say, “May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say—if I had said any such thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen—I told them only what you commanded me to: ‘worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ I was a witness over them during my time among them. Ever since You took my soul, You alone have been the watcher over them: You are witness to all things” (Q 5:116–17).¹¹

Elsewhere, the Qur’an details the consequences for those who make a confession like that of St. Peter:

Those who say, “God is the Messiah,¹² son of Mary,” have defied the truth. The Messiah himself said, “Children of

9 John Kaltner and Christopher G. Frechette, *How the Qur’an Interprets the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 2020), 11.

10 Kaltner points out that “this passage appears to claim that Christians worship Mary/Maryam as a deity and that they consider her to be a part of the Trinity;” and that this belief is not reflected in “mainstream Christian theology.”

11 All Qur’an verses, unless otherwise noted, are from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem’s translation, Oxford University Press, 2016.

12 Kaltner notes that this understanding of Messiah may not be synonymous with either the Jewish or Christian understanding of the term. According to Kaltner, “The Qur’an does not provide a description of the role of the Messiah/al-Masīh, and, given the fact that the designation is used only for Jesus/‘Īsā, it is probable that the title was adopted due to Christian usage of it without full understanding of its meaning.” See *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 122–23.

Israel, worship God my Lord and your Lord.” If anyone associates others with God, God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. No one will help [such] evildoers (Q 5:72).

Kaltner is quick to advocate for hermeneutic goodwill:

Christians must not jump to the wrong conclusions about why the Qur’an rejects key elements of their faith. Such rejection does not imply animosity or disrespect for Christianity, but simply reflects the way Islam understands monotheism, which is so central to its system of belief. Muslims believe that God is one, and anything that violates the divine unity (*tawhīd*) is considered an example of sin of the association (*shirk*) of something in the created world with the uncreated nature of God. The Qur’an teaches that belief in the divinity of Jesus is an example of such an association and therefore a violation of God’s oneness.¹³

Who, then, is ‘Īsā according to the Qur’an? Kaltner believes that, in summary, ‘Īsā’s own first words as an infant leave little room for confusion:

[Jesus] said: “I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet; made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless. Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.”¹⁴ Such was Jesus, son of Mary (Q 19: 30–34).

Considering that no shortage of ink or blood has been spilled over these scriptural differences, it is evident that a question as simple as “Who do you say that I am?” begets substantial theological and sociological ramifications.

13 Kaltner, *How the Qur’an Interprets the Bible*, 23.

14 Resurrection here refers to the Islamic concept of communal resurrection of the dead, and not the Christian doctrine of Christ’s particular resurrection.

Moving towards a Constructive Problematizing Method

The question remains: how can such stark fundamental differences become constructive means of dialogue? The example of Jesus/‘Īsā illustrates several important interreligious concepts. First, it is a keen illustration of the revelatory power that Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue possesses. Within even just a brief excursus, one can see how conversation surrounding a figure such as, but not limited to, Jesus prompts discussion of philosophy, theology, history, and the list goes on. Second, it reveals the stakes of engaging in dialogue in the first place, as the figure of Jesus/‘Īsā, regardless of Abrahamic affiliation, cuts to the core of religious identity forged through centuries of contestation. Lastly, connected to the stakes, is the removal of the ability to “harmonize” interpretations. Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue, dialogue that focuses on images or ideas within scripture, certainly has the potential to offer equally rich exchange. However, lest the themes be intentionally problematized (ethical issues, doctrinal issues), there remains more room for scriptural harmonization in which fundamental differences are sidestepped in favor of solely highlighting religious compatibility.

I have begun this essay by utilizing a brief excursus to respond to a specific dialogic dilemma (Christology) and to offer a look into the natural disposition of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue as a breeding ground for Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. Next, I delve into the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue, citing methodologies from Scriptural Reasoning, comparative theology, and educational neuroscience. After articulating these values and foundations, I build from the work of John Kaltner, taking his writings on Biblical-Quranic characters and arranging them in a pedagogical typology for structuring dialogue based upon the values of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. I then examine a single character from a specific category of that typology to illustrate the dialogic avenues available once Constructive Problematizing Dialogue is applied. In presenting this method, I argue that the key to truly profitable Abrahamic dialogue that engages both theologically and sociologically is the intentional and nuanced centering of fundamental religious difference.

Constructive Problematizing Dialogue

At the onset of this essay I identified two primary issues that vex Abrahamic dialogue, particularly at the non-academic discursive level. I named these

issues Harmonization and Doctrinal Avoidance. Here, we will explore each issue in depth.

A Soteriology of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue

Harmonization (my own term) is a form of assimilation in which a participant engaging with a text or concept outside of their own religious traditions misrepresents the parent tradition's assertion, imposing instead their own hermeneutical framework upon another religion. Simply put, in the act of harmonization, a well-meaning interlocutor softens religious uniqueness in favor of a constructed commonality. Such an impulse may come from a natural fear of difference and a subconscious desire to minimize difference to avoid conflict. Harmonization may also stem from a sort of misplaced empathy as participants venture to reach out in compassion and understanding but only succeed in reaching into themselves. Or, to offer a third option, Harmonization may be symptomatic of a liberal understanding of religious pluralism. Marianne Moyaert credits much of this understanding to the work of philosopher John Hick. According to Moyaert, Hick "claims that all religions are historically and culturally determined interpretations of the ineffable Real."¹⁵ In this view, "pluralism presupposes unity in diversity," however this view "all too often ends up undermining particular religious traditions."¹⁶

Harmonization should not be confused with other dialogic endeavors. The work of Francis Clooney, SJ in comparative theology makes a similar move of engaging with another tradition and then seeing what is revealed in one's own religious tradition because of the exchange.¹⁷ As Michael Barnes describes, "[In comparative theology] one's own tradition is read with proper attention to the defining doctrines of the tradition but also with an awareness of how analogous themes and ideas are conceived and ordered by the other."¹⁸ Harmonization might also be confused with "holy envy," as posited by Krister Stendahl, in which a participant finds "that which is beautiful and

15 Marianne Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), 65.

16 Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning," 65.

17 For an overview, see Francis X. Clooney, SJ, "Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, 51–63.

18 Michael Barnes, "Reading Other Religious Texts: Intratextuality and the Logic of Scripture" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 3 (2011): 392.

moving within the religion of the other”¹⁹ and finds themselves longing for it in their own faith. However, both comparative theology and holy envy evade the pitfall of harmonization, each requiring an intimate familiarity of the uniqueness of each religion as distinct from one’s own. Where Clooney and Stendahl acknowledge distinction, harmonization seeks to nullify it.

This should not, however, disregard the inevitability and usefulness of a religious hermeneutic beyond that of the scripture’s parent tradition. Moyaert details how in SR,

Jews, Christians, and Muslims can read and discuss one another’s texts on an equal basis without having to bracket their own faith commitments. Thus, for example, Jews are not the only ones who can make statements about the (final) meaning of a text from the Tanakh. Every text is read, studied, and critiqued inter-religiously. There is no room here for possessive claims and exclusivist demands.²⁰

Harmonization, then, is different from viewing a different scripture through your own eyes. It is assuming that the way you view scripture is the equivalent of how the parent tradition views their own text.

Doctrinal Avoidance refers to the sensation of having to hide elements of one’s religious self within interreligious dialogue. Reasons for this are plentiful. Historical interreligious trauma, to say nothing of current events, creates justifiable tension around self-disclosure. The location of the dialogue may also feed into this, be it in a house of worship, academic setting, or, to think more broadly, within cultures that prioritize a certain religious ideology or even secularity. Scripture specifically, as David Ford notes, carries particularly high stakes in interreligious discourse:

The Tanakh, the Bible and the Qur’an are the main platforms of those within each tradition who stand against dialogue and in favour of self-protective or aggressive confrontation. Each of these scriptures has texts that can be used to legitimate violence, claims to superiority, blanket condemnations, cruel punishments, suspicions, oppressive morality, and hostility to those who are not believers in God

19 Todd H. Green, *Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn’t Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism* (Fortress Press, 2018), 166.

20 Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning,” 68.

as identified by one's own tradition. Their scriptures are where the particularity of each is evident "warts and all" and have been widely used in polemics between them as well as in attacks on each by secular critics.²¹

Given that "scriptures are usually seen as an insurmountable obstacle to the success of inter-religious dialogue," it is not surprising that the impulse would be to shy away and refrain from self-disclosure within dialogue.²² However, if Ford is right in saying that "each tradition's scripture is at the heart of its identity," and thus uniquely capable to "not only bring core identities (of each tradition) into conversation, [but] sustain them there,"²³ then the mission of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue is to avoid dilution of these core identities and allow for, to quote Nicholas Adams, "making deep reasonings public," resisting the lure of "closeted" religion.²⁴

I will add a third and final problem that Constructive Problematizing Dialogue aims to address. I refer to this phenomenon as the "square one" phenomenon. The logic of "square one" believes that it is only through enduring, lasting, and repeated encounters with interlocutors that depth can be achieved in interreligious conversation. For a certain level of sophistication to be achieved, the participants either need to be of a certain pedigree or the community engaging in dialogue needs to have built a profound level of trust with one another. It is certainly a worthy aspiration that interlocutors have this deep relationship, as it is the hope and aim of any dialogic endeavor to foster relationship and understanding. However, for aspiring dialogue participants who do not have the luxury of time or repetition, episodic dialogue may be the only recourse. In such episodic engagement, oftentimes it feels as though the conversation is starting over repeatedly, or, always at "square one." Constructive Problematizing Dialogue, therefore, aims to bypass this sensation with a pedagogy that centers conflict in an approachable and achievable framework.

In constructing this framework, it is vital to understand the different gifts, or limitations, that each religion brings to dialogue. Ben Quash notes:

21 David Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning Between Jews, Christians and Muslims" *Modern Theology* 22:3 (2006): 345–46.

22 Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning," 71.

23 Ford, "Interfaith Wisdom," 345, 346.

24 Nicholas Adams, "Making Deep Reasonings Public" in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, ed. David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, 41–57 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 54.

Modern, western Christians have a strong internal imperative to find the “right” meaning, the “right” interpretation, and then all to agree on it. This is partly because of an idea...that Christian life is about being nice to each other (and avoiding or eliminating conflict in our relationships), and partly because we have imbibed a very strong modern idea that the meanings of the texts we regard as authoritative should be clear, single and unambiguous... the Jewish tradition... has a sophisticated account of how texts can yield a vast range of meanings, and a robust account of how argument is the best way to make it happen.²⁵

Given SR’s history with textual reasoning, which finds its roots in the chavruta style of discourse,²⁶ Jewish participants may feel right at home in this format (and, in my own experience, be underwhelmed by the learning curve necessary for the other religions). Constructive Problematizing Dialogue strives to “level the playing field,” establishing a culture and pedagogy unto itself that fosters the skills for participants to engage without the prerequisite of time, study, or repetition.

Philosophy and Commitment of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue

The goal of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue (CPD) is to intentionally bring interlocutors into a place of ideological discomfort, to “problematize,” as it were, in order to encourage the skill building of conflict engagement. Thus, in addition to SR, CPD resources philosophical aspects of comparative theology as well as pedagogical techniques as informed by the fields of neuroscience and education.

CPD is principally born out of the philosophy and methodology of SR, particularly SR’s commitment to honoring the distinctiveness between each religion. As Moyaert explains:

25 Ben Quash, “Deep Calls to Deep: The Practice of Scriptural Reasoning,” 9, The Matheson Trust for the Study of Comparative Religion, <https://www.themathesontrust.org>. Quash groups Muslims broadly in this understanding as well.

26 Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning, 68.

Scriptural reasoners believe in the power of serious, deep, collegial, and inter-religious study of texts, the aim of which is not so much to obtain agreement beyond differences, but to make respectful disagreement possible. They believe dialogue is meaningful only when the “core identities” of the three faiths concerned are brought into conversation with one another. Instead of downplaying inter-religious differences, scriptural reasoning even seeks to “articulate and preserve the separate identities of each of the three religions”. Perhaps this rather “conservative” inclination explains why this form of dialogue is attractive to believers who object to the liberal presuppositions that often undergird inter-religious encounters. “Rather than turning aside from [inter-religious] differences in an attempt to preserve some putative peace (not really peace at all), [SR proposes that it] is precisely through exploring these differences together that [Jews, Christians, and Muslims] learn the meaning of [their] profound interdependence.” For them, participating in the interpretation and questioning of the scriptures of another faith tradition does not mean a relativization of their own faith commitment, but forms an incentive to read their own scripture anew, and to understand them anew.²⁷

Where CPD and SR part ways, however, is in their text selection. Adams notes how “choosing texts for scriptural reasoning is in fact something that is not as controlled as one might anticipate, and this is a useful illustration of scriptural reasoning’s general openness to luck.”²⁸ Indeed, by Adams’s description, scriptural reasoning “shows itself shaped more by luck than planning,” and attempts to overly program the texts “would be very much against the spirit of openness to luck and surprises which scriptural reasoning exhibits.”²⁹ While CPD admires the spontaneity of honest exchange that SR upholds, this “openness to luck and surprise” also leaves ample room for the challenges that CPD hopes to combat.

Turning now to comparative theology, we have already briefly discussed the work of Francis Clooney, SJ. By Clooney’s own estimation, comparative theology and SR are two “discipline(s) that [have] both reading and

27 Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning,” 65.

28 Adams, “Making Deep Reasonings Public,” 47.

29 Adams, “Making Deep Reasonings Public,” 48.

dialogical features.”³⁰ Nevertheless, Clooney is adamant that the two fields are different, as comparative theology maintains a “minimized sociality” of learning as compared to SR.³¹ For comparative theology, “there are no longer settled groups of interlocutors, neatly sorted out on either side by religious identification,” and as a result “boundaries are ideally blurred, echoes and references multiplied, lineages interwoven.”³² I believe this insistence of differentiation on Clooney’s part is a missed opportunity. Where theological conclusions and assertions generally go beyond the scope of SR, they are precisely where comparative theology thrives. Through CPD, readings can be chosen with an eye on theological ramifications, allowing theological differences to become transformative forces in the experience of the conversation partners. Conversely, comparative theology runs the risk of infiltration and near colonization as it seeks to “blur the boundaries” between religious “others.”³³ That is precisely where SR offers remedy, centering the witness, experience, and identity of each conversation partner rather than encouraging the siloed departure-and-return experience of comparative theology. CPD aims to be the meeting place of these rich interreligious disciplines, at times extending them beyond their limitations and at others offering thoughtful restraint.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, we turn to neuroscience and educational pedagogy. In her book, *Our Brains at War*, Mari Fitzduff goes into extensive detail on the neurological processes that influence human proclivities towards conflict. Though she focuses predominantly on violent conflict, her work is invaluable in crafting peacebuilding programming. As Fitzduff details, we are neurologically predisposed to “us” versus “them” schemas in social navigation. It is no secret that religion constitutes a monumental differentiator within this binary, and Fitzduff herself notes how “even the apparently smallest of social, historical, or theological differences, such as those between Sunni or Shia Muslims, can and do provide a framework for violent social conflict in many parts of the world.”³⁴ Waxing biblical, Fitzduff comments how “one’s pronunciation of a particular word can in many places be enough of a marker to kill or be killed” and how “in biblical times, the Gileadites would test the Ephraimites to pronounce a

30 Clooney, “Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 57.

31 Clooney, “Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 57.

32 Clooney, “Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 58.

33 See Cornille, *Meaning and Method*.

34 Mari Fitzduff, *Our Brains at War: The Neuroscience of Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 37.

word correctly as the only way to tell their enemy from their friend (Judges 12:6).”³⁵

Centuries of interreligious strife have also taken their neurological toll. Dialogic efforts between the Abrahamic traditions alone will quickly collide into the traumatic epigenetics (effects of the environment on genes) and collective memories of Crusades, the Holocaust, and myriads of other belligerent tragedies in our shared history to say nothing of current events.³⁶ Between a natural disposition toward “othering” and compounded trauma, neurological problems demand neurologically sensitive solutions.

This is where CPD can provide such solutions. If we hold that conflict engagement is in fact a “skill,” then certain criteria are necessary for growth and certain strategies can be resourced to meet those criteria. To complement Fitzduff’s neurological exploration, I commend the work of Daniel Coyle found in *The Talent Code*. In this piece, Coyle travels the world, seeing how some of the most skilled practitioners in a variety of fields are trained. Articulating that what we perceive as skill is neurologically actualized through Myelin (fatty tissue that surrounds neurological connections) growth within the brain, Coyle asserts three principal attributes that foster this production, namely: Ignition; Expert Coaching; Deep Practice.³⁷ Such neurology offers fascinating opportunities for interdisciplinary consultation when designing occasions for exchange. In conjunction with pedagogical methods to most efficiently activate skill building, a comprehensive understanding of the neurology of conflict could change the entire playing field of crisis engagement within interreligious dialogue. CPD attempts to do just that. Specifically, it brings participants into what Coyle terms “deep practice” by placing them well into the zone of proximal development, such that the challenge is just enough that participants feel an element of stress, but not so much that frustration outweighs determination. CPD offers the necessary scaffolding to allow conversation partners to intentionally engage with conflict, avoiding harmonization and doctrinal avoidance, such that neurological adjustments can occur to build the skills necessary for conflict engagement.

35 Fitzduff, *Our Brains at War*, 37.

36 By *epigenetics* is meant effects of the environment on genes; by *collective memory*, “widely shared knowledge of past social events that are collectively constructed through communicative social interactions, which can have a significant impact on our behaviour, feelings, and thoughts.” Fitzduff, *Our Brains at War*, 21, 50.

37 Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 32.

On Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue

Before beginning to apply this methodology, a quick word regarding Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue. Up to this point, CPD has held a character-based approach as the chief locus of problematizing. Having now explained the logic behind CPD, it should be apparent (along with my excursus at the beginning of this essay) that Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue inherently brings interlocutors to that zone of proximal development, thus optimizing the “deep practice” that pedagogical neuroscience commends. This is, however, not without its drawbacks. Kaltner himself admits that focusing on Qur’anic characters is only a starting point in accessing “the content and style of the entire Qur’an.”³⁸ Such a narrow focus, while necessary for deep practice, can hardly represent each scriptural tradition in toto. Can, then, the constructive problematizing endeavor be achieved using themes as a locus rather than characters? A response would certainly be “yes,” but with several caveats. First, generic themes imply a commonality amidst the scriptures, just as Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue does. This baseline commonality is necessary to ensure that a conversation can even take place. However, this commonality is very easily harmonized amidst the religions. Often, if a topic such as “Dreams,” “Fasting,” “Light,” or “Migration” is chosen, each participant feels as though the texts say roughly the same thing trans-scripturally, if but in different ways.³⁹ Second, themes create very unwieldy categories. A dialogue could be focused on discussing ethical or theological themes within scripture, such as “soteriology” or “eschatology,” but now this over-particularizes the thematic qualifications and assumes that these categories are remotely present amidst other religions. Theological, ethical, and thematic considerations are certainly major categories that are worthy of conversation. CPD dictates, however, that conversation topics be curated such that 1) each religion is able to speak authentically in its own religious language; 2) differences are centralized as to not be harmonized or avoided; and 3) the differences, or commonalities, are not so daunting that the conversation becomes over- or underwhelming.

CPD is born of the very best of the philosophies and methodologies of SR. However, it calls for a pedagogical turn in which materials discussed are programmed in such a way that discussing differences is inevitable and approachable. This scaffolding enables the necessary neurological pathways

38 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 4.

39 See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/text-packs.html> for examples of such excerpts.

to be formed to equip people to engage with conflict and be able to apply it throughout their life. Such skill building has the capacity to not only improve the quality of interreligious dialogue but will further broaden humanitarian peace efforts by creating a culture of bravery paired with higher thresholds of tolerance and compassion. Let us now see how CPD might be utilized within Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue to structure and optimize Abrahamic Dialogue.

Developing a Typology for Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue

We began our exploration into constructive problematizing through an illustration of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue. By focusing on the figure of Jesus, an array of multifaceted considerations—such as theology, history, and literary differences—came into view. One primary difference, however, remained the centerpiece of the excursus. In theological terms, this might be referred to as Christology. However, more broadly, and using an etic description as opposed to a term emic to the Christian theological traditions, this can be understood as Jesus’s function within the narrative. In Christianity writ large, Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of Man, the *logos*, the savior of the world, and a person in the Trinitarian Godhead. In Islam, Jesus is a *rasūl*, a messenger sent by God, and a prophet (*nabī*), but, in all cases, a man like any other.⁴⁰ In Judaism, Jesus does not make canon. However, a wide range of Jewish understandings contextualize Jesus as a rabbi, prophet, and messianic figure.⁴¹

The first move in Constructive Problematizing is to identify a central point of departure for each scriptural character shared among the three Abrahamic traditions. Invariably, this point of departure affects the character’s function within the tradition. Here, I will propose a typology that, for purposes of dialogue, organizes Biblical/Qur’anic characters according to their literary function and point of departure in comparing each scriptural text. The purpose of this typology will eventually be a constructive turn in

40 Abjar Bahkou notes that though the Qur’an also calls ‘Īsā “the Word” (*al-Kalimah*), “the Christian idea of Jesus being the word of God is totally rejected by Islam.” See Abjar Bahkou, “The Islamic Claim of Jesus and the Christian Response,” *Concordia Journal*, 42, no 4 (2016): 322–31.

41 For conversation about Jewish perspectives of Jesus, see Zev Garber, *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011).

which each type is utilized for different objectives within dialogue. For now, the task ahead is establishing a single, concise departure for each character.

The Work of John Kaltner

As a cornerstone of this endeavor, I will be principally engaging the scholarship of John Kaltner, a preeminent scholar in this comparative work. His *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (2018), co-authored with Younus Y. Mirza, details each of the characters that are shared between the Biblical and Qur'anic traditions. In each chapter, Kaltner and Mirza offer thorough descriptions of each character depending on their scriptural context. For some, the differences are subtle. In others, the variations are poignant and potentially jarring. Here, I summarize and reflect upon Kaltner's scholarship, distilling his character overviews into a typology for use in CPD.

A quick word of consideration regarding Kaltner's approach: much of Kaltner's work aims to enable non-Muslim readers to engage with the Qur'an. When speaking about scripture, Kaltner and Mirza organize character realizations into two scriptural streams: Biblical and Qur'anic. They additionally categorize certain materials, such as Jewish Midrash, Christian non-canonical Gospels (such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Protoevangelium of James), and Islamic "Life of the Prophets" literature, as extra-scriptural. It is worth noting the risk factors in this Biblical/Qur'anic dichotomy. Referring to a single stream as "Biblical" risks anachronism. There are many "biblical" characters, such as Jesus, that are not biblically canonical within Jewish tradition. Kaltner and Mirza's delineation risks furthering a Judeo-Christian mythos that is not inherently constructive in Abrahamic dialogue, conveying an implicit supersessionism for Christian-Jewish relations and a "two-against-one" mentality in relation to Muslims. Given, however, that this is the structure that Kaltner uses in the breadth of his work, we will treat this dichotomy (Bible/Qur'an) as a shorthand worthy of interrogation and elaboration. I will nuance Kaltner and Mirza's category of "Bible" by further distinguishing the "Jewish Canon" and the "Christian Canon" whenever possible, honoring Christianity's adherence to the Hebrew scriptures without belittling Judaism's distinct scriptural identity. Later, I will prioritize separating out the three unique voices of each tradition more fully.

Typology Overview

My proposed typology (Figure 1) builds upon Kaltner's scholarship by taking the characters featured in *The Bible and the Qur'an* and organizing them into three principal categories based upon character *function*. While I will argue why certain characters belong in the categories they have been assigned, there is certainly room for interpretation and amendment. However, using this notion of function triggers varying levels of theological and contextual problematizing, aiding in the constructive problematizing endeavor.

Category 1 characters maintain a similar function in both the Bible and the Qur'an. In these texts, though there may well be variation and differing theological implications, their overall role and purpose in either scripture remains essentially the same. Category 2 characters, in contrast, are characters *exclusive* to each tradition. In this category, there is little to no room for common ground between the scriptural traditions.⁴² Category 3 returns to shared characters; however, in this case, their function within their narratives have radically changed.⁴³ Characters in bold have the capacity to span several categories depending upon desired usage.

42 This category is complicated by the status of non-Qur'anic scripture in Islamic tradition. Even if a character is not mentioned in the Qur'an by name, that character may still be considered part of the Islamic tradition as long as it does not contradict the Qur'an. Mirza offers a succinct explanation of the history and controversy of the *isrā'īlyāt* tradition in "Ismael as Abraham's Sacrifice: Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr on the Intended Victim", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2013, Vol. 24, No. 3), 279–83. Similarly, there are a number of characters in the Qur'an that may or may not have Biblical parallels, such as Dhū al-Kifl (Q 38:48), who Kaltner notes has been paired with a number of Biblical counterparts (see John Kaltner and Younus Y. Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an* (London: T & T Clark, 2018), 42.

43 Kaltner notes that "In general, the Qur'an presents the biblical figures in a way that conforms to Islamic beliefs and practices." (Kaltner, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 4). In this sense, all the Biblical characters have undergone some sort of function change, as their Qur'anic function serves to articulate and depict faithful Muslim life. However, even considering this, some functional shifts are more dramatic than others.

Figure 1*

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
<p>Aaron/Hārūn Abraham/Ibrāhīm Adam/Ādam Cain/Qābil and Abel/Hābīl Elijah/Ilyās Eve/Hawwā' Gabriel/Jibrīl God Gog/Ya'jūj and Magog/Ma'jūj Isaac/Ishaq Jacob/Ya'qūb Job/Ayyūb John/Yahyā Jonah/Yūnus Lot/Lūṭ Mary/Maryam Moses/Mūsā Satan/Shayṭan</p>	<p>Hārūt and Mārūt (Q) Malik (Q) Specific Apostles (NT) Dhū al-Qarnayn (Q) Various Prophets (HB) Iblīs (Q) Jinn (Q) Hūd (Q) Šālīḥ (Q) Shu'ayb (Q) Luqman (Q)</p>	<p>Aaron/Hārūn David/Dāwūd Ezra/'Uzayr Goliath/Jālūt Haman/Hāmān Isaac/Ishaq Ishmael/Ismā'īl Jesus/'Isā Joseph/Yūsuf Potiphar's Wife (HB)/Pharaoh's wife (Q) Korah/Qārūn Lot's/Lūṭ's wife Mary/Maryam Moses's/Mūsā's Mother Noah/Nūḥ Pharaoh/Fir'awn Pharaoh's/Fir'awn's Family Queen of Sheba Satan/Shayṭan Saul/Ṭālūt Solomon/Sulaymān Zechariah/Zakarīyā</p>

*Characters in bold have the capacity to span several categories depending upon desired usage.

Category 1: Consistent Literary Function

We begin by exploring Category 1, which is home to some of the most illustrious Biblical/Qur'anic figures. The advantage of this category is that, by and large, there is a copious amount of textual information found within both scriptures. In this first category of characters, the point of departure between traditions is delayed and the similarities are frontloaded. And, even as the function of each character remains relatively unchanged, the differences are enough to warrant considerable theological discussion. Let us briefly focus on Abraham/Ibrāhīm as an exemplar of this category.

For many reasons, Abraham/Ibrāhīm is a logical place to begin any Abrahamic character exploration. Kaltner notes how “The Qur’an text shares a great deal with the Genesis account [of Abraham] in terms of their similar cast of characters and common plot outline.”⁴⁴ Many similar stories

44 John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur’an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 103.

are found in both texts.⁴⁵ However, the Qur'an lacks the sense of chronology found in the biblical account.⁴⁶

In Hebrew, the name Abraham means “father of a multitude.” This pairs with Abraham’s function within the Hebrew Bible as the progenitor of the covenant people of Israel. The same could be said of Ibrāhīm, a forerunner in a chain of revelation that acts as a frequent refrain throughout the Qur'an. Like his Biblical counterpart, Ibrāhīm acts as a pioneer of the faith, and, as Kaltner notes, “Muhammad is repeatedly told in the Qur'an that he should follow the ‘religion of Abraham/Ibrāhīm.’”⁴⁷

Rather than analyze each difference between the realizations, we will instead focus on the point of departure. In the case of Abraham/Ibrāhīm, this point of departure centers around the nature of his covenant with God. The biblical account offers several distinct narratives in which God establishes a covenant with Abraham. Here is its rendering in Genesis 17:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall

45 “Abraham/ leaves behind his family and homeland to journey to a new land (19:48–50; 21:70–71; see also Gen 12:1–6), where he sets up a shrine for worship (2:124–29; see also Gen 12:8; 13:18). God instructs Abraham/Ibrāhīm to enact an unusual ritual that involves the division of animals and/or birds into parts (2:260; cf. Gen. 15:7–11). In both texts, Abraham/Ibrāhīm is visited by messengers sent from God who tell him that he and his wife will have a son, and then the messengers announce their plan to destroy the city where Lot/Lūt is living (11:74–76; see also Gen 51:24–37 and Gen. 18:20–33). Prior to the city’s destruction, Abraham/Ibrāhīm makes a plea to God in an effort to save Lot/Lūt’s people (11:74–76; see also Gen. 18:22–33). Finally, in both the Bible and the Qur'an, Abraham/Ibrāhīm nearly sacrifices his son, but in each case, it turns out to be a test from God and the son is spared (37:99–113; see also Gen. 22:1–19).” Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 12.

46 A trend true for most of the characters in the Qur'an.

47 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 11. See also Q 16:123 and Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*, 119 for treatment of Ibrāhīm as a forerunner of the prophet Muhammad. Kaltner notes that this handling of Ibrāhīm indicates another key Qur'anic trend, “whereby the lives of prominent figures of the past are presented in ways that support and validate Muhammad’s claim to be a prophet.” Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*. This will be a recurring theme in examining these characters, regardless of placement in the typology.

be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God” (Gen 17:1–8).

In Genesis, Abraham’s covenant is characterized by “the election of Israel as a chosen people” of God’s covenant “and the promise of the land as a visible sign of that covenant.”⁴⁸ Compare this to the Qur’an’s response to such claims.

Children of Israel, remember how I blessed you and favored you over other people, and beware a Day when no soul can stand in for another. No compensation will be accepted from it, nor intercession be of use to it, nor will anyone be helped. When Abraham’s Lord tested him with certain commandments, which he fulfilled, He said “I will make you a leader of people.” Abraham asked “And will You make leaders from my descendants too?” God answered, “My pledge does not hold for those who do evil” (Q 2:122–24).

In analyzing this passage, Kaltner notes Ibrāhīm can be understood as more of a “universal ancestor” rather than the forerunner of a particular group of people, given that “Islam maintains that all people are born Muslims.”⁴⁹

This differing notion of “covenant,” then, becomes a defining point of departure for all three Abrahamic faiths.⁵⁰ Abraham is a literal ancestor for Jews; a spiritual one as Gentiles are “grafted onto the vine” of the covenant

48 Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*, 118.

49 Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*, 104.

50 As with terms such as *ʿĪsā* as “the word” and “the messiah,” the Qur’an uses the word “covenant” but with different theological meanings than found in the Bible. See Il Joo Kong, “Textual and Contextual Reading of Biblical Abraham and the Qur’anic *ʿIbrāhīm*” in *Prophets in the Qur’ān and the Bible*, edited by Daniel S. Baeq and Sam Kim (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 54.

(see Romans 11); and a universal ancestor in Islam. What remains constant, however, is Abraham’s function as a progenitor of a faith, placing him squarely in Category 1.⁵¹

Category 2: Narrative Exclusivity

We now turn to Category 2, the opposite of Category 1. Category 2 consists of characters either found in the Qur’an that are not present in the Bible (such as prophets like Hūd, Šālīh, and Shu’ayb or characters such as Luqman), or characters not elaborated upon in the Qur’an.⁵² Thus, the characters unto themselves are points of departure, even if they are broadly referenced trans-scripturally.

One challenge within this category is the lack of scriptural resources about them. Many of these particular characters are mentioned briefly or appear only in a list of names within the Qur’an.⁵³ Some characters, despite their brevity, offer fascinating windows into scriptural historical inclusion, such as Dhū al-Qarnayn (Q 18:83-98), “who is generally held to be Alexander the Great.”⁵⁴ Scarcity of scriptural reference, therefore, does not imply lack of theological intrigue.

This category is far too wide to comprehensively represent every character within it. Instead, we will briefly explore a single character group, jinn—non-biblical figures featured in the Qur’an whose presence in Arab culture predates their inclusion in Islam.⁵⁵ According to Kaltner and Mirza, jinn are “invisible creatures, often associated with parts of the natural world, who [interact] with humans in both positive and negative ways.”⁵⁶ Amira El-Zein beautifully describes the contrasting and yet interwoven relationship between humans and jinn in the Qur’an:

51 Kaltner argues a further function of Ibrāhīm, calling him “The Critic of Polytheism” and the “Champion of Monotheism.” See Kaltner, *How the Qur’an Interprets the Bible*, 85–89. While these functions serve a purpose distinct to Islam’s mission of radical monotheism, they harmonize Abraham’s commitment to the God of Israel and pair with Midrashic accounts of Abraham’s protests of idolatry (see Bereshit Rabbah, Ch. 8).

52 The Qur’an Sura 31 is named for Luqman, but he is not featured in Kaltner’s work.

53 Though are often elaborated upon in extra-scriptural resources.

54 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 56.

55 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 89.

56 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 89.

In many instances, the Qur'an mentions the elements from which the jinn are composed: "Surely, We created mankind of a clay of mud molded, and the jinn created We before of scorching winds" (Qur'an 15:26–27)...The jinn are subtle and secret beings whose extremely refined elements veil them from us, fire being a pure energy, and wind being the vital breath of the universe, the vehicle of light par excellence and of the invisible; it is that which we feel around us without being able to touch, almost an intelligent power that appears to direct things.⁵⁷

Although the jinn are unique to Islam within Abrahamic dialogue, any conversation focused on jinn will inevitably result in the discussion of other similar categories of Biblical creatures such as angels and demons. Indeed, the most famous of these figures is Iblīs, the enemy of humanity. An argument could be made for Iblīs's inclusion in a different category within the typology, for "prior to his refusal to bow down to the first human he was known as Iblīs, but after refusing to submit to the divine will he became Satan/Shayṭān."⁵⁸ This is further complicated by Iblīs's presence as the tempter in the creation narratives within the Qur'an, reconciling both Jewish and Christian understandings of the garden episode. Here, the inclusion of the jinn offers narrative clarification to Satan's presence not otherwise explicitly offered in the Bible, and thus deserving of the Category 2 classification.

Category 3: Diverging Literary Function

With Categories 1 and 2 representing the extremes of comparison between the Bible and the Qur'an, we now turn to the *via media* of Category 3. Whereas characters in Category 1 shared the same function in both the Bible and the Qur'an, and Category 2 offered little to no overlapping content, Category 3 characters have radically different functions in their scriptural realizations. In other words, the point of departure is much earlier than Category 1, resulting in dramatically different interpretations of these scriptural figures. Jesus/Īsā is perhaps the most notable exemplar of this category, as described in the introduction of this essay. However, for reasons

57 Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 32–33.

58 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 63.

to be discussed later, we will use the figure David/Dāwūd to introduce this Category.

In the biblical tradition, King David is arguably one of the most complex and pivotal characters of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, he is the progenitor of the messianic line and marks the zenith of the kingdom of Israel. On the other hand, he is a deeply flawed character with highly questionable morals, such as the Bathsheba narrative in 2 Samuel. Not so in the Qur’anic text. There, Dāwūd is considered a prophet, with “much of the biblical material related to his life...not found in the Islamic text, including traditions about his rise to power and his reign as king of Israel.”⁵⁹ Mark Durie summarizes Dāwūd’s Qur’anic representation succinctly:

Compared to some other biblical figures, Dawud receives comparatively little attention in the Qur’an. There is, for example, no vestige of...messianic theology ...[and] he is not afforded the biblical title of messiah (al-masih), which in the Qur’an is reserved solely for ‘Isa. Instead the figure of Dawud is pressed into service, first in the Meccan surahs as an example of a righteous prophet who receives Allah’s (miraculous) favors, in the form of special abilities which include wisdom and knowledge, understanding the language of birds, and a supernatural ability to make coats of mail from iron. Later, in the Medinan surahs, he is presented as a fighting, cursing prophet whose enmity is directed against his own people.⁶⁰

While biblically notorious episodes such as the slaying of Goliath/Jālūt are present in the Qur’an, noticeably absent is David’s episode with Batsheba. Such behavior would be unacceptable to the Islamic notion of a prophet, “[conflicting] with the Qur’anic doctrine of the moral infallibility (*‘ismah*) of messengers as righteous, God-fearing, and rightly-guided.”⁶¹ However, the Qur’an includes a passage (Q 38:16–28) that “has much in common with what is described in the Bible in 2 Samuel 12 when the Prophet Nathan confronts David for the sins he committed.”⁶² Kaltner and Mirza go on to note that this passage “is remarkable because it is a rare instance

59 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 34.

60 Mark Durie, “Dawud,” in *Prophets in the Qur’an and the Bible*, ed. Daniel S. Baeq and Sam Kim, 89.

61 Durie, “Dawud,” 88.

62 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 35.

of a prophet seeking repentance in the Qur'an."⁶³ The omission of these vital stories, as well as David/Dāwūd's function as a prophet in the Qur'an obligating him to adhere to the prophets' conventions, makes him a fascinating example of a Category 3 character.⁶⁴

Utilizing Kaltner's extensive study of Biblical/Qur'anic characters and applying the principles of CPD, we have grouped these shared and unshared figures into a typology for the purpose of constructively problematizing interreligious dialogue. In each example, we have isolated what function the character serves in each text, and what theological ramifications the shift implies. Category 1 offers a great deal of commonality with just enough difference to maintain scriptural uniqueness. Category 2, in contrast, offers virtually no common ground on which to tread. Category 3 is the middle ground between the two, but it is certainly not a "happy medium." Quite the contrary: Category 3, by virtue of such an early departure point, offers characters who provide the greatest amount of interreligious dissonance. It is in this category we will linger, exploring the contributions of one figure, Ishmael/Ismā'īl, as a locus for interreligious dialogue.

Ishmael, a Locus for Interreligious Dialogue

Before we begin our exploration of Ishmael/Ismā'īl, it is important to reiterate that each category in this proposed typology should be viewed as having its own gifts to offer CPD. Category 1 offers the security of similarity. Interlocutors can revel in their mutual commonality, while simultaneously highlighting the theological importance of the differences as they emerge. This is ideal for initial interreligious dialogue, bridge building, and establishing relationships. Category 2 offers the opposite: with no commonality to cling to, conversation partners must engage head on with the uniqueness of each tradition. This category is best used when differences are meant to be the highlight of a dialogue rather than similarities. The third category is the most nuanced of the three because of the acute dissonance that it creates. Familiar figures in both traditions are presented with significantly different literary functions. It is this category that warrants

63 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 35.

64 Made all the more pertinent to Category 3, as pointed out by Karel A. Steenbrink, by the different retellings of King David's story within the Hebrew Bible itself. See 1 and 2 Chronicles as compared to 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. See Karel A. Steenbrink, "Reading the Bible Together with Muslims: David as Sinner King and Repentant Prophet," in *Exchange* 50, no. 3–4 (2021): 196–208.

further exploration, as it offers the greatest capacity for both conflict and revelation.

Redefining a Paradigm: Jesus Revisited

At the beginning of this essay, I used the figure of Jesus to illustrate the potency of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue in the CPD endeavor. As I illustrated, each of the Abrahamic faiths hold some sort of stake in the figure of Jesus, be it as a deified figure, a prophet *par excellence*, or simply a specific cultural representative. Having now set up a typology according to the principles of CPD, it should be clear that the figure of Jesus resides in Category 3, as his function changes in each scriptural tradition (including his absence in the Tanakh).⁶⁵

There is something equally alluring and repelling about using Jesus as a locus for interreligious dialogue. On the one hand, Jesus, in many ways, gets to the very heart of Abrahamic difference. His status as a member of the Trinitarian Godhead within Christianity forms a bedrock of many Christian denominations and stands diametrically opposed to modern day messianic assertions from Judaism. This is to say nothing of Islam's stark stance on the sole-humanness of the prophet 'Īsā (Jesus), as well as Qur'anic inclusion of Jesus narratives found in non-canonical Christian sources (such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Protoevangelium of James) and the exclusion of much of the ministry and teachings of Jesus found in the New Testament. Certainly, for the willing interlocutor, a focus on the character of Jesus yields much interreligious fruit.

On the other hand, one cannot and should not ignore how charged discussing a figure such as Jesus can be. For many Christians, the notion of the divinity of Christ being denied is too abrasive, and the temptation to evangelize too strong. For many Jews, the figure of Jesus evokes generational trauma of accusations of being "Christ deniers." The ramifications of Matthew 27:25 still fuel anti-Jewish sentiment and rightfully elicit suspicion and skepticism.⁶⁶ For many Muslims, the claim of Jesus as divine

65 This does not account for a typological reading in the Christian tradition of the "Old Testament," which certainly offers its own contributions to the constructive problematizing effort.

66 "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" Often quoted as an antisemitic and anti-Jewish prooftext citing Jewish complicity in the killing of Jesus.

is considered *shirk* (association), an egregious sin within Islam.⁶⁷ For these reasons, a new paradigm is necessary for Abrahamic dialogue.⁶⁸ I assert that it can best be found in the figure of Ishmael.⁶⁹

Justification and Critiques for Ishmael as an Interreligious Locus

Jewish Scholar Carol Bakhos offers a moving depiction of the compelling nature of Ishmael as a character:

Perhaps no other biblical figure evokes a sense of liminality quite like Ishmael. He is Abraham's firstborn, circumcised with Abraham, yet he is not the son of the covenant but the son of a promise. He is a full-fledged member of the family, yet he is sent away, and Genesis 22:2 can speak of Isaac as Abraham's "only" son. His presence is felt, yet his actions are few. He is spoken about yet never speaks. God hears his voice, but the reader hears silence. He will be a great nation, but "his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him." He is loved, and although expelled from Abraham's house, he is not rejected.⁷⁰

It is perhaps this liminality that makes Ishmael an illustrative candidate for a new Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue paradigm. As Bakhos notes, "Ishmael plays different roles in each religious tradition's explanation of who constitutes the family of Abraham."⁷¹ These different roles staunchly place Ishmael in Category 3 of our typology, meaning that each tradition will hold this figure to a different function despite commonalities among

67 *Shirk* is "a theological term referring to the association of someone or something with God, that is, putting someone or something in the place of God, thus deviating from monotheism." *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 293.

68 This is not to suggest that Jesus cannot be an effective figure for Dialogue. See, for example, the Institute for Islamic Christian and Jewish Studies presentation on Jesus.

69 One might suggest Abraham as an effective locus for such dialogue, given that he is in all three the progenitor of the Abrahamic faiths. While certainly this does make him an effective locus, Ishmael's placement as a Category three character situates him to better serve the constructive problematizing endeavor.

70 Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 154.

71 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 188.

the narratives. But more than Ishmael's literary position, his theological and cultural placement makes him an embodiment of the Abrahamic predicament. Bakhos reminds us that "since antiquity, Ishmael has been considered the progenitor of the Arab people, and since the medieval period he has symbolized Islam."⁷² In each scripture passage, this metonymic placement will offer both insight to the history of conflict within the Abrahamic family, as well as potentially exciting possibilities for cooperation.

Alongside these assets of Ishmael as an interreligious locus come challenges. As will become immediately apparent, there is a disparity between the traditions regarding scriptural content containing Ishmael. For Islam in particular, much of the material containing Ishmael is found in extra-Qur'anic sources, including stories found in both Islam and Judaism.⁷³ The temptation to expand discussion past Biblical and Qur'anic texts presents an rich opportunity, but complicates notions of what constitutes scriptural authority.

Additionally, using Ishmael instead of Jesus as an interreligious locus does not inherently lower the stakes of the conversation. Each tradition holds the figure of Ishmael with conviction, even if he does not regularly appear in day-to-day religious life. However, perhaps it is this shared yet different sense of conviction that will give Ishmael the appropriate positioning to be an effective locus in constructive problematizing.

Methodology of Figure Analysis

What follows will be a survey of the scriptural passages in which Ishmael directly or indirectly appears. As we did previously, we will limit our conversation to narratives found in the Bible and the Qur'an, alluding to extra-scriptural traditions when pertinent.⁷⁴ Contrary to the impulse to go chronologically from a historical perspective (Judaism, Christianity, Islam),

72 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 156.

73 For example, the story of Abraham visiting the wives of Ishmael, found in both Pikei de Rabbi Eliezar and "extra-Qur'anic" texts, summarized in Bakhos *The Family of Abraham*, 184 and retold in Louis Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 266–69.

74 This is not to suggest, however, that extra-scriptural materials should not be used in CPD or SR. Quite the contrary: such inclusion would more than likely further the CPD cause. However, such inclusion would need to be done with care, unsure "like" was being put in conversation with "like." Otherwise, further misrepresentation could be risked in the exchange.

as is the impulse of most scholars doing this comparative work, we will take a different approach. Rather, we will begin to follow the rationale of a session of SR, in which each tradition will offer up its unique contributions to the discussion and the other two traditions will offer responses in light of that contribution. Thus, even as one tradition acts as “host,” each of the following sections will aim to be innately dialogic, emulating the goals of this project as a whole and offering an example of the process of CPD in lieu of a case study.

Islam as Host: Ismāʿīl in the Qurʾan

Given Ishmael’s metonymic role in history as the ambassador of Islam, we will begin with Ishmael’s presentation in the Qurʾan. As might be expected, Ishmael is a prominent figure in the Islamic tradition. Ironically, Bakhos humorously notes that “Ishmael’s presence within the Qurʾan (itself) is relatively unremarkable.”⁷⁵ His principal moment is in the building of the Kaʿba with his father, Abraham.⁷⁶

We made the House (*al-Kaʿba*) a resort and a sanctuary for people, saying “Take the spot where Abraham stood as your place of prayer.” We commanded Abraham and Ishmael: “Purify My House for those who walk round it, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate themselves in worship... As Abraham and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House [they prayed], “Our Lord, accept [this] from us. You are the All Hearing, the All Knowing. Our Lord, make us devoted to You; make our descendants into a community devoted to You. Show us how to worship and accept our repentance, for You are the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. Our Lord, make a messenger of their own rise up from among them, to recite Your revelations to them, teach them the Scripture and Wisdom, and purify them: You have the power to decide” (Q 2:125; 127–129).

75 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 183.

76 “Cube-shaped ‘House of God’ located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Focal point of the hajj pilgrimage and a world spiritual center that all Muslims face during prayer... some believe that Adam built it and Abraham and Ishmael only rebuilt it. Often call the earthly counterpart to God’s throne in heaven.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 165.

Here, as with all the prophets of Islam, Ishmael is presented as a model of the faith: obeying God and giving God the reverence due to him. Also, Ishmael is depicted as the partner of Abraham. This may prove jarring for those only familiar with the Biblical narratives of Ishmael, in which Ishmael is cast out from the family (to be explored in detail when we explore the Torah text). Here, however, and exclusive to the Qur'an, Ishmael functions both from a place of prophethood and alignment with the faith of Abraham. Given this posture, it is even more striking when Abraham sets out to sacrifice Ishmael:

When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, "My son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?" He said, "Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast." (Q 37:102)⁷⁷

Jews and Christians will immediately identify this passage as the parallel to the *akedah*, the binding/sacrifice of Isaac found in Genesis 22:1–19. Those familiar with the Biblical retelling will also immediately notice a striking point of departure: Ishmael's consent to the intended sacrifice. As M. Shahid Alam articulates: "In this narrative, Abraham and Ishmael are co-equals or near co-equals."⁷⁸ This is a stark difference to the Genesis account, in which Isaac is never consulted.

⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸Abraham said, "God

77 The identity of "the boy" is never named within the Qur'an, however it is commonly held that it refers to Ishmael. For a full treatment on this, Ayaz Afsar points to surah 37: ayat 99–113 in volume 4 of Ismail b. 'Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Urdu tr. *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Karachi: Nur Muhammad Karkhanah-i Tjjarat, n. d.), 37–43; and in volume 15 of Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Damascus Maktabat al Ghazzali, n. d.), 99–101. See Ayaz Afsar, "A Comparative Study of the Intended Sacrifice of Isaac/Ishmael in the Bible and the Qur'an," *Islamic Studies* Vol. 46, No. 4 (Winter 2007): 495f.

78 M. Shahid Alam, "Ishmael and Isaac: An Essay on the Divergent Moral Economies of the Qur'an and the Torah," *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 145–46.

himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”
And the two of them walked on together. (Genesis 22: 6-8)

For Alam, this point of departure evokes questions of how personal autonomy and faith interact in each tradition.

The Qur’an views the individual (including sons and daughters in relation to their parents) as endowed with reasoning, understanding and free will, and, therefore, free to chart his or her life, to reject or embrace God’s guidance. As a result, each individual — except for children, the mentally insane, and persons in a state of sleep — is fully accountable only for his or her actions. Repeatedly and emphatically, the Qur’an enunciates this principle. In the Torah, the line between individual, collective and inter-generational responsibility gets blurred. An individual may inherit rewards or punishments for the actions of his ancestors; and conversely, God passes on the sins and merits of one individual to his descendants. This principle is central to the Jewish Bible since upon it is based the doctrine of God’s election of the Jewish people.⁷⁹

It may be tempting to condense Ishmael’s function in the Qur’an to a reversal with his brother Isaac: as Isaac was the favored son in Genesis, so Ishmael is in the Qur’an. However, Ayaz Afsar reminds us that “The Qur’an gives equal honour and status to the two sons of Abraham.”⁸⁰ Unlike the Biblical text, there is no sense of the chosen and not chosen son. However, Ishmael’s validation of the prophethood of Muhammad, a convention of the prophets in the Qur’an, is heightened given that Muhammad is the direct descendent of Ishmael.⁸¹ Thus, Ishmael’s function as the dutiful prophet and partner Abraham is essential in legitimizing Muhammad as the mouthpiece of God and bearer of the Qur’an.

Christianity as Host: Ishmael in the New Testament

While Ishmael’s largest amount of content can be found in the Torah, we will hold off and give Judaism the last word as host. Instead, we will turn next

79 Alam, “Ishamel and Isaac” 153.

80 Afsar, “Comparative Study,” 494.

81 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 186.

to the Christian New Testament. While not mentioned by name, Ishmael is invoked prominently within Paul's letter to the Galatians. In this letter, Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of Isaac and Ishmael, become the source of an extended analogy:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by an enslaved woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the enslaved woman, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. . . . Now you, my brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the enslaved woman and her child, for the child of the enslaved woman will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman."⁸² So then, brothers and sisters, we are children, not of an enslaved woman but of the free woman (Gal. 4: 22–26; 28–31).

As Bakhos explains, "According to the allegory, believers in Christ are the spiritual descendants (of Abraham); observers of Torah are represented by Hagar and Ishmael, for they are slaves to the Mosaic law."⁸³ Muslim and Jewish readers may find this allegory culturally confusing, as Ishmael here represents the followers of Torah, a concept alien to both Qur'anic and Tanakhic readings of the Ishmael narrative. However, what remains consistent within the Biblical tradition is that Ishmael's function is as the eternal other, as Ishmael represents "the nonchosen son sent away, cut off from the family of Abraham."⁸⁴ For Paul, the Ishmael narrative embodies the story of "the new community of believers, those represented by the son born of the spirit (Isaac)" in which "the younger sibling supplants the

82 Genesis 21:10.

83 Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 177.

84 Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 177.

older.”⁸⁵ It cannot be overstated how this reading of the story fuels the heart of Abrahamic conflict, establishing supersessionist theologies leading to antisemitic and anti-Jewish sentiment and act.⁸⁶ However, this reading of Ishmael’s alterity is not unique to the New Testament, as we will now see in the Hebrew Bible’s treatment of Ishmael.

Judaism as Host: Ishmael in the Torah

Of the Abrahamic scriptures, Ishmael is most heavily referenced in the Torah. There, he is included in several substantial narratives. The first is in Genesis 16, where Hagar, the Egyptian slave, is cast out of the family of Abraham.⁸⁷ In the wilderness, Hagar is pregnant with Abraham’s son, Ishmael, and is visited by an angel who delivers this prophecy:

“Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
 you shall call him Ishmael,
 for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.
 He shall be a wild ass of a man,
 with his hand against everyone,
 and everyone’s hand against him,
 and he shall live at odds with all his kin” (Gen. 16:11–12).

This prophecy sets Ishmael as the irreconcilable “other.” And, indeed, Rabbinic tradition sets Ishmael as the “wicked” brother, guilty of everything from idolatry to sexual deviance.⁸⁸ However, there is a tension within the prophecy in Genesis that offers just as much reconciliation as it does alienation. For here we see the nonchosen son of Abraham endowed with

85 Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 177.

86 Boyarin, however, offers an alternative reading of Galatians that avoids an anti-jewish hermeneutic. See Boyarin, “Was Paul an ‘Anti-semitic’? A Reading of Galatians 3–4,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 47 (1993): 47–80. See also Pamela Eisenbaum, “Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?” in *Cross Currents* 50, no. 4 (2000–2001): 506–24, for a more general and generous reading of Paul in relation to Anti-Jewish interpretation.

87 Much more should be said, and has been said, about the role of Hagar as “the Stranger” who is the first to name God. Focus on Hagar is outside the scope of this paper, especially given her absence in the Qur’an, however her significance in all three Abrahamic traditions (including extra-Qur’anic Islamic tradition) warrants her as prominent a position in Abrahamic dialogue and is highly encouraged.

88 See passages throughout Midrash Rabbah, such as Genesis Rabbah 62:5, 53:1; Exodus Rabbah 1:1, and so on.

his own blessings, echoing those of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12.⁸⁹ Indeed, Ishmael goes on to become something of a mirror image to Isaac with his twelve sons being recorded in Genesis 25. The function of Ishmael is further complicated in Genesis 21, where, once again, Hagar is cast out with Ishmael into the wilderness. Here, as Hagar leaves Ishmael to die, again an angel appears and protects the young boy:

And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink (Gen. 21:17–19).

Muslims will find this narrative familiar, recognizing it from “The Stories of the Prophets” literature, which details the rituals of the Hajj.⁹⁰ These include “the *say*, or running back and forth seven times between two small hills near the Kaaba in imitation of Hagar’s search for water for Ishmael.” As the tradition holds, “the nearby well of Zamzam is believed to have miraculously appeared to save them from death.”⁹¹

Also, within the Genesis passage, notice the repeated refrain of “God heard,” which is the meaning of the name Ishmael, and the statement of the covenantal promise to “make a great nation of him.” Though the rabbinic tradition will at times view Ishmael as an antagonist to the covenant people, and indeed biblically set the Ishmaelites as an enemy of Israelites, the scripture points to the purposes of covenant to allow for an understanding of religious plurality.⁹² Clare Amos muses:

Is this the hermeneutical importance of the story of Ishmael—not that it offers us the possible existence of a

89 God’s promises to Hagar/Ishmael are not referred to as a covenant (*b’rit*) in the text and could be interpreted as an extension of the Abrahamic covenant. However, this essay is more inclined to consider it a distinct set of God’s promises to Ishmael, indicative of God’s commitment to those outside of the Abrahamic line in a narrow sense.

90 Hagar in Arabic is rendered Hajjar, connected to this term.

91 “Hajj,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 103.

92 See Psalm 83:6.

covenant which allows him and his physical and spiritual descendants to be incorporated in a neat Judeo-Christian schema. Instead it persists in reminding us that a mature faith and theology of religions needs to allow space both to affirm other human beings as our “brothers”, whose lives are interwoven with ours but who have the right to remain “other”?⁹³

Amos’s reading empowers interlocutors to find hope amidst the scriptural conflict; that embedded in the scriptural tradition is the promise of a God-instilled integrity amidst religious difference, where divinity can be found amidst contestation and plurality.

Ishmael as Paradigmatic of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue

Where Abrahamic dialogue is concerned, Ishmael is the complete package. He is a representative that speaks to a people and a tradition, as found within Islam. He is the embodiment of deep histories of contestations and alienation, as found in the Biblical tradition. But, he also presents a scriptural basis for theologies of religious plurality. Here, covenant, understood as God’s promises made as a result of “hearing” those perceived as “other,” indicates divine presence in more than just a single religious understanding. All these elements in tandem make Ishmael an ideal locus for interreligious dialogue that allows for unavoidable engagement with conflict and hope for a way forward.

Conclusion

Since the events on and following October 7, 2023, in Israel and Palestine, a new spirit has been felt amidst interreligious interlocutors. Though for some, such dialogue is more important than ever, for others, the already tenuous space created by such dialogue has been betrayed. The fireproofing power of interreligious dialogue, that which builds sustaining relationships, trust, and goodwill between religious practitioners, is essential when a (proverbial) fire occurs. Fireproofing, however, is already too late once the fire has hit. On account of the geopolitical and humanitarian crises occurring in the Middle East, the Abrahamic traditions are caught now in such a fire.

93 Clare Amos, “Incomplete without the Other: Isaac, Ishmael and a Hermeneutic of Diversity,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, No. 3 (July 2009): 254.

Because religions are inextricably linked to the world events surrounding them, such a high level of conflict demands a higher standard of interreligious dialogue. The methodology presented in this essay presumes, at its heart, that conflict engagement is a skill worthy of deep practice. This deep practice is achieved through thoughtful consideration of the material discussed in dialogue, thus ensuring that religious differences are central and approachable within the conversation. This methodology similarly indicts well-meaning interreligious endeavors, even SR, of conflict avoidance, malforming interlocutors and denying them the internal resources to construct lasting humanitarian peace and theological cooperation.

It may be trite to end with an observation citing the need for thoughtful interreligious engagement in the world today. It would be similarly naïve to ignore the stakes of conflict engagement when so many are depending on reconciliation. I reiterate: there is no substitute for enduring, trusting, and deeply rooted relationship formation. This essay asserts, however, that reconciliation is futile without skilled conflict engagement that avoids the temptations of harmonization or doctrinal avoidance. It further asserts that such engagement is possible even within episodic dialogue. Through such intentional encounters, our differences have the potential to become the very things with which we become enamored, rather than barriers preventing mutual affection. Therefore, what we say within interreligious dialogue has just as much power as how we say it, allowing thoughtful engagement to transcend into heartfelt appreciation, interdependence, and familiarity. If hospitality is coupled with intentional and communal skill building, then there is no telling what interreligious cooperation may be achievable in our lifetime.

*The Reverend **Aaron R. Dunn** serves as Associate Rector at Grace Episcopal Church in Silver Spring, MD. He is a graduate of Virginia Theological Seminary where he earned a Master of Divinity degree and a certificate in Muslim-Christian Studies through the Washington Theological Consortium. In 2024, he was awarded the Anglican Communion Prize through the Center for Anglican Communion Studies at VTS in recognition for his “dedication to international Christian mission and theological understanding across cultural and theological difference.” Aaron has been involved as a discussion facilitator for interreligious organizations such as the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies and the Rumi Forum. In 2022, he participated in the ICJS Emerging Religious Leader’s Program, focusing on Muslim-Christian Dialogue, and in 2023 he completed training as a Scriptural Reasoning facilitator through the Rose Castle Foundation. In 2024, he participated in the inaugural Congregational Leaders Workshop through the United States*

Holocaust Memorial Museum. Currently, Aaron serves as Ecumenical and Interreligious Officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington.

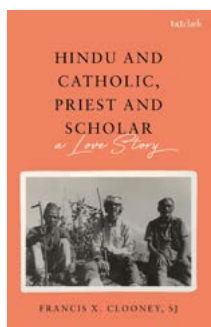


The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

BOOK REVIEW

Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story

By Francis X. Clooney, S.J. London: T&T Clark, 2024. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-567-71023-9. \$24.95 (paperback).



In the title of this autobiographical book, Francis X. Clooney—Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard University, prolific exemplar of textually oriented comparative theology, and leading founder of the modern field itself—outlines the key components of his identity and how they have shaped his scholarly trajectory. He writes this book because of the interconnectedness of his life and work, where one will not be clear without the other. His goal is to “provide exercises, work to be done by readers themselves, inquiring into the deep currents of their own lives,” in a very Jesuit way, he supposes, as he sees “all life as a series of intellectual-spiritual exercises” (18).

Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story is a deeply personal, vulnerable, and revealing text. Clooney discusses every aspect of his life chronologically, from his childhood, his personal experience of the divine, his vocational call to priesthood and the Jesuits, his transformative encounters with the Hindu tradition, to his professional pursuits of comparative theology within the academy. He was “touched by God” at age fifteen, became a Jesuit at eighteen, a priest at twenty-seven, and a professor at thirty-three. The next forty years of his life are spent pursuing a particular line of comparative thought as a scholar, ministering to parishes as a Catholic priest, and deepening his own relationship with God amidst Hindu and Catholic practices. Chapter one begins with his birth, in 1950, and he concludes the book by gesturing beyond himself, in gratitude that comparative theology and his monumental contributions to this field will outlive his lifetime. This book is a love story, he says, “because love is the key to all that I have lived, been given, struggled to keep alive and honest and vulnerable” (176). Clooney begins and ends his book with a discussion

of love: the love of the divine and the presence of this divine, of love in all things.

At the age of fifteen, on July 6, 1966, Clooney experienced the “defining religious experience” of his life, that he calls “a single instance of God-touch” (9). He was alone, and nothing extraordinary preceded or followed this revelation where he felt God at once entering him, and also already deep inside of himself. His language in describing the event mirrors mystics across time and tradition, finding resonance with the writings of Teresa of Avila and Mirabai, for example. Clooney’s response to this visitation was “You who have come to me—you who have touched me—you, within me—to you I give my all, irrevocably this night” (10). In fact, he describes his life as a “Yes” to this one moment, about seeing the presence of the divine everywhere, though particularly of course, in Clooney’s method, in “moments of quiet study” (10).

Upon becoming a Jesuit in 1970, the three vows Clooney professed have given him a sort of freedom, “both desperate and joyful,” where he experiences transcendence deep within himself, and not externally (32). He draws a parallel from entering vowed Jesuit life to the formation he receives a few years later, when he begins his decades of learning Hindu traditions (33). It is through his Jesuit formation, part of which sent him to Nepal for his regency, serving as a teacher at St. Xavier’s School for grades six to twelve for two years, where he first encountered Hinduism and experienced deep resonances with his Catholic tradition. The first meaningful encounter is at a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali, while witnessing animal sacrifices. While theologically, it is impossible to account for his “deep intuitive openness” to this deity, he felt “connection and harmony” with his own Catholic upbringing and rituals (47–48). Perhaps most surprising of his disclosures about religious life is his vulnerability around sex and sexuality, insights into the life of a Catholic priest that are rarely discussed in academia. He includes this aspect of his identity “simply to show how like every vowed religious I am a celibate with a complicated identity... Like poverty and obedience, chastity, practiced over a long time, reshapes body and soul” (32). This discussion so early in the book sets a tone of honesty and openness; and while sexuality is certainly part of his identity and thus worth including, it is not a driving force for him. His brief mention is of note, however, especially at a time where our Church and our country are particularly occupied with questions around sex and sexuality.

Throughout the book and intertwined with his religious vocation as a Jesuit, Clooney references much of his own work and traces the development of his scholarship in comparative theology. For those new to the field, this

offers a clear introduction grounded in the personal accounts of a scholar who is constantly pushing the boundaries of theology and of his own faith, calling others to the “transformative spiritual implications of study” (88). Clooney even advocates for comparative study as a kind of conversion that “saves us from our many blindnesses” (89). He acknowledges that many in the academic field of theology do not necessarily share this view of comparative work, and gives passing mention to colleagues who balked at the initial inclusion of comparative theology at Jesuit institutions of higher education.

In one example of Clooney’s personal transformation through comparative study, he references the Dvayam or mantra of the *Śrīvaiṣṇava* Hindus, which he prays with Jesus’s final cry from the cross. Both prayers are of complete surrender; for him they “intensify one another, doubled without becoming a single prayer” (146). He describes other such instances of allowing his studies to enter into his prayer life. He even finds that both Sanskrit and Greek verses come to him at odd moments throughout his life. The Dvayam comes to him in church, for example, and the words of Jesus from the cross come to him in temples (150). This insight is not shared in order to make sweeping theological claims, however. Clooney is clear that he shares these practices because his identity is not simple or reducible to only Christian or only Hindu, nor is he asserting a double belonging.

As director for Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions 2010–2017, Clooney set out to bring six themes to life: “tradition, text in context, translation, comparative study, (still) faith (still) seeking understanding, and awareness of suffering” (156). Though he remains unsure of an evaluation of his time as director, or indeed the purpose of the Center itself, he is clear that these six themes are essential components of his scholarly and personal trajectories. This book is useful for all scholars in reflecting on their work and its potential impact as inseparable from their lived and embodied realities. May we all be inspired by *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story* to read and experience deeply across preconceived boundaries and to be open to the transformation of ourselves, and thus the world.

Katie Mahowski Mylroie
Boston College

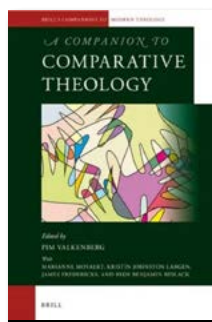


The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

BOOK REVIEW

A Companion to Comparative Theology

Edited by Pim Valkenberg, with Marianne Moyaert, Kristin Johnston Largen, James Fredericks, and Bede Benjamin Bidlack. Leiden: Brill, 2022. xviii + 637 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-38838-3. \$201.00 (hardcover and e-book).



How do you judge when an area of study has “arrived” in the academy, having developed into something more than an idiosyncratic set of theoretical questions or esoteric clique? One measure would be the emergence of a distinctive secondary literature, including guides and handbooks, to explore and to set limits on what can now be recognized as a field or sub-discipline. If so, then Comparative Theology (CT) seems to have arrived, at least in the Anglophone worlds of North America and Europe. Francis X. Clooney published *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Boundaries* (Wiley-Blackwell) in 2010, but this was arguably still aspirational and more than a little idiosyncratic to Clooney himself, as one important founder of the discipline. More recently, methodological overviews of the field have been published by Paul Hedges (*Comparative Theology*, Brill, 2017) and Catherine Cornille (*Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2019). Michelle Voss’ *Comparing Faithfully* (Fordham UP, 2016) and Mara Brecht and Reid Locklin’s *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom* (Routledge, 2016) offer resources for bringing CT into the classroom, and there is also at least one entry in the YouTube-ish “how to do it” category: Clooney and Klaus von Stosch’s *How to Do Comparative Theology* (Fordham UP, 2017).

Two major research companions have also now appeared on library shelves to guide new scholars in the field: Axel M. Oaks Takacs and Joseph L. Kimmel’s *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2023) and the present volume, edited by Pim Valkenberg and several colleagues. The subtitle of the former names it as a festschrift to Clooney, and it could be read as a multi-author update to his 2010 introduction, with whole sections on spirituality, vocation, and the Society of Jesus alongside those taking up questions of theory and method or

attempting particular comparative experiments. Valkenberg's volume, by contrast, reveals a tighter and more systematic structure. At either end of the collection are sections on the history of CT up to 1985 (Part 1) and "New Directions" in the contemporary discipline (Part 7). In-between, the work explores distinctive patterns of comparative engagement by religious tradition: Judaism (Part 2), Islam (Part 3), Hinduism (Part 4), Buddhism (Part 5) and Chinese Religions (Part 6). Each of these tradition-based explorations has the same four-part structure, with a first overview chapter followed by three chapters that are more explicitly comparative. It is notable that Christianity is not one of the traditions with its own dedicated portion, thus conceding that contemporary Comparative Theology remains an overwhelmingly Christian enterprise. Christian interlocutors are characterized by the editors as "initiating partners" of each conversation (2). Nevertheless, they have ensured that each section includes at least some voices from the various "Others" who define the structure of the work. Altogether there are 31 chapters by 32 contributors, including both well-known luminaries and up-and-coming scholars in the discipline. It is strengthened by a very helpful introduction which lays out the rationale of the work clearly and walks through the sections step by step, as well as an extensive index.

The structure of the *Companion* could be read as a capitulation to the widely criticized "world religions paradigm," and this is definitely a weakness of the approach; at the same time, this choice opens space to facilitate deeper dialogical engagement than one finds in the Takacs and Kimmel volume, for example. Thus, in the first chapter of Part 2, Marianne Moyaert explores the unique, non-symmetrical relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and hypothesizes that comparative theologians often avoid engaging Judaism out of fear of perpetrating "new comparative violence" (125). This issue of asymmetry, identified by Moyaert, becomes a thread through subsequent chapters on Torah and Christ by a Christian comparativist (chapter 6, Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski), on the Song of Songs by a Jewish comparativist (chapter 7, Devorah Schoenfeld), and on the Land of Israel in the Jewish meal blessing, *Birkat Hamazon* (chapter 8, Emmanuel Nathan). The thread is then picked up again in future sections of the book, including Jonathan Edelman's creative *sic et non* on the fruitfulness (or not) of a comparative approach to Hindu Studies in Part 4 (chapter 16) and Louis Komjathy's exploration of the possibility of a Daoist comparative theology in Part 6 (chapter 24). Near the end, Axel Takacs' chapter 30 calls for a closer relationship between comparative theology and interreligious studies precisely because of this endemic asymmetry. He urges comparative theologians to acknowledge the inherent relationality of

religious communities and to fix their scholarly gazes “on the liminal spaces of interreligious encounters rather than on single religious traditions” (569). These are the places where the boundaries of the given religious tradition—Christianity, too!—are continually re-drawn.

Individual chapters also raise new questions and interpretive perspectives, with wide relevance. In chapter 11, for instance, Vahid Mahdavi Mehr asks the provocative question, “Can There Be an Islamic Comparative Theology?” His answer is ultimately no, at least with respect to Christianity and Judaism—because, on his reading, the Qur’ān neither claims to supersede these traditions nor concedes that they are truly “foreign” to itself. Hence, the only possible engagement would be a form of ecumenism. In chapter 21, Bede Bidlack invokes comparative theology as a tool to help Christian theology get past cultural essentialism or its mirrored foils. By paying attention to the language systems in which religious traditions have developed (for instance, the significance of Chinese language in Chinese religions, and Greek in the case of Hellenized Christianity), the Christian comparative theologian can guard “against the entrenchment of equating Hellenization with revelation, on the one hand, and against scrapping the tradition of the church in favor of some pure, non-Hellenized theological development on the other” (417). In both Mehr and Bidlack’s chapters, comparison helps the religious community recall historical modes of relation with neighboring traditions which were not the taxonomic world religions paradigm.

The *Companion* features several methodologically innovative examples of comparative theology that break out of well-worn debates about whether comparative theology should be confessional or meta-confessional. To begin with, nuanced historical treatments by Hugh Nicholson (ch. 3) and Pim Valkenberg and Christian Krokus (ch. 4) reveal the complex, dynamic relation between confessional theology and phenomenology of religion in such figures as Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Jean Daniélou and Henri DeLubac. Readers are also introduced to the ‘ritual turn’ in comparative theology, thanks to chapters by Kijin Wu on sacrifices to ancestors, *jì zǔ* (祭祖), in Taiwan (chapter 23) and Marianne Moyaert on the importance of intentional communal performance (chapter 27); both point to liturgy or ritual as a prime theological locus for comparison. Moreover, several essays go on to hint how embracing these dynamics of lived religion may infuse comparative theology with a livelier sense of social or spiritual engagement. One stellar example of this is Maureen Walsh’s chapter on pregnancy loss memorials in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism. Instead of looking for analogues

of thought, text, or even practice in two traditions, Walsh notes how these memorial practices (Buddhist rituals pertaining to *mizuko*, “water children,” and American Catholic shrines and statues honoring the unborn) arise out of the “same basic problem—the issue of pregnancy loss”—but conceive of this problem in different terms and therefore propose different therapeutic responses to it. As our globalized world confronts new ecological and technological disruptions, such a problem-based approach could situate comparative theology to play a useful role in identifying shared challenges along with a variety of ways for interpreting and responding to them. Moreover, although professors everywhere are weary of being asked about the “relevance” of studying religion, this *is* the sort of comparative work that can readily appeal to the pragmatic nursing undergrad taking a general education class or that may still delight the jaded university administrator wondering whether Humanities disciplines are using their cultural diversity turf in the curriculum to bring anything interesting to the table.

Several chapters press the difference that religious commitments can make in realizing a socially engaged but not socially determined life. In chapter 18, John Makransky seeks to combine a Christian concern for human dignity and liberative justice with a Buddhist suspicion of reductive dualities (the oppressor versus oppressed, the exploiter deserving ire versus sufferer deserving solidarity). Pondering what modes of activism are truly effective, Makransky does call for a socially engaged “fierce compassion;” but he insists this must be suffused with the best of Buddhist and Christian theological anthropology, lest religious activism fall into either uncaring passivity or self-righteous anger. So too, Lucinda Mosher’s chapter on calligraphy and iconography raises the question of what lettering and imaging is really for. Exploring these ancient devotional practices as deeply humanistic participations in beauty and narrativization, she also notes contemporary interreligious efforts, such as a 2003 event at which Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scribes worked in parallel and in collaboration, where spiritual writing becomes a “construction zone” for comparative theology. Especially as AI tools like ChatGPT and Dall-E cause some to question the value of human writing and art, at least on the level of distilling information or generating a picture, Mosher’s chapter can serve as a reminder that religious devotions may aspire to something else entirely. At a time when society seems awash in polemics and overwhelmed with data, such chapters in the *Companion* hint that CT could come to the rescue—laying open anew just how pluralistic, alternative, and creative the religiously committed human experience can be.

As Catherine Cornille sums it up in her title for the final chapter, comparative theology is “more than comparing theologies.” As a whole, this volume successfully orients the reader to the multiple ways scholars have sought to render that difference. Early on, as the sub-discipline sought to establish legitimacy, scholars devoted much energy to asserting which methods and commitments were shared or unshared with comparative religion. More recently, comparative theologians have grappled with questions of normativity and epistemic power, trying to embrace honestly the inevitability, opportunities, and risks in trying to think better along with someone else’s resources. Today, comparative theologians continue to worry about the methodological rigor and ethics of their work, while increasingly embracing the lived intercultural and interreligious milieu in which religious communities encounter each other and continue to theologize their spiritual and social life.

The *Companion* both surveys these developments and offers myriad examples of comparative theologies animated by this range of concerns, making it a truly panoptic orientation to the work of the discipline.

Reid Locklin
University of Toronto–St. Michael’s College

Stephanie M. Wong
Villanova University

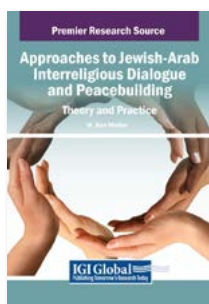


The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

BOOK REVIEW

Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Theory and Practice

By M. Ben Mollov. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2025. 417 pp. ISBN 978-1-6684-9476-4. \$245.00 (hardcover); \$245.00 (e-book); \$295.00 (hardcover + e-book); \$185.00 (softcover); \$37.50 (individual chapters).



Many people in the world feel that religion is the source of much conflict in contemporary times—that it is the problem, rather than part of the solution. Ben Mollov, a veteran peacebuilder and academic, thinks otherwise, and he makes his case very strongly in his new book *Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Theory and Practice*, which is the culmination of more than twenty-five years in this field in Israel and abroad.

Mollov is on the faculty of the Graduate Program in Conflict Management, Resolution and Negotiation of the School of Communications and is Head of the Project for the Study of Religion, Culture and Peace at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He has been specializing in the Jewish Political Tradition and Interreligious/Intercultural approaches to Dialogue and Conflict Resolution for a long time. His work in fostering dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, which began in the early 1990s, brought him to many fascinating places—including Hebron, the Gush Etzion block near Bethlehem, Khan Unis in the Gaza Strip, Akko in Northern Israel, as well as to Malaysia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, he was a member of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), the multi-religious and multi-cultural organization that I founded and directed from 1991 until the end of 2014.

One of the fundamental ideas that Mollov presents comprehensively in this book is that “there is no escaping the Arab-Israeli Conflict becoming a religiously based conflict.” As he argues cogently, it has already become a religiously based conflict since “it is rooted in a clash of narratives ultimately based upon religion, culture and identity, three different but closely related

concepts.” Much of this book explains how these concepts are related and offers new ideas and strategies as to how to integrate these strands of the topic into effective dialogue work.

This book is organized as two main sections. The first one serves as background to the rest of the book. It contains three chapters: an Introduction, a chapter on “Religion, Conflict and Conflict Resolution,” and one on “the Arab-Israeli Conflict as Rooted in Religion and Culture.” The second section of the book contains Mollov’s main findings and applications, which are evidenced especially in chapters 4–6, in which he brings empirical research to bear on Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue. In addition, he adds some very interesting chapters on “Idealism, and Realism in the Jewish Political Tradition,” “A Federalist Covenantal Approach to Peacebuilding and Religious Diplomacy,” and “The Abraham Accords.” All these chapters reflect his research interests over many years. Also, each chapter begins with an abstract and concludes with references and endnotes.

This book is part of a growing literature in recent decades that tries to explain how religion can be a positive force in conflict resolution. The fact is that religion is highly relevant for dialogue and conflict resolution, although much of the secular world still does not recognize that this is the case. In his introduction to this book, Mollov mentions a number of books that have dealt with the theme of religion, dialogue and peacebuilding during the past few decades, such as Abu Nimer, Welty, and Khoury, *Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East* (2007); Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000); Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religions Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (2005); Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (2002); Ronald Kronish, *The Other Peace Process: Interreligious Dialogue, a View from Jerusalem* (2017); Omer, Appleby, and Little, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (2015); and Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (2002).

Indeed, in this book, Mollov does provides an excellent literature review on the interrelated themes of religion, dialogue, and peacebuilding. In addition, he summarizes much of what he has learned from his twenty-five years in this field in his conclusion to this book. The major themes that he emphasizes in this book are:

- Religion can provide a bridge between Jews and Arab in the Middle East, based on the similarities between Judaism and Islam.

- Religion can be used to recontextualize/reframe dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs (particularly given that Islam constitutes an important underlying foundation of Arab identity and worldview).
- The promotion of mutual respect between Jews and Arabs is crucial, which can be advanced by interreligious dialogue is paramount in the Middle East for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
- Interreligious dialogue does not stand alone as a factor for advancing conflict resolution; peacebuilding must be combined with the traditional elements of diplomacy which also includes at times hard power as well as soft power, that can bring about stable balances of power.” (pp.361-362)

His conclusions are based on many years of research and experience in dialogue. In particular, he taught a course entitled “Jewish-Arab-Interreligious Dialogue” at Bar Ilan University under the auspices of the School of Communications International Program. That course, which ran for six academic cycles, provided a new model for Jewish-Arab relations based on the interreligious approach at the university level. Through it, the author gained valuable experience as a facilitator of dialogue. In addition, he conducted innovative empirical research through questionnaires and interviews with participants. *Approaches to Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding* benefits from the resulting insights.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the author’s discussion of the Abrahamic Accords and their significance for interreligious dialogue. He asserts: “The Abrahamic Accords of 2020 can be considered the beginning of a game-changer in that its legitimacy (as opposed to merely de facto recognition) to a Jewish collective in the Middle East which had essentially been absent in peacebuilding efforts prior to the Accords” (362). The Abraham Accords were negotiated during the last year of the previous Trump administration (2020), as a way to expand the peace process in the region. Agreements were reached with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain and later with Morocco. Many critics, myself among them, viewed these agreements as an end-run on the Palestinians, who were left out of this process. Yet, Mollov sees much value to these agreements, especially from an interreligious perspective. For example, under Point 6 in the Accords, one can find this uplifting paragraph:

Mutual Understanding and Co-existence: The parties undertake to foster mutual understanding, respect, co-existence and a culture of peace between their societies in the spirit of their common ancestor, Abraham, and the new era of peace and friendly relations ushered in by this treaty, including by cultivating people-to-people programs, interfaith dialogue, and cultural, academic, youth, scientific and other exchanges between their peoples... They shall work towards establishing a High-Level Joint Forum for Peace and Coexistence dedicated to advancing these goals” (345).

But did any of this every happen in any significant or substantive way? Not really. In my view, the language of the Abraham Accords is loftily aspirational. As yet, these accords have had no major impact in the region of the Middle East.

The recent Israel-Hamas war has made interreligious dialogue as a method of peacebuilding in the region much more difficult. According to Mollov: “Recent events sparked by the Hamas perpetrated massacre of October 7, 2023, have sent shock waves through the Middle East and seemingly severely undermined hopes for peacebuilding between Jews and Arabs” (366). I would say that he was using great understatement here, since in practice the war has been so severe that almost no dialogue has been possible between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs during the past 15 months. Nevertheless, Mollov is more optimistic than I am, since he believes that the pendulum can swing back:

When peacemaking/peacebuilding once again comes on to the agenda, the interreligious approach to dialogue and peacebuilding should be called upon. Indeed, the history of the twentieth century shows that humanity cannot live indefinitely in a cycle of violence and terror and vision is called for to allow us to exist in some worthy manner. Indeed, all the more so in the Holy Land” (366).

I hope he is correct, but I am not as sanguine as he is. I haven’t seen many visionaries around here lately. Maybe they will somehow arise out of the depths of despair.

This well researched and comprehensive book will be useful for faculty who teach about interreligious dialogue in the context of conflict resolution around the world, as well as for students who study interreligious relations, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding at many colleges, seminaries, and post-graduate institutions. It will also be relevant to anyone interested in learning about people and institutions who have contributed positively to interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine in recent decades.

Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish
 Independent scholar, author, and peacebuilder
 Jerusalem, Israel



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions

By David Thang Moe. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024. xxiv + 178 pp. ISBN 979-8-3852-1808-0. \$29.00 (paperback); \$44.00 (hardcover); \$29.00 (e-book).



Public theology has emerged as an essential role, taking deep roots in theological reflection of God's work in societal issues and faith engagement in the public sphere. In the fifty years since the term was introduced, papers on public theology tend to have been written for audiences within the narrow academy without sufficiently engaging the voices of grassroots Christians in their theological reflections.

In *Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions*, David Thang Moe gives a fresh perspective on public theology and convincingly addresses the need to engage with the lived experiences and voices of the grassroots Christian. He reconstructs Asian public theology by bridging the gaps between the academic and the grassroots voices. Moe points out the limitations and insufficient engagement of the previous scholars doing public theology and how they failed to address liberation from demonic spiritual forces and the ecclesial movement in society. Utilizing the lived experiences and voices of the grassroots Christian community from the context of political oppression and ethnic persecution in Myanmar indeed turns the lived Asian public theology into a renewal theology.

Beginning his exploration of the unhappy gaps between the grassroots and academic voices, in the first chapter, David Moe reconstructs the old triple dialogue of Asian Theology and proposes a new, fresh triple dialogue on Academy-grassroots church dialogue, Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and global dialogue with non-Asian public theologians. He then describes four communities for doing public theology: Church, Academy, Society, and State. In chapter two, David Moe elaborates on his motivations and methods for engaging in the lived community. Chapter three is significantly powerful as he unpacks and analyzes the works of his interview on how

grassroots Christians express their witnesses of lived faith. In chapter 4, Moe traces the roots of Asian public theology and explains how the concept had already appeared in Asia before the term developed in the West. In the final chapter, Moe calls for a holistic understanding of the lived public theology that should be performed as everyday theology, rather than solely as academic reflection in the academy—“weekday theology”—and doxology in the church—“Sunday theology” (114). David Moe emphasizes the need for interreligious, prophetic witness in the context of Asia, particularly in the political turmoil in Myanmar, envisioning interethnic co-existence, reconciliation, and cooperation with other religious groups to foster socio-political transformation in the post-coup landscape.

Beyond the Academy is a compelling work and a massive contribution to scholarship on Asian public theology, especially in Myanmar. David Moe reinvigorates the discipline of public theology with a fresh, necessary perspective by collecting the different stories and theological insights of grassroots and engaging their voices in lived public theology. Through interviewing grassroots Christians from various backgrounds, positions, and places in Myanmar, he investigates their perception of the Church, Salvation, and Salvation-public life relation. Their stories indeed paint a vibrant picture resonating with the current Christianity in Myanmar. David Moe’s contribution in this book is also very ecumenical and insightful, discussing the soteriology and ecclesiological lived public theology as he engages with the grassroots from different Christian denominations in Myanmar, including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals (53). The way he integrates the voices of the grassroots is significant in supporting the main argument of this book.

In his exploration of the origin of Asian public theology, David Moe convincingly illustrates how public theology was developed in Asia before the term formally emerged in the West. Through the lens of the Karen ethnic minority in Myanmar, he emphasized how the communities had embodied their faith in public life without knowing the academic concept of “public theology.” A critical gap in Asian public theology is that while interreligious dialogue has thrived, academy-church, intrareligious dialogue has always been overlooked. Thus, David Moe thoughtfully acknowledges the works of influential figures like the earlier theologians M.M. Thomas and Shoki and critiques their limitations of integrating the role of ecclesiology and the voices of the grassroots church as sources for developing Asian public theology of liberation. Then, he moves to the contemporary context and evaluates the works of Felix Wilfred and Aloysius Pieris as fresh perspectives of Asian public theology. David Moe persuasively argues that these four

main theologians still failed to develop the role of the Spirit in Asian public theology and that there is a need to balance the political and pastoral role of the church in public witness. In Moe's view, the grassroots church has been just a recipient, not a collaborator. Whereas Christology has been emphasized as a major theme in Asian public theology, ecclesiology has been neglected (116). While Moe highlights the role of the Spirit in Asian public theology and the Asian people's struggles of spiritual powers, it is not immediately clear what kind of spiritual powers are being referred to. A clearer distinction between divine and evil spiritual forces would be helpful.

Moe's call for an integrated approach to public theology, reconciliation of ethnic minorities, and collaboration with other religious groups sets a fresh discipline in public theology and a blend of scholarly insight. He proposes a new, fresh triple dialogue focusing on academy-grassroots church dialogue, Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and global dialogue with non-Asian public theologians. He adds a third reality (majority-minority ethnic conflict) of the Asian context to the twofold reality (multifaceted religiosity and mass poverty), which Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris neglected. Moe also profoundly promotes inclusivity by highlighting women's role in witnessing Jesus's resurrection. However, even though he highlights the importance of involving both males and females in his approach to the church's public witnesses in Asia, the practical engagement of women and their experiences are not discussed enough in-depth, and how women are contributing in a particular context could have been further developed. Moe also provides a fresh view of biblical hermeneutics, re-reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan by highlighting the most often neglected role of the innkeeper (143). Anchored in the context of Myanmar's political situation, Moe vividly illustrates the embodiment of the politics of hospitality in Myanmar, like the innkeeper in the parable; it is in this way that the religio-ethnic communities supported each other and collaborated to resist the violent coup as a common enemy.

While Moe is trying to bridge the gap between academics and the grassroots, many may still arguably challenge whether the book sufficiently addresses the lived faith of the public, especially when gathering the voices of the grassroots from Myanmar. The lived faith of the grassroots communities in ways that are distinctive and relevant to their particular context could be further broadened. While acknowledging David Moe for highlighting grassroots voices comprehending soteriology, ecclesiology, and the prophetic mission of the Church in politics, the engagement with these voices is not sufficiently deep as the center of the theological reflection. As its goal is to move beyond the Academy, the book should give more

space to the stories of suffering, lived experiences, and perspectives of the grassroots Christians in Myanmar. The empirical foundation and the practical strategies of the grassroots Christian witness in political turmoil could be further enhanced to move completely beyond the academy. It can also be constructively criticized and raise the critical question of whether the book fully addresses the complexities of ethnic and religious conflict within Asia, especially how the majority religious or ethnic groups can oppress the minority groups. It is acknowledged that Moe is trying to encourage interreligious collaboration, however, it is also necessary to critique the root cause of the issues of the Buddhist nationalism instead of praising certain aspects of religious traditions. Moreover, in promoting a dialogical approach to other faiths and reconciliation for interethnic co-existence, the role of the ecumenical movement in social-political transformation and interdenominational collaboration among Christian grassroots individuals in the context of political unrest also needs to be further deepened, as it is essential for lived faith witness in public theology.

However, these insufficient engagements do not prevent me from recommending this book. David Moe is a great scholar for Myanmar, and *Beyond the Academy* is a powerful testimony regarding the urgent need for lived public theology. Moe challenges the status quo of the lived Asian public theology of religions both in a theoretical dimension and in the practical application of public theology, including the pastoral public witness of spiritual powers to engage the lived experiences and communal struggles. Cooperating with the ordinary Buddhists who shared the same experience in the Myanmar Military Junta, he called for reconciliation, unity, solidarity, and prophetic resistance in the post-coup periods to do socio-political transformation together. This book is a must-read for theologians, practitioners, and those who are interested in discussing lived faith in the public sphere.

Yex Nang Shwe Rong
Doctoral student, specializing in Feminist Political Theology
Divinity School of Chung Chi College
Chinese University of Hong Kong

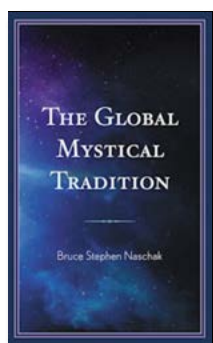


The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

BOOK REVIEW

The Global Mystical Tradition

By Bruce Stephen Naschak. New York: Lexington Books, 2023. 264 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-7936-3790-1. \$105 (hardcover); \$94.50 (ebook).



Bruce Stephen Naschak’s *The Global Mystical Tradition* explores religious traditions characterized by their “hidden from view” nature to elucidate the lineage pathways and their possible interrelationships using historical and speculative work. Thus, it offers a great complement to research that often focuses on spontaneous, ecstatic revelation as a means to mystical encounters—such as accounts of the lives of Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207–1282), and Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886).

Naschak postulates that esoteric traditions require a master/disciple model for more complete understanding. Thus, the method of the book is found in “tracing over history through the master-disciple relationship.” While the linear stance is helpful, life itself can be a teacher for those who do not require or do not find an individual master from whom to learn; and many mystics engage wholly in the material world as explored in books such as *Ordinary Mysticism* by Mirabai Starr and *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics* by Marsha Sinetar.¹

Each of the first nine chapters of *The Global Mystical Tradition* discusses esoteric practices meant to facilitate mystical experience—that is, the union with the Divine—of a particular worldview: Shamanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Through these explorations, Naschak shows a type of continuity and similarity in the higher order of consciousness that is part and parcel of the mystic traditions: when one cannot say the unsayable, language needs

1 Mirabai Starr, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground* (HarperOne, 2024); Marsha Sinetar, *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics: Lifestyles for Spiritual Wholeness*. Paulist Press, 1986.

to be supported by images, objects, dreams, and/or visions. Naschak tends to these interweavings in his concluding tenth chapter. There he brings in the Goddess across traditions, emphasizes the creativity, inspiration, and revelation coming from these practices, and states that, “while the personal ecstatic experience is a foundation...training by masters of the tribe’s tradition is also essential” (217).

As an Advaita practitioner, I was sensitive to cases in the book that demonstrated the appreciation of the differences of each tradition, syncretism, and even possible misappropriation.² For example, concepts from Hinduism are used to ground much of the discourse in the book. Regarding a particular aspect of the Hindu concept of bhakti, while a devotional mindset might be a requirement for entry into the master-disciple relationship, the definition of sublimation of one’s lower self to a higher principle needs to be more carefully nuanced. There are many of the tradition who see such thinking—that is, “train the seeker on his or her fundamental physical and mental levels so that he/she will be open to the higher spiritual/mystical experience” (10)—as a principal barrier to mystical experience. They may assert that it is more salient to recognize that we are born of light and just remember. As mentioned above, there are pathways that emphasize more spontaneous, direct encounters of the Divine. They do not require rigorous practice and abstinence and rather are supported by full and whole embrace and acceptance of all.

Naschak tends to equate esoteric practice as perhaps disengaged from practical reality, as opposed to exoteric practices such as communal ritual, prayer, and scriptural reading. I would add from personal experience and the spiritual care of fellow mystics that there is an inner sensibility from engaging in life that calls one towards the more mystical aspects and direct experiences of the Divine—which may lead, eventually, to a search for a teacher. All in all, as Pravina Rodrigues shows us: to convey Oneness we can embrace the differences and possibilities of Manyness.³

In conclusion, I greatly appreciated the chronological and geographical order of exploring the hidden towards an integrated approach to directly experiencing the Divine. *The Global Mystical Tradition* offers a survey of

2 Banerjee, P. M. (2023) “Ashes of the Forehead: Appreciation as an approach to religious difference.” Mosher, L., Pierce, E. J., & Rose, O. N. (Eds.). *With the Best Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes*. Orbis Books.

3 Rodrigues, P. (2023). *A Sakta Method for Comparative Theology: Upside Down, Inside Out*. Lexington Books.

multiple practices and experiences across mystical traditions that can support one's own journey in a detailed, interreligious way.

Preeta M. Banerjee, Ph.D.
Babson College

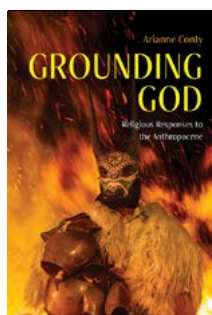


The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).

BOOK REVIEW

Grounding God: Religious Responses to the Anthropocene.

By Arianne Conty. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023. 230 pp. ISBN 978-1-4384-9574-3. \$88.00 (hardcover); \$34.00 (e-book).



How can we survive the impending apocalypse? By reversing direction, learning from the past rather than rushing to The End? Conty reminds us that “for indigenous peoples the end of the world is old news; it has already happened.” Five centuries ago, for example, she notes, viruses and gunpowder “massacred 95 percent of the peoples of the Americas, along with most of their traditional ways of living” (29). What can we learn from their stories of solidarity and kinship?

Conty cites John Cobb’s contribution to Roger Gottlieb’s *This Sacred Earth*: “a truly ecological consciousness was far more clearly and efficiently present in hunting and gathering societies than in our traditions” (52).¹ Hence, we turn to animist rituals and stories for “new” ways to restore our original connections to religion and civilization. There are seemingly hundreds of citations like this in Conty’s monumental work of scholarship and philosophy which may prove to be one of the most helpful, hopeful, and popular scholarly books of this era. For example, in her chapter on Christianity, she cites Lynn White Jr, Pope Francis, Matthew Fox, Mark Wallace, Anne Peterson, Anne Primavesi, Stuart Kauffman, and Nancy Ellen Abrams.

Among the other organized religions (Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and so on), Buddhism apparently has the most to offer now to those committed to saving the planet. Conty draws from both Nagarjuna (the founder of Mahayana Buddhism), who categorically rejected binary thinking, and the twentieth-century Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji, whose theory “deconstructs the Western understanding of environment altogether, and is

1 John B. Cobb, Jr, “Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology,” in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, second edition (Routledge, 2004), 248–261.

thus able to move beyond the dualistic dilemmas of Western ideology” (58). Conty lists the “confluence of science and Eastern ideas [such as] the ideas of interdependence of Taoism and Buddhism, the Jewel-net of Indra; the attribution of soul...to all beings; the interspecies relationships intrinsic to the idea of reincarnation; and the Buddhist idea that all things lack inherent existence and thus are constituted through relationality” (56–57).

Conty also demonstrates the relevance of naturalism, analogism, Neopaganism, panpsychism, the indigenous animism of the Amazon basin, and the *machinic animism* of Felix Guattari. As she traces all this back to goddess worship, she integrates shamanism, Druids, Wicca, Gaia, nineteenth-century Romantic poets, and New Agers (77). Finally, she proposes new ecological values to replace modern binaries.

Many centuries ago, Buddhists demonstrated that “individual” human beings are ever-changing stories told by unreliable narrators (“there is no *you*”). Nevertheless, these stories can supply the examples and models needed to balance philosophical abstractions and convince a wider public of their innate ability to cross the boundaries between self and other. We now know that empathy is triggered by mirror neurons in each member of a group. Intense awareness of other beings can also be observed in animals, whether they be the hunters or the hunted. Shamans cultivated this sympathetic imagination to the point where they could easily cross species boundaries. (Some of us moved in that direction when “spirit animals” were taken seriously, as they still are in Rudolfo Anaya’s classic, *Bless Me Ultima* [1994].)

In her fifth chapter, on Animism, Conty highlights the thinking of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, author of *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), who has observed that the sympathetic imagination is an ability “only the humanities can foster: the ability to see something from another person’s point of view” (113). Carefully reading a book activates the sympathetic imagination as we “leave the self” and “see as other” (112). Conty also draws our attention to Nobel Prize winning novelist, J. M. Coetzee, author of *The Lives of Animals* (1999), who demonstrated that “the humanities foster the inclusion of all other beings within humanity, just as indigenous animism does, and that such an inclusion is indeed constitutive of what it means to be human” (113). In other words, “the sympathetic imagination, rather than rational calculation, is what is required to see things from the point of view of a jaguar, a flying ant, or a forest” (113).

Hopefully, Arianne Conty's *Grounding God* and related books will facilitate the widespread cultivation of empathy for all beings that will make "the Anthropocene Era truly human" (117).

Jerome Bump
University of Texas
Austin, Texas



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).
