



# GTU

## Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

The Journal of the Graduate Theological Union

**Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology**

**Volume 2, Issue 1**

ISSN 2380-7458

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*Editorial*

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Author(s): Henry S. Kuo

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 4-8.

Published By: Graduate Theological Union © 2016

Online article published on: February 28, 2018

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## **Let Dividing Walls Finally Be Torn Down: *In Praise of Ambivalence***

**Henry S. Kuo**

*Chief Editor (2015-2016)  
Graduate Theological Union  
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

*Published in: BJRT, vol. 2, no. 1 © Graduate Theological Union, 2016*

The 2015-2016 has been yet another year of great change at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU). First, Dr. Judith Berling, who was the 4th academic dean of the GTU, will be retiring from the faculty. Coinciding with her retirement, Dr. Arthur G. Holder, who has served as the GTU's 6th Academic Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs since 2001, will be stepping down from his position. In recognition for their long service to both the wider academic community and to the GTU, the GTU has hosted a conference entitled "Learning as Collaborative Conversation" on May 25-26 focusing on the work of Dr. Berling. Additionally, an anonymous donor wishing to honor both Drs. Berling and Holder has made a generous gift of \$16,000 to initiate the Berling-Holder Fund for Interreligious Education. The BJRT joins the wider GTU community in honoring them by publishing its first special edition. (Vol. 2, No. 2) I strongly encourage readers to peruse the fantastic contributions by colleagues and students of Professors Berling and Holder in that issue.

As a side note, for the first time, that issue of the BJRT is available in hard copy on Lulu.com. We are in the process of converting and reformatting the Inaugural Issue (Vol. 1, No. 1) so that can be made

available in print. Future issues can be purchased on Lulu.com as well. More information is available on the BJRT website.

Second, the GTU's doctoral program has been reorganized into four departments: Sacred Texts, Historical and Cultural Studies of Religions, Theology and Ethics, and Religion in Practice. Within each department are several concentrations which students can focus their studies in. In response, the BJRT has reclassified its articles under those departmental classifications. Lastly, several new centers have joined or are established at the GTU. The Center for Arts, Religion, and Education (CARE), the Center for Swedenborgian Studies and the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences (CTNS) are becoming academic centers of the GTU. In preparation for CARE's move to the GTU, the Doug Adams Gallery is relocating to the 2465 Le Conte Avenue building, with the opening date being August 30 with the exhibition of Nicholas Coley's works to commence the week after. And of course, there is the Mira and Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies, the first of its kind in the United States, which was established thanks to the generous donation by Mira and Ajay Shingal.

The Graduate Theological Union is physically located in an interesting place and time. South of the Hewlett Library - one of the largest collection of theological works in the world - is the main campus of the University of California at Berkeley. The University may have a reputation for being a bastion of secularism, but students and faculty at the GTU have engaged and collaborated with their peers at UC-Berkeley since the GTU's founding half a century ago. Indeed, the student movements from the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s to the Black Lives Matter Movement of today indicate the shared concerns and desires for justice in both institutions. Both institutions also share in some of the administrative challenges; UC-Berkeley's funding from the state has been drastically reduced over the past years, for instance. But north of the GTU, some of the country's most expensive homes line the meandering streets of North Berkeley. Housing costs in the Bay Area have been rising

dramatically over the past few years, driven by the tech firms that dot the area. Indicators suggest that some of the median rents in the Bay Area exceed that of Manhattan itself! The inflated housing has led to increased homelessness, as landlords (and, in some cases, city officials) encourage or, in some cases, force their tenants to move out in favor of wealthier tenants who could afford higher rent. Students and faculty at UC-Berkeley and certainly at the GTU have been adversely affected by these housing dynamics.

The juxtaposition of poverty and wealth is stark, indeed. But the unique relationship between the GTU and UC-Berkeley gives us a moment to reflect on the virtue of ambivalence in religious and theological studies. It is indeed odd to consider ambivalence as a virtue particularly in religious or theological academia. By ambivalence, I do not mean a lack of clarity, but the charity and courage to perceive the many facets of any given situation or theory. This requires charity to love not just the subject material, but also the people whom the subject will no doubt affect. It also demands the courage to examine the shadows, the dangerous memories – to use Johann Baptist Metz’s terms – in our own thoughts, assumptions, and lives. That is to say, in my estimation, our perceptions of reality can only, at best, approach completeness, and never really *is* complete. Hence, we strive as academics to continually see and perceive those facets, to bring our histories and our contexts to critically analyze them, and then to articulate them with the most eloquent and clearest language we can muster. Because of this three-fold task in academic inquiries in religious and theological studies, our work is exceedingly difficult.

And, not to mention, underappreciated. The market for religious practice demands a reduction of complexity to a digestible efficiency. The torrid political rhetoric of recent months follows this model of “reduction to digestible efficiency.” Rather than expending time to understand the diversity of Muslim theologies and the lived communities in the United States, too many have imbibed the Islamophobic doctrine of a monolithic

“Islam” that is fundamentally anti-Western. Cooperation and peaceable coexistence is quickly replaced with rhetoric to build higher and thicker walls.

Hence, the importance of ambivalence. Ambivalence requires the courage to look on both sides of dividing walls. In this sense, it encourages the inhabiting of the grey space between black-and-white ideological polarities. The Episcopal theologian Kwok Pui-Lan has often spoke of the need for theology to resist either/or modalities of theological thinking in favor of both/and modalities. Indeed, this is what I think ambivalence is at its best. I dare not speak on behalf of religious traditions not of my own, but a great example of how orthodox Christianity (meaning, traditions that confess the Nicene Creed) has embraced this ambivalence is Jesus Christ. In the Creed is the Jesus who is not *either* human *or* divine, but the Jesus who is *both* human *and* divine. Or, as Kwok puts it, the “*both-and* Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Far from diminishing the “purity” of religious traditions, ambivalence deepens our understanding of them.

The motto of the GTU is to be a place “where religion meets the world.” Since 1962, scholars on Holy Hill have sought to inhabit, reflect on, and clarify this grey meeting space. Indeed, as I’ve come to understand it, the mission of the GTU is not to find a way to re-insert “religion” back into a religionless “world,” to reclaim the world for religion in order that religion can once again wield the political power it once had. Rather, it is to reflect on the ambivalent space where religion and the world are in critical conversation. Instead of wresting power for itself, religion meeting the world encourages religion to speak truth to power, proposing creative solutions to the challenges besetting this world using the best theories and tools from other disciplines. Such ambivalence requires a rigorous interdisciplinarity, one that engages a variety of disciplines on their own terms, and bringing them into conversation with religious thought. To do this, religion scholars must be firmly rooted in

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<sup>1</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 171.

and not merely be amateurs of their own traditions. Only then can dividing walls be truly torn down, facilitating a constructive “meeting” of religion and the world. This second volume, following in the footsteps of the inaugural volume, continues this tradition of critical engagement.

The BJRT aims to publish as many as possible the lectures that have been given at the GTU and its consortial seminaries. This year’s issue features the 39<sup>th</sup> Distinguished Faculty Lecture, given by William O’Neill, SJ; the 24<sup>th</sup> Reading of the Sacred Texts Lecture, given by Rita D. Sherma; and the 24<sup>th</sup> Surjit Singh Lecture, given by Philip Wickeri. The BJRT welcomes contributions from across the world, and this year we are proud to include many creative and rigorously thought-out studies, such as Shin Young Park’s analysis of the sublime in comparing the philosophies of both Plotinus and St. Augustine of Hippo. The interdisciplinarity that has been emphasized in the GTU’s scholarship is demonstrated by Brent Lyons’s constructive proposal in science-theology discussions, Wes Ellis’s bringing together of childhood studies and biblical hermeneutics, and Jessica Tinklenberg’s understanding of the popular TV show, *The Simpsons* as a model postmodern biblical interpreter.

These articles embody ambivalence in the best sense of the term, and demonstrate different ways in which “religion meets the world.” To live up to the highest academic standards that enable religion to effectively meet the world is a difficult, but imperative calling, indeed! These are the challenges that have and will continue to confront faculty, students, and staff at the GTU. Let us, then, sojourn onwards ambivalently.

## **Bibliography**

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