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Koret Fellowship in Interreligious and Intercultural Facilitation

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The Koret Fellowship in Interreligious and Intercultural Facilitation, 2021 Graduate Theological Union

In times of polarization, conflict, and estrangement, we recognize that there is an immense need for skillful facilitation of encounters between religious and ethnic communities. In that light, the aim of this fellowship was to create a cohort of leaders who will be change agents in the realm of interreligious and intercultural communication. Building upon the interreligious expertise of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), this fellowship was geared towards providing training and mentorship to a select group of fellows to cultivate the specific skills and experiences necessary to facilitate constructive interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The Koret Fellowship was made possible through the generous support of the Koret Foundation, a philanthropic foundation based in San Francisco that devotes its resources to enhancing the quality of life for the Bay Area community through education, the arts, and civic institutions. The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology is excited to feature these essays and highlight a unique editorial format for the journal.

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Thriving Together—via Dialogue

Mwaambi G. Mbûûi

“The journey of a thousand mile begins with a single step,” so the popular adage goes. And it sure did; or at the very least, that’s an apt analogy to describe our most noble undertaking through the interreligious training and facilitation venture, under the auspices of the Koret Fellowship. A project that started with rather uncertain steps right from the application process, blossomed into an evidently solid unit of respectful teamwork; all characterized by camaraderie and optimism, coupled with generous doses of confidence—both at individual and collective level. While remaining circumspect so as not to appear to presumptuously speak for the rest of the Koret Fellows, it is fair to observe that our skill-set(s) as Interreligious (IR) dialogue facilitators underwent a drastic *facelift*—for the better—by the end of our time together. For this I am forever grateful, especially having signed up for the whole exercise as more of a greenhorn in matters of engagement across interreligious differences; hence, I was a little bit reticent, at first. Gladly, I had the boldness to take the initial steps, and as it turns out, that’s all it really takes for some viable exchange to materialize: A willingness to plunge in, reach out and engage with the religious Other, with a goal to finding some common ground—towards greater, mutually enriching *common good*.

In the following brief reflection, I will first dwell on the actual training sessions that we had through the Fall and Spring semesters; attempt an assessment of the two dialogue sessions we had the privilege of facilitating at the Holy Names University, and offer a snapshot of some of the implications of being a part of, and working as a Team—a brief integrative conclusion. The overarching theme of my reflection could be aptly conceived as follows: Mutual thriving through respectful dialogue.

Training for Facilitation

Having no vast experience in regard to IR engagement, as already pointed out, I was not so sure what to expect at the outset of the training sessions. To add to the cloud of uncertainty, my religious identity was so fluid (still is, admittedly) as to be in any way clearly defined. As such, I harbored some nagging self-doubts about the ability to flow seamlessly with the rest of the Team members, whom I suspected had made the cut

owing to their supposedly unapologetic grounding in their respective traditions. Naturally, then, the scourge of imposter syndrome vexed me, quite a bit. A lingering question all along had been: would I need to keep a mask on so as to make an impression as a faithful Christian theologian-practitioner, or was there room to bring along the complexities of my Afro-Christian self-identity into full dis/play? Thankfully, it didn't take that long into our meetings with our most competent trainers, Andi Laudisio and Dr. Dave Krueger, to discover that it was totally fine to haul *all* of myself into the game! That concern out of the way, the stage was now set for what turned out to be such a greatly enriching, enlightening and fun-filled *cruise*.

While it may not be that easy to pinpoint an aspect of the Wednesday evening training sessions that made them so interesting, and consequently fruitful, their effectiveness may as well hinge on the somewhat casual and warm approach with which they were executed. As vastly experienced and methodical as both of our trainers definitely are, there was a sense in which we were all in this together—more of colleagues than inexperienced apprentices. Without a doubt, then, the inclusive atmosphere they so intentionally created ensured that the very best in each of us was not only brought forth, but readily affirmed. This further resulted in an atmosphere of rather effortless interlocation, undergirded by deep and unpretentious interest in each others' stories, perspectives and contributions. The group exercises spread throughout the training period were greatly invaluable, to this end; a case in point is the numerous hearty chats and breakout sessions that we enjoyed. With such an effective, all-round preparation towards the actual facilitations missions, it then becomes easy to make the connection between the adequate equipping we had received on the one hand, and the decent degree of confidence and comfort exhibited during the actual class forums, on the other.

The Facilitation Forums

Dr. Charles Sarno—Associate Professor of Sociology at Holy Names University in Oakland, California, and host of various class sessions—provided a most hospitable space in which to put into practice the lessons and insights gleaned in the course of our two semesters-long training drills. At some point, I was not so sure about the wisdom of returning to the

same venue for the second time; a part of me wanted to explore further—to venture out into other possibly more interesting terrains. However, as we started to prepare for the second appointment in earnest, it gradually dawned on me that working on solidifying already existing relationships could prove all the more profitable in the long run, after all. And therein lies a key nugget for interreligious engagement, I'd offer: focusing on building lasting relationships through life experiences shared over time is more likely to result in greater fruitfulness, as opposed to adopting a more of a hit-and-run disposition, where a casual approach to commitment is the unstated *modus operandi*. Furthermore, the virtues of trust, humility and respectful embrace of the Other's worldview becomes more likely if cultivated over an extended period of time—intentionally, and with deliberate determination. In close connection, as we spend more time with our interlocutor(s), the possibility of gaining a beyond-the-surface appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses becomes all the more tangible. Besides, it's not that possible to keep masks on, for that very long!

After the two encounters we had with the Holy Name's university students, a key takeaway for me is better formulated in the form of a question: would it be more appropriate to speak in terms of engagement than dialogue, considering the rather obviously skewed power dynamics at play during some of these encounters? This question stems from the realization that in some of the settings, one of the parties inevitably assumes the convener's role, with the other being relegated to the guest/audience sphere. For instance, most of our engagements with the students were decidedly of a monologue nature, albeit inadvertently; try hard as we may, the fact of our approaching the "dialogue" circle as the expert in the room was undeniable. Is this necessarily an occasion for lament, or simply part of the stubborn realities of IR dialogue/engagement?

The Space to Thrive Together: In Conclusion

Given the brevity of this reflection, it may not be practical to provide a comprehensive overview of the benefits accruing from having been a Koret Fellow. That being said, I elect to zero in on one that might actually be the most prominent, namely, the ample space afforded for us to thrive in our respective particular identities, in relation with each other. Commendably, there was sufficient room for each member to offer their

unique contributions towards the success of the whole, in an atmosphere devoid of manipulation, undue pressure or Othering—whether explicit or implicit. An even more refreshing feature was the humility that played out in the genuine interest expressed towards others’ unique contextual particularities. In addition, the democratic opening up of sufficient room for participation in assuming leadership roles ensured that individual gifts and talents were maximally harnessed, yet without coercion. In a nutshell, I emerged a far better Afro-Christian, and a more skilled IR interlocutor, at the end of it all. How so exceedingly exciting, and equally invaluable!

Postscript

Here goes an equally important personal take-away, following our last/final interactive session: It’s never too late to *Come out*—to embrace one’s truest and fullest identity! In my case, it is manifesting in the sphere of having to grapple with concerns around religio-cultural self-identity, way into my middle-age years. All this on account of what feels like a stolen heritage, owing to imposed purportedly superior Eurocentric Christian cultural frameworks. As overwhelming as the whole venture may feel, I am forever grateful for having commenced the somewhat treacherous and long-winding journey towards an authentic self-discovery, and an equally unapologetic self-embrace—both for myself and for those with whom I will have the privilege to walk/share. And for this and the rest manifold blessing/s that the Koret Fellowship initiative availed, all I can say is a resounding ASANTE SANA/THANK YOU!

Growing in Authenticity: The Healing Power of Interreligious Dialogue

Rachelle Syed

In the fall of 2020, I was one of six individuals chosen for the Koret Fellowship program at the Graduate Theological Union. In this essay, I will reflect on this experience by focusing on the spaces created for and by dialogue, with a particular focus on teaching dialogue, as well as the challenges and opportunities of the online space in which our dialogues took place.

I came to this project with some experience in interreligious dialogue, mainly around the subject of Islamophobia and what I will call the

“crisis management” that surrounded this topic from the early 2000s to now. My own religious identity and history is eclectic. My family is mainly a mix of Lutheran and Catholic Christians and were heavily influenced by my grandmothers. My maternal grandmother, Marge, was a lifelong choir member deeply embedded in the world of her church, while my paternal grandmother, Carolyn, fought to pursue her love of theology and service by ultimately becoming a minister. I, however, traveled through several religious traditions before converting to Islam at 13, in 1999. As a Muslim I became heavily involved in the effort to combat the growing wave of Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11. I earned my MA in Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian relations, participated heavily in interfaith dialogue projects, and did ethnographic fieldwork in the Middle East in an effort to demystify some aspects of Muslim life abroad, especially in relation to women. Later, after over 20 years as a devout Muslim, I left the folds of Islam to pursue a deeper spiritual calling in the realm of the Shakta Hindu tradition, especially that of *bhakti*, or devotion, and my focus shifted from the way the world encountered a tradition to the purposeful cultivation of my own spirituality beyond the bounds of this world. While I am deeply connected to the tradition I currently practice, as a *Shakti bhakta* or person devoted to the personification of the Divine as Shakti, Divine power embodied as feminine, my experience and “upbringing” in the various religious traditions I have encountered and inhabited remains an influential part of my life. Especially in terms of my own understanding of the flow of divinity from one tradition to the next and the ability of diverse practitioners to communicate across, and within, these boundaries.

My teammate, Kali, often remarked on the importance of showing up to the dialogue as your true self. Toward this task, the ability to communicate and cooperate across these boundaries speaks directly to the themes of vulnerability and authenticity, first within the heart and mind of oneself. The fellowship began with a self-reflection: who are we, what do we believe, and most importantly, what shapes our spiritual/religious identities? These questions go far deeper than simply articulating tenets of faith. To be asked why we believe something, and what informs and challenges those beliefs, encourages a venture of honest self-exploration through which we have the opportunity to identify our own mindsets

concerning our potential desires and the protection or propagation of those beliefs.

What may come up is an awareness of our own defensiveness and fears. Fear, for example, could manifest when we experience the sense of insecurity that may emerge in the midst of a perceived challenge, which can elicit a response of defensiveness, effectively shutting dialogue down. Additionally, this reflection asks us to genuinely examine both how we see ourselves and how we see the Other in our dialogues. Indeed, this might be thought of as the most difficult aspect of any dialogue, yet it is absolutely essential as a means through which to approach dialogue in such a way that we bring our true selves to the table, rather than a caricature we might think best represents our respective traditions. This level of authenticity requires the vulnerability inherent in such sincere self-reflection, allowing dialogue to happen between people, human beings, who in turn will evolve as a result. In essence, this work prepares the self for evolution as a garden is prepared for planting. As a faithful person, I believe that it also offers the opportunity to expand and deepen faith by removing it from the fetters of exterior control. Therefore, a key lesson is that this work cannot be rushed or glossed over and in my own work I imagine a pre-dialogue workshop in which participants are compassionately lead through such reflection. This work forms the structure that creates the “safe-space” for the dialogue, wherein all are free to show up as themselves, paving the way for meaningful relationships to form.

M'bui, another teammate, used the metaphor of a mask to illustrate the various ways in which we hide or protect aspects of ourselves. In dialogue, this may be because we are concerned with “right representation” and engaging with the intention of ensuring the Other only sees us in an imagined perfection (something I personally experienced in my early engagements with dialogue). The mask, then, can protect us from the challenges we might face, regardless of whether those challenges actually help us grow or not. We all wear many masks, and since dialogue might be thought of as a formalized or structured means of communication with the express intention of facilitating deep relationships, it stands to reason that we cannot be expected to drop all of our masks at once as, like

any relationship, there are levels and stages to our engagement with both the Other and ourselves. Exploring our masks is also part of that growth and encourages us to approach dialogue with a sense of mindful patience, especially when leading others through such a project. My teammate Daniel furthered this metaphor when he shared a lesson he's learned in his work as a rabbi: most people are dealing with some kind of pain, regardless of how we look on the surface. I see dialogue as a healing measure since some of the pain we experience is often connected to perceptions, stereotypes, and other forms of violence that dehumanize and degrade Others—whether we are thinking in terms of religious boundaries, or one's own family. Even if the dialogue itself cannot address some pains (we might not be able to end the violence in Palestine/Israel by having a dialogue in California), dialogue can still create healing by means of the relationships it creates. We not only learn about ourselves and others; we create communities of solidarity, shared experience, and complicate often simplistic narratives that silo our suffering as if suffering belongs to one community alone, leading us to ignore the suffering of others. In dialogue, there is space to heal not just immediate suffering, but generational suffering as we heal rifts that may have existed long before us.

Dialogue, then, is a space of multidimensional transformation, beginning first within oneself. One has an opportunity to become more familiar with one's own truths before encountering the truths of another, who brings with them experiences and ideas that may challenge us in difficult ways. We become transformed by all aspects of the dialogue, but perhaps the most profound aspect is that facilitated by the personal relationships that are formed. We grow when we begin to see others as equally human but we also grow when we learn to listen to how our traditions might be seen or experienced by others, shifting the focus from "right representation" to the humanity that interlaces us.

Of the skills taught to us by Koret facilitators, I see the use of reflective questions, I-statements, and summarizing to speak directly to this interaction. Transformation requires a bedrock of vulnerability and authenticity, but its "food" is the work of understanding, as best we can, through the eyes of another. In order to do this, we must put aside our personal biases and assumptions (which we can only do if we are first

mindful of them) and allow ourselves to be open to the voices of others without judgement, understanding, as best we can, being our only goal.

Lastly, this project occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and was therefore held entirely online. This was a challenge, as this experience demonstrated how much of dialogue is, in fact, nonverbal, including body language and eye contact. The inability to share a meal, for example, amongst the fellows seemed to impact our communication amongst each other, especially for those of us who hadn't met before. Put plainly, online communication requires greater effort and in the context of the sudden isolation in which we found ourselves, it wasn't entirely clear where to direct that effort or how to resolve the perceived shortcomings of online dialogue.

This manifested most clearly in the two dialogue events held in the classroom of Professor Sarno. Students often had cameras off preventing a face-to-face interaction, which could have helped ensure that we had student's attention and participation. In our group reflection the subject of norms and expectations was brought up as a possible solution, with the exception that we couldn't necessarily impose those expectations on someone else's classroom. From this experience, it is clear that online environments require a new approach. I juxtapose this against the belief that online environments are less effective because we had little opportunity to truly prepare for an online space. It was only through the experience that we could see all the smaller pieces required to make this space most effective. Communication in the online realm is different, but not necessarily less effective, depending on how it is approached. If we insist that dialogue can only happen in person, tremendous opportunity could be lost as, pandemic or not, the world continues to expand its digital capacity. Rather than avoid this sphere, I believe there is an opportunity here to recalibrate how we approach communication in online environments. Most notably, such a paradigm can allow for powerful dialogues as online environments connect us like never before. We don't *have* to be in the same place, and indeed, this can become a powerful aspect of dialogue.

During my time as a fellow, I also had the blessed opportunity to curate a Hindu-Muslim art exhibition with the purpose of facilitating

dialogue between these communities. Our Koret facilitators were also helpful to me here, as I was pointed directly to the work of Leonard Swidler and his “dialogue of the heart.” I believe that what I learned from this experience can assist in online dialogues. Like our fellowship, the pandemic required me to pivot and this entire exhibition, and its dialogues, occurred online. Our dialogues were facilitated by the artwork in the exhibition, providing a door through which we could access and share deep parts of ourselves with each other. This was only one benefit of this project in terms of dialogue, and through it I learned that dialogues held online can still be powerful if we are prepared for them. We might not be able to do things the way we wish we could, but to focus on this would be to ignore everything we can do now that we couldn’t before. Earlier, I mentioned that sharing a meal with my teammates would have deepened our dialogue. Indeed, it would, but to simply say it isn’t possible is, I think, to give up too easily. Instead of sharing a meal, and keeping Swidler’s work in mind, we could have shared recipes and told the stories behind them, tried cooking them alone and then talk (and probably laugh) about how that went. We could have shared music, participated in virtual services with each other, shared a ritual, and certainly, shared artwork and music—all of these means communicate whether we are in the same place or not. I’d argue that an online platform can be just as useful as an in-person one, albeit perhaps it would be quite different and participants would have a different kind of experience. It is difficult to lose something we believe to be vital but it can also be a tremendous opportunity that, in my worldview, we have the responsibility to fully explore and innovate.

I am truly grateful for my time as a Koret fellow. In my own walk through these spaces, I have learned a tremendous amount, especially through my interactions with the other fellows. Each of them taught me something unexpected and profound, and this has gone on to inform my academic work like no dialogue I have engaged in before. My only regret is that it’s already over, as there are so many other questions, ideas, and adventures I’d like to embark on with this team. I began this program with a belief in the power of dialogue, but this belief has evolved into a deeply held value that works its way into all aspects of my work and growth. It has also reinforced my belief that the way forward—in any sense—must be

facilitated through dialogue, as it is here that we can grow together in both our similarities and our uniqueness.

The Need for Interreligious Dialogue Between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar

Lwan May Oo

I am very blessed to be one of the recipients of the Koret Fellowship with my five amazing schoolmates. Coming from a community-centered context, almost everything I have learned, studied, and experienced always had to deal with the impact and relevancy for the larger community beyond myself. Using a metaphor of a coin, if the excitement of what I can learn is the head, then what I can contribute from my study is the tail. Therefore, it is such a great privilege for me to participate in the “Dialogue Training Sessions” of the Koret Fellowship. Sharing different unique religious, cultural, and political backgrounds, ranging from sweet to bitter personal experiences, I have come to learn that sharing is one of the best ways to understand each other. It opens our eyes to look beyond the boundaries. It clears our thoughts in order to remove self-centeredness, self-pity, and self-piety, and makes us see a larger picture of a particular subject. Participating in the Koret Fellowship program confirms my passion and conviction of the need for Dialogue. With confirmation and conviction in mind, I have organized my reflection as follows: First, I am going to write about my background for helpful context; second, I will reflect on the Dialogue Institute “Training Sessions;” and lastly, I will review the interreligious, intercultural dialogue sessions the Koret Fellowship cohort facilitated with the students from Professor Sarno’s classes.

First, I would like to share my own context in order to make the point of why I write as I do. The Christian theology of religions is very important for reflecting on my country’s current crisis. Because of the danger of cultural and religious discrimination and assimilation from the majority, state favored Buddhism in Myanmar, the way how we Christians as a minority understand ourselves and the way we relate to our neighbors will determine the destiny of the Christian community in Myanmar. In order to live out our theology and our insight we must use an initiative approach so we can participate in the process of national building to peace,

reconciliation, and development, most importantly engaging actively by means of religious dialogue.

Christians in Myanmar are struggling for their survival and are trying to do contextual theology to root the gospel in Myanmar's Buddhist soil, even though sometimes in a defensive way. However, the contribution of religious exclusivism is not fruitful for, or indeed may even threaten, the survival of Myanmar Christians. In a situation where a Christian minority is liable to be absorbed by an aggressive faction of the majority religion, Buddhism, which is favored by the State, both negative and positive consequences can be envisioned. On the negative side, the proposal of religious pluralism, which is not preferred by many Myanmar Christians, may result in fostering a lack of confidence in the Christian faith. On the positive side, interreligious dialogue can open new doors of engagement for Christians in the Myanmar context. For example, Christians in Myanmar must participate in the peace and development process of nation building with their neighbors by means of dialogue, with our confidence in the power of religion in the process of social and political transformation. Finally, the aim of religiously grounded public engagement is not to convert people but rather to offer religious wisdom applied to the work of building justice and peace. This is my conviction as Christians in Myanmar step forward initiatives and intentionally to our Buddhist counterparts by means of sharing inspirational, authoritative stories. At the same time, it is important to fight against the military junta by participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement in order to build our nation and move forward toward peace and prosperity.

The Dialogue Institute's "Training Sessions" for the Koret Fellowship cohort is the second point I would like to reflect on. These sessions went well beyond my expectations. I thought the sessions would be based merely on a lecturing system, with the mentors talking during most of the class sessions and the students only having a chance for questions and answers at the end of the class, as a typical classroom pattern. But, on the contrary, the mentors gave much space and time for the students to participate in the learning process and encouraged us to open our feelings, experiences and expectations in our own way, without imposing an "either/or" way of thinking. In my opinion, this kind of learning

environment creates intimacy, openness, and creativity that trigger confidence, connectivity, and enthusiasm.

Lastly, participating in facilitating dialogue sessions with Professor Sano's classes is a pragmatic side of the Koret Fellowship training that challenges how much we were ready intellectually, mentally and spiritually to engage with others outside the classroom or our comfort zone. At first, it was an overwhelming and nerve-wracking experience because we did not know exactly the level of the students' knowledge, and how much we would need to prepare, not to mention the fact sessions would be on "ZOOM". The first session was a little bit awkward because the students were in 'no video mode'. It is ok with 'no video' when students have become familiar with each other after a couple of class sessions. But for the first time, lack of a visual connection made talking to them seem uncomfortable. However, this was not a big barrier, the class went well, and we still were able to have valuable discussions. Having facilitated sessions with two groups of students, I was amazed because I came to realize that I really enjoy talking and sharing about my faith tradition, my identity and my background freely and defenselessly. Convincingly, expressing the fact that there is no need to be timid in talking about our convictions too. Regarding the concept of dialogue, the students seemed to be more interested in practical examples. A student from my breakout room said that he did not understand most of our discussion because of the use of many technical terms and asked a practical question about a particular event. Among his questions, the one that caused me to ponder profoundly is, "what if our partner or neighbor or friends are hostile, how should we respond? How can we deal with them?" Honestly, I was not adequately prepared to respond to such questions and I admitted that I had no specific answer. From that experience, I have learned an important fact about teaching dialogue, that we should also collect and provide tangible and accessible examples of dialogue.

In conclusion, participation in the Koret Fellowship allowed for an empowering of one's spiritual, mental and social life to experience the core of what it means by dialogue, through training sessions and by applying it in sharing and interacting with students. I experienced growth and transformation in my personal life throughout the process. I opened myself

to my schoolmates by sharing my vulnerability, and in return, I have learned of the pain and beauty of my schoolmate's lives, which makes me feel humble, encouraged, and not left alone. The Koret Fellowship in Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue program is without doubt a fruitful and inspiring one.

Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue: A Tribal Consideration

Zulunungsang Lemtur

I was fortunate to be a part of the Koret Fellowship along with another five Ph.D. students from the Graduate Theological Union, cutting across different faith traditions and cultural backgrounds. Over the last two semesters, we had a wonderful time learning about different religious traditions, cultures, and important aspects in navigating dialogue. It was truly an enriching experience for me. My identity as belonging to the *Naga*¹ tribe, the tribal worldview, culture, and ethos, and my Christian upbringing have shaped my understanding of 'self' and of the 'other.' As such, my reflection will pivot around the intersection of culture and religion, which I believe is pertinent today for interreligious engagement.

Religion and culture are essential for human civilization, and they indicate an intricate relationship and connection. There might be complex ideas in terms of concepts and definitions, but religion and culture cannot exist alone. They are relative, complementary and have shaped human lives and communities. However, both these factors can also be tricky because they might fall into the trap of legitimizing and inhabiting space that can create friction. Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations predicts that future conflicts will be attributed to culture and religious identities or civilizations. Thus, dialogue becomes imperative if civilization is to survive and can be an advocate for peacebuilding. Consequently, dialogue based on learning about each other's cultures and spiritualities and engaging the

¹ The word 'Naga' is a generic word which is comprised of many tribes and inhabitant of northeast India. The word 'Naga' in Burmese words means people with pierced ear (earholes). According to Burmese oral tradition, a huge group of people having pierced ear left Burma (modern day Myanmar) and proceed towards the northern part crossing the Chindwin and Irrawady rivers and enter the present-day *Naga* inhabited areas. In the past, *Nagas* had pierced ears as their custom and this is how people who migrated through Myanmar are called as *Nagas*. N. Talitemjen Jamir and Lanunungsang, *Naga Society and Culture: A Case Study of the Ao Naga Society and Culture* (Jorhat: Nagaland University Tribal Research Centre, 2005), 12-13.'

teachings of each can build bridges of understanding capable of fostering positive peace. As such, the goal of these dialogues is to build intercultural competencies between individuals and groups.

The saying '(hu)man is a social animal' is a cliché. Humans are social beings; therefore, one is a part of the community. One needs society for survival and for which social interaction, communication, and relations become pointers for dialogue. Therefore, to comprehend a person's being, one's reference to the other or community is vital. Such dialogue helps shape one to understand the context, culture, and religious traditions and provide space for mutual learning. However, one needs to be cognitive of the dangers that can emanate from such exchanges. David Landes speaks of "toxic cultures which handicap those who cling to them... in their ability to compete in a modern world".² One needs to engage genuinely in another culture; only then can there be an openness to spirituality, which will open new vistas to understand and embrace people.

According to the World Faiths Development Dialogue: "What matters in culture is its ability to create self-respect, challenge exploitation and domination, and offer meaning to what people produce and consume, land, liberty, life and death, pain, and joy. Culture is about meaning. That is why it is related closely to spirituality."³ Hence, the symbiotic connection between culture and religion is essential for human flourishing, and we need to foster cultural-spiritual dialogue to boost learning across religious and cultural boundaries.

Today globalization is reshaping the human socio-cultural landscape, characterized by diverse peoples and communities in close proximity. The rising diversity of cultures infers competencies and capacities for people and communities to learn and act for social harmony. Therefore, intercultural competence becomes critical in mapping human communities. Linda Hogan pointed out how essentialist and deterministic stereotypes of culture and religion curtailed discourses, leading to conservatism and coercion. Hogan argues that to have a viable interreligious and cross-

² World Faith Development Dialogue, "Cultures, Spirituality and Development," <https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkley-center/20010822culturespdev.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2021).

³ Ibid.

cultural dialogue, how we treat cultures, communities, and religion is essential. As good citizens, we have a role in ensuring that the public square is a place of civility and respect and cultivates virtues that promote the community's cosmovision.⁴

The peace and survival of the world lie in unity despite diversities. Each religious and spiritual tradition offers pathways for cosmic harmony, beauty, and respect. In this setting, the *Naga* tribal culture and spirituality could offer a dialogical model that seeks to promote intercultural competence and the communitarian facets that reconcile ethos for mutual flourishing. Therefore, it is vital to understand the locus of both the culture and spirituality in the *Naga* context. Firstly, in *Naga* culture, the individual is embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, but never as an isolated person. There is no individual history, but history, ethics, religion, and politics are the products of community, and there is no community without individuals. All their activities, such as rituals, ceremonies, festivals, songs, dances, and sacrifices, were steered for social wellbeing. Hence, it is to the community that tribes attribute the way of human socialization. The core of *Naga* communitarianism entails good, peace, harmony, stability, solidarity, mutual reciprocity, and sympathy become the key to humanness in the *Naga* communitarian culture.⁵

Secondly, spirituality is the deeper dimension of the socio-ethical principle that touches a community's life and governs it. The *Nagas* share a common spiritual heritage, and the most striking feature of this is their cosmocentric perception of spirituality. *Naga* spirituality emphasizes that creation is central all beings are part of it. The *Nagas* perceive the whole cosmos as one integrated and interlinked experience of spiritual connection to space. This provides a vision of life rooted in a harmonious relationship with nature, preservation, and protection of people's culture.⁶ Hence, the organic connection of all realities is the core of tribal spirituality that relates to each other. This is an inward retrospection or looking within

⁴ Linda Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 157-166.

⁵ Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology* (Berlin: LIT, 2011), 115-116.

⁶ Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education: An Indigenous Perspective*, PTCA Series no.4 (Kolkatta: Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia, 2012), 19-28.

oneself, but the whole of nature can genuinely promote inter-relation and interdependence. Spirituality cannot survive without reference to the nature that shaped people's cultures for centuries.

Lastly, the tribal notion of the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of God-human-world/space forms the crux of *Naga* tribal people's understanding to live peacefully with each other. *Naga* tribes understand the God, human, and nature relationships as one. Nirmal Minz argues, for the tribes, there is an organic relationship between human beings, trees, animals, water, soil, and God, and as such, any disruption in this chain would lead to ruin or the breakdown of the entire ecosystem.⁷ They have a holistic worldview that enables them to perceive and experience the divine about nature and creation. There is no distinction between God, humans, and nature. In this context and perception of the God-human-nature relationship, traditional *Naga* tribes locate the symbiotic unity of all creations. This worldview can be a complement to the understanding that all are of one entity. Therefore, without relating to the divine and creation, there is no idea of personhood in isolation.

This tri-fold understanding can contribute towards a fuller meaning of life and affirm that everything and God is one integrated whole. This symbiotic understanding can contribute the world's religion to a fuller appreciation of creation. For the tribal community, despite the differences in cultural, social, and religious background, everyone and everything is integrally related. As such, no one has the right to dominate or suppress the other. Life can grow into its fullness only when this beauty of diversity is accepted and respected, which will enable one to nurture love and peace. This symbiotic understanding can contribute towards a new paradigm of a positive approach to peacebuilding and dialogue that respects and recognizes the relationship of all creation with God.

Hence, cultural-spiritual dialogue seeks to clarify, promote, enact, and support intercultural competencies. To become competent, we need to develop ways through education, life experiences, and formal and informal learning opportunities. This will enable people to acquire

⁷ Nirmal Minz, "The Adivasi Perspectives on Ecology," in *Ecology: A Theological Response*, ed. Andreas Nehring (Madras: Department of Research and Publications GLTCRI, 1994), 68-72.

intercultural competencies required for building solidarity and a peaceful community. Therefore, one needs to look deeper into religious traditions and cultures for clarity and guidance along the paths towards building an egalitarian society. Learning from tribal cultural realities and traditions provides the competence that shapes people's views and understanding of each other's rights and duty toward transformation and harmony. The traditional *Naga* religious beliefs and practices offer us to rethink interreligious dialogue beyond dogma, religious practices, and anthropocentrism. It opens us to explore the basis of inter-relationship that stresses the connection of all creation to the creator God.

Reflections on Encountering the Other

Daniel Stein

I felt fortunate to join a thoughtful cohort of scholars and people of faith who were committed to learning more about each other. Our group—it is fair to say—was more than interreligious: it was multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational. I would be joining a group of women and men who practiced religion in diverse ways and who came to the Graduate Theological Union from India, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and the United States.

I am a Conservative rabbi, and I am blessed that as part of both my training and my professional life I have been fortunate to form lasting friendships with other people of faith. Yet, the timing of this particular convening also made this moment feel both more significant and more urgent. We were beginning our meetings just months after the murder of George Floyd, at a time when the United States was reflecting more openly on the ways in which systemic racism and injustice were formative in creating the country. We were also meeting at a time of political upheaval and uncertainty. Over the course of our time together we witnessed a fearful transition of power in the United States, many of our group's lives were impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and a member of group's family was in great peril because of the crisis in Myanmar.

Beyond being a Jew and the grandchild of refugees, I am a cisgender, white male. I enjoy full time employment, and my family does not suffer from want. I wondered how these positions of privilege would impact my

interactions with our group. Was there a way, I wondered, for me to conduct myself both in this group and in my broader studies at GTU that would make space for these narratives while allowing me to contribute?

I found a measure of guidance in a text from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, a 19th century Hassidic master whose outlook we might call, anachronistically, psychological. He writes—in my adaptive translation: “In every place you find the greatness of the Holy One, there you will find humility” (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 31a). To accomplish these demands transcending the physical world: in order to become a part of God’s infinite will, one must first strive to go beyond their own ego.

While participating in the fellowship, it was this practice of contraction that I strove for. I was greatly assisted in this effort by the tools provided by the dialogue Institute. Their methodology provided a framework for reflective listening as constructive engagement and reminded me that we could only share with our partners if we learn to shift our lens from evaluation to appreciation.

I believe that this process of appreciative inquiry allowed me to truly listen to my interlocutors. As I heard their stories, I grew in my admiration for them. I also think we began to identify a common thread in our experiences. Many members of our group have backgrounds in communities that have experienced deep and often violent oppression or are experiencing such violence today. Yet instead of becoming trapped in narcissistic melancholy, the experience of trauma has motivated many of them to seek lives of deeper meaning and service. Here, I am reminded of a concept developed by philosopher Enzo Traverso, which he calls “fruitful melancholia.” He writes, “This melancholia does not mean lamenting a lost utopia, but rather rethinking a revolutionary project in a nonrevolutionary age. This is a fruitful melancholia that...implies the transformative effect of loss.”⁸

For the fellows in our group, the productive transformation of loss was a central task. In listening to their stories of the challenges they faced as indigenous people or ethnic and religious minorities, I heard echoes of my own family’s story. In my own family, it was the absence of justice that

⁸ Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 20.

created both a longing and a resolve to act for justice. As trust built among our group, I sensed similar motivations among my peers.

Beyond the rich conversations that developed in our group, perhaps the highlight of our time together was the opportunity to engage in rich dialogue in a public forum. The two occasions we had to model dialogue were hopefully beneficial to the students with whom we interacted. With certainty I can say that they were most beneficial to us. The act of our working on a shared project and collaborating to prepare for the facilitation session helped to draw our group together. Working together on a shared task, with the desire to both best represent ourselves and our group, motivated us to listen and learn from each other in new ways. While I will resist singling anyone out from our group, I will say that at various points I was moved by people's enthusiasm, empathy, grace, courage, and resilience.

A concluding thought: the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas contemplated the moral traditions of Judaism and the inherent responsibility towards the creation of justice. For Levinas, understanding that responsibility was not something a person could develop on their own. Instead, a person had to encounter the Other—not an ethnic Other as might be contemplated by later theorists, but that which lives beyond the self. Levinas instructed that one had to experience the face of the Other in such a way as to be partners with them and to ensure that they did not go through life and death alone. To leave a person alone in encountering death he argued, was to be an accomplice to their suffering. Instead, encountering the other should inspire us towards a sense of solidarity in our shared humanity, and call us towards our responsibility to be with all who experience suffering.

I am most grateful to the Koret Foundation, the Dialogue Institute, and most of all to the community of fellows who joined with me over this past year. The sense of connection, sharing, openness, and honesty we gave to each other allowed us the opportunity to both truly see and be seen.

Authenticity, Empathy, and Grace: Lived Experience with the Cornerstones of Religious Exchange in the Modern World

Meera (Kali) Tanikella

I have spent my whole life trying to answer one question: How do we minimize human suffering, both to free people from feeling unnecessary pain, and to channel those resources towards the formidable problems currently facing humankind? This question first led me to be a biology major in college, thinking that being a medical doctor would be the answer. However, the pain model of medical training with its focus on drugs and diagnosis, rather than the human beings, led me to exploring other options. A fortuitous introductory psychology course felt like the right answer. I devoted all my resources to observing human behavior, understanding the underlying mechanisms that gave rise to these behaviors, and learning skills that would allow me to help those seeking help.

This worked, until I started working with the most vulnerable children and families in the county. These were the children who had been neglected, abused, and had grown into teenagers in the family or juvenile justice systems. My job allowed me almost unlimited amounts of money, driving time, and manpower to help these children and their families. I set out enthusiastically to use all my training, support and resources to help make these children's lives different. Very early on, I started to notice that something in the experiences of these children and families seemed to have rendered them incapable of healing. Slowly, I began to realize that the trauma that these children had undergone had prevented them from forming a sense of self, or in some cases, had effectively destroyed any attempts they had made to create a functional sense of self. Their problem wasn't one event that had blown their worlds apart, it was that they had never had a world, didn't know how to belong to one, and were acting out because they felt they were defenseless and unprotected. This wasn't a psychological problem; this was a spiritual problem. This did not simply need psychological intervention, it needed a spiritual one.

As I started to look around, I realized that it wasn't just these children and their families that were struggling spiritually. I realized that all the problems surrounding us—from the climate crisis, to the extreme polarization of the political entities within our country—were really

spiritual problems that needed spiritual answers. Would people consume irresponsibly, if they had the spiritual understanding that it was in their own best interests to be ecologically conscious? Would people be so harsh to judge those that had different beliefs than them, if they had the spiritual empathy and understanding that others' lives had shaped their perspectives, just like their own lives had shaped theirs? These questions led me to theology and eventually to the GTU.

After having applied and gotten in, I looked for ways to get involved and start making a difference. Alas, as a Hindu student, the opportunities were few and far between. However, the Koret fellowship announcement arrived in my inbox, with its focus on interreligious dialogue and on finding solutions to the big problems that face the world. I applied, and waited in nervous anticipation. I was informed that I was to be given the opportunity to be a part of the fellowship and was absolutely thrilled.

So what is it that I have gained over the course of my time in this fellowship? I have been shown an extraordinary amount of grace. As someone that's new to the field, to the institution and to this interreligious space, I have been given the space to ask stupid questions, the encouragement to be vulnerable, the chance to make mistakes and be forgiven for them, the amazing opportunity to listen and learn from those who had embodied their authenticity, and maybe, just maybe, find that it is ok for me to be authentically embodied.

As a minority student from a developing country, I've always worn my religious identity secretly. When people learn that I am Hindu, they often ask about the caste system, about the many Gods, about why Hindus wear a dot on their foreheads. It becomes tiring to explain that the caste system as it exists now was actually a British construct and a bastardization of the flexible *jathi-varna* system (artisanal guilds that were based on profession, not on birth)--the Indian iteration of the "divide and rule" principle that was used successfully all over the world, which has unfortunately been internalized by the oppressed people of my country over the course of the British Raj. It becomes tiring to explain that actually, the many Gods are there to give people choices, so that they can choose a divinity that represents and reflects them and makes the process of spiritual engagement easier for them. It becomes tiring to explain that the

dot is there as a reminder of the spiritual “third” eye—so that as two eyes look outward, one should look inward, always looking and reflecting inwardly. These questions become so tiring, in fact, that it becomes easier to make a joke and change the subject, or avoid being seen wearing a dot.

This fellowship, under the gentle guidance of able leaders and participants who lead by the example of their authenticity and grace, has given me the hope—and maybe even the courage, to be a bit more authentic. It has given me the opportunity to experience being a practicing Hindu without having to be representative of my whole tradition, and without bearing the weight of everything that it means. It has afforded me the opportunity to cast off some of my own burdens and given me hope that maybe I don’t need to hide aspects of myself to be accepted, and that perhaps sometimes I can be free of my burdens and just be myself.

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