



# GTU

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*Editorial*

**At the Place “Where Religion Meets the World”**

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## At the Place “Where Religion Meets the World”

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This academic year (2014-2015) has borne witness to many important events both on “Holy Hill” and in the wider world beyond it. The Board of Trustees of the Graduate Theological Union appointed Riess Potterveld to be the 7th president of the GTU. Several of the GTU’s consortial seminaries elected new leaders.<sup>1</sup> A generous donation to the GTU of rare and priceless works of art and sculpture is in the process of being catalogued and will soon be on display for visitors. The Hindu Studies Initiative has been established under the leadership of Professor Rita Sherma, and will be inviting its first cohort of M.A. students in the coming Fall. Outside the GTU campus, alumna Laurie Zoloth (Ph.D. ’93) of Northwestern University has completed her term as President of the American Academy of Religion. Jorge Aquino (Ph.D. ’06) has also just finished his term as President of the Association of Catholic and Hispanic Theologians in the United States (ACHTUS), and is succeeded by Nancy Pineda-Madrid (Ph.D. ’05). Just a few months ago, the Rev. David V. Esterline (Ph.D. ’84), was named the 6th president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, becoming the first GTU graduate to lead a Presbyterian theological institution in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pacific School of Religion elected Rev. David Vásquez-Levy to be its 12<sup>th</sup> president. Starr King School for the Ministry elected Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt as its 5<sup>th</sup> president. A few months later in December, the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology named Fr. Peter Rogers, OP its next president.

The list can go on, but suffice it to say, exciting things are happening in the GTU community both on and beyond the “Holy Hill!”

Unfortunately, this same academic year has also witnessed sobering and heart-wrenching events throughout the nation, and indeed the world, as well. In the winter of 2014, several pivotal events happened in Ferguson, Staten Island, and followed in other cities such as Baltimore and, more recently, McKinney, Texas where the nation had to confront the reality that racism is still deeply embedded as “America’s original sin,” to use James Cone’s phrasing.<sup>2</sup> Several GTU faculty and students have participated in #BlackLivesMatter marches and demonstrations around the Bay Area, with some of them having been arrested for their participation. The shadow of the lynching tree once again falls upon the nation in June, as nine members of the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC were killed by a young White man in what the police identified as a hate-crime.

In light of these developments, I am brought to reflect on the GTU’s mission of ensuring that it is a place “where religion meets the world.” But what does it mean to be such a place in a world in which various systemic evils and injustices seem to run their course with little resistance, and hope seems to be in short supply? In this editorial, I hope to simply provide a short reflection on the matter by discussing the report from the Pew Foundation, released in early 2015. While I do not mean for the editorial to become a Christian-theological reflection, I aim to use a Christian reflection on the data to launch into a broader and more general reflection on what it means for religion to “meet” the world.

The report from the Pew Foundation showed a precipitous decline for mainline Christianity in the United States, with stunning growth coming from the nebulous and categorically-unclear religion known as the “None in Particular.”<sup>3</sup> Statistical data can lead people to construct worlds differently.

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Moyers, Interview with James Cone, *Bill Moyers Journal* (PBS, Nov. 23, 2007). Available at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/watch.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *America’s Changing Religious Landscape* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center,

One way of constructing the world given the data from the Pew Foundation is one in which Christianity is becoming less relevant. Many mainline churches accept this hermeneutic and live into the church's death.

Yet, a closer inspection of the report paints a more nuanced and less desperate picture: among Christian churches, non-White congregations experienced growth regardless of denominations. Thus, what the Pew Study shows is not so much how the church in America is declining, but how much the church in America is diversifying. One wonders how many Christians identified themselves with "None in Particular" because the church institutional does not reflect how they see Christianity? All this to say, within the orbit of Christian theology, this is something worth celebrating; the church is embracing a catholicity of ethnicity, of ideas, whereby people from all ethnic backgrounds and philosophical persuasions are drawn into the ever widening embrace of the church. Of course, how deep and wide the borders of the church's catholicities stretch was, is, and will be something the church wrestles with. Thus, far from being dead, the church is presented with the opportunity to exercise its option of living into a greater catholicity, a catholicity that encompasses various human conditions.

Which human conditions shall be included in the orbit of Christian catholicity requires churches to continually read the signs of the times, to always engage with the world at large. This obligates Christian theologians to perform a hermeneutical double-duty: (1) to understand the world, and (2) to understand their own theological traditions adequately in order to bring both into constructive conversation. To put it differently, constructive theology is weak without adequately understanding the theological traditions from the past. Those traditions we take for granted were, after all, constructive theology at one point in the church's history.

In the broadest sense, I would surmise that Christianity is not unique in needing to understand the world and their own religious traditions. Indeed most, if not all, of the major world religions represented at the GTU have

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2015). Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

traditions stretching back many millennia. In a multi-cultural and multi-religious region such as the Bay Area, and in a concentrated location such as Berkeley, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Humanist, Islamic, Jewish, Unitarian, and many other religious traditions have a rare opportunity to learn from one another in close proximity. Not all Christians are aware, for instance, that there are many Buddhist schools of thought. Indeed, the course availability at the GTU and the neighboring University of California at Berkeley provide what may well be an unparalleled and one-of-a-kind opportunity for such learning to take place.

But yet, the close religious proximity means little if religion does not engage the realities of the world. How do religions “meet” and engage a world in which people differ on how to interact with the Other? How do various Christian traditions engage an America in which racism, as Charleston (among too many other recent incidences) has painfully revealed, remains a dangerous memory in which few wish to confront, to name an example? How do various religions engage the environmental crisis that our world faces today? Such questions are at the heart of the mission of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology. In publishing this journal, we aim to present sustained and perspicacious reflections on the difficult space in which religion “meets” the world. I thank the editors at the BJRT and the administration of the GTU for their support of the project. Starting off strong is difficult for a project such as this, and the journal would not have been possible without their hard work. Of course, many thanks to our authors and reviewer for their contributions to this inaugural issue, all of which represent interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to bring religion to “meet” with the world.

The rainbow that reveals itself in the wake of a rain shower inspires Karen Lebacqz’s reflections on God’s justice for today in the inaugural Lebacqz Lecture. A little known individual from the Bancroft Library archives provides a lens into a more expansive understanding of what is meant by “Reformation”, as Christopher Ocker’s Distinguished Faculty Lecture shows.

Purushottama Bilimoria's article on animal justice draws on various traditions to bear on animal existence, and Colette Walker ruminates on the connection between art and spirituality, bringing Wassily Kandinsky and Rudolf Steiner in conversation with each other.

The previous academic year has witnessed many changes in the world, changes that challenge, and changes that are celebrated. Yet, some things don't change. Religion, for one, will never disappear. For more than fifty years, the GTU has watched over these religious developments from atop Holy Hill. Yet, faculty and students do not watch idly by, for at the place "where religion meets the world," how theology or religious studies is done is not merely an academic inquiry, but one in which the theories and religious reflections meet the realities and challenges the world faces. One of the contributions the GTU has made, and will continue to make, was to articulate clearly this liminal space where religion meets the world as the world continues to change. This leads faculty and students to reflect critically and analyze rigorously the traditions, assumptions, and methods that involve critique inquiry within such a space, and courageously propose new ways of thinking and new ways of action so that the world can indeed be conducive to the flourishing of all life. The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, as a journal of the GTU, aims to be a resource to the wider public, to show how we make real the GTU's mission to be a place "where religion meets the world."

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