8 Theology Without Walls

An interspiritual approach

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[C]ommunity cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them – unknown and undiscovered brothers [and sisters].

– Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Thurman 1986)¹

Introduction: embodying TWW, the Snowmass Dialogues

In 1984, Father Thomas Keating, a Roman Catholic monk in the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (also known as “Trappists”), convened a group of advanced contemplatives from differing religious traditions, including Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic participants. The idea was to engage one another in intimate dialogue over five days in a private retreat setting. Its primary purpose was not “interreligious” dialogue, in the sense of learning about the doctrines and practices of religious traditions other than one’s own. Rather, as Keating describes it, he invited the participants to “meditate together in silence, and to share our personal spiritual journeys, especially those elements in our respective traditions that have proved most helpful to us along the way” (Miles-Yeppez 2006, xvii). Participants were not meant to speak *for* their tradition – as representatives – but first and foremost as human beings engaged in spiritually transformative processes, processes informed and inflected by religious and cultural traditions.

Keating, who has been my most formative spiritual mentor and who passed away just a few months ago (at the ripe old age of 95), was a powerful figure in the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition. He helped develop the now widespread silent meditation technique of Centering Prayer and pioneered experiments in interreligious exchange as abbot of St. Joseph’s monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. Over decades of participating in interreligious dialogues, Keating began to realize that the most interesting “dialogue” always seemed to happen at the margins of events, in private during meals, for instance, or in car rides to and from the airport.

Once participants found themselves on stage, however, a different dynamic ensued. They spoke to the audience, not to each other, and often felt they had to represent their religious tradition, limiting what they felt comfortable saying. What would happen, Keating wondered, if we simply shared our spiritual journeys as human beings, learning from one another, and discovering together our experiences of ultimacy?

Keating's insight was an auspicious one. The group he convened in 1984 continued to meet once a year for five-day retreats over the next 30+ years, ending in 2015. For the first 20 years the group kept no records and published no reports. They decided on complete privacy so they could speak freely about their experiences of spiritual transformation – without worrying that some “heresy” might get back to their religious communities where many were leaders. It was not a static group, as members came and went throughout the years, but a handful also remained for all 31 years. Eventually, a book was published recounting the first 20 years of their work, and later a documentary was produced (Miles-Yepetz 2006; Olsson 2013). The group became known as “The Snowmass Interreligious Conference,” often referred to simply as “The Snowmass Conference,” since they held the majority of their yearly retreats at Keating's monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. During the final ten years, as members began inviting “mentees” to guide and pass on their accumulated wisdom, the name changed to the “Snowmass InterSpiritual Dialogue Fellowship” (SISD).

I personally participated in SISD as Keating's mentee in 2010, and subsequently became its administrator and a participant for the final five years. I now carry forward the work they began through a new dialogue series, known as “The Future of Religion & Interspirituality (1986).”² I introduce this because I intend to use it as a fulcrum for a broader exploration of the Theology Without Walls (TWW) project. The experience of intimate dialogue among diverse and committed spiritual practitioners yields insights, as we will see later, that can be difficult to discern through textual analysis or philosophical reflection. Such “interspiritual” dialogues are imbued with a humanizing ambience, where TWW is pursued as an embodied, existentially potent affair – one with germane consequences for a new generation of spiritual seekers.

An interspiritual approach to TWW

Wayne Teasdale introduced the term “interspiritual” in his 1999 book *The Mystic Heart* (Teasdale 1999). He used the word to denote a new type of spiritual search emerging from the increasing phenomena of religious traditions sharing with one another from the depths of their experiences of ultimacy (Teasdale 1999, 10, 26). Teasdale spoke of a new interspiritual paradigm for the religious quest, one “that permits people from various traditions, or from no tradition, to explore the spiritual dimensions of any religion” (Teasdale 2002, 173). Two elements were essential to his understanding of

interspirituality: 1) *experiences* of ultimacy, especially experiences occurring within the context of long-term commitments to contemplative practice; and 2) the *sharing* of such experiences in collaborative ways, where the revelatory experiences of others affect our own religious quest.

Teasdale believed interspirituality could pave the way for an enlightened global culture by helping to create a “continuing community among the religions that is substantial, vital, and creative.” Interspirituality was not meant to subsume or surpass the world’s religious and spiritual traditions or to form a “homogenous superspirituality,” but rather to “make available to everyone all the forms the spiritual journey assumes.” What makes interspirituality possible is the “openness of people who have a viable spiritual life” and who develop a “determination, capacity, and commitment to the inner search across traditions.” Teasdale envisioned the world’s religious traditions as spiritually interdependent, “because an essential interconnect-edness in being and reality exists” (Teasdale 1999, 26, 27). Such an interdependence of life is often proclaimed by traditions themselves.

The context for an interspiritual approach, then, is one in which ultimacy is explored from multiple perspectives within a collaborative mode of inquiry, with an emphasis on potential transformative possibilities of a spiritual or religious nature. This makes an interspiritual approach an inherently *contemplative* endeavor that includes both personal experience and the teachings of traditions, and highlights a dialogical methodology as a vital aspect of its repertoire. An interspiritual approach to TWW therefore embraces “the religious quest as transformative journey” (see later). Of course, religion is many things and can be studied just as any other human endeavor might. These include sociological, historical, economic, psychological, and scientific perspectives, to name just a few. TWW, I would argue, should include these perspectives in its endeavor. However, TWW is first and foremost *theology* – the *logos* of *theos*, “to know and articulate” what we can of ultimate reality.

Theology must ultimately be concerned with that which is irreducibly “religious” in human life. Elsewhere I have argued that this irreducible component involves “the religious quest as transformative journey” (McEntee 2017, 618). That is, religion, for everything else that it is, is in essence concerned with a transformative journey that aligns, transmutes, awakens, and orients one in various degrees of harmony with God, Buddha-nature, Dao, Allah, Yahweh, Great Spirit, Heaven, Brahman, “the axiological depths of nature,” etc.³ I use the term “ultimate reality” for all this as a vague comparative category of family resemblances, without equating any of them. My aim here is to show some of the consequences and possibilities of this trajectory as a locus of reflection.

For instance, from this perspective one might regard sacred texts as only secondarily concerned with dogmatic or metaphysical formulations of a confessional nature. The primary context of sacred texts would be interpreted with respect to the ways in which particular orientations, practices,

metaphysical frameworks, narrative stories, and commitments function so as to affect varying textures of transformative possibilities hidden in humanity's entanglement with ultimacy.

As an example, consider the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. John Thatamanil makes a distinction between understanding the Four Noble Truths and an experience of *satori*, or enlightenment. An intellectual understanding of the Four Noble Truths Thatamanil calls "second-order knowledge," while experiencing *satori* gives "first-order knowledge" of ultimacy (which Thatamanil also refers to as "practical knowledge of ultimate reality"). Without denying the importance of a confessional stance towards the Four Noble Truths – after all, being Buddhist assumes one takes "refuge" in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, at least *until* one reaches enlightenment – we may nevertheless proclaim that the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon. It is an embodied, existential experience of *satori* that ultimately brings about the "comprehensive transformation" hinted at and articulated by the Four Noble Truths (Thatamanil 2016, 357). Thus, the Four Noble Truths might be interpreted not only on a dogmatic level of their metaphysical agreement or incommensurability with other theological frameworks but also as a functional means of transformative possibility. That is, one might ask what underlying orientations are contained within the Four Noble Truths that serve to prepare and initiate one into transformative processes that are undergirded by ultimacy.

Incommensurability or homeomorphic equivalent?

Let me offer an example from our aforementioned Snowmass Conference. In the dialogues, a Tibetan Buddhist posed the following question to a Christian contemplative (paraphrasing): "If there remains a concept of the self, how does one deal with the problem of egotism that emerges from progressing along one's spiritual path?"

The question alludes to an apparent "incommensurability" between the Buddhist doctrines of *anātman* ("no-self," or literally, "no ātman," ātman being the "self" or "soul" within various schools of Hinduism) and the Christian doctrine of a personal soul. The answer, from a Christian perspective, is that all progress happens only through grace. One is never "good," only blessed. When someone referred to Jesus as "good," he admonished them: "Why do you call me good? No one is good – except God alone."⁴

At a level of doctrine we find (perhaps) incommensurable "accounts of reality." However, I would suggest that in considering "the religious quest as transformative journey," we have found what Raimon Panikkar referred to as a "*homeomorphic* equivalence."⁵ Viewed from a functional level of contemplative transformation, we might rephrase the question as, "How does one deal with the problem of human selfishness and ego aggrandizement, especially concerning so-called 'progress' along a contemplative path, which

is meant to transform and transmute, rather than aggregate, this quality within human beings?”

For Buddhists, an account of (perhaps even “an experience of”) reality that emphasizes the illusionary nature of any substantial sense of self and that includes numerous practices that aim to deconstruct such a concretized notion of self function to combat ego aggrandizement as one progresses on a path, leaving no foothold whatsoever for an ego (or sense of self) to grasp onto. For Christians, an account of (and “experiences of”) reality that sees human nature as utterly and completely dependent upon God for its own process of sanctification and that ultimately lays all “good” not in the hands of one’s self but to God alone functions in a similar way.

In terms of how each of these conceptualizations and/or experiences operate at the level of “transformative journey,” within their respective soteriological and theological frameworks, one can see that both work to induce a humble state of mind and to uproot the temptation to attribute to oneself fruits that may arise from walking a contemplative path. Although this may not be the only thing (or even the most important thing) that these concepts work to achieve within their respective frameworks, it can be acknowledged that, whatever else they do, they serve to accomplish in particular ways certain similar functions in the interiority of practitioners.

What once appeared incommensurable now finds consonance, at least in certain respects.

A tale of difference

One of the long-term participants in the Snowmass Dialogues was a highly respected senior monk in the Ramakrishna Order. I’ll call him Swami. The Ramakrishna Order is a Hindu monastic order established by Swami Vivekananda, a famous disciple of the Indian sage Sri Ramakrishna (Vivekananda took the first Parliament of World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893 by storm, leading to an influx of Hindu thought and teachings in the West). The Ramakrishna Order generally follows the teachings of Vedanta Hinduism, and its branches in the West are often known as “Vedanta Societies.” If you were to walk into Swami’s monastery you would find four pictures of venerated teachers on the wall (a scene repeated in many Ramakrishna monasteries throughout the United States), which include Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi (Ramakrishna’s wife and spiritual counterpart, often referred to as the “Holy Mother”), Jesus, and the Buddha. According to the teachings of the Ramakrishna Order, at various periods throughout cosmic ages the divine reality appears as a human being in order to guide and teach others. Such human beings are called “avatars,” which means “descent of the divine.” Jesus, the Buddha, Ramakrishna, and Sarada Devi are all considered avatars, or divine incarnations, within the Ramakrishna Order. Each avatar is seen to carry specific messages for humanity appropriate to the time and place in which they appear, yet each is believed to have “discovered

the same truth” and have come to “reestablish the one eternal religion” (Vedanta Society of Southern California 2019). Because Swami accepted and experienced Jesus as a divine incarnation, and venerated him as such, he felt that he mostly understood the Christian contemplative path and shared their experience of Jesus.

Swami brought this outlook with him as he began to participate in the Snowmass Dialogues. Over the years, however, he began to realize that his experience of Jesus as a divine avatar from the perspective of Vedanta Hinduism was *not* the same experience of Jesus that Christians seemed to be having in the depths of their contemplative life. This forced Swami to reconsider his position on both Jesus and Christianity. The differences Swami was registering were not the obvious ones on a doctrinal level or ones that might be proposed as the result of immaturity on a spiritual path. Christian practitioners who Swami considered very advanced in the spiritual life simply did not encounter Jesus in the same way as one among many avatars. There was a type of phenomenological variance in the experience of Jesus that affected the transformative journeys of those who experienced him in this way, opening up the possibility that perhaps the revelation of Jesus could not be circumscribed within a Hindu doctrine of avatars.

This was a joyous discovery for Swami, as he now realized he had much to learn and discover about the experience of Jesus that was not present in his own tradition. These kinds of nuanced differences are often better discovered in person, *dialogically*, where one can triangulate around another’s experience – and others can triangulate around one’s own experience. A dialogical methodology enhances the ability to home in on both differences and similarities that might be extremely difficult (or even impossible) to discover through the reading of texts or the lens of theological frameworks abstracted from the religious quest as transformative journey. Differences such as these speak to the need for a discerning openness to the experience of others and to a willingness to discover unrealized aspects of our own journey, as well as undiscovered possibilities in the journeys of others.

An interspiritual approach to TWW insists that we remain open to these differences. There are an abundance of reasons for such humble openness, including to more fully discover aspects of ultimacy; to contextualize our own spiritual journeys and experiences of ultimacy in ever more nuanced ways; to discover unknown transformative possibilities for our own religious or spiritual path; to develop reverence for the transformative possibilities we discern in others; to know that there exist transformative possibilities undergirded by ultimacy that are not, and perhaps never will be, part of our path, and that is okay; and finally to help incarnate an ever-growing solidarity that thickens *through* difference. The participants of the Snowmass Dialogues report they bonded more through discussing their disagreements than they had in discovering their points of agreement. As differences were discussed, people became franker about what they believed. Without trying

to convince others, they simply offered their understanding as “a gift to the group” (Miles-Yepez 2006, xix).

The importance of contemplative traditions for TWW

What does it mean to “know” or “articulate” ultimate reality? For some, this may refer to an interpretive meaning of a sacred text. However, for contemplative traditions, to “know” ultimate reality has always meant in some sense to *embody* it. To “articulate” ultimate reality is to live it, to manifest it in some way, to harmoniously align one’s self with it, or even in some sense to identify with it. Knowing and articulating ultimate reality, for these traditions, is always correlated with a transformation of one’s being-in-the-world, a transformative journey of the “head, heart, and hands,” as Teasdale put it.

From an interspiritual perspective, a transformative journey of the head includes a sculpting of the intellect through the active shaping of the theological frameworks we construct (“interpretive schemes” in Thatamanil’s language), as well as a “striving to understand the specific, subtle meanings of religious concepts and how the traditions relate to each other” (Teasdale 1999, 29). A transformative journey of the heart occurs in the depths of spiritual practice and the applications of spiritual teachings to daily life (this is similar to Thatamanil’s “therapeutic regimes”). The journey of the heart reflects an *embodiment* of one’s spirituality and serves as both the offspring of one’s commitments and a reciprocal source of information that informs them (that is, transformations of the heart do more than “install” interpretive schemes into the “body, mind, and heart,” as Thatamanil describes, but also, from an interspiritual perspective, change and inform such schemes in a reciprocal manner; Thatamanil 2016, 357). Finally, a transformative journey of the hands involves the collaborative projects we engage in with others of differing beliefs and practices for the common good, especially with regard to issues of social and environmental justice (Teasdale 1999, 29).

Louis Komjathy, a leading scholar in the field of contemplative studies, has taken care to emphasize that contemplative traditions are unique; are rooted in particular cultures, practices, and soteriological frameworks; and can appear incommensurable in certain respects (for instance, Komjathy finds that diverse religious and contemplative traditions offer “mutually exclusive, equally convincing accounts of ‘reality’”; Komjathy 2015, 39). At the same time, one tends to find “recurring patterns and parallel practices across traditions” (Komjathy 2018, 137). These include sustained commitment to contemplative practices and “recognition of the value of interiority, presence, seclusion, silence, stillness, and so forth” (Komjathy 2018, 142). Komjathy goes on to describe contemplative traditions as ultimately about “transformed existential and ontological modes,” utilizing what he calls “psychologies of realization” to achieve such transformations (Komjathy

2018, 108). Of particular interest for TWW is Komjathy's suggestion that contemplative traditions are engaged in the mapping of "more 'advanced' ontological conditions" through "committed and prolonged contemplative practice" (Komjathy 2015, 54), which must be distinguished from "meditative dilettantism" (Komjathy 2018, 128). From this point of view, we might come to appreciate advanced contemplatives as "professionals," in a sense of religiously inflected ontological exploration. It is important to note that these transformed modes of being can, and often do, include sociopolitical concerns, as seen, for instance, in the life and writings of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Soelle, Abraham Heschel, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nhat Hahn, and Howard Thurman.

Advanced contemplatives, thus, can be valued as professionals with expertise, as it were, of experimentation with the practices and modes of being-in-the-world that accomplish transformative possibilities undergirded by ultimacy to varying degrees. A contemplative tradition, then, is a community of inquiry that forms around such experimentation and accomplishments, and includes the collected magisteria of the community – the sacred texts, stories, theologies, practices, and practitioners. Different traditions define transformative processes in various ways, giving birth to potentials hidden in the human heart. One experience does not necessarily equate to another. A Christian experience of mystical union with God or Jesus may be different from a Buddhist experience of the "fundamental nature of the mind." I say "may be" because I do not wish to prejudge these matters and do not believe that inquiry into them has progressed to a point where we can be sure of the differences and overlap in experiences of ultimacy. Such questions rather compose an existentially significant and potent field of exploration into matters of ultimate importance and should be approached with an open mind – and an open heart.

Contemplative life, then, can (and should) be seen in some sense as a professional area of expertise of human encounter with ultimate reality (not necessarily *the* professional area). It is not that other forms of encounter with ultimate reality need be circumscribed or considered more or less important. Rather, it is to note the uniqueness of contemplative experience and the shared "family resemblances" of contemplative traditions, and hence their importance for TWW. Another way to think of contemplative traditions is as communities of inquiry into ultimate reality that tend to manifest predictable, embodied divine "traits," to use a term from the academic field of contemplative studies, or what I have called elsewhere "divine adornments."⁶ Such traits, such as *bodhichitta* in the Buddhist tradition or *caritas* in the Christian tradition, need not be equated and can be seen as uniquely embodied results attained to varying degrees within particular contemplative traditions.

From this perspective, the importance of contemplative life for TWW becomes radiantly apparent. If TWW wishes to consider all relevant "revelations, enlightenments, and insights" into ultimate reality, then seriously

consulting those for whom this is an area of expertise, mainly advanced contemplatives, would seem to be a *sine qua non* of such an undertaking. Given the uniqueness of individual contemplative traditions, it becomes equally important for TWW to consider the *particularities* of varying contemplative traditions, including possible differences in resulting “divine adornments” or “traits,” without a trenchant need for simplification or generalization.

TWW as theological milieu for the “spiritual but not religious”

The interspiritual approach to TWW explored here would be of benefit to the growing, but inchoate, spirituality of the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). For instance, TWW can help provide a locus of thought for SBNRs to consider as they survey an ever-growing, and perhaps confusing, landscape of potential spiritual practices they might adopt. TWW does this by engaging a discursive community to reflect upon traditional contemplative practices, the possible transformative effects of such practices, and the strengths and weaknesses of various practices. These analyses should include sociological, religious, and political perspectives, as well as address what it might mean to extract such practices from their cultural and theological frameworks. It is not hard to see how such a discourse might be of immense benefit to SBNRs as they attempt to navigate their own unique, individualized paths amidst a smorgasbord of spiritual practices and religious frameworks, some of which are authentic, others which are commercialized, and still others which are downright dangerous.⁷ Knowing some of the pitfalls and dangers, as well as how to cultivate discernment among such diverse spiritualities, would contribute to the efficacy of an SBNR’s spiritual quest.

TWW can help as well to provide various conceptions of ultimacy that transgress confessional boundaries. This serves SBNRs in developing more sophisticated frameworks for understanding their own spiritual paths. TWW also provides a discursive community for SBNRs to hone and shape their understandings through academic exchange. One might imagine future scholars working on theological frameworks and philosophical or political theologies from ever-deepening interspiritual perspectives. Such a development would also be of benefit to those in religious traditions as well as to the SBNR movement, as it would naturally continue to deepen reflection on questions of difference and individuality, discernment of spiritual maturity, the relationship of religious traditions to one another and to their own institutionalized forms, and the very concept of what it means to be “religious.”

Who is to say that SBNRs will not eventually be regarded as forerunners of a new religious spirit, a religious spirit that sees the religious quest as a transformative journey, embraces democratization of the spiritual life, and in this sense, may be particularly apt for our times?

Interspirituality as a religious path

Over the first few years of the Snowmass Conference participants worked through difficulties in trying to formulate some common points of agreement. They eventually produced a document, which became known as “The Points of Agreement” (yet remained out of the public eye for decades). Choosing “ultimate reality” as their reference word for ultimacy, the points consist of eight statements about ultimate reality and the human condition, such as a recognition that the world religions “bear witness to the experience of ultimate reality”; that ultimate reality cannot be limited by names or concepts; that it is the ground of actuality and potentiality; that all human beings have a potential for transformation, wholeness, enlightenment, transcendence; etc.; that “disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life,” yet nevertheless all spiritual attainment is, in the end, “not the result of one’s efforts” but instead dependent upon ultimacy itself; and that ultimacy may be experienced outside of religious practices, such as “through nature, art, human relationships, and service to others” (Miles-Yepez 2006, xvii).⁸

One point of agreement in particular, however, interests me here. It reads, “Faith is opening, accepting, and responding to Ultimate Reality. *Faith in this sense precedes every belief system*” (Miles-Yepez 2006, xvii, emphasis mine).

To see faith as something that exists prior to every belief system is to turn on its head a more widespread, pedestrian understanding of faith, where “faith” exhibits a “belief” in something that perhaps cannot be proven, like the trinitarian nature of God, for instance. If, on the other hand, faith *precedes* any belief system, then it stems not from assent to some humanly constructed religious framework, but rather exists as an intrinsic aspect of humanity’s entanglement with ultimacy. *Faith*, in this sense, is inherent to the human condition. One might choose not to explore it or to refuse its quiet, constant nudging. Or one may nurture it, and this would seem to be the purpose of belonging to a religious tradition. However, if one’s faith exists before one’s tradition does, then the tradition itself becomes a vehicle for the nurturing of an intrinsic human capacity. Distinctive “nurturings” of this capacity contribute to differing substantiations of ultimacy. It is worth noting again that committed practitioners from different religious traditions were able to affirm this statement on faith.

All human beings have a capacity for transformative growth that aligns them in increasing degrees with ultimacy. This capacity exists outside of any religious tradition. An interspiritual approach further affirms the diversity of such approaches and entertains the possibility that diversity in manifestation is at the heart of ultimacy, and that therefore the many ways of nurturing our “faith” is a consequence, or reflection, of such multiplicity. Each particular way will inevitably have strengths and weaknesses, bringing unique insights into the nature of ultimacy and the transformative possibilities of human beings to align and orient themselves towards ultimacy. These

are not preordained ways, mapped out prior to their manifestation, but rather are birthed within spontaneous and creative impulses at the heart of manifestation. *These differences are but a flowering of life itself and compose a reflection of ultimacy.*

Given this, spiritual impulses that look to give rise to new types of religiosity, such as we see today in the West among multiple religious believers, SBNR, and interspiritual folks, need not be seen as disconnected from ultimacy just because they are not embedded in traditional religious forms. A better question would be: Are they responding to their “faith” in the sense given earlier? One might consider the possibility that, for these individuals, nurturing their faith – that is opening and responding to ultimacy – creatively manifests in nontraditional religious ways. Certainly it is not hard to see some of the qualities we often associate with these nontraditional spiritualities as undergirded by ultimacy, such as a spiritual longing for transformation; questioning unhealthy institutional and hierarchical religious structures; naming and addressing problems of embedded patriarchies, colonialisms, and racism that exist in *all* of our religious traditions; emphases on issues of social and ecological justice; democratic sensibilities in exploring differences among spiritual orientations; and the freedom to follow and embody one’s sense of the sacred – that is, to nurture one’s “faith.”

To nurture one’s faith requires commitments. Such commitments lie at the root of an interspiritual path, which is where I delineate between an ambiguous use of the term “spiritual” and what it means to be “religious.” Spirituality is not a mere component of our lives. The spiritual is a kind of intrinsic quality to life itself, part of the ground of actuality and potentiality and the ever-present possibility of opening and responding to ultimacy. The spiritual overflows into all of life, its ambiguity pointing towards its ever-present nature as ground. To be “religious” involves an *active* cultivation of this spiritually transformative capacity, which opens up a vast territory for discernment. This in turn implies a need for theological reflection and practical experimentation regarding concepts of spiritual maturity and the efficacies of various spiritual practices and orientations. It is a *religious* practice to bring one’s religious and spiritual commitments into the reflective light of the intellect and to make oneself aware of one’s orientations towards ultimacy so that they may continually be (re)evaluated and evolve as one’s journey proceeds.

Further, as religious denotes, in the terms of this chapter, commitments to a transformative journey – that is, a spiritual path that attempts to continually orient and reorient one towards ultimacy in ever clearer and more transparent ways with greater faith, hope, love, service, compassion, and wisdom, and confidence in the ameliorating potency of one’s quest – then an interspiritual religious path would be one where one’s religious *identity* is primarily predicated upon such commitments. This could obviously occur both within and without religious traditions. That is, an interspiritual religious path may be journeyed on within a traditional religious identity or

walked in such a way that is not embedded in any singular religious tradition. Interspirituality imparts a sense of solidarity with all those who walk committed paths of a spiritually efficacious nature.

I'd like to conclude on a personal note, with a closing story from the last day of the final Snowmass Dialogue. As practitioners from many of the world's different religious traditions sat in a circle in the meditation hall at St. Benedict's monastery, looking out onto the vast landscape of the Rocky Mountains through the wall-length, cathedral-like windows surrounding us, we began to go around the circle, offering thoughts on our experience and what we might take back to our religious traditions and communities as a result. As various responses were given and one after another told of insights – some difficult, others joyous – that they would endeavor to offer back to their communities, I was overcome with the coalescence of an incipient, but growing, awareness. As it happened, I was the last to speak, and when I did my voice stammered with emotion.

"It is wonderful to hear about all of the myriad things you will be bringing back to your home traditions," I told them.

It brings me joy, but I would be lying if I did not admit to a hint of sadness. I do not have a tradition to "return" to, for it exists here, *among you. This is my tradition.* My spiritual (and religious) home is to be found amidst the spaces you have created, in that which has come into being through your willingness to open yourselves, and your traditions, to one another, without defensiveness and in love. It exists within the interchange and synergy of spiritual energies that entwine when you come together. And amidst the silence we share. And the personal, intimate testimonies of those who have dedicated themselves – in endearing, instructive, and inspirational ways, to their own transformative journeys.

This tradition, my tradition, is what I have called "interspiritual." I have come to know, through friends, colleagues, and mentors across the globe, that I am far from alone in claiming it. I have no doubts that though youthful, it is also undergirded by ultimacy, as all authentic religious traditions are. Its story has only begun to be told.

Notes

- 1 Citation refers to Friends United edition.
- 2 The new dialogue series, known as FRIS for short, is an invitation-only dialogue held at contemplative centers around the country, run by The Foundation for New Monasticism & Interspirituality, of which I am a founding member. For more, see Foundation for New Monasticism & InterSpirituality, founded in 2015.
- 3 For "axiological depths of nature," see Wildman (2016), in reference to a religious naturalist perspective.
- 4 *The Bible*. New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 1984. Lk 18:19.

- 5 See Panikkar (1981) and Panikkar (2014), among other Panikkar books as well.
- 6 For “traits,” see Komjathy (2018); for “divine adornments,” see McEntee (2017).
- 7 “Authenticity” here is a matter of discernment, often practiced within discursive communities of practitioners. These communities can, and perhaps should, exceed the boundaries of one’s own tradition and/or spiritual commitments. TWW, broadly understood, would constitute one such diverse community.
- 8 An interesting tidbit here I know from personal knowledge is the difficulty the participants had in even choosing a term for ultimacy. For example, the Christians preferred “ultimate mystery,” but Buddhists could not assent to “mystery,” as they felt this disputed their viewpoint that ultimacy can be directly awakened to.

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