

Thinking Catholic Interreligiously
CTSA Convention Theme, Atlanta, June 9-12, 2022

No religion exists as a complete world unto itself. No person of faith is exempt from the powerful effects of the near presence of people of other ancient and new faith traditions. People of many faiths, evolving faiths, and seemingly no faith are our neighbors today, our colleagues and friends, our students. If we are to be Catholic today in a fully realized manner we must *be* Catholic interreligiously; as theologians, we must also *think* interreligiously.

Of course, thinking interreligiously is by no means entirely new. That the religious other has always been with us is evident even in the earliest moments of Biblical writings, in the Jewish people's coming to be as a people in covenant with God among the nations. The intertwining of God's people with people of other faiths is manifest likewise in the travels of St. Paul, the Gospel encounters of Jesus with non-Jews, the early Church's engagement with the ideas and practices of the Greek and Latin worlds and, later on, with the philosophical insights of Muslim philosophers expert in Greek thought. The plurality of religions has been conceptualized variously in theologies of the Logos, by images of seeds of the Word and the spoils of Egypt, and through fulfillment theologies or Barthian counterclaims – all the way up to the best of ground-breaking work in Catholic systematic theology, missiology and the theology of religions, in contemplative discourse and in the pioneering work in theologies arising in the East and south of the Equator.

Closer to our times, the pioneering words of *Nostra Aetate* still ring true: “The Catholic Church rejects none of the things that are true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere attentiveness those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless by no means rarely reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people.” This conciliar wisdom has been reaffirmed in bold ways over many decades. In 1986 in Madras, Pope John Paul II said, “The fruit of dialogue is union between people and union of people with God, who is the source and revealer of all truth and whose Spirit guides men in freedom only when they meet one another in all honesty and love. By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God.” Opening ourselves to God through interreligious learning is a divine possibility with implications we have barely begun to understand. Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb put it this way in February of 2019: “The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings,” and the same message has been deepened during Pope Francis' March 2021 visit to Iraq, and in last year's *Fratelli Tutti*, which climaxes in a chapter on religions in service of collaboration and community in our world today. But how to deepen our grasp of this interreligious perspective in every field of Catholic theology today?

The work of theologizing interreligiously is speeding up before our eyes. We are all invited, even pressed, to rethink our way through the Catholic tradition in light of the innumerable interreligious possibilities of our time, amid the opportunities, questions, and challenges posed by other faith traditions, yet also in a secularizing world in which religions are both marginalized and brought closer together. Theology flourishes in the particular, and so we are invited to return anew to each of the disciplines that thrive at the CTSA, thinking freshly our doctrines and core beliefs, our moral norms and ethical deliberations, the ministries of the Church, education at all levels, and of course our prayer as individuals and as Church. Even in an era when we are still only beginning to explore the realities of global Christianity, the interreligious dimension pushes us still further, beyond the borders of Christian ideas, words and cultures. Comparative theology – faith seeking understanding across the borders of religions – is a venerable but new discipline that aims to stand among the best of Catholic theologies precisely while cultivating deep learning across religious boundaries. Are we not all comparativists today?

But we must not be naïve. Historically the Roman Catholic Church has always been entangled in issues of power and privilege, and has very often entered upon deep relationships with the ideas and practices cultivated of other religions; but only some of the time has this engagement been positive. Thinking interreligiously has not happened in neutral spaces. Christianity in Europe and Asia, Africa and the Americas, has been affected by myriad interactions with local cultures, languages, religions, but many of these interactions have been driven and tainted by colonialist and orientalist tendencies. Even today, the rest of the world is too often assessed from positions of privilege ensconced in the West and in not only dominant but domineering Christian ways of thinking. Neither do our methods of studying religions stand innocently apart from the great challenges of our time that must be allowed to shape how we study, write and teach: the environment, migration and refugees, gender and sexual identity, racism and sexism, the legacies of slavery and colonial exploitation, poverty's abysmal gap between rich and poor – and yes, religious bigotry and violence, particularly intolerance toward minorities. We must find ways to ponder the mysteries of our faith *and* think interreligiously, but with a humility purifies us of erring ways of theologizing that have done justice neither to our faith or the faiths of our sisters and brothers around the world.

Hence the proposed theme for 2022 in Atlanta, Georgia – where we hope to gather in person again after two years of distanced conversations online. To address the theme *Thinking Catholic Interreligiously* together is a chance for us to take into account the explicit and hidden presence of the religious other in our disciplines by way of ideas, practices and experiences, and to work together constructively in accentuating the interreligious dimensions of all we do in our enduring professional commitments. How we enact this theme at our 2022 convention must of course be in keeping with how each of us already does her theological work, attentive to the many specific issues we already find pressing upon us amid the crises of our times. Some of us will refer to focus on issues in Christology, Trinity, soteriology, or theologies of revelation or grace. Others will of necessity begin to think interreligiously in the course of a search for normative measures, as when proponents of the theology of religions or ecclesiologists ponder the truth and limits of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Missiologists and scholars of global Catholicism reimagine the faith in the context of the great non-Christian cultures of the world. Patristic scholars should and will still read the mothers and fathers of the early Church, the doctors of the Church, and great theologians of the past century, but now too re-reading them all with an acute mindfulness of the interreligious context of all theology. Others among will prefer to push out constructively into waters uncharted in our tradition, drawing on the conceptual and affective resources of other religions, to include them in rephrasing for our century the enduring doctrinal heritage of Christianity. Ethicists will look to patterns of human flourishing and seek to understand the truth and the good of human existence by addressing the crises of our times – the impending ecological disaster; migration and refugees; the oppressive weight of poverty; deep-seated biases that exclude the many and privilege the few; violence, guns, war, abortion. But this thinking will now be done, we can only hope, even while seeking explicitly to learn interreligiously on each and every issue, lest modern, Western, Christian, and Catholic views be taken for granted as better and normative. Many of our members are already well positioned to push the hard issues related to race and gender, the dignity and roles of women in the Church, inclusions of many kinds in the course of our quest for a truly catholic Catholicism that is now inflected with the input of ancient religious traditions other than our own, and in scholarly and personal dialogue with persons of all dispositions in those traditions today, right here in North America.

“Thinking Catholic Interreligiously” highlights attention to religions, but even this attentiveness is not simple. Scholars regularly debate the meaning and use of the term “religion” as a modern Western invention. Here in the United States and other parts of the world, many people, particularly younger, are seeking authentic ways of living that do not depend on any particular specific religious belonging. Some drop the term “religion” altogether, and strive for a simpler, purer spirituality – what is spiritual but not religious – or for forms of multiple belonging that remap the religious landscape in which we write and

teach. How can we still think as Catholics, attentive to the many religions around us, yet in ways not confined by outmoded frames of knowing? All of this lies before us in Atlanta in June 2022, and I invite us all to work together for a most memorable convention.

Postscript: I drafted this thematic statement in the winter of 2019-2020, thinking ahead to what would have been a convention on this theme in June 2021. Reality intervened. The pandemic has devastated our world and caused so much suffering at home and abroad. The specter of systemic racism and racist violence has been exposed yet again in all its ugliness, while violence against women and people of color is yet again a grotesque reality impossible for us to overlook. How might we keep focused on thinking interreligiously as Catholics, without ignoring the issues pressing upon us? We shall see – we must see our way forward.

Plenary Speakers and Respondents:

Catherine Cornille (Boston College), response by Norbert Litoing, SJ (PhD Cand., Harvard)
Amir Hussain (Loyola Marymount University), response by Alex Oaks Takacs (Seton Hall University)
Mara Brecht (Loyola University of Chicago) and Reid Locklin (St. Michael's College, University of Toronto), response by Stephanie Wong (Valparaiso University)

Presidential Address: Christine Firer Hinze (Fordham University)

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