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BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, AND INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES MEDIA

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THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

From the Editor-in-Chief

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

1

ARTICLES

Rethinking Space and Place as Loci for Polyphonic Consciousness: A Case for a Spirituality of Inclusivity

SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai

5

Independent Churches and Black Liberation Theology in Africa: What Interactions?

Rodrick Kapwa

31

University Chaplaincy in Global Context: The First 25 Years of the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE)

Gregory W. McGonigle

51

Two Spiritual Masters: St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo

James Wiseman

75

Interfaith Transposed: Interfaithlessness in the Age of Religious Exit

Kristen Tobey

101

“Creating Commonplaces”: Value Generalization in the *A Common Word* Dialogue between Islam and Christianity

Benedict Coleridge

127

INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTIONS

The Compassion of Rowan Williams: Lessons for Interfaith Dialogue

Akbar Ahmed, Frankie Martin, and Aminah Hoti

165

Toumliline’s Experiment—Benedictine Monasticism and Interfaith Dialogue in Postcolonial Morocco (1952–1968): A Site of Incarnational Dialogue Between Christianity, Islam, and Amazigh Identity at the Crossroads of Decolonization

Mohammed Lazrak

187

BOOK REVIEW

The Habits of Race and Faith in a Religiously Diverse World

Paul Hedges

205

FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

I am excited to see the publication of Issue 51 of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*. This issue marks the third for which we are offering print editions for purchase. Editors, staff, and Board Members at Interreligious Studies Media are delighted to support this option as we continue to develop the journal, Interreligious Studies Press, and our other scholarly and educational material on the ISM website (www.interreligiousstudies.org).

Issue 51 comprises six articles, two scholarly reflections, and one book review.

In “Rethinking Space and Place as Loci for Polyphonic Consciousness: A Case for a Spirituality of Inclusivity,” SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai draws on Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to argue that religious and secular identities are formed through space and place, and so can never be closed off from others. Critiquing ideas of identity built on exclusion and on claims to purity, the author proposes a “spirituality of inclusivity” in which understanding oneself always requires understanding the other. The essay focuses on pilgrimage, especially the Hajj, along with Jewish and Christian ideas of sacred space, as practices that unsettle insular belonging and train practitioners in hospitality. By replacing a scarcity mindset with a “surplus mindset,” the article offers a phenomenological basis for encounters between religious and secular traditions.

In “Independent Churches and Black Liberation Theology in Africa: What Interactions?,” Rodrick Kapwa traces the intertwined histories of the African Independent Churches (AICs) and Black liberation theology, focusing mainly on Francophone Africa and South Africa. The AICs emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as protests against colonial domination and missionary Christianity. Kapwa argues that the relationship between the AICs and Black liberation theology ran both ways. The AICs’ preached, contextual theology gave Black liberation theology fertile ground to grow from, and Black liberation theology in turn gave the AICs theological legitimacy. Kapwa concludes that, because the

AICs and Black liberation theology sit between missionary Christianity and traditional African religions, they offer a hermeneutical framework for interreligious and intercultural dialogue in contemporary Africa.

In “University Chaplaincy in Global Context: The First 25 Years of the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE),” Gregory W. McGonigle offers the first institutional history of this global network of university chaplains and campus ministers. The article draws on documentary records, archival materials, and oral histories with organizers and participants. It traces the association from its first conference in Vancouver in 2000 through its seventh, held in Frankfurt and Mainz in 2026, and follows how its gatherings grew from mostly Christian and Jewish participation into an increasingly multifaith and Humanist community. McGonigle then turns to recent structural changes and efforts to bring in chaplains from Africa, Asia, and South America. He argues that IACHE offers a valuable platform for international dialogue and cooperation at a time when such institutions are increasingly questioned.

In “Two Spiritual Masters: St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo,” James Wiseman brings together the sixteenth-century Carmelite mystic and the twentieth-century Tibetan Dzogchen master as kindred spirits. He frames the comparison within the dialogical vision of *Nostra Aetate* and Bede Griffiths’s notion of a “common wisdom.” After brief accounts of each man’s life, Wiseman compares their teachings on the ultimate goal of human life: union with God for John, and the realization of the “natural Great Perfection” for Nyoshul. Each, he shows, speaks of that goal in apophatic terms. He then traces parallels in the paths each prescribed, including detachment, the movement from discursive meditation to restful awareness, solitude, humility, and love. While acknowledging real doctrinal differences, the article presents the two as companions in contemplative practice.

In “Interfaith Transposed: Interfaithlessness in the Age of Religious Exit,” Kristen Tobey examines “interfaithless” initiatives in the United States, in which people who have left different high-demand religious groups come together as they navigate religious exit. Drawing on surveys and interviews, Tobey focuses on the Interfaithless Beach Party, held in Southern California between 2014 and 2022, where former Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Jews, Scientologists, and others built community through shared food, humor, and stories of estrangement and recovery. Rather than placing such gatherings at the margins of the interfaith movement, Tobey borrows the musical idea of transposition: interfaithlessness, she argues, is interfaith encounter played in a different key. The article challenges assumptions that the growing nonreligious population

is hostile to religion and invites interfaith practitioners and scholars to take “exes” seriously as partners in interreligious exchange.

In “‘Creating Commonplaces’: Value Generalization in the *A Common Word* Dialogue between Islam and Christianity,” Benedict Coleridge argues that democratic theory has much to learn from interfaith dialogue. Against Jürgen Habermas’s search for a shared “normative grammar” underlying pluralist deliberation, Coleridge pairs Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics with Hans Joas’s account of “value generalization.” Together, he argues, they show how traditions can clarify their ethical meanings and develop new shared values through critical encounter rather than formal abstraction. His case study is the *A Common Word* initiative, launched in 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars in the wake of Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg lecture. Coleridge reads the scriptural exchange that followed as a “conceptual laboratory” in which ethical commitments grew across difference. The article offers a model of intercultural deliberation that honors particularity while cultivating common ground.

These six articles are followed by two scholarly reflections.

In “The Compassion of Rowan Williams: Lessons for Interfaith Dialogue,” Akbar Ahmed, Frankie Martin, and Amineh Hoti look at how the former Archbishop of Canterbury has approached the religious “Other.” They draw on their personal interviews with Williams and on his wider body of work. The authors, two of whom are Muslim scholars who have known Williams for years, trace several core themes in his thought. Interfaith dialogue, for Williams, should be framed within an awareness of a larger unity. Each tradition receives only a partial understanding of the divine. Identity is formed through encounter with others, and a pluralist political society should be imagined as a “covenant” among diverse communities. The article also sets out Williams’s practical steps for dialogue and argues that his compassionate, hopeful approach offers lessons well beyond Christianity.

In “Toumliline’s Experiment—Benedictine Monasticism and Interfaith Dialogue in Postcolonial Morocco (1952–1968),” Mohammed Lazrak recovers the history of a small Benedictine monastery in the Middle Atlas that has received little attention. Its monks refused to see themselves as “pastors” or “chaplains.” Instead, they chose to be “men of prayer” living among their Muslim and Amazigh neighbors. Drawing on site plaques, archival sources, and his own 2025 fieldwork, Lazrak traces how the community learned Arabic and Berber, ran a dispensary and boarding school, and hosted the *Rencontres Internationales*. These gatherings, held under royal patronage and attended by Louis Massignon and Emmanuel

Levinas, anticipated the spirit of Vatican II. Reading this legacy through the Qur’anic ideal of *ta’aruf* (Q 49:13), the article proposes a model of “incarnational dialogue,” in which religious encounter rests on shared life and material solidarity rather than theological exchange.

The issue closes with one book review: Paul Hedges reviews *The Habits of Race and Faith in a Religiously Diverse World*, by Mara Brecht.

This issue would not have come together without the proficient and superb work of Lydia Bremer-McCollum (Assistant Editor), Sze-Long A. Wong (Design and Production Editor), Mark Spinnenweber (Graduate Research Fellow), and Aubrey Chavez (Social Media and Website Manager). My sincere gratitude is extended to all of them.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
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ARTICLE

Rethinking Space and Place as Loci for Polyphonic Consciousness: A Case for a Spirituality of Inclusivity

SimonMary Asese Aihiokhai

Abstract

The need to rethink space and place is relevant for the flourishing of all persons, especially as it pertains to markers defining both religious and secular persons. This work argues for the place of a spirituality of inclusivity that allows for the instantiation of identities that are open to otherness, whether religious or secular. For such a spirituality to take hold on the imagination of all, especially of those who embrace a religious tradition, a deliberate probing of the politics of space and place cannot be avoided. Such probing calls for an embrace of identities that are always open to otherness. In other words, self-understanding calls always for other-understanding. This work centers insights from Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to argue its conclusions.

Keywords

identity, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, other-understanding, pilgrimage, politics of space and place, polyphonic consciousness, self-understanding, spirituality of inclusivity

Introduction

The human person is a being defined by sociality as a primary condition of being human in the world. However, to be a social being is not something that is abstract. It is a praxis of being that is fundamentally grounded in an embodiment that is oriented towards the concrete realities playing out in space and place. Consequently, embodiment allows for the production of space and place, and reciprocally, space and place define the contours of embodiment from which the consciousness of the self as a subject-in-relation arises. As Amanda Card argues, “bodies are research tools. They can be put to work in concert with other sources to explore the past. Bodies are also *ARCHIVES*. They are of the world, (re)created within the same contexts as the objects they use, the places they inhabit, and the times in which they live.”¹ Even collective institutions that have their own persona, such as religious traditions, fall within the matrix of space and place as the locus for their attainment of self-awareness. The spaces and places within which such traditions operate reveal something about the traditions just as the traditions also reveal something about such spaces and places. In other words, spaces and places are sites of interrogation that reveal markers of social identities. Consequently, an appeal to insularity as the locus for self-awareness by religious traditions is a false one; simply because there is always a surplus of meaning, presence, and claim inherent in such spaces and places, which offer the traditions a claim to embodying surplus of meanings, presence, and claim that also bond them to both the spaces and places and every other reality that are present in such spaces and places. One can thus conclude that religious traditions are themselves sites of encounters that go beyond the domain of the sense of self that they uphold. The mere fact that identity is always identity in relation to the other grounds identity as always a linkage to that which is beyond it. To claim that I am a Christian is to also make the claim that my identity orients me towards a horizon that is beyond my identity. Jussi Backman notes this well in their close reading of Aristotle and Plato on identity when he writes, “identity can only unify something if that thing has first become in some sense differentiated. Self-identity cannot be a simple undifferentiated equality; as unity, as a coming together with oneself, identity involves a relation to oneself and thus a certain distance from oneself.”²

- 1 Amanda Card, “Body and Embodiment,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field. First Edition*, eds. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Julianne Tomann (New York: Routledge, 2020), 30.
- 2 Jussi Backman, *Complicated Presence: Heidegger and the Postmetaphysical Unity of Being* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2015), 217.

A fundamental question that this essay attempts to address is this: How does the relationship between space and place allow for holding in place both unity and difference in the articulation of social identities, especially those that pertain to religion? Thus, grounding this work in a Heideggerian consciousness³ and insights from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this essay will explore how a rethinking of space and place can birth forth a polyphonic consciousness that can serve as the locus for the praxis of a spirituality of inclusivity.⁴ To do this well, this essay will offer a robust understanding of what a spirituality of inclusivity means for our times and how it can serve in the praxes of encounters that focus not only on religious traditions but on the context of secularism as well. In this work, I am making the claim that the rethinking of space and place is possible and needed for the contemporary era. In fact, one can conclude that this work best reflects the insight articulated by Michael Keith and Steve Pile when they argue that “new spaces of resistance are being opened up, where our ‘place’ (in all its meanings) is considered fundamentally important to our perspective, our location in the world, and our right and ability to challenge dominant discourses of power.”⁵

The Politics of Space and Place in Western Consciousness: A Culture of Erasures and the Possibility of Hospitality

Contemporary society is defined by the politics of space and place. This is

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- 3 It is worth noting that this work is not making a general claim that only through a Heideggerian lens can discourses on space and place be engaged. Rather, this work offers a particular reading of Heideggerian thought on the subject.
 - 4 It is proper to note the following since this work appropriates insights from Martin Heidegger. The fact that Heidegger embraced Nazism at the expense of German Jews who were the target of racist policies cannot be ignored in the engagement of Heideggerian thought. I engage his insights in this work with a consciousness of that history (For a critique of Heidegger and his affiliation with Nazism, see, Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022)). Appropriating Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insight that is engaged later in this work, one could argue that Heidegger’s appeal to an exclusionary memory that defined the reality of Nazism is conditioned by the two-pronged bias inherent in such memory. First, the memory of Germany was one stripped of the rich contributions of German Jews historically. Second, the era of Nazism also produced a cultural space and place that was conditioned by bias which also shaped the reconstruction of such historical memory on what constitutes a German and Germany as well.
 - 5 Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.

particularly true with the reality of the nation-state that has defined how the global community articulates its identity. As Nick Hopkins and John Dixon rightly note, “place and space play a central part in the ways that large-scale and abstract social categories such as ‘nation,’ ‘class,’ and ‘race’ impact on lived experience and are reproduced through it.”⁶ Yet, the political claim to space and place by either an individual or a collective group of people, whether defined by a shared historicity or linguistic markers, or even agreed-upon ambitions to pursue a collective goal, tends to be seen not as a discourse of the abstract; rather, it is most often understood as real and definitive. This bias for realness and definitiveness often produces what Edward Relph calls, “insidedness and outsidedness.” However, this label is oriented towards the phenomenology of place. One must ask, what about space? There can be no place without first the instantiation of space. Yet, space, if it is to be understood phenomenologically, cannot be without meaning or a lack of intentionality. The mere fact that space has an intricate relationship with language—to be spoken of already evokes a type of intentionality or meaning. The fact that space is part of discourse means that it draws humans into an experiential connection.⁷ By this, I mean that space exudes a phenomenology of connection that is grounded in sociality. To speak of space is to ground experience. This is because the places where we live out our lives are themselves made possible by the opening that space exudes. Hence, Relph articulates different modes of spatial experiences, whether “instinctive, bodily, and immediate—for example, pragmatic space, perceptual space, and existential space” or “special experience that are more cerebral, ideal, and intangible—for example, planning space, cognitive space, and abstract space.”⁸ These modes of spatial experience are intricately connected and instantiate the holistic existence of beings, humans included. But space is also linked to place. In other words, to speak of place is to also instantiate space. No place exists without a spatial context. Both space and place are within the discourse of language and thus hold captive the human imagination. They are not void or empty. As Relph points out, “space is not void or an isometric plane or a kind of container that holds places.”⁹ Just as

6 Nick Hopkins and John Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” *Political Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2006): 174.

7 See Elizabeth Keating, “Discourse, Space, and Place,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis. Second Edition, volume 1*, eds. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 244–261.

8 David Seamon and Jacob Sowers, “Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph,” in *Key Texts in Human Geography*, eds. P. Hubbard, R. Kitchen, and G. Vallentine (London: Sage, 2008), 44. See also, Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

9 Seamon and Sowers, “Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph,” 44.

place is experienced by humans so also is space.¹⁰ These are necessary markers defining the human condition.¹¹ The focus of this work is not to pursue in detail the differences between space and place. Rather, the focus is on how the human condition is shaped by them while affirming their intricate connections. As already noted, there is no place unless there is space, and space is the grounding for place.

Though Relph argues that human experience, as it pertains to place, produces either “existential insideness,” which is the “unselfconscious and authentic experience of place as central to existence” or existential *outsideness*, which produces “inauthentic experience of place,” the notions of insideness and outsideness evoke modes of relationality.¹² While the former may evoke a sense of being at home and belonging, the latter also evokes a relational connection but not as having a sense of being at home but as one who is connected to those who claim it as their home—a connection that exudes the experience of being an outsider. As Hopkins and Dixon note, space and place have an “impact on who is allowed to be where, they affect how people are included or excluded from public spaces, and they shape ways in which people relate to each other.”¹³ The fear of change and an insistence on the familiar tends to drive the politics of exclusion have come to define the claim to spaces and places in human history, especially for those who are able to muster the geopolitical tools (narratives, cultural memories, religious, political, and economic resources) to lay claim to such spaces and places.¹⁴ It ought to be stated though that even exclusion instantiates a type of relationality. In this case, it is not one of intimacy or inclusion. Rather, it is one of exclusion. One who excludes has been held captive by the existential condition of the one who is excluded. Stated simply, if I decide to prevent someone from entering my house because I do not want them to share the space and place with me, their embodied existence has held me captive. Rather than focus on other things, I am held captive by the reality of their proximity, which I want to ensure does not become part of the intimacy playing out in my house. This is particularly true as it pertains to the geopolitics shaping urban cities, where even the strategic attempt to produce

10 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 9.

11 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 1.

12 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 142.

13 Hopkins and Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” 174.

14 For a treatment on the politics of space and place playing out in a neighborhood of East Jerusalem that supports the claim being made here, see, Marik Shtern and Haim Yacobi, “The Urban Geopolitics of Neighboring: Conflict, Encounter and Class in Jerusalem’s Settlement/Neighborhood,” *Urban Geography*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2018): 467–487.

an apartheid system of exclusion still locates the other in proximity with the one initiating the exclusion. The proximity of the other, even if it is an exclusionary closeness, always holds the instigator captive, at least in the domain of their cognitive focus. By this I mean that the mere fact that one is thinking of ways to produce an exclusionary society shows that their intended victims have held their imagination captive. Salma AbdulMagied states this well when she writes, “the idea of ‘Othering’ exists because of the existence of others in the society, where the people exist together. The other is not someone that is not part of us but is someone or a group of people that are intentionally being situated outside the society.”¹⁵ In other words, on a very basic level, proximity is a relational grounding both for the subject and the one being otherized. As Bruce B. Janz rightly observes, “place often designates uniqueness, in a romantic sense, but in fact even those unique places are aggregates, productions that have constituent parts.”¹⁶ These constituent parts are not alleys of exclusion. Rather, they are pathways of connections that transcend the domain of insularity. Furthermore, they validate a polyphonic turn as it pertains to discourses on identity.

Furthermore, what is most relevant to space and place is that they offer the grounding for all that can be said to define the human person as a being oriented towards sociality as well as the embrace or rejection of experiences that define human identity(ies). In other words, to speak of human identity is to ground oneself within the domain of relationality. But what type of relationality is one articulating here? Martin Heidegger calls attention to the politics of identity when he reflects on two notions of identity that exude from the framework of belonging together.¹⁷ One involves an “emphasis [on] the unity of the together over belonging—that is, we give emphasis to the unity of that which belongs.”¹⁸ The other centers the emphasis on “belonging—the relation between—that allows for the unity of the together.”¹⁹ While the former stresses autonomy, the latter stresses relationality that goes beyond itself into the domain of difference. Western consciousness of identity is primarily shaped by the focus on unity. As Jeff

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- 15 Salma AbdulMagied, “Othering, Identity and Recognition: The Social Exclusion of the Constructed ‘Other,’” *Future Journal of Social Science*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2022): 113.
 - 16 Bruce B. Janz, *Philosophy in An African Place* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), 14.
 - 17 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 23–41.
 - 18 Jeff Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” *jeffmalpas.com*, 2013, 7, <https://jeffmalpas.com/wp-content/uploads/Rethinking-Dwelling-Heidegger-and-the-Questi.pdf>.
 - 19 Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” 7.

Malpas notes, identity in western consciousness is primarily about unity, which is “paradigmatically understood on the model of *numerical* unity, and so as indeed exclusive of any difference and as apart from that which is different.”²⁰ When such turn to unity is rigidified, it becomes the grounding of violence towards that which has been judged to be different or alien to the content of that which constitutes such unity.

Also worth noting is the fact that all identities are themselves shaped by the politics of space and place. This includes so-called individual identities. Importantly, the conceptualization of space and place as a condition for grounding identity(ies) stresses “the idea that our sense of who we are is fundamentally social and based upon our identification with various social group memberships.”²¹ Thus, “many social identities incorporate a spatial dimension.”²² For example, “national identities are typically spatialised...and reproduced through boundary-making practices. So too, religious identities frequently involve the sacralisation of space and are reproduced through a series of spatialised practices involving rituals of pilgrimage and purification.”²³ The politics of space and place speaks to the tension that exists between a sense of homeness and homelessness and the negotiations that are employed to define these. Too often, society is conditioned to think of being at home as evoking a sense of completeness—after all, one is familiar with such a world. Hence, attachment to a place is seen as something favorable to the human person in their praxis of identity construction.²⁴ With this in mind, a sense of loss is “associated with relocation.”²⁵ This idea is incomplete. While attachment to a place may evoke a sense of being at home, it does not mean that such a world exudes completeness. What is considered home is always a site of pilgrimage that flows into other places as well. In other words, to call a place home is to evoke a sense of openness to other places. Thus, home becomes a pilgrimage site of self-discovery not as an insular project but as a continuum of connections with other places which offer pointers to a richer sense of self as well. This is because identity exudes relationality, not in a closed manner, but in the open and closed dynamics that identity emanates. As Janz notes,

20 Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” 8.

21 Hopkins and Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” 176.

22 Hopkins and Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” 176.

23 Hopkins and Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” 176.

24 Janz, *Philosophy in An African Place*, 16.

25 Hopkins and Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” 175.

“place resists the homogenization of culture” or of identity.²⁶ Hence, “place must remain both an irreducible other to the self, and a constitutive part of the self...”²⁷ Accounting for the other allows for the instantiation to a polyphonic consciousness that allows for the going beyond the insular domain.

Again, place does not exude a static identity but a dynamic identity. Stated succinctly, identity evokes concentric circles of connections. Most often religious traditions and secular societies tend to focus more on the innermost ring within the concentric circles and ignore the other outer rings. For example, a Catholic is understood to be a member of the Catholic Church who has received baptism and embraces the tenets of the Catholic Church. But their identity as a Catholic is not solely defined by these acts of belonging. For them not to be considered as a member of a cult, their sense of identity demands that they expand their relational contacts with members of other religious traditions and even the secular world itself. The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium* states this well when it articulates a concentric circle of belonging that goes beyond the concrete ritual acts of becoming a member of the Catholic Church.²⁸ Even in the case of cultic belonging, the concentric circles are still there even when the demand to relate outside of the cultic circle may be frowned upon. No one can exist insularly. The same can be said of religious traditions. Thus, any discourse on religious identity ought to also instantiate a turn to otherness which offers an opportunity to instantiate multiple voices, insights, and negotiated horizons that reveal the content of the markers shaping what is appropriated as a religious identity. To engage these complex realities, an embrace of a polyphonic consciousness is expected. Polyphonic consciousness speaks to a refusal to simplify that which is complex and to hold in place the tensions that arise as one attempt to articulate a sense of self, religious or secular.

On another note, because humans are not just social beings, but are creatures of language, space and place serve as the grounding of meaning within the domain of discourse (language). In other words, to use language, one needs community, a sense of familiarity that allows for reciprocity of meaning when a word is spoken. Yet, language, if it is to serve the purpose of giving meaning to the human condition, must of itself be open so that new words and new negotiations of meaning can be appropriated. This opening is grounded in a turn to difference. Thus, one can conclude that

26 Janz, *Philosophy in An African Place*, 20.

27 Janz, *Philosophy in An African Place*, 20.

28 Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium* November 21, 1964, sec. 14–16, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

being at home is not insular. It must necessarily be oriented towards difference that exists beyond the parameters of the familiar. This understanding applies to religious traditions and their doctrinal appropriations, along with the modes of ritualizing the doctrines. They ought to always have an opening to engage and dialogue with those who are not part of that tradition. In other words, religious traditions cannot operate as though they are the only ones existing in the spaces and places they occupy. They ought to ground their beliefs in a praxis of doctrinal hospitality because God is always a God of hospitality and transcendence. In transcendence, God overcomes all forms of insularity that traditions may want to employ to reduce God to an idol of theirs. As Malpas notes, while reading Heidegger closely, “identity is never just a matter of the self-sameness of the thing, but always directs us towards the thing in its relationality—the thing as it both *gathers* and is itself *gathered*—and in this way identity is understood as determined by *being* rather than that which determines or founds *being*.”²⁹ This means that identity is dynamic, that is, understood “as something that is constantly being worked out, *and* as encompassing an essential difference and differentiation. Moreover, the difference at issue here is not the difference of two self-same entities that already stand apart from one another, but a difference that itself arises only in and through an essential relatedness.”³⁰

As it pertains to religious beliefs and even theological and ritualistic praxes within faith traditions, the claim to purity of faith ought to be queried because purity itself is a claim grounded in a myth. If religions exist in social spaces and their contents arise from the social worlds of existence, then its contents cannot be said to be pure without any influence from external forces. Even the claim to a pure culture is a problematic claim. As Janz notes, it pertains to scholars who uphold an African pure culture as the site for retrieving an African philosophy: “not only is the location of purity a problematic issue, the access to purity is as well.”³¹ Moving beyond the discourse on purity, one ought to note that “the multiple interactions among the different religions have created different religious self-understandings among their affiliates.”³² Even when affiliates participate in religious rituals, they bring to bear their nuanced beliefs that have been shaped sociologically by their interactions with other realities outside of the boundaries of their

29 Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” 8.

30 Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” 9.

31 Janz, *Philosophy in An African Place*, 124.

32 SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, “Interreligious Living: A Personalistic/Sociological Approach to Religious Pluralism,” *International Journal of African Catholicism*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011): 18.

religious traditions. Thus, if religious tradition is to be understood as a place, it is definitely a site of multiple places that produce a tapestry of identities, which the affiliates embrace even when they claim to uphold a doctrinal proposition.

The Other as an Invitation to Reimagine Space and Place through a Spirituality of Inclusivity

How can such complexities and simplicities that play out in space and place be embraced by religious traditions and their adherents? To address this question, I offer insights into what I have termed a spirituality of inclusivity. A spirituality of inclusivity takes seriously complexities and insists on putting the good of the other at the center of religious imagination and not the sin of the other. As Robert Draper notes in his article for *National Geographic* on the uniqueness of the pontificate of Pope Francis, “what he will do is return the church to its true doctrine—the one it has forgotten, the one that puts man back in the center. For too long, the church put sin in the center.”³³ To put the goodness of the other within one’s understanding of God is exactly what Pope Francis describes in the following words: “how nice that brothers are united, that brothers pray together. How nice to see that nobody negotiates their history on the path of faith—that we are diverse but that we want to be, and are already beginning to be, a reconciled diversity.”³⁴ Goodness is not an abstract virtue. It is lived out through concrete actions that play out within space and place by embodied beings. In the context of this essay, it is that of religious and non-religious persons. If this is the case, then goodness must be oriented towards an openness to the other who is not just the recipient of the good act but also the embodied instantiation of the possibility for the performance of such an act. Thus, a spirituality of inclusivity takes seriously the other, religious or secular, as a graced medium of awakening of one to become virtuous through performance of good acts. Rather than consider the other as deficient of the grace of God or the right to exist within such a space and place, a spirituality of inclusivity looks upon the other as a gift, a bearer of God’s message to be good, and the embodied symbol for the enactment of a covenantal commitment to embody an altruistic love for the other by one. This approach is not grounded in a

33 Robert Draper, “Will the Pope Change the Vatican? Or Will the Vatican Change the Pope?” *National Geographic*, August 2015, 59.

34 Robert Draper, “Will the Pope Change the Vatican? Or Will the Vatican Change the Pope?” *BishopAccountability.org*, <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/2015/07/will-the-pope-change-the-vatican-or-will-the-vatican-change-the-pope/>.

naivete. Rather, it involves a deep understanding of the human condition as saturated with possibilities for goodness and evil and a deliberate choice to focus on the good side. This does not mean that the bad side is not addressed. That can be the ingredient for transformative dialogue among all parties, instantiating mutual conversion.

A spirituality of inclusivity insists on embracing otherness in its mediating power of instantiating abundant life for all within and outside spaces and places of religious praxes. It insists that such spaces and places are media of connections and never of exclusions. Heidegger argues that

Space means a place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds... *Accordingly, spaces receive their being from places and not from 'space.'*³⁵

Heidegger's insights on the connection between space and place offers an opportunity for a critical engagement with how religious traditions currently understand the relevance of space and place in their articulation of their sense of self and their religious praxes as well. Most often, the imagination of sacred spaces and places offers an opposing dualism as though there can be no connection between the opposing realities. As Aslam Farouk-Alli observes, "one of the most outstanding characteristics of the production of sacred space is the ensuing distinction that is inevitably made between the sacred and the profane. These boundaries of demarcation introduce the dimension of opposition; not only between the sacred and the profane, but also between foreign and familiar, hostile and secure. Our sacred world, or cosmos, is thus in opposition to the wild, dangerous and chaotic forces of the profane world surrounding us."³⁶ It is this oppositional claim that defines the sacred as opposed to the profane that ought to be critiqued to allow for a richer understanding. As Farouk-Alli notes while

35 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 154.

36 Aslam Farouk-Alli, "A Qur'anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2002): 64. See also, Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), 29.

reading Mircea Eliade's work, *The Sacred and the Profane*, closely, humans become "aware of the sacred as a result of it manifesting itself, or showing itself as something wholly different from the profane."³⁷ Yet, even in this manifestation, the sacred does not obliterate the profane. Rather, it grounds itself within it. Or at best in proximity to the profane. Drawing from Heidegger's thinking, the sacred, in this context, anchors itself within the profane as a type of boundary-making phenomenon. Yet, such boundary does not offer an opposition in a manner that does not allow for an intermingling. Rather, the sacred needs the profane for it to manifest itself and for it to be seen and interacted with. Stated differently, though this process of manifestation is "something mysterious and of a wholly different order," it is "a reality that does not belong to our world but that is manifested in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world."³⁸ A similar thought process is accounted for in the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Though, not using the language of sacred and profane, Merleau-Ponty calls attention to how "we are enmeshed in the world, which, simultaneously, is enmeshed in us."³⁹ Stated differently, "inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside myself."⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty calls attention to the phenomenology of perception and by so doing, helps shed light on how space and place play a role in the unpacking of our understanding of embodiment. Or stated differently, "my body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension.'"⁴¹ In other words, what we perceive, we are already in relation to it. This possibility of being in relation only occurs because of spatiality and the grounding of our embodiment in place(s).⁴² As Merleau-Ponty notes, "the world must not exist around us as a system of objects whose synthesis we perform, but rather as an open ensemble of things

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- 37 Farouk-Alli, "A Qur'anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam," 65.
- 38 Farouk-Alli, "A Qur'anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam," 65. See also, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.
- 39 David Seamon, "Merleau-Ponty, Environmental Embodiment, and Place: Implications for Architecture and Placemaking," in *Embodied Awareness of Space: Body, Agency and Current Practice*, eds. Christos Kakalis and David Boyd (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 97.
- 40 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 407.
- 41 Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 235.
- 42 See Lara M. Mitias, "The Place of the Body in the Phenomenology of Place: Edward Casey and Nishida Kitaro," in *Philosophies of Place: An Intercultural Conversation*, eds. Peter D. Herschok and Roger T. Ames (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 302–317.

toward which we project ourselves. The ‘movement that generates space’ does not display the trajectory from some metaphysical point without a place in the world, but rather from a certain here toward a certain there, which, moreover, are in principle substitutable.”⁴³

A major point ought to be highlighted from the insights above. Religious and secular memories of spaces and places ought to be critiqued to ensure that the identities derived from remembering spaces and places where the body, individual and collective, derives its identity(ies). The nostalgia of space and place that tends to define both the secular and religious world must be evaluated to ensure that it does not lead to a false understanding of the intimate connections between the profane and the sacred. Why is this approach necessary, one may ask? In response to this question, I turn again to Merleau-Ponty as my interlocutor. He argues that “memory is consciousness of the past, which we cannot derive from the present, nor even from ‘former presents’...Memory constructs or deploys the past.”⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty makes a nuanced statement as it pertains to the retrieval of memory that is relevant to the argument being made here. Noting the fact that there arise “obstacles” when consciousness attempts to retrieve the past, he argues that “if there are obstacles, this is because there is a *hyle* of the past, therefore because the past is not only that which I construct. The whole constituting apparatus is reconstruction, and there has to be another presence to me of the past on which the construction is measured. Construction is that without which there is no past for me, but not that through which the past is past for me.”⁴⁵

One can conclude from Merleau-Ponty’s insight on memory that the reconstruction of memory evokes the instantiation of a two-pronged bias. First, what is experienced and which becomes part of the *hyle* is mediated by the bias of embodied perception both of the experience and the space and place where the experience occurs. Second, the retrieval of the content of the *hyle*, which entails a reconstruction based on the present experiences that necessitate a turn to memory is also grounded in bias which is linked to the content of the space and place as well. Thus, memory is always linked to the content of bias coded in space and place. Even though Merleau-Ponty does not use the language of bias, it can be deduced from his discourse on memory. As he notes in the following: “since the past is that which has been

43 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 407.

44 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity. Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 193.

45 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 193.

present, we cannot comprehend the modalization *has been*, the index of the past, if we conceive of the present badly. [Yet, we must] not conceive of the present as a picture (impressed in me or grasped by synopsis)—Especially insofar as what happens, the present, is not a picture. It is a variation of my grasp, a deviation of my anchorings.”⁴⁶ In other words, what I grasp of the present, which becomes the content of the past, is mediated by the totality of the social conditions and modalities of sense making that I deploy and which is also conditioned by the politics of space and place as well. Stated simply, the grasping of the present is conditioned by the social bias shaping my present condition as a being grounded in space and place. This is the first instantiation of bias that produces what is referred to as the deposit of memory. The attempt to retrieve the content of memory is further mediated by a bias that is produced through the reconstruction due to the present reality playing out in space and place. What is reconstructed becomes a biased reconstruction.

Furthermore, to differentiate a memory is to also account for the “integration of the multiple levels of awareness that occur through the process of self-differentiation [that] instantiates a link to otherness.”⁴⁷ In this case, it is those whose memories of the past that must also be accounted for within the retrieval of memory itself. Consequently, a spirituality of inclusivity does not deny the reality of difference. After all, it is only through difference that we come to articulate our subjective (individual and collective that is distinct from those of others) identity. Rather, such a spirituality exudes an embrace of difference that is oriented towards unity. It is a spirituality that grounds itself not in certitude but in openness to possibilities because all knowledge of the self and of the other that are within the domain of memory are themselves conditioned by bias and thus incomplete of the surplus reality from which the pruning that bias makes possible.

The reconstruction of memory is not outside of the deployment of bias that conditions how shared spaces and places are understood. This is because the project of memory is done by embodied beings whose senses that are relevant for the act of perception are themselves held captive by the meanings that have been coded into those shared spaces. With this in mind, one can thus conclude that the memory of the other or of oneself reveals also something about the memory of shared spaces and places.

46 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 193.

47 SimonMary Asese Aihiokhai, “Black Bodies as Sacraments of Disruption: Reimagining the Human Person in an Era of Marginalization,” *Religions*, vol. 16, article 385 (2025): 13.

Furthermore, “in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of perception, human beings are not first subjects who then determine and define the object before them, nor is that object a mute, fully determinate thing that only then imposes itself upon experiencers. Rather, through bodily perception, we immediately engage with and are aware of the thing because it immediately and mutually engages *with us* to offer a reciprocating, pre-reflective sensibility and signification.”⁴⁸ Stated differently, “this simultaneous entwinement is the only way we and these objects exist for one another.”⁴⁹ With this in mind, one can thus argue that

the place where the Jew settles (whether in the land or Israel or in the diaspora) can never be a totality. Jewish faith defies centrality and the ‘skewing through’ of heaven earth and underworld in one axis mundi. The place is meant as a medium for the sacred only so far as it does not become the sacred’s substitute....While the place is indispensable, the true sacred center is in the common faith of the people given in the Book. They are at once the People of the Land and the People of the Book.

Consequently, the notion of place is built on Resistance—advocating the essential distance between the people and their land. Accordingly, importance is laid on leaving as a counterpoint to arrival, on exit to resist nativity (the taken for grantedness of place), and on presence as but a trace of absence.⁵⁰

If Zali Gurevitch’s and Gideon Aran’s insights are to be taken seriously, it means then that memory of spaces and places and the identities they evoke ought to be queried rigorously to allow for shedding light on the erasures that are coded into such memories. Gurevitch and Aran do this when they call attention to an exegetical reading of Exodus 25:8—“And let them make a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”⁵¹ As they note, “the making of the Temple is not intended for the dwelling of God. The verse seems to divert itself at the last word from its expected routine course. Rather than the anticipated ‘in it’ it surprises us with ‘among them’”. This conspicuous

48 Seamon, “Merleau-Ponty, Environmental Embodiment, and Place: Implications for Architecture and Placemaking,” 99. See also Fred Evans, “Chiasm and Flesh,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 185.

49 Evans, “Chiasm and Flesh,” 186.

50 Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran, “Never in Place: Eliade and Judaic Sacred Space,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 39e Année, no. 87 (1994): 137.

51 Gurevitch and Aran, “Never in Place,” 139.

diversion indicates in a very concise way the idea of the temple—that it only symbolizes faith, and thus it is not cosmology as such but a dialectic of cosmology and anthropology. A place must be built, but the dwelling of God is among the people.”⁵² If the dwelling of God is with the people, then wherever the people are located, God dwells with them. Theologically, the transcendence of God means that no one space or place can contain the divine exclusively. While the transcendent God can only be encountered within the concreteness of space and place, such an encounter is not fixed or tied to just one place. Many spaces and places open up for such an encounter if such a God must retain its transcendence. Hence, King Solomon declares on the occasion of the dedication the Temple: “Behold the heaven and heaven of heaven cannot contain thee, how much less this house that I have built” (1 Kings 8:27).⁵³

Reflecting on the politics of space and place in Islam, one also notices how Mecca holds captive the social imagination of Muslims. For some, Mecca serves as the center of the universe. Consequently, the “Ka’bah was the first house of worship built on earth.”⁵⁴ For others, it simply refers to an interfaith consciousness because it is understood as “the first house of worship for people of the scripture i.e. Muslims, Christians and Jews.”⁵⁵ Also worth noting is the fact that in Islam, the praxis of pilgrimage offers a pathway for understanding who a Muslim is, an identity that opens itself up to understanding how God is both encountered in spaces and places and also transcends those spaces and places. The Hajj (pilgrimage) reflects a Muslim’s response to the call of God. As the Muslim embarks on pilgrimage, he/she offers prayers to God, the same that is also prayed on Mount Arafat with the following refrain: “*Labbayka Allāhumma, Labbayka!* (At your call, O God, Here I come).”⁵⁶ As Isma’īl R. Al-Fārūqī and Imtiyaz Yusuf note, Islamic pilgrimage is a reminder to Muslims of their new identity that goes against exclusivism and classism. Through pilgrimage, Muslims embrace a renewal of the consciousness of their bonds with all humans. They open themselves to the hospitality that comes from others. Just as a pilgrim cannot hold claim to a space or place in an exclusionary manner, Muslims come to see the

52 Gurevitch and Aran, “Never in Place,” 139.

53 Gurevitch and Aran, “Never in Place,” 141.

54 Farouk-Alli, “A Qur’anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam,” 67.

55 Farouk-Alli, “A Qur’anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam,” 67. See also, T. Ibn ‘Ashur, *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir. Volume 4* (Tunisia: Dar al-Tunisia lil-Nashr, 1984), 13.

56 Isma’īl R. Al-Fārūqī and Imtiyaz Yusuf, *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture & World Order* (London and Washington, D.C.: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012), 42.

world as the home of all. Rituals surrounding the Hajj evoke in the Muslim's consciousness memories of displacement and the caring hand of God in bringing comfort to those who are homeless.⁵⁷ For example, the journey to "Safa, whence they cover the distance to Marwah at trotting pace seven times (al-Sa'y)" Muslims are "reenacting the experience of Hājar (Hagar), mother of Ismail, in her search for water after she was deposited there with her infant by Ibrāhīm, as he was bound for another migration. Hājar did eventually find water which tradition tells had sprung miraculously under Ismail's little feet. The fountain, called *Ẓamzam*, still gives its water to the pilgrims, many of whom take it in bottles to their distant relatives."⁵⁸ Even with this rich motif of inclusiveness in the meaning given to pilgrimage in Islam, there still exist enduring practices of exclusion. For example, non-Muslims are banned from entering Mecca and Medina.⁵⁹ To address this bias of exclusion, Muslims, just as Jews and Christians, may need to reclaim the motif of exile that is linked closely to pilgrimage and which shapes their religious and cultural histories. Using Marc H. Ellis' insight, these religious traditions are called to be the New Diaspora. For Ellis, New Diaspora entails the resistance to give a name to a multi-pronged nature of a community that is constitutive of exiles from many lands and experiences but who insist on being a people who care in an altruistic manner.⁶⁰ Jews were once exiled and were also migrants as well. In their captivity in Egypt, God chooses to set them free. Jesus was himself an exile fleeing the persecution of Herod with his earthly parents. The early followers of Mohammed and Mohammed himself were exiles fleeing the persecution of the Meccans. With this in mind, a spirituality of inclusivity takes seriously the role of space and place in shaping both the embodiment of members of religious traditions and the traditions themselves and helping to bring to consciousness the content of the identities that are crafted in such a context. Consequently, any idea of the religious self, individual or collective, must "be discovered through an investigation of the places it inhabits."⁶¹ As noted by Malpas while reading

57 Al-Fārūqī and Yusuf, *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture & World Order*, 40–42.

58 Al-Fārūqī and Yusuf, *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture & World Order*, 41.

59 Richard Ostling, "An Old Question That's Back in the News: Why Can't Non-Muslims Visit Mecca and Medina?" *Religion Unplugged*, September 23, 2022, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/9/20/an-old-question-thats-back-in-the-news-why-cant-non-muslims-visit-mecca-and-medina>.

60 Susanne Scholz and Santiago Slabodsky, "Practicing Exile in the New Diaspora as a Jewish Scholar of Conscience: An Interview with Marc H. Ellis," in *The New Diaspora and the Global Prophetic: Engaging the Scholarship of Marc H. Ellis*, eds. Susanne Scholz and Santiago Slabodsky (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021), 24–25.

61 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography. Second Edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.

Gaston Bachelard's thought closely, "the life of the mind is given form in the places and spaces in which human beings dwell and those places themselves shape and influence human memories, feelings and thoughts. In this way the spaces of inner and outer—of mind and world—are transformed one into the other as inner space is externalized and outer space brought within."⁶²

Pilgrimage, whether within Islam, Christianity, or any religion, offers what Karen Pechilis calls an orientation "towards de-centralization."⁶³ In Victor Turner's words, "...the social mode appropriate to all pilgrimages represents a mutually energizing compromise between structure and *communitas*; in theological language, a 'forgiveness of sins,' where differences are accepted or tolerated rather than aggravated into grounds of aggressive opposition."⁶⁴ Reading Turner closely, Pechilis argues that "in the context of pilgrimage religion anesthetizes the divisiveness of social distinctions. Although a temporary process, the cooperative atmosphere during pilgrimage becomes a "paradigm for other kinds of behavior—ethical, political, etc."⁶⁵ Though Pechilis concludes that pilgrimage focuses on decentering exclusionary modes of being for religious people who embark on such ritual journeys, I argue that the disruptive intentionality is part of the content of the religious imagination. This disruption is similar to what poetry does to the reader. It orients the reader to the poet through the poem itself in such a manner that both find themselves in each other through the mediation of the poem itself. As Bachelard rightly observes within the domain of poetry, poetic "resonances are dispersed on the different planes of our life in the world, while the repercussions invite us to give greater depth to our own existence. In the resonance we hear the poem, in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own. The reverberations bring about a change of being. It is as though the poet's being were our being. The multiplicity of resonances then issues from the reverberation's unity of being...[The] poem possesses us entirely."⁶⁶ For example, Islam grounds itself within what is considered the five pillars of Islam. One of these pillars is Hajj (pilgrimage). It is not meant to have a temporary effect on the psyche of the pilgrim. Rather, it is meant to orient the pilgrim to a spiritual awakening that transcends former modes of being. As Al-Fārūqī and Yusuf rightly note, "since the pilgrim's affirmation of his recognition of God's Creatorship is at

62 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 6.

63 Karen Pechilis, "To Pilgrimage It," *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1992): 60.

64 Victor W. Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," *History of Religions*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1973): 221–222.

65 Pechilis, "To Pilgrimage It," 60. See also, Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," 215.

66 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 7.

once his affirmation of all men's creatureliness and hence equality before God, the pilgrimage is the greatest and most eloquent embodiment of Islam's egalitarianism and universalism."⁶⁷ The pilgrim's consciousness is oriented to the world outside of their familiar context. In other words, the spaces and places transversed by the pilgrim are the holders of the content that brings about the transformation of the pilgrim. Not only is the pilgrim transformed, so also are those who live in such spaces and places as they encounter the pilgrim who is from far away. Each take on perceptions that link them together. The pilgrim's transformation is not complete unless the narration also accounts for those spaces and places that they encounter along the way. In Nigeria, Muslims who go on pilgrimage to Mecca embrace a new title, *Alhaji* (for men) and *Alhaja* (for women) symbolic of a heightened awareness of God's calling and their response to it. This awakening is not grounded solely on an esoteric awareness of one's intimacy with God. Rather, it is demonstrated through the hospitality shown to one by those that one encounters along the way to Mecca. Most often, those who show the pilgrim hospitality are not Muslims themselves. They serve as Allah's viceroys of goodness in the world that is extended to the Muslim. Consequently, the awakening ought to orient the Muslim to embrace fully God's peace and to share that sense of peace with others. Hence, the performance of *zakat* (almsgiving) to those who are less fortunate. The recipients of such almsgiving are not necessarily Muslims. They are all children of God and worthy of dignity and care.

Returning to Heidegger's notion of the link between space and place and identity awareness, one can argue that the place of pilgrimage where the religious one is awakened to an opening to others in a manner that their religious commitment becomes the ground for a rich praxis of hospitality towards others offers also an awareness of seeing spaces not as sources for exclusionary modes of being but as the possibility to articulate a place of welcome for others. This is because the identity that arises from such a space is itself a gift. The awakening is a gift and the product of the hard work of the pilgrim. Pilgrimage is a journey that is saturated with the motif of finding oneself as a being grounded in a higher calling of intimacy with God through taking seriously the realities of the world. What do I mean by this? The pilgrim who embarks on this journey experiences the world around them through their senses. They encounter cultures, peoples, languages, political systems, economic systems, and topographies that are different from those they are familiar with. Yet, the destination of the pilgrim cannot be reached unless through these encounters. There is no way around it. The

67 Al-Fārūqī and Yusuf, *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture & World Order*, 42.

awakening does not only occur at the place of pilgrimage. Rather, it is a gradual process that begins with the first step the pilgrim takes towards the place of pilgrimage. In fact, one's home is the first site of pilgrimage. The journey begins from there. As they encounter all that is different, the pilgrim awakens to a world larger than theirs. They also begin to see both the differences and the connections they have with that world. The place of pilgrimage is always beyond their world even if it may have the qualities of their religious tradition. Since pilgrimage always begins within one's tradition or home, the sight of a pilgrim is always tuned towards that which is beyond, even when they are gazing at the familiar. Hence, this looking beyond allows the pilgrim to probe their tradition and to seek ways to enrich their appreciation of that tradition, hence the journey begins towards those sites that can enrich that vision. An example would help here. A Christian from Portland, Oregon who embarks on a pilgrimage to Rome to see the catacombs and other holy sites is awakened to a larger world that is beyond the realities shaping her city. That awakening begins at home and continues as a continuum of consciousness. In Rome, the holy sites contain symbols and rituals that are within the Christian religion and of which the pilgrim is familiar. Yet, they are also within spaces and places that the pilgrim cannot lay total claim to. Rome is not Portland. The sacred sites in Rome offer the opportunity of bridging the familiar and unfamiliar worlds. Consequently, the awakening that occurs for the pilgrim as a continuum of consciousness offers the possibility of holding in place complexities and diverse realities, some of them sacred, and others profane but which serve the purpose of expanding their horizon and understanding of how their Christian identity is an orientation towards otherness and not a flight to insularity in their interactions in Portland.⁶⁸

Phenomenologically, home, as site of pilgrimage, is a site of revelation that allows even the pilgrim to enact the first discourse that instantiates a turn to pilgrimage. What do I mean by this? To become aware that one needs to embark on a journey of pilgrimage that is intended to bring about a broader knowledge of self is possible because what is considered home is the first site of such discourse that instantiates such an awareness. Consequently, the journey of the pilgrim is not a journey that dislocates, rather, it is one of connections. The embodied pilgrim's journey connects the home to the new site where the pilgrim journeys to. In fact, all sites that the pilgrim enters are thus connected to the original site of return which is called home. This point is similar to the unpacking of the nomadic life in relation to place. As Malpas notes, "places are established (though not exclusively) in relation to activity,

68 See Turner, "The Center Out There," 194.

and the area in which a ‘nomadic’ people lives and across which they regularly travel can thus be understood as itself a single place spread across an extended region of integrated activity, or else as a closely integrated network of regularly traversed (regularly ‘enacted’) places.”⁶⁹ Thus, to speak of home for the nomad is to speak of the totality of the spaces and places traversed. This is because home evokes a continuum of connections and not disconnections or insularity. Again, as Malpas argues, “place allows for the appearing of place within it” in a manner that allows both for the instantiation of other places within it and as a source of connection with other places where activities of revelation occur—revelations that produce more awareness of self (identities).⁷⁰ Similarly, for the pilgrim, home opens up to the realities inherent in the spaces and places leading to the pilgrimage site. To speak of home is to speak of a site of pilgrimage which opens itself up to other pilgrimage sites of encounters and self-discoveries. With this in mind, one can argue that a spirituality of inclusivity is itself an embrace of the consciousness inherent in pilgrimage. To be inclusive is to take seriously connections as the bonds that instantiate a healthy identity and even the human condition. The sites along the pilgrimage journey evoke a turn to connection and openness to others as well.

A spirituality of inclusivity also takes seriously the following insight: the content of one’s faith, as experienced and lived out within space and place, is always open as a continuum for encounters with others. As Malpas notes, “the stuff of our ‘inner’ lives is thus to be found in the ‘outer’ places in which we dwell, while those same places ‘without’ are incorporated ‘within’ us.”⁷¹ Pechilis notes this well when she argues that, unlike places of worship, which are close to home and tend to be used as exclusionary modes for preserving the familiar, whether modes of worship or narratives that evoke a sense of religious tribalism, “places of pilgrimage, on the other hand, are associated with novelty, not conservatism. They are unbounded places in which new connections can be made.”⁷²

However, it is worth noting that though pilgrimage offers the possibility of articulating a vision and an experience of universalism that allows a pilgrim to open himself up to otherness, this is not always the case. The politics of memory and narrative must be engaged for this to be truly concretized. Does the pilgrim allow the experience to speak for itself or does

69 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 174.

70 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 175. See also, Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 49.

71 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 6.

72 Pechilis, “To Pilgrimage It,” 63.

the pilgrim filter the experience through the hermeneutic lens of their own socio-political world? Or does the pilgrim allow both to be manifested—the filtering and the unfiltering of the experience? Pechilis articulates this well when she argues that “pilgrimage symbols operate ‘bidirectionally,’ that is, they oscillate between local and general meanings.”⁷³ In fact, “we might well posit...that the persistence of pilgrimage depends partly upon maintaining the bidirectionality of its symbolism.”⁷⁴ Also, Candace Slater calls attention to a phenomenon observed among pilgrims who migrate to the pilgrimage site (residents) and those who only embark on the pilgrimage and return back to their homes (non-residents). “Unlike residents, for whom storytelling is an essentially circular process of re-creation, non-residents are likely to adopt a linear approach. Their stories are therefore not the form of repeated circumambulation but are an attempt to connect a series of episodes that would otherwise function much as random dots on an experiential page. ...For them, a master legend represents not an impoverishment of experience through fixation and definition, but the construction of a past that would otherwise not exist.”⁷⁵

Narratives evoke a consciousness of embodiment in a manner that such embodiment is in dialogue with all that is present in space and place. The intermingling of the body that perceives with that which is perceived evokes an enduring notion of intimacy. Here, intimacy is meant to reflect a sense of connection, whether deliberate or not. To be an embodied creature is to live in and through connections. Hence, “to posit the question ‘who are you?’ is to make present the question ‘who am I?’. To resolve the former is to attend to the latter. To attend to the latter is to first engage the former. In fact, the latter can never be resolved unless the former is first encountered. This is the grounds for envisioning subjectivity. It is itself the ritualization of connections even though it is crafted in the domain of self-differentiation.”⁷⁶

The claim to space and place by religious or secular traditions ought not be grounded in a scarcity mindset as though the other’s claim to such space offers some limits to their own flourishing. In other words, a scarcity mindset sees space and place always through the lens of limits and boundaries. Because space and place are scarce, then violence towards the other becomes legitimized. This approach is problematic. To address this, a surplus mindset ought to be embraced; one that is grounded in encountering the other

73 Pechilis, “To Pilgrimage It,” 66.

74 As cited in Pechilis, “To Pilgrimage It,” 66. See also, Candace Slater, *Trail of Miracles: Stories from a Pilgrimage in Northeast Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 2–5, 55–116.

75 Slater, *Trail of Miracles*, 147.

76 Aihiokhai, “Black Bodies as Sacraments of Disruption,” 13.

through all that define one's religious tradition. Such an encounter must ground itself through the art of listening. "To listen is already to find oneself in a state of openness towards" that which speaks or which we perceive.⁷⁷ Pilgrimage is linked to deep listening. In fact, it is rooted in a turn to perception that involves all the senses. It evokes in the pilgrim an invitation to open up to all that is encountered along the way. The transformation of the pilgrim does not occur at the destination. It is gradual. It plays out both through the entire journey to the site and from it to where the journey started. What is most interesting in this gerundic approach to transformation of the pilgrim is that the pilgrim never comes home the same. Home itself is transformed just as the pilgrim is transformed. This is because to call a place home is to instantiate activities but since the pilgrim is transformed, their activities also become transformed, leading to the transformation of home itself. As Stephen F. Haller notes, pilgrimage "involves the risk of becoming a different person that one cannot envision before the experience. It is only through engagement, brought about by actual pilgrimage activity, that one is even capable of seeing and appreciating the altered worldview that is created—and by then it may be impossible to close that door."⁷⁸ A spirituality of inclusivity entails a process of finding oneself. It grounds the religious person within spaces and places that allow them to encounter others within those spaces and places so that they can adequately find themselves not as an exclusionary being involved in a closed relationship with God, but as a faith person that is drawn to an open-ended intimacy with the God who transcends insularity. It is open-ended because all of creation have a right to experiencing the dignity of God within the spaces and places they live out their lives, and because they approach this relationship through a religious world which speaks to their experiences in a direct manner. But this religious world is never insular. It operates always within spaces and places that transcend insularity.

The pilgrim, through their openness to the pilgrimage experience, does not reduce their meaning making world to a dualistic choice that oscillates between their previous understanding of the world and the encounters they are exposed to in their pilgrimage journey. Rather, they appropriate a complex meaning making world that orients them to a sense of 'belonging' as articulated by Heidegger, hence the grounding of a polyphonic consciousness. In this way, the meaning given to space and place by the religious person is constituted by multiplicities and refusal to turn to a

77 Malpas, "Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place," 11.

78 Stephen F. Haller, "Pilgrimage and Paradigm Shifts: The Role of Experience in Identity Transformations," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, vol. 11, issue 4 (2022): 9.

reduction of meaning. It ought to be grounded in a surplus that grounds difference and relationality. As Malpas notes while reading Heidegger closely, “this means, however, that rather than being tied to a problematic notion of identity as determinate and exclusionary, the notion of place itself provides the proper attitude to such a notion. Indeed, rather than thinking of place in terms of identity, identity needs to be rethought in terms of place itself—which means in terms of place in all its complexity as well as its simplicity.”⁷⁹ This means that sense of self must also account for the sense of the other, even though the two are not necessarily the same. Their difference does not deny the fact that they are interconnected.⁸⁰

Conclusion

As religious traditions engage in the process of reimagining their sense of self, they cannot ignore the politics of space and place. God encounters humanity not in an abstract context, but in the concrete dimensions of space and place. A proper response to such a God who meets humanity within spaces and places is to study closely how all that inhabit such spaces and places serve as the stimuli for awakening to the intimacy that God offers. The content of such spaces and places cannot be defined through a scarcity mindset as though they do not have the ability to share in the gift of intimacy that God offers. God’s gifts are always in abundance. Consequently, it is only through a surplus mindset that religious traditions can properly respond to the invitation to be intimate with God.

Even the language religious traditions use to articulate their sense of self in the world cannot be grounded in a closed hermeneutic. Rather, it ought to offer an opening to a surprise and the gift of otherness that resides both within and outside the tradition. As does pilgrimage effect a change in the pilgrim in a manner that allows for the pilgrim to embody contents of the world of all they encounter in their journey to the pilgrimage site, while also leaving residues of themselves within such spaces and places their bodies transverse, so also should the content of such language and the meanings given to its content exude for religious and secular traditions. Self-understanding is always open to other-understanding. This connection means that one ought to take seriously the contours that the other’s embodiment portend. In the religious context, religious traditions ought to

79 Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” 10.

80 See Adrianna Smurzyńska, “Relations between Self-understanding and Other-understanding: Similarities and Interactions,” *Avant*, vol. XI, no. 2 (2020): 1–12.

constantly reflect on how their sense of self evokes a spirituality of inclusivity that allows for an embrace of ‘surplusness’ as it pertains to their respective perceptions of each other within the concreteness of spaces and places. This approach is most relevant for the contemporary era as religious or secular traditions encounter each other on multiple fronts.

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SimonMary Asese A. Ahiokhai, *Ph.D.*, is professor of theology (systematics) and religious studies, and an affiliate faculty of ethnic studies at the University of Portland. He is the author of *Fostering Interreligious Encounters in Pluralist Societies. Hospitality and Friendship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and *Essays on the Human: Towards a Theology on Human Dignity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026). He is the editor of *Religion, Women of Color*, and the *Suffrage Movement: The Journey to Holistic Freedom* (Lexington Books, 2022); and lead editor of *How First-Generation Students Navigate Higher Education through an Embrace of Their Multiple Identities* (Routledge, 2025); *First-Generation College Students and Study Abroad* (Routledge, 2025); and *Pedagogies for First-Generation Students and Globalized Classrooms* (Routledge, 2025).

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ARTICLE

Independent Churches and Black Liberation Theology in Africa: What Interactions?

Rodrick Kapwa

Abstract

This article demonstrates that the emergence of the African Independent Churches (AICs) has a strong link with Black liberation theology. The AICs have provided a decisive contextual framework for the development of this theology in Africa, while this, in turn, has legitimized the claims and aspirations of these churches. This study sheds new light on the intertwined history of these two major dynamics of African Christianity. In this way, it contributes to a better understanding of the evolution of Christianity on the continent and its intersections with social and political struggles for liberation. Building on this intertwined history, the article further argues that the AICs and Black liberation theology together constitute a privileged site for interreligious and intercultural dialogue in contemporary Africa. Situated on the border between missionary Christianity and traditional African religions, and attentive to the lived experience of African peoples, they offer a hermeneutical framework in which dialogue functions not as an intellectual luxury but as a historical, social, and theological necessity.

Keywords

African Independent Churches, Africa, Black liberation theology, colonialism, liberation struggles, interreligious dialogue, intercultural dialogue

Introduction

The emergence of the African Independent Churches (AIC) between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century has aroused great scientific interest. Born in the wake of missionary Christianity, they integrate elements of traditional African religions, marking the rooting of Christianity on the continent and a critique of the unsuitable missionary model. Two main causes explain their appearance: first, the deterioration of the African condition under colonization; second, an African rereading of Christianity, adapting the faith to the local cultural and spiritual context.

After independence, liberation theology transformed the religious landscape. It denounces the role of Christianity in colonial abuses and demands justice and dignity, as Desmond Tutu puts it: More than any other theology, liberation was born in the crucible of human suffering and anguish.¹ Jean-Marc Éla sees it as a “cry of the African man,” calling on the Church to resist postcolonial injustice.²

Although chronologically distinct, the AIC and this Black liberation theology maintain reciprocal influences. This article explores the interactions between Black liberation theology and AIC. As Rufus Ositelu notes, the acronym AIC covers a plurality of realities; here, it designates the independent African Churches of the phase of emergence (the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries).³ The analysis will focus on Francophone Africa and South Africa, without ignoring other contexts.

Using the method described, the article will be divided into three parts: a description of the AICs, Black liberation theology, and their mutual interactions.

I. The Emergence of AICs in Africa

1. History

As Éric De Rosny points out, the most serious phenomenon of Christianity in modern Africa is the development of AICs.⁴ The irruption of these

1 Desmond Tutu, “La théologie de la libération en Afrique,” in *Libération ou adaptation? La théologie Africaine s’interroge*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi (L’Harmattan, 1979), 195.

2 Jean-Marc Éla, *Ma foi d’Africain* (Karthala, 1985), 213.

3 Rufus Ositelu, *African Initiated Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality, and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches* (LIT, 2002), 38.

4 Eric de Rosny, *L’Afrique des guérisons* (Karthala, 1992), 239.

Churches in Africa occurred during the colonial period in the context of many societies belonging to Christianized Black Africa. It was the emergence of messianic movements in Africa that eventually gave rise to the African churches.⁵ Called African Independent Churches or Indigenous Churches, these churches were founded in Africa, by Africans and for Africans, breaking away from the historical missionary churches.⁶

It is noteworthy that the reaction of Africans to the missionary churches has been expressed in four ways: acceptance, rejection, adaptation, and indifference. The development of the AICs is situated in the perspective of those who, on the one hand, rejected the teachings of the missionaries and, on the other hand, those who adapted their teachings. The AICs were of two types, those that emerged from a split with existing white churches and those that arose independently of any existing religious group.⁷

History reveals that several causes have pushed Africans to seek religious independence from institutional churches.

2. Causes

For many scholars, the context of the emergence of African Independent Churches has been political, social, and religious, without any dogmatic opposition. As we will demonstrate below, the African Independent Churches share with Black liberation theology the desire to contextualize the Christian faith in the struggle for social justice and the dignity of the oppressed in Africa. Thus, without denying the many causes mentioned by scientists on this issue, we explain in our article two major causes that have given rise to AICs in Africa.

AICs as a Response to White Ostracism. Balandier situates the proliferation of African independent churches in the logic of a reaction against the colonial situation and the domination exercised by European minorities. The colonial situation led the African Independent Churches to exalt African values, and to return to African culture in order to affirm it before Europeans.⁸

5 George Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire: dynamique sociale en Afrique centrale*, 3rd ed. (Presse Universitaire de France, 1963), 417.

6 André Mary, "Introduction: Africanité et christianité: une interaction première," *Archives des sciences des religions* 143 (2008): 9–30, 11–12.

7 Kofi Asare Opoku, "La religion en Afrique pendant l'époque coloniale," in *Histoire générale de l'Afrique, Vol. VII : L'Afrique sous domination coloniale 1880–1935*, ed. Albert Adu Boahen, (UNESCO, [1987] 2000), 569.

8 George Balandier, "Messianismes et nationalisme en Afrique noire," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 7, no. 14 (1953): 41–65.

For Kā Mana, the birth of the African Independent Churches was directly affirmed as a religious dynamic with a political orientation. He describes the African Independent Churches as “a breath of protest not only against official Christianity in its betrayal of the Gospel, but against the system of colonial rule as a whole.”⁹ Abel Kouvouama insists on the same subject, pointing to the anti-colonialist, nationalist and even revolutionary characteristics of the indigenous religious movements, which ended up giving birth to the AICs.¹⁰

The extension of the African Independent Churches extended to South Africa, Central and East Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea. Balandier affirms the idea that the phenomenon of African independent churches is located in the regions where Christianity was most intensive and where racial discrimination was most pronounced, it is exactly between the Cape and the Congo River.¹¹ Balandier’s thesis is not unanimously accepted by current scholars. Today the majority of scholars believe that the birth of African Independent churches was nourished by different reasons depending on the context. In the context of South Africa, for example, the emergence of the Ethiopian and Zionist churches focused mainly on the ostracism of the white churches, which the apartheid regime could only reinforce. For the Congo Free State, the whip or chicotte was one of the punishments reserved for Africans; it was a practice provided for by criminal law until 1940 and by disciplinary law in the army and in prison. It could also be executed based on custom. Already denounced by several contemporary European observers and critics of Stanley’s expeditions and activities in the Congo, even before the founding of the Congo Free State, the use of the chicotte became increasingly associated with colonial coercion. The ignorance, whether deliberate or otherwise, of the conditions governing its application, together with the cruel treatment that often accompanied it, contributed to making the chicotte a powerful symbol of colonial oppression.¹²

The African Independent Churches have played an important role in the defence of human rights. They encouraged communities to claim their rights and value their traditions, opposing forced assimilation. The AICs have been firm in their criticism of the injustices and abuses perpetrated by the colonizers, they have sought to awaken the collective consciousness on the issue of Black rights. Like many charismatic prophets of AICs, Williams

9 Kā Mana, “Les Eglises indépendantes en mutation,” *Esprit* 317, no. 8/9 (2005): 118–123, 119.

10 Abel Kouvouama, *Une histoire du messianisme: Un “monde renversé”* (Karthala 2018), 18.

11 Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique noire*, 419.

12 Jean-Luc Vellut, *La mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial* (Éditions Snoeck, 2005), 15.

Wade Harris denounced the abuses and injustices of colonization, seeking to unify people around a new faith that rejected practices he saw as destructive. His movement encouraged a form of resistance in the face of colonial oppression. Harris' reaction did not go unnoticed, and in 1914 he was expelled from the Ivory Coast after his movement gained momentum.¹³ William Harris' movement left a complex legacy, oscillating between resisting colonial oppression and promoting a new religious vision. Although contested, his movement continued to fight against colonial injustices and to claim the rights of local populations.¹⁴ Almost on the same trajectory, Simon Kimbangu, the precursor of Kimbanguism, never encouraged violent forms of resistance, but beyond the healings and miracles he performed, he also preached against the colonial order, insisting on the nature of love that advocates equality between races.¹⁵ Kimbanguism in the Congo directly supported the struggle for independence by providing an organizational and ideological framework.¹⁶

The AICs have also provided spaces for national movements to come together and reflect. They have enabled a large-scale mobilization of the population. By rejecting the control of European mission churches, the AICs contributed to the cultural and spiritual emancipation of Africans. This process of Africanization nurtured a sense of pride and self-confidence that was essential for political struggles for independence. It has made it possible to reappropriate Christianity.¹⁷

A Spiritual Quest and a Theological Re-evaluation. The spiritual search within the AIC has manifested itself in a desire for authenticity and closeness to the realities lived by the faithful. John Mbiti says a lot about the ambivalence between missionary Christianity and African spirituality. He points out that, for many Africans, missionary Christianity meant a set of rules to be observed, promises for the other world, hymns without rhythm, a ritual to be followed, and a few other outward gestures. For many Africans, missionary Christianity was perceived as largely confined to formal church activities, particularly Sunday worship and occasional weekly services, with limited

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- 13 Williams Wade Harris (1860–1929) was a Liberian grebo evangelist who preached in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana.
 - 14 André Mary, "William Wade Harris: Prophète des derniers temps," *Ethnologie française* 46, no. 3 (2016): 437–446, 445.
 - 15 Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951) was a Congolese religious leader and founder of Kimbanguism.
 - 16 Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot, *Kimbanguism: An African Understanding of the Bible* (Penn State University Press, 2017), 68.
 - 17 Anne-Marie Goguel, "Églises, mouvements religieux et changements sociaux en Afrique du Sud," *Revue Tiers-Monde* 31, no. 123 (1990): 559–583.

integration into the broader social, cultural, and everyday realities of African communities. In contrast, African Independent Churches sought to embody Christianity as a more comprehensive way of life, addressing spiritual, social, cultural, and communal needs within African contexts. It was an active Christianity inside a church building. Traditionally, Africans do not receive enough religion of this type because it does not fill their entire existence and their conception of the universe. The AICs were places where many Africans felt at home, not only to worship, but also to confess and express their Christian faith. Sheltered from AIC, African Christians can freely shed their tears, sing about their pains, present their spiritual and physical needs, listen to the world in which they live, and “empty their bags” before God. The AICs were an attempt to rebuild new foundations that could replace the disintegration of traditional solidarity.¹⁸

The AICs focused their messages and practice on healing and prophetism. This perspective gave the AIC a headstart over the missionary churches that did not, in large part, believe in spirits and witchcraft. The AICs have presented a dynamic response to the spiritual needs of many Africans. Healing and prophecy provided an alternative to traditional forms of Christianity and a framework for addressing the socio-political challenges of the time. By healing, Eric de Rosny emphasizes that we must understand the return to health in the broad traditional sense of the word, i.e., to social harmony as much as to physical form, to well-being under the gaze of God. To heal is to find lost harmony, and, in the first place, to heal fear and anxiety. These healing rituals are essentially occupied by community prayer. This form of prayer offers an almost physical feeling of being answered, which culminates in trance. This ancient form of possession, which manifests the coming of *genii* or ancestors, also reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit. It does not only mean that the Spirit coexists with the possessed person, but that it replaces him momentarily.¹⁹ Almost all the prophetic figures who were the forerunners of the AICs were miracle workers and great prophets, such as Kimbangu, Williams Harris, Isaiah Shembe.²⁰

The theology of the salvation of souls, as well as the theology of the foundation of Christianity, were the greatest infirmities of missionary evangelization during the colonial period. The theology of the salvation of souls, as Gabriel Chunanga evokes, strove to convert the indigenous populations of Africa to Christianity and to plant local churches that were to

18 John Mbiti, *Religions et philosophie africaines* (Clé, 1972), 241.

19 Eric de Rosny, “Les Églises indépendantes africaines. Fonction sociale et originalité culturelle,” *Études* 358, no. 1 (1983): 93–108, 98–99.

20 Isaiah Mloyiswa Mdiwamafa Shembe (1865–1935), was a South African prophet and founder of the Ibandla LamaNazareth.

reflect the Church of Rome, with its doctrine, its liturgy, its institutional organization, in the Western cultural context. In pursuing the spiritual conversion and salvation of Africans, this theological approach did not always adequately consider the cultural realities, social contexts, and religious worldviews of African peoples. The theology of the foundation of Christianity was in turn nothing less than the transposition of Christianity as it was experienced in the West into the cultural and geographical context of sub-Saharan Africa. These theologies have been criticized for being limited to the sphere of values, systems, practices, and rites, deeply immersed in Western culture. These theologies generated a set of frustrations related to the lack of knowledge of African values and dignity, which led to the birth of several theologies in Africa with attractions for the culture and system of representation.²¹

In response to these challenges, notes Marthinus Louis Daneel, the AICs have developed a relevant theology of religions, not in written form, but in preached form. Their religious life itself represented a rudimentary and unsophisticated process of contextualization, but in many ways original and authentic. The AICs have created a type of context in which dialogue and confrontation between the Christian message and traditional religion takes place in a coherent way. In this interaction, a form of Christianity emerged, an existence-oriented Christianity. This form of belief, which is often reproached for having some syncretic weaknesses, was nevertheless full of profound ideas and truths that made the good news alive in the African world. The AICs have discovered the need for a proximity between the preaching and the real needs of their listeners. The AICs have understood that for preaching to be effective and creative, it must be close to the set of beliefs, the revealed message, and it must be close to the real concerns and needs of the congregation.²²

II. Black Liberation Theology

The term liberation theology was first used by Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1968. In his book *Liberation Theology*, he defines liberation theology as the search for an answer to the relationship between Christian salvation and the historical process of liberation of the human being. For Gutiérrez, liberation theology

21 Gabriel Tchongang, "Brève histoire de la théologie africaine," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 84, no. 2 (2010): 175–190, 176–177.

22 Marthinus Louis Daneel, "Towards a Theologia Africana: The Contribution of Independent Church to African Theology," *Missionalia* 12, no. 2 (1984): 64–89, 67–70.

is based on praxis, viewed from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed.²³ In this approach, theological praxis constitutes the first act, while theological elaboration proper is conceived as a second act. Liberation theology is thus described as “a way of living and celebrating faith, a way of acting and intervening in society, a way of shaping individual and collective, ecclesial and social life.”²⁴ The perspective of the poor and oppressed leads to an understanding of God as the Savior and Deliverer of those who suffer injustice. Additionally, Leonardo Boff, one of the leading exponents of liberation theology, emphasizes that liberation theology aims at the integral liberation of the human being. It cannot be reduced to a simple socio-political movement, because it integrates the physical, social, spiritual and eschatological dimensions of human existence at the same time.²⁵

Black liberation theology is part of this dynamic while being deeply marked by global Black liberation movements, such as Black Power and postcolonial pan-African currents. It affirms that God stands on the side of the oppressed and that the Gospel calls for concrete social transformation, both in Africa and in the Black diaspora. This theology is understood as a historical continuity linking the experiences of slavery, colonization, and segregation to contemporary struggles for civil rights and social justice.

In the African context, African theology has emerged as a process of theologization rooted in the cultural, historical, and socio-economic realities of the continent. It has gradually integrated issues related to postcolonialism, development, structural poverty, and the quest for an authentically African religious identity.

In this context, Black liberation theology can be seen as a specific expression of African theology. While sharing methods of contextualization and liberation, it places greater emphasis on racial oppression and historical violence inherited from colonial and postcolonial domination. Jean-Marc Ela, one of Africa’s leading liberation theologians, insists that one cannot rediscover Christ in the poor without concretely sharing in his struggle for life and dignity.²⁶ It should be noted, however, that Black liberation theology has not had the same resonance in all regions of Africa. It was expressed with particular acuity in the former colonial territories where domination was more brutal, particularly in French-speaking Africa, Belgian Africa, and especially in South Africa, marked by the apartheid regime.

23 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Théologie de la libération*, trans. F. O’Malley, Perspectives (Lumen Vitae, 1974), 57.

24 Francisco de Aquino Júnior, “Actualité de la Théologie de la libération,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 68, no. 3 (2012): 681–699, 683–687.

25 Leonardo Boff, *Jésus-Christ libérateur. Essai de christologie critique* (Cerf, 1974).

26 Jean-Marc Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine. Dieu qui libère* (Karthala, 2003), 88.

1. *Definition and Justification of Black Liberation Theology*

For Allan Boesak, Black liberation theology is a theology “in situation.” It analyzes the condition of Black people in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can recognize that the gospel is commensurate with Black humanity and its aspirations. Black theology is thus a liberation theology for Blacks, seeking to interpret the Black experience from the Christian faith.²⁷ Black theology is liberation theology for Black people. It seeks to probe the Black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievements of Black humanity.²⁸

Without contradicting this perspective, it is important to note that other forms of Black theology coexist with Black liberation theology. This is particularly the case with the African theology of inculturation, which aims to make the Gospel penetrate every culture in a way that is alive, creative, and faithful to the identity of the African peoples.

Even before the independence of the 1960s, Africa was already experiencing forms of political awakening and anti-colonial protest, notably through the Négritude movement, led by Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the pan-African thought embodied by Kwame Nkrumah. In the post-1960 period, Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement continued this dynamic of liberation in southern Africa.

However, it was in the United States of America that Black liberation theology took the systematic form we know today, in the context of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Inspired by Latin American liberation theology, it aimed to denounce social injustices and promote the dignity of the oppressed. In sub-Saharan Africa, Black liberation theology developed in reaction to white supremacy and oppression, finding in South Africa, as early as the 1970s, a privileged ground of theological resistance against apartheid.²⁹

Desmond Tutu points out that, like all liberation theology, Black liberation theology was born out of an attempt to understand the suffering of the victims of institutionalized oppression and exploitation. It affirms that the oppressed are human persons created in the image of God, redeemed by Christ and sanctified by the Spirit. This awareness has enabled Africans to

27 Allan A. Boesak, *Farewell to innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Orbis Books, 1977), 510–511.

28 Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology. An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought, Second Edition*, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 206.

29 Sandisele L. Xhinti, “Revisiting Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa: Through “New Voices” of Women Black Theologians,” *HTS Theologiese Studies* 77, no. 3 (2021): 10.4102/hts.v77i3.5816.

rediscover their dignity, their historical responsibility and their vocation to participate.³⁰

Black theology is also a theology of “négritude,” in the sense that it affirms Black humanity in the face of racism and dehumanization. It is based on the lived experience of Black people, in America as well as in Africa. James H. Cone argues in this regard that any truly Black theology must reflect on what it means to be Black, bringing out its categories of interpretation from the Black experience itself.³¹

Faithful to the Sacred Scriptures, Black liberation theology presents God as a God of compassion who, in Jesus Christ, comes to liberate all humanity (John 8:34–36). It sees liberation not as a mere aspect of the gospel, but as its fundamental content and framework. Liberation is thus understood as total, encompassing all dimensions of human life.³²

2. *The Stakes of Liberation*

Liberation theology in Africa is expressed as a Black theology because of its roots in the specific experience of African peoples facing racial, political, social, and economic oppression. Starting from the suffering, resistance, and quest for liberation of Black populations, she rejects any abstract or universalizing theologization that ignores concrete historical contexts.

Black liberation theology acts as both a deconstruction and a reconstruction. It deconstructs Eurocentric theological narratives that have marginalized the Black experience and served to justify oppression. It is opposed to a universalizing reading of Christianity that does not take into account the realities experienced by Black people. European missionaries often presented a God shaped by their own worldview, which the African peoples were forced to receive. However, this God was not always the God of the Gospel, but an ideological construction in the service of colonial domination.³³

The success of Christianity in Africa after the colonial period cannot be explained by the acceptance of European Christianity, but by its appropriation and transformation. Inculturation, particularly encouraged by

30 Allan Boesak, “La théologie de la libération en Afrique du Sud,” in *Libération ou adaptation? La théologie Africaine s’interroge*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi (L’Harmattan, 1979), 203–204.

31 James H. Cone, *La noirceur de Dieu*, trans. M. Jean and J. Philibert (Labor et Fides, 1989), 35.

32 Isabel Apawo Phiri and Julius Gathogo, “A Reconstructive Motif in South African Black Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36, Supplement (2010): 185–206, 188.

33 Daneel, “Towards a Theologia Africana,” 72.

the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), is a significant illustration of this, as evidenced.³⁴

Black liberation theology, however, is not limited to a critique of Western Christianity; it also pursues a project of reconstruction. It proposes a theological vision centered on the dignity, freedom and autonomy of Black peoples. This reconstruction touches the identity of Africans, as well as their social and spiritual imagination, integrating their history, culture, and struggles as essential foundations of theological reflection.³⁵

Africans soon realized that the Eurocentric understanding of the gospel had no other purpose than to reduce them to a state of blind obedience. It took several years for blacks to ask fundamental questions about biblical principles veiled by white theology. How can a God of love, who created all men in his own image (Gen. 2:27), accept that some live oppressed? Thus, Black theology was an answer to the many questions that Black people had about the nature of the gospel. Black liberation theology has found an accessible language of the gospel for the African people. Francisca Chimhanda points out that in the South African context, the oppressed Black masses were both speakers (committed to providing answers to their oppressive situation in terms of liberation and salvation) and interlocutors (they were asked questions about their situation and about divine and human action in the realization of human freedom).³⁶

Black theology exhorts the oppressed not to allow themselves to be overcome by hatred, self-pity, and bitterness, feelings as dehumanizing as persecution itself. As with the theology of James H. Cone in the context of the United States of America, Black theology in Africa seeks to build a faith that enables Africans to love their blackness, endure terrible hardships, and resist pain without losing their sanity in the struggle for freedom.³⁷ The concept of “blackness” used here is much more than just pigmentation of a person’s skin. In the context of Black theology and consciousness, négritude

34 Read Barthélemy Adoukounou, “Vatican II et l’Inculturation. Emergence de la question du sujet et de la culture comme clef herméneutique du Concile,” (paper given at “La 28ème Semaine Théologique sur l’Évangélisation en profondeur, 50 ans après Vatican II. Chemins de l’expression, de la célébration et du vécu de la foi chrétienne en RDC,” Kinshasa, April 22–26, 2013) and Ludovic Lado, “Cultures hybrides, identités multiples: Repenser l’inculturation en Afrique,” *Études* 404, no. 4 (2006): 452–462.

35 To learn more about the concept, see Kā Mana, *L’Afrique va-t-elle mourir? Bousculer l’imaginaire africain. Essai d’éthique politique* (Cerf, 1991).

36 Francisca Chimhanda, “Simon Maimla and the prophetic vision of liberation for Black Theology,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010): 21.

37 Leslie R. James, “Cone and Cannon: Black Theology and Visions of Society,” *Journal of Black Religious Thought* 1, no. 1 (2022): 88–100, 90.

refers to solidarity in the suffering and oppression of the descendants of those who suffered under slavery and colonialism. This is how Boesak insists on the necessity of self-love, emphasizing that this love is not a love for Blacks and a hatred against whites. On the contrary, Black theology advocates self-love by referring not to hatred of whites, but rather to the awareness that in the brotherly relationship between Blacks and whites, neither is the slave of the other.³⁸

Black theology promotes the idea that Western values should no longer be considered as a reference.³⁹ Speaking of Cone, Eugene Baron emphasizes that it was important to address these questions about the situation of Black people because the gospel was addressed to human beings (John 3:16) and, therefore, human dignity includes the message and content of the gospel. Liberation theology in Africa has been an integral part of the Black struggle for freedom, it has tried to help oppressed Africans to build a sense of pride in their qualities as men, to look others in the eye and to talk to them face to face, and not as if they should be forgiven for being Black. As we have said before, Black liberation theology is a theology of blackness, “it affirms the humanity of whites in that it says ‘no’ to white encroachment and oppression.”⁴⁰

III. Reciprocal Influences between the Emergence of African Independent Churches and Black Liberation Theology in Africa

In his book, *Théologie, libération et cultures africaines*, Engelbert Mveng asserts that liberation theology was not born in America but in Africa.⁴¹ According to him, this theology was born out of the quest for a new African way of reading the Bible, which is how the fundamental principle of liberation theology was born in South Africa and then in the former colonies within Africa. Its immediate consequences were the creation of the AICs.⁴² The Congolese theologian, Ngindu Mushete, also goes in the same direction, pointing out that liberation theology in Africa predates that of Latin America because this theology is the one that gave birth to the AICs.⁴³ For

38 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 2010), 7–8.

39 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 27–28.

40 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 18.

41 Engelbert Mveng and Benjamin L. Lipawing, *Théologie, libération et culture africaines: Dialogue sur l'anthropologie négro-africain* (Cle; Présence Africaine, 1996).

42 Mveng and Lipawing, *Théologie, libération et culture africaines*, 28–29.

43 Ngindu Mutshete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine* (L'Harmattan, 1989), 99.

Tinyiko Maluleke, Black African culture and Indigenous or African Independent churches are the interlocutors of Black theology. He argues that in many Black theology conferences, AICs have been and still are mentioned.⁴⁴

From these statements, we can therefore summarize that there is a clear connection between the AICs and Black liberation theology. For most scholars, it is Black liberation theology that is the basis for the creation of Indigenous churches. This statement is not false, but it is essential to note that it was from the 1960s that Black theology emerged in North America with emblematic figures such as James H. Cone and James Deotis Roberts, and then it reached colonized Africa, more particularly South Africa, in 1972. On the other hand, the emergence of AICs took place at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, these churches predated the wave of independence in Africa. This chronological divergence suggests that the AICs cannot be considered a direct product of this theology. It is true that Black liberation theology has influenced some AICs, especially in South Africa in the 1970s, but this does not mean that all these churches are derived from it. The AICs have their own cultural and historical roots that pre-exist Black liberation theology. It is crucial to recognize the historical autonomy of the AICs and their development before the emergence of Black theology. It should also be noted that the AICs are considered to be faithful to their own cultural ways of being in the world and this did not equate to a Black consciousness. This is not the case with Black liberation theology. Kelebogile T. Resane points out that Black theology, perceived as an aspect of the nationalist liberation struggle, developed a close relationship with Black Consciousness through its contextualized approach. These two intellectual and ideological movements worked in synergy to challenge the oppressive regime that marginalized Black communities and undermined social and natural justice.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, a full understanding of the interactions between Black liberation theology and AICs must take into account distinct historical contexts and reciprocal influences, rather than simplifying this relationship to mere causality. Several AICs were born in their own theo-cultural framework, without any connection to Black liberation theology.

44 Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Black Theology as Public Discourse," in *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life: Multi-event 1999 Academic Workshop Papers*, ed. James R. Cochrane, (University of Cape Town, 1998), 60–62.

45 Kelebogile T. Resane, "Black Consciousness and Black Theology: Di ya thoteng di bapile (relationship for liberation)" *HTS Theologiese Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9001>.

1. *Black Theology as a Framework for Theological Legitimation of the Practices and Beliefs of the AICs*

Like African religions in general, AICs were also marginalized by missionaries and colonizers during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. It is essential to emphasize that in the nineteenth century, African values were not highly valued in the Western world. On the contrary, descriptions of Africa and Africans written by European authors contributed to the fall of Black Africans further and lower on the scale of humanity. For example, in 1813, John Balamy devoted fifteen pages of his *History of All Religions* to the religions of India, but as for the religions of Africa, he devoted only two pages, to which he described them as “paganism.” This attitude was also observed at the World Congress of Religions in 1893, where African religions were completely erased from the progressive intellectual vision. The restitutions of this Congress did not pay attention to African religions. Even a century later this view has not changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edwin W. Smith, in his book *The Religion of Lower Races, as Illustrated by African Bantu*, describes the African religion as “a religion of fear” and “elementary.” The neglect of African religious practices lays bare a long history deeply rooted in European racism.⁴⁶

The origin of the contempt shown by the missionary enterprise in the face of the emergence of the AICs thus finds its origins in the contempt of the European powers for the African people.

It is important to note that AICs are characterized by a lack of formal written theology. Most AICs have little to do with doctrine in the Western sense of an elaborate and systematic document of faith containing the essence of dogma. For their part, the African Independent Churches have developed a theology not in written form; rather, their theology is preached and put into practice in symbolic rituals. The main causes of the lack of a written theology of AICs are related to several paradigms. First, because of their origins, the AICs are the result of local and popular initiatives, which have led to a less academic and more practical approach to the faith. Secondly, the majority of African Independent Churches also centered all their doctrine on spiritual experience where healing and salvation were a major focus. Ultimately, the African Independent Churches have not been able to develop a written theology due to the lack of theological training among the founding leaders as well as the majority of those who succeeded them. Despite this, the creative genius of the African Independent Churches

46 Edwin W. Smith, *The Religion of Lower Races: As Illustrated by the African Bantu* (Macmillan, 1923), 33 and Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions* (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 37–41.

lies in the fact that they have developed a framework for the production and maintenance of knowledge through orality and ecological awareness. Oral traditions, at the heart of African civilizations without dominant scripts, served as the main vector for preserving collective memory, including mythical tales, proverbs, and epics that encoded enduring practices in several sectors such as the religious sector of the African Independent Churches.⁴⁷ The transmission of “word of mouth” and “from master to disciple” plays a great role in the maintenance and transmission of rites and symbolisms within the African Independent Churches.

The absence of theological rigidity has been the cardinal element, at the origin of the doctrinal loss and lack of legitimacy of several African Independent Churches over the years. Having no elites trained in universities or seminaries, the African Independent Churches have struggled to legitimize their faith and to respond in a formal and epidemiological way to the multiple assaults of their detractors. Now, as M. L. Daneel points out, the proliferation of churches in Africa indicates that Africa, like Oceania, are continents outside the West where the Christian message has had a significant impact since the Christianization of the Mediterranean and European peoples during the first millennium of our era. The absence of similar Independent Churches in countries such as Japan, China, India, and Pakistan is clear evidence that the gospel has not had an impact in Asia as it has in Africa. Unfortunately, this truth has had enormous difficulty in asserting itself in the scientific world, because the African Independent Churches have been clothed with several prejudices.⁴⁸

Although the phase of independence in Africa may have legitimized African Independent Churches in some countries, such as Kimbanguism in the DRC, in most countries, African Independent Churches continued to be perceived as a form of paganism. This is mainly due in part to their religious syncretism, that is, their ability to integrate elements of traditional African religions into their practice of Christianity. This negative perception persisted for a long time and was sometimes reinforced by traditional missionary churches who saw these movements as a threat to their religious monopoly. Black theology put forward the idea that African Christianity should be rooted in the continent’s culture and history, not just a Western import.

Black theology has allowed for the reaffirmation of two key principles of the African Independent Churches, namely, the struggle against colonial

47 Jan Vansina, “La tradition orale et sa méthode,” in *Histoire générale de l’Afrique: Méthodologie et préhistoire africaine*, ed. Joseph Ki-Zerbo (UNESCO, 2000), 167–190.

48 Marthinus Louis Daneel, *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a study of African Independent Churches*, MissioPastoral Series No. 17 (Mambo Press, 1987), 43.

brutality and a spiritual and theological renewal. This is how Cone evokes that for Black theology, Christianity is first and foremost “a religion of freedom” and that the role of Black theology articulated by Cone is to analyze the meaning of the liberation of the oppressed and to make it aware of the scriptural legitimacy of their struggle. He insisted that the liberation of those who are oppressed is not extrabiblical. The Gospel is above all the liberation of those who are oppressed, because when the Gospel fails to bring about the emergence of communities of the oppressed, it ceases to be evangelical. Desmond Tutu also points out that as liberation theology, Black theology is now part of the struggle for the deliverance of the people. From a spiritual and theological point of view, for the victims of oppression and injustice it is important to hear that the God of their faith is the liberating God, the God of the Exodus, who led a people from slavery to glorious freedom.⁴⁹

2. *The Emergence of AICs as Fertile Ground for the Contextual Approach to Black Theology in Africa*

One of the creative geniuses of AICs is the contextual approach. It should be recalled that the contextualization of theology in Africa is a dynamic process that aims to adapt Christian theology to cultural, social, and economic realities of the continent. Contextualization goes beyond the idea of a simple indigenization of the gospel; it is not just a response to the gospel in the terms of a traditional culture. The contextualization born of the original encounter between the Word of God and the world. It presents itself as a dynamic process that recognizes the ever-changing nature of all human situations and the possibility that change will pave the way for the future.⁵⁰ Ndidi Gbule insists that theology cannot take place in a historical vacuum: theology is inscribed in time and space and is therefore inevitably linked to culture. Contextualization is meant to be a pastoral theology that responds to the needs of Christians in a more penetrating and powerful way, so that the Gospel may come to life and be rooted in the culture of peoples.⁵¹

Robert Schreiter distinguishes between models of translation, adaptation, and contextualization in the construction of local theology. He clarifies that contextual models, as the name suggests, focus more directly on the cultural context in which Christianity takes root and expresses itself.

49 Desmond Tutu, *Liberation Theology in Africa*, 196–199.

50 Sebastien Kalombo Kapuku, “Les théologies protestantes et la contextualisation de la parole de Dieu” *Mouvements et Enjeux Sociaux—Revue Internationale des Dynamiques Sociales* 109 (2019): 20–29, 23.

51 Ndidi Justice Gbule, “Contextualization of Christianity in Africa: A Dialectic,” *Icheke revue de la faculté des sciences humaines* 16, no. 1 (2024): 407–408.

Contextual models are seen as embodying the ideals of what local theology should be, even if the implementation of these ideals often proves difficult in practice.⁵²

Contextualization is a central concept of Black liberation theology in Africa, involving an interpretation of biblical texts that focuses on the lived experiences of Black people. This perception is not an innovation of Black theology, for it has its deep roots in the theological construction of the African independent churches.

Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa understands the practice of AICs as a theological expression, a form of legitimate contextualization, and an illustration of African Christianity.⁵³ Since their emergence, the AICs have always been attempts to Africanize Christianity. The people who initiated the AICs aimed to penetrate the African man deeply. Missionary work, as we have emphasized with its theology of the salvation of souls, has not succeeded in linking the African man to true Christianity. The “indigenous” churches have succeeded in making Christianity real and meaningful for their faithful by taking up in their rites, with prudence and wisdom, certain local cultural elements.

The AICs have addressed the problem of identity somewhat in their adapted rituals, their conflicting sermons, their dialogue with representatives of the African religious worldview, and ritualized symbolism; they have produced a creative solution in their quest to be both authentically African and authentically Christian.⁵⁴ This creative solution of the AICs is a jumble of contextual theology in Africa. The AICs provided a new theological angle that would be exploited and legitimized by Black theology in the African continent. The AICs have developed and reinterpreted the Gospel message in an African context. They adopted the customs of the Church culturally, producing raw material for African theology in general and Black theology in particular with regard to Christian ministry in dialogue with culture.

3. Black liberation theology and AICs as an opening to intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Africa

Jean-Claude Bassat defines interreligious dialogue as an exchange of words and a reciprocal listening committed on an equal footing to believers from

52 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 2015), 14.

53 Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa, “Tracking the Decolonial in African Christian Theology. A Southern African Perspective on Mission from the Margins as a Decolonial Mode of Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 112, no. 2 (2023): 202–217, 205.

54 Daneel, “Quest for Belonging,” 71.

different religious traditions. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is thus situated beyond mere coexistence, which it presupposes, and below symbiosis, which would render any dialogue superfluous. In a true dialogical dynamic, confrontation is no longer synonymous with opposition or conflict, but becomes recognition and respect for differences, in the maintenance of the convictions proper to each religious tradition. Bassat also emphasizes that, since the Second World War, interreligious dialogue has been intrinsically linked to cultural dialogue and ecumenical dialogue, as these dimensions are interdependent in the construction of a peaceful world.⁵⁵

Historically, several contemporary initiatives have marked the emergence of interreligious dialogue on a global scale. The Parliament of the World's Religions, held in 1893 in Chicago, was the first significant attempt to establish comprehensive interfaith dialogue. However, this initiative did not really bear fruit until after the Second World War, when European religious structures met at the Seelisberg Conference in 1947 to analyze the causes of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism. These dynamics led, in 1948, to the creation of the World Council of Churches, which first brought together the Protestant churches, before gradually opening to other Christian traditions. On the side of the Catholic Church, it was the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that officially opened the way to interreligious dialogue, notably through a theological rereading of the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions.

In this context, Black liberation theology and the African Independent Churches can be understood as privileged spaces for openness to interreligious and intercultural dialogue in contemporary Africa. However, a question arises: Why speak of interreligious and intercultural dialogue when Black liberation theology and the AICs claim to be above all Christian movements? While it is undeniable that ecumenical dialogue is a real issue in the relations between the AICs and the historic Churches, it is above all interreligious and intercultural dialogue—often not formalized—that appears to be the major theological site of African creativity. In Africa, interreligious and intercultural dialogue is neither an intellectual luxury nor a secondary pastoral option; it is a historical, social, and theological necessity. The African context, marked by an ancient religious plurality and by the complex legacy of colonization, imposes a dialogical approach as a condition for peaceful coexistence, social justice, and fidelity to the Gospel.

We believe that the need for interreligious and intercultural dialogue is imperative for Africa as a whole. Historically, the need for dialogue must be

55 Jean-Claude Bassat, *Interreligious Dialogue: Chance or Decline of Faith* (Cerf, 1996), 27–28.

understood as a form of symbolic reparation. Long before the spread of Islam and Christianity in Africa, traditional African religions were already structuring all African societies spiritually, socially, and culturally. Christian evangelization and the spread of Islam have often been accompanied by a hierarchy of religions, relegating African religious traditions to inferior or marginal forms. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue therefore aims to restore the dignity of these traditions and to recognize their constitutive role in the religious identity of African peoples. On the social and political level, this necessity is part of the context of contemporary African societies, crossed by religious tensions, identity conflicts, and political instrumentalizations of religion. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue thus appears as a tool for social pacification and the construction of living together. Finally, on the theological level, dialogue is a requirement deriving from the Christian faith itself, insofar as the proclamation of the Gospel cannot be credible without a real recognition of the cultural and religious contexts in which it takes place.

In this perspective, Volker Küster, in his article “Intercultural Theology Is a Must,” proposes three methodological and terminological tools for structuring interreligious and intercultural dialogue: ethics, hermeneutics, and aesthetics.⁵⁶ This study mainly mobilizes hermeneutics as a key to understanding interreligious and intercultural dialogue in Africa. According to Küster, understanding the other presupposes the accumulation of knowledge about him, but this acquisition can only take place in a dialogical process, in which the other must be able to recognize himself in the perception and interpretation that is proposed of him. Conversely, communication only becomes effective when what is expressed is relevant in the context of the interlocutor.⁵⁷

We can emphasize that Black liberation theology and the African Independent Churches offer precisely a fruitful hermeneutical framework for interreligious and intercultural dialogue in Africa. Black liberation theology starts from the lived experience of Black African populations; it questions the religious boundaries imposed by colonization while valuing a cultural continuity that has long been denied. It proposes a reading of the Christian faith in dialogue with the demands of social justice and the aspirations for freedom of the African peoples, thus deconstructing the image of a Christianity disconnected from the realities of postcolonial Africa. As for the AICs, they do not only dialogue with Catholicism, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism; they are located on the border between historical missionary

56 Volker Küster, “Intercultural Theology is a Must,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 4 (2014): 171–176, 174.

57 Küster, “Intercultural Theology is a Must,” 174.

Christianity and traditional African religions. This liminal position confers on them a major responsibility in contemporary Africa, namely, as privileged places of interpretation, mediation, and recomposition of religion in a pluralist context.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the close link between the emergence of African Independent Churches and Black liberation theology in Africa. These two movements, although distinct in their genesis, influenced each other, helping to shape an African Christianity rooted in local realities and committed to struggles for justice and Black dignity.

We have shown how Black liberation theology has been nourished by AIC experiences and claims, finding in their practices and discourses a source of inspiration for a contextual approach to faith. Conversely, the AICs found in Black liberation theology a theoretical framework and an intellectual justification for their own aspirations. The AICs and Black Liberation Theology also constitute an imperative framework for the construction of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the context of contemporary Africa.

This study also revealed the richness and complexity of the African religious landscape, marked by remarkable creativity and adaptability. It stressed the importance of interactions between religious movements and social dynamics in understanding contemporary issues of Christianity in Africa.



Rodrick Kapwa is an independent researcher in African theology and religious studies based in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo. He holds a Master of Arts in Bible and Theology and is currently pursuing further theological studies at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Brussels (FUTP). His research interests include African theology, contemporary transformations of Christianity, and ecclesial dynamics in Africa.

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ARTICLE

University Chaplaincy in Global Context: The First 25 Years of the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE)

Gregory W. McGonigle

Abstract

Since the year 2000, university and college chaplains from several nations have been gathering for global conferences of chaplains in higher education nearly every four years. After an initial global conference in Vancouver, Canada, in 2000 and a second in Brisbane, Australia, in 2004, several continental and national associations of university chaplains constituted an International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE) to build bridges among universities, chaplains, and campus ministers worldwide. IACHE has since gathered for seven global conferences in total. This article traces the history of IACHE and describes its leadership efforts and its global conferences to date. It also describes some of the changes currently taking place in continental and national university chaplains' associations and discusses current efforts to broaden the scope of IACHE to include more university chaplains from Africa, Asia, and South America.

Keywords

International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE), university chaplaincy, campus ministry, higher education, global networks, interfaith engagement, organizational history, international collaboration

One of the defining features of the past 25 years in global history has been the increasing speed of connection in the transmission of information and knowledge around the world made possible by the new technology of the internet.* At the same time, an ancient calling, the religious and spiritual life that was the founding impetus of many institutions of higher learning around the world, has been engaged in a process of global networking of those who lead and support the living spiritual lives of university students, faculty, and administrations—chaplains and campus ministers.¹ While increasing secularization has been predicted by some and witnessed in some quarters, at the same time, globalization, multiculturalism, and postmodernism have rekindled the spark of religious and spiritual practice in many universities, both for traditions that have long been present as well as for those more newly arriving.²

In the year 2000, a group of chaplains in higher education at universities on several continents decided to begin to form a new network that became the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE). According to the constitution of this group, it had the goal of connecting chaplains as higher education professionals to share ideas and resources, to network their universities and programs to better serve their campuses, and to organize the hosting of quadrennial conferences that would gather as many chaplains as possible from settings around the world to hear keynotes, share papers, and learn about the various contexts in which spiritual life takes place in higher education.³

IACHE was formed as an association of higher education chaplain professional associations, with the founding bodies being the continental or

**I offer my grateful appreciation to the colleagues who allowed me to contact them for this article and to those who sent me materials to facilitate my research. All of us in the field of college and university chaplaincy around the world owe a debt of gratitude to those who helped envision and establish IACHE, and especially to those who took on the challenge of gathering our global conferences of chaplains from around the world in their own contexts. They have blessed us all.*

- 1 "IACHE History," IACHE website, <http://www.iache.org/>. This article will use the term "chaplain" and "campus minister" almost interchangeably for ease, although strictly speaking, at least in the US, "chaplains" are those employed directly by universities and colleges to serve all students, whereas "campus ministers" are employed by particular denominations or sending organizations to serve students of their own denomination or tradition and may also engage in multifaith or interfaith work. The presence, structure, and responsibilities of each vary greatly around the world, although there are commonalities.
- 2 Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Jacobsen, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 3 "IACHE Constitution 2016," IACHE website, <http://www.iache.org/>.

national university chaplains' associations of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States. Over the past 25 years, some of these associations have consolidated and others have eclipsed, and yet the work continues, even as IACHE is eager to build relationships with colleagues from other contexts, for whom spiritual life may take different forms and offer new insights for higher education. So far, there have been seven quadrennial conferences of IACHE that have taken place in North America, Oceania, and Europe. As IACHE looks toward the next 25 years, its leadership is eager to find ways to structurally build more access for chaplains from regions that may not have established university chaplains' associations, but that nevertheless have spiritual life connected to higher education and have insights for this broader work, especially from the continents of Africa, Asia, and South America.

In this article, at this particular moment in the history of IACHE, I have endeavored to interview organizers of or participants in each of the past seven global conferences of chaplains to understand the important themes and topics that their conferences were intended to address, important keynotes and papers that were delivered, as well as learning excursions and other opportunities that were part of their conferences. I have done this to provide something of a foundational history of the ways that IACHE has developed over the past 25 years and also to plant seeds for the creative new ways it may grow in the next 25 years as IACHE looks toward the future. By way of disclaimer, I will say gathering historical information over 25 years from a network of colleagues around the world, many of whom worked for universities as only one part of their larger ministries, has been a challenge. I express my regrets in advance if there are people or contributions that should have been recognized that are inadvertently omitted here, and I look forward to how future colleagues will continue building on the stories related here.

My methodology in developing this history was documentary analysis of materials available online and the current records of IACHE (my own and those that were sent to me at my request for depositing into the archives), oral history with leaders and participants in IACHE whom I interviewed or corresponded with, and insider narrative, as I have been a participant in IACHE since 2012 and a board member since 2022.

Many things have changed in recent times, including through the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of autocratic governments in many parts of the world, and the continued movement of immigrants and refugees bringing ethnicities, cultures, and religions to different contexts and reshaping the religious landscapes of many countries. Looking toward the future, IACHE has great potential for connecting the tremendous resource

of higher education institutions with the spiritual and moral dimensions that can enrich human and community life. Countless challenges and new questions are on the horizon with the rise of AI, divisive wars, climate change, and more, and yet the perennial questions of what gives life meaning and purpose and how best to live and flourish together abide. The global collegium and connections IACHE represents are but one part, but potentially a significant part, of how we can connect educators and learners to facilitate the greater thriving of the human spirit.

2000: “Phoenix Rising,” University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

According to Bill Wiegert, the former Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) campus minister at the University of British Columbia (UBC), the impetus for the first global conference of chaplains in higher education began when he and three other Canadian chaplains attended a conference of the European Student Chaplains Conference (ESCC) in Durham, UK in 1996.⁴ (After 2002, ESCC became known as the Council of European University Chaplains, or CEUC.) The visiting Canadian chaplains were impressed by the quality of the conference and spoke with some of the chaplains there, including the international coordinator Johan Kijne of Denmark, and the local coordinator Reynaud de la Bat Smit, about the idea of gathering a global conference of chaplains in the near future in Canada.⁵ A few possible locations were proposed and considered, and Wiegert offered UBC in Vancouver, which was chosen, and he became chair of the local host committee. Kijne came on board as an advisor to them, and he was also involved in an international committee that formed to support the conference. (Kijne served as coordinator for the ESSC/CEUC from 1991 to 2002 and coordinator for the global conferences from 1996 to 2008).⁶

According to Kijne and Erich von Dietze, an Australian chaplain who was chair of Australia’s Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (TCMA) and later became chair of the international committee, the local/national host committee also included Rick Garland and Norma McDonald, and the international committee included: Ulla Albert (Europe); Karen Bach (Canada); Jan Fuller Carruthers (USA); Leona Garchow (New Zealand); Nobu Imaizumi (Asia); Devorah Jacobson (USA); Chin Huat Kang (Asia);

4 Bill Wiegert, phone interview with the author, October 17, 2025.

5 Johan Kijne, email message to the author, October 29, 2025.

6 Johan Kijne, email message to the author, October 29, 2025.

Zac Kaye (Canada); Morag Logan (Australia); Wendy McCaninch-Ruenzi (USA); Reggie Nel (Africa); Fabian Radcliffe (Europe); and John Valk (Canada).⁷

As Wiegert recalled, the conference took place in June of 2000 at UBC, and it lasted approximately 4–5 days with roughly 200 chaplains and campus ministers attending. Together, the local host committee and the international committee chose the theme “Phoenix Rising,” which was intended to reflect the fact that, in some regions, chaplaincies and campus ministries in higher education were falling back and needed to revitalize.

The conference included three keynote speakers who were Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, as well as papers and workshops presented by the conference participants, worship services in the major faith traditions represented among the participants (including Bahá’í and Hindu worship services), and a range of excursions, including into the city of Vancouver and to Vancouver Island. Notably, the chaplain participants were encouraged to attend not only their own worship services but also those of others at the conference in order to learn. The conference participants included not only North American and European chaplains but also several chaplains from Japan and Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa. They stayed in university residence halls to contain costs, and they used the Lutheran campus center for worship and talks, as well as the Hillel Jewish center and the Roman Catholic college. They also held plenaries in UBC’s Chan Centre for the Performing Arts and held a celebration with food from many cultures in the UBC student union.⁸

The conference was so successful that one of the main outcomes was the desire to do it again in four years, and Wiegert and others worked with colleagues in Brisbane, Australia to help plan the next global conference, including by way of a trip Wiegert took to Brisbane.⁹ By the time of the next global conference, he had left campus ministry for congregational ministry in Calgary and was not able to attend the second global conference, but he had helped to start an initiative that would continue for over 25 years. The international committee that gathered to help plan the second Global Conference in Brisbane also widened its charge and began planning toward the establishment of IACHE.¹⁰

The Global Conference in Vancouver lived on as an inspiration in the guild of Canadian university chaplains and campus ministers, which,

7 “Senior Consultant Dr. Erich von Dietze,” AHRECS website, <https://ahrecs.com/>; Erich von Dietze, email message to the author, October 15, 2025.

8 Bill Wiegert, phone interview with the author, October 17, 2025.

9 Bill Wiegert, phone interview with the author, October 17, 2025.

10 “IACHE Constitution 2016.”

although lacking a national interfaith professional organization, created a “Campus Chaplaincy Centre” website in 2008 to serve as a resource for themselves. That site expresses pride in having hosted the first global conference of campus chaplains and having energetically participated in those since then.¹¹ A webpage of Canadian Lutheran History also presents a note from Bishop Raymond Shultz mentioning support for campus ministries was “in decline,” but remembering that “Pastor Bill Wiegert and the ministry at UBC hosted a remarkable worldwide interfaith campus ministry gathering that would likely be impossible at present levels of support.”¹² Bishop Shultz mourned this fact by saying:

Campus ministry has always had a push/pull relationship with the rest of the church. There is more freedom of inquiry possible and more flirtation with doubt than some church members consider safe. However, facing the questions, exploring the edges, and having faith grow out of that experience is elating and powerful. As a consequence, campus ministry has been the place of formation for a good deal of our church’s leadership.¹³

2004: “Dreaming Landscapes,” Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

According to the IACHE constitution, Erich von Dietze (TCMA) was the chair of the international committee 2002–2006 and prepared an initial draft of the constitution of IACHE.¹⁴ The original six founding/foundational bodies were: the Aotearoa/New Zealand Tertiary Chaplains Association (ANZTCA, Aotearoa/New Zealand); the Association for College and University Religious Affairs (ACURA, USA); the Conference of European University Chaplains (CEUC, Europe); the National Association of College and University Chaplains (NACUC, USA); the National Campus Ministry Association (NCMA, USA); and the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (TCMA, Australia).¹⁵

11 “About the Centre,” Canadian Campus Chaplaincy Centre, <https://campuschaplaincy.ca>.

12 “LSM, LSAA, Campus Ministry Gallery,” Canadian Lutheran History, <https://canadianlutheranhistory.ca/>.

13 “LSM, LSAA, Campus Ministry Gallery.”

14 “IACHE Constitution 2016.”

15 “IACHE Constitution 2016.”

The international committee 2000–2004 membership included: K. Amal, SJ; Raimund Blanke; Patricia Blundell (Griffith University, Australia, chair of the local host committee); Phillimon Chikafu (Mutare, Zimbabwe); K. James Davis (University of Puget Sound, USA); Erich von Dietze (Curtain University, Australia, chair of the international committee); Leona Garchow (New Zealand); Bill van Groningen; Zac Kaye (Canada); Johan Kijne (Denmark); Morag Logan (Australia); Hannu Majamäki (Finland); Rakesh Peter-Dass; Ricky Waters; Bill Wiegert (UBC, Canada); and Brian Young (UK). The national Australian host committee membership included: Patricia Blundell (local host committee chair); Erich von Dietze; Roy Hazlewood; Johan Kijne (consultant); Morag Logan (chair); Peter Maher; Michael Pietsch; and Judy Redman.¹⁶

The conference took place July 1–7, 2004, and the chair of the local host committee was Patricia Ann Blundell, a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy and a former campus minister at Griffith University in Brisbane. Blundell was also a member of the board of Religions for Peace (Australia) and the author of several writings on university chaplaincy. She was also instrumental in founding the Multi-Faith Centre at Griffith, which continues to operate today.¹⁷ (The center later developed a Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue that operated for nine years, but it closed as a result of COVID-19 funding cuts on December 11, 2020).¹⁸

According to correspondence with Judy Redman (University of New England, Australia, Uniting Church chaplain), the theme of “Dreaming Landscapes” was chosen to acknowledge how “Australian First Nations people talk about the creation of the world as happening during the Dreaming,” and it also gestured toward the dreaming of “new landscapes” of spirituality and peace through chaplaincy work.¹⁹ The local organizing committee included: Patricia Blundell (ecumenical chaplain at Griffith University, where the conference was held); Erich von Dietze (Curtain

16 *Dreaming Landscapes*, conference brochure (Griffith University, 2004).

17 Patricia Blundell, “Establishing a Multi-Faith Centre: A Cautionary Tale for Chaplains,” *Journal of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association* 20, no. 1(2004): 301–306; “Multi-Faith Centre,” Griffith University website, <https://www.griffith.edu.au/>.

18 Bryan J. Adams, “Building Relationships, Transforming Institutions: The University Multi-Faith Centre as a Vehicle for Community Engagement,” *TRANSFORM: The New Normal for Higher Learning* 5 (2020): 35–43. Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/icdgriffith>. “The Closing of Griffith University’s Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Culture,” Religions for Peace Australia, December 27, 2020, <https://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/>.

19 Judy Redman, email message to the author, October 23, 2025.

University); Roy Hazelwood (University of Newcastle, Ourimbah campus, now deceased); Greg Hughson (a former Methodist university chaplain at Otago University, New Zealand); Morag Logan (University of Melbourne); Peter Maher (University of Sydney Catholic chaplain, now deceased); Mike Pietsch (University of South Australia Lutheran chaplain); and Judy Redman (University of New England Uniting Church chaplain). Johan Kijne was the liaison person between the Australian committee and the European, Canadian, and US associations.²⁰

The conference was organized into three subthemes which were: Landscapes of Faith and Religion, Landscapes of Justice and Respect, and Landscapes of Learning Communities. There were three keynote lectures which addressed each of those themes respectively, given by Ursula King (University of Bristol, UK), Chandra Muzaffar (International Movement for a Just World), and David Tacey (La Trobe University). In addition, there were many participant paper presentations and participant workshops. Both the keynotes and the paper presentations (and some workshop materials) were later published in the *Journal of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association* in 2004, running some 400 pages in length.²¹ Judy Bowman (a Lutheran chaplain at Monash and Melbourne Universities) also had in her files a CD that contained hundreds of photos from the “Dreaming Landscapes” conference.²² One of the major contributions of this conference to IACHE was its focus on Indigenous spirituality, Indigenous heritage, and ongoing Indigenous living presence, which has continued to inspire future IACHE conferences.

2008: “Reflecting Light,” University of Tampere,²³ Tampere, Finland

The IACHE constitution was subsequently developed by the 2006–2008 international committee, whose membership included: Patricia Blundell (Griffith University, TCMA, secretary, and chair of the host committee 2004); Karen Bush (NCMA); Wayne Clark (Hendrix College, NACUC and treasurer); Esther Dierderen (CEUC); Serena Fujita (Bucknell University, ACURA, at large); Peter Gustavson (CEUC, chair of the Finland host committee 2008); Cassandra Howes (CEUC and chair); Johan Kijne (CEUC, consultant to Finland host committee 2008); Risto Korhonen

20 Judy Redman, email message to the author, October 23, 2025.

21 Judy Redman, email message to the author, October 23, 2025.

22 Judy Bowman, email message to the author, October 23, 2025.

23 University of Tampere became Tampere University in 2019.

(University of Tampere, CEUC, chair of the local host committee 2008); and Ricky Waters (ANZTCA).²⁴

The conference took place June 30–July 4, 2008, hosted by Risto Korhonen, the former Lutheran campus pastor from the Federation of Tampere Evangelical Lutheran Parishes, placed at the University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland.²⁵ Interestingly, a Vatican website contains a summary of the conference written by Jeremy Fairhead, an official of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People.²⁶ Fairhead writes that the theme “Reflecting Light” was a nod to the importance of Midsummer in the Nordic countries, and was meant to invoke the common calling of human beings to reflect light to one another globally. It also invoked the notion of unity and diversity—like the sun, there is a common source of light in the calling to university chaplaincy and campus ministry, but there is also an acknowledgement that the light reflected is not the same everywhere; there are many traditions and forms in which it takes shape. The many goals of the conference included sharing stories, refining professional skills, developing tools and resources, sharing ideas and experiences, forming an international association, encouraging chaplaincy worldwide, exploring the role of religion in higher education, and committing to a spirituality that promotes peace, justice, and understanding.²⁷

According to Fairhead, the conference gathered nearly 350 chaplains from 40 different faith groups, with a majority from Protestant traditions but including Catholics as well. It was hosted at the University of Tampere, a public university with about 2,000 international students. The two keynotes were given by Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt Divinity School (USA), on the idea of reflecting light without casting other traditions in a negative light, and by Taneli Kukkonen of the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), about the qualities of light itself, and why people see it similarly, differently, and in some cases not at all.

The conference also included a number of workshops given by participants, which, according to Fairhead, “ranged widely in subject matter” and religious understanding. Topics included loss and grief, daily

24 “IACHE Constitution 2016.”

25 Maria Muilu, “I Won’t Hammer You on the Head with the Bible: Visiiri Took the Retiring Campus Pastor Out for a Beer,” *Visiiri*, September 6, 2024, <https://www.visiirilehti.fi/>.

26 Jeremy Fairhead, “Third Global Conference of University and College Chaplains, Campus Ministers and Religious Professionals,” *People on the Move*, no.108, December 2008, <https://www.vatican.va/>.

27 Fairhead, “Third Global Conference of University and College Chaplains.”

transformation, multireligious chaplaincy, ecumenism, Bonhoeffer's Christology, and workshops on international students' experiences, including culture shock and Catholic pastoral care. Each day offered opportunities for devotions and social activities, and the conference was divided into reflection groups that met twice after the keynotes to share and discuss the issues raised in them. In sum, Fairhead noted the conference "wisely" made no attempt to draw a clear conclusion, but rather celebrated the different experiences and understandings of all those seeking to provide better pastoral care in higher education.²⁸

2012: "Mosaics in Motion," Yale University, New Haven, United States

The international and local committees 2008–2012 membership included: Omer Bajwa (Yale University, USA); Patricia Blundell (Australia, local host committee chair 2004); Esther Diederer (Netherlands); Lucy Forster-Smith (Harvard University, USA); Serena Fujita (Bucknell, USA); Cassandra Howes (UK); Callista Isabelle (Yale, USA); Katrina Jenkins (Rollins College, USA); Risto Korhonen (University of Tampere, Finland, local host committee chair 2008); Sharon Kugler (Yale, USA, local host committee chair 2012); Daniel Puski (Hungary); and Joanne Sanders (Stanford University, USA).

The conference took place from June 25–29, 2012, hosted by Yale University Chaplain Sharon Kugler, who was the first woman, the first Catholic, and the first layperson to be chaplain of Yale.²⁹ Sharon had come to Yale after a distinguished tenure at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where she had opened the Bunting-Meyerhoff Interfaith and Community Service Center in 1999. She had attended the Global Conference in Tampere, Finland, and proposed to host the next conference with a strong desire to increase its multireligious scope.

Kugler chose the theme "Mosaics in Motion: Spiritual Leadership in a Multifaith World," with a special desire to highlight the arts as a part of, and pathway into, interfaith engagement. The conference was planned to coincide with the annual International Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, and that festival co-sponsored conference events such as an interfaith

28 Fairhead, "Third Global Conference of University and College Chaplains."

29 "Sharon Kugler Is Reappointed as University Chaplain," *Yale News*, July 17, 2012, <https://news.yale.edu/>.

sacred music concert with the Yuval Ron ensemble.³⁰ The conference had four subthemes of: religious literacy, radical hospitality, service with thoughtful reflection, and creating and sharing sacred space.³¹

In addition, Kugler was deeply committed to helping the conference be more accessible to chaplains from parts of the world where travel and the conference registration fee could be prohibitive, and she was able to secure significant funding from Yale to use for scholarships for these colleagues, in the area of \$120,000. Homestays and other low-cost options were also arranged to help reduce the cost of travel and lodging for chaplains and seminarians from around the world. The local host committee also decided that the formal events of the conference would be alcohol-free to make it more inclusive for colleagues who did not drink for religious reasons, as somewhat of a departure from past conferences. For the first time, two of the four keynote speakers were Muslim.³²

The keynote speakers at the conference included: Gail Bowman, university chaplain at Dillard University, which had experienced the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005; David Ellenson, president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Grancell Professor of Jewish Religious Thought; Ingrid Mattson, director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations, and director of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program at the Hartford Seminary; and Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core.³³ Other features included paper presentations and workshops, roundtables, a sacred music concert, opening and closing banquets, and an excursion to historic Mystic Seaport.³⁴

For this first IACHE conference in the US, the three US-based chaplaincy and campus ministry professional associations (ACURA, NACUC, and NCMA) cancelled their conferences that year in order to contribute resources toward the IACHE conference, which also encouraged their membership constituencies to attend. Highlights included an opening reception at Yale's beautiful Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and meals with the 400 chaplains who attended in the beautiful Yale

30 Sharon Kugler, phone interview with the author, October 30, 2025.

31 "Yale to Host Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education," *Yale News*, June 4, 2012, <https://news.yale.edu/>.

32 Sharon Kugler, phone interview with the author, October 30, 2025.

33 "Yale to Host Global Conference."

34 *Mosaics in Motion: Spiritual Leadership in a Multifaith World*, conference brochure (Yale University Chaplain's Office, 2012).

Schwarzman Center “Commons” Dining Hall.³⁵ The keynotes were also very impressive, including Ingrid Mattson, who was a pioneer in American Muslim university chaplaincy and chaplaincy studies, and Eboo Patel, who would become one of the most influential voices on interfaith engagement in American higher education, now leading Interfaith America. In some workshops, some attendees expressed the sense that the US was perhaps overrepresented—perhaps because there were three US national chaplaincy and campus ministry associations present. This may be a valuable consideration for future US conferences.

2016: “Digging, Dialogue, and Diversity,” La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia

The international committee 2012–2016 membership included: Omer Bajwa (Yale, ACURA); Lucy Forster-Smith (Harvard, ACURA, and secretary); Serena Fujita (ACURA, resigned 2015); Cassandra Howes (Bedford, UK, CEUC and chair); Greg Hughson (University of Otago, ANTCA); Katrina Jenkins (Rollins, NACUC); Sharon Kugler (chair of the host committee 2012; resigned 2015); Robert Lingard (Southern Cross University, TCMA); Cody Nielson (Wesley Foundation University of Minnesota, NCMA); Daniel Püski (University of Debrecen, CEUC); Jay Robinson (TCMA); and Günther Sturms (Delft University of Technology, CEUC).³⁶

The local organizing committee included: Patricia Blanks (La Trobe, and chair); Judy Bowman (Monash University); Russell Briese (Griffith); Ray Hazelwood (Newcastle University); Greg Hughson (Otago); Julie Jerbic; Robert Lingard (Southern Cross); Richard Murray (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology); Russ Nelson (Griffith); Judy Redman (Charles Sturt University and La Trobe); and Jay Robinson (Monash).³⁷

The conference took place from July 11–15, 2016, hosted by Patricia Blanks, a multifaith spiritual advisor in the Multifaith and Wellbeing Service at La Trobe University in Bendigo, Australia, ninety minutes north of Melbourne.³⁸ An interview with Lucy Forster-Smith, then serving as the

35 “Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library,” Yale University Library, <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>; “Commons,” Yale Schwarzman Center, <https://schwarzman.yale.edu/commons>.

36 “IACHE Constitution 2016.”

37 *Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education 2016*, delegate handbook (La Trobe University, 2016).

38 “Multifaith Spiritual Wellbeing Service,” La Trobe University, <https://www>.

Sedgwick Chaplain at Harvard University (USA), related some of the focus of the discussions.³⁹ The title of the conference, “Digging, Dialogue and Diversity,” hearkened back to the fact that Bendigo was established in the 1850s as a gold mining town, but it also suggested that today’s higher education requires a different kind of digging for treasure—the mining of our faith traditions and academic studies in order to build a just world at peace.⁴⁰

Conference coordinator Patricia Blanks shared the initial proposal for the Bendigo conference, the delegate handbook, and the introduction to the concluding global panel of chaplains, which chose as its starting metaphor the image of a platypus. The proposal for the conference in Bendigo relates that considerable thought was put into the idea of hosting in Bendigo because it is a rural regional city, a significant 165 kilometers from Melbourne.⁴¹ While Perth was considered as a possible site, the practicalities of it proved challenging. Positives for Bendigo included the fact that all the chaplains in Victoria were members of the state chaplaincy body, and most were members of TCMA. Together, they had also hosted two successful national conferences, and many had attended past IACHE global conferences. Ninety percent of the chaplains offered their assistance in hosting. La Trobe University was a multifaith chaplaincy with 15 years of experience working with the university and the wider community, and the chaplains there were endorsed by all of the local faith communities.⁴²

Bendigo was also written about as a city “with a great spiritual heart” in which the biggest employers were the education and health sectors.⁴³ The city also offered the conference full support, including the Lady Mayor’s offer to open the conference proceedings, and also cited were the cheaper and high-quality local food, the ease of local transportation, La Trobe’s offer of the free use of university facilities (except for after-hours security and cleaning), and the chaplains’ expertise in securing sponsorships.⁴⁴ In addition, the neighborliness of “country towns”—both to visitors and to the growing immigrant populations from China, Indonesia, Philippines, and

latrobe.edu.au/.

39 Jeffrey Blackwell, “Memorial Church Sr. Minister Forster-Smith Talks International Conference of University Chaplains,” *The Harvard Gazette*, August 22, 2016, <https://news.harvard.edu/>.

40 Blackwell, “Memorial Church Sr. Minister Forster-Smith.”

41 “IACHE Conference 2016 in Bendigo?” unpublished conference proposal, Tertiary Campus Ministry Association, n.d., deposited in the IACHE archives, Pitts Theological Library, Emory University.

42 “IACHE Conference 2016 in Bendigo?”

43 “IACHE Conference 2016 in Bendigo?”

44 “IACHE Conference 2016 in Bendigo?”

Sudan—were noted, along with the surrounding bushland’s wild orchids, birds, and other animals.⁴⁵

Many Bendigoans are descendants of the Jaarah and Dja Dja Wrung peoples who are the region’s traditional and living Indigenous peoples, along with those of European pioneer ancestry who came to work the mines. Numerous sacred sites were mentioned, including the Chinese Joss House, the Anglican church, the Atisha Buddhist Monastery, the Islamic Society, the Jewish synagogue, a growing Coptic Orthodox church, other Protestant denominations, and individuals of other and no faiths.⁴⁶

The 2016 Delegate Handbook began with an acknowledgement of the Jaarah and Dja Dja Wrung peoples and an invitation to dig into the conference, not for gold, but “for the treasure of spirituality, knowledge, experience, and sharing” with one another.⁴⁷ It continued, “In a world still torn by conflict, it is important that we celebrate our faith values and recognize similarities shared across our different faiths as we strive for justice and peace.”

Keynote speakers included Rachael Kohn; Richard Leonard, SJ; Abdullah Saeed; Julian Hamilton; and a multifaith panel of chaplains from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.⁴⁸ Workshops included topics such as: atheism, Christianity, and Humanism; what Jesus said and did; pastoral encounters; strategizing your chaplaincy; the science/religion debate; exploring Muslim chaplaincy; navigating privilege; honoring Indigenous spirituality; responding to suicide; Buddhism and pluralism; nonviolent communication; sacred spaces; serving refugee students; global citizenship; secularism in Australia; teaching the next generation of chaplains; institutionalizing spiritual values; dances of universal peace; deaf ministry; caring for student deaths; self-care for chaplains; serving first year students; and labyrinth walking.⁴⁹

Six reflection rooms were provided, including Catholic, Jewish, Multifaith, Muslim, and Protestant rooms, in addition to a labyrinth space. There were also five designated chaplains to the conference itself. Other features of the conference included association meetings, excursions, dinners, cafe conversations, and a visit to the Indigenous Student Services Unit. The usual Global Marketplace was replaced by a Festival of Sharing because

45 “IACHE Conference 2016 in Bendigo?”

46 “IACHE Conference 2016 in Bendigo?”

47 *Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education 2016.*

48 *Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education 2016.*

49 *Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education 2016.*

Australia's strict quarantine rules did not allow for importing food. Instead, arts and ideas were shared, followed by Australian desserts.⁵⁰

Greg Hughson, a former Methodist university chaplain at Otago University (New Zealand), noted that in addition to helping plan the conference and offering two workshops, he followed the conference by leading a one-week tour of the South Island of New Zealand for six chaplains.⁵¹

2022: “Liberty, Legacy, and Leadership,” University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom⁵²

The international committee 2016–2022 membership included: Jeremy Clines (University of Sheffield, CEUC, and chair of the host committee); Cassandra Howes (CEUC); Mohamed Ismail (until 2022); Robert Lingard (Southern Cross, TCMA, until 2021); Shahla Meghrani (at large, until 2021); Jay Robinson (Monash, TCMA); Christine Schardt (Mainz, CEUC); Jill Shaw (Massey University, ANZTCA); Günther Sturms (Delft, CEUC); and Denise Yarbrough (at large, USA). The planning was also made possible by a local planning group in Sheffield; a pan-European strategy group; and a conference administration team at the University of Sheffield, under the leadership of Jeremy Clines, the former Anglican chaplain and now coordinating chaplain of the Belief, No Belief, and Religious Life Centre (BNBR Centre) at the University of Sheffield. The conference was postponed from 2020 to 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵³

The conference took place from June 13–17, 2022, with some pre-conference days as well.⁵⁴ The theme of “Liberty, Legacy, and Leadership” was chosen to signify the idea of the chaplaincy as an agent for liberty and liberation in higher education, and the idea that, during times of political and social turmoil, there is a need for the egalitarian principles of faiths to rise to the fore. “Legacy” was intended to gesture toward the fact that the conference was taking place in a nation that had operated a colonial empire. The conference sought to reckon with that legacy through honoring and respecting Indigenous communities and exploring the meanings of Brexit

50 *Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education 2016.*

51 Dunedin Methodist Parish Bulletin September 11, 2016, Dunedin Methodist website, <https://www.dunedinmethodist.org.nz/attachments/14734832633.pdf>.

52 “IACHE Global Conference 2022,” IACHE, <http://www.iache.org/>.

53 Jeremy Clines, ed., *Liberty, Legacy, Leadership: IACHE 2022 Handbook* (Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd., 2022).

54 Clines, *Liberty, Legacy, Leadership*.

(which took effect on January 31, 2020) for relationships with Ireland and the rest of Europe. And “leadership” was meant to invoke the goal of nurturing healthy styles of leadership in the global communities of the next generation, and highlighting grassroots, radical, and alternative forms of leadership that promote understanding and holistic wellbeing.⁵⁵

The conference formally began on Monday, with refreshments and a keynote by Grace Davie entitled “Changing Religion, Changing Universities, and Changing Chaplains.” That was followed by an opening ceremony and civic reception and dinner, and then a second keynote with Pádraig Ó Tuama and Anthony Reddy on “The Borders of Our Lives.” Tuesday began with morning reflections, followed by a keynote with Jana Bennett on “Religion, Disability, and Embodiment in a Virtual World.” After morning refreshments, a fourth keynote was given by Harold Koenig on “How Spirituality Is Relevant to Good Mental Health.” After lunch, there were two sections of workshops and another keynote by Lindsay van Dijk on “Non-religious Provision and Faith-based Chaplaincy.” Then, that evening, there were excursions to several local spiritual communities, including Anglican, Bahá’í, Hindu, Humanist, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh sites.

On Wednesday, after morning reflections, there was a sixth keynote by Anthony Reddy on “Colonial Legacies, Brexit, and Anti-racism,” followed by the conference business meeting. In the afternoon, there were regional tours, and then a roundtable on “Peaceful Campus Dialogue in the Context of Anti-hate, Anti-racism, and Anti-violence” with five speakers of different backgrounds. Following dinner, there was IACHE’s beloved International Marketplace, in which each chaplaincy was invited to share food, drink, or other items from their context. As usual, Wednesday night closed with evening reflections.

Thursday morning reflections were followed by a seventh keynote with Kristin Aune on “University Chaplaincy as Relational Presence.” After morning refreshments, there were workshop sessions and two additional keynotes by Linda Woodhead on “A Place for Religion When No Religion Is a Big Bit of the Mix,” and by Mohammed Abu-Nimer on “Peacebuilding and Interfaith Dialogue in University Contexts and Beyond.” There were more afternoon workshops and afternoon tea, and a roundtable on “Leadership, Conflict, and the Post-secular University,” followed by a celebratory closing dinner and evening reflections. On Friday, the final day of the conference, there was a tenth keynote with reflections by Harvey Belovski and Jana Bennett, followed by a closing ceremony and then departures.

55 Clines, *Liberty, Legacy, Leadership*.

What stood out to many at this conference was the number and the diversity of the keynote presentations, which were very high-quality and strongly multifaith, including Humanist perspectives. Jeremy Cline's hospitality was incredibly welcoming and supportive of everyone. The conference included a beautiful, printed handbook with copious contents, including poetry; welcomes; statements on sustainability, accessibility, and religious accommodations; lists of the planning teams; maps and logistical information; the schedules and descriptions of all events; biographies of all of the speakers and workshop presenters (the latter of which were approximately 20 in number); as well as information on the pre-conference sessions.

The pre-conference sessions included sessions entitled: Empowering Minorities in Chaplaincy; Out of Doors Chaplaincy; LGBTQ Chaplaincy; Ecological Consciousness; Insights from a Hindu Chaplain; Disability, Theology, and Empowerment; Do We Need a Journal for Higher Education Chaplaincy; Campus Chaplains and Research; Spiritually Accompanying a Whole University; Understanding the Human Impact of Immigration Policy Change for the United States; the Impact of Conversion Therapy for Black LGBT People; Listening Projects; the UK's PREVENT Strategy; Extremism and Hate Incidents; Islamophobia and Antisemitism; Valuing Spiritual Sadness; Benedictine Spirituality; Chaplain Recruitment; Supporting Student Development; Transforming the Self; and How Buddhism Can Contribute to Higher Education.⁵⁶

Other workshop sessions included a vast array of topics, including: Black Majority Christian Groups; Developing Chaplaincy; Faith and Belief Provision in UK Universities; Friendship for Christian Women; What Students and Staff Think about Chaplaincy Work; a Hindu Framework of Care; Working with International Students; Using Mindfulness in Group Rituals Following a Student Death; What Does God Say about Suicide; Mindful Explorations of the Five Senses; the Training of Muslim Chaplains; How Chaplaincy Can Support Students in African Universities; Beauty and Refinements; Crafting Theology beyond God; the Future of Muslim Chaplaincy; Queer Salons; the Benefits of Thinking Eternally; Leading from Difference; GAY: Meaning God Adores You; Responding to Self-harm; Hip-hop Songs in Christian Context; Hospitality; Getting the University's Attention; Spiritual Direction for Emerging Adults; Social Media; Reconstructing Chaplaincy; Student Mental Health; the Problem of Religious Diversity; Evangelism; University Chaplaincy and the Gospel; How to Make Religion or Belief Inclusive; Freedom on Campus; Leadership

⁵⁶ Clines, *Liberty, Legacy, Leadership*, 2022.

Development; Students Serving Students; Religious Student Societies; Servant Leadership; Ecology; Organizing and Leadership; the Emergence of Student Wellbeing Offices; Religion Is Optional, Meaning Is Mandatory; Strategic Leadership in Chaplaincy; Experiential Learning on the USA-Mexican Border; the United Nations; Mindful Stitching; Spiritual Direction; and Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy.⁵⁷

Excursions included the National Holocaust Memorial Museum; the stately ducal home of Chatworth House; the Sheffield Industrial History and Coal Mining Museum; the Yorkshire Sculpture Park; walks in the city of Sheffield, including museums and galleries; and the history of the Sheffield Football Club. There was also an exhibit on forgiveness on display.⁵⁸

The conference had many sponsors, and it offered an extensive bookshop in the common dining room. Another feature of this conference was the great flexibility it allowed for people to attend for individual days of the conference as their schedules permitted. A highlight was also being greeted by the Lord Mayor of Sheffield and her chaplain, as well as various university leaders and significant local religious leaders. In terms of participants, in addition to European and North American chaplains, there was a significant contingent of chaplains from Malawi. Moreover, there was significant religious diversity among the chaplains, with Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim chaplains represented.

2026: “Diversity, Dialogue, and Democracy,” Frankfurt and Mainz, Germany⁵⁹

The international committee 2022–2026 membership included: Barry Baron (Colgate University, treasurer, at large, ACSLHE); Jeremy Clines (Sheffield, CEUC, and chair of the host committee 2022); Betti Gombkoto (Prague, CEUC); Ellie Hummel (Mount Allison University, at large, Canada); Gregory McGonigle (Emory University, secretary, at large, ACSHLE); Anthony Cruz Pantojas (Tufts University, at large, ACSLHE); Monica Sanford (Harvard Divinity School, at large, ACSLHE); Christine Schardt (Mainz, CEUC, and host committee chair 2026); Jill Shaw (Massey, ANZTCA, and vice chair); Günther Sturms (Delft, CEUC, and chair).

57 Gregory W. McGonigle, *Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Humanist Chaplaincy in Higher Education*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024. Clines, *Liberty, Legacy, Leadership*, 2022.

58 Clines, *Liberty, Legacy, Leadership*.

59 Christine Schardt, “IACHE Conference 2026,” <https://iache2026.org>.

In considering a possible conference location for 2026, several colleges and universities in the United States proposed hosting since it would have been the USA's "turn;" however, given current events and the political climate, Christine Schardt, a Catholic campus minister in Mainz, offered to host with help from CEUC, and the board accepted her proposal. She and her local host committee chose the theme of "Diversity, Dialogue, and Democracy"—seeking to highlight Frankfurt and Mainz's location in the heart of Europe, which has been a point of convergence for many developments in religious life and history—the UNESCO medieval Jewish heritage sites of SchUM (Speyer, Worms, and Mainz); the medieval Benedictine abbey of the mystic St. Hildegard von Bingen; the Gutenberg Bible Museum; the Osthofen Concentration Camp Memorial; St. Stephan's Collegiate Church and its Marc Chagall windows; the Bahá'í House of Worship for the European continent; and more recently established sacred sites like the Islamic Center of Frankfurt.⁶⁰ Given the times, the theme was chosen to highlight all of this diversity, the need for ongoing dialogue around the world, and the moral calling to affirm the democratic values of "freedom, equal rights, justice, solidarity, and peace."⁶¹

The conference took place June 8–12, 2026 and was co-led by Christine Schardt of the Catholic campus ministry at the University of Mainz, Kerstin Söderblom of the Protestant campus ministry at the University of Mainz, their Business Organizer Viva Roumieh, and their Public Relations Coordinator Vanessa Karwat. Some 24 countries were represented among the registrants. There was also a Local Planning Group and Local Supporting Organizations.

The conference began with a convivial welcome reception at the Protestant campus ministry followed by music by student musicians, various welcomes, a keynote on "Diversity and Educational Equity" by Marita Liebermann, dinner, and a panel. The second day began at the beautiful St. Stephan's Collegiate Church in Mainz with a keynote by Thomas Hieke and a response by Rabbi Barry Baron on the church's Marc Chagall windows. After lunch there were two sessions of workshops followed by the International Market and dinner with student musicians. Wednesday was the

60 "ShUM Sites of Speyer, Worms and Mainz," UNESCO World Heritage Convention, <https://whc.unesco.org>; "You Have Come to Visit Our Abbey," Benediktinerinnenabtei St. Hildegard, <http://abtei-st-hildegard.de/english>; "Gutenberg-Museum Mainz," Landeshauptstadt Mainz, <https://www.mainz.de/>; "Osthofen Concentration Camp Memorial," Landeszentrale Politische Bildung Rheinland-Pfalz, <https://www.gedenkstaette-osthofen-rlp.de>; "Welcome," Pfarrei St. Stephan Mainz, <https://bistummainz.de/pfarrei/mainz-st-stephan/english/welcome>; "Bahá'í Faith in Germany," Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

61 Schardt, "IACHE Conference 2026."

day of excursions to the various sites mentioned above followed by reflection groups and dinner on the town. Thursday's program began at the University of Frankfurt with a joint keynote by Saba-Nur Cheema and Meron Mendel followed by workshops and tours in Frankfurt and then a closing dinner. Friday's schedule included the IACHE General Meeting and CEUC Annual Meeting, followed by a keynote with Meike Jolie and Stephan Jolie and a closing ceremony with student musicians, after which the conference adjourned.⁶²

As always, the conference invited chaplains, scholars, practitioners, and graduate students to propose papers and workshops in the fields of interfaith studies, lived religions and ethics, and chaplaincy studies, in order to open up new areas for research, dialogue, and practice.⁶³ Papers and workshops presented included topics such as: Religions on Campus; Interfaith Travel Learning for Peace; a Peace Encounter Bracelet Workshop; Introduction to Mindfulness in Action; Evidence for Early Multireligious Pedagogy in Preparing Campus Chaplains; Council Circles for Interreligious Spiritual Practice; Biographical Work as a Process of Recognition; Islamic Chaplaincy and Interfaith Engagement; Dialogue and Democracy with the Diversity in Nature; the Question Wheel and Inclusive Conversations; Exploring the Future of IACHE; Multifaith Spaces on Secular Campuses; Queer in Church; University Chaplaincy in Asia; LGBTQI+-queer-genderfluid?!; and Preparing Buddhist Chaplains for Three Publics.

As has become standard for IACHE, commitments to gender equality and LGBTQIA inclusion (which is a requirement of all countries proposing to host the global conference), ecological sustainability, and disability awareness were expressed on the conference website and in the program book, with the support of an awareness policy and awareness team.⁶⁴ In addition, photographers and videographers were present to document the conference and some provisions were made for participants to attend online if they could not attend in person.

IACHE Looks Toward the Future: The Next 25 Years

Since 2020, a number of changes have occurred with national university chaplaincy professional associations. In the United States, ACURA and NACUC had become increasingly overlapping in purpose and membership,

62 Schardt, "IACHE Conference 2026."

63 Schardt, "IACHE Conference 2026."

64 Schardt, "IACHE Conference 2026."

and they decided to merge to become the Association for Chaplaincy and Spiritual Life in Higher Education (ACSLHE) in 2020.⁶⁵ At its annual meeting on February 4, 2025, ACSLHE officially voted to (re-)join IACHE. Meanwhile, the NCMA dissolved on March 15, 2024, depositing its archives at the Yale Divinity School.⁶⁶ And in Australia, the TCMA dissolved on September 21, 2025, transferring its assets to Australia's Council for Chaplaincies in Tertiary Institutions (CCTI).⁶⁷

Given these changes, the IACHE board is developing proposals to amend the IACHE constitution to affirm the remaining constituent bodies as: ACSLHE, ANZTCA, and CEUC. In addition, a new structure is being considered to establish an executive board with an ongoing presence from the formerly represented regions of Canada and Australia, as well as newly represented regions that do not yet have formal continental or national bodies but whose presence and insights have been greatly desired on the international board for years—chaplains from Africa, Asia, and South America.

Recently, board members have been endeavoring through their own professional travels to build relationships with institutions such as Yonsei University (South Korea), the University of Pretoria (South Africa), and the Seminario Rabínico (Argentina), with the hope of involving chaplains from these or similar institutions in IACHE. The hope is also that the involvement of such institutions might allow for them or neighboring universities to become future global conference sites. IACHE has developed “Conference Hosting Guidelines” to assist universities in proposing to host a global conference, which provide detailed recommendations about a shared international and regional/local hosting process.⁶⁸

One challenge that has emerged with appointments to the IACHE international executive board is the fact that some of the member associations' continental or national board terms are on a different schedule from IACHE's and may be shorter than four years. It has been an IACHE best practice and custom that continental or national representatives be elected to the IACHE international executive board based on proposals from their full associational memberships at a continental or national business meeting in the year of the global conference, and that the representatives

65 “Who We Are,” ACSLHE, <https://acslhe.org/>

66 National Campus Ministry Association, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/NationalCampusMinistryAssociation>.

67 Tertiary Campus Ministry Association, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/TertiaryCampusMinistryAssociation>.

68 “Guidelines for Submitting a Proposal to Host an IACHE Conference,” IACHE, <http://www.iache.org/>.

remain in their position for a full four-year term to help plan the next global conference. Ideally, continental or national associations also put aside some funding to support their representative's travel for attending an in-person IACHE executive board meeting at the midpoint between global conferences (to explore and plan at the next global conference location), and to attend the global conference that they help to plan. IACHE also recommends that, in the year that a continental or national association is hosting a global conference, they not hold a continental or national conference so that they can give full support to the global conference being hosted in their region, including providing scholarship funds as a form of global hospitality. In the past, continental and national associations have decided to add a one-day pre-conference to the global conference for their own networking and traditions and to handle their annual associational business. These are some of the best practices that have developed over time for IACHE board representation, board service, hosting, and business.

IACHE is also in the process of officially establishing its archives. It is the hope that these archives will continue to serve as a resource for the association and help to inspire the vision of connecting interreligious university spiritual life around the globe in the service of a just world at peace.

Looking further ahead, members of IACHE have expressed that they hope to continue to be, and to become more fully, a significant setting for the convening of higher education chaplains and spiritual life leaders for professional development around the globe. A significant trend in higher education chaplaincy in the past decades has been the tendency to become more multireligious and interreligious, with the religious diversity among students, faculty, and staff at universities around the world increasing, and with current events continually demonstrating the need for deeper and more intentional interreligious dialogue and collective action for peace.

In the early years of IACHE, many more chaplains represented Christian and Jewish traditions, but the trajectory over the past two decades has been greater participation of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist chaplains in the field, and also becoming a significant and valued presence in the gatherings of IACHE. At the same time, there is a growing number of students, faculty, and staff at universities who hold multiple religious belonging or who are Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR), which presents new challenges to the field of supporting spiritual life, learning, and engagement in the higher education context.

Of course, these changes are not merely additive but also to some extent reshape the fundamental assumptions of who constitutes an association like IACHE, what it is intended to accomplish, what it can do and what it cannot

do, etc. Even some of the questions that have arisen in conference planning—such as whether alcohol should be served at conferences, or whether a conference can be hosted in a country that does not guarantee LGBTQIA human rights—invite reflection about how IACHE sees itself as an association of colleagues. And the questions about how to create a more truly global international association will require further structural reflection on membership and leadership, perhaps new pathways to membership and more attention to practicalities like scholarships and sponsorships. But they also hold great potential for enriching the vision and contributions of the association with greater insights and potential to advance positive international spiritual and ethical relations and growth around the world today.

In a time when some on the global stage are questioning the relevance and importance of associations intended to advance international peace, friendly international relations, and the harmonization of the efforts of different peoples, IACHE has the potential to reaffirm these values in one particular realm that nevertheless can have significant impacts on people’s lives. Its founders and members have created a platform for international dialogue, learning, cooperation, and relationships that has room to grow, but also has a valuable contribution to make today.

Table 1. IACHE Conferences, 2000–2026

Year	Location	Host	Theme
2000	University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada	Bill Wiegert	Phoenix Rising
2004	Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia	Patricia Blundell	Dreaming Landscapes
2008	University of Tampere, Finland	Risto Korhonen	Reflecting Light
2012	Yale University, New Haven, USA	Sharon Kugler	Mosaics in Motion
2016	La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia	Patricia Blanks	Digging, Dialogue, and Diversity
2022	University of Sheffield, UK	Jeremy Clines	Liberty, Legacy, and Leadership
2026	Frankfurt and Mainz, Germany	Christine Schardt	Diversity, Dialogue, and Democracy

Gregory W. McGonigle has served as dean of religious life, university chaplain, and a member of the faculty at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, where he developed a multifaith chaplaincy team and designed and opened the Emory Interfaith Center. He previously built multifaith chaplaincy programs at Tufts, Oberlin, and UC Davis. He is a Unitarian Universalist minister and author and holds degrees in religious studies and divinity from Brown, Harvard, and Boston University. He has been a researcher for the Harvard Pluralism Project and is past president of the National Association of College and University Chaplains (USA) and currently serves as secretary of the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education.

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ARTICLE

Two Spiritual Masters: St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo

James Wiseman

Abstract

The Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* spoke of the Catholic Church's "high regard" for other religions and sought to promote dialogue among them. The following article seeks to further this goal by reflecting on the work of two highly regarded spiritual masters within two of these religions. Within the Christian tradition was St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Carmelite who is widely recognized as a preeminent Christian spiritual master, while a counterpart from the Buddhist tradition was Nyoshul Khenpo, a twentieth-century exponent of Dzogchen, which he considered the heart of his own lineage within Tibetan Buddhism. The article begins with a brief account of the life of each man, followed by what they taught about the ultimate goal within their respective traditions, as well as the practices or virtues needed to attain that goal.

Keywords

John of the Cross, Nyoshul Khenpo, detachment, meditation, solitude, humility, love

Introductory Remarks

On October 28, 1965, the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church approved *Nostra Aetate* ["In Our Time"], a declaration on the relation of the

Church to non-Christian religions. This was the shortest of the council's sixteen documents but also one of its most influential. With a large majority of about 87 percent of its voting members voting for approval, the council changed a centuries-old attitude toward other religions that had been marked by negative attitudes toward them and no real need for dialogue. The French journalist Henri Fesquet, who covered the entire council, later wrote about the significance of *Nostra Aetate* in the following words: "Whether we recognize it or not, this sudden extension of Rome's religious horizon marks a rupture with a certain tradition [in the Church's past]. It would not have been possible without the combined efforts of Pope John XXIII and Cardinal [Augustine] Bea, as well as the sustained collaboration of Vatican II."¹ The second section of *Nostra Aetate* says that "Throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life. At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being, or still more of a Father," leading to "a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense." The declaration goes on to name some religions that have developed "well-defined concepts and exact language" to answer basic questions of who we are and how we ought to live. Of Buddhism in particular, the declaration says that this religion "in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination, either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help." That second section of the declaration concludes with these words: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions...The Church therefore urges her sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture."²

That declaration, only five sections long, has had major influence in the more than sixty years since its promulgation. The Vatican now has a Dicastery (i.e., a permanent council) for Interreligious Dialogue whose staff organizes interreligious dialogues in various parts of the world and publishes the journal *Pro Dialogo*, while other groups promote the same ideals in their

1 Henri Fesquet, *The Drama of Vatican II*, trans. Bernard Murchland (Random House, 1967), 746.

2 *Nostra Aetate*, sec. 2, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Liturgical Press, 2014), 739.

own countries or regions, all with the goal of abandoning the negative attitudes of the past and instead promoting mutual understanding.

There have also been individual pioneers who have been leaders in the same endeavor, such as the monk Bede Griffiths, born in England in 1906 but having spent the final decades of his long life in India until his peaceful death in 1993. He showed his own attitude toward religious diversity in the Introduction to his work *Universal Wisdom: A Journey through the Sacred Wisdom of the World*, where he expressed the hope “that the texts which have been gathered together in this volume...may provide a source book for a new vision of reality, which the world is seeking today.”³ Reflecting on such texts, we come to “see our own religion in a new light and we begin to discern how humanity today could grow in mutual understanding, toward that unity which is our common goal.”⁴

Such an approach is at the background of this article, which seeks to foster the kind of mutual understanding that pioneers like Griffiths desired. While interreligious dialogue may occur when two individuals or groups from different traditions meet face-to-face, it can surely take place also in the *intra*religious dialogue that comes about when a person confronts texts by authors from two different traditions and is open to the expanded horizon that can result from reflecting on their works. To that end, I have chosen two authors, one from my own Catholic tradition and the other from Tibetan Buddhism. Many other pairs might have been chosen, but John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo seemed appropriate because they have been widely recognized as spiritual masters within their own traditions. John of the Cross (1542–1591) is one of only thirty-eight persons who have been designated “Doctor of the Church” because of their sound teaching, leading our contemporary scholar Bernard McGinn to claim that John of the Cross “blazes like a star of the first magnitude.”⁵ For those of us living in the West, Nyoshul Khenpo (1932–1999) is less well-known, but within his own Tibetan Buddhist tradition he was so highly regarded as to be called “the most outstanding and knowledgeable exponent of Dzogchen, the summit and heart of the teaching of the ancient Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.”⁶ During the final decades of his life, Nyoshul taught some of the

3 Bede Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom* (Fount, 1994), 10.

4 Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom*, 10.

5 Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain (1500–1650): Volume 6, Part 2, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (Crossroad Publishing, 2017) 230.

6 Sogyal Rinpoché, introduction to Nyoshul Khenpo’s *A Marvelous Garland of Rare Gems: Biographies of Masters of Awareness in the Dzogchen Lineage*, trans. Richard Barron (Padma, 2005), xv.

most important Nyingma lamas, such as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Dzigar Kongtrul, and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Much of what Nyoshul wrote has now been translated from Tibetan to English in the books that will be referred to in this article.

When I began my research I did not know what correspondences I might find, but during my reading and reflection I came to conclude that these two men were in important respects kindred spirits. Even though on a discursive level they certainly differed in matters of doctrine, there did seem to be on the non-discursive level of spiritual practice what Griffiths considered a common wisdom which we all share, one that “converges on the center” from which “everything springs” and toward which “everything is converging.”⁷

In structuring this article, I will use the following major divisions: (1) a brief account of the life of St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo; (2) what St. John and Nyoshul said about the ultimate goal within their respective traditions; (3) what each author taught about the path to the goal, specifically with respect to the need for detachment, the kind of meditation each recommended, and the attitudes or virtues needed to reach the goal, specifically the practice of solitude, humility, and love.

A Brief Account of the Lives of St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo

The Life of St. John of the Cross

John was born in 1542 at Fontiveros, Spain, a town about twenty-five miles northwest of Avila. After receiving a basic education in nearby Medino del Campo, he entered a Carmelite friary in 1563 and after professing vows was sent to that order’s college in Salamanca, where he could also take some courses at its famous university. Ordained to the priesthood in 1567, he was in his hometown to sing his first Mass when he met Madre Teresa de Jesús, better known in English as St. Teresa of Ávila. She persuaded him to join her in her plan of providing a stricter, reformed rule for the Carmelite friars as she had already begun to do for Carmelite nuns. Not surprisingly, their plans for reform brought about much opposition, so much so that in early December 1577 a group of Carmelites who followed the mitigated rule had John seized and imprisoned in a cell at their monastery in Toledo. This cell was tiny, originally intended as a closet, with very poor lighting, and John

7 *A Human Search: The Life of Father Bede Griffiths*, directed by John Swindells (More Than Illusion Films, 1993), DVD.

was taken from it three times each week for scourging as he knelt in the middle of the refectory. After a daring escape in the middle of the night in August 1578, John journeyed to El Calvario in the southern part of the country, where he was safer. In the ensuing years Fray John assumed various duties in the reformed order: prior of the monastery at El Calvario, confessor and spiritual director of the nuns at nearby Beas, rector of the Carmelite college in Baeza, vicar provincial of Andalusia, and major definitor at the 1588 chapter of Madrid. It was during these years that he did much of his writing (poems, commentaries on his poems, and spiritual maxims) along with practicing the work at which he felt especially suited: serving as spiritual director for the friars, nuns, and laypersons.

The calm did not last, however, this time because of clashes within the reform itself. The vicar general, Nicolás Doria, proposed changes that Fray John and others opposed. At the chapter held in 1591, John was not elected to any office. Instead of being despondent, he wrote to Madre Ana de Jesús at Beas: “If things did not turn out as you desired, you ought rather to be consoled and thank God profusely. Since His Majesty has so arranged matters, it is what most suits everyone...It is in my favor since, being freed and relieved of the care of souls, I can, if I want and with God’s help, enjoy peace, solitude, and the delightful fruit of the forgetfulness of self and of all things.”⁸ Fray John was then sent to the solitude of La Peñuela, only to suffer a month later from an inflammation of the leg that quickly worsened. To receive medical attention, he was sent to the town of Ubeda in September 1591, where the sickness grew still worse and led to his death shortly after midnight on December 14. He was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726 and declared a Doctor of the Church by Pius XI in 1926.

The Life of Nyoshul Khenpo

Nyoshul was born in 1932 in Kham, the eastern region of Tibet, and was at that time given the name Jamyang Dorje. His devout grandmother urged him to find a teacher who could train him on the path to enlightenment. Following her advice, the boy began a lifelong search for learning, although always accompanying that search with spiritual practice. A twelve-year period of training led him to be recognized as a *khenpo*, that is, someone recognized as being a professor or abbot. After receiving the “pith instructions” that distill the essence of Buddhist philosophy into clear, experiential guidance, he received a new name, Nyoshul, taken from the name of the monastery at which he was then living as well as the name of

8 Quoted by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., “General Introduction,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (ICS Publications, 1979), 25.

the teacher who had introduced him to the nature of the mind. His extensive study of works by the prominent fourteenth-century master Longchen and by later teachers, along with oral instructions that were the heart of the Dzogchen tradition and that were only given to him and other disciples one at a time and never to a whole group, determined Nyoshul Khenpo's special lineage. Sometimes Nyoshul would meditate alone in a cave or on mountaintops, but at other times would visit monasteries in Tibet to receive further teachings from all the different Buddhist traditions and lineages, for by this time he knew what he was seeking and where to find it. He also composed extemporaneous songs, known as *vajra* songs, penning them spontaneously on whatever paper happened to be at hand. Sung spontaneously for various individuals, they were later repeated at his students' request and then recorded, transcribed, and translated into English or French. These songs, along with Nyoshul's own commentaries on them and on earlier songs by other Tibetans, form the core of his published works.

His life, and that of his fellow Tibetans, changed drastically with the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950. He joined a group that set out from the eastern region of Kham in order to escape, but most of his companions died or were killed on the way, so Nyoshul was among the relatively few who arrived safely in Nepal. He said that this experience made a lasting impression on him, showing the impermanence that surrounds our lives. From Nepal he went to the Himalayan region of West Bengal and lived in great simplicity in India for the next twenty-five years. He was now able to give teachings to others, doing so in a very kind and loving way and making use of teachings from various schools of Buddhism besides his own, for he was a follower of the non-sectarian Rimé movement within Tibetan Buddhism. In his words, "We should have an open, spacious attitude and be open to all forms of the truth, all the different paths that can bring beings to the ultimate understanding."⁹

On the background of his extensive training and study, Nyoshul became determined to write a history of the Dzogchen lineage, a project on which he was at work when in the mid-1970s he suffered a stroke and seemed to be at the point of death for several years. A guru in Bhutan urged him to marry as a way to help restore his health, so he left the monastic state and married a woman named Damchö Zangmo, the daughter of a Bhutanese yogi who gave him the kind of care that seems to have prolonged his life. Bhutanese friends helped him raise enough money to fly to Switzerland for medical treatment, and from there he accepted an invitation to reside in the

9 Nyoshul Khenpo and Lama Surya Das, *Natural Great Perfection: Dzogchen Teachings and Vajra Songs* (Snow Lion, [1995] 2008), 35.

Dordogne area of southwestern France, where he helped build a retreat center at which he later taught for four years. With somewhat improved health, he began traveling to various countries to teach, but he took up permanent residence in Bhutan so as to be near sites sacred to Longchen, who had founded a monastery in that country in the fourteenth century. Falling seriously ill in 1999, Nyoshul was flown back to France for medical care and died there in late August of that year.

The Ultimate Goal of Our Life according to these Two Teachers

Having heard something of the lives of these two spiritual masters, let us see what they taught about the ultimate goal of our life. For John of the Cross, the major source of all his teaching was certainly the Bible, where that ultimate goal is often called “eternal life.” For example, in Jesus’s high-priestly prayer in the seventeenth chapter of the Fourth Gospel, he asks the Father to glorify him, the Son, “so that he might give eternal life to all you gave him. Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ” (John 17:2–3). In the Second Letter to Timothy, the goal is expressed in somewhat different language, for after saying that he has competed well, finished the race, and kept the faith, the Apostle continues: “From now on, the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will reward to me on that day, and not only to me but to all who have longed for his appearance” (2 Tim. 4:7–8). One of the most influential of early Christian authors, John Cassian (c.360–c.435), wrote that our ultimate goal is “the kingdom of God,” which can be reached only if our lives are marked by “purity of heart.”

St. John of the Cross would surely have agreed with any of these, but the terms he regularly used are “union with God” or “uniting one’s will with God’s.” One of many passages in which he expresses this goal is the following from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: “Our intention in this work is to guide the soul through spiritual goods to the divine union with God.”¹⁰ Or similarly, from the second book of the same treatise: “A man makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting his will perfectly to God’s...When this is done, the soul will be illumed by and

10 St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3.33.1. These numbers refer to Book 3, Chapter 33, Section 1 of the work. All subsequent quotations from the treatises of John of the Cross will follow this format. I use the translation by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., eds., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, but this numbering system will be useful to readers using any other editions or translations.

transformed in God. And God will so communicate His supernatural being to it that it will appear to be God Himself and will possess all that God Himself has.”¹¹ To help explain this, in the *Spiritual Canticle* John uses the image of a window through which the light of the sun is shining. If there are no smudges on the window, then there seems to be no distinction between the window and the light shining through it. He writes: “In this transformation the two [i.e., God and the soul] become one, as we would say of the window united with the ray of sunlight.”¹² Such language has at times made spiritual writers seem suspect to authorities anxious to preserve orthodox teaching, but John is clear that the identity was of “appearance” and not of substance.

At first sight, Nyoshul’s teaching about our ultimate goal may seem so different from the teaching of St. John as to make us doubt that at the deepest level there is a “common wisdom” that allows us to see how different traditions actually converge. Practically all Christians would find themselves in agreement about their ultimate goal being union with God, eternal life, or other synonymous terms, but no Buddhist would use such terminology. Even though Nyoshul was a self-proclaimed “non-sectarian” and therefore very open to teachings from the various Buddhist schools, he always held that Dzogchen is the quintessential practice. He writes of Dzogchen’s goal as one’s coming to realize or truly experience that “this innate Great Perfection [the literal meaning of Dzogchen], this basic goodness called Buddha-nature, Buddha-mind, or *rigpa*, is our own nature...our very own being....It is what we are.”¹³ Or again: “[O]ne’s own nature is the infinite great expanse.”¹⁴

Now if St. John of the Cross teaches that the ultimate goal of our life is to attain union with God, whereas Nyoshul holds that our ultimate goal is to realize that our innate basic goodness, our Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind, is our very own being, or that our own nature is “the infinite great expanse,” then this might indeed make us suspect the claim of Griffiths that at the deepest level religions share a common wisdom. That suspicion becomes questionable, however, when we examine more closely the way in which each of these masters talks about this ultimate goal. According to John, even though we may know many truths about the divine reality (such as creation, the Trinity, and the Incarnation, all of which are summarized by St. John of the Cross in his nine *Romances* based on the opening verses of the Fourth

11 St. John, *Ascent*, 2.5.7.

12 St. John, *Spiritual Canticle* (second redaction), 26.3.

13 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 108.

14 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 114.

Gospel), such knowledge is not the same as full comprehension. John's years of study at Salamanca, where the work of St. Thomas Aquinas was central to the teaching of theology, surely made the Carmelite familiar with that passage in the *Summa Theologiae* where St. Thomas writes: "No created mind can attain the perfect sort of understanding that is intrinsically possible of God's essence. God, whose actual being is infinite, as noted above [in Ia 7,1], can be infinitely understood. The created mind, however, understands God more or less perfectly according to the degree of the light of glory that floods it. Since...the created light of glory cannot be infinite, it is impossible for any created mind to understand God infinitely; impossible, therefore, to comprehend him."¹⁵

It is for this reason that St. John frequently writes that we must advance to union with God's wisdom "by unknowing rather than by knowing," for "all of the world's wisdom...contrasted with the infinite wisdom of God is pure and utter ignorance."¹⁶ This being so, the saint sometimes uses the phrase "I don't know what" (*un no sé qué*) to describe the unfathomable gap between our knowledge and God's reality. The phrase appears, for example, in each of nine stanzas of a *Glosa á lo Divino* that is among his minor works. Its final stanza reads as follows:

I will never lose myself
 For that which the senses
 Can take in here,
 Nor for all the mind can hold,
 No matter how lofty,
 Nor for grace or beauty,
 But only for I-don't-know-what
 Which is so gladly found.¹⁷

For his part, Nyoshul used very similar language about the goal of Dzogchen practice, as when he wrote that that "the natural Great Perfection...is inconceivable and cannot be described. The absolute truth is not something that can be apprehended by the mind of ordinary beings. In order to indicate this to beings, in a relative way, the Buddhas have said that the void nature is like the sky, while its luminous expression is like the sun."¹⁸ In one of his *vjara* songs, Nyoshul refers to the "unfabricated, intrinsic nature of

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 12, 7, in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, trans. Herbert McCabe, O.P. (Blackfriars, 1964), 25.

16 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.4.5.

17 St. John, "Commentary Applied to Spiritual Things," in *The Collected Works*, 737.

18 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 74.

mind” that is “free of all limitations.” This calls to mind the frequent reference in Dzogchen writings to “the sky-like nature of our mind. Utterly open, free, and limitless, it is fundamentally so simple and so natural that it can never be complicated, corrupted, or stained, so pure that it is beyond even the concept of purity and impurity.”¹⁹ Dzogchen masters realize, of course, that to talk of the nature of mind as “sky-like” is only a metaphor, but the term does help us to begin to imagine the ineffable, all-embracing boundlessness of the mind, far beyond the power of human words to describe just what it is.

This means that both men were writing within what is sometimes called “the apophatic way,” a term that comes from the Greek verb *apophánai*, meaning “to say no; to deny.” What both St. John and Nyoshul are denying is that our finite mind is able to grasp fully, to “comprehend,” the ultimate reality to which we are called. This teaching has been propounded by some of the most important thinkers in both the Christian and Buddhist traditions, and both St. John and Nyoshul are in full agreement with this traditional teaching about the inability of the human mind to comprehend or fathom the ultimate reality, whether that be called God or the Buddha-mind. Such emphasis does not deny that many persons will feel more called to follow a “cataphatic” path, finding genuine spiritual nourishment in religious objects like statues and paintings, mantras and mandalas, as well as in practices intended to lead to the actual visualization of a deity or sacred person or object. But it is surely one of the lasting values of the more austere approach of St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo that they keep us always mindful that the ultimate reality to which we aspire is truly transcendent or, as taught in still another religious tradition, Hinduism, is *neti neti*, “not this, not that.” From this perspective, we can very well conclude that such spiritual masters do share “a common wisdom,” even though basic agreement at this level does not mean that they are merely “saying the same thing.” But if the ultimate goal is strictly ineffable, both St. John and Nyoshul held that it can nevertheless be experienced or in some respects “seen.” Let us therefore consider how these two spiritual masters describe the path to the goal of which each speaks.

19 Sogyal Rinpoché, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Harper, 1992), 49.

Teachings about the Path to the Goal

St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo on Detachment

Both in his minor works, such as his *Precautions* and his *Maxims and Counsels*, as well as in the major treatises—the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the *Dark Night*, the *Spiritual Canticle*, and the *Living Flame of Love*—John made use of what he had learned of Aristotelian philosophy at Salamanca. Since, “as we learn in philosophy,” it is impossible for two contraries to coexist in the same subject, then because “darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries...the light of divine union cannot be established in the soul until these affections are eradicated.”²⁰ In one of the minor works, St. John gives examples of the kinds of objects to which one may become attached and so be hindered in attaining union with God: “the habit of much talking; some small unconquered attachment, such as to a person, an article of clothing, a cell, a book, or some kind of food, or other conversations and little satisfactions in tasting things, and knowing and hearing, and the like.”²¹ But it is not only attachment to particular objects, such as a book or a kind of food, that will stand in the way of union with God, for attachment to spiritual feelings is just as much a hindrance, as so clearly expressed in one of St. John’s *Sayings of Light and Love* in the minor works. Here, in a way reminiscent of the kind of image used so effectively by St. Francis de Sales in the following generation, St. John uses the example of an insect to emphasize the way this kind of attachment can deprive one of the freedom necessary to ascend to divine union: “The fly that clings to honey hinders its flight, and the soul that allows itself attachment to spiritual sweetness hinders its own liberty and contemplation.”²² Even if persons are not fully aware of it, such appetites do actually torment them, as illustrated by eight scriptural passages either quoted or referred to in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1.7. It is not that the things themselves are what keeps one from union with God, but rather the craving or appetite for them, a distinction clearly made by the saint when he wrote: “We are dealing with the denudation of the soul’s appetites and gratifications; this is what leaves it free and empty of all things, even though it possesses them. Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within it that causes the damage.”²³

20 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.4.2.

21 St. John, *Maxims on Love*, no. 43, in *The Collected Works*, 677. See also *The Precautions*, no. 7, page 657 in the same volume.

22 St. John, *Sayings of Light and Love*, no. 24, in *The Collected Works*, 668.

23 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.3.4.

Such appetites concern not only impersonal objects, such as a particular “article of clothing, a cell, a book,” as mentioned above, but also one’s fellow human beings. Here the danger is particularly acute when it concerns one’s immediate family or close relatives. In his words, “you should have an equal love for and an equal forgetfulness of all persons, whether relatives or not, and withdraw your heart from relatives as much as from others, and in some ways even more for fear that flesh and blood might be quickened by natural love, which is ever alive among kin and which must always be mortified for the sake of spiritual perfection.”²⁴ One perceptive student of St. John who understood the saint’s teaching in this regard was the prominent French philosopher of the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain. Writing in particular with respect to love of one’s relatives, but in a way that would apply to any object of one’s love and desire, Maritain wrote that the soul is bound not to destroy its legitimate love for relatives but rather “to subordinate it completely to charity and, as far as may be necessary, to tear out its own sense of proprietorship. Only then will it arrive at a perfect love of its own, in and for God, loving them [i.e., one’s relatives] indeed as its own, but according to God in a supernatural and incomparably deeper way.”²⁵

St. John’s advice on how to overcome our natural appetite toward all created things is summarized in some of the best-known passages from his works, the two lists given near the end of the first book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The first list asks his reader always to be inclined “not to the easiest, but to the most difficult; not to the most delightful, but to the harshest,” and to six other alternatives, all summed up in a desire “to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.”²⁶ St. John’s second list is longer but it, too, concerns the way to channel our desires or appetites in a Godward direction. The list begins by assuring us that “to reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing,” and after listing more than ten other alternatives concludes that “in this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest,” whereas when anything is coveted, in that very desire the spirit is wearied.²⁷

This is the kind of teaching that has led some readers of St. John of the Cross to feel that what he asks is excessively harsh and demanding, but what such readers overlook is the saint’s assurance that living in this way will in fact bring about a sense of freedom and delight far beyond anything that purely natural inclinations could ever provide. As he wrote, “If you sincerely

24 St. John, *The Precautions*, no. 5, in *The Collected Works*, 656.

25 Jacques Maritain, introduction to *St. John of the Cross*, by Fr. Bruno, O.D.C. (Sheed & Ward, 1936), xxi.

26 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.13.6.

27 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.13.11.

put them [i.e., these teachings] into practice with order and discretion, you will discover in them great delight and consolation.”²⁸ Or again, St. John writes that if by mortification a person lives a genuinely spiritual life, “this person, now of pure heart, finds in all things a joyful, pleasant, chaste, pure, spiritual, glad, and loving knowledge of God.”²⁹

This assurance that what one loves will be one’s own in a supernatural way, far more delightful than what might seem to result from a purely human appetite, was perhaps nowhere more beautifully taught by St. John than in a prayer contained among his minor works. Having himself reached a high degree of union with God’s will, he was now able to exclaim in exultant tones: “Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me. What do you ask, then, and seek my soul? Yours is all this, all is for you.”³⁰

Having seen what St. John teaches about the need for detachment from our various appetites, let us now consider what Nyoshul said about the same topic. An appropriate place to start is with the *Bhavacakra* or “Wheel of Life,” which is depicted on the outside wall of almost all Buddhist temples or monasteries in the Indo-Tibetan region, for at its center is a small circle depicting three creatures that symbolize the “three poisons”: attachment or craving (represented by a rooster), aversion or ill-will (a snake), and ignorance or delusion (a pig). To the first of these poisons Nyoshul ascribes special emphasis, writing that “of all the Buddhist teachings, the main thing is the release or loosening of selfishness, of self-grasping, of ego-cherishing, of craving, resistance and attachment.”³¹ Indeed, he ascribes to Buddha Shakyamuni the claim that “the root of all suffering is clinging, attachment. There is no teaching other than this. This is the root of all.”³² Accordingly, detachment is the way to be released from cyclic existence and so “become enlightened like the primordial Buddha.”³³

Living in this way will, of course, include being freed from the other two poisons as well. Instead of the aversion or ill-will represented by the image of the snake in the wheel of life, we give up quarrels and enmities, all strife and hostility, even as we likewise give up the delusion or ignorance symbolized by

28 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.13.7.

29 St. John, *Ascent*, 3.26.6.

30 St. John, “Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love,” in *The Collected Works*, 669.

31 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 94.

32 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 119.

33 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 76.

the pig, no longer being misled by the “magical appearance of all phenomena,”³⁴ because we come to recognize their lack of substantial, independent existence, just as upon awakening from sleep we realize the insubstantiality of our dreams. Using his acquaintance with a well-known parable from the Christian scriptures, Nyoshul writes that the genuine happiness that comes to one by overcoming clinging and attachment is like that of the prodigal son upon being restored to his proper place, for it is “like being reintroduced to ourselves, like the prodigal son being restored to his rightful place as crown prince of his father’s kingdom, beyond the possibility of doubt or disputation.”³⁵

So even though St. John of the Cross would not have accepted the Buddhist notion of there being no substantial self, it would be altogether correct to say that his teaching is intended to draw us away from what many Christian writers call the “false self” of self-centeredness, foreshadowed by what St. Paul had earlier written when he urged his readers to “put away the old self of your former way of life ... and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:22–24). In this respect, both St. John and Nyoshul would be in agreement about the joy or happiness that is the fruit of putting away the clinging, craving, or possessiveness that otherwise keeps us fettered. Even as the two men emphasized the need for detachment from our various cravings, they also wrote much about the need for appropriate ways of meditation, which we will next consider.

St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo on Meditation

St. John is explicit about the fact that his work was intended primarily for nuns and friars of the Primitive Observance of Mount Carmel, whom he considered “proficients,” that is, “already detached to a great extent from the temporal things of this world.”³⁶ He was convinced that many of them were well prepared for a form of prayer that consisted in “a simple, loving knowledge” of God, a “loving awareness” that would be hindered if their spiritual director insisted on their continuing to meditate in a discursive manner as they had done while still in the state of beginners.³⁷ Several times he gives the signs that a person is ready to move on to a higher form of prayer, and he repeatedly warns that “directors should not impose meditation upon persons in this state, nor should they oblige them to make

34 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 51.

35 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 77.

36 St. John, *Ascent*, prologue.

37 St. John, *The Living Flame of Love*, 3.34–35.

acts or strive for satisfaction and fervor. Such activity would place an obstacle in the part of the principal agent Who, as I say, is God.”³⁸

St. John assumes that his readers will readily understand the difference between the kinds of prayer or meditation to which he refers, the earlier form being “to meditate and make acts of discursive reflection with the imagination.”³⁹ When using the word *meditación* all by itself, St. John is usually referring to this kind of meditation, which he sometimes calls “*la obra del discursivo meditar*” or “*la meditación y discurso*.” In such cases, he will sometime contrast this with “contemplation,” which is “*la via del espíritu (que es la contemplativa)*.”⁴⁰ As St. John was writing in the first instance only for his fellow Carmelites of the Primitive Observance and as they would already have experienced discursive meditation during their period of initial formation, he did not need to define more exactly just what he meant by that term. It will be helpful, however, to give a brief description of discursive mediation as taught by another great Spanish saint who lived somewhat earlier in the sixteenth century, St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Of the various writings of this founder of the Society of Jesus, the best known is surely the *Spiritual Exercises*, intended above all to help Christians discern their particular God-given calling. These exercises abound in the kinds of “points” and the uses of the imagination that St. John considered necessary for beginners. One could turn to almost any page of the *Exercises* to see what “discursive meditation” (that is, meditation “step by step”) really means. Consider what St. Ignatius asks of someone meditating on “the standard of Christ,” contrasted with “the standard of Satan.” The preludes to this meditation abound in the use of the imagination, as when one is asked “to imagine a great plain in the region of Jerusalem, where the supreme commander of the good people is Christ our Lord; then another plain in the region of Babylon, where the leader of the enemy is Lucifer.” There follow three points about Satan, including imagining him “seated on a throne of fire and smoke,” summoning “uncountable devils” to all parts of the world, and admonishing them to tempt people to covet riches and honor. In contrast, there follow three points where one gazes in imagination on Christ our Lord, considering how he has taken his place on a beautiful area near Jerusalem and from there sends his followers throughout the world to spread his doctrine and call people to spiritual or actual poverty, to a desire for reproaches and contempt, and to humility, thereby inducing people “to all the other virtues.” This is followed by three colloquies, the first being a

38 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.33.

39 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.32.

40 For these terms, see St. John, *Ascent*, 2.13.1; 2.14.2; and 12.14.1.

prayer to Our Lady, the second to her Son, Jesus, and the third to the Father, followed by the Lord's Prayer, plus a note saying that "this exercise will be made at midnight and again after arising," followed by "two repetitions of it, one near the hour of Mass and one near that of Vespers," each of them closing with the three colloquies mentioned above.⁴¹

It is crucial to emphasize that St. John of the Cross fully recognized the value of such meditations for those who are still in the beginning stages of the spiritual life, but he was very concerned that inexperienced directors would keep insisting on such meditations for persons who needed another kind of prayer. In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, he twice writes of signs that a person is ready to move on beyond discursive meditation, namely that the person no longer receives satisfaction from its practice, can no longer fix the imagination or sense faculties on particular objects, and is drawn instead to "remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises ... of the intellect, memory, and will."⁴² It is altogether understandable that St. John would express his concerns about unwise directors in a treatise like the *Ascent*, which is largely devoted to the active nights of the senses and spirit. His concern was so great, however, that even in the *Living Flame of Love*, a work that was devoted to the spiritual marriage, the highest stage possible on earth, he also devotes many pages to expressing his dismay over the harm done by unwise insistence that a person should keep trying to practice discursive meditation when he or she is no longer able to do so. In fact, some of his harshest criticisms of poor directors are found in this treatise, as when he writes:

[M]any spiritual directors cause great harm to a number of souls because, in not understanding the ways and properties of the spirit, they ordinarily make them lose the unction of these delicate ointments, with which the Holy Spirit anoints and prepares them for Himself, and they [the directors] instruct them in other baser ways, serviceable only to beginners, which they themselves have used or read of somewhere. Knowing no more than what pertains to beginners—and please God they would even know this much—they do not wish to permit souls to pass beyond these beginnings and these discursive and imaginative ways (even though God may desire to lead them on). Thus they do not let them go beyond their natural

41 Ignatius of Loyola, "*The Spiritual Exercises*" and *Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, S.J. (Paulist, 1991), 154–64 (nos. 136–48).

42 St. John, *Ascent*, 2.13.2–4.

capacity, but through their natural capacity souls cannot make much progress.⁴³

Similarly, he wrote elsewhere: “It is sad to see many disturb their soul when it desires to abide in this calm and repose of interior quietude, where it is filled with the peace and refreshment of God.”⁴⁴

If, however, a wise and experienced director helps a person proceed to that gentle, loving awareness that is brought about by God and leads through what the saint terms “the spiritual espousals” all the way to “the spiritual marriage,” then a soul attains the most sublime state possible in life on earth. It is now God who infuses both knowledge and love, for “in this contemplation we are discussing (by which God infuses Himself into the soul), particular knowledge as well as acts made by the soul are unnecessary, because God in one act is communicating light and love together, which is loving supernatural knowledge.”⁴⁵ The soul here returns to a pristine state in which the soul “resembles Adam in the state of innocence, who did not know evil. For she [the soul] is so innocent that she does not understand evil, nor does she judge anything in a bad light.”⁴⁶ So intimate is this “transforming union” that “the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one,” although St. John rightly emphasizes that this is not to be called a “substantial conversion,” for “the substance of the soul is not the substance of God,” who infinitely transcends the substance of any creature.⁴⁷ The saint adds that any more perfect union could take place only in the next life.

There is no doubt but that St. John expected those of his Carmelite readers who had reached this state of transforming union to lay aside the works and exercises in which they would have been engaged at earlier periods of their life. This is especially clear when he writes that “until the soul reaches this state of union of love, she should practice love in both the active and contemplative life. Yet once she arrives, she should not become involved in other works and exterior exercises that might be of the slightest hindrance to the attentiveness of love toward God, even though the work be of great service to God. For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church ... than all these other works

43 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.31.

44 St. John, *Ascent*, 2.12.

45 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.49.

46 St. John, *Cantic*, 26.14.

47 Quotation one is from St. John, *Cantic*, 12.7; the second quotation is from St. John, *Living Flame*, 2.34.

put together.”⁴⁸ He then alludes to the legend that St. Mary Magdalen, after some time spent preaching to others, went to live in the desert for thirty years in order to surrender herself fully to this love.

St. John was, however, well aware that there are many different callings in the church. He certainly never claimed that God wanted every single Catholic to live as Carmelites as did he and St. Teresa of Avila, but he was convinced that even those whose ministry was of a more active sort would benefit if they avoided too much involvement in their works and devoted more of their time to prayer. In his words, “They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer, they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.”⁴⁹ With this summary of what St. John of the Cross taught with regard to meditation, contemplation, and prayer in general, we next ask how this teaching might compare with that of the Tibetan Buddhist master Nyoshul Khenpo.

Within the Buddhist tradition, the term “meditation” is normally not restricted to what St. John usually meant by “discursive meditation.” For Buddhists, the term embraces many different ways of calming the mind and so is described by various terms. In his “Instructions on Mindfulness,” Nyoshul writes that the terms “calm abiding,” “one-pointedness,” and “mastery of the mind” are different ways of speaking of the same aspect of meditation. “These mean that we need to remain focused...Whether it is the recitations of Tara or Avolokiteshvara, or the accumulation of the preliminary practices...such as performing prostrations, single-minded mastery of our mind is what is important. In fact the practice of concentration, of focusing the mind, is not only found in the buddhadharma but is taught in many other traditions as well....[They all] teach stilling the mind and one-pointed concentration.”⁵⁰ Such stilling of the mind should characterize one’s entire day, whether one is walking, sitting, eating, resting, or any other aspect of daily life. But whereas some Buddhist traditions place much emphasis on prostrations, spinning prayer wheels, or using mandalas and mantras, the Dzogchen emphasis is distinct in its strong emphasis on “calm abiding” or “resting in natural great peace.” That latter phrase is in fact the first line of a poem that Nyoshul once wrote, a line that in the

48 St. John, *Canticle*, 29.2.

49 St. John, *Canticle*, 29.3.

50 Nyoshul, *The Fearless Lion’s Roar*, trans. David Christensen (Snow Lion, 2015), 131–32.

opinion of his friend and fellow Tibetan Sogyal Rinpoché sums up all that Nyoshul taught: “Rest in natural great peace.” For at the very end of his introduction to Nyoshul’s *Marvelous Garden of Rare Gems*, his monumental history of the entire Dzogchen tradition, Sogyal wrote that Nyoshul himself was, in every way, “the greatest statement of Dzogchen, in simply how he was and how he incarnated that natural ease of the innermost nature of mind...the ‘natural great peace’ he wrote of so beautifully” in these lines:

Rest in natural great peace.
This exhausted mind,
Beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thoughts
Like the relentless fury of the pounding waves
In the infinite ocean of samsara.
Rest in natural great peace.⁵¹

Not surprisingly, this emphasis on rest corresponds to St. John’s teaching that, as one progresses along the spiritual path, the relative “busyness” of discursive meditation is to be replaced by resting in a gentle, loving awareness of God’s presence. Nyoshul, of course, does not speak of God, but it is significant that he is just as aware as was St. John of the limits of discursive thought. He agreed with one of his predecessors, Patrul Rinpoché, that in most Buddhist schools or “vehicles” there is a chaining of “one thought to another, an endless chain of discursiveness that we get tangled in, due to our own willful efforts. But in the path of Dzogchen, all appearances, all phenomena, spontaneously dissolve in their own natural state, self-appearing, self-releasing, beyond fixation and reference point.”⁵² Similarly, Nyoshul once wrote in a letter to his disciples of “aimless discursive thoughts arising of themselves, and dispersing and vanishing like clouds.”⁵³ Likewise, Sogyal Rinpoché wrote of the simplicity that at times characterized his own way of meditation: “Sometimes when I meditate, I don’t use any particular method. I just allow my mind to rest and find, especially when I am inspired, that I can bring my mind home and relax very quickly. I sit quietly and rest in the nature of mind; I don’t question or doubt whether I am in the ‘correct’ state or not...I simply am. A fundamental trust is present. There is nothing in particular to do.”⁵⁴

51 Nyoshul, in Sogyal Rinpoché’s introduction to Nyoshul’s *A Marvelous Garden of Rare Gems*, xlii.

52 Nyoshul, *Great Perfection*, 109–10.

53 Nyoshul, *Great Perfection*, 131.

54 Sogyal Rinpoché, *Book of Living and Dying*, 63.

Clearly there are definite similarities between what St. John of the Cross meant by “the contemplative way” and the teaching about meditation found in the works of Nyoshul Khenpo, Sogyal Rinpoché, and other Tibetan Buddhist masters in the Dzogchen tradition. This brings us to the next and final topic in this paper, namely the practices needed if one is to attain the ultimate goal: solitude, humility and love.

St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo on Solitude, Humility, and Love

As one would expect, there are many requirements if a person is fruitfully to follow the path toward the ultimate goal, but certainly the following three are central: a significant degree of withdrawal or solitude, the practice of humility, and an all-pervasive spirit of love.

Both in his major treatises and his minor works, St. John regularly taught the importance of a degree of withdrawal from worldly activities. In one of his minor sayings, he urges his reader to “withdraw from creatures if you desire to preserve, clear and simple in your soul, the image of God. Empty your spirit and withdraw far from them and you will walk in divine lights, for God is not like creatures.”⁵⁵ When he was prior of the community at Los Mártires he would often take his friars out into the open air along the spurs of the Sierra Nevada. Once there the group would spend some time in conversation, after which he would sometimes say, “Today each one is to go alone through the mountains and spend the day in solitary prayer and in speaking to the Lord from his heart,” while at other times he left them to speak with one another while he went off alone to spend the day in prayerful solitude. If not to the mountains, he might lead the group to a spot along the banks of one or another of the small rivers near the friary, allowing all of them to enjoy the beautiful landscape.⁵⁶ The saint’s love of beautiful scenery is especially evident in his poetry, as in the following two stanzas from the *Spiritual Canticle*:

My Beloved, the mountains,
The solitary, wooded valleys,
The strange islands,
The sonorous rivers,
The whisper of the amorous breezes.

55 St. John, *Sayings*, in *Collected Works*, 668.

56 Crisógono de Jesús, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kathleen Pond (Longmans, 1958), 196.

The tranquil night,
 At the time of the rising of the dawn,
 The silent music,
 The sounding solitude,
 The supper that recreates and enkindles love.⁵⁷

If such relishing of created beauty seems contrary to St. John's advice to "withdraw from creatures," it really is not, for he realized that such places could lead one to thoughts of their Creator, just as he knew that those who were already advanced in the spiritual life would easily be able to love friends, relatives, and all creatures in a Godly way, for these goods would turn such persons immediately to God.

With regard to the virtue of humility, it is not at all surprising that St. John should write about it often in his various works. One significant place is in the first book of the *Dark Night*, for after he describes with psychological acumen the various manifestations of pride that afflict some beginners, he turns to those who are truly humble, who are far from desiring to be anyone's teacher or favorite but are instead "ready to take a road different from the one they are following, if told to do so.... They rejoice when others receive praise, and their only sorrow is that they do not serve God as these others do. Because they consider their deeds insignificant, they do not want to make them known. They are even ashamed to speak of them to their spiritual directors because they think these deeds are not worth mentioning."⁵⁸ One might think, of course, that St. John had risen to such a height that he had no need to acknowledge any weaknesses or failings on his own part, and if we had only his various treatises available to us that would be a conclusion easy to make. We do, however, also have a number of his letters, and it is instructive to read his letter to Doña Juana de Pedraza, written just two years before he died. There he writes: "Let not the soul be attached to anything, for since prayer is not wanting, God will take care of His possessions; they belong to no other owner, nor should they. I see this with myself: the more that things are mine, the more I set my heart and soul and care on them. The loved object becomes one with the lover, and so does God with the one who loves Him. Hence one cannot forget the loved object without forgetting one's own soul; and a person even forgets his own soul for the object loved, because he lives in the thing he loves more than in himself."⁵⁹

57 St. John, *Canticle*, stanzas 14 and 15 of the second redaction.

58 St. John, *Dark Night*, 1.1.7.

59 St. John of the Cross to Doña Juana de Pedroza, Jan. 28, 1589, in *The Collected Works*, 691.

Finally, it may be that St. John is nowhere more eloquent than when he writes about love, which has been seen as the most central Christian virtue ever since the teaching of Jesus and of his apostle St. Paul, who wrote his memorable praise of this virtue in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. And as Jesus taught with regard to the two great commandments and to how we are to relate to those who dislike or even hate us, so too is St. John insistent that our love is to be extended to everyone. In a letter he wrote to a fellow Carmelite in October or November of 1591, just weeks before he died, St. John said: “Have a great love for those who contradict and fail to love you, for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love. God so acts with us, for He loves us that we might love by means of the very love He bears toward us.”⁶⁰ St. John certainly lived these words, for when he was near death at Ubeda and was suffering not only from physical pain but from harsh treatment by Fray Francisco Crisóstomo, the Carmelite superior of that house, he spoke kindly to that friar, urging him not to be distressed that the small community had to endure great poverty. We are told that Fray Francisco Crisóstomo left the dying man’s cell in tears and afterwards became an avid distributor of his relics and an imitator of his virtues. Until his last breath the saint had lived what he had taught, namely that a little of pure love “is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems to be doing nothing, than all the other works put together.”⁶¹ And that at the evening of life, all of us will be examined on our love.⁶² We will next see that similar teachings are to be found in the works of Nyoshul Khenpo.

In the autobiographical account that is the first chapter in Nyoshul’s *Natural Great Perfection* he writes that at various times in his life he lived in strict solitude. For example, while in his early twenties he made a solitary retreat for an entire year while concentrating on instructions he had received from one of his teachers, while other times he “spent meditating alone on windswept mountaintops and in caves consecrated by the lineage masters of old.”⁶³ In an essay on one of the songs of the fourteenth-century Dzogchen master Longchen, Nyoshul first quotes from one of that master’s poems the lines “Emulating the way of the sages / Meditate in solitude and discover peace!” and he then comments in the following words: “Longchenpa counsels us not to stay in towns and cities, because this will cause us to lose our peace of mind. We will be endlessly distracted and will not be able to

60 St. John, to a Carmelite nun in Segovia, Oct.–Nov. 1591, in *The Collected Works*, 706.

61 St. John, *Canticle*, 292.

62 St. John, *Sayings*, no. 57, in *The Collected Works*, 672.

63 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 21.

practice. We should always stay in places of solitude and devote ourselves to dharma practice. Then, at the time of our death, we will have no regrets. The best outcome will be enlightenment in this very lifetime, and if we don't attain that, at least we will have no regrets. So we must be clear about what we are doing!"⁶⁴

Nyoshul himself lived according to that advice. Although he had at times visited large cities in Europe and the United States, the hectic pace of life in such places led him always to prefer living in rural areas, whether in Tibet, India, or France. The kind of advice he gave in his commentary on one of Longchen's poems is also reflected in some of his own *vajra* songs. While giving a retreat at a zendo in the Catskill Mountains of New York state in 1992 he composed a lengthy song that included the following lines, which reveal not only his love of the natural world but also his ability to note the kinds of flora and fauna to be found in such a setting. He gave no commentary on this song, nor was one needed. Especially beautiful are the following lines:

O, my extremely fortunate friends,
 Here in this supreme place of the ultimate, vast sky-like expanse [...]
 Look at this wonderfully pure sight.
 Externally: Unfabricated, this natural forest,
 Adorned with thousands of variegated colors,
 Trees, creepers, leaves, flowers,
 All kinds of birds, deer, skunks, turkeys, and other wild animals
 frolicking,
 While delightfully resounds the melodious humming of all types of
 creatures,
 And a shower of snowflakes wafts down from the sky,
 Shaped like flowers, petals, and divine objects.
 In this place, totally free of the cacophony of meaningless worldly
 babble,
 Which would disturb the practice of meditative serenity,
 Within this naturally tranquil forest
 Is the supreme place for accomplishing wisdom and samadhi.
 Emaho, how wonderful!⁶⁵

As humility is a further quality that Nyoshul considered crucial on the path to the ultimate goal of "natural Great Perfection," one of the clearest ways in which he himself practiced it was his reverence for his various teachers.

64 Nyoshul, *Fearless Lion's Roar*, 41.

65 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 125–26.

He never claimed any personal ability of his own that had not been made possible by those who had taught him during his formative years. It was these teachers “who gave me everything,” so he continued regularly praying to them.⁶⁶ Sogyal Rinpoché once asked Nyoshul how he had become so “realized,” and he replied with his usual humility, “I don’t have any deep understanding. I just prayed to the lama [i.e., one’s teacher],” for he was convinced that “if you possess that heartfelt devotion to your lama and the lineage, then you can and will receive the blessing of Dzogpachenpo.”⁶⁷ Even though he came to be regarded as fully enlightened in Buddhahood, he never accepted that kind of status for himself. Indeed, throughout his writings he regularly refers to himself in very lowly terms, such as “the bucktoothed foolish ox, the fallen monk” or “the Tibetan stray dog.”⁶⁸ This is similar to the way some of the most revered Christian saints would speak of themselves by a term like “miserable sinner,” a designation that can best be understood as reflecting their awareness of the infinite distance between themselves and God, even as Nyoshul considered himself to be only a novice compared to Buddha Shakyamuni or Longchen.

As regards the attribute or virtue of love, what Nyoshul taught is perhaps best found in his discussion of *bodhicitta*. This Buddhist term, which literally means “the mind” [*citta*] aspiring to “awakening” [*bodhi*], was considered by Nyoshul to be “the all-sufficient wish-fulfilling jewel” and thus “the foundation of all the vast and profound teachings.”⁶⁹ It is the practice of unselfish love and compassion and as such is the most profound way to dissolve ego-clinging. The aspect of unself love (or “loving-kindness”) includes the wish that all beings be established at the level of perfect enlightenment and so experience the supreme happiness of that state, while the aspect of compassion consists of wishing that all beings be free from suffering and from the causes and effects of suffering. In its universal scope, *bodhicitta* is “an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings,” so effective that we read that constant meditation on *bodhicitta* by an eleventh-century bodhisattva led sheep and wolves to live together in peace in his hermitage.⁷⁰ This virtue can be developed by reading a book like *Entering the Path of Enlightenment* by the eighth-century Indian monk and philosopher Shantideva, and as its practice deepens and expands

66 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 116.

67 Nyoshul, quoted in the Introduction to *A Marvelous Garden*, xxv and xxvi.

68 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 124, and *Fearless Lion’s Roar*, 220.

69 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 140–41.

70 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 43 and 45.

within a person there will arise “incredible spontaneous compassion for all those who don’t realize it” and who are still suffering from delusion.⁷¹

However, it is important to emphasize that Nyoshul not only taught the importance of love but actually lived it. An American Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg, once spoke of his “wide-open consciousness and huge unbounded heart. Being with Khenpo was the closest I’ve come to experiencing transformation through just being in the presence of a realized person.”⁷² Similarly, Sogyal Rinpoché said of him that “he treated everyone with kindness, no matter who they were. He was known for his pure perception, for seeing the good in people, whoever they might be, and for showing love and compassion to absolutely everyone he met.”⁷³ In words that for a Christian would resemble some aspects of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Nyoshul wrote that so often “we indulge in unloving or unkind feelings, in likes and dislikes. Yet ... all our preferences are unreliable and cause us to accumulate the karma of meaningless attachment and aversion. We need to give up all strife and hostility and instead without delay subdue our own mind and practice the dharma.”⁷⁴ That he himself tried to live in this way shines through in a *vajra* song he composed for his students while he was living in France. One stanza consisted in these words:

I remain loving and kind to whomever I meet, high or low,
 Man or woman, my parents from long ago.
 I treat them all as close brothers and sisters, with love in my heart.
 For this the stupid and jealous may mock me,
 But they cannot change my naturally kind thoughts.⁷⁵

In this attitude, as in many other ways, Nyoshul Khenpo was a kindred spirit with St. John of the Cross, and it may properly lead us to agree with Bede Griffiths that such spiritual masters did indeed share “a common wisdom” from which everything springs and toward which everything is converging.



71 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 120.

72 Sharon Salzberg, quoted in the Introduction to *A Marvelous Garden*, xxxvi–xxxvii.

73 Sogyal Rinpoché, introduction to Nyoshul’s *A Marvelous Garden of Rare Gems*, xix.

74 Nyoshul, *Fearless Lion’s Roar*, 30.

75 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 130.

***James Wiseman** is an Abbot, Teacher of Religion, and Vocations Director at St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC. He regularly teaches courses at Catholic University of America and has published widely on the history of mysticism, including Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View (Orbis Books, 2006).*

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ARTICLE

Interfaith Transposed: Interfaithlessness in the Age of Religious Exit

Kristen Tobey

Abstract

This article examines so-called interfaithless initiatives in the United States, in which exes from different high-demand religious groups participate together as they navigate the difficult process of religious exit. Sustained attention is focused on an Interfaithless Beach Party held regularly between 2014 and 2022. I argue that associating interfaithlessness with interfaith becomes legible by thinking of interfaithlessness not as peripheral to but rather as a transposition of interfaith. Indeed, these are examples of interfaith encounter at its best, showing not just proximity between exes from different religions, but meaningful interreligious exchange that complicates assumptions about the growing nonreligious population in the United States.

Keywords

interreligious, interfaith, high-demand religions, nonreligion, religious nones, religious exit, religious identity

Introduction

Every fall, in a peaceful rural setting, people from different religious backgrounds gather for fellowship over a weekend known as the Fall Excursion. Attendees take in lectures by scholars and practitioners, play games of religious trivia, and share food and music from different religious

traditions. They participate in small-group breakout sessions focused on topics such as how to talk about religious beliefs across difference, comparative religious views on sexuality, strategies for community building, and more. All these activities could have been taken directly from the Interreligious Dialogue playbook. Versions of all of them, in fact, have been hosted during the last year by the Tuohy Center for Interreligious Understanding at the university where I teach. But the plot twist comes at the beginning of this story: The gathering described above is not an interreligious/interfaith event. Rather, it is a retreat designed to help people who have exited a religion deal with their ensuing trauma.¹

Part therapy, part education, and part recreation, the Fall Excursion, which has been organized annually since 2019 by the nonprofit organization Recovering from Religion, is not the only such endeavor in this era of religious exit. From online discussion forums to organized in-person activities of many different sorts, numerous initiatives now exist to meet the therapeutic and social needs of religious exiters, whose number in the United States has grown exponentially over the last three decades. Some are meant for exiters from a single religious group, such as the Ex Jehovah's Witnesses United Facebook group, or local Off the Derech Meetups for former Orthodox Jews. Some, like the Fall Excursion, welcome exiters from different groups, while others have been designed purposefully to bring together exiters from different groups, either out of numerical practicality or for philosophical reasons. At a time when actors in the interreligious space are sometimes at a loss for ways to meaningfully include the nonreligious, religious exiters—an ever more significant subset of the nonreligious—increasingly are doing an uncanny kind of interreligion all on their own.²

In his epilogue to a 2020 volume applying social movement theory to interfaith activities, Paul Numrich refers to a terrain “along the edges” of what many scholars have begun to identify as an interfaith movement.³

1 The description is compiled from the programs of the Recovering from Religions Fall Excursions from 2019–2024, available online at recoveringfromreligion.org.

2 On inclusion of non-religious within interfaith contexts, see Terry Shoemaker and James Edmonds, “The Limits of Interfaith? Interfaith Identities, Emerging Potentialities, and Exclusivity,” *Culture and Religion* 17, no. 2 (2016): 200–12. On the “uncanny” as I am using it here, not in Freud’s psychoanalytical sense but rather in Jentsch’s sense of an intellectual unease with an apparent miscategorization, see Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906).” Translated by Roy Sellars. *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1997): 7–16.

3 There is disagreement amongst scholars in interreligious studies over whether there is a coherent interfaith movement; even those arguing that there is often emphasize how diffuse and perhaps unintentional it is, but hold that common aims

There, he locates projects or episodes that, in his analysis, contribute to the interfaith movement's "core goal of...improving relations amongst religious traditions" unintentionally, incidentally, or even while actively opposing that goal.⁴ For example, in a space-sharing arrangement in which different congregations make use of an interfaith center, the center's normative interfaith goals are largely unknown or irrelevant to many who use the space, for whom the arrangement is purely practical. Some even espouse teachings that actively oppose those goals, but still demonstrate respect and care for the needs of the other religious groups who use the space. For Numrich, such situations "both contribute to the interfaith goal of improved interreligious relations and exemplify just how decentralized, disparate, fluid and fragmented this social movement is."⁵

At first glance it may seem that if my subjects in this article and their activities belong anywhere in the vicinity of interfaith, it is here, along the fragmented edges. It may also seem, both from a scholarly point of view and from the perspectives of participants in interfaith or in the initiatives I discuss here, that to place them there might well render those edges not just fragmented, but so disjointed as to be meaningless and functionless as edges. At the very least, to consider initiatives for people who have actively rejected religious institutions and identifications, who often feel negative if not openly antagonistic toward their former religion, as of a piece with interfaith surely requires a greater suspension of disbelief even than the examples Numrich considers. But in what follows, I would like to suggest that associating what I am calling "interfaithlessness" with interfaith is indeed legible, by thinking of interfaithlessness not as peripheral to but rather as a transposition of interfaith.

Transposition has a variety of meanings and usages. I am using it here in its musical sense, as a compositional technique whereby a piece of music is moved entirely to a different key. The resulting tune usually but not always sounds all-but-identical to the original, unspooling the same melody from a different starting point. Depending on the interval between the original and the new starting pitch, the transposition might go undetected by anyone without perfect pitch—that is, by the vast majority of people. It might be detected but not registered as anything unusual, as happens every time a

are enough to unite its disparate elements. I hold no stake in this argument but find Numrich's attempt to broaden to category of interfaith a useful springboard for the present analysis.

4 Paul D. Numrich, "Epilogue: Understanding a Decentralised Social Movement," in *The Interfaith Movement: Mobilising Religious Diversity in the 21st Century*, ed. John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock (Routledge, 2020), 219–27.

5 Numrich, "Epilogue," 226.

group settles together into the same key for a rendition of Happy Birthday after a flurry of different starting pitches. A transposition might sound just the slightest bit uncanny for reasons a listener can't quite identify, or it might be entirely unsubtle, as when a piece is transposed from a major to a minor key. A transposition of a well-known or much-loved song probably will sound wrong at first. It might grow on the listener, or it might never stop sounding wrong. Like, for example, Happy Birthday sung in a minor key, some transpositions require a certain suspension of disbelief. In all these cases, subtle or overt, that there is a relationship to the prior melody is perceptible, and usually easily so, even if the specifics of that relationship may take some parsing, and even though whether or not the transposition succeeds equally—or at all—as pleasant to listen to remains in the ear of the listener. I argue that a similar relationship obtains between interfaith and interfaithlessness. Even if an initial suspension of disbelief is required, these brief sketches of some representative examples of interfaithless initiatives, followed by a more sustained examination of one idiosyncratic but instructive example, an Interfaithless Beach Party held once or twice a year from 2014 until 2022, show interfaith encounter at its best. Moreover, these initiatives, especially the Beach Party, show not just proximity between exes from different religions, but meaningful interreligious exchange that complicates assumptions about the growing nonreligious population in the United States.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this article, I use the term interfaithless not only to describe the Interfaithless Beach Party, but more widely to refer to any initiative in which exites from multiple religious groups participate together. As this is neither a widely-used term nor one of my own invention, a few words about my choice to apply it as I do are in order. Prior to its adoption in the context I am describing here, the term interfaithless was most closely associated with American Judaism. Appearing in Alan Dershowitz's 1997 book *The Vanishing American Jew*, it describes the marriage between Dershowitz' son, for whom Judaism is a heritage more than a faith, and a woman whose Catholicism is similarly cultural more than religious. Since neither one has a sense of religiosity, their marriage will be, as his son explains and Dershowitz laments, an "interfaithless" one, a version of the interfaith marriages that had become so common—and in some circles, so threatening—in American

Judaism, and which Dershowitz sees as even more problematic.⁶ Following Dershowitz, the term appears primarily in discussions of Jewish intermarriage, sometimes as a neutral descriptor but often reiterating his alarm over the ramifications of such unions on the survival and flourishing of Judaism in the United States.

It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that one of the initiatives that has used the term to describe its own activities is the Jewish nonprofit organization Footsteps. Through counseling services, career and legal assistance, education, outreach, and more, Footsteps, founded in 2003, supports individuals leaving ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, whether they wish to separate entirely from Judaism or maintain some form of Jewish identity and/or practice apart from ultra-Orthodoxy. In 2021, however, Footsteps introduced a monthly, virtual Interfaithless Meetup, held over Zoom. Advertised across social media platforms and on the Footsteps website's FAQ page (addressing whether Footsteps' services were only available to Jews), the Interfaithless Meetup would welcome "folks who left *all* kinds of insular religious communities (including ex-Orthodox Jewish, ex-LDS, ex-Muslim, exvangelical, and others!)"⁷ Glossing the meetup as "a peer support group available for those navigating life outside of their communities of origin," Footsteps used the term interfaithless not in alarm, but rather to signify the aim of coalition and shared healing.⁸

The second initiative that uses the term is the Interfaithless Beach Party (IBP), discussed at length below. This event's organizer chose the word interfaithless as an echo, both self-evident and a bit cheeky, of "interfaith." As he told me, "I remember that when I was in college, there were always groups on campus...that would have some kind of common interest and they would group together and call themselves like an interfaith kind of thing...And then I just kind of thought, well, we're all people who left our faith and we're from a bunch of different backgrounds. So this is just interfaith-less."⁹ In speaking with people who attended the IBP, I encountered one interviewee who, more than once, used the term interfaith

6 Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century* (Little, Brown, 1997).

7 "Interfaithless Meetup," Meetup Page for Footsteps, <https://www.meetup.com/interfaithless-meetup/>.

8 "Frequently Asked Questions," Footsteps website, <https://www.footstepsorg.org/>. The Footsteps Interfaithless Meetup ceased in early 2024. Unfortunately, my attempts to gain access to both participants and Footsteps staff to find out more about this brief experiment were unsuccessful. It is fascinating to consider the why and how of an interfaithless initiative in this context, and hard not to wonder about the reasons for its demise.

9 Morris Bird, telephone conversation, March 19, 2025.

instead of interfaithless when describing the party. He corrected himself immediately, but his repeated slip of the tongue indicated to me that, like the organizer, at least some attendees understood the beach party as a short step away from—perhaps not even entirely distinct from—interfaith engagement, now so culturally ubiquitous as to be known even by those ensconced in insular religions that have not been common participants in such endeavors.¹⁰

Both Footsteps' and the IBP's usage of the term interfaithless is a creative re-use of the known language of interfaith (or, in Footsteps' case, perhaps a secondary re-use of Dershowitz' prior re-use). Such re-use shows simultaneous attachment to and distance from the interfaith phenomenon, and indeed to faith itself.¹¹ That doubleness also informs my application of the term to a wide range of fairly disparate endeavors, though I use it advisedly. To find terminology for nonreligion, and specifically for religious exit and exiters, that does not implicitly privilege religion and religiousness is difficult. What Ryan Cragun and Joseph Hammer call "pro-religious hegemony" is evident in widely-used terms like *apostate* and *defector*, which clearly assign a negative valence to religious exit. Even terms that are not overtly pejorative, like *deconvert* or *unchurched*, connote religion as the normative state. In all these examples, religious exit and nonreligion are deviant relative to religion and religiousness.¹² Shira Schwartz, in one resonant example, explores the linguistic implications of "off the derech [OTD]," the phrase commonly used to refer to people who have left Orthodox Judaism, noting, "[T]o be OTD is primarily to be 'off,' as in, *she's a little off, that's a real turn-off, or off with his head!*"¹³ The term "interfaithless" poses the same issue of an implied negative, even when the intent is to use it as a neutral descriptor. The "less" suffix is unambiguous about signifying a lack, a not-ness, which reflects an assumption of the non-lacking state—which, in this case, could be "interfaith" or "faith" or both—as normative.

10 On the cultural ubiquity of interfaith, see Thomas Albert Howard, *The Faiths of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue* (Yale University Press, 2021).

11 Here and elsewhere I am using "faith" in its broad sense, as it is colloquially used in the interfaith space, to refer to religious traditions or communities and individuals' attachments to them (as in, "people of different faiths"), rather than its more narrow sense of belief or conviction, though I understand the broader meaning as often (but by no means always) including the narrower one to some degree.

12 Ryan T. Cragun and Joseph H. Hammer, "One Person's Apostate is Another Person's Convert: What Terminology Tells Us about Pro-Religious Hegemony in the Sociology of Religion," *Humanity & Society* 35, no. 1–2 (2011): 149–175.

13 Shira Schwartz, "In Terms of OTD," in *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*, ed. Ezra Cappel and Jessica Lang (State University of New York Press, 2020), 249–74.

Pro-religious hegemony is hard to get around with such a blatant suffix of deficiency.

While some, especially in the interfaith space, may take no issue with pro-religious hegemony, I agree with Cragun and Hammer that such a stance, and terminology reflecting it, does harm within the academic study of religion. In this context, however, the very not-ness of the term interfaithless is fitting. For the religious exiters who seek out support resources, religion indeed has always been the normative state; being without it, for most of these subjects, does not yet feel normal, and perhaps never will. I submit, then, that in this case the markedly pro-religious term “interfaithless” is apt precisely because it connotes a state of not-ness, and with it, an ongoing attachment to the religious group that has been left. It is a somewhat wistful term for an often-wistful state.¹⁴ It is in this spirit that I use the term even for groups that do not themselves use it: with consideration, and to signal a simultaneous modification of and adjacency to both faith and interfaith. Like so much of the terminology used to talk about religious exit and nonreligion, it is a fraught term and should not be used without caution and intention, but in this context its fraughtness matches its subject matter.

Relatedly, I have chosen to use the descriptor “ex,” another term with a potentially negative valence, to refer to religious exiters. I do so in the spirit of Helen Rose Ebaugh’s seminal *Becoming an Ex*, still considered a definitive study of role exit almost forty years after its publication. Identifying patterns in the leaving process shared by exes including ex-alcoholics, ex-convicts, ex-nuns, divorced people, and more, Ebaugh demonstrates that being an ex is fundamentally different than never having been the thing in question. Ex-ness consists not simply in the not-being, but rather, in the interplay between not-being and, crucially, *having been*.¹⁵ Ex-ness is not merely a lack; both analytically and experientially, it has its own presence and its own rich generative potential.¹⁶

14 This is evident also in the emic terms exes generate for themselves. Someone who identifies as an “exvangelical,” for example, is linguistically tethered back to the evangelical tradition and community. Calling oneself simply “a Christian” or “not religious anymore” would not perform this same function.

15 Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit* (The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

16 See, for example, Shira Schwartz, “X Marks Our Spot: Religion and Gender in Transition,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 40, no. 1 (2024): 117–45.

Religious Exit and the Initiatives Supporting It

Though recent data indicates that the trend may be reversing or at least slowing, the last three decades have seen a tectonic shift on the American religious landscape with regard to religious affiliation and disaffiliation. Since the mid-1990s, data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and several Pew Research Forum surveys have shown an exponential rise in respondents who no longer identify with the religion of their upbringing. People who self-identify as not religious—the “nones,” as they were called first with alarm but now as a matter of course—now make up twenty-nine percent of the American population. While the growth of this demographic is less steep in the most recent survey than in earlier years, when the percentage rose in only two decades from five percent to thirty percent, clearly the most recent figure still represents a critical mass of people.¹⁷ Increasingly the number includes people who have been raised without religion, but they are outnumbered, and have been since at least 1972, when the GSS first began to ask Americans about religious affiliation, by those who have exited a religion. Cragun and Jesse Smith effectively capture the trend in their recent book *Goodbye Religion*: “In the 1970s, exiters were a relatively small group, though still larger than Mormons and Jews combined. But today, exiters are not a small group. As of 2023, there were more religious exiters in the US than Southern Baptists and almost as many exiters as Catholics.”¹⁸ Data on religious exit primarily has shown the drift, first a trickle and then a flood, away from mainline Protestantism and Catholicism—an unsurprising reflection of religious demographics in the United States. But in recent years, the increasing availability of exit as a cultural model has led to a swell of exit from smaller and more insular groups as well.

While leaving a religion can feel inconsequential, especially from a group in which drifting away is common and not highly stigmatized, many who leave what the people who study such groups and the people who leave them often call high-demand or high-control religious groups experience exit as a profound rupture, given how thoroughly their daily lives and relationships have been circumscribed by religion.¹⁹ Exit from such a

17 Gregory A. Smith and Alan Cooperman, “Has the Rise of the Religious Nones Come to an End?” *Pew Research Center*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.

18 Ryan T. Cragun and Jesse M. Smith, *Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization* (New York University Press, 2024), 35.

19 To find a suitable umbrella term for groups as disparate as ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Scientology, and Mormonism, to name only a few of the groups mentioned in this article, is an ongoing struggle for anyone who studies such

religious groups commonly results in extreme isolation from one's former community—in many cases, the whole of an individual's social world—in the form of excommunication, disfellowshipping, shunning, or other forms of extreme ostracizing. For many such exiters, the experience of punishing isolation upon exit together with the fallout from wounding experiences while still in the group produce what many psychologists and religious exiters now call religious trauma.²⁰ While not every person exiting a high-demand religion would characterize their experiences or their mental/emotional state in this way, the prevalence of those who do has created a need, or an opportunity, for groups whose mission centers around trauma recovery; I discuss two representative examples below. Even exiters who do not feel burdened with religious trauma may simply feel lonely at the loss of their community and seek out new social connections, and many initiatives for exes prioritize this need.

Just as religious pluralism was the precondition that birthed interreligious dialogue, the increasing pluralism of the no-longer-religious cohort has birthed interfaithlessness.²¹ Initially, the Internet created the necessary (virtual) proximity. For example, the Reddit board r/IAmA began in 2009 as a forum where people could share “something uncommon that plays a central role in your life.”²² While not specifically geared toward religion, posts from ex-Scientists, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, and ex-Mormons were among the earliest to be shared. Here, interfaithlessness manifested (and still manifests) as curiosity about other religions. Many of the commenters asking follow-up questions and sharing their own experiences come from other high-demand religious groups, remarking on a perceived similarity between their and the original poster's religions. Also prevalent are

groups, not least because they have little more in common than the way *some not all* members experience them. I am utilizing “high-demand religions” because it seems to me to be more value-neutral than terms like “cult” (which is, in fact, how almost all of the exes I spoke to referred to their former religion). But I want to stress that this is language of convenience, not fact. Though some religions may tend more toward a high-demand model, the totalizing or maximalist nature implied by “high-demand” or “high-control” is a strain within any religion rather than something inherent to particular religions. Free-rider Scientists exist just as surely as do thoroughly inculcated ones; maximalist Catholics exist just as surely as do cafeteria Catholics.

- 20 Psychologist Marlene Winnell formalized the term in “Religious Trauma Syndrome” (Series of 3 articles), *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today* 39, nos. 2, 3, and 4 (May, September, and November 2011). The idea that religion could inflict trauma, however, had already been in currency for decades.
- 21 Interreligious dialogue, writes Thomas Albert Howard, depends on proximity, and is triggered when “alterity moves in next door” (Howard, *The Faiths of Others*, 14).
- 22 “IAmA,” Reddit, created May 27, 2009, [reddit.com/r/IamA/about/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IamA/about/).

comments both seeking and offering support resources for those wanting to leave, or in the process of leaving, a high-demand religion. Virtual channels like this one helped in-person initiatives for religious exiters to gain traction. As these in-person initiatives began to emerge, most operated, and still do, primarily in an idiom of trauma recovery. Brief descriptions of two representative examples will provide context for the sustained examination of the Interfaithless Beach Party that follows.

Recovering From Religion (RfR), the nonprofit organization whose Fall Excursion is described above, was established in 2009 to assist people leaving what it calls high-control religious groups. RfR offers a variety of services in addition to the Fall Excursion. These include the well-known Clergy Project, an online support community for current and former religious professionals who no longer believe; The Secular Therapy Project, a clearinghouse of nonreligious therapists; and a twenty-four-hour telephone hotline staffed by trained, volunteer peer supporters. RfR hosts online forums, in-person support groups in several cities, a blog, a podcast, and weekly Zoom sessions in which a guest presentation or interview is followed by a live moderated chat amongst attendees. Its various projects are roundly endorsed by many religious exiters across social media, with many calling RfR a lifeline in a time of crisis and key to easing their exit process. Another group, The Liberati, also foregrounds trauma, stating on its webpage, “Awakening from a lifetime of religious indoctrination and manipulation is painful. Please know that you are not alone. There is help and there is hope! Thousands of your fellow survivors of religious trauma are now thriving and living their best lives. Below are several resources that can help you on the journey from religious fear and control to freedom and self-determination.”²³ Like RfR, they host discussion groups and provide information about mental health topics. The Liberati also hosts more recreationally-coded events, like museum tours and neighborhood walks around New York City, including a “Holy Hipsters” walking tour of Williamsburg on which participants observe the culture of Hasidic Judaism. For both The Liberati and RfR, the needs of religious exiters are specific, profound, and primarily have to do with religious trauma. The Interfaithless Beach Party, to which I turn next, moves away from the trauma idiom and reveals other possibilities both for meeting the needs of exes and for analyzing their experiences. Without explicitly emphasizing trauma, the beach party still provided a healing context for exes, and also a robust opportunity for attendees to engage religion meaningfully across difference.²⁴

23 “You are Not Alone,” *The Liberati*, <https://theliberati.org/helpful-resources>.

24 Though all are explicitly welcoming to exes from all groups, RfR was started by ex-evangelicals, The Liberati by ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Interfaithless

The Interfaithless Beach Party

The Interfaithless Beach Party (IBP), held in Southern California once or twice a year from 2014 to 2022, stands out as a rather idiosyncratic example of interfaithlessness. I conducted a survey with IBP attendees ($n = 29$, or roughly thirty-three percent of total attendance at the event's peak) and semi-structured interviews with six attendees in addition to the event's organizer. Such a small sample size will not support many generalizations, but it was plain from survey responses and interviews that the IBP was operating in a markedly different idiom than many other initiatives for exes. Rather than foregrounding trauma and recovery, the IBP, a beach barbecue that welcomed exes from any religious group for fellowship and recreation, foregrounded fun. Morris Bird, an ex-Mormon living in Los Angeles, started the event as an extension of informal dinners for ex-Mormons he had been organizing at local restaurants. After a harrowing past in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormon Church) and a drawn-out, difficult exit process, feeling alone and "crazy" in Los Angeles, Bird began to seek out other ex-Mormons on online message boards. He arranged and announced an in-person meetup at a local Chinese restaurant for anyone who was interested. It went well and he continued to arrange the dinners a couple of times a year. As he found more and more ex-Mormons interested in socializing, the size of the group became too unwieldy to gather comfortably around a restaurant table. The beach would both accommodate a larger group and communicate Bird's desire to "make it, like, the un-church," as he told me, where people could come and go as they pleased, without walls and without expectations or obligations. The first beach party, in 2013, was an ex-Mormon event like the dinners had been, but expanding the reach the following year to include exes from other groups was, Bird told me, a natural result of the curiosity the ex-Mormon group had often expressed about the experiences of people leaving other groups:

Once I did the first [beach party] I thought, well, hey, shoot, it's all sorts of room with the beach. And then I started to think...we would always inevitably talk about Jehovah's Witnesses or other kind of similar churches. And I thought, well, I'd like to meet those people who left those churches because, you know, that would be interesting to hear their experiences and how it compares to being Mormon and leaving Mormonism. And so then I found other

Beach Party by ex-Mormons. While it is beyond the scope of this article, further study on how these different backgrounds infect each initiative and shape its participants would be worthwhile.

message boards, people that left Jehovah's Witnesses or people that left Scientology or ex-Orthodox Jewish people or whatever...And it became so gratifying to hear people from all those other backgrounds share their experience.²⁵

Word of the Beach Party spread through preexisting ex communities, especially on Reddit and through Meetup.com. According to Bird, at its peak the event attracted about one hundred people, and most people I interviewed and surveyed attended multiple times, even driving back for the party from out of state if they had moved away from the area.

Numerically, the IBP was always predominantly ex-Mormon. One attendee I interviewed, himself an ex-Mormon, told me that he never really stopped thinking of it as an ex-Mormon event, another that he went several times before he noticed that it wasn't. But the vast majority of attendees I surveyed and interviewed reported that they came to appreciate deeply the interfaithless aspect of the IBP, even if for many, that aspect may have been incidental to their first attendance. On the other hand, several attendees told me that they were initially drawn to the event precisely because it was interfaithless. Renee, an ex-Mormon, said that when she first heard of the event, its interfaithlessness was "a huge draw. Absolutely a huge draw...Growing up in the religion that I did, we were really discouraged from connecting with people of other faith backgrounds...So [I loved] the idea of meeting all these people and finding out how similar or dissimilar our lives were." For Bird, that kind of exchange gave the event its meaning and purpose, and he worked continually to reach new prospective attendees. He told me he always hoped attendance would diversify even further to include, for example, more ex-Muslims (as far as he remembered, only one ex-Muslim had attended, though she did come back more than once). In other words, interfaithlessness was the point of the event for its founder and central for many attendees, though they perceived, experienced, and made sense of interfaithlessness in varied ways.

Organizational overwhelm led Bird to stop putting the event on after 2022.²⁶ Every attendee I spoke to was disappointed, if not devastated, that

25 Quotations in this section come from semi-structured telephone interviews I conducted with IBP attendees. They are lightly edited for grammar and clarity. With the exception of Morris Bird, a known figure, pseudonyms are used.

26 Though the timing of the event's demise coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, a momentous period that had a profound and in many cases chilling effect on religious life and social life worldwide, COVID apparently was not responsible for the founder's decision to halt the beach parties. As he told me, the IBP did go on hiatus during the peak of the pandemic, but resumed with high participation when the worst was believed to be over.

the event had ceased, and expressed that they certainly would attend if it were to resume.²⁷ The value they placed on the event, their experiences there, and the friendships they made came through palpably and emotionally in our conversations. Attendees were at different stages of the exit process, from days to decades out of their former religious group, and in some cases with one foot still in the group. For some it was the first ex-related activity they had participated in, while for others it was one of several they had attended or were attending at the same time. And while many of my subjects spoke about how much they appreciated that, unlike many of the other events and groups they had attended or were attending at the same time, trauma was not overdetermined at the party, they also, without exception, spoke of how powerfully their distress was eased by attending. The IBP was the birthplace of profound friendships and a much-needed outlet for attendees' complicated feelings about religion and religious exit. Additionally, it was the site of a great deal of curiosity about, sharing of, and respect for religious difference, as I hope to show in what follows.

The IBP stood apart from many other interfaithless initiatives not only in that it did not foreground religious trauma, but also in that it was almost entirely unstructured. Its one fixed element was a striking one, considering the context: Every year, Bird would barbecue an enormous batch of pork ribs. It is not impossible—but also, I think, not likely—that Bird, having grown up surrounded by other Mormons, didn't realize pork would be a provocative choice. Perhaps he (incorrectly) assumed that, like himself, other attendees had no lingering attachments to the dictates of the religious groups they had left. Perhaps he wanted to cook and eat ribs and trusted other attendees to make their own food choices. But the pork ribs, reportedly an inescapable olfactory presence even if one did not choose to eat them, came up again and again in survey responses and my conversations with attendees as a symbolically loaded food and an important locus for post-religious identity work. Bird himself told me about an ex-Orthodox Jew who initially was “revolted” by the smell of the ribs and “couldn't even be downwind of them” for the first couple of years he attended. But, Bird said, “[H]e had a great time in spite of that, and he came time after time, and fast forward a couple of years and he just loved the ribs...He told me that the ribs were what helped him feel like he was moving on, that it was a way for him to just

27 Interestingly, one of my interview subjects told me that she had wanted to take over the work of organizing when Bird stepped back, but he had not wanted to hand over his contact lists to her. Bird told a different story, and I didn't press him on the issue. This article is not the space to speculate about this succession debate, but it is an interesting wrinkle in the story that certainly does bear further examination.

feel normal.” One survey respondent reported that the presence of the ribs initially created an awkward atmosphere and contributed to a feeling of not quite belonging, though this respondent also attended more than once and began to feel better about the situation in later years, upon realizing that one was not socially required to eat every food that was offered—politely refusing them year after year, as this respondent continued to do, was acceptable. For this respondent, learning to express food preferences was an important part of learning a new culture apart from Orthodox Judaism, even as those lasting preferences indicated an ongoing attachment to at least one of its norms.

Another story about the ribs came from interview subject Yael. Yael was a young mother of six when she stepped away from Orthodox Judaism “sort of in one fell swoop,” feeling terrified that she might lose her husband, who did not support her decision at the time, and her children. Her marriage survived (shakily at first, but more easily after a few years as her husband too began to move away from Orthodoxy), but she did lose all her friends and her entire support system. She took part in some of the virtual groups for ex-Orthodox Jews that Footsteps (discussed above) was offering during COVID, but told me, “A lot of people get stuck in that arena where they don’t ever feel fully comfortable to integrate. And I didn’t want that to be my community, these people that were sort of in the middle. I wanted to try to get to the other side of that, so I didn’t get stuck in that middle place.” “That middle place,” for Yael, would have been a new life largely circumscribed by ex-Orthodox people and norms in the same way that her old life was circumscribed by Orthodox culture; the interfaithlessness of the beach party provided a much more desirable alternative for her, one that felt more truly like moving forward. Driving to the IBP was Yael’s first time driving on Shabbat, and she recalled thinking “I will for sure get in an accident and I will die and no one will know...I will just have no one to call because I don’t have anyone that’s going to answer their phone [on Shabbat].” But she was exhilarated to drive away from the community, and upon arriving, though she was one of only four or five Jewish people in attendance, felt overjoyed to see families with children there. She thought, “It’s not hopeless for me...[T]heir kids are coming and they still are living their lives. It didn’t end just because they have kids and they’re stuck...in all of that.” When presented with the pork ribs, Yael told me she was shocked for a moment but then didn’t hesitate:

There were pork spareribs...I had my first pork at that meeting...I was just like, everyone’s doing it. It’s fine. They’re like, nothing’s going to happen. You’re going to be alright. I felt more supported

and cheered on...It felt like an inauguration of some sort, like, you're part of this. You have the strength to do this. Someone said, oh, do you still keep kosher? Do you want the ribs? They're really good, but you don't have to, you know, and they were very respectful of where I was at. And then...[an] Israeli man, he was like, "Oh my God, you know those are pork!" I know, the first meeting you're eating pork! Like, well, why not? You really jumped in with both feet, huh? I'm out, I'm driving here, I'm coming here, I'm going to eat whatever you have. Yeah, I'm just doing it.

A couple of observations emerge from Yael's story. First, like the other Orthodox Jews I mentioned above who either did or did not choose to eat the ribs, Yael used food choices to both (literally) internalize and demonstrate a new sense of self and way of being, in keeping with research on leaving religion as a highly embodied process.²⁸ Had this been an event only for ex-Orthodox Jews, one imagines that pork probably would not have been on the menu and Yael would not have had such an opportunity. The interfaithlessness of the event, then, facilitated her negotiation of Jewishness and ex-Jewishness, echoing how interfaith engagement requires its participants to continually refine and assert identity boundaries. Second, the group's response is a striking mix of respect and support for her religious background and any attachment to it she might retain, and encouragement to cast off those attachments. The collective acknowledgement of the ribs' significance for a Jewish person, ex-ness notwithstanding, demonstrates recognition of and respect for religious difference, even for different religious ontologies.

Other foods at the IBP were significant as well. Renee told me about the themed snacks people brought to share, foods parodying or poking fun at attendees' religious backgrounds, which created opportunities for engagement in a playful mode:

There are inside joke snacks from different groups that you don't know about until you encounter other groups. Like people bring Mormon desserts as a joke with Jell-O, a lot of Jell-O salad, cupcakes with funny sayings on them...One time [an ex-Mormon] decorated cupcakes with fake Prozac, [because Utah County has]

28 See, for example, Lynn Davidman, "The transformation of bodily practices among religious defectors." *Embodied resistance: Challenging the norms, breaking the rules*, ed. Chris Bobel and Samantha Kwan (Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 209–19; and Maria Vliek, "(Re)Negotiating embodiment when moving out of Islam: An empirical inquiry into 'A Secular Body,'" In *Transforming Bodies and Religions*, ed. Mariecke van den Berg et al. (Taylor and Francis, 2020).

the highest rate of antidepressant use in the country... [To ex-Mormons] it's funny because it's a way of coping, and then also the Scientologists could joke about it because they're not allowed to have psychiatric medication, so it's like, oh, don't eat the Prozac cupcakes! You'll get in trouble! Just jokes like that, goofing on things.

Parody foods nicely evoke ex-ness as characterized by Ebaugh (above), revolving around the having-been-the-thing, the both-once-and-no-more. They reveal both the knowledge of the insider and nostalgia for the past attachment, but the "goofing" element loudly communicates a different, removed positionality vis-à-vis the former community. The foods don't signal "I'm not that thing," but rather, "I'm not that thing, *but I was*."

Humor and lighthearted fun, from joking about cupcakes to having bonfire singalongs, were big parts of the IBP, and several attendees told me the event's levity was exactly what they appreciated about it. For many that levity provided a much-needed counterpoint to more overtly therapeutic activities they were participating in or had participated in as part of their exit process, whether that was actual therapy or meetups that foregrounded trauma. As Julie told me, "I've had some events personally where I invited a therapist to be there to sit and talk with us, and it was a much more intensive experience. Not everyone wants that or is comfortable with that. Nice to have just simple fun." Renee called it "the summer camp version of therapy." But the IBP wasn't all levity. As Julie and others reported, and as the generalized survey results confirmed, though the conversations were more casual than in a more overtly therapeutic setting, most of the conversations were about attendees' shared experiences in a high-demand religion. Many of those experiences were highly distressing, and the conversations that proceeded from them weighty. For example, the beach setting compelled serious conversations about bathing attire, modesty, and body image, conversations that often dredged up difficult pasts (which, in many cases, were not so very long past) but that, as Renee told me, "people could just feel safe to have." Here was an opportunity to talk with one another about experiences, especially difficult ones, that they didn't feel they could share with anyone else. As Rob told me,

I remember going and just number one being so excited as it was coming up and then going to it and then after leaving just feeling very full and, like, yes, I can do this and my people are out there and...I would just have so many passionate conversations and people understood me and my story because they had been through

almost the exact same thing and it was like, you just felt like that was my tribe, and it was very significant, feelings of just happiness and warmth, because these people knew exactly what I had been through because they had been through almost the same thing... That was my new tribe, people who had been all in and then were all out. Because those are the only people that truly understand my story, and where I've been.

They were, he said, "going on a journey together" as they negotiated the upheaval of religious exit. Rob, for example, had not spoken to his family for thirty years when he and I talked; estrangement from family and friends, usually continuing into the present, came up in every conversation I had. For many, the connections made at the IBP came to occupy at least a portion of that void.

Another ex-Mormon, Ammon, who had been in the military, described the feeling of familiarity at the IBP as "just a little vibe or something," and compared it to meeting someone else with a military background. Without any outward signs or words exchanged, there would be a sense of recognition between former military, and that's what he felt at the IBP, "but deeper, much, much deeper." Outside of the IBP, Ammon had only told a handful of people—probably fewer than five, he thought—about his Mormon background because it was "just very hard to explain to people." But at the IBP, no explanation was necessary. His differences with the church, and his motivation for leaving, had been largely intellectual and he still, decades after his departure, felt silly for once having believed LDS teachings. "[T]he word crazy doesn't begin to explain what you are saturated with [as a Mormon]. And so therefore seeking out people who had that same shared experience was somehow comforting for me...and I haven't had that since they stopped the beach parties." Though the commonality was most immediate with other ex-Mormons, he said he "definitely" felt it with attendees who had exited religions other than Mormonism. Bird shared the same sentiment:

[I]t was therapeutic to realize that not only was I not alone within Mormonism or being an ex-Mormon, but I was in many ways part of a broader human experience of people who left high-demand religions... [Those] communities are very tight knit. You're kind of inside your own little community very strongly. And once you leave, you leave by yourself and then larger communities are gone and your friends are gone and your parents might be hostile towards you... And it was just kind of gratifying to meet people from other

backgrounds and swap notes and realize that you weren't so unusual. Or your experience wasn't so unusual.

The commonality attendees found with one another, and the feeling of being deeply understood in a way that they couldn't be in any other setting, were defining aspects of the beach party for every survey respondent and interviewee, without exception.

More than simply finding commonality with one another, attendees insisted on commonality—that the experience of walking away from a certain type of religious group rendered them profoundly like one another, even in the face of acknowledged differences. Renee described how different religious groups “cultivate different skill sets and different personalities”:

We would always joke [about] where you could find everybody. It'd be like, okay, I'm at the park. All the Scientologists are talking really loudly at the table over here and all the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are helping set up all the desserts...Of course the ex-Mormons are going around to see if anyone needs seconds, of course the Jehovah's Witnesses are diligently already taking out the trash, of course the Scientologists are arguing about where the cornhole should be set up because they're asserting their leadership over the situation.

Julie also spoke of traits that inhered within certain groups: “[T]here were some really fun moments [because of it], like the Mormon crowd, they were artsy and liked to sing and dance and stuff. I feel like that's part of their upbringing. And so a lot of us ended up going to karaoke and...I found out there were a lot of people that I connected with on other aspects.” Different religious upbringings bestowed various qualities or interests that, in post-religious life, became the basis for connections and ultimately friendships.

Difference was perceived in more serious ways, too. Several of my interviewees voiced the sentiment that exes from other groups were worse off than they themselves were, that others were more vulnerable or threatened or simply faced a more difficult time transitioning out of their religious community. Julie, for example, was especially sensitive to how extreme shunning was for ex-Orthodox Jews, who often retained perceptible markers of difference that she, as an ex-Scientologist, did not have. This sensitivity to others' special vulnerability emerged in a concrete episode that a number of interviewees mentioned. At one of the parties, attendees were unnerved by the presence of a man no one could quite put a finger on; he turned out to be a representative from the Church of Scientology. Precisely to guard

against such incidents, Bird did not make the exact location of the IBP widely public, but somehow the “Scientology spy,” as my interviewees described him, had found the spot. The group banded together to protect the ex-Scientologists and oust the infiltrator on their behalf. Renee, who was not an ex-Scientologist, told me that episode “made the group feel really powerful and healing for me...It almost makes me tear up because it feels so wonderful and full circle.” The opportunity to protect a fellow attendee in a threatening situation seemed important to several interviewees, a way to demonstrate their newfound opposition to religious control and to confront religious authority, even if it wasn’t their own.

Some attendees were surprised to find dynamics of similarity and difference playing out otherwise than they had expected. Renee, an ex-Mormon, spoke of finding more commonality with women from other religious groups than with ex-Mormon men. As she said, “I was really surprised by how similar the experience of growing up in Mormonism as a girl and growing up in Jehovah’s Witnesses as a girl [were]...the pressure you’re under in a certain way that I was like, wow, I never realized that we were having the exact same challenges.” With ex-Mormon men, however, Renee noticed that they usually left the church because of intellectual disagreements, whereas women left because of repression and patriarchy.²⁹ That difference was difficult for her to overcome:

It is very telling how...in the ex-Mormon diaspora, the women have these stories about, like, I left college to have a bunch of kids and I never got to live my dreams, and then if their partner or man leaves he’ll be like, “Yeah, I know. When I was a Boy Scout we used to do all the fun stuff at church, but now I have a wife who complains all the time.” It’s like, my guy. Your problems are not the same. There’s not always an acknowledgement that there’s this element of physical and emotional labor the women have held for them. And [men] tend to be like, “I left because it wasn’t true.”

Ex-Mormon men, she felt, couldn’t understand the experiences of ex-Mormon women. But ex-Jehovah’s Witness women, ex-Orthodox Jewish women, could and did, in ways that made her feel seen and heard.

29 I observed the same gendered variance in interviews and survey results, and it bears further exploration. It is important to note, however, that while such a variance no doubt reflects, at least in part, the actual experiences of the subjects relating them, it also reflects the different norms according to which women and men are taught to interpret and articulate their experiences and feelings.

IBP attendees differed too in their relationship to religion. They maintained varying degrees of attachment to their former religion's cultures, practices, and beliefs, and identified with or without or against religion in almost as many different ways as there were respondents. Bird spoke to this difference when he told me about some attendees' desire to burn religious items, specifically the Book of Mormon. Renee had already told me this was something that happened at the party; she found it cathartic, as did many others. Bird viewed it differently: "[T]here were always people that were at some stage along their transition, right? Some people were halfway in, halfway out...[S]ome people were just curious, and I didn't want anybody who still had any measure of faith to feel like they were being attacked...I just wanted people to feel comfortable, even if they had some measure of belief inside them towards God or whatever else." Thus, while one may be tempted to observe that attendees got along so easily simply because they had no stake in the truth claims of their various religions and thus no insurmountable ideological differences, that was not the case. They had all left their religious groups, but they had detached from their respective truth claims to widely varying degrees. They retained profoundly different notions of ontology and of community, of what being an ex meant vis-à-vis the group they had left. Exes retain cosmologies tied to the community they left; one imagines that, for example, an ex-Scientologist's and an ex-Orthodox Jew's cosmologies are fairly dissimilar.³⁰ In everyone's telling, however, such differences were of lesser weight than the perceived, *insisted upon* commonality of their shared experience. In short, rather than entirely eliding the differences, both superficial and quite meaningful, that still obtained between them, IBP attendees emphasized their experience-based commonality. As Julie (an ex-Scientologist, thus always in a minority at the party) observed about the interplay between similarity and difference: "I think that's actually one of the things that made it so it was a much less triggering experience for a lot of people, because of the fact that you could recognize yourself in someone else, but not like looking in a freaking mirror."

Interfaith Transposed

Interfaithless initiatives echo interfaith ones when they host and foster curiosity about different religions, and when they connect people across (ex)religious difference to confront the shared challenges that attend to religious exit. The IBP renders that echo particularly robust, as exes

30 Schwartz, "In Terms of OTD."

demonstrate their respect for other religions and form intense, lasting connections with people from other religious backgrounds. Is interfaithlessness, then, interfaith? As I mentioned above, subjects had very different relationships to their former religious communities, practices, and beliefs, but most told me that they did not think of themselves as religious anymore. Does characterizing interfaithlessness as interfaith, even as somehow related to it, thus fall prey to the error that Wayne Proudfoot identified as “descriptive reductionism,” whereby we “ascribe to [someone] concepts he would not recognize or beliefs he would not acknowledge”?³¹ To describe religious exes as still somehow “really” religious certainly would run this risk, and in many if not all cases would, I believe, fall prey to this error. But as Kevin Schilbrack observes, to *re-describe* something as religious, even if religion is a non-native term to the population in question, can be not only acceptable but useful. To do so is not to say that the population is latently religious, but simply that patterns derived from the study of religion can be applied legitimately and fruitfully elsewhere.³²

Placing interfaithlessness “along the edges” of interfaith does not, to my mind, achieve this redescription. The spatiality of the metaphor is literally marginalizing, suggesting that there is a central way to do both faith and interfaith, and then there are peripheral, lesser, not-quite-right ways. Even bracketing the value judgments this model imposes, it does not reflect the reality of the American religious landscape, which is characterized by the instability of its centers and margins. In fact Numrich is arguing quite the opposite about his examples of unintentional interfaith—that those examples *are interfaith too*—but in considering interfaithlessness, the metaphor does not best serve the argument, not least because in some ways, interfaithlessness is *more* like interfaith than Numrich’s examples, in which religion may be entirely incidental.³³ In the interfaithless initiatives I have described, religion is anything but incidental; rather, “religious residue” is, by the acknowledgement of all present, the order of the day.³⁴ As Cragun and Smith observe, echoing Ebaugh on ex-ness, the formerly-religious, though in many cases not themselves religious any longer, still are “related to religion

31 Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (University of California Press, 1985), 193.

32 Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1112–38.

33 Paul D. Numrich, “How Important Is Religion in Interreligious Relationships? Interreligious Space-Sharing as a Case Study,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 26 (2019): 42–57.

34 Nadia Beider, “Religious residue: The impact of childhood religious socialization on the religiosity of nones in France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 74, no. 1 (2023): 50–69.

in some way, be it discursively, descriptively, or practically[.]” They continue:

[E]ven though to be nonreligious is to not have religion, it is also some kind of positive differentiation from religion, not just a ‘lack’ of it. Put differently, whether a person consciously decides to leave religion with great fanfare, or slowly drifts away from it without noticing, the process nevertheless involves changes in beliefs, behaviors, and identities that stand *in relation* to previously held religious beliefs, behaviors, and identities.³⁵

What I am suggesting we see in these interfaithlessness initiatives, especially the Interfaithless Beach Party, is not a marginal or lesser kind of interfaith engagement, but rather a fully legitimate, vigorous example of interfaith engagement that simply has a different source—that of ex-ness rather than religious identification. It is in this sense that I employ the metaphor of transposition, not in the spatial sense that clearly resides within both its literal meaning and many of its usages, but rather in its musical sense of an all-but-identical melody originating from a different starting point.³⁶

There is a further aspect of musical transposition that seems to me to be especially apt here. A musical transposition usually is meant to solve a compositional problem. When a piece of music is out of range for a particular voice or instrument, for example, the transposition nudges it higher or lower on the scale, rendering accessible what was formerly unlikely or impossible (or at least unpleasant to listen to). Exes from high-demand religious groups acutely need support in their world-building endeavors, and as they told me, they need the worlds they are working to build to include religious diversity, both as a reflection of the milieus they are tentatively entering for the first time, and as a corrective to their insular pasts. Traditional interfaith spaces, for as much as they increasingly succeed at efforts to include the nonreligious, may not feel inviting or suitable to people struggling with the effects of complicated religious pasts and presents. Interfaithless spaces, however, can render accessible the benefits of religious diversity—benefits for which my subjects poignantly articulated a real need—for those who no longer feel able or willing to think of themselves as religious.

35 Cragun and Smith, *Goodbye Religion*, 18.

36 Indeed, historian of American religion Martin Marty used the term in its spatial sense, to talk about movements from centers to margins, in “Transpositions: American religion in the 1980s,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480, no. 1 (1985): 11–23.

In their book *Goodbye Religion*, Cragun and Smith analyze whether several worried predictions about what a less religious society might look like have come true in the years since the rise of the nones. Will a greater proportion of nonreligious people mean a decrease in civic engagement, kindness, or charitable giving? Do nonreligious people have fewer children or worse general health? Do they find less meaning in life? Across the board, Cragun and Smith find that the “pillars of American society” have not been much changed by the decline in religiosity, and do not manifest in particularly different ways for nonreligious versus religious people. Analyzing Pew and GSS data, they find that nonreligious people are as kind, if not more so, than religious people, if views on immigration or attitudes toward members of other religious groups are taken as measures of kindness. Data does not indicate measurable differences in health outcomes between religious and nonreligious people. Nonreligious people are no more likely to violate universally accepted moral codes than religious people. In other words, anxiety about a decline in religiosity leading to a damaged society is, they argue, unfounded.³⁷ The examples of interfaithlessness I have discussed here, especially the Interfaithless Beach Party, allow for a further conclusion: Even those who have, by their own characterization, been deeply wounded by religion do not necessarily hate religion or long for secularization. They may regret their own experiences, but they still have the capacity—and the desire—to engage on the basis of religion, even across difference, and to respect the ways that their fellow exes may remain attached to it.

Thus, any expectation that an increasing proportion of exes in society will lead automatically to antipathy toward religion either at the societal level or the individual level—an expectation that, as Cragun and Smith observe, may be a fearsome one to some—seems unfounded and must be rethought in light of cases like the IBP. Certainly, and in many cases justifiably, exes from high-demand religions tend to be antipathetic toward their own religion, and toward high-demand religions in general, but IBP attendees were not categorically opposed to religion, with some subjects joining a different one after their exit. Often, they did not even hate or reject everything about the one they had left (Yael gave her daughter a bat mitzvah, albeit a nontraditional one; Ammon supported his daughter in attending Brigham Young University). Instead, they were thoughtful about religion, their own and others’. They engaged with one another on the basis of religion; they found and celebrated their similarities and defended one another’s perspectives and experiences. Such engagement is especially striking given that most of these subjects had little to no experience with the

37 Cragun and Smith, “How is this Affecting Society?”, in *Goodbye Religion*, 207–49.

kind of inclusivity required for the community-building project they were undertaking. On the contrary, most had come out of radically exclusivist contexts; many were reacting against precisely that exclusivism when they left. And despite, in many cases, a lack of experience with anything like that kind of community, it seemed to be working. As Yael told me:

I was very mistrustful [at first]...I was just really afraid of even being at the beach at night alone...And I was so happy driving home. I just felt so free and so much strength from it that I just came home so happy. My husband was so mad when I opened the door and I just thought, Oh my gosh, this is like I'm on cloud nine. No one could take away my joy today...I felt so not alone. And that's really what I needed.

IBP attendees were profoundly affirmed and enriched by their fellowship with one another, just as they were occasionally challenged.

I did not ask my subjects whether they understood what they were doing at the Beach Party as interfaith, and I do not expect they all would have answered that question the same way. But it seems to me that, for IBP attendees and for others participating in interfaithless initiatives, the metaphor of interfaith transposed would not seem farfetched. It is true that, throughout our conversation, Bird repeatedly referred to his desire to make the IBP “like the inverse of a church,” and that the vast majority of interviewees and survey subjects reported that they were not religious anymore. But recall the interviewee I mentioned earlier who more than once referred to the Interfaith—not Interfaithless—Beach Party; recall Renee who, in joking about where everyone could be found at the party, toggled back and forth between calling people exes and calling them simply Mormons or Scientologists or Jehovah’s Witnesses, without the “ex.” The line between religion and ex-religion is a blurry one for many of these subjects, as they acknowledged often. They recognized the ongoing effects of religious attachments and experiences in their lives, not in opposition to but by way of ex-ness—*because of* the decision to leave, not in spite of it. Nostalgia for aspects of their former lives often floats like a ghostly melody through current lives lived in a state of ex-ness. For many of my subjects, interfaithless initiatives helped to shift that melody from a sad-sounding minor key into a cheerier major one. The current age of religious exit thus may bring about not less but more opportunity for meaningful exchange, appreciation, and connection across (ex)religious differences, as exes fashion their new lives in concert with one another.

***Kristen Tobey** is Associate Professor of Religion and the Social Sciences at John Carroll University.*

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ARTICLE

“Creating Commonplaces”: Value Generalization in the *A Common Word* Dialogue between Islam and Christianity

Benedict Coleridge

Abstract

This article sets out to illustrate how democratic theory can draw inspiration from interfaith dialogue to envision anew the conduct of intercultural dialogues at a transnational level and within pluralistic societies. Against Jürgen Habermas’ neo-Kantian conception of normative universality supplied by a latent, shared, “normative grammar,” this article emphasizes the importance of a critical dialogical encounter between conceptions of the good and the value traditions from which they arise. Specifically, the article shows how the hermeneutical process of question and answer (as theorized by Hans-Georg Gadamer), when joined to an attendant process of value generalization (set out by Hans Joas), allows for the clarification of ethical meanings in their “articulating-constitutive” dimension and the development of new, shared, values across traditions. To illustrate how a hermeneutically rich process of value generalization works to cultivate an appealing form of critical ethical commonality, the article explores the example of the *A Common Word* dialogue between Islam and Christianity, which, it posits, has worked as a “conceptual laboratory” within which ethical meanings grow.

Keywords

Gadamer, Habermas, *A Common Word*, Levinas, hermeneutics, interfaith dialogue, Islam, Christianity, value pluralism, democratic theory

Introduction

A familiar feature of contemporary reflection upon democratic deliberation and intercultural dialogue is the search for normative premises that might ground convergences upon essential or “basic” principles for normative commonality amidst cultural pluralism. To this end, a great deal of analytical effort is poured out on establishing ethically diminutive principles of “the right” that might prove acceptable to consociates holding diverse “thick” conceptions of the good, including those resourced by religious traditions. Insofar as ethical convergence is envisioned without the guiderails of shared metaphysical premises, it tends to feature minimalist agreement upon constitutional essentials cast in a secular and formal mold, or “learning processes” characterized by the progressive secularization of validity claims—what Jürgen Habermas calls the “linguistification of the sacred.” For liberal proceduralists like Habermas, any hope for normative unity across the fissures of contemporary value pluralism lies in “the secularized world of moral and rational-legal universalism.”¹ Thus, as Habermas tells it, “the only unifying context that the sons and daughters of “homeless” modernity still share is the practice of moral argumentation, now conducted with inadequate reasons.” For Habermas, “the store of commonalities has shrunk to the formal features of these [ethical] discourses.”²

Critics of Habermas’ discourse ethics raise a number of now familiar challenges, insisting, for example, that his framework conceals its dependence upon shared social values and common historical memory of past conflicts over the nature of the common good.³ According to this line of criticism, a semantically truncated proceduralism not only obscures its own cultural “thickness” but prevents consociates from cultivating shared values through engagement with ethical worldviews as they undergird political and social hopes. In this vein Charles Taylor, for example, argues that it is a mistake “to believe that there can be some decision whose neutrality is guaranteed by its emerging from some principle or procedure.”⁴ This, he suggests, tends to breed “the illusion that there is no need to negotiate the place of these symbols, and hence to confront the actual substantive differences.”⁵ Similarly,

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, “Israel or Athens: Where Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?”, in *The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Peter Dews (MIT Press, 2001), 88.
- 2 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Polity Press, 2008), 87.
- 3 Martin Loughlin, *Against Constitutionalism* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 107.
- 4 Loughlin, *Against Constitutionalism*, 143.
- 5 Loughlin, *Against Constitutionalism*, 143.

Danielle Allen emphasizes that Habermas “solves the problem of generating agreement only by undoing the need to work hard for it.”⁶ This skepticism regarding the ideal of discursively rational proceduralism stems from a more fundamental rejection of the kind of contemporary neo-Kantianism that entails “the identification of morality with a unified code, generated from a single source.”⁷ Where Habermas insists that “reason, which is always bound up with language, is also always beyond its languages,”⁸ Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, in particular, insist on the inevitability of working in and through the thickets of natural languages so as to overcome the “jackals and the vultures of partial and...surmountable non-communication.”⁹

The grounding contention of this article is that the “store of commonalities” available to consociates inhabiting a globalized—and locally pluralized—modernity requires tending beyond the minimalist presuppositions of “rational-legal universalism.” The many forms of intercultural impingement generated by globalization, along with the developing cross-disciplinary recognition of “multiple modernities,” suggests a pressing need for translation and negotiation between differing experiences of encounter with the “modern” and between the claims to universality that give shape to these encounters. If, to turn to Sanjay Subrahmanian’s phrasing, modernity is a “conjunctural” phenomenon, rather than a dynamic by which parochial practices are subsumed beneath universal logics, then an account of transnational, intercultural, deliberation must wrestle with the practical conditions of conjunction.¹⁰ Specifically, it must consider how different trajectories of experience, different traditions of generating ethical and political meaning amidst modernity, might overcome mutual inscrutability or suspicion to develop common ethical resources. This article explicates the possibilities for critical diagnosis and the composition of ethical commonality presented by the practice of “value generalization” as articulated by Hans Joas. It weds Joas’ pragmatist account of value

6 Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 63.

7 Charles Taylor, “Perils of Moralism,” in *Theology and Public Philosophy: Four Conversations*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso and Cecilia Rodriguez Castillo (Lexington Books, 2012), 347.

8 Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A Stark (Polity Press, 1988), 144.

9 Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 112.

10 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400–1750,” *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (1998): 75–104. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Radical Thinkers (Verso, 2011). 163.

generalization to Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology, as well as to his theorization of the "process of understanding," to show that both criticism and transformation may occur with reference to ethical values that call for a specific kind of contextually sensitive understanding and, with it, a more provisional, less finalist, form of politically developed commonality. This form of commonality reflects, I will argue, Emmanuel Levinas' insight that "to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces."¹¹

My purpose is to illustrate how democratic theory can draw inspiration from interfaith dialogue to envision anew the conduct of intercultural dialogues at a transnational level and within pluralistic societies. I will draw a connection between Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology and Joas' pragmatist account of "value generalization," which, I will argue, is a practice in evidence in the *A Common Word Between Us and You* dialogue between Islam and Christianity.¹² Taken together, the hermeneutical ontology of Gadamer, Joas' pragmatism, and the example of the *A Common Word* dialogue, enables an account of the conditions and procedures through which the work of "creating commonplaces" across cultural fault lines best proceeds.

The practice of deliberative value generalization as presented here has three purposes that make it distinct from liberal accounts of deliberation in search of agreement on "constitutional essentials" or on a universal normative grammar. First, to allow different conceptions of the good to surface without our pre-emptively consigning their value articulations to the category of "private," "non-rational" or "non-generalizable." Second, to enable the disclosure and comprehension of claims and vocabularies resident within these traditions in their "articulating-constitutive" character, rather than as static representative claims or propositional assertions. Third, to facilitate consociates in developing a self-reflexive diagnostic capacity that unveils the genealogical dependencies of their own traditions, while also discerning whether certain value-articulations might be generalized to form a basis for common action and shared commitment.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first section establishes the theoretical foundations, canvassing the Habermas-Gadamer debate on language and reason. I set out the differences between the Habermasian view of "language as a species endowment," and Gadamer's hermeneutical ontology, which outlines the context "within which language grows" and understanding is developed. Taking up the Gadamerian account, I explore

11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press, 1969), 76.

12 Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, October 13, 2007, acommonword.com.

its practical application in the second section, through a discussion of the process of value generalization in evidence in the *A Common Word* dialogue. Finally, gathering together the material of the previous sections, the third section highlights the potential for value generalization to move beyond evaluative assessments of static doctrinal propositions, to uncover ethical meanings in their “articulating-constitutive” dimension. This, I suggest, is conducive to a form of dialogical interchange more immune to discursive caricature and more effective in the face of social and ethical inscrutability.

Section 1: Language, Reason and Ontology

I begin by outlining two rival views of the relationship between language and reasoning. One approach (the Habermasian) looks to the formal features of discourse to supply context-transcendent normative principles, while the other (the Gadamerian) considers such principles to emerge only through the meaning-making processes of interpretation and translation. The Habermas-Gadamer debate hinges upon the question of whether reason can establish evaluative standards apart from specific languages in use—that is, specific vocabularies and communities of shared meaning.

Habermas’ Normative Grammar

For Habermas, the philosophical accomplishment of a “principled” morality precedes and facilitates the creation of the emancipated political collective composed of rationally autonomous individuals. Habermas shifts the underpinnings of moral universalism from natural law and metaphysics to the terrain of language assessed formalistically as a “species endowment” structured by pragmatic presuppositions. In Habermas’ view, “reason, which is always bound up with language, is also always beyond its languages.”¹³ Thus, “languages themselves contain the potential for a rationality that, expressing itself in the particularity of a specific grammar, reflects the limits of that grammar and at the same time negates them in their specificity.”¹⁴ Reason is “always beyond its languages” in light of its capacity for objectification, which occurs through the act of reflection. Habermas’ theorization of “reflection” presents the process by which a socially embedded “self-presence” comes to objectify itself or understand itself under a conceptual lens. In the specific sense intended by Habermas, the individual

13 Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A Stark (Polity Press, 1988), 144.

14 Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, 144.

subject develops a self-understanding defined by a certain conceptualization of moral autonomy, which makes the subject's relation to inherited language one to be excavated and potentially overturned.

The intellectual pursuit of the “project of modernity” begins, in Habermas’ vast corpus, with a historical diagnosis upon which the structure of his subsequent moral and legal theory depends. Habermas’ historical story traces a breakage between the social imaginary, moral psychology, and institutional configuration. He warns that morality “withdrawn into the cultural system maintains only a virtual relation to action as long as it is not actualized by motivated actors *themselves*.”¹⁵ Habermas takes a “culturally withdrawn” morality to be motivationally weak and therefore deficient as an integrative force, relying as it does upon subjective will rather than an all-encompassing cosmological imagination and tacit social consensus of the kind that understands the well-ordered political community to incarnate the divine *oikonomia* or economy of grace).¹⁶ He wants instead to develop a moral framework that asserts universal validity while at the same time being immanent to quotidian practices and social imaginaries so as to retain motivational strength. Hence, for Habermas, a principled morality “depends on socialization processes that meet it halfway by engendering the corresponding agencies of conscience, namely the correlative superego formations.”¹⁷ Our conceptions of the good, replete with their claims to truth, are to be directed towards this ever more inclusive “principled morality” through which post-metaphysical “agencies of conscience” are cultivated at the level of the individual subject. By so doing, we in turn revise our conceptions of the good, ensuring their partial refashioning in contact with the epistemological and communicative presuppositions of a post-metaphysical normative culture. To do so is to expand the boundaries of moral consideration by means of non-customary, non-traditional, norms which, though cognizant of their genesis in antecedent traditions, escape their constraints through re-articulation along semantically generalized and metaphysically non-committal lines.

Habermas’ normative system—and its accompanying theory of deliberation amidst value pluralism—relies, therefore, upon a quasi-historical account of the development of “post-conventional” morality and the progressive diminishment of metaphysically laden worldviews as bases for

15 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Polity Press, 1996), 113.

16 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini, Meridian (Stanford University Press, 2011).

17 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 113.

philosophical and deliberative justification. According to the historical story Habermas tells, natural law as articulated by Aristotle and his interpreter Aquinas once offered an all-encompassing societal ethos such that “cultural value patterns and institutions sufficiently overlapped with the action orientations and motives fixed in personality structures.”¹⁸ In a pre-modern context marked by metaphysically thick worldviews, European societies were characterized by a tightly integrated normative, institutional, and motivational web, the elements of which reinforced each other and militated against the critical relativization of tradition by the individual. This integrated “lifeworld” met with fragmentation with the emergence of early modern movements of theological reform and Enlightenment thought, through which religious and ethical practices were assessed, the argument goes, with reference to an ever more highly developed idea of reflexive reason. Action orientations were thus separated from the strong motivational complex of religious belief and the once wholesale imbrication of ethical value patterns and institutional life teased apart. The unravelling of this matrix of belief and ethical consensus constitutes a diachronic process understood by Habermas in terms of “the rationalization of the lifeworld,” where the imbrication of culture, politics, and law is undone and “cultural traditions and processes of socialization came under the pressure of reflection, so that actors themselves gradually made them into topics of discussion.”¹⁹ In other words, actors become capable of objectifying their own commitments in the course of conversation, rather than inhabiting them in the pre-reflective sense that Habermas ascribes to tradition-based practices. Consequently, the commitments and practices inherited via the medium of tradition are “reduced to mere conventions and differentiated from conscientious decisions that passed through the filter of reflection and independent judgment.”²⁰

We therefore encounter a crucial distinction made by Habermas—with obvious descent from the Kantian ideal of freedom as individual self-direction—between “received” convention and the exercise of “independent” and “conscientious” judgment in public discourse, the latter guaranteeing the autonomy of the moral agent by effecting a critical relativization of ethical traditions. Moral autonomy requires reflective agency that “gets behind language,” so to speak, enabling us to bring our commitments and our received values into view, so as to be rationally endorsed or discarded. The primary assumption here is that procedural rationality’s claim is diminutive (and hence culturally or doctrinally non-

18 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 95.

19 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 95.

20 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 95.

intrusive) given that, in this scheme, it rests upon grammatical necessity rather than Kantian noumena or a more assertive metaphysics. As Bernstein suggests, Habermas' primary claim is that amongst the plurality of forms of life rooted in their "unique traditions," "we can detect a gentle but obstinate...claim to reason," a "claim to reason that points to the possibility of the argumentative redemption of validity claims through mutual dialogue and discourse."²¹ This is the "basic intuition" of Habermas' communicative theory as enunciated and amended over his wide-ranging corpus, its "moral-political" intention being to demonstrate that across various communicative action-contexts there are "unifying" presuppositions that orient us to the development of mutual understanding and autonomy.

By extension these presuppositions may be converted into procedures that draw us to eliminate elements that distort our communication so that we better realize an ideal of *reciprocal* dialogue that generates autonomy and solidarity.²² Within Habermas' communicative ethics the diminutive profile of reason, based on its merely "grammatical" character, undergirds procedural principles that draw from the terrain of social reality while remaining independent of its particular ethical vocabularies and the perspectival constraints they impose. Thus, Habermas writes: "[S]pecialized for questions of justice, a principled morality views *everything* through the powerful but narrow lens of universalizability. Its telos consists in the impartial judgment of morally relevant action conflicts, and hence it facilitates a knowledge that is meant to orient one's action but does not thereby *dispose* one to act rightly."²³ Principled morality therefore carries out a clarifying function, rather than a motivational one, requiring the "semantic" (but not cognitive) resources of ethical or religious traditions to add motivational depth to the individual's adherence to principle. The emphasis here upon impartiality foreshadows Habermas' commitment to the revisionist power of a certain kind of autonomous reason—instantiated through processes of reflection—that works to reorder the "inherited" contents of ethical traditions and consequently to shift the adherent's relationship with their tradition to one of reflective appropriation rather than unreflective inhabitation. Habermas gives further characterization of this understanding of critical reason in his critique of Gadamer's ontological prioritization of hermeneutical understanding (*Verstehen*):

Gadamer fails to recognize the power of reflection that unfolds in *Verstehen*. There reflection is no longer blinded by the illusion of an

21 Richard J Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity* (Polity Press, 1985), 192.

22 Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 195.

23 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 113.

absolute, self-grounded autonomy, and it does not detach itself from the ground of the contingent on which it finds itself. But when reflection understands the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and to which it returns, the dogmatism of life-praxis is shaken.²⁴

As this passage illustrates, Habermas' deflationary Kantianism aims to secure a conception of reason as non-transcendental but nevertheless capable of overcoming what Gadamer calls the hermeneutical situation within which the subject's reflective understanding is circumscribed by a finite epistemic horizon. While it may not descend from noumena in the Kantian sense, reflection in the Habermasian scheme produces something like the Durkheimian perspective, operating to objectify ethical life and thus to reshape the premises upon which traditions operate. Put differently, it preserves a cognitive space beyond language, from which philosophical reason may survey the commitments expressed by languages-in-use without being bound to the resources that they make available. For Habermas, then, the particularity of values means the *particularism* of values, such that, in Joas' words, "the only hope of universalization...lies in the spheres of law and normative morality."²⁵

Gadamer's Hermeneutical Ontology

Gadamer, on the other hand, transfers his enquiry into the conditions of human understanding onto an ontological register. His description of the process of understanding avoids the binary validity problematic (of distinguishing valid from invalid argumentation) and instead accounts for the conditions in which understanding is pursued. Gadamer's hermeneutical framework as explicated in *Truth and Method* bears upon both the text and the social world as reservoirs of meanings, leading Fred Dallmayr to note Gadamer's insistence on the "close linkage and even convergence of dialog and hermeneutical understanding."²⁶ Dallmayr frames Gadamer's theory as antithetical to the kind of abstraction pursued by Habermas. Thus, although Gadamer's theory is abstract in the sense that it makes general ontological claims, "hermeneutics is not, and has never been, a purely abstract theory, but is closely linked with lived experience and human conduct."²⁷ Of course,

24 Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, 168.

25 Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), 176.

26 Fred Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics and Inter-cultural Dialog: Linking Theory and Practice," *Ethics & Global Politics* 2, no.1 (2009): 23–39, 27.

27 Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics and Inter-cultural Dialog," 20.

one might say that Habermas' communicative ethics are also grounded in human conduct, insofar as they rely upon an internal logic posited by Habermas as inherent in linguistic rationality. So, how does Gadamer's theory characterize the process of establishing commonality, and how does this differ from universalization by law and normative morality?

For Gadamer, all understanding proceeds from a particular perspectival position characterized by "prejudices;" understanding progresses towards an appreciation of "the whole" only via a constitutive relationship with "the parts," and only from within a specific "horizon" that delimits the initial perception of the individual subject.²⁸ This view of the "situation" or ontology in which we are cast includes a conception of consciousness as "being affected by history," so that the reflexivity to which a critical introspection should strive is "primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation."²⁹ Reflexive consciousness does not stand outside of particular language contexts in an objectifying stance, but rather entails one becoming aware of the inevitability of expressive and conceptual dependence; it involves recognition of the finitude of consciousness and of understanding. Thus, on the Gadamerian view, "all self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven," so that our attempts at reflective "illumination" are destined to fall short of completion.³⁰ This incompleteness is not due to a "deficiency in reflection," but to "the essence of the historical being that we are."³¹ Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology therefore insists upon a view of the subject as historically and contextually embedded, with no way of achieving a perspective that interrupts history or that achieves a "complete" self-knowledge. Instead, the "thinking mind" may gradually expand the range of its vision, "throwing light" upon the situation in which one stands while always falling short of "objective knowledge" of it.³²

This distinguishes the Gadamerian notion of self-knowledge from the aspiration to what Hegel calls "absolute knowledge" by which history, or in the neo-Kantian case reason, becomes "completely transparent to itself," elevating itself to the level of a concept.³³ We are set within a hermeneutical situation, as Gadamer puts it, which reflects the reality that "every finite present has its limitations."³⁴ Accordingly, we may define the concept of a "situation" by saying, replete with ocular metaphor, that it represents a

28 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 302.

29 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 312.

30 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

31 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

32 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

33 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 312.

34 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

standpoint from which one looks out at a horizon that delimits the extent of one's vision. The concept of the *horizon*, working in concert with that of the perspectival *situation*, refers to "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."³⁵ The horizon, therefore both extends and delimits the range of "the thinking mind;" implying an expanse open to view that extends well beyond what is immediately in front of us, it nevertheless suggests that our perspective is embedded in a cultural landscape that offers no prospect of an extra-mundane Olympian viewing platform, so to speak. Joining Gadamer, Habermas also refuses the Olympian viewing platform of transcendental reason, preferring instead to locate an immanent logic inherent in the nature of human communicative practices, from which we might extrapolate an intra-mundane rather than transcendental normative universalism. Unlike Gadamer, however, Habermas strives to protect by means of formal abstraction the decisiveness delivered by argumentative rationality, as distinct from a form of understanding made critically reflexive by knowledge of its own incompleteness and dependence for extension upon encounter with other perspectives.

Habermas famously sets out to preserve a form of prejudice-disintegrating reason through an account of "language as a species endowment," which generates a normative pragmatics that transcend the peculiarities of natural languages. Though Habermas broadly agrees with Gadamer that horizontal movement between languages is intrinsic to linguistic experience, which bears with it possibilities for translation, he preserves a commitment to rational self-reflection as involving a distantiation from prejudices or prior meanings. While Habermas prioritizes "argument," retaining a commitment to the "unforced force" of reason, Gadamer proposes an ontology of dialogue, according to which, as David Tracy puts it, dialogue is ontologically and epistemologically "foundational to all linguistic understanding."³⁶ Where Habermas seeks a secure meta-theoretical scaffolding for a critical theory of argumentation, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are "grounded in the ontological, not merely epistemological foundation of dialogue."³⁷ Dialogue is the native medium of human social life, involving interchange between self and other (or text) through the hermeneutical alternation of question and answer. As Tracy puts it, the essence of Gadamerian dialogue is, first, "an alertness to the claim to attention of the other" and, second, "a submitting of oneself to the logic of

35 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

36 David Tracy, *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 190.

37 Tracy, *Fragments*, 194.

dialogue as a back and forth movement.”³⁸ Crucially, that dialectic of question and answer is a process of self-exposure to alterity rather than a method of enquiry through which the self remains at some formal remove. This depiction of our involvement with language undergirds Gadamer’s argument against Habermas’ theory of “language as a species endowment,” that “language ... is not the finally found anonymous subject of all socio-historical processes and action, which presents the whole of its activities as objectifications to our observing gaze.”³⁹ For, he insists, “language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world.”⁴⁰ Hermeneutical understanding is not, therefore, a method of inquiry that simply disintegrates “substantiality”; it is what is involved in moving through the domain of human meanings, making it, in Heideggerian language, an essential aspect of our “being in the world.”

One of the accusations levelled at Gadamerian hermeneutics, first and foremost by Habermas, is that it opposes hermeneutic experience to “methodic knowledge,” thereby sacrificing the means of reflective critique in favor of the authority of tradition.⁴¹ Gadamer’s characterization of the conditions of understanding and of self-knowledge rejects the structure of Kantian critical reason, along with the notion of an unencumbered rationality that objectifies the inheritance of tradition—thus, “understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as a participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.”⁴² Yet the “tradition” to which Gadamer alludes here is not that of the “comprehensive doctrine” that political liberalism sets out to restrain in light of its received structures of authority and its exclusive truth claims. It is, rather, the “situation” in which all stand as subjects attempting to extend our understanding of those who operate out of cultural and historical alterity and, through the comparison this brings about, our self-knowledge. Gadamer insists that this is “in no sense a preference for that which is customary, to which one must be blindly subservient.”⁴³ Rather, it is

38 Tracy, *Fragments*, 196.

39 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (University of California Press, 1976), 32.

40 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 29.

41 See, for example, *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (MIT Press, 1985); see also Fred R. Dallmayr, “Borders or Horizons? Gadamer and Habermas Revisited,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76, no. 2 (2000): 825–851, 840.

42 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

43 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reply to My Critics,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (State University of New York Press, 1990), 288.

to characterize tradition as emergent, such that “alteration of existing conditions is no less a form of connection to tradition than is a defense of existing conditions.” Tradition, he emphasizes, “exists only in constantly becoming other than it is.”⁴⁴ With the “pre-judgments” and “fore-meanings” that it affords, tradition is prerequisite for attempts at reflexive understanding for the reason that it supplies the semantic and imaginative resources with which the effort at understanding begins, even where it does so in acts of explorative resistance or counter-action to hegemonic idealizations.

A tradition, as Gadamer addresses it in *Truth and Method*, includes components that are written down as well as being carried by linguistic practices, in both cases taking the form “not of something left over, to be investigated and interpreted as a remnant of the past,” but rather a “continuity of memory” to which new meanings are conjoined.⁴⁵ That we are situated in close relation to traditions out of which we reason is one of the ontological presuppositions of Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory, suggesting, in turn, that “reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms.” There can be no “reason” without the meanings born out of historical consciousness by traditions, meaning that “reason is not its own master but remains constantly dependent upon the given circumstances in which it operates.”⁴⁶ Enlightenment thought, says Gadamer, bears the conviction that reason may “safeguard us from all error,” yet despite its demand for the “overcoming of all prejudices,” it too proves itself to be laden with prejudices (including the “prejudice against prejudice”) and resources borne by what Habermas calls “ethical” traditions.⁴⁷ The possibility of reasoning with a view to developing a more expansive “horizon” is therefore tied to the resources supplied by traditions, which frame the context in which we pursue knowledge of the hermeneutical situation in which we, and our interlocutors, are set. Hence, “only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world.”⁴⁸

This assertion of dependence upon prior “common understanding” may understandably prompt hesitation insofar as it appears to narrow the routes towards critical re-appraisal of tradition promised by contemporary neo-Kantian critical theory. Critical renewal of understanding, on Gadamer’s terms, does not arise out of a kind of enlightening friction between context-

44 Gadamer, “Reply to My Critics,” 288.

45 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 408.

46 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288.

47 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288.

48 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 15.

independent reason and lifeworld practices. Indeed, Gadamer resists any default association between “understanding” and the “unmasking” of unreflective dogmatism, rejecting the assertion, which he lays at Habermas’ feet, that “reason and authority are abstract antitheses.”⁴⁹ However, he offers full throated recognition that the forms of authority that reside within traditions exercise “an essential dogmatic power in innumerable forms of domination.”⁵⁰ With this acknowledgement, he seeks to prize apart the analytical interweaving of “authority” with unreflective dogma, introducing instead the question of legitimacy and the prospect of “true authority” that is accepted through an obedience that is “neither blind nor slavish.”⁵¹ Disclosing the structure of pre-judgements that constitute the “understanding” borne by a tradition does not inevitably lead to the disintegration of received authority. Authority, insists Gadamer, should not be associated inevitably with dogmatic formulations and unreflective adherence, but potentially also with “insight as a hermeneutical process.”⁵²

Acknowledging that tradition may in many imaginable instances incorporate “reasonable” authority does little to assuage concerns about the conservatism of defaulting to “common understanding” mediated via established avenues of interpretive power. And indeed, Gadamer’s rendering of tradition is, as David Tracy rightly notes, vulnerable to the charge of being too sanguine about the restrictive conservatism of authority and the narrowing of resources of emancipatory transformation.⁵³ But also embedded in Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics is the means to recast tradition, an essentially linguistic phenomenon, as performing a far more capacious role than binding its adherents to static meanings. In the very same movement from “familiar and common understanding” to encounter with “the alien,” meanings are destabilized and renewed and alternatives brought into use. Just as speech depends upon an existing semantic field, it equally moves to constitute new meanings via the slippages and modifications made through elucidation, interpretation and narrative with its metaphorical and metonymic richness. Ethical and normative renewal is realized in and through language; meanings are adjusted as speech is retrained upon newly discerned problems, generating new values in turn. The emergence of transformed meanings (and with them values) is therefore akin to, as Taylor puts it, the “open-ended process of extension and alteration” central to the life of a “language-in-use,” by which we are

49 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 33.

50 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 33.

51 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 33–34.

52 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 34.

53 Tracy, *Fragments*, 194.

constantly “straining the limits of expression.”⁵⁴ Thus the scope for a more or less unlimited linguistic innovation within ethical traditions; a wide range of subtle adjustments, stimulated by the act of speech, can be made to meanings. Given this dynamism, it is impossible to be made a “prisoner of language,” locked inextricably within existing patterns of use. So, argues Taylor, “our language is always more than we can encompass; it is, in a sense, inexhaustible.”⁵⁵ It can, in Taylor’s Gadamerian rendering, only be deployed against a “background which we can never fully dominate” but that never fully dominates us either, given our capacity for expressive and interpretive creativity. Or, as Gadamer himself puts it, “while we live wholly within a language, the fact that we do so does not constitute linguistic relativism because there is absolutely no captivity within a language.”⁵⁶

The development of a “critical” or reflexive form of understanding, which includes “self-knowledge,” occurs in and through these conditions in which we are “situated.” Yet Gadamer’s conception of reflexive self-knowledge keeps open room for a critical stance towards the tradition(s) in which the individual subject is set, or upon which they depend for their initial “fore-meanings.” Moreover, by accepting perceptive finitude and the ongoing and unfinished nature of self-knowledge, this self-reflexivity contravenes attempts at philosophical and political finalism (the post-ideological “end of history”) and the Enlightenment’s “abstract contrast between myth and reason.”⁵⁷ Gadamerian self-knowledge seeks out a reflexive alertness to the nature of the “hermeneutical situation,” an alertness that, although it is self-reflexive, does not thereby overcome contextual limitations or dependencies. Crucially, says Gadamer, “the consciousness of being conditioned does not supersede our conditionedness.”⁵⁸ With this in mind, developing a critical self-consciousness that registers the hermeneutical situation and that mediates intelligently between its own perspective and the ethical alterity it encounters, “means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.”⁵⁹ To suggest that the priority assigned by Gadamer to tradition requires a relinquishment of critical aspirations would therefore be to miss the critical possibilities inherent in the dialogical exchange between worldviews in which perspectives drawn out of different

54 Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 232.

55 Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” 232.

56 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 16.

57 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 286.

58 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 448.

59 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

situations develop a shared understanding that is inter-perspectival. This inter-perspectival stance is drawn out of the dialogical exchange, rather than being theoretically mandated in the manner of the egalitarian universalism to which Habermas attaches “only a formal-pragmatic meaning.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it does not relinquish “cognitive purpose” or critical potential by detaching itself from theoretically mandated formalism: rather, its ends are set and its critical aims renewed through dialogical encounter. The hermeneutical understanding developed here requires a horizontal movement that either picks up or sheds ethical material as it moves towards new ground—it is one of translation and modification rather than disaggregation and subsumption. I mean to refer here to what Dallmayr calls the “border crossing quality of hermeneutics,” which entails “the readiness of the understanding to be ‘addressed’ and possibly transformed by multiple domains of experience.”⁶¹ Hermeneutical understanding, as Gadamer formulates it, proceeds by “working out” or “working through” (*Ausarbeitung*) encounter with alterity rather than via the methodical objectivization of experience.

The outcome of this process of understanding is what Gadamer terms a “fusion of horizons,” which entails an act of transposition through which the particularity of another’s identity remains fully particular and free from the imposition of external standards or rubrics imposed under the guise of neutral arbitration. Thus, Gadamer writes on the historicity of understanding, that “transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other.”⁶² The “higher universality” involved in the fusion of horizons does not abandon consciousness of the limits of one’s view—the notion of a horizon entails both expansiveness of vision and its limitation. What Gadamer calls “hermeneutical understanding” aims towards the development of a “superior breadth of vision,” which entails a specific kind of development of one’s sensitivity to the alterity of one’s interlocutor; as Gadamer puts it, “to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand, not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.”⁶³ A process of value generalization that seeks to generate an expanded horizon for its participants entails creative exegesis and reworking of the ethical traditions so engaged; this, in turn, can

60 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, 49.

61 Dallmayr, “Borders or Horizons,” 848.

62 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

63 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

be expected to stimulate conceptual modification and ethical renewal in the face of newly considered dilemmas and newly developed relationships. Such a process moves with one eye to the past, the other to the present and its contingent details—it entails “reinterpretation of historically embodied meaning” paired with a simultaneous diagnostic move by which such meaning is refitted in accordance with the details of the present. Hence, doing justice to those values that we wish to assert as universal in their relevance depends upon achieving “a realistic picture of present conditions for the realization of historically generated ideals and their unfulfilled potential.”⁶⁴

Gadamer’s conception of the fusion of horizons has attracted well known criticisms, which, from different directions, raise the concern that it may amount to the “submission of one horizon to another.”⁶⁵ R.J. Bernstein, for example, using Derrida’s concern for the indissolubility of otherness as a prompt, questions whether Gadamer’s fusion of horizons violates the alterity of the other. He asks whether, by involving the interpretation of the other through the foregrounding of pre-judgements and the projection of the interpreter’s own horizon, processes of understanding that tend towards a Gadamerian “fusion” have the effect of “reducing the other to the same because understanding necessarily involves my horizon and the horizon that I project on behalf of the other.”⁶⁶ As Gadamer puts it in *Truth and Method*, a person who is trying to understand a text “projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.”⁶⁷ But, this “fore-projection” of meaning is “constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, in understanding what is there.”⁶⁸ This corrective process seems adequate when the hermeneutical activity entails the relation between reader and text but encounters more pitfalls when countenancing hermeneutical conversation between persons.

The most obvious such problem relates to adverse conditions for sincere dialogical interchange, such as relative imbalances in hermeneutical power. This leads Bernstein to ask whether Gadamer’s “fusion” concept underplays the demanding conditions for “genuine” dialogue, ignoring the prevalence of what Habermas would refer to as distortive communication based upon

64 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 135

65 Erdal Yilmaz, “The Fusion of Horizons: The Possibility of a Genuine Ethical Dialogue,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41, no. 3 (2022): 229–239, 230.

66 Richard J. Bernstein, “The Conversation that Never Happened (Gadamer/Derrida),” *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 3 (2008): 577–603, 593.

67 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279.

68 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279.

“perlocutionary” rather than “illocutionary” speech acts.⁶⁹ These are important criticisms to leave in place as warnings against the fore-projection of meanings morphing into a forced homogenization on terms set by the stronger party to the conversation. Challenges certainly arise where hermeneutical understanding pertains to dialogue between persons, where, as Gadamer insists, “reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation.”⁷⁰ To take up a Levinasian theme, the search for initial commonality, or for the common “object” of dialogical interchange, requires caution against overwhelming the alterity of the other, so diminishing the “astonishment” brought about by the other as the source of revelatory difference. This is conceivable where “commonality” is associated too closely with “coherence” on terms that lack openness to genuine hybridity and self-revision. As Levinas puts it, the revealing function of language is not limited to its coherence. Were it to be so limited, “the function of language would amount to suppressing ‘the other,’ who breaks this coherence,” the outcome being that “language would consist in suppressing the other, in making the other agree with the same!”⁷¹

I lack adequate space to address these tensions at any length here, given the array of interesting questions they pose. But if Gadamer’s hermeneutical ontology offers the seeds of a response, we might locate them, firstly, in his prioritization of the “question” in the process of understanding, which involves the dialectic of question and answer. For Gadamer, “discourse that is intended to reveal something”, which is to say dialogical discourse, “requires that thing be broken open by the question.”⁷² But the act of posing questions, pedagogical, interrogatory, or otherwise, requires an explicit acknowledgement of guiding presuppositions, such that it retains a “state of openness” as a question from a specific origin addressed to a particular subject. The logic of the question, insists Gadamer, is embedded in experience and particularly in the encounter with difference, which culminates, through the “dialectical negativity” of experience, in “the knowledge of not knowing.”⁷³ One consequence of this self-knowledge is the kind of “hermeneutical consciousness” that “culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by

69 Bernstein, “The Conversation that Never Happened,” 594.

70 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 386.

71 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

72 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371.

73 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370.

dogma.”⁷⁴ Hermeneutical consciousness therefore preserves a strong form of self-reflexivity and a state of epistemic openness generated by the dialogical conditions of language use.

Secondly, “successful conversation,” in Gadamer’s account, is not a process of mutual adaptation between interlocutors (with all the potential for asymmetry), but rather involves the generation of an altogether “new community” of common concern. As with the openness involved in the structure of question and answer, “genuine conversation” proceeds without finally established controlling presuppositions: we do not “conduct” a conversation as much as “fall into conversation” or “become involved in it,” without directorial power over the understanding that eventuates.⁷⁵ Conversation, in other words, has a constitutive and revelatory dimension beyond programmatic control. “Successful conversation” within a community of concern therefore shifts the stance of the interlocutors from one of mutual observation to one of proximal solidarity, by which the viewpoint of the other is apprehended and its cultural and experiential moorings brought into clearer view. Hence, “the person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather, he thinks along with the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected.”⁷⁶ This leads Monica Vilhauer to insist that Gadamer’s “fusion” be understood in the larger context of understanding as a “play process” in which participants are engaged in “the sharing of a common game—a game of articulating a common subject matter together.”⁷⁷ Indeed, this vision of “successful conversation” between interlocutors draws closer to establishing what Levinas calls an “ethical” relation, which entails a discursively constituted, hermeneutically informed, kind of social solidarity that departs from the ideal of “rational-legal universalism.” Accordingly, to use Levinas’ formulation, intercultural dialogue does not represent “the unfolding of a prefabricated internal logic” but “the constitution of truth in a struggle between thinkers, with all the risks of freedom.”⁷⁸

74 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370.

75 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 401.

76 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 333.

77 Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lexington Books, 2010), 51.

78 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

Section 2: Value Generalization in the *A Common Word* Dialogue

Building upon this ontological portrait drawn by Gadamer, I will now develop an interpretation of the *A Common Word* dialogue as an undertaking that fused Gadamer's insights into the "process of understanding" with Joas' pragmatist theory of deliberation as "value generalization." My joining of these two elements is in response to a prompt by Linda Zerilli, who asks what it would mean "to take the contexts of local particularity as a starting point for a critical political encounter in which the universal criteria for cross-cultural judgements could be articulated rather than assumed?"⁷⁹ Any response to this question will, quite clearly, require a non-ideal theorization of practices in which participants are dealing with claims made under contingent circumstances and out of specific histories. Registering that such contingency presses upon how we theorize cross-cultural dialogue, Joas insists that engagement across value difference will always fall short of the "purely rational discourse" envisaged by Habermas as an orienting ideal for deliberation.⁸⁰ If, as I join Joas in assuming, such a "pure" discourse is both impossible and of limited practical guidance as an ideal, then the question arises of whether the only alternative is unmoderated decisionism and antagonism.⁸¹ These, of course, are constitutive of the "risks of freedom" to which Levinas refers.

The answer that I propose, in conversation with Joas, is that we can overcome this paralyzing bipolarity by preparing to deliberate about values in the politically tense, interpretively contingent and power-laden contexts in which they are mobilized and articulated. Value generalization offers an opportunity to evaluate and negotiate the values—including claims to universality—operative in contexts of value pluralism; to see where they may intersect and promise commonality or to address injustices they may have produced. It is, in Joas' words, to move beyond a paralyzing historical relativism "without breaking with the insight that even universalistic validity claims are not founded in "reason" as such, but have a contingent history of emergence that is not irrelevant for their evaluation."⁸² Value generalization, says Joas, is "neither a consensus achieved through rational argumentation" nor an agreement to tolerate differences registered as insurmountable. Rather, it is at once "more and less than rational discourse," being oriented

79 Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 171.

80 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 175.

81 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 175.

82 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 175.

toward the achievement of a “dynamic mutual modification” of different traditions along with the development of sources for their transformation and renewal.⁸³ Because it engages values in their cognitive *and* affective dimensions, along with the histories out of which they develop, it is distinct from the rational procedure envisioned in Habermas’ theory of discourse ethics. Moreover, value generalization aims at a provisional understanding between ethical subjectivities and the traditions out of which they speak; it aims less at the formation of an “overlapping consensus” or a “multivariate” convergence upon liberal constitutional premises, than at generating a shared exegesis that leads to mutual hermeneutical adjustment. In this sense, its aims are less to do with convergence upon a principle of structuration or a principle of authority, than the formation of new ethical resources.

But how does value generalization work in practice? Joas notes that between a “purely rational” discourse and arbitrary decisionism lies a “third way,” which forms the basis for “the praxis of interreligious dialogue.”⁸⁴ As an example of this third way in which to establish shared ethical premises and more refined hermeneutical engagement, I wish now to offer an assessment of the *A Common Word* dialogue between Christian and Muslim scholars, initiated in 2007 and continued through various avenues since. This dialogue, I argue, achieved three things: It diagnosed the nature of contemporary tensions between Christians and Muslims against the backdrop of raised tensions and inflammatory public discourse that resounded with commentary on the “clash of civilizations” and the incompatibility of Islamic and Western values. The process charted here entails the identification and development of values that, rather than excavating minimalist universal principles posed as latent in the confrontation between different cultures, exemplifies the process outlined by Linda Zerilli of “a political practice of making cross-cultural judgments and claims in an idiom that others can come to recognize as shared.”⁸⁵

In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI gave a lecture in Regensburg, Germany, on “faith, reason and the university,” in which he quoted the medieval Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologus. The quotation, from Palaiologus’ famous *Dialogue with a Persian*, provoked widespread discord and unrest in Muslim communities across the world. The offending paragraphs of the speech referred to a Platonic dialogue composed by the Greek emperor in the late fourteenth century, while Constantinople lay under siege by the Ottomans. The dialogue is between the emperor and an “educated Persian,”

83 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 181.

84 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 176.

85 Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 171.

who remains unnamed. In following the dialogue format it can be situated within a tradition, alive also throughout the early centuries of Islam in Syria, Iraq and Egypt, of dialogical disputation between Muslims and Christians (with Zoroastrians and other sects playing a role) over Christological ideas and the supersessionist nature of Islamic claims.⁸⁶ The dialogue presents both a polemic and an apologetic. Integrating theological, philosophical, and political themes, it unfolds in keeping with prior literary treatments of Islamic conquests of formerly Christian territories and the theological divergence of traditions, penned by writers grappling with the shifting boundaries of empire, from John of Damascus to Gregory Palamas and the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos. Within this literary setting, the *Dialogue* makes a scriptural and theological argument for the truth of Christian teaching and against conversion by force.

Pope Benedict deployed excerpts from the emperor Manuel's text as part of an academic discussion of the way in which violence was antithetical to a reason-oriented religious faith. The Pope took the medieval emperor to be making a decisive statement against forcing religious conversion through violence, a position based on the belief that "not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature."⁸⁷ In his exegesis of the text of the dialogue between the emperor and the unnamed Persian, Pope Benedict cited one particular statement, made by the emperor, against the convergence of religion and violence, a statement made with reference to Islam: "show me just what Muhammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."⁸⁸ The Pope qualified this citation by referring to it as "forceful" and expressed with a "startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable."⁸⁹ He proceeded to a citation of Lebanese theologian Theodore Khoury, which compared the integration of Greek philosophy and Christian theology to a reading of Islamic theological tradition in which "un-reason" does not contradict God's nature or commands; even if divine command were deeply unreasonable, it would nevertheless demand adherence.⁹⁰ Pope Benedict followed these citations with a lengthier discussion of the vital convergence of reason and faith,

86 See Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

87 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections," Lecture of the Holy Father, September 12, 2006, University of Regensburg (Holy See, 2006), <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>.

88 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections."

89 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections."

90 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections."

which would characterize “that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today.”⁹¹

The aforementioned citations, in particular the citation of Manuel Palaiologos, provoked profound anger in Islamic communities across the world, drawing condemnation from governments and religious leaders. The lecture elicited responses from the Palestinian Authority and the Egyptian, Pakistani, Indian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian governments, amongst others. In the course of this reaction, it became clear that, for many, the words of Manuel Palaiologos had been taken to express the Pope’s own views, a misreading that led to particularly strong condemnations and anger. Protests were held outside Westminster Cathedral in London (at which violently anti-Christian slogans were employed), mass protests were held outside Al-Azhar University in Cairo, German, American and Israeli flags were burnt in Basra, Iraq, and an apology was demanded by various governments and Islamic community organizations.⁹² Some translated their anger at the Pope’s reported views into violence, with Christian churches being fire-bombed in Iraq and the Palestinian Territories and an Italian nun being murdered in Somalia.⁹³ In response to this widespread unrest, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel defended the Pope’s lecture, which she argued had been misinterpreted; then Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi emphasized the lecture’s theme of “dialogue” and the European Commission warned against reading quotes in isolation from their context in the speech as whole. Moreover, the Commission stated that “reactions which are disproportionate and which are tantamount to rejecting freedom of speech are unacceptable.”⁹⁴ Thus, as with recent debates triggered by the murder of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris, the public exchange—local and trans-national—crystallized around the conceptual tension between “free-speech” and “respect.”

The larger arguments, on faith, reason and violence, present in Pope’s lecture were subsumed beneath serious, widespread, and in some corners willful, misinterpretation of his citation of the Byzantine emperor. Whereas Pope Benedict had deployed Manuel’s text as part of a reflection on the peaceful coexistence of religious traditions and communities, the citation was read in isolation and its sentiments attributed wrongly to the Pope.

91 Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections.”

92 See Melanie McDonagh, “The Pope’s Message of Greater Dialogue Achieves the Opposite,” *The Telegraph*, September 16, 2006, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/us/>.

93 “Violence Against Christians Grows in Iraq,” *Ekklesia*, September 29, 2006, <https://www.ekklesia.co.uk/>.

94 Lucia Kubosova, “Brussels Defends Pope’s Freedom of Expression,” *EU Observer*, September 18, 2006, <https://euobserver.com/>.

Nevertheless, there may well be a critical point to be made about the Pope's use of a fourteenth-century source in the contemporary context, as the popular "clash of civilizations" thesis reduced the encounter between traditions to caricature and affirmed insoluble differences. The absence in the Pope's lecture of strong and empathetic qualification suggested blindness to the possibility of the lecture communicating a reductive account of Islamic tradition and its relationship to the idea of "reason." Similarly problematic was the construction of a binary opposition between reason and its opposites. Whereas medieval Christian scholastic and theological traditions were positioned as accommodating of reason in their theological methods, the operation of Islamic tradition was posited as prone to the exclusion of reason (with its "unforced force") and the deployment of its opposite, brute force. This was on any reading a gross reduction even if a merely insinuated one. It represented a failure to acknowledge the poly-vocality of Islamic traditions and their multiple forms of reasoning.

Additionally, the speech did not offer interpretive attention to detail in its treatment of the Islamic concept of "jihad," making reference to Islam in order to support a tendentious argument of immediate political resonance (the year being 2006, with violence surging in Baghdad), but without making counter-observations about the diversity of interpretive traditions within Islam, which complicate the application of Sura 9:5 in the Qur'an, the Sura concerned with "spiritual struggle" and violence. As such, although much of the reaction to the lecture was based on misreading (or lack of reading the text altogether), the text was nevertheless alienating in its failure to demonstrate interpretive sensitivity to the complexity of another tradition. In September 2006, Pope Benedict issued an apology in which he stated that he was "sorry" for the offence that the lecture had caused, and that the citation of Manuel Palaiologos was in no way designed to express his own views.⁹⁵ His apology, though accepted by many, including for example the Muslim Council of Britain, was considered to be insufficient by others, considering the deep feelings of alienation that the Pope's lecture, and the public reporting of it, had caused. The lingering anger and resentment implied that a more sustained engagement was required, not only in order to assuage the immediate alienation felt in many Muslim societies, and amongst Muslim citizens of Western democracies, but to set in train more durable and sensitive relations between religious traditions.

One year after the Regensburg lecture, such engagement was initiated from within Islam, and it is this engagement that offers a case study for the

95 "Muslim Body Welcomes Pope's Apology," BBC News, September 17, 2006, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/>.

illustration of the practice of value generalization and the commonality that it forges. In October 2007 one hundred and thirty eight Muslim scholars penned a letter to Christian leaders, entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* (ACW) in which they called for dialogue based on the recognition of two core principles operative in the lives of both religious traditions: love of God and love of neighbor: “[T]hus in obedience to the Holy Qur’an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the Two Commandments of love.”⁹⁶ These two commandments amount to value articulations with scope for transfiguration into shared principles for common action; in both traditions, the principles of “love of God and love of neighbor” uphold the moral equality of one’s contemporaries by acknowledging them as “neighbors.” At the same time, they direct subjects toward the practice of “neighborliness,” making this moral status into something that calls for respect and consideration. The principles for common action so generated depend upon paradigm instances resident within each tradition, along with stories, images and the detail of each tradition’s history of self-interpretation. They therefore require interpretive and translational exchange in order for the contours (and limits) of their commensurability to unfold.

The original letter has a strong scriptural emphasis, seeking to trace in the written sources of the two traditions commensurable themes that might underwrite the pursuit of shared understanding and common action on the part of Christians and Muslims. The letter elicited a variety of responses including from the Holy See’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, and from a group of over three hundred Christian scholars who cooperated to write what became known as the “Yale Response.” The Yale Response, written in November 2007, begins by asking forgiveness from “our Muslim neighbors” for any historical mistreatment of Muslim communities by Christian populations.⁹⁷ The Christian scholars then proceed to join their Muslim counterparts (the signatories to the original ACW letter) in asserting that *political* concord—peace between peoples and within societies—will be easier to attain if “religious peace” is achieved.⁹⁸ The letter then acknowledges and endorses the “common ground” identified by the Muslim scholars and leaders, based on the two principles of love, while at the same

96 “A Common Word Between Us and You,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: Five Year Anniversary Edition*, 51–101 (The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 54.

97 “The Yale Response,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: Five Year Anniversary Edition*, 143–162 (The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 144.

98 “The Yale Response,” 144.

time recognizing significant differences: “that so much common ground exists...gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us can not overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together.”⁹⁹ A longer, more detailed and more critical response was penned by the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams after consultation with Christian leaders and scholars from across the different denominational traditions.¹⁰⁰ Williams’ response written in a more reserved tone than the Yale Response, engaged in a closer reading of the details of the ACW letter, as well as a more detailed explication of Christian theology and Christian perspectives on the relationship between the two traditions. Christian leaders from a range of denominations endorsed his response; it was therefore taken to offer a Christian voice drawing insight from beyond the Anglican Communion.

The initial exchange that gave rise to the continuing ACW dialogue featured an interchange of letters that pay close attention to the sources within each tradition that might underwrite concord and collaboration. The letter from the Muslim scholars entails textual citation from the Qur’an and from the Bible as a means for establishing the commonly held “two principles” of love, thereby enacting interpretive discernment of commensurability. The citation of the “alien” text is generally qualified, and the tone is exploratory; phrases such as “as we understand it,” or “perhaps” invite response, or correction, where necessary. The resources of Islamic scripture and interpretive tradition (*hadith*) are then related to those tenets of Christian religious tradition that appear to offer scope for commensurability. Notably, the focus of the initial ACW letter is primarily on the resources for commonality offered by sacred texts (rather than lived experience), which may in part be due to the different roles of authoritative texts within the two traditions. As Williams points out in his letter of response, the Qur’an is understood by Muslims to contain the words of God, received by Muhammed. This may be one explanation for the strong textual focus of the letter from the Muslim scholars and leaders and its deployment of scripture as a means of identifying channels for co-existence and co-operation. In contrast, the various traditions of Christological thought understand the figure of Jesus Christ to represent the *logos*—or Word of God—made incarnate, the New Testament acting as the authoritative witness to Christ’s life and the transformations in human possibility that, according to the Christian imagination, it effected. By highlighting in his written response to

99 “The Yale Response,” 144.

100 Rowan Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: Five Year Anniversary Edition* (The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 187–212.

the original letter this distinction in the operation of sacred texts, Williams offers the kind of corrective note that assists the process of mutual learning—he addresses perceived deficiencies in the mode of interpretation used by the authors of the original *A Common Word* letter.

Behind the formal exegetical element with its scriptural reasoning the initial ACW exchange exhibits the attempt to discern and clarify the intentions of the letter writers, and to establish relations of trust in a context of political tension and widespread interpretive reduction—that is, desire for mutual understanding and peace unaccompanied by a proselytizing or self-valorizing agenda. In responding to the original letter, the staff of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies emphasized that they were “pleased to see that the biblical and Gospel quotations used in this document come from the sources and that explanations given are on occasion based on the original languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. This is evidence of deep respect and genuine attentiveness to others, while at the same time of a true scientific spirit.”¹⁰¹ For the members of the Pontifical Institute, such attentiveness to interpretive complexity demonstrated sensitivity to their tradition and its linguistic diversity (even if only at the textual level). It acknowledged that learning through translational and interpretive activity, though arduous, is essential. The openness to engaging in difficult interpretive activity on the part of the Muslim letter writers, and the significant explanatory discussion in their own text, where scriptural and interpretive reasons are given to clarify the resources that they rely on to substantiate their commitment to the “principles of love,” acts to develop trust.

Note, here, the reciprocal interpretive movement beginning with scriptural reference—both to Islamic and Christian texts—and interpretation. This is followed by response, in this case from Christian leaders, which clarifies possible deficiencies in the interlocutor’s interpretation before posing new questions or setting out different perspectives. This quite clearly reflects a process close to the Gadamerian view of hermeneutical understanding; the interlocutors first pose their “prejudgments”—the way in which the other tradition’s commitments appear to them from within their own hermeneutical situation—which are then subjected to correction or adaptation, before new questions or interpretive issues are posed. The outcome is the establishment of what Bohman calls an “inter-perspectival stance,” which is “fully dialogical, giving

101 Staff Members of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies of Rome, “Appreciation of An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders,” *Chiesa*, November 25, 2007, <https://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/>.

inquirer and agent equal standing as agents in a shared practice (whatever the goals of that practice may be).¹⁰² Or, to use Gadamerian language, it establishes a “specific bond of belonging” by which participants “think along” with each other from a stance of shared responsibility.

Section 3: The Problem of Understanding and the “Articulating-constitutive Dimension”

Hermeneutically grounded value generalization as practiced in the *A Common Word* dialogue has a further goal that goes beyond either establishing the equal standing of agents or nurturing a “specific bond of belonging.” It works also to cultivate critical understanding of ethical meanings as they function within the traditions of those engaged in dialogical interchange. Gadamer’s explication of the “process of understanding” offers a rich account of the linguistic and hermeneutical functions by which this occurs, supplying a frame for assessment of the *A Common Word* dialogue’s pursuit of shared ethical premises. Crucially, it moves beyond treating value statements as formal “truth claims”—propositional assertions that are only doctrinal in nature—towards pursuing a more textured form of understanding, which I will now briefly explicate.

For Gadamer, “the real problem of understanding obviously arises when, in the endeavor to understand the content of what is said, the reflective question arises: How did he come to such an opinion? For this kind of question reveals an alienness that is clearly of quite a different kind and ultimately signifies a renunciation of shared meaning.”¹⁰³ There is no simple methodological formula that might be applied to develop this understanding—yet as Taylor and Dreyfus remind us, the one indispensable ingredient is engagement with those who deploy the terms in question, or for whom the terms articulate a horizon of concern. In order to “penetrate their discourse, we simply have to begin by holding discourse with them,” one which will be, at first, elementary—focused on “equally accessible things”—but will then move towards the development of more sophisticated exchanges that disclose how their ethical meanings are constituted.¹⁰⁴ In its identification of the two “principles of love,” the *A Common Word* project exemplifies a process by which generalizable values are identified, alongside

102 James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (MIT Press, 1996), 95.

103 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 187.

104 Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 124.

the explicit acknowledgment of difference and incommensurability: “whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimising some of their formal differences—it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament.”¹⁰⁵ The same recognition is offered by Williams, who states that those on whose behalf he speaks—other Christian leaders across the denominational spectrum—had read the original letter as an invitation towards finding “a way of recognising that on some matters we are speaking enough of a common language for us to be able to pursue both exploratory dialogue and peaceful co-operation with integrity and without compromising fundamental beliefs.”¹⁰⁶

In identifying values that might be generalizable across traditions, the participants in the ACW dialogue had first to overcome the problem of understanding the meanings operative within another tradition, without assuming conceptual transposability. To assume the transposability of key terms is to read them in a representative sense, as “corresponding” to phenomena, which they then reflect in language. Yet this would be to overlook the way in which a “language in use” constantly works to generate new meanings; thus, says Gadamer, “from language we learn that the subject matter is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding, but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself.”¹⁰⁷ Gadamer’s point here is that language does not operate in a merely descriptive sense by corresponding to mind-independent phenomena, but rather works in an “articulating-constitutive” manner, which generates and mediates new possibilities of expression and, with them, ways of seeing and understanding.¹⁰⁸ Language is “the medium of hermeneutic experience” and the medium, as McLuhan’s phrase goes, is inseparable from the message.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, to grasp what terms mean in their representative function—in their reference to phenomena—we have to understand what they mean in what Taylor calls their articulating-constitutive function.¹¹⁰ That is, what meanings the terms are articulating and what frameworks of meaning they (re)constitute by doing so.

105 *A Common Word between Us and You*, 68.

106 Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” 188.

107 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 187.

108 See Taylor, *The Language Animal*.

109 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 401.

110 Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 124.

To illustrate, take the term “conscience.”¹¹¹ Our understanding of “conscience” as a noun draws, rather like “soul,” upon a background understanding and vocabulary that refuses thoroughgoing materialism in its ontology of the individual subject. Understood according to its “representative” meaning, “conscience” would be taken to correspond to a spiritual reality, which those moving in lockstep with scientific or philosophical materialism might wish to deny. Even when taken in a more secular sense, it depends upon an “inside-outside” structure according to which the innermost sanctum of selfhood is associated with a site of interiority to which the individual mind may remove itself for reflective purposes.¹¹² But whether or not we accept an account of human reality inclusive of a spiritual dimension that surpasses material causality, we might wish to understand *how* the term “conscience,” so central to contemporary moral and political language, functions, along with the background against which it is intelligible. This background includes a range of assumptions about the structure of human cognition and the metaphysical context in which mind, body, “soul,” “conscience” and, indeed, “self,” play their parts. Taylor calls this a “footing” on which speech proceeds under certain assumptions. These may be assumptions about the kinds of relations established by certain forms of expression. So, for example, the nature of the term “oath” or “promise” suggests a footing upon which statements such as “I will return the book to you undamaged” amount to a commitment that cannot go unmet without social consequences (which Taylor thinks of in terms of shock or violation).¹¹³ Or, alternatively, they may be assumptions about the kind of function performed by a particular form of statement or concept given the background against which it works.

When it comes to discerning whether values or meanings might be shared across traditions in such a way as to form generalizable values, the challenge is most fundamentally to understand terms in their articulating-constitutive dimension. Consider Paul Heck’s exploration of whether something akin to “conscience” is operative within both Christian and Islamic traditions and to gauge whether this concept functions in a similar or commensurable manner within each tradition. The question is whether two different terms communicate the same meanings—do, “conscience” and the Arabic term “*ḍamīr*” refer to the same kind of moral dimension, with the

111 Paul Heck, “Conscience Across Cultures: The Case of Islam,” *The Journal of Religion* 94, no. 3 (2014): 292–324, 293. Paul Heck turns his attention to conscience in light of a dialogical encounter with Moroccan Muslim students.

112 Charles Taylor, *Self Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 111.

113 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 267.

same cognitive and affective structure? Heck begins by asking whether the “dynamics of conscience,” so different across the Christian denominational traditions, are equally diverse across Sunni, Shī‘a and Isma‘īli Islam, finding, perhaps predictably, that there are a great many descriptions and imaginative understandings of conscience within Islamic tradition.¹¹⁴ He finds that the concept of “*ḍamīr*” may indeed be commensurable with Christian conceptions of conscience in the sense of “the psyche being exposed” to external judgment or scrutiny, but that it is “not a voice admonishing you in advance to adhere to moral truths written on the human heart” as described by St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans.¹¹⁵ That is, *ḍamīr* may well *function* differently from “conscience” by depending upon different tacit meanings and assumed structures, cognitive, metaphysical or otherwise. After a substantial comparative examination of “conscience” and “*ḍamīr*,” Heck concludes that across the two traditions broadly conceived—the Christian-Kantian and the Islamic—there is shared recognition of “a mechanism that exists within humans to compel them to adhere to moral duties.”¹¹⁶ Across Islamic and Christian traditions there are various linguistic and expressive resources for describing a moral functioning that holds the individual in interrogative relationship with the divine and with the demands of moral duty as understood by their respective tradition.

The differences at work here are important and need to be taken into account so as to avoid an over-hasty assumption of commensurability, particularly of the kind that Ahmed warns us against, which inappropriately applies a Protestant Christian view of “the religious” to other traditions, such as Islam.¹¹⁷ While recognizing the significant divergences between the two tradition-based languages with which “conscience” and *ḍamīr* are articulated, Heck asserts that the overlap between the traditions is such that Muslims and Christians can “recognise the importance of conscience for the moral good of society even when disagreeing about the content of the moral good and even when conceiving of conscience in language specific to their respective traditions.”¹¹⁸ Conscience and *ḍamīr* are not commensurable in the sense that the terms represent or designate precisely the same object, made intelligible against the same set of background assumptions. Yet they nevertheless offer scope for generalizability across traditions because of the dynamics that they

114 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 315.

115 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 315.

116 Heck, “Conscience Across Cultures,” 322.

117 See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

118 Heck, “Conscience across Cultures,” 324.

introduce, by which subjects are made answerable to a source of authority that stands outside, but acts upon, the individual will.

What is clear, therefore, is that in discerning the scope for value generalization we ought to begin by pursuing an understanding of available principles and meanings as they function within the tradition with which they are engaged. For value generalization to be possible, we must be able to develop an understanding of meanings in their articulating-constitutive function, rather than in their static or codified form. This implies treating meanings not as single axioms that might be apprehended by means of correspondence with meanings available in one's own tradition, but rather, as Wittgenstein puts it, as "a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support."¹¹⁹ Reflecting this insight in his contribution to the initial ACW exchange, Williams urges further examination of the extent to which "the Christian conviction of God as Love and the all-important Islamic conviction that God is 'the Compassionate, the Merciful' (*ar-rahman ar-rahim*) represent common ground, and to what extent do differences need to be spelled out further?"¹²⁰ If articulations of the envisaged nature of God amount to premises, this meaning must be spelt out so that its implications may be clarified—that is, the value commitments such premises may bring into being. In the initial ACW exchange, the search for generalizable values begins, then, not with the location of common propositional commitments but with an examination of the language employed to characterize the nature of divinity, the "hypergood" that Islam and Christianity pose as the source of all other goods.¹²¹ It represents an effort to understand the range of meanings available in the moral imagination of another tradition, where the defining reality is the individual subject's and the community's relation to the divine. This is, necessarily, an entry into the domain of theological reflection, but it is also to enter an interchange of historical and ethical meanings with which efforts at theological articulation are interwoven. Where these traditions present ethical life as, fundamentally, an effort at participating in the economy of divine love through mimetic and ritual enactment, interpreting values demands attention to ritual and narrative practice and to the background this gives to linguistic meanings. Such complexity reflects Joas' argument regarding the comparative sophistication of value generalization—the ACW exchange entails engagement with values

119 Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. H. von Wright, and G. E. M. Anscombe, *On Certainty* (Blackwell, 1974), 145.

120 Williams, "A Common Word for the Common Good," 197.

121 The term "hypergood" comes from Taylor's account of the valuing of goods in a moral framework. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 63.

articulated in non-propositional form, in terms of allowing for expression of affective attachment and narrative power.

For the purpose of understanding *how values function* in the ethical life of another tradition, exploration of values in terms that extend beyond their propositional format is vital. As Joas points out, our commitment to values stems from more than a cognitive recognition of their validity claims. Rather, we have values and live them as commitments, in such a way as to make them more than mere assertions.¹²² We do not arrive at a deeply held attachment to values through a process of rational discursive persuasion, but rather are constituted cognitively and affectively by the hermeneutical situation in which we move—thus, “values cannot simply be discussed in an atomistic way, as if they were no more than discrete, self-contained opinions.”¹²³ Rather, value judgments point to histories, as Joas insists, having been constituted out of past experience as well as the languages by which these experiences are mediated. Hence “biographical, historical, and mythological narratives are no illustrations to didactic ends but a necessary feature of communication about values.”¹²⁴

Recognizing that value articulations are developed at different levels and by various means within a tradition, Williams insists that a dialogical exchange that seeks to understand, and to develop shared value commitments, cannot remain a merely intellectual enterprise. His insistence here fuels the diagnostic perception that the ACW exchange is fundamentally political, with political ends in sight—those of sustaining a space of common ground otherwise threatened by certain strains of political discourse and theological controversy. Thus, Williams suggests that “opportunities for lived encounter with people of different faiths, both within and across national boundaries, need to be multiplied and developed in an atmosphere of trust and respect.”¹²⁵ In so doing he echoes the original ACW letter in which the engaged scholars emphasize the urgent political nature of developing “meaningful peace” between the world’s two largest religious traditions, where “our common future is at stake.”¹²⁶ The ACW letter urges that in securing a “common future” amidst social conditions that intertwine Christians and Muslims everywhere, dialogue between Christianity and Islam cannot be confined to a formal interchange between scholars: “[F]inding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a

122 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 177.

123 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 179.

124 Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, 178.

125 Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” 17.

126 “A Common Word Between Us and You,” 15.

matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders.”¹²⁷ Rather, dialogue as they envisage it requires mutual learning taking place at various levels of engagement and certainly beyond scholarly textual exegesis.

In order to retain a non-esoteric social and political relevance, value generalization ought to entail discerning novel ends established with reference to the specificities of political and social context. In practice, following the Gadamerian description of the conditions of understanding, ACW participants operate out of distinct hermeneutical horizons—locational, political and ethical—though they are, from different angles, commonly exposed to specific meta-discourses (the “clash of civilizations” or Christian/Muslim antagonism). In the case of the ACW dialogue, methodologically refined textual exegesis becomes politically purposive when set in train alongside a diagnostic effort that foregrounds and acknowledges political context. In so doing it establishes a deliberative encounter that registers the pressure placed upon traditions and their adherents not at a formal theological level but at the level of social and political exclusion or everyday reduction to caricature; it implies attention not only to esoteric Christological or Qur’anic arguments, but also to the political and social circumstances that led to the original dialogical outreach by the authors of the *A Common Word* letter. This includes the recognition that peace and concord in contexts where traditions rub up against each other requires the adaptation of values to new circumstances, thereby suggesting the importance of diagnostic practices to the process of value generalization.

The diagnostic practices illustrated here include the identification and description of both the contemporary and historical circumstances that establish the need for a new articulation of values. To this end the ACW participant parties each give an account of the political background against which a new value horizon is to be formed. Implicit in the address of the Muslim scholars to their Christian counterparts is the urgency of new political imperatives—namely, the political and social cross-pressures of the “global war on terror” and the reductive construal of Islam. The Christian respondents equally diagnose the imbrication of theological hermeneutics with political imperatives—particularly those of sustaining ethical commonality or “common ground” upon which relations of equal agency may be maintained. Thus, the Christian scholars who responded to the *A Common Word* letter note the complex interweaving of political and religious influences in the history of Christian-Muslim antagonism: “[T]hough tensions, conflicts, and even wars in which Christians and Muslims stand against each other are not primarily religious in character, they possess an

127 “A Common Word Between Us and You,” 72.

undeniable religious dimension.”¹²⁸ With this diagnosis in mind, the ACW dialogue is, on the view of these scholars, called to address the religious dimension of conflict *in concert with* an awareness of its imbrication with ostensibly secular political and social discourses; the dialogue resists the conceptual positing of “religion” as an independent variable while also asserting the need for the adherents of the involved traditions to take responsibility for the manner in which their resources are mobilized. It therefore answers the challenges of hermeneutical reduction—the essentialization of religion by the secular or Protestant understanding, or the reduction of either Islamic or Christian tradition from a hermeneutical standpoint that conceals their multivalence. At the same time, the ACW exchange renders a portrait of contemporary social and politically inflected antagonisms as more complex than allowed for by the readily available designation of “religious extremism,” or the discourse of “irremediable civilisational conflict.”

In openly acknowledging the backdrop of discursive antagonism, reduction and mistrust against which it works, the ACW exchange sets out the importance of reconstructing what Bohman calls a “*political* relationship of equal agency” between alienated subjects.¹²⁹ The agency in this case is interpretive rather than assertoric. There is an interpretive mutuality at work here that allows space for difference, disagreement, and correction, while nevertheless orienting all of these towards the search for common ground; the different participants are able to propose their own particular readings of the contemporary conjuncture and the “ends” to which it should orient interlocutors deliberating with goodwill. In the case of *A Common Word*, “mutuality” is developed through the forging of relations of reciprocal attentiveness that allow individual subjects—citizens—to *appear*, as Arendt would put it, through the articulation of their histories, ethical sources, and diagnostic perception of the present moment and its political salience.¹³⁰ In this sense, mutuality retains a commitment to reciprocity, but avoids indexing deliberative interchange to the practice of “methodologically neutral” argumentation.

That the relationality thereby established between participants remains *political*, drawing upon an undiminished particularity, is demonstrated by the assertion of difference throughout the exchange—the ongoing registration of particular, rather than formal, subjectivity. In general, the Christian

128 “Yale Response,” 144.

129 Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy*, 95, italics mine.

130 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 77.

respondents enthusiastically accept the claims by the Islamic letter writers to some commensurability between Islamic and Christian injunctions to neighborly care and concern.¹³¹ But, as Williams makes clear, the possibility of discerning common ground depends upon the exploration of difference; hence, in the initial ACW exchange there is the recognition that subjecting each other's traditions to an ongoing process of reciprocal translation and interpretation will be vital in developing an understanding of distinct descriptions of superabundant divine love and of the meanings that lend the values of "neighborly" consideration their intelligibility within each tradition. Intelligibility, an important precursor to discerning shared premises, is therefore intimately tied to an acknowledgement of difference, of the reality of "hermeneutical situations" beyond our immediate grasp and therefore accessible only through an interpretive unsettling of our own horizon.

The *A Common Word* dialogue arguably satisfied the pragmatic presuppositions asserted by Habermas as necessary for a practice to "count seriously" as argumentation. It (a) practiced publicity and inclusiveness, (b) gave all who wished to the opportunity to speak, (c) ostensibly excluded deception and illusion, the participants having "meant what they said."¹³² In place, however, of referring to the an latent "normative grammar" and its attendant "rules of egalitarian universalism," the participants foregrounded contextually formed principles of neighborliness that mandated not only equal consideration, but that offered the affective and motivational depth to generate dialogical commitment under adverse circumstances.¹³³ The ACW dialogue represents a deliberative process that sets aside Habermas' dichotomous assertion of "the difference between the certainties of faith and publicly criticizable validity claims" (the inter-subjective markers of egalitarian universalism), so as to assess politically resonant values in their "articulating-constitutive" dimension.¹³⁴ In Hans Sluga's terms, a "conceptual laboratory" is established, in which we "achieve new interpretations" through "an interpretive, hermeneutic enterprise."¹³⁵ In more socially immediate terms we might also think of this "laboratory" as a dialogical community: that is, a community formed out of those processes of attention to values and meanings (translation and critical interpretation),

131 See Williams, "A Common Word for the Common Good."

132 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 50.

133 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 50.

134 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143.

135 Hans Sluga, *Politics and the Search for the Common Good* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 35.

which in turn acts as a context “within which language grows.”¹³⁶ In its attention to its own constitutive differences it works to establish a common world of shared meanings in which reciprocal acts of acknowledgement and attention prise open the values of one’s interlocutors, making them legible against the backdrop of both “old” tradition and “new” experience. As evinced in the ACW dialogue, value generalization models a form of deliberative interchange that critically mines the genealogies that stand behind value articulations, that accepts perspectival finitude and that acknowledges value articulations as potentially persuasive in their affective, narrative and expository capacity, rather than in their cognitive power or decisive validity. It undergirds the Gadamerian vision of hermeneutical conversation, where “to reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”¹³⁷

Conclusion

This article has offered an initial exploration of how, by integrating the insights of the “pragmatic turn” in critical social theory with the ontological commitments of Gadamerian hermeneutics, we can develop an account of democratic dialogue that involves the critical disclosure of ethical identities (such that critique may be refined by encounter with cultural detail), and the reflective reconstruction of shared values. I have emphasized the need for a hermeneutically rich account of deliberative practice amidst value pluralism, which, I argue, need not necessarily be tied to a traditionalism that seeks to defend received practices from critical destabilization or transformation. If one aim of democratic theory is to envisage ways of nurturing shared values and ethical commonality across traditions, then the kind of critical dialogue explored here models practices by which that may be realized. It illustrates the methods by which co-citizens, consociates and transnational interlocutors might “create commonplaces” and so “make the world common” as a precursor to pursuing shared action and as a bulwark against reduction and caricature. Rather than positing value generalization as a replacement for liberal theories of deliberation on “constitutional essentials” within states, we might see it as part of a multidimensional framework of critical argumentation, of relevance to the tensions that arise within the

136 Charles Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 234.

137 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 387.

transnational public sphere facilitated by communicative globalization in the digital age. These tensions are present across civil jurisdictions, in keeping with the trans-societal extension of culture and religious tradition. They highlight the need for the methodical nurturing of shared normative premises at a social level, and for democratic theory to take seriously the task of cultivating motivationally strong forms of ethical commonality. This is not, as I have emphasized, a matter of suspending critical engagement between traditions, or overthrowing evaluative standards for critique in favor of a thoroughgoing relativism. Rather, it is to supplement critical evaluation with the hermeneutically developed understanding of meanings, which works to overcome caricature and inscrutability and better grounds public interchange about values. At a time when the “clash of civilizations” thesis imprints itself discernibly upon public discourse across Western democracies, value generalization offers a means of conducting inter-cultural dialogues oriented towards the critical appraisal of self and other, of “creating commonplaces” and thereby developing of solidaristic communities of understanding.



***Dr. Benedict Coleridge** is a political and legal philosopher trained at the University of Oxford and Yale Law School.*

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INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

The Compassion of Rowan Williams: Lessons for Interfaith Dialogue

Akbar Ahmed, Frankie Martin, and Amineh Hoti

Abstract

For decades, Rowan Williams has been a leading intellectual and spiritual authority in the Anglican Church, with his influence extending beyond his denomination to include Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. Among Williams' core concerns is reaching out to non-Christians and pursuing interfaith dialogue. In this article, the authors draw on their interviews with Williams and his body of work to examine the lessons he offers concerning the "Other"—or people from communities different from one's own—and interfaith dialogue. These include the need to frame interfaith dialogue within a cognizance of a larger unity, an openness to the idea that each tradition has received partial understanding of the divine, and the importance of possessing inclusive social and political ideals concerning intercultural relations. Williams' steps for practically conducting interfaith dialogue are also presented. The authors argue that Williams provides a valuable approach towards the "Other" and interfaith dialogue applicable beyond Christianity to all of humanity in a world stricken by religious, ethnic, and national conflict.

Keywords

Rowan Williams, Christianity, interfaith dialogue, the "Other," identity, coexistence, intercommunal relations, pluralism, global affairs, political theory, education

There are few things more important than promoting understanding and bridge-building between people of different religions and cultures. It is not as simple or easy a task as it seems. On the contrary, it is complex and subject to push back from the different parties as, too often, some interfaith practitioners end up arguing that their point of view is better or more valid than that of their dialogue partners of other religions. Conversely, sometimes religious differences or the unique worldviews and perspectives of the “Other”—or people from religious, cultural, racial, ethnic, or national communities different from one’s own—are glossed over or not adequately discussed, thus allowing questions and stereotypes to remain.

With this in mind, we the authors, who are committed to building bridges and promoting understanding, wish to focus here on a thinker and spiritual leader who, we believe, has much to teach us about how to practically move forward with the essential and urgent task of interfaith dialogue. Dr. Lord Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, has, over the course of his long and esteemed career, seriously and with great compassion and empathy reached out to the non-Christian “Other.” He has carefully considered the subject of interfaith dialogue from within a Christian context and how it may best be conceptualized and practiced. In his work, we find a consistent discussion of the major challenges facing interfaith and intercultural harmony in the twenty-first century and how they may be overcome.

Below, we will draw on our personal interviews with Williams and on his body of work to examine his approach to non-Christians, his understanding of interfaith dialogue, and his recommendations for fostering human coexistence. We will discuss the following core elements of Williams’ thinking on these subjects: an awareness of the essential role that the “Other” plays in our own identities and pursuit of truth, the significance of framing interfaith dialogue within a cognizance of a larger unity of all, an openness to the idea that, with our human limitations, each tradition has received a partial rather than an absolute understanding of the divine, and the importance of possessing inclusive social and political ideals concerning intercultural relations and striving to implement them—in this case we will highlight Williams’ work in the field of political theory. Additionally, we present Williams’ own steps for practically conducting interfaith dialogue.

We argue that while Williams is writing from within a Christian framework, all of us, regardless of our own religions and backgrounds, have much to learn from his approach. Williams’ ideas are relevant across diverse traditions and can be adapted within other contexts. We as the authors, who come from different religious and cultural traditions—both Muslim and

Christian—and have been collaborating on projects for some two decades with the goal of improving relations and understanding between different peoples, have learned much and been inspired by Williams in his work on this subject.¹ Here we would like to share some of Williams’ insights and observations in the hopes that others of varying backgrounds may benefit from them in learning about, meeting, and collaborating with one another across religious, racial, ethnic, national, and cultural lines. Williams is what we, the authors, refer to as a “Mingler,” someone who points to the dangers of exclusivism and insists on seeing humanity in a single framework, stressing human unity.² In his scholarship and leadership, Williams provides valuable guidance for us in navigating and ameliorating a world consumed by religious, ethnic, and national acrimony and violence.

Williams and the “Other”

To reach the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the world’s Anglican faithful living in the historic Lambeth Palace, and then the Master of a Cambridge College, is about as high as you can ascend in British society. Rowan Williams achieved both positions, all the while producing high-quality academic work. Moreover, he entered the popular imagination when he conducted the marriage ceremony of Prince William and Kate Middleton, which had an estimated television audience of one billion people. He now plays the role of a leading public intellectual: His debate with Professor Richard Dawkins, the formidable Oxford professor and widely seen as the leader of the New Atheists in the world, is well-known and should be studied for style and content. In 2025, the *New York Times* described Williams as “among the most important religious thinkers in the world.”³

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- 1 See, for example, our quartet of studies examining the relationship between the West and the Islamic world: Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam* (Brookings Institution Press, 2010); Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013); Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Europe: Islam, Immigration, and Identity* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018).
 - 2 This is the subject of our forthcoming book *The Mingling of the Oceans: How Civilizations Can Live Together*, in which we focus on people possessing this inclusive approach towards the “Other” and human unity.
 - 3 Peter Wehner, “The New Atheists ‘Attack a God I Don’t Believe In, Either’: A Q&A With Rowan Williams,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

Williams held an office that has been at the center of English history. The clashes between the archbishops and the reigning monarchs in attempting to preserve the primacy of the church are legendary. In the twelfth century, Henry II prompted the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral itself and Thomas Cranmer, who helped build a case for Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, was executed in the sixteenth century, but not before he compiled the English Book of Common Prayer. Balanced against this, however, have been the many occasions when the church has reached across sectarian lines to embrace those of other faiths. Williams has done just this, and with substantial intellectual authority—he was described by a biographer as the most intellectually distinguished Archbishop of Canterbury since Saint Anselm, who served in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.⁴ Furthermore, Williams' influence and profile extends well beyond the boundaries of his own Church of England to include Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity.⁵

Williams' talents additionally include poetry, and he has published both books of his own poetry and a book of commentary on spiritual poems by Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists of different nationalities.⁶ He is fluent in around ten languages and his diverse intellectual influences include religious scholars like Thomas Merton and Meister Eckhart and philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein. Williams is a formidable theologian whose prodigious scholarship also effortlessly ranges across the fields of literary criticism, philosophy, and political theory.

I have seen up close Williams' commitment to interfaith dialogue and embracing non-Christians over the years in my meetings with him.⁷ Dr. Amineh Hoti and I, both Muslim scholars, were invited to Lambeth Palace in 2012, for example, to attend one of Williams' final public events as archbishop—which notably focused on interfaith engagement—and I was asked to deliver the keynote address in the afternoon session. At this event, the lectures of the archbishop to Muslim audiences in Egypt, Libya, and Pakistan, which had been compiled into a volume and translated into Urdu and Bengali, were presented to the archbishop along with glowing speeches

4 Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 3.

5 Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 3.

6 Rowan Williams, *A Century of Poetry: 100 Poems for Searching the Heart* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge Press, 2022).

7 While all three of us have met, interviewed, and interacted with Williams over the years, in this paper we will use "I" when referring to, me, Akbar Ahmed and "we" when we are speaking of all three authors.

made by Muslims recording the contributions of the archbishop in promoting interfaith dialogue.

Williams has also been a great supporter of Amineh, coming to Cambridge to launch her book project, *Valuing Diversity: Towards Mutual Understanding and Respect*, at Michaelhouse, one of the oldest churches and educational centers in the UK.⁸ We returned to interview Williams two years later during fieldwork in Europe for our study *Journey into Europe* on the relationship between Islam and Europe.⁹ This time, we met him at the Master's Lodge at Cambridge's Magdalene College. The image of Lord Rowan absorbed in a Rubik's Cube with four-year-old Anah Hoti, Amineh's daughter, and my granddaughter, at this meeting reminds us of his human quality of compassion. He is known in the land as a champion of the less privileged and the voiceless. His Welsh background has helped him sharpen his empathy for the underdog—particularly minorities and those of different ethnicities and religions, and he has affirmed, “God is likeliest to be found among those we have...dismissed or shut out.”¹⁰ At the heart of his work and advocacy has been an embrace of people and ideas outside of his own religious and cultural tradition, which he argues creates the necessary space for mutual growth and enrichment based on encountering difference. His compassion lies close to the surface.

Williams' efforts in this regard have not been without controversy, particularly as far as the Muslim community was concerned after 9/11, an event that he witnessed up close while serving as Archbishop of Wales (he was only a few blocks from the World Trade Center on that morning). To him, the importance of interfaith dialogue and facilitating human coexistence based in the message and example of Jesus only grew in importance after that horrible day. When it became known that Williams might soon become Archbishop of Canterbury not long after 9/11, he was described in the *Wall Street Journal* as a “terror apologist” for calling on people to understand the terrorists' motives and making statements like “Bombast about evil individuals doesn't help in understanding anything.”¹¹

8 The Woolf Institute and the Society for Dialogue and Action, *Valuing Diversity: Towards Mutual Respect and Understanding* (The Society for Dialogue and Action, the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations, and the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, 2008).

9 Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Europe: Islam, Immigration, and Identity* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

10 Rowan Williams, *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 187.

11 Peter Mullen, “Tales of Canterbury's Future?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2002, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

But this was nothing compared to the uproar that resulted from Williams' 2008 lecture on sharia law, in which he argued that British law must take seriously the presence of populations such as Muslims who had their own legal interpretations, and he hoped to open up a space for conversation which might lead to a more plural legal system. The tabloid headlines included "WHAT A BURKHA: Archbishop wants Muslim Law in UK"¹² and "a victory for al Qaeda."¹³ There were calls for his resignation as British government officials complained that Williams was trying "to fundamentally change the rule of law."¹⁴ There was also criticism within the church, for example from bishops in Nigeria.¹⁵ Williams explained that he had only hoped to create "a helpful interaction between the courts and the practice of Muslim legal scholars in this country."¹⁶ His commitment to serious interfaith dialogue, not just in the theological or educational realm but in the practical, nuts-and-bolts aspects of living together and what this means and looks like, was undiminished by the controversy.

Williams' Early Life and Formative Influences

Williams was born in 1950 in Swansea, Wales to a middle-class family. He was descended from Welsh miners and shepherds who were drawn into the Swansea valley at the beginning of the nineteenth century, hoping to find greater opportunities. His family was proud of their Welsh identity, and while Williams grew up speaking both Welsh and English, his grandfather had banned the use of English in their home.¹⁷ As an infant Williams was stricken with meningitis, and he was unable to play sports or engage in physical activities in the way that most boys did.¹⁸ Consequently, he withdrew into the world of books, consuming works of literature, philosophy, and history.¹⁹ He went on to attend the University of Cambridge and while he initially planned to attain a degree in English literature, he switched to theology. This was not, as he saw it, an alternative to literature but "as a way of exploring the deeper questions that he had stumbled upon in his reading

12 Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 396.

13 Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (T & T Clark, 2012), 63.

14 Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 63.

15 Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 396.

16 Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 400.

17 Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 26.

18 Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 13–14.

19 Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 14.

of authors like Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden.”²⁰

Williams’ reaching out to other cultural communities was already visible during this period in his interest in Russian Orthodox Christianity. It was not an interest that would have necessarily been viewed with neutrality by others around him, as this was the height of the Cold War in the 1960s. As a teenager, Williams became aware of what he called “an alien cultural presence on the other side of Europe which had a hinterland of imagery both odd and seductive” and he wished to know more. He read Russian literature, listened to Slavic music, and watched Russian films.²¹ After graduating from Cambridge, he moved to Oxford where he completed a Ph.D. on the Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky.

Williams was ordained as a deacon and spent nearly a decade in parish work in Cambridge, all the while continuing his academic career. He then moved to Oxford to assume the post of Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, subsequently ascending to the high church positions of Bishop of Monmouth and Archbishop of Wales before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002. At his enthronement as archbishop, he gave an address which outlined the approach he would have throughout his tenure concerning embracing people of differing backgrounds: “Once we recognize God’s great secret, that we are all made to be God’s sons and daughters, we can’t avoid the call to see one another differently. No one can be written off; no group, no nation, no minority can just be a scapegoat to receive our fears and uncertainties. We cannot assume that any human face we see has no divine secret to disclose,” including “those who are culturally or religiously strange to us.”²²

Unity and Diversity

In his writings and teachings, Williams has stressed both the inherent diversity of the world and our essential connections with this diversity. We should accept, he says, that the “diversity and mysteriousness of the world around is something precious in itself. To reduce this diversity and to try and empty out the mysteriousness is to fail to allow God to speak through the things of creation as he means to.”²³ We are all intermeshed and should recognize “the complex interrelations that make us what we are as part of

20 Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 22.

21 Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule*, 65.

22 Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule*, 260–261.

23 Williams, *Choose Life*, 55.

the whole web of existence on the planet.”²⁴ Humanity itself is “unimaginable without all those other life forms which make it possible and which it in turn serves and conserves.”²⁵ We should be aware that “we can’t control the weather system or the succession of the seasons. The world turns, and the tides move at the drawing of the moon. Human force is incapable of changing any of this. What is before me is a network of relations and interconnections in which the relation to me, or even to us collectively as human beings, is very far from the whole story. I may ignore this, but only at the cost of disaster.”²⁶

And yet, we tend not to recognize this interconnection, preferring to think of ourselves as somehow meaningful or complete either on our own or as part of our own group. But this is to lack a perspective of the whole. “To *understand* the world,” Williams contends, “is to sense a deep embrace, a mutuality or interpenetration that does not simply negate the reality of individual subjects or individual moments, but forbids us from thinking of those moments as enclosed or absolute.”²⁷

A good example of Williams’ thinking on this subject can be seen in his statements on nationalism. He is not against being proud of one’s own ethnic identity—in his case being Welsh. But we must always keep in mind the link with the greater unity. Each group of “people living with this or that corporate history, common language and culture” such as the Welsh, he argues, should see their identity “as a thread in a larger tapestry.”²⁸ This idea is firmly rooted in Christian theology and history, Williams argues, and “Any racial group or language group or sovereign state whose policy or programme it is to pursue its interest at the direct cost of others has no claim on the Christian’s loyalty.”²⁹

This perspective comes out clearly in Williams’ commentary on the Welsh poet Waldo Williams, whose verse, “*Cadw ty mewn cwmwl bystion*” (“Keeping house/ among a cloud of witnesses”), Williams notes, “has become almost proverbial in Wales.”³⁰ It is not a matter of choosing one group over another but embracing the local and universal simultaneously, as Lord Rowan explains, “Belonging to a tradition with deep local roots makes us heirs to not a possession that has to be violently defended but a security

24 Williams, Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (Bloomsbury, 2012), 201.

25 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 198.

26 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 185.

27 Williams, *A Century of Poetry*, commentary on Jan Zwicky, “Grace Is Unmoved. It is the Light that Melts, excerpt from ‘Philosophers’ Stone.’”

28 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell, 2000), 254.

29 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 253.

30 Williams, *A Century of Poetry*, commentary on Waldo Williams, “What is Man?”

which allows us to seek mutual recognition between people, not opposition and rivalry.”³¹

Our identities as a part of a group, then, should not be seen as closed, but open—especially to people outside of our group. In our interview with Lord Rowan, he told us, “Identity is always something we have to work at. It’s not something just given. We can’t simply say, ‘This is who I am. It’s all in here. In me, or in us, and that’s all we need to know.’ The identity of Britain, or just England, of course, has always been diverse. And I’m speaking here as somebody who comes from a minority group in Britain, that is the Welsh, with their own language, their own cultural history. So I suppose I’ve been conscious from my childhood that it’s more than one story. And that’s the second thing about identity. We find out who we are by telling stories about ourselves.” In his case, “When I was at school, we were obliged to study Welsh history as well as English. So it was like having binoculars. Two things to look at.”

Self and Other

The “Other” is crucial for Williams because they bring out something important in us—essentially we find out who we really are while meeting one another, learning about each other, and going on a journey together. As Williams says, “We shall none of us know who we are without each other.”³² While we may believe that our own experience is the correct one or only one that matters, “The individual reality or situation is like a single chord abstracted from a symphony: It can be looked at in itself, but only with rather boring results, since what it is there and then is determined by the symphony...there is no perspective outside plurality.”³³ He calls for us to turn “away from an atomized, artificial notion of the self as simply setting its own agenda from inside towards that more fluid, more risky, but also more human discourse of the exchanges in relations in which we’re involved.”³⁴ He wants us to be “confident enough to *exchange* perspectives, truths, insights.”³⁵ Of great importance is “listening” to others, which is needed “almost more than anything else...patience before each other, before the

31 Williams, *A Century of Poetry*, commentary on Waldo Williams, “What is Man?”

32 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 303.

33 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 186–187

34 Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 47.

35 Williams, *Being Human*, 40.

mysteriousness of each other.”³⁶

In reaching out to others, we deemphasize the self and thus create a better world for all—including ourselves: What is important is “life for the other, which is the life that Christ embodies, in history as in preaching and sacrament.”³⁷ Williams affirms that “What we need in order to live in a balanced, ‘reasonable’ way within creation is the well-being and flourishing of our neighbours, justice being done to and for them.”³⁸ He explains, “Scripture is definitely clear that to be drawn near to God is always to be drawn near to each other, and there is no way of separating those two.”³⁹ If we do the opposite, as so many do, if we “live untouched or uncaring in the midst of poverty, disease, violence, corruption and disaster, we starve. Our failure in giving to the neighbour becomes an injury to ourselves.”⁴⁰ We also often fall prey to “zero-sum” thinking which “assumes that there can never be ‘enough to go round’: if I have more, they have less; if they have more, I have less” which is “so evidently at the root of virtually all major conflicts, social, national and political as much as personal.”⁴¹ A perspective of unity, however, gets beyond such zero-sum thinking and can promote peace.

The essential basis of our relations with all is love, Williams notes, which was Jesus’ example, as Jesus advocated for the “harmony and well-being of the entire human family.”⁴² To follow Jesus’ example is “to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts...humanity in endless growth towards love.”⁴³ Just as God loves all, “we too must learn to love beyond the boundaries of common interest and natural sympathy and, like God, love those who don’t seem to have anything in common with us.”⁴⁴ He further asserts that “Creation, the total environment, is a system oriented towards life—and, ultimately, towards intelligent and loving life.”⁴⁵ Lord Rowan is insistent that “There cannot be a human good for one person or group that necessarily excludes the good of another person or group” and “no life can be allowed to fall out of the circle of love.”⁴⁶ On the basis of this

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- 36 Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (New Seeds, 2005), 84.
 - 37 Rowan Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 195.
 - 38 Rowan Williams, *Passions of the Soul* (Bloomsbury, 2024), 44.
 - 39 Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule*, 219.
 - 40 Williams, *Passions of the Soul*, 44.
 - 41 Williams, *Passions of the Soul*, 66.
 - 42 Williams, *Christ*, 220.
 - 43 Rowan Williams, *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 95.
 - 44 Williams, *Passions of the Soul*, 107.
 - 45 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 205.
 - 46 For the first quotation see Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 230; for the second see

love—the love on which the “universe” is founded—will society and the world flourish.⁴⁷

Williams also argues that just as truth cannot be encapsulated in one’s own limited perspective without encountering those who are different, no one religion can be so contained—the divine is much larger than any single experience, comprehension, or tradition. Concerning Christians, he cites the French Catholic theologian Jacques Pohier, who said, “God does not show himself in Jesus Christ as being the totality of meaning.”⁴⁸ This means, Williams contends, that everyone is trying to understand God in their own ways, and God “does not control how the divine is to be met by means of a single set of revealed schemata.”⁴⁹ “We do not, as Christians,” Williams explains, “set the goal of including the entire human race in a single religious institution, nor do we claim that we possess all authentic religious insight.”⁵⁰ Being Christian “is believing the doctrine of the Trinity to be true...It is not to claim a *totality* of truth about God or about the human world, or even a monopoly of the means of bringing divine absolution or grace to men and women.”⁵¹

Williams on Interfaith Dialogue

As we see from this discussion, Williams is repeatedly calling our attention to a larger reality which unifies us. Even though “we are, by the very nature of our humanity, naturally *attuned* to the reality of God,”⁵² he argues, the particular ways in which we understand God will differ. This is where interfaith dialogue can be very fruitful, because “we have none of us received the whole truth as God knows it; we all have things to learn.”⁵³ Williams asserts that “there is no possibility of claiming that every human question is answered once and for all by one system.”⁵⁴

Williams’ approach to interfaith thus starts from a position of “humility,” which asserts that “even as we proclaim our conviction of truth,” we “acknowledge with respect the depth and richness of another’s devotion to

Williams, *Choose Life*, 38.
 47 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 232.
 48 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 122.
 49 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 122.
 50 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 194.
 51 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 196–197.
 52 Williams, *Where God Happens*, 49.
 53 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 301.
 54 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 299.

and obedience to what they have received as truth.”⁵⁵ This does not imply “for a moment that dialogue entails the compromise of fundamental beliefs or that the issue of truth is a matter of indifference; quite the opposite.”⁵⁶ It is likewise not a matter of “the triumph of one theory or one institution or one culture,” but how we can constructively “find a way of working together towards a mode of human co-operation, mutual challenge and mutual nurture.”⁵⁷

Williams goes even further and gives us concrete ideas for how to conduct interfaith dialogue. He counsels us to avoid misunderstandings by paying close attention to the language and concepts we employ, asking questions like “Are these two or more traditions addressing similar or different concerns when they use language and imagery that seems to be closely similar?”⁵⁸ When we begin to understand another tradition on its own terms, things that we initially thought might be the opposite of what we believe turn out not to be so. Then you can “try to discover what your own tradition commits you to and how it answers legitimate criticism from outside—criticism which often (as in the case of the mutability of God) could be raised intelligibly *within* the native tradition. What emerges is frequently a conceptual and imaginative world in which at least some of the positive concerns of diverse traditions are seen to be held in common.”⁵⁹

We are already often operating at a disadvantage when we attempt dialogue between faiths and cultures because of the images that we often have of those who are different from ourselves. Frequently, Williams states, the “Other” is constructed as the “opposite” of the “Self.”⁶⁰ This distorted figure is often a “fantasy” to us—an act of “conscription” into our “story,”⁶¹ without caring to understand their story from their own point of view. It is a universal problem as “all human beings are liable to be drawn into the fantasy lives of others.”⁶² This, however, is destructive, with Williams explaining, “When you get used to imposing meanings in this way, you silence the stranger’s account of who they are; and that can mean both metaphorical and literal death.”⁶³

55 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 301.

56 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 301.

57 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 191.

58 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 131.

59 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 290.

60 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 287.

61 Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 68.

62 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 297.

63 Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 64.

This has been done often by Christians, Williams says—they “conscripted Jews into their version of reality and forced them into a role that has nothing to do with how Jews understand their own past or current experience.”⁶⁴ Speaking of the resulting antisemitism, Williams told us, “the poison is still in the system. And even now, even today.” It is also the case with Muslims, who “were made to play a part in the drama written by Christians, as a kind of diabolical mirror image of Christian identity, worshipping a trinity of ridiculous idols.”⁶⁵ Jews and Muslims, for their part, “cherished equally bizarre beliefs about Christianity at times. They, like us, needed to assert some kind of control over the stranger, the other by ‘writing them in’ in terms that could be managed and manipulated.”⁶⁶

In the contemporary world, Williams lamented, this is happening far too often. We fear one another, and thus build walls between us, but “Every wall we build to defend ourselves and keep out what may destroy us is also a wall that keeps us in and that will change us in ways we did not choose or want. Every human solution to fears and threats generates a new set of fears and threats...Defences do some terrible things to us as well as to our real and imagined enemies.”⁶⁷ We also often see ourselves as victims of such “enemies” which feeds into our opposition to them. This sense can become “so entrenched that even one’s own power, felt and exercised, does not alter the mythology.”⁶⁸

Interfaith Dialogue Steps

How do we get past our fantasies of those of different religions and cultures which can be so dangerous? Lord Rowan presents several practical steps which are useful for us to consider when conducting interfaith dialogue. First, he calls for “abandoning the right to decide who they [strangers] are.”⁶⁹ Instead, we should be “enabling the stranger to be heard, deciding that the stranger has a gift and a challenge that can change you.”⁷⁰ The second is to acknowledge our inherently limited view. Williams states, “I recognize that what’s before me, whether rose or person, can be seen from

64 Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 63.

65 Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 63.

66 Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 63.

67 Williams, *Choose Life*, 44–45.

68 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 144.

69 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 303.

70 Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 305.

other perspectives than mine.”⁷¹ In being open enough to listen, we will also learn how we are seen—we will discover “things about ourselves we did not know, seeing ourselves through the eyes of another.”⁷²

Third, rather than trying to learn about the religious “stranger” by focusing only on theology or beliefs, spend time with them. Williams recommends, “hang around with the representatives of one or another religious tradition—share the experiences of worship, entertain the images, the stories they tell. Look at the lives they point to as important lives, important saints, figures in their tradition: because I think it is profoundly true that the religious apprehension is caught, not taught.”⁷³

This was the element he emphasized in his interview with us, stating, “When you realize you’ve not really got close to your neighbors, you will either panic, or you can say, ‘well it’s time I started isn’t it?’ So either you react with projecting all sorts of mysterious and terrible things onto them, or you sit with them and listen.” In the case of Muslims, Williams said, “We in Europe and elsewhere simply need to educate ourselves about what Islam really is. And we need to listen very hard to the average Muslim neighbor...To listen to the experience of those who are unobtrusively but faithfully living ordinary Muslim lives fully within our society. Listen to them.”

The fourth step, in a recommendation also suggested by spiritual figures such as Rumi, is to attempt to see others who you may not like from the perspective of those who love them.⁷⁴ You will then see them as full human beings and it becomes more difficult to hate and dehumanize them. The final step is to acknowledge that others have suffered. In that sense, tragedy can provide an opportunity because it can enable you to empathize with others. This was Williams’ message when he spoke at a church in New York on September 12, 2001: “trauma can offer a breathing space; and in that space there is the possibility of recognising that we have had an experience that is not just a nightmarish insult to us but a door into the suffering of countless other innocents, a suffering that is more or less routine for them in

71 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 17.

72 Williams, *Choose Life*, 156.

73 Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule*, 125.

74 Rumi advised, “[L]ook at him now through his lover’s view—/Don’t look with your own eyes! No, you must try/ To look with the beloved’s seeker’s eye ... Borrow eyes from his lovers to see sharply!” Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Masnavi*, Book Four, translated by Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford University Press, 2017), 8. Also see, Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 17.

their less regularly protected environments... There is a global hospitality possible too in the presence of death.”⁷⁵

Williams’ Ideal Political Society

Another aspect of Lord Rowan’s thought important for our discussion of interfaith dialogue is his political philosophy. Like philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, Williams has spent a great deal of time pondering the ideal society. For him, in accordance with his Christianity and outlook on adherents of different religions, the ideal society is a *plural* society. It is a place where everyone can be themselves, where they bring their own unique contribution to public life and learn from each other. In this, he is engaged in a similar project and in dialogue with former UK Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who also attempted to put forth a model of the ideal society based in the high aspirations of his own religious community in works like *The Home We Build Together*.⁷⁶

Williams posits the ideal society on two main levels, the level of the nation or state and the level of the world. The same general elements are present in both. Williams’ ideal nation-state and world alike are places in which people from different groups are able to recognize, communicate with, trust, and respect one another, and have conversations and debates “across cultures about the requirements of the good.”⁷⁷

In the state, he explains, there will always be different communities and groups, each with their own concerns, their own unique worldviews, their ways of running their own affairs and so on. Williams argues that every group should have their utmost rights and abilities to pursue their lives in these terms. But his model is not the “multicultural” one discussed in the West which, he contends, can isolate communities and in which the state can become “chaotically pluralist, with no proper account of its legitimacy except a positivist one (the state is the agency that happens to have the monopoly of force).”⁷⁸ Nor is it the secular model, which seeks to push difference, especially religious difference, into the private realm and to remain “neutral” in public. If religions are not brought into the open, Williams believes, “the most important motivations for moral action in the public sphere will be obliged to conceal themselves. And religious identity,

75 Williams, *Writing in the Dust*, 60.

76 Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (Continuum, 2007).

77 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 123.

78 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 80.

pursued and cultivated behind locked doors, can be distorted by its lack of access to the air and the criticism of public debate.”⁷⁹

So, we are forced to deal with each other, and the gifts and results of the encounter are substantial. “Forget ‘multiculturalism’ as some sort of prescription,” Williams urges, “begin from the multicultural fact. We are already neighbours and fellow-citizens; what we need is neither the ghetto nor the reassertion of a fictionally unified past, but ordinary intelligence, sympathy and curiosity in the face of difference—which is the basis of all learning and all growing-up, in individuals or societies.”⁸⁰

Once we are aware of others’ differences, we will discover what elements we share and which we may not. As far as the politics of the state itself, the political process should be to identify those “transcendent values” we discover in the process of dialogue that we all have in common, those “values and priorities” which “can claim the widest ‘ownership.’”⁸¹ This can be a particular moral vision or something as practical as paved roads. Other examples include development programs for a city or region, environmental regulations, and questions of bioethics.

The goal is to hold state-level discussions and pass laws concerning how everyone can live together, dealing with issues of common interest that are beyond the level of the individual or a particular group. But the state can only be the desired “space in which distinctive styles and convictions could challenge each other and affect each other” if members of each group first have “the freedom to be themselves.”⁸² In the end, “what is needed for our convictions to flourish is bound up with what is needed for the convictions of other groups to flourish. We learn that we can best defend ourselves by defending others.”⁸³ He calls for “a model of politics which is always to do with negotiation and the struggle for mutual understanding.”⁸⁴

Williams endorses Jonathan Sacks’ belief that society can best function as a “covenant,” a resonant concept in Judaism and Christianity. As Williams explains, “Diverse communities resolve to enter a kind of ‘covenant’ in which they agree on their mutual attitudes, and thus on a ‘civil’ environment, in every sense of the word; and they build on this foundation a social order in which all have an investment.”⁸⁵

79 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 53.

80 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 112.

81 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 296 and 297.

82 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 81.

83 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 297.

84 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 297.

85 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 300.

One important role for the state—and other groups and entities—in Williams’ vision is in education, particularly in educating students about each other’s traditions and discussing the important links between them in the past. He says, “A society in which religious diversity exists is invited to recognize that human history is not one story only; even where a majority culture and religion exists, it is part of a wider picture.”⁸⁶ History shows that “diversity cannot help being interactive; and that it in itself can prompt us to think of social unity as the process of a constantly readjusting set of differences, not an imposed scheme claiming totality and finality.”⁸⁷ History is key because “if we don’t know how we got here, we will tend to assume that where we are is obvious. If we assume that where we are is obvious, we are less likely to ask critical questions about it.”⁸⁸

State education should highlight the ways in which religious traditions interact in history and how they arose together. The reality is that “divergent strands of human thought, imagination and faith can weave together in the formation of each other and of various societies” and this is just what has happened, for example, in the UK.⁸⁹ The country and culture are the product of many different influences, Williams told us, for example, “we’ve always had waves of immigrants. In fact, the English themselves are a wave of immigrants from the point of view of the Welsh.” Concerning the UK, Europe, and Islam, Lord Rowan said that Islam is not separate from Europe nor does it represent something alien, but it is within the European cultural sphere and context and tradition: “Islam has long been bound up with Europe’s internal identity as a matter of simple historical fact, and it stands on a cultural continuum with Christianity, not in some completely different frame.”⁹⁰ The UK has been “affected by the strand of mathematical and scientific culture stemming from the Islamic world of the early Middle Ages...aspects of medieval Christian discourse took shape partly in reaction to Islamic thought. The apparently alien presence of another faith has meant that we have had to ask whether it is after all as completely alien as we assumed; and as we find that it is not something from another universe, we discover elements of language and aspiration in common.”⁹¹

Williams put it this way while speaking with us: “The history of Andalusia and the interaction of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities there, that’s very well known. I’d also point out the enormously important

86 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 299.

87 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 299.

88 Williams, *Being Human*, 56–57.

89 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 300.

90 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 71.

91 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 300.

cultural phenomenon of Sicily. Right in the heart of the Mediterranean world, where you have the Norman culture of Northern Europe coming in, you have the Byzantine culture of Eastern Europe present, and you have a North African and Arab-speaking element. And through most of the Middle Ages Sicily was, again, a place of conversation. And look at Eastern Europe. You may say that the Eastern Empire, the Byzantine Empire was locked in conflict with the Islamic world, and of course it was. At the same time, it was also interacting constantly with it, more than with the West at times. Even intermarrying with it.” Thus, the reality of our current situation where we are living with so much diversity “becomes a stimulus to find what it is that can be brought together in constructing a new and more inclusive history,” and “[t]he fuller awareness of a shared past opens up a better chance of shared future.”⁹² Education should stress these kinds of past connections between communities that helped create the society of the present.

The same principles that hold true for the ideal state also hold for the ideal world. Just like the state, the world has diverse peoples and, in our current system, states which have sovereignty. There is a need for a world body to bring the different groups together in the common interest—especially through promoting agreed-upon rules and norms. Williams explains, “Just as the particular state has the task of addressing issues that no one community can tackle, so in the global context there are issues beyond the resource, the competence or the legitimate interest of any specific state.”⁹³ These include mediation of disputes between countries and issues like climate change, environmental degradation, water access, and controls on deforestation and overfishing. There are issues that affect “the security of any imaginable political and social environment, safeguards without which no individual state can realize its own conception of the good.”⁹⁴ Additionally, “[t]he unchallenged dominance of one national interest will always need restraining.”⁹⁵

Williams is clear that he is *not* arguing for a kind of “world government” that dictates terms to individual countries. He is proposing that matters be decided on different levels—a local level, a state level, and ultimately those matters that concern all states and peoples should be discussed at a world level. We must always work to perfect international institutions, to prevent them from “micromanagement” on cultural or economic issues of individual

92 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 299–300.

93 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 53–54.

94 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 55.

95 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 56.

states and from majorities enforcing “their group interests on particular states.”⁹⁶

In his interview with us, Williams discussed his ideas for a UN-level global body that could specifically mediate between peoples in the key areas of concern that arise around the world. “In addition to a United Nations Security Council,” he said, “perhaps we need a United Nations Mediation Council. Perhaps we need a few states with a reasonably good political track record who could be relied on to do some of the brokerage of peace agreements and so forth between communities in tension.”

Hope for the Future

In Williams’ thinking, we see a deep compassion and a love for humanity based in faith. We have also seen how he begins with the idea of diversity being a given and something that cannot simply be wished away or ignored. The notions of diversity on the one hand and unity on the other are intimately linked due to our interrelated natures. Attempting to enforce a “purity” on society only leads to more conflict and destruction. We must consequently and with urgency take a different path to emerge from our current predicament of people of different religions, ethnicities, and nations in conflict. In Williams’ work and example we have many ideas of how to do things differently, and we have in this paper presented some of them which are relevant to the understanding and practice of interfaith dialogue and reaching out to the “Other,” or people from communities different from one’s own. They are important for all of us to consider regardless of our own religions and identities. We have seen in Williams’ ideas a strong focus in approaching interfaith dialogue with love and through the practical aspects of living together. When we do so, new possibilities emerge of *how* we can better live together, but this can only occur through a dialectical process of dialogue and getting to know one another. These principles are equally applicable to fostering coexistence on both local and global levels.

Perhaps one of the main takeaways is the importance of having ideals concerning what kind of society we want to live in and pursuing these ideals in our own lives, including in everyday ways with our neighbors. Williams is telling us that while we do have religious conflict, hatred, suffering, and many other problems in our societies, the choice is ours if we wish to move in a positive direction of overcoming these problems. Pursuing an ideal means living in hope even if we are facing a very difficult situation. As Williams

96 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 56.

states, “[t]he probabilities stack up in a fairly unpromising way, and then a moment happens where the light gets in, where something in the world refuses to be crushed by that.”⁹⁷

Indeed, Lord Rowan embodies a profound optimism and faith of conviction even in perilous times. He articulated this sense powerfully in a rumination on visiting South Africa under apartheid. Speaking of the courage of a Black South African church worker he met named Helen, who was interrogated by the secret police after Williams departed, he asked: “Is it possible for human beings—especially in circumstances of pressure and oppression like that—to look at something other than just the power and violence that is around them? Is there freedom even in the middle of an experience like that? [...] Is there somewhere else to go? Is there something else to see? Is there another world? ‘Other world’ may conjure up images of fairies, spirits and ghosts but I hope [Helen’s story] may show what it is to live in another world and at the same time to live right in the middle of this one; to live with another vision; to step to a different drummer...because that is the heart—the hard essence of faith.”⁹⁸

In our interview with him, Williams closed with the following hopeful prayer which captures his own faith and optimism that the peoples of the world may be brought together in love and peace: “May God our Creator open our hearts and our ears to one another. And may God our Creator whose will is for our peace and our wellbeing lead us hand in hand towards a true worldwide community in which none is forgotten, none is oppressed, none is humiliated. May God our Creator teach us to value and to revere the signs of His presence in each one of us, so that in all things there will be the peace and reconciliation that our Lord God requires. Amen.”

RY

Ambassador Akbar Ahmed is Distinguished Professor of International Relations and holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University, School of International Service. He is also a global fellow at the Wilson Center, Washington, DC. His academic career included appointments such as Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; the First Distinguished Chair of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD; the Iqbal Fellow and Fellow of Selwyn College at the University of Cambridge; and teaching positions at Harvard and Princeton Universities. Ahmed dedicated more than three decades to the Civil Service of Pakistan,

97 Wehner, “The New Atheists ‘Attack a God I Don’t Believe In, Either.’”

98 Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule*, 119.

where his posts included Commissioner in Balochistan, Political Agent in the Tribal Areas, and Pakistan High Commissioner to the UK and Ireland.

Frankie Martin is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at American University. He was senior researcher for Akbar Ahmed's previous quartet of Brookings Institution Press studies on the relationship between the West and Islamic world and holds an MPhil in Anthropology from the University of Cambridge. His writing has appeared in outlets including Foreign Policy, CNN, The Guardian, and Anthropology Today.

Dr. Amineh Ahmed Hoti is Fellow-Commoner at Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge. She was also a senior researcher for Akbar Ahmed's quartet of Brookings Institution Press studies on Western-Islamic relations. She received her PhD from the University of Cambridge and co-founded and directed the world's first Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations at Cambridge. Her most recent book is *Gems and Jewels: The Religions of Pakistan* (DP Edulji, 2021).

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INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Toumliline's Experiment—Benedictine Monasticism and Interfaith Dialogue in Postcolonial Morocco (1952–1968): A Site of Incarnational Dialogue Between Christianity, Islam, and Amazigh Identity at the Crossroads of Decolonization

Mohammed Lazrak

Abstract

The Benedictine Monastery of Toumliline, founded in 1952 in the Middle Atlas mountains of Morocco, represents one of the most remarkable yet understudied episodes of Christian-Muslim encounter in the twentieth century. Operating at the intersection of decolonization, religious reform, and civilizational dialogue, the monastery rapidly evolved from a conventional monastic institution into a pioneering intercultural space. This reflection examines Toumliline through the lens of the sociology of religion, arguing that its famous *Rencontres Internationales*—launched in 1956 under royal patronage and drawing intellectuals such as Louis Massignon and Emmanuel Levinas—anticipated the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II by nearly a decade. Anchored by Quranic verse 49:13 (Surah al-Ḥujurāt), which the site's contemporary preservation project has placed at its entrance as a threshold inscription, the article develops the concept of *incarnational dialogue*: religious encounter grounded in material solidarity rather than theological abstraction. Evidence is drawn from eight photographs taken at the site in 2025 documenting multilingual plaques, the boarding school, the monastery cemetery,

and USAID-funded preservation infrastructure. This article contributes to the comparative sociology of religion by offering a historically grounded model for rethinking interreligious coexistence in the postcolonial Maghreb.

Keywords

Toumliline, Benedictine monasticism, interfaith dialogue, Quran 49:13, *ta'aruf*, postcolonial Morocco, Rencontres Internationales, Louis Massignon, incarnational dialogue, Amazigh identity, multicultural memory

Epigraph: The Quranic Threshold

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

O mankind! Indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.

—Quran 49:13, Surah al-Hujurāt—inscribed at the entrance of the Toumliline site

Introduction

I first learned of Toumliline the way, I suspect, most outsiders do: sideways, in a conversation about something else entirely.¹ I had gone into the Middle Atlas in 2025 to look into a different question concerning Amazigh heritage sites, and a colleague's passing remark sent me instead toward a half-forgotten monastery above Azrou where, I was told, Christian monks and Muslim scholars had once debated the future of the postcolonial world under royal patronage. I had trained in the sociology of religion and had read reasonably widely in the comparative literature on Christian-Muslim encounter; that I had never once come across the name Toumliline struck me less as a personal gap than as a symptom worth investigating. So, I made

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the association Toumliline's Friends, the USAID DAKIRA program, and the communities of Azrou who preserve the memory of this site. The author declares no conflict of interest. No external funding was received for this research.

the drive up from Azrou. What follows is the result of that visit, and of the reading it set in motion.

In October 1952, twenty Benedictine monks descended from the Abbey of En-Calcat near Toulouse and settled in the forested hills above Azrou, in Morocco's Middle Atlas. Their arrival coincided precisely with a rupture between the Catholic Church and French protectorate authorities—a rupture that created, paradoxically, an opening for a new kind of religious presence. Rather than aligning with colonial power, these monks oriented themselves toward the Moroccan people: learning Arabic and Berber, practicing medicine, farming the land, and hosting a boarding school for Moroccan children (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The outer wall of the Toumliline site bearing Quranic verse 49:13 (Surah al-Ḥujurāt) in Arabic calligraphy and English translation. Its placement as the visitor's first encounter frames the monastery's entire legacy through an Islamic lens of universal human dignity and mutual recognition. Photograph by the author, 2025.

What emerged over the next sixteen years was a Christian monastic community that reimagined its vocation not as the conversion of others, but as the practice of dialogue itself. Toumliline was, in the fullest sense, a laboratory—a contained experimental space where the boundaries between religious traditions were not dissolved but thoughtfully negotiated. It is therefore deeply significant that the first thing a visitor encounters at the site today is not a cross or a monument to the monks, but a wall-mounted inscription of Quranic verse 49:13 (see Figure 2). This choice by the contemporary preservation project is a hermeneutic declaration, viz., the

meaning of Toumliline cannot be grasped from within Christianity alone. It must be read through Islam.



Figure 2. Entrance sign of the Former Benedictine Monastery of Toumliline rendered in Arabic, Tifinagh, and French. The trilingual inscription performs the cultural coexistence the monastery sought to embody during its active years (1952–1968). Photograph by the author, 2025.

The monastery’s story has remained largely absent from anglophone scholarship and mainstream histories of the Catholic Church in Africa and the Maghreb. This article argues that Toumliline deserves far more sustained attention—not merely as an interesting historical anomaly, but as a theoretically generative case for the sociology of religion, postcolonial studies, and the emerging field of interreligious ethics.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *The Sociology of Interreligious Encounter*

The study of interfaith dialogue as a sociological phenomenon has undergone significant development since the 1990s. Robert Wuthnow established the vocabulary of “bridging” and “bonding” social capital in religious contexts, identifying conditions under which religious communities

either entrench or dissolve their boundaries.² However, his framework translates imperfectly to colonial and postcolonial settings where religious difference is overdetermined by political asymmetry. José Casanova introduced the concept of “deprivatization”—the re-entry of religion into public life to give moral voice to social forces—which is essential for understanding Toumliline’s alignment with Moroccan nationalism.³ Jürgen Habermas offers a complementary framework through the theory of the public sphere as a discursive space insulated from state and market logic, directly applicable to the *Rencontres Internationales*.⁴

Marianne Moyaert develops interreligious hospitality as an ethical and embodied practice, particularly relevant for theorizing Toumliline’s dialogue through shared space and daily life rather than doctrinal exchange.⁵ Catherine Cornille identifies humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality as the five conditions of genuine interreligious dialogue.⁶ Toumliline satisfies all five in historically unusually pure form.

2.2 Christianity, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Critique

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff established the now-standard critique of Christian mission as a vector of cultural imperialism.⁷ Within this paradigm, the Toumliline monks initially appear as a predictable instance of colonial religious presence. Yet this reading is too simple. Julian Bourg situates the French Catholic left’s engagement with decolonization within the broader intellectual context of postwar French thought, providing crucial background for understanding the milieu from which Toumliline’s founders emerged.⁸ Louis Massignon offers the theological horizon of the experiment; his concept of *substitution*—spiritual solidarity with the other through shared suffering—anticipates what this article terms incarnational dialogue.⁹

2 Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

3 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Square*, trans. T. Burger (MIT Press, 1989; German version published in 1962).

5 Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Brill, 2011).

6 Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008).

7 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1–2 (University of Chicago Press, 1991 [vol. 1]; 1997 [vol. 2]).

8 Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

9 Louis Massignon, *Parole donnée* (Julliard, 1963).

2.3 Moroccan Cultural and Intellectual History

Mohammed Kenbib has opened space for nuanced accounts of religious pluralism in Moroccan history, while Pierre Nora provides the framework of *lieux de mémoire*—sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself—directly applicable to the contemporary preservation of Toumliline.¹⁰ The gap this article addresses is the absence of sustained interdisciplinary analysis of Toumliline itself, which appears neither in the major comparative studies of Christian-Muslim dialogue nor in standard accounts of postcolonial Moroccan culture.

This scholarly gap is not for want of surviving material. The association Toumliline’s Friends and the Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir, a Moroccan heritage NGO founded in 2008, have since maintained a dedicated “Reinventer Toumliline” project that gathers photographs, plaques, and testimony from the monastery’s active years, and the USAID-backed DAKIRA program has extended this preservation effort through new multilingual signage at the site itself.¹¹ A contemporaneous participant account also survives. This is Peter Beach and Williams Dunphy’s 1960 book on the monastery’s early years, cited on the site’s own signage.¹² Periodic journalistic coverage, including a 2022 retrospective marking the monastery’s fiftieth anniversary of closure, has likewise kept the “spirit of Toumliline” in circulation outside academic channels. What is missing, in other words, is not documentation but disciplinary attention. Heritage practitioners and travel writers have preserved and publicized Toumliline faster than scholars of religion have theorized it.

10 Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et Musulmans au Maroc 1859–1948*, Thèses et mémoires 21 (Publications de la Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, Université Mohammed V, 1994); Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Représentations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

11 Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir, “Toumliline: Un Itinéraire Mémoriel,” *Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir*, 30 May 2022, describing the installation of 13 explanatory totems in Arabic, Amazigh, English, and French, each incorporating period photographs; see also Fondation Mémoires pour l’Avenir, “Diffusion de la Mémoire à travers les publications,” documenting its collection and preservation of the history of the Toumliline monastery and its International Meetings.

12 Peter Beach and William Dunphy, *Benedictine and Moor: A Christian Adventure in Moslem Morocco* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960).

3. Methodology

This article adopts a historical-sociological approach combining close reading of primary sources with theoretical frameworks from the sociology of religion and postcolonial studies. Four methodological commitments structure the analysis.

The first is historical reconstruction. The monastery’s trajectory is reconstructed through multilingual historical plaques at the site (Figures 3–4), archival materials from the Abbey of En-Calcat, and published accounts by participants in the *Rencontres Internationales*. The plaques, photographed by the author during a field visit in 2025, constitute a primary source encoding deliberate interpretive choices about identity and legacy.

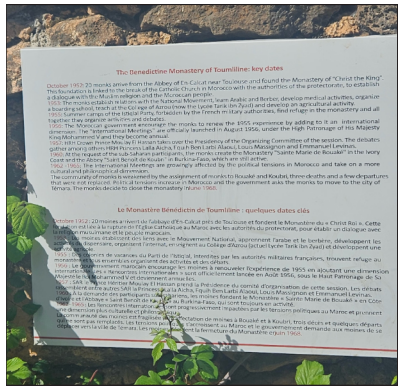


Figure 3. Bilingual (English/French) historical plaque listing key dates of the monastery’s history, including the monks’ civic engagement and the evolution of the *Rencontres Internationales*. Photograph by the author, 2025.



Figure 4. The same historical narrative rendered in Arabic and Tifnagh (Amazigh) script, attesting to the deliberate multilingual framing of the monastery’s memory by the contemporary preservation project. Photograph by the author, 2025.

The second is thick description. Following Clifford Geertz, I attend to the webs of meaning within which events were embedded.¹³ Institutional practices—the boarding school, the dispensary, the summer camp refuge—are read as semiotic acts whose significance exceeds their practical function.

The third is Quranic hermeneutics as analytical lens. The placement of Quran 49:13 at the entrance is treated not as decoration but as a post-hoc

13 Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3–30 (Basic Books, 1973).

interpretive act that reveals how the monastery's legacy is being re-read through Islamic ethical categories of mutual recognition and human dignity—a hermeneutic approach informed by the tradition of Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud.

The fourth is materiality of memory. The preservation infrastructure—multilingual signage, cemetery commemoration (Figure 6), USAID partnership (Figures 7–8)—is treated as a primary object of analysis, examining how physical remnants produce and contest meanings about Morocco's multicultural past.

A final note on positionality is warranted. Primary photographic documentation was collected during a field visit to the Toumliline site in 2025. The researcher's positionality as an outside observer of both the Moroccan context and the Catholic tradition is acknowledged as a limit of this study. Future collaborative research with Moroccan scholars and community members should address this limitation.

4.1 "That You May Know One Another": *Quran 49:13 as the Theological Key*

The Verse and its Placement

Surah al-Ḥujurāt, verse 13—commonly rendered as the “verse of mutual recognition”—is among the most cited Quranic passages in contemporary interfaith discourse. It addresses not believers but humanity as a whole (*yā ayyuhā al-nās*), grounding human dignity not in religious identity but in the universal fact of creaturely diversity. The verse performs a remarkable theological move by transforming difference from a problem to be overcome into the very mechanism of knowledge. Diversity is not an obstacle to communion; it is its precondition.

That this verse now greets every visitor to the former Benedictine monastery of Toumliline was not decided by the monks themselves—they departed by 1968—but by the contemporary preservation partnership including USAID's DAKIRA program and the association Toumliline's Friends. The choice is thus a retrospective interpretation. It reads the monastery's sixteen-year experiment through the lens of Islamic scripture and finds there a convergent ethics of encounter (see Figure 2).

Ta'aruf: Knowing across Difference

The key term in the verse is *ta'aruf*—mutual recognition or acquaintance—derived from the root *ʿ-r-f* (to know, to recognize). In classical Quranic exegesis, *ta'aruf* has been interpreted as a divine command to engage in active, sustained encounter with those who differ from oneself. It is not a

passive tolerance but an active striving for knowledge of the other in their particularity. This concept maps precisely onto what the Toumliline monks practiced. They learned Arabic and Berber, entering the cognitive and affective world of their neighbors. They ran a school for Muslim children (Figure 5). They sheltered political movements not their own, demonstrating that recognition extends to the sharing of risk and refuge.



Figure 5. The boarding school (Dākhiliyya / Internat) plaque at Toumliline. The text preserves the testimony of Azrou parents who sent a delegation to consult the Fqih Bel Larbi about the propriety of their children visiting the Christian monks. His reply—“They are men of God”—encapsulates the social trust at the heart of the Toumliline experiment. Photograph by the author, 2025.

From a sociological standpoint, this convergence between Quranic ethics and monastic practice suggests that Toumliline was not merely an

experiment in tolerance, but in mutual transformation through sustained encounter. Neither the monks nor the Moroccan community around them emerged unchanged from sixteen years of shared life. This is the deepest meaning of *ta'aruf* and, thus, the deepest meaning of Toumliline.¹⁴

4.2 Historical Context: Decolonization and the Politics of Religious Space

The founding of Toumliline cannot be understood apart from the broader political crisis engulfing Morocco in the early 1950s. By 1952, the French protectorate had entered its terminal phase. The nationalist Istiqlal Party was gaining mass support, and the relationship between the colonial administration and Moroccan society had become increasingly antagonistic. It was in this fractured landscape that the Benedictine monks chose to align themselves not with the colonial establishment but with the Moroccan national movement.

As the historical placard at the site records (Figures 3 and 4), the monks established relations with the National Movement, learned Arabic and Berber, developed medical activities, organized a boarding school, and taught at the Collège d'Azrou—today the Lycée Tarik Ibn Ziyad. In 1955, when summer camps of the Istiqlal Party were forbidden by French military authorities, the monastery became a refuge. This positioned Toumliline as a site of civic courage at a moment of colonial repression—reflecting what Casanova calls the “deprivatization” of religion, in which religious institutions re-enter public life to give moral voice to marginalized social forces.¹⁵

4.3 Incarnational Dialogue: Living Together as a Theological Act

Beyond Doctrinal Exchange

The concept of interfaith dialogue is often understood in terms of formal theological exchange. Toumliline's most radical contribution was to demonstrate that dialogue could be something far more embodied. This article proposes the term *incarnational dialogue* to capture this mode: A form of interreligious encounter grounded not in abstract theological negotiation but in the sharing of daily life, labor, and civic responsibility. The monks lived alongside Muslim Moroccans—treating their sick, educating their children, cultivating their fields, and sheltering their political movements. This immersive cohabitation enacted a theology of presence that anticipated the formal ecumenical frameworks Vatican II would articulate in *Nostra Aetate* by

14 Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*.

15 Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

more than a decade, and aligns closely with Moyaert's concept of interreligious hospitality.¹⁶

The Boarding School: Dialogue as Pedagogy

Among the most concrete expressions of incarnational dialogue was the boarding school—the *Dākhiliyya*—run by the monks at the Collège d'Azrou. That Muslim parents in Azrou sent their children to be educated by Christian monks speaks to a level of community trust built year by year through accumulated acts of *ta'āwuf*. The plaque at Figure 5 preserves a remarkable testimony, viz., some Azrou parents, concerned about their children visiting the monastery, sent a delegation to Fez to consult the Fqih Bel Larbi. The theologian's reply—preserved across four languages on the site's signage—is the most succinct verdict ever pronounced on Toumliline: "Not at all. They are men of God."¹⁷

This episode reveals three sociologically significant dimensions: first, the community's trust was not uncritical—parents exercised religious due diligence; second, Islamic scholarly opinion, when properly consulted, validated the monks' presence as compatible with Muslim values; third, the monastery had accumulated sufficient social capital—through years of shared life, medical service, and civic solidarity—to earn this endorsement.

4.4 The Rencontres Internationales: A Forum Before Its Time

Launched in August 1956 under the High Patronage of King Mohammed V, the *Rencontres Internationales* brought together Christian monks, Muslim scholars, Jewish philosophers, and secular intellectuals. Among those who participated were Louis Massignon and Emmanuel Levinas—whose combined presence placed this Middle Atlas monastery at the intersection of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought at a moment when such triangular dialogue was almost without precedent. The chronology of the monastery's key events is presented in Table 1.

16 Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, (Holy See, 1965), <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*.

17 Fqih Bel Larbi cited in Beach and Dunphy, *Benedictine and Moor*.

Table 1. Key chronology of the Benedictine Monastery of Toumliline (1952–1968)

Date	Event
Oct. 1952	20 monks arrive from En-Calcat (near Toulouse) and found the Monastery of Christ the King near Azrou, Morocco.
1953–1955	Monks establish civic relations with the National Movement, run the Collège d’Azrou, develop medical activities, and shelter members of the banned Istiqlal Party.
Aug. 1956	Rencontres Internationales officially launched under the patronage of King Mohammed V, attracting Massignon, Levinas, and other international intellectuals.
1957	HRH Crown Prince Moulay El Hassan assumes presidency of the organizing committee of the Rencontres.
1960	At the request of sub-Saharan African participants, monks found a sister monastery in Ivory Coast.
1962–1965	Political tensions increasingly affect the Rencontres Internationales, which shift toward a more cultural and philosophical focus.
June 1968	The monastery closes following three deaths, several monk departures, and mounting political pressure from the Moroccan government.

Source: Compiled by author from site plaques and archival sources, 2025.

From a sociological standpoint, the *Rencontres* represent a striking example of what Habermas theorizes as the “public sphere”—a discursive space insulated from both state power and market logic.¹⁸ The monastery’s physical and institutional autonomy provided precisely such insulation, while its royal patronage lent the gatherings legitimacy that protected them, at least initially, from political interference.

4.5 *The Human Cost: Death, Departure, and the Monastery Cemetery*

The history of Toumliline is not only a history of ideas and institutions. It is also a history of bodies—of men who chose to live and die in a foreign land in the service of an experiment whose outcome they could not foresee. The cemetery plaque (Figure 6) commemorates three monks buried at Toumliline: Frère Jean-Michel Reder (Dutch, architect, 1919–1959); Frère Félix Biollay (Belgian, diplomat, 1885–1962); and Frère Edouard Le Bel (French, lawyer, 1914–1966). The diversity of national origins and

18 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Square*.

professional backgrounds speaks to the cosmopolitan character of the Toumliline community.



Figure 6. The cemetery plaque bearing photographs and biographical details of the monks buried at the site, and the founding motto: “Neither pastors nor chaplains, but men of prayer” (Monsignor Amédée Lefèvre, October 1952), rendered in four languages. Photograph by the author, 2025.

The plaque also preserves the founding motto of the monastery, spoken by Monsignor Amédée Lefèvre, Apostolic Vicar of Morocco and Archbishop of the Diocese of Rabat, at the inauguration of October 1952: “Neither pastors nor chaplains, but men of prayer.”¹⁹

By explicitly refusing the roles of pastor (charged with converting) and chaplain (charged with serving an existing Christian community), Lefèvre was announcing something theologically precise. The monks were not sent to change Morocco, rather, they were sent to pray within it. The three graves in Moroccan soil are the most literal expression of incarnational dialogue, serving as a presence so embodied that it ends in burial.



Figure 7. USAID DAKIRA monument at the Toumliline site. DAKIRA (Arabic: dhākira, “memory”) aims to preserve Morocco’s multicultural history through collective community efforts, positioning Toumliline as a node in a broader national heritage project. Photograph by the author, 2025.



Figure 8. Sign for “Toumliline’s Friends” (Les Amis de Toumliline / أصدقاء تومليلين) in Arabic, Tifinagh, English, and French, with supporting organization logos including MIT and USAID. The use of Tifinagh signals deliberate alignment of the monastery’s legacy with contemporary Amazigh cultural recognition in Morocco. Photograph by the author, 2025.

19 Monsignor Amédée Lefèvre, “Inauguration of the Toumliline Monastery,” October, 1952.

4.6 Contemporary Memory: Preservation as a Pluralist Act

The material presence of preservation infrastructure at Toumliline today is striking. The USAID-funded DAKIRA program (*dhākira*, Arabic for “memory”) has erected multilingual signage across the site (Figures 7 and 8). The association “Toumliline’s Friends” has mobilized support from MIT, ANFF, and numerous civil society organizations. The inclusion of Tifinagh—the ancient Amazigh script granted official constitutional recognition in Morocco’s 2011 constitution—reframes Toumliline not merely as a site of Christian-Muslim dialogue but as a space of Amazigh cultural affirmation.

From a sociological standpoint, what we are witnessing at Toumliline today is the construction of what Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*—a site where memory crystallizes and secretes itself.²⁰ The monastery has become a palimpsest of identities: Benedictine, Moroccan, Amazigh, Catholic, postcolonial, and global. The choice of Quran 49:13 as the threshold inscription recruits Islamic scripture as the guarantor of the experiment’s contemporary relevance.

4.7 Toumliline and Tibhirine: Convergent and Divergent Fates

The most illuminating comparison for Toumliline lies not in Morocco but a few hundred kilometers to the east, at the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame de l’Atlas in Tibhirine, Algeria. Founded in 1938, Tibhirine pursued a project strikingly similar in spirit: a small community of French monks living, farming, and offering medical care alongside a Muslim rural population, in a posture of coexistence rather than conversion.²¹ The two monasteries are connected by more than analogy. Several secondary accounts report that Christian de Chergé, who became Tibhirine’s prior and the best known of the seven monks kidnapped and killed there in 1996, spent youthful summers at Toumliline during the very years the Rencontres Internationales were taking shape, a biographical thread linking the Moroccan experiment to the Algerian one it is sometimes said to have anticipated, though this detail would benefit from fuller archival confirmation. More firmly documented is a second link: when the French director Xavier Beauvois came to film *Of Gods and Men* (2010), the Cannes Grand Prix-winning dramatization of the Tibhirine killings, he shot the monastery scenes not in Algeria, where filming was impracticable, but at Toumliline itself, which had by then stood empty for over four decades. The abandoned Moroccan

20 Nora, “Between Memory and History.”

21 John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

cloisters stood in, on screen, for their martyred Algerian counterpart.

The comparison also throws into relief how differently the two sites have been remembered. Tibhirine's story ended in atrocity, and atrocity generates its own memory-work. Accordingly, there emerged a substantial popular and journalistic literature, an internationally awarded film, and, in December 2018, and the Catholic Church's beatification of the murdered monks alongside twelve other Algerian religious martyrs.²² Toumliline's story ended more discreetly, in closure and four decades of near-total neglect, and neglect does not generate its own literature. The disparity in attention the two sites have received is itself sociologically instructive. Violence produces durable commemorative infrastructure in a way that peaceful dissolution does not, so that a monastery which is martyred is remembered while a monastery which merely closes must be rediscovered. Read in this light, the DAKIRA program and Toumliline's Friends are attempting something unusual, viz., to build for Toumliline the kind of memorial architecture that Tibhirine acquired involuntarily, without the tragedy that would ordinarily seem required to justify it.

5. Conclusion

Toumliline lasted sixteen years—a brief flicker by the scale of institutional history. And yet its intensity belies its brevity. In those sixteen years, a small community of Benedictine monks demonstrated that religious difference need not be an obstacle to shared life, that a monastery could be a civic institution, and that dialogue could be practiced as much in a field, a classroom, or a cemetery as in a theological seminar.

The Quranic verse now standing at the entrance offers the most precise formulation available of what the monks were doing: *ta'aruf*—the active practice of knowing one another across difference. The convergence of Benedictine hospitality, Massignonian *substitution*, and Quranic *ta'aruf* on the same fundamental ethics of encounter is precisely what makes Toumliline such a rich case for the comparative sociology of religion.²³ What the sociology of religion can learn from Toumliline is that the most durable forms of interfaith dialogue are not those that bracket religious difference in the name of a thin liberal universalism, but those that allow that difference to

22 Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine*.

23 Massignon, *Parole donnée*.

be fully present—and to become, precisely in its presence, the ground for something new.²⁴

The three monks buried above Azrou are the most eloquent witnesses to this claim. They did not merely study Morocco. They became, in the most irreversible sense possible, part of it.

I did not expect, when I climbed the path to that small cemetery, to be as moved as I was by three foreign names carved into Moroccan stone. Whatever else this article argues, it began in a plain fact, that a place I had never heard of turned out to hold one of the more instructive chapters in the twentieth-century history of religious coexistence, and it had been left largely to plaques, NGOs, and passing travelers to keep that chapter legible. If this article persuades even a handful of colleagues to make the same drive up from Azrou, or to open the archives that Toumliline's Friends and the DAKIRA program have already begun to assemble, it will have done its job.

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Mohammed Lazrak, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at ENS, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez, Morocco, where he teaches English language, literature, and cultural studies. His research interests include religious discourse, interfaith dialogue, religious diplomacy, anthropology of religion.

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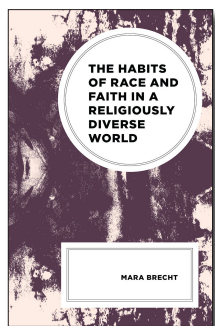


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24 Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*; Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*.

BOOK REVIEW

The Habits of Race and Faith in a Religiously Diverse World. By Mara Brecht. Lexington Books, 2026. xi + 223 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-4985-5905-8. \$80.50 (hardcover); \$72.45 (ebook).



Brecht has, with this book, tackled an important issue, bringing together the question of theologies of race and theologies of religion, looking at how whiteness often constitutes a norm in the Christian experience. There is much to commend in the book, however, given what a review must do, I also have the regrettable task of outlining the various ways in which this text falls short. First, though, let me outline the book and the author's intent.

The book has 13 chapters spread over 3 parts. The first part, "Interreligious Encounter and Ways of Being Human," takes on the question of how humans, specifically Christians, meet and relate to those of other religions, while also giving an overview of the theory of habits of both Aristotle and Dewey. These may seem disparate topics, but Brecht usefully makes the case that habits form how we behave and experience the world, which includes in our encounters with otherness, and she draws this latter thread through the book. The second part, "A Deep Dive into Whiteness," looks at how our experience of the world is racialized, and in particular how Christianity has very often been directly connected to race, or rather has privileged white people and their experiences. The third part, "Theologies of Interreligious Encounter," looks at the theology of religions and liberation theologies, arguing that theologies either foreground race and liberation or religious diversity but can't seem to do both, and then trying to offer her own way through.

Three notes on Brecht's seeming intentions are also useful. First, she states upfront that this work comes from her Catholic context, and it mainly

foregrounds Catholic theologians and experiences, so will be less relevant to others, but she goes beyond this in ways that others can still relate to. Second, she takes a focus on the US context, it is only a long way into the book that she actually states this focus, but the US-centrism had become apparent long before (81 at the outset of chapter 6). For US readers this may be assumed as normative (a privilege of which most US scholars are often unaware) and much here has wider relevance; however, it leads to some issues I will address below. Third, the writing style seems generally aimed at undergraduates, and she opens by saying that she's tried to write the whole book in her "authentic teaching voice," with the thirteen-chapter pattern suggesting this could be used as a coursebook across a term/semester (ix).

Turning to my critiques, I'll start first with this as a textbook. The writing style and level are very uneven. Some chapters read like they're designed for first-year students, with really basic concepts and simple language; if one is not this target audience, then it may feel as though one is being talked down to. However, elsewhere the language and concepts are denser, as if aimed at upper-level undergraduates and even graduate students. This is especially so when she engages the theological material, but there are figures discussed who are probably not familiar even to many undergraduate theology students. There are also places where she seems to be directly addressing her fellow scholars and educators, saying something works for her and making asides about pedagogy and other issues. Certainly, one can address students about one's teaching choices; I do this regularly. However, what I see here doesn't read like how you would talk to students about this. Therefore, I don't see how the book as a whole could be used as a textbook, though some chapters could certainly and usefully stand alone as class readings.

A second issue is that there are a few inaccuracies, misinterpretations, and oversimplifications. Brecht, for instance, claims that racism began with Kant. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that this is a historically inaccurate claim. Certainly, some texts make this claim, but an engagement with the literature on the history of race, racialization, and the racialization of religion will disavow one of such an idea very quickly (see, e.g., Francisco Bethencourt's *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* or Marianne Moyaert's *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization*). I don't get a sense of deep engagement with that literature here, even if Brecht is likely familiar with it. It indeed has a "great men" approach, as if one or two individuals developed these ideas with no relation to the social, political, and economic realities. (Understanding race without a focus on economics misses key elements of racialization). As a further note on the literature base, many discussions in chapters often seem to rely heavily on

only one or two books, especially older ones. This can lead to dated conversations that lack nuance. For instance, in discussing the concept of “religion,” Brecht mainly uses Masuzawa’s 2005 classic *Inventing World Religions*, and Nongbri’s 2013 *Before Religion*.¹ Both are excellent books, but debates have moved on. For a 2024 text, it is striking how much literature is at least one or two decades old, and often much older (whole sections rely on 1980s and 1990s texts). Certainly, many classic texts have stood the test of time, but this approach outlines older classics and does not look at the current state of the field. As a note, Brecht cites a 2017 text for evidence that Facebook is the biggest social media platform in the world, and one can only imagine students rolling their eyes when they hear their professors telling them that their parent’s platform is the biggest thing (51–52). I could continue but these examples suffice.

Brecht’s American-centric focus also causes problems because she says there seems no way to bring together the tension between liberation theologies and theologies of religions. But Asian (and Catholic) liberation theologians, such as Aloysius Pieris have well established discussions on this.²

If I focus on criticisms, I don’t deny much good material. While her discussion of race and the more sociological theories come off as superficial and sporadic, she is much sounder on the theological discussions. This may be a function of her primary training in theology. She is, to my mind, right on the money in stressing how significant Rahner is for *Nostra Aetate*, and the wider texts of the Second Vatican Council. She seems to offer an implied pushback against a growing literature that contests Rahner’s significance for *Nostra Aetate*, even if Brecht does not explicitly name this literature. On the one hand, as an intro or survey-level text, perhaps we can forgive Brecht’s lack of engagement with more recent literature. On the other, other parts of her book offer rather complex and detailed discussions; this makes the book unbalanced on occasions.

In conclusion, there’s a lot that I like about this book. Some discussions are really excellent, and I could imagine myself giving sections to students. At the same time, my copy of the book is marked in a number of places with crosses in the margins and “Nos” when I come across the inaccuracies. The book would have to be paired with other sources offering critical

1 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale University Press, 2015).

2 See, for example, Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Orbis, 1988).

supplemental material. Having really enjoyed, learned from, and often gone back to some of Brecht's other work, I find myself surprisingly underwhelmed by this one, even while it offers some helpful sections.

Paul Hedges
SRP, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK

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