A Multi-Faceted Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue
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Edited by
Heon Kim
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I wish to acknowledge American Academy of Religion (AAR) for its Regional Development Grant. This collection started its life thanks to this grant, which enabled the bringing together of distinguished specialists in Interreligious Studies for their contributions to this collection. I am also grateful to AAR Mid-Atlantic Region that provided fertile soil for this collection. Via its annual conferences in which I served as the founding chair of the Interreligious and Interfaith Studies section, I got to know many specialists. A careful selection among them and their most up-to-date research eventually bore fruit in this collection.

A special word of thanks goes to our editors at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, particularly Adam Rummens, and Amanda Millar for their encouraging support and understanding throughout the project especially under the pandemic.

—Heon Kim
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, USA
March 1, 2022
INTRODUCTION

HEON KIM

Interreligious dialogue is one of the most burgeoning topics in the Study of Religion today. In the globalized world of pluralism and diversity, it comes to the fore in scholarly attention and public interest. The ubiquitous globalization continues to frame individual and social lives by a mix of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, instilling a collective consciousness on pluralism for harmonious living among diverse people of different religions. This context of globalization and pluralism increases interreligious encounters and interactions to necessitate interreligious dialogue, and thereby paves the way for abundant studies.

This edited collection, *A Multi-faceted Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue*, offers cutting-edge scholarly discussion on interreligious dialogue. In particular, the following two situations put a value on this collection.

First, an ever-increasing number of interreligious studies ironically evinces that the existing research is far from sufficient to figure out the nature and the characteristics of interreligious dialogue. Instead, it suggests there is still much left to be examined. For instance, a good number of the studies raises up a controversial issue around the practicality and feasibility of interreligious dialogue. Some argue that dialogue among different religions is not possible mainly because belief involves faith in favor of one’s religion and thus interreligious dialogue is at best a missionary-oriented in practice. On the contrary, others provide experiential research to demonstrate why interreligious dialogue is feasible. The question whether interreligious dialogue is possible or remains an unattainable ideal is still at stake in the current academic discourse. This edited collection adds a considerable piece to illustrate that interreligious dialogue is not only feasible but necessary for a harmonious and healthy life in any community in today’s global village where religious diversity and pluralism have become the norm.

Second, the existing studies tend to focus on a single aspect of interreligious dialogue—typically from either one religion or one discipline, like from Christianity or sociology. Despite its undeniable contribution, this
tendency often confines its examination to a specific perspective, which hinders the view from a bigger picture. This collection fills in this gap. It employs a multi-faceted reflection as a methodology. While a multi-faceted reflection allows each specialist to use her/his lived reflection to articulate her/his own finding on an aspect of interreligious dialogue, a coherent collection of the findings illuminates diverse facets of interreligious dialogue in order to offer a bigger and comprehensive picture.

A Note on Method: A Multi-faceted Reflection

Methodologically, this edited collection uses a multi-faceted reflection in an innovative way. Instead of comparing different religions with textual analysis, a multi-faceted reflection holds a dialogical perspective, which encourages dialogue within one’s research between texts and contexts, between different religions, between theories and practices, and most notably, between the researcher’s lived experience and textual realities. With this dialogical perspective, a multi-faceted reflection seeks to uncover lived aspects of interreligious dialogue to provide a more realistic understanding.

A multi-faceted reflection is used both in each contributing chapter of this collection, and in the editing process to make a coherent collection. This edited collection consists of seven chapters, each of which reflects the author’s lived experience in interreligious dialogue. The different, diverse, and reflective topics that seven chapters individually discuss are coherently edited to shed light on multi-facets of interreligious dialogue. This edited collection utilizes a multi-faceted reflection in the following senses.

First, this collection is multi-faceted in the sense that it does not take an exclusivist approach to one focal dimension of interreligious dialogue in order to draw out the most important aspect of the subject; rather, it acknowledges many aspects of interreligious dialogue in order to present them ‘as they are.’ Each chapter of this collection looks at interreligious dialogue from different angles—including educational, theological, philosophical, and ecological perspectives. Thus, this collection of seven essays explores seven different facets of interreligious dialogue to represent various aspects of interreligious dialogue.

This multi-faceted approach is present even when two or more authors do not necessarily agree with one another. For instance, some authors put an emphasis on the theological dimensions of interreligious dialogue, while another author deemphasizes these dimensions and addresses non-theological aspects. Instead of the editor’s arbitral intervention, these two seemingly opposite views are respected ‘as they are’ in order to provide room for
readers to examine them comparatively and dialogically. Just like interreligious dialogue occurs among diverse views, this edited collection does not hesitate to include different and even opposite views, which themselves set forth multiple facets of interreligious dialogue.

Second, this edited collection is reflective in the sense that each chapter is an outcome of the author’s reflection on her/his lived experience in interreligious dialogues. All the authors in this collection are insiders to interreligious dialogue, each of whom has spent many years in practicing interreligious dialogue in diverse places—e.g., the classroom, conferences, and local dialogue centers. The different and diverse lived experiences of each author are well reflected in their essays, and they depict vivid and practiced aspects of interreligious dialogue. For example, one author writes: “I now type these words from quarantine, in a city ravaged by a global pandemic. For many of us, not least of all the current author, reflections on the religious meaning of fragility have suddenly become just a bit more compelling.” Having reflected on his lived experience, another author asserts that “True religion, then, is not just about belief—it’s about practice.” These reflective observations reveal experiential and practical aspects of interreligious dialogue, which are difficult to capture by pure reasoning or textual analysis alone. By the same token, this edited collection readily welcomes some chapters that expose the authors’ religious orientations for a realistic and reflective presentation of practicing interreligious dialogue.

It is however far-fetched to count on this reflective approach as the best method for the studies of interreligious dialogue. Rather, it may have many pitfalls. In fact, an author in this collection, while reflecting on his lived experience on the term fragility, confesses that “the term [fragility] may also connote our personal shortcomings, including our liability toward self-deception.” As it relies on an author’s personal subjective experience, this reflective approach may expose such “personal shortcomings.” Besides the pitfall of personal shortcomings, this edited collection is open to any critical assessment, which would assist in reconsidering and improving its reflective method. For now, given that personal shortcomings matter, to read as many reflective studies as possible can minimize the pitfalls of personal reflection. In this sense, this collection of seven reflective essays hopefully remedies such personal shortcomings. Also, by presenting each chapter ‘as it is’ with the editor’s arbitrary editing intervention at its very least, this collection invites readers to assess collectively and dialogically the chapters, each of which offers different reflective approaches to the diverse facets of interreligious dialogue. Positively speaking, a reflective approach aims to present reality ‘as it is.’ It is not merely or purely thought experiments by reason alone, but reflections upon one’s real-life experiences. In employing
a reflective approach with this positive aspect, this edited collection hopes to provide readers with the genuine realities and possibilities of interreligious dialogue.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1, “Interreligious Dialogue as a Religious Imperative: What Happens When Pluralism Is a Core Constitutive Claim of One’s Tradition?,” Jeffery Long discusses religious imperatives to interreligious dialogue. In his reflective analysis, there are three types of dialogue among people of diverse religions. The first type is “the mission-oriented or conversion-oriented dialogue,” which is “advanced ultimately in order to persuade the adherents of other traditions that one’s own tradition bears unique saving truths that others would do well to accept, sometimes under a threat of eternal damnation, should these saving truths not be accepted.” The second type is “an imperative to work for the betterment of the material living conditions of all people.” In Long’s observation, people in this type “engage in interreligious dialogue with an understanding that only through such dialogue across religious boundaries can truly effective work to resolve common issues be advanced—such as, for example, work to address the environmental crisis.” Although this second type seems better than the first one in term of interreligious dialogue per se, it has an intrinsic problem that considers interreligious dialogue as a means to another end, namely, for a common good. Interreligious dialogue must remain imperative to itself as the goal and the end of dialogue. This is reserved in the third type, which Long explains as “the very act of engaging in a dialogue—a dialogue of equals, in which each participant is open to learning from the others—is inherently valuable, being capable of leading to fresh insights into the topics on which the dialogue is held, and a deeper understanding of reality on the part of all those involved.” Long signifies this type of dialogue as “an inherently religious act.” Though Long does not give a specific name to this type, it may be called ‘pluralist imperative,’ following his description:

This is an imperative that arises from the deep commitment of a religious tradition to a pluralistic understanding of truth, according to which no tradition, not even one’s own tradition, can claim a complete monopoly on the truth. The desire to know and realize truth, coupled with a sense of the incompleteness of all traditions, gives rise to an imperative to seek out the truths of others: to engage with them in a real dialogue aimed at enhancing the perspectives of all of its participants, and bringing all their varied perspectives ever closer to the asymptotic goal of completion: to the full realization of truth.
In Long’s conviction, a pluralistic understanding of truth enables practitioners to engage in a real dialogue. As an exemplary case of this type of pluralist imperative, he presents Vedantic pluralism, which holds “the view that many traditions affirm truth, in different ways, and that these traditions can all act as paths to the realization of God—which, according to Vedānta, is the manifestation of a divine potential that exists within all beings—combined with the view that none of these traditions is a perfect or complete manifestation of truth, and must be tested experientially, gives rise to the imperative to interreligious dialogue in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna.” To Long, this pluralistic imperative to interreligious dialogue is not exclusive to one specific religion, but also fits with “the God of the Abrahamic religion, the Brahman of Advaita Vedānta, the Dao, Buddha Nature, and so on.”

A pluralistic facet of interreligious dialogue is intrinsic to comparative religion. This aspect is reflected in Chapter 2, “An Experiential Approach to Comparative Religion and Interreligious Dialogue.” In this chapter, Ray Silverman advances his previously published volume titled Rise Above It: Spiritual Development for College Students to reconsider the nature of comparative religion for interreligious dialogue. Aligning with this collection’s method of a multi-faceted reflection, Silverman’s experiential approach reflects on his lived teaching experience to present an educational aspect of interreligious dialogue. He writes that “for many years, as a professor of comparative religion, I organized field trips to various religious centers… When the time came to meet the adherents of the various faith groups (usually at the end of a service) my students noticed that there were more similarities than differences… There was essential agreement around core ideals like a belief in something higher than one’s ego, and unselfish concern for the welfare of humanity.” In Silverman’s own assessment, this experiential approach enables his students to “discover the power of living religion, not just studying it” and to “understand that they cannot really know a subject until they have tried it for themselves.” This reflection on the experiential approach echoes an Husserlian phenomenology of religion. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) asserted that the sense and logic of human religious experience is an inherent structural property of the experience itself, not something constructed by an outside observer. The phenomenologists of religion followed this initiative to suggest that “the best way of understanding

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such a complex phenomenon as religion is to try to get inside the religious experience itself in order to understand the intentionality of phenomena.”

Silverman puts this theory into practice in his classroom with his experiential approach, and is convinced that “they [the students] can learn all about archery, but they never really know how to shoot an arrow, until they give it a try.” This experiential pedagogy provides fresh insights for interreligious dialogue. Obviously, it allows one to access interreligious dialogue as a real religious experience and lived phenomenon, which needs to be understood from an insider’s perspective to figure out why (intentionality) s/he engages in interreligious dialogue. As well reflected in Silverman’s classes, interreligious dialogue is not something to be understood by reason alone but to be experienced in practice.

Joyce Konigsburg’s essay discloses another educational aspect of interreligious dialogue. In Chapter 3, “The Pedagogical Necessity for Interreligious Literacy in a Religiously Diverse World,” Konigsburg argues that religious literacy in higher education is necessary in this pluralist world of interreligious encounters, engagement, and dialogue. Like Silverman, she reflects on her teaching experience in World Religions courses, and confirms Long’s study on the pluralist imperative for interreligious dialogue. Konigsburg is convinced that “Academic instruction emphasizes religions as pluralistic, dynamic, and culturally situated. These educated perspectives on diverse religious traditions are imperative for in–depth comparative studies and effective interreligious dialogue.” These educated perspectives can be attained by religious literacy, which “acknowledges religious others and respectfully seeks deeper understanding, often through interreligious encounters and engagement.” Compared to Long’s pluralist imperative and Silverman’s experiential pedagogy, Konigsburg’s essay underlines religious literacy as an imperative to interreligious dialogue, especially in religion courses. Following the footsteps of Durkhemian functionalism and Weberian rationalism that were dominant in the mid-twentieth century along the line of the modernization and secularization paradigm, many social scientists theorized and predicted gradual disappearance of religion in face of modernity. Yet, as Konigsburg rightly observes, religion remains vibrant in today’s highly secularized and materialized context. In her

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conviction, “religious literacy has a civic dimension,” and “understanding how religion influences others’ worldviews and effects their behaviors and motivations becomes an important advantage in the public sphere.”

Regardless of the civic importance of religious literacy, Konigsburg reflects on her teaching experience to note that “significant illiteracy about religion exists among students (as well as the general population), which too often generates prejudice and fear of religious others.” Having observed this reality of student religious illiteracy, she ponders over barriers for educational religious literacy and thereby develops pedagogical methods. Above all, religious literacy begins with the acknowledgement of plurality, which “respects many attitudes and seeks understanding, especially during interreligious encounters and dialogue.” Just as interreligious dialogue occurs with respect for religious others, “an accepting, trusting classroom atmosphere to voice opinions, listen, and evaluate evidence is vital for interreligious dialogue and other pedagogical methods for teaching religions.” In Konigsburg’s reflection, this pedagogical use of interreligious dialogue per se sets up religious literacy as the goal of religion courses. In this sense, she stresses that “the goal is to present religious content in a logical, orderly manner so students comprehend ideas and beliefs within each religion and then understand each religious tradition in the larger context of interreligious and global perspectives.”

For this goal, Konigsburg discusses several pedagogical methods to increase religious literacy. Among them, “transformative learning” deserves to be noted. As aforementioned, a reflective approach of this edited collection involves coming to terms with our personal shortcomings and biases. With this problem in mind, Konigsburg suggests transformative learning. This learning, as she describes, “engages religious others through dialogue and comparative studies to promote understanding and respect for multiple traditions,” and “occasionally involves controversy, emotion, maturity, and discernment, but it yields new academic perspectives that broaden and may even change student worldviews.” Putting an emphasis on interreligious dialogue in her pedagogical consideration, Konigsburg concludes that “because interreligious literacy is essential for college students to function in a competitive, increasingly pluralistic, globalized world, a complete general education therefore necessitates religious studies courses and critical thinking skills for constructive comparison and dialogue.” Likewise, her essay provides many insights into the educational facet of interreligious dialogue.

Completely different from these three chapters, Chapter 4, “The Divine Reality Is as You Find It: The Interactive Logic of Theology Without Walls,” discusses another facet of interreligious dialogue. In this chapter,
Jerry Martin looks at interreligious dialogue from a theological perspective, which he has deepened throughout his many years of research experience on the theme of, as he empathetically calls it, “Theology Without Walls.” This chapter is a reflection of his service as the founding chair of Theology Without Walls, a group in the American Academy of Religion, and his earlier editorial work, Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative. 5 Martin defines “Theology Without Walls” with a logical syllogism: “if the aim of theology is to reach as full an understanding of the divine or ultimate reality as we can, and if evidence and insights into that reality are not limited to a single tradition, then what one needs is a theology without confessional limits, a Theology Without Walls.” As presented in this syllogism, “Theology Without Walls” represents a theological facet of interreligious dialogue, which uses interreligious dialogue for “the search for truth.” Neither this search nor truth belongs to solely one theology or one religion. Yet, truth can be sought theologically by a “Theology Without Walls.” Having reflected on what he learned from a presenter in a conference he chaired, Martin proceeds to state:

Theology Without Walls looks, not only at the plurality of religions, but at the diverse ways human beings have of encountering divine reality, or finding insight into it, including apercu or epiphanies, not all of which arrive under the auspices of a religion. These experiences have epistemic efficacy. They are revelatory of the ultimate. Hence, there is a match between the mode of engagement and the nature of the divine reality we discover. We might say: The divine reality is as you find it.

Martin suggests that multiple spiritual sensibilities, both religious and non-religious, connect directly with the ultimate reality. In this perspective, the value of interreligious dialogue is to open us toward as many of these approaches as possible. The particular facet of the divine we encounter, Martin explains, corresponds with our mode of engagement: a personal deity for those who pray, a great oneness for those who pine for a unity with the cosmos…etc. Although Martin and Konigsburg deal with different aspects of interreligious dialogue, both share the recognition of plurality as absolutely foundational for such an undertaking. 6

As the recognition of plurality is a foundation of interreligious dialogue, it penetrates this edited collection throughout. In one’s train of reflective

6 I would like to thank Jonathan Weidenbaum for suggesting this paragraph and proofreading this introduction.
thought, plurality may presume fragility, fragment, and separation. The later chapters of this collection look at each of these notions of fragility, fragment, and separation in interreligious dialogue.

In Chapter 5, “The Significance of Fragility: An Alternative Approach to Religious Pluralism,” Jonathan Weidenbaum takes up the theme of fragility in order to explore the significance of interreligious dialogue. He chooses the theme of fragility by reflecting upon his teaching experience with students of diverse religious backgrounds in New York City, and his sabbatical experience in the Himalaya region where Hindu traditions are dominant in the folk culture. In the foothills of the Himalaya Weidenbaum observed the threat of hazards to people’s life, and in his classrooms in midtown Manhattan he interacted with “veterans returning from overseas, international students from countries rife with poverty and political hatred, and individuals from broken homes and impoverished neighborhoods.” This lived experience leads Weidenbaum to contemplate “the fragile and precarious nature of life.” He observes that people live, albeit to different degrees, with all sorts of suffering—be it from natural threats like “landslides and hungry tigers” in the Himalaya, or from human-made war and injustice in Manhattan. As Weidenbaum notes, the fragile nature of life is remarkably predominant under the COVID-19 pandemic:

[T]he timing could not have been more appropriate for such an exploration. I type these words from quarantine, in a city ravaged by a global pandemic. For many of us, not least the current author, reflections on the religious meaning of fragility have suddenly become just a bit more compelling.

As the pandemic is the most pressing concern at this moment, Weidenbaum’s examination of religious approaches to the theme of fragility is very timely. Having reflected upon his observation of suffering in people’s lives, Weidenbaum focuses upon fragility as “the most intractable philosophical challenge of religious pluralism—namely the question of the extent to which different spiritual traditions can be reconciled.” This question is answered in his in-depth analysis of the core premises of three religions, which are Buddhism’s emphasis on “a state of liberation attained by releasing ourselves from all desires and attachments,” Hinduism’s equation of atman with Brahman along with its teaching that “we have an ultimate reality which generates the entire cosmos in all of its modalities, destruction as well as creation,” and mystical Judaism’s central notion of “a deity subject to forces and tensions not of its own volition, and requiring of human effort for the perfection of creation.” This analysis leads Weidenbaum to convincingly disclose “the psychological, metaphysical and melioristic
treatments of our fragility” within different religions, and to conclude by arguing for the possibility of incorporating all three approaches:

[T]he lure of one of the approaches toward fragility will predominate for many of us. But if neither its directives for living nor its depiction of the absolute is inflated to either eclipse or deny the others—that pretense toward all-encompassing truth which is itself just another expression of human weakness—there is nothing preventing us from affirming all three strategies for ameliorating the agonies and insecurities of our finitude.

As with Weidenbaum’s essay, Chapter 6, “Re-Collecting God Fragments: A Global Non-theology of Mother Wisdom,” provides a well-timed discussion on a facet of interreligious dialogue, which directly addresses today’s world under the COVID-19 pandemic. Neela Saxena, the author of this chapter, begins:

As the world grapples with Pandemic 2020 which is a strangely compassionate warning from Mother Earth, perhaps some of us are ready to heed the voice of Prajna/Hokhma/Sophia that every religious tradition harbors, and all creative expressions in the world hint at. However, articulating in academic language what that Wisdom is can be a taxing task.

Similar to Weidenbaum, Saxena takes up the theme of suffering in order to discuss interreligious wisdom. Yet, while Weidenbaum’s essay deals with the concept of fragility as an individual suffering in the world of religious pluralism, this chapter focuses on the notion of the fragment to address a communal aspect of suffering that all of us go through in this world under the pandemic. Directly reflecting upon suffering, Saxena takes on the task of interreligious dialogue for the purpose of finding “transformative wisdom that all the Buddhas, Christs or awake beings in the world experienced and out of deep compassion for suffering humanity, suggested possible paths for.” To find such wisdom, she “posits that all G/god images, concepts, and theories are fragments of an unknowable totality that need to be pieced together and dissolved so that an awakened consciousness can rejuvenate the aching earth and help us evolve rather than remain locked in eternal conflict.” For Saxena, such fragments scattered throughout diverse religions need to be articulated and pieced together to find transformative wisdom. In her conviction, this task takes “out of all notions of theology,” and her examination therefore reveals a non-theological aspect of interreligious dialogue. This is in contrast with Martin’s essay in Chapter 4, which presents a theological facet of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, by focusing on “Mother Earth,” this chapter looks at an ecological aspect of
interreligious dialogue. This ecological perspective is discussed in none of the other chapters in this collection, and is little examined in much existing interreligious studies.

By examining diverse religions beyond theology, Saxena sums up her finding interreligiously or trans-religiously:

Like Egyptian Great Mother Isis who collected body parts of Osiris together and gave birth to Horus, we can look at each God fragments as valid image of a totality that has attracted human beings and given them both momentary knowledge and comfort... What is this Mother wisdom of a virus communicating to us? It is forcing us literally to go home, go within, and seek reality beyond the simulacra that our hyperreal existence with control mechanism of every kind have produced... Theologies have produced enough destructive and hierarchical dualism in the name an abstract transcendental unity that suppressed the Feminine. It is time to dance with the dualities of our inner yin and yang... At this time of our collective mourning when more than 245,000 people, mostly poor, non-white and the vulnerable, have perished in the US alone... [which] has been at the epicenter of this dialogue around the virus... I end this paper by invoking master Laozi who speaks of the mystery of the great Void and the easeful power of soft Yin, the Mother of ten thousand things in the Dao de Ching.

All of these aspects of plurality, fragility, fragment and suffering are synthetically discussed in the last chapter. As indicated in the title, “The Separation Thesis for Interreligious Dialogue: A Rereading of Genesis and the Abrahamic Faiths,” Heon Kim utilizes the separation thesis for the first time in the Studies of Religion. The separation thesis is an advanced theory on the idea of self and other, which “assumes that self is separate from others and thus forms relationships with others who are ontologically dialectical, but practically reflective, to self.” In light of this separation thesis, Kim innovatively rereads Genesis as depicting human beings as ‘separate beings’ from God and from one another. In his own words, “we are separate from God, and thus we are separate from one another.” Proceeding from this defining statement of separation, Kim distinguishes the vertical separation from God and the horizontal separation among human beings, and further discloses two aspects of the horizontal separation—the positive and the negative ones. As he demonstrates in his analysis of Genesis, positively, ‘we are separate from one another, and so we are equal,’ and negatively, ‘we are separate from others, and thus we privilege ourselves over others.’ In the history of the Abrahamic Faiths, Kim finds the negative manifestations of separation, and as opposed to it, he puts forward the covenant in Judaism, love in Christianity, and al-tawhid (Unity) in Islam to illustrate the positive aspects of separation. Having presented separation interreligiously in this...
way, Kim conclusively considers a separate being not to be a source of conflict but more essentially to be a dialogical being.

With its articulation of ‘separated and thus dialogic being,’ this last chapter adds another facet of interreligious dialogue to the many dimensions that the earlier chapters shed light on. As implicated in this last chapter, all the facets of interreligious dialogue are interconnected to bring them into dialogue among one another and understand interreligious dialogue in a bigger picture. For instance, the plurality of interreligious dialogue that the earlier chapters commonly discuss can be interpreted through the sense of separation in general and the positive aspects of the horizontal separation in particular. Specifically, it is akin to the role of “distance” in Weidenbaum’s chapter as it involves the separation between the Abrahamic religions.

Weidenbaum writes:

As worldly siblings often neglect to perceive each other as the adults they have become, failing to peer beyond the screens created through their childhood memories, so all three Abrahamic religions can use stepping back from each other a bit to gain a more objective and fresh perspective. Such a distance may assist us in appreciating the unique contributions and emphases they each have.

This “distance” amongst the Abrahamic religions reinforces the separation thesis, while “the unique contributions” confirms Jewish theology on the covenant, Christian love-centric theology, and Islamic theology on al-tawhid. The notion of fragments in Saxena’s chapter also resonates with the separation thesis.

Just like all of the chapters, this last chapter also reflects on the author’s lived experience. Kim writes:

As a matter of fact, in my lived experience, one’s belief in the superiority of her/his faith is most often observed in interreligious and interfaith dialogue, even including academic discourses. Since 2014 I continue to serve as the founding chair of the Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Section in American Academy of Religion Mid-Atlantic Region. While having led the annual conferences of this section, I often observed that a participant’s belief in the superiority of her/his faith caused problems in making a healthy dialogue, but, insofar as it remained in the personal domain of choice, this belief also helped for a productive dialogue to re-consider and/or deepen one’s faith.

This lived experience is reflected in the last chapter of this collection, which puts forth “separated beings” to suggest “dialogic beings.”
Readership and Contributions

This edited collection, *A Multi-faceted Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue*, is unique and engaging, especially in the following three aspects.

First, it is a careful selection and coherent collection of the best papers that were presented at the Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Section of American Academy of Religion (AAR) Mid-Atlantic Annual Conferences in 2016-2020. In this regard, this collection presents the most up-to-date scholarly discussion on interreligious dialogue and represents what specialists in the field are currently engaging in. Thereby, this collection will surely capture the attention of academicians in diverse disciplines—whoever wants to read and follow the latest cutting-edge discussion on interreligious dialogue. Scholars in the relevant interdisciplinary fields will likewise want to explore this collection. Social scientists in the burgeoning areas of globalization and pluralism will also find this collection to contain valuable case studies, as it deals centrally with the features, the implications, and the questions of interreligious dialogue in today’s context of globalization and pluralism.

Second, this edited collection is unique as an outcome of the AAR Regional Development Grant of 2019-2020. This grant was to be used for a group activity for publication in order to build a community of scholars among the AAR members. Thereby, the grant enabled the bringing together of distinguished specialists in interreligious dialogue in a publication workshop. This collection is a tangible outcome of the specialists’ collaborative publication activity with the AAR Grant. Therefore, it should draw attention of the AAR leadership and members to promote and publicize it as a successful platform and exemplary role-model to build a community of scholars. In fact, in the history of the AAR Regional Development Grant, this sort of collaborative publication activity is the first one. As it is so innovative, this edited collection will surely provide the AAR leadership with a blueprint and feasible means to foster a dynamic and productive scholarly network aligning with the AAR’s regional efforts to build a community of scholars.

Last but not least, *A Multi-faceted Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue* is unique in pushing beyond scholarly pure reasoning as developed in textual analysis. It is reflective as indicated in the title of *A Multi-faceted Reflection*. Far from being exclusive to a single aspect of interreligious dialogue, it is inclusive enough to reveal a diversity of aspects as they are reflected in real-life experiences. This real-life reflection will make this collection appeal to a wider audience beyond academia, especially whoever seeks for fruitful dialogue with people of other faiths, and/or wants to learn how to live harmoniously in local communities with people of diverse religions.
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
AS A RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVE:
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PLURALISM
IS A CORE CONSTITUTIVE CLAIM
OF ONE’S TRADITION?

JEFFREY D. LONG

Why Engage in Interreligious Dialogue?
Three Approaches

This essay explores the idea that interreligious dialogue is, at least for some traditions, a religious imperative. It then delves into various implications of this imperative from the point of view of the Vijñāna Vedānta, or Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, tradition of Hinduism. This project is pursued in the hope that these reflections might be useful to others, not only in this tradition, but in other religious traditions—and of no religious tradition—as well.¹

An imperative to interreligious dialogue is, in some traditions, a missionary imperative: a dialogue advanced ultimately in order to persuade the adherents of other traditions that one’s own tradition bears unique saving truths that others would do well to accept, sometimes under a threat of eternal damnation, should these saving truths not be accepted. An example of this might be the evangelical Christian imperative to go forth unto all the nations and spread the gospel.

One might well argue that such dialogue is not really a true dialogue at all, but more of a monologue, given that the religions of others are not perceived as having anything of value to add to one’s own knowledge base.

¹ The term Vijñāna Vedānta to refer to this tradition and its philosophical perspective has been coined and promoted by Swami Medhananda—formerly Ayon Maharaj—in several articles, and most notably, in his book, Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
Indeed, they may even be seen as inherently delusory and demonic. Historically, however, there have been Christian evangelists who—albeit in the name of ultimately converting their interlocutors—have delved deeply into other religious traditions, arguably giving rise to the modern discipline of the study of religion in the process.\(^2\) (It should also be noted that not all Christians adhere to the kind of exclusivist theology entailed in this approach to dialogue across religious borders. This specific Christian movement is simply being used as an example.)

In other cases, the imperative to dialogue may arise more or less accidentally or tangentially from other, more fundamental imperatives, such as an imperative to work for the betterment of the material living conditions of all people. One may then engage in interreligious dialogue with an understanding that only through such dialogue across religious boundaries can effectively work to resolve common issues be advanced—such as, for example, work to address the environmental crisis.

A good example of this kind of imperative might be interreligious dialogue that arises from the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, or ‘repairing the world’: an ethical obligation to work for the well-being of all people, which, in practice, can include cooperative activity with the adherents of other religious traditions. Such dialogue, aimed typically toward achieving a pragmatic goal which greater interreligious understanding and cooperation is seen to facilitate, has become increasingly common. Indeed, the idea that a more peaceful, habitable civil society will be enabled by dialogue and understanding across worldviews is foundational to work of, for example, Eboo Patel and the Interfaith Youth Corps.\(^3\)

In the first type of dialogue—the mission-oriented or conversion-oriented dialogue—the goal is not so much a deeper understanding, as an understanding aimed at facilitating the conversion of the other. In the second type of dialogue, while there is a real search for genuine understanding, this understanding nonetheless remains a means to another end: namely, the good and noble goal of bringing about a more peaceful and habitable society, where people of diverse religions can co-exist peacefully, and with a sense of mutual appreciation for one another’s traditions.

Finally, though, a third imperative to dialogue may also arise from a profound sense within a religious tradition that the very act of engaging in

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a dialogue—a dialogue of equals, in which each participant is open to
learning from the others—is inherently valuable, being capable of leading to
fresh insights into the topics on which the dialogue is held, and a deeper
understanding of reality on the part of all those involved. We are speaking
here of dialogue as an inherently religious act.

The aim of this dialogue is the very knowledge that it yields, not some
other goal—even a good and noble one, like a more peaceful world—which it
is hoped this knowledge will facilitate. Such a pursuit of understanding for
its own sake is not, of course, wholly incompatible with a goal such as the
cultivation of better relations amongst religious communities. Indeed, one
may pursue such understanding while also wholeheartedly wishing that
such a good outcome might arise from it. But the primary, or the immediate
motive behind such a pursuit is the knowledge it might yield. Similarly,
those who pursue dialogue in the name of a more peaceful world may find
the contents of the dialogues they pursue to be also inherently interesting
and worthwhile, but incidental to the overarching goal of improving
interreligious relations. Thus, these two approaches to interreligious dialogue
are, one could say, mirror images of one another.

It is the last kind of imperative that this essay shall explore: an imperative
to learn from others simply because one wants to know what they may have
to teach. This is an imperative that arises from the deep commitment of a
religious tradition to a pluralistic understanding of truth, according to which
no tradition, not even one’s own tradition, can claim a complete monopoly
on the truth. The desire to know and realize truth, coupled with a sense of
the incompleteness of all traditions, gives rise to an imperative to seek out
the truths of others: to engage with them in a real dialogue aimed at
enhancing the perspectives of all of its participants, and bringing all their
varied perspectives ever closer to the asymptotic goal of completion: to the
full realization of truth.

The Ramakrishna Tradition and its Imperative
to Dialogue

The specific tradition whose perspective this essay will engage is a Hindu
tradition which is based on the life and teachings of the nineteenth century
Bengali sage, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886). This tradition—which is
variously labeled Vedânta, modern Vedânta, Neo-Vedânta, Integral
Vedânta, or Vîjñâna Vedânta—is well known for being the first Hindu
tradition to be brought to the Western world, through the teaching and
organizational activities of Ramakrishna’s chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda.
(1853-1902), who established the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894, and the Ramakrishna Mission in Kolkata in 1897.

This tradition’s imperative to dialogue, while it certainly has precedent in an ancient Hindu predilection for pluralism—as famously expressed in key verses of the Rig Veda and the Bhagavad Gītā—is rooted primarily in the multi-religious sādhanas, or spiritual disciplines, that were pursued by Sri Ramakrishna during his lifetime, as recorded in such primary textual sources of this tradition as the Bengali Śrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta, authored by Mahendranath Gupta, and, also in Bengali, the Śrīrāmakṛṣṇalālāprasānga, by Swami Saradananda.4

Ramakrishna’s central teaching is that many religions can lead to an authentic experience of the divine, and that the same divine reality constitutes the ultimate goal of all of these religions. He based this claim on his own experiences of having followed many different religious paths:

I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once. Wherever I look, I see men quarrelling in the name of religion….But they never reflect that He who is called Krishna is also called Śiva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy, Jesus, and Āllāh as well—the same Rāma with a thousand names. A lake has several ghāts [places where there are steps which lead down to the water]. At one the Hindus take water in pitchers and call it ‘jal’; at another the Mussalmāns [Muslims] take water in leather bags and call it ‘pāni.’ At a third the Christians call it ‘water.’ Can we imagine that it is not ‘jal,’ but only ‘pāni’ or ‘water’? How ridiculous! The substance is One under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament, and name create differences. Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely realize Him.5

At the same time that Sri Ramakrishna affirmed that there was truth in many religions and that many religions could lead to God—we could call this the

4 The Rig Veda and Bhagavad Gītā verses mentioned here are, respectively, “Reality is one; the wise speak of it in many ways” (Rig Veda 1.164.46c) and “In whatsoever living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths, Arjuna, lead to me” (Bhagavad Gītā 4:11). These verses are widely interpreted, particularly in the modern period, as affirmations of religious pluralism: that the various sacred realities described in the world’s religions ultimately refer to the same highest reality, and that the world’s religions are all effective paths to the realization of the final goal of union with the divine, however this might be conceived.

5 Mahendranath Gupta, Śrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda as The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, 1942), 35.
positive affirmation of pluralism—he also affirmed that no single religion, as recorded in the teachings of its authoritative texts, offers a complete or perfect picture of truth. In other words, pluralism also involves a negative judgement, in the sense that the claims of any one religion to be the sole and perfect repository of truth and of salvific practices, are to be rejected:

The scriptures contain a mixture of sand and sugar, as it were. It is extremely difficult to separate the sugar from the sand.6

For Ramakrishna, discerning which elements of the scripture are true and which ones are not—separating the sugar from the sand—while ‘extremely difficult,’ is not impossible. It requires the guidance of a teacher—a guru—whom one trusts, followed by one’s own practice and experience.

The experiential element, for Ramakrishna, is the essential part of this process. Reasoning alone does not lead to the direct realization of truth. It is at best preparatory to the experience of God:

One should learn the essence of the scriptures from the guru and then practice śādhanā [spiritual discipline]. If one rightly follows spiritual discipline, then one directly sees God…What will a man gain by merely reasoning about the words of the scriptures? Ah, the fools! They reason themselves to death over information about the path. They never take the plunge. What a pity!7

What happens when one combines positive Vedāntic pluralism with the understanding that no tradition is wholly true? The view that many traditions affirm truth, in different ways, and that these traditions can all act as paths to the realization of God—which, according to Vedānta, is the manifestation of a divine potential that exists within all beings—combined with the view that none of these traditions is a perfect or complete manifestation of truth, and must be tested experientially, gives rise to the imperative to interreligious dialogue in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna.

If truth can be found in many traditions, then it is worthwhile to engage deeply with them, in order to learn the truth that they have to present to the world. This is what Ramakrishna did, at least according to the written accounts that we have of his life and spiritual practices. And if no single tradition, even one’s own, is perfect or complete—if the words of the scriptures require both rational and experiential testing and direct realization—then there is an even further motivation to engage in such dialogue, because

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6 Ibid, 543.
7 Ibid.
it is possible that other traditions contain some important truths of which one is as yet unaware. If one is full of love for the divine, as Ramakrishna is said to have been, and wishes to know the divine directly, in as many of its manifold aspects as possible, then one will want experience the divine as Hindus do, as Muslims do, as Christians do, and so on.

**The Imperative to Interreligious Dialogue Embodied in the Life of Sri Ramakrishna**

The claim that Ramakrishna realized God through many paths is a faith claim. It could be said to be the constitutive faith claim of the Hindu tradition that takes Ramakrishna as its founding figure and primary inspiration: the Viṣṇu Vaiṣṇava darśana or sampradāya, or school of thought and practice. The foundations for this claim, textually speaking, are the aforementioned primary sources on Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings, as preserved, interpreted, and promulgated by the Ramakrishna Order, the Ramakrishna Mission, and the Vedanta Societies in America.

This claim can, of course, be received skeptically—as it has been by a range of scholars who have argued that the mystical experiences which Ramakrishna claimed to have had were the result of neurological or psychological disorders. It can also, however, be viewed as a justifiable claim, based on an epistemology that takes such experiences to be potential sources of valid knowledge. It is not obvious, in other words, that claims of this kind are necessarily fantastical or false.

Without actually developing or repeating philosophical arguments for the defensibility of mystical experience as a valid source of knowledge, this

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9 This is the approach taken by Swami Medhananda, drawing upon the work of such philosophers as William Alston and Richard Swinburne. See Maharaj, 196-237.
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paper, because it is explicating the point of view of the tradition that takes Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings and experiences to be foundational, will simply proceed with the presumption that Ramakrishna’s experiences were veridical, and that the written testimony about them is reliable. While the conversation about whether this is actually the case is a valid and important one, for the purposes of this paper, it is tangential, given that the aim here is to show what it means for interreligious dialogue to be a religious imperative: to unpack the implications of such a situation. Defending every facet of the specific tradition that is being used as a case study of this situation is beyond this paper’s immediate scope.

What is it, precisely, that Ramakrishna is believed, in this tradition, to have experienced? And what, according to this tradition, are the implications of these experiences—taking them, again, to be veridical and reliable sources of knowledge? We shall now explore Ramakrishna’s sādhanas, as presented in the primary sources about his life, and examine their philosophical implications. Several salient features of Sri Ramakrishna’s worldview will thus emerge, such as:

• The internal complexity of the divine: the fact that the infinite, divine reality possesses an aspect that answers to traditional descriptions of a personal, theistic divinity, another aspect that is impersonal and corresponds to the idea of divinity as an ultimate absolute principle and not a personal being, and another aspect which corresponds to the cosmos itself and the beings who inhabit it.
• The fact that ways to the divine are similarly diverse: that the path to the divine correspond to its diverse aspects.
• The reality of avatars, or divine incarnations.
• The reality of the phenomenon of rebirth, or reincarnation.

The main intent of this section is not only to demonstrate that an imperative to interreligious dialogue exists for anyone who takes seriously Sri Ramakrishna’s claims to have experienced God through many paths. It is also to show how the specifics of Ramakrishna’s worldview shape that imperative, making it distinctive amongst other approaches of a similar kind.

Born in February 1836, in the small village of Kamarpukur, in Bengal, with the name of Gaḍādhara Chattopadhyāya, Sri Ramakrishna, from an early age, displayed a tendency to enter what could be called altered states of consciousness. By his own account, his first such experience took place when he was six years old. While walking in a field, he beheld a flock of white birds flying against a background of dark clouds. The beauty of this
sight so absorbed his attention that he lost consciousness of the external world, entering a state known in the Yoga tradition as \textit{samādhi}, in which one’s awareness becomes completely absorbed in the object of one’s contemplation. On another occasion, while playing the deity Śiva in a play held to celebrate the holiday of Śivarātri (‘Night of Śiva’), his mind became completely absorbed in the contemplation of Śiva, and he lost outward consciousness (much to the alarm of the community members who had gathered to view the play). Before he left Kamarpukur at the age of nineteen, to serve as a priest at a temple of the Mother Goddess Kālī in Dakshineshwar, near Kolkata, these experiences of \textit{samādhi} had become a common—almost daily—occurrence for Sri Ramakrishna, causing members of his family and the local community to believe that he suffered from a neurological or psychological disorder.\footnote{It is interesting to note that this skeptical interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna’s experiences was held by many of his contemporaries, most of whom were devout Hindus, and is not only the approach of later scholars.}

From the age of nineteen until, at the age of forty-nine, he began to suffer from the effects of throat cancer, to which he would succumb at the age of fifty, Ramakrishna served as a priest of the Goddess Kālī, the Divine Mother and wife of Śiva. Initially, he took up this posting to serve as an assistant to his brother, Ramkumar, who was also a priest at the Dakshineshwar temple. His brother died suddenly, however, shortly after Ramakrishna had moved to Dakshineshwar to assist him. The impact of this loss on Ramakrishna’s state of mind was profound. As Richard Schiffman writes:

\begin{quote}
It reminded the young devotee that behind the shimmering mirage of life something permanent and infinitely worth finding was concealed. And it also reminded him, urgently, that he had not yet found it.\footnote{Richard Schiffman, \textit{Sri Ramakrishna: A Prophet for the New Age} (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 20.}
\end{quote}

In the days following the loss of his brother, Ramakrishna became consumed with a desire to have a direct vision, a direct experience, of the Goddess Kālī. Feeling that he could not honestly serve as a priest of this Goddess if he did not really and truly know that She was a real presence in the temple, he became filled with longing for Kālī. This longing culminated in and precipitated a powerful vision, which Ramakrishna himself describes:

\begin{quote}
I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered with a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize Her in this life. I could not bear the separation from Her any longer. Life seemed
\end{quote}