

## Preface

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Who is My Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Education in the Global Village

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## *Preface*

Welcome to the *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion's* special issue on Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Education in the Global Village, distributed through the McGill University Library. This issue of *JCREOR* goes back to a symposium held on October 19th and 20th, 2022, at McGill University. In 2022, the School of Religious Studies at McGill University most appreciated a grant made possible by the Lilly Foundation. As this grant was designated during the epidemic of Covid 19 in 2020–2021, we were granted an extension to use the funds for in-person symposiums and a preliminary study of student needs in our theological programs.

Thus, in 2022, the School of Religious Studies (SRS) was able to welcome various scholars to discuss and exchange ideas on theological education under the banner name “Who is My Neighbour?” The thinking behind the two symposia was to allow academics and those who were part of the larger community to meet and discuss what might be possible as we intentionally sought to reframe our theological curricula. We were able to open the symposia to online participants and found that a great many of our former students from around the world were able to be with us. From Montreal to Whitehorse, Vancouver to the Caribbean, Jerusalem to Mumbai. These voices were heard, and the distinctive nature of their concerns was discussed. We also found that our online capacity needed serious overhauling if such a venture were to happen again.

We chose two particular foci for the symposia. The first symposium, entitled “Who is my Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Formation,” looked at the nature of theological education with reference to Christianity’s dialogue with other religions. To this end, we chose Judaism and Islam. The second symposium, entitled “Who is my Neighbour? Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century,” looked at how globalization has helped our understanding of what shape Christian theological education should take in the coming years.

Our objectives were, therefore, circumscribed by the audiences we sought to engage, which in this case included both the scholarly community and the communities of the various pastoral charges our students engage with after graduation. We also partnered with the Canadian Center for Ecumenism and sought further funding from the Lilly Foundation at the same time. Whereas we did not receive any further funding for these two symposia, we successfully applied for funding from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for a third symposium on Religious Phobia.

Frequently, when symposia are thought of by the broader public, they are frowned on as being but “mere” popular venues of scholarly engagement. However, the SRS has endeavoured over these past fifty years to keep a close and abiding relationship with its larger community bases as a litmus test for its theological teaching objectives. A test that has not only withstood the test of time but has engaged the theological programs in important community-based thinking.

The School of Religious Studies’ commitment to the globalization of Theological Studies began in the 1990s and has continued on many different levels through the work of former Emeritus professors and current faculty. However, the need to address the issues under a newly fashioned global awareness and engagement motivated our application for a grant from the Lilly Foundation Inc.

Professor Gregory Baum’s reputation as a *peritus* at Vatican II derives mainly from his role in framing at least the first drafts of *Nostra Aetate*. This document leads all church denominations to rethink their relationships with other religious traditions. Indeed, some would argue that it has had a lasting effect on how Christianity regards the “other.” In his final writings, Baum enlarged the ever-increasing diameter of the ecumenical circle to include dialogue with secular modes of thought, the sciences particularly. Although Douglas Hall’s theology is not explicitly directed at interreligious dialogue, his *Theologia crucis* sounded the clarion call for the need for Christianity to respond to the ending of Christendom. The aspects of “*What is my neighbourhood?*” and “*Who is my neighbour?*” have come more sharply into focus as the hegemonic forces of the patriarchal traditions of Christianity begin to fade.

Even if Christendom is not at an end, we must earnestly seek out pathways of teaching that will permit the next generations of pastors and church leaders to take their place around ever more complex tables of global dialogues. We are fortunate to have the intellectual frameworks to offer our students a robust foundation in Comparative Studies and now Interfaith Studies. These symposia helped us continue to build on our long history of preparing intellectuals capable of becoming faith leaders in their respective communities. To help us in our discussions, we were grateful to have as many world-class thinkers and writers as possible join in our deliberations.

### **Dialogical Process**

To model the dialogical process, we decided that in-person symposia were necessary. So, we invited sixty faith leaders from the various public communities and congregations in and around Montreal to partake in the two-day event. An exchange between the invited scholars and the public transpired, which was engaging and insightful. Too often, as scholars, we are under the impression that our words do not resonate with layhearers with no specific formal training in theology. Too often, those whose training is not formal feel intimidated to ask questions as if their questions are not astute and or are too naïve and therefore unworthy of being put in academic milieus.

The sense that theological reflection had grown too distanced from its congregational contexts led to our wanting to have such a dialogical milieu to exchange ideas on interfaith dialogue and ideas for the future of theological education. We were, therefore, encouraged when the keynote speakers we did have were firmly based in a faith community of their own and/or other faith communities.

### **Who is my Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Formation**

Amy Jill Levine started the two-day event with a keynote paper on biblical notions of who my neighbour is. A scholar of the New Testament, Levine is acutely aware of the too-easy theological takeover

of Tanach to fit the interests of Christian theology. Readers will find in her paper an important warning not to embrace too quickly for purposes of dialogue. These notions appear similar in the biblical text of either or both Tanach and the New Testament. The heritages of interpretation of both Judaism and Christianity have their hermeneutical traditions that must be considered when comparing and contrasting terms. Professor Levine also warns against our not taking seriously enough just how overbearing the dominant tradition of Christianity in its many forms can be. Although she does not use the term, supersessionism is an attitude as much as it is a theological perspective, which seems endemic to much Jewish Christian Dialogue.

The panel responses offered provide the reader with expanded horizons in the sense that they not only address the concerns raised by Levine but also add important perspectives. Professor Jean Duhaime provides a whirlwind summary of Vatican II responses to Christian-Jewish dialogue as well as reflections on certain key theological ideas, such as the people of God, and gives us insightful reasons for adopting interfaith dialogue as part of the curriculum of theological students preparing for ordination. Drawing on the recommendations of a joint document of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, which was made now some twenty years ago, we are reminded of just how slow institutional change can be.

Rabbi Sherril Gilbert's responses are based on her many years of community interaction in Montreal and St. John's, Newfoundland. We are reminded that the theory is of little worth unless it can be implemented in the community. To this end, her insights from the pastorate are engaging.

Imam Hassan Guillet offers many insights as he describes in detail the need to expand dialogues, such as those of the Jewish Christian type, to include Muslim dialogue partners and other faiths. To this end, he describes some of the challenges of such dialogues and concludes that such challenges serve the various faith communities well as they endeavour to highlight the humanity of us all.

### **Who is my Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Formation Interfaith Dialogue as it Impinges on the Public Square**

Professor Ingrid Mattson warns the reader against a too-sanguine notion of interfaith dialogue helping in matters of public policy. She is quick to point out that in the age of social media, there is an even greater need for those engaged in public policy to pay heed to various power dynamics between dialogue partners. She notes the difficulty of locating the "public square," and ends her critical reflections by asserting that all forms of interfaith dialogue should avoid hierarchical forms of representation, highlighting once again the very different forms of governance between faith communities.

In response to Professor Mattson's paper, Professor Cory Labrecque seeks to draw on his work in Christian theological bioethics. He speaks of interfaith dialogue as a covenantal process of engagement which permits the other of a different faith community to carve out, as Scott Hahn has suggested, "a sacred space in which love of God and love of neighbour become the same act," thus permitting the recognition of the humanity of the other.

When Rabbi Dr. Lisa Grushcow responds through her years of critical engagement with any number of Jewish-Christian dialogue partners in the public square, she does so through the memory and words of Abraham Heschel. Her own experience leads her to speak of the meaningfulness of discovering mutual respect and responsibility for each other.

## **Who is My Neighbour? Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century An Exercise in Liberal Biblical Theology**

In assessing the needs of Christian theological education in the twenty-first century, one that takes seriously the global village in which we now live, Professor Robert Hill provides us with a series of questions that arise from his reading of the New Testament. As a seasoned scholar and communicator of the New Testament, Professor Hill argues boldly for a liberal biblical theology, one that will provide an adequate base for the complexities of the diversities now lived. Using an essay written in the 1950s by George Caird, Hill takes the reader through a series of questions meant to describe the New Testament and ask questions about the Bible that provide a biblical theology. In doing so, Hill revitalizes Caird's ideas and demonstrates to a new generation that the biblical text is in constant need of reinterpretation. It is this reinterpretation that, for Hill, is so vital, especially as it provides the basis for a much-needed liberal biblical theology.

In response to Hill's essay, Professor Roland De Vries considers the decline of Christianity in North America – particularly Canada and Quebec – and offers a series of reflections on the state of Christian theological education in such a context. Rev. Dr. Heather McCance, for her part, seeks to develop the notion of theological imagination by arguing for theological categories that themselves envelope and create worlds that defy scholastic and regulatory schemata. She argues for this based on her long service in teaching practical theology. The matter of theological reflection is important and drives the imagination to think in categories that speak to each successive generation. Her starting point is the biblical text of Matthew 16:13–16, which has Jesus ask, “Who do other people say that I am?”

Professor Cory Labrecque challenges the reader to suppose that the various skill sets needed of the theologian, from language acquisition to historical contextualizing to contemporizing of the text, are all skills much needed in an age where we are now more than ever faced with the phenomena of “fake news.” Ultimately, Labrecque's writing brings us face-to-face with his discipline of theological bioethics. He does so as he engages the topic of human dignity and leads his reader into a world of theological reflection that most have either forgotten or never knew possible. In Labrecque's words, theology reaches into the crevices of life that other disciplines prefer to ignore. It is precisely the language of theology, God-talk, which needs updating and one that Labrecque argues passionately should be carried out within the confines of secular institutions such as the University. His is a singular warning against thinking that the University, secular or otherwise, can ignore the very language that so affects millions around the globe.

## **Who is My Neighbour? Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century *Onye Agbataobim (My Neighbour) – One Who Finds Refuge in My Heart***

Rev. Dr. Chukwemeka Anthony Atasi's paper uses the particularity of African theology to argue for the need to pay close attention to how language develops a world which is not only particular but, in its particularity, speaks to certain universal ideas. Indeed, these arguments speak eloquently to universality, particularly when speaking about who my neighbour is in the twenty-first century of our globalized world. When the reader might think that she has been taken on a journey far from her own experiences, what is revealed to her by Anansi's arguments is that when she is drawn into the Igbo world, the differences are not so great as to be alienating. Indeed, this world extends her own.

The first respondent, Rev. Dr. Karen Petersen Finch, argues that, in today's increasingly polarized world, what is needed is an ecumenical dialogue that focuses on three main aspects of the dialogical –

openness, transparency, and generativity. This type of dialogue, she argues, is what forms the peacemaking habits of the kind of well-balanced theological education needed for the twenty-first century.

Speaking from within the context of Quebec, the second respondent, Rev. Dr. Alyson Huntly, argues that theological programs will only be revitalized by those who come from “away.” The theological reflection that needs doing now must be led by those who have suffered the most under colonial rule and whose lived heritage has known the horrors of colonial racism and economic degradation. Huntly asks the reader how we will be transformed by those who come to us as foreigners?

### **Acknowledgements**

This journal publication is the result of two one-day symposiums. Thanks to the gracious hospitality of the Director of the School of Religious Studies, Professor Garth Green, the papers were delivered and discussed in the beautiful Birks Heritage Chapel and the Senior Common room of the School at McGill. During these two days, invited scholars from across Canada and the United States, along with graduate students and invited members of various public institutions, met to discuss the future of theological education. The papers were rewritten in the light of those discussions.

We appreciate that the School’s heritage of interfaith dialogue and global perspectives prepared and continues to prepare us to analyze received education models. Mostly, we are aware that none of this would have been possible had it not been for the generous grant provided by the Lilly Foundation Inc.

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