

# A Breadth of Belonging

## Navigating Interreligious and Intercultural Spaces



### *Introduction to This Issue*

## A Breadth of Belonging: Navigating Interreligious and Intercultural Spaces

As we go to press with the January 2021 issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, infectious disease experts warn us that the new year will still find the world in the grip of a global pandemic *and* that there are new vaccines being developed in various parts of the world that raise hopes that this grip will loosen as we travel further into the new year. If there is anything that 2020 has driven “home,” it is the reminder that the boundaries that separate various peoples are permeable, no matter what our politics. How we navigate and negotiate these boundaries in the most lifegiving ways possible is both challenge and gift.

This issue takes up one aspect of that challenge and gift with a variety of essays that explore identity and difference. The essays probe the complexities of asserting what “home” means for people who have a foot in more than one world.

The theme for this issue sprang from the opportunity to publish the keynote address and two responses to it of the 2019 World Mission Institute (WMI), held in Chicago in April 2019. The *Currents* staff is grateful to Dr. Kenneth Sawyer, Professor of Church History at McCormick Theological Seminary, for his

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work as a co-organizer of the WMI, his introduction to the material published here from that conference, and his own essay. The first section of this issue includes Dr. Sawyer’s introduction to the WMI Conference, followed by a greeting from President James Nieman, the keynote address by Catherine Cornille, responses by JoAnne Terrell and Joy Ziemke. This second section of the January issue contains other essays that extend the theme of this issue in a variety of directions.

**Catherine Cornille's** World Mission Institute address, "Religious Hybridity and Christian Identity: Promise and Problem," surveys types of dual-belonging and honors those seeking to be accountable to the deepest demands of their own Christian identity while being open to the insight and wisdom of non-Christian ways. She notes similarities among religious traditions, and the fact that dual-belonging has a long history within Christianity that takes several forms expressed in practice and theology. Pluralistic cultural contexts, blended families, charismatic teachers and practices, and ethically compelling examples offer promising prospects of combined traditions, usually combined within an individual consciousness, path, or story. Cornille concludes that individuals are not the best judges of the adequacy of dual-belonging efforts. Instead, Cornille offers the wisdom of inter-monastic dialogue and the emerging discipline of comparative theology as providing methods to assess and engage competing claims. The requirements of any tradition will extend far beyond the responses of any individual, and beyond the inadequacies of any one community or culture. For Cornille, depth of Christian religious traditions can tame the desires that inspire duality, since the deepest reaches of identity within communities of faith are not available to those whose attention and allegiance is divided. Cornille offers an appreciative word to those whose yearnings prompt efforts at dual-belonging, but those who understand themselves belonging to two or more communities will find themselves unable to plumb the depths of either. Instead, Cornille offers the complex consolations of "being, or at least aspiring to be, 'just' Christian."

**JoAnne Marie Terrell's** response to Cornille's keynote affirms divine presence and loving goodness that precedes the particularities of religious traditions and religious language we cherish; a divine presence not limited to the dualities, binaries, and boundaries we enforce. Furthermore, divine love has deployed multiple religious traditions and many modes and methods to overcome the harm done by cultural hubris and the empowered racist and extended colonialist forms of any one religion. Terrell offers an autobiographical narrative that endorses a continuing process drawing upon the insight and grace of pre-critical/natural knowledge of God, nurtured in deepening Christian, Buddhist, and Daoist practice, informed and sharpened by a Womanist sensibility, all to cultivate a habitus of openness to divine presence and provision that is as eager for claims of ultimacy as it is impatient with claims of exclusivity and finality.

**Joy Ziemke's** response is a reflection on matters of faith, formation, and community. Ziemke's religious formation crossed significant cultural/religious boundaries: Protestant and Catholic, contemplative and active, lay and monastic. Recounting with gratitude her years of extensive practice of contemplative prayer, her seminary formation within the vibrant urban community of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and the demands of her vocation in social-service agencies, Ziemke then writes of the crises of searching for community after she relocated to Michigan. The vital realities of Buddhist community and the overt similarities of her Christian practice to the disciplined Buddhist contemplation

and prayer offered life and sustenance, leading her to recognize her deepest Christian commitments embodied in ancient Buddhist forms that were new to her. Ziemke concludes by affirming the subsuming of her Christian identity within a Buddhist frame.

In "Rumi and Haji Bektash Veli as Mediating Leaders in the Islamization of Anatolia 1100 c.e.-1350 c.e." **Kenneth Sawyer** explains how the transition from Christian Asia Minor to Islamic Anatolia was marked by several steps and stages, each presenting complex interpretive issues for historians. The Islamization of these territories of what is now modern-day Turkey answered the devolution of Byzantine power and the decline of Christian hegemony. The Battle of Manzikert in 1071 resulted in a steady flow of Muslim tradesmen, warriors, and holy men into Christian cultural spaces. Some Muslims served as interpreters and intermediaries of Islam, providing a broad and welcoming place for converts and those in lingering transit from one community to another. Mediating figures like Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī (known in the west as Rumi) (1207-1273) and Haji Bektash Veli (1209-1271) formed very different religious communities, though each was sufficiently tolerant of diverse practice as to encourage affiliation by non-Muslims. Rumi's deeply rooted Sunni identity was expressed in a broadening Sufi recognition of God's loving presence throughout creation. His invitation toward depth prepared communities to be receptive to more precise orthodoxies in later projects of "Sunnification." Haji Bektash Veli flourished within a vibrant folk tradition generally uninterested in orthodox ways. These, and other, mediating forms of Islam were crucial components of this process of Islamization.

We are pleased to publish a translation by **Dean M. Apel** of an essay by **Kjell Söderberg** titled "Carl Olof Rosenius and Swedish Emigration to America." Carl Olof Rosenius grew up in an environment with early and positive contact with English Methodist mission. Starting already in 1840, he had close cooperation with two of the most important representatives from English-American mission organizations whose contributions were decisive for the mass emigration from Sweden to America starting in 1846. Through his writings, above all the periodical *Pietisten*, he became the central figure of the nineteenth century Swedish revival. Thus, Rosenius became a deep well of inspiration for the pioneer priests who, in the footsteps of the first mass emigration, led large emigrant groups from different parts of Sweden and thus contributed to further emigration. Among other things, these pioneer priests established the Swedish Lutheran Augustana Synod with its Rosenius-inspired low church character. With his writings, Rosenius reached even beyond the Lutheran denominations in the Swedish-American settlements. His writings are still published and read in the United States.

"Some Ethical and Procedural Requirements for Research by Westerners among Indigenous People," by **Jim Harries** critiques the practice whereby research language and methodology designed in the West (first world) is applied to intercultural research of indigenous (majority world) contexts. Different contexts of the indigenous, of which case studies are given, require research

considerations not needed within the Western world. A focus on language and translation points to the need for research in indigenous contexts to be engaged by Western people using indigenous languages. The prominence of patron/client systems in indigenous communities disqualifies research by people who are or who are perceived to be powerful. Western researchers are encouraged to take a *vulnerable* stance, using indigenous resources and languages in their research relationships.

Christ and the church are central for Barth's conceptual and contextual theological understanding of Christian identity and vocation in his time, argues **David Thang Moe** in "The Identity and Vocation of Christians in the Theology of Karl Barth." Built on these two key themes, this essay first discusses Barth's understanding of the distinction between the Christian identity and others. Second, it examines Barth's threefold concept of faith, prayer, and obedience as the theological framework for Christian identity and vocation. Third, it looks at Barth's concept of Christian identity and vocation from a critical perspective and explores how and why Christian vocation and other human vocations should be related in the broader creational providence of God.

Much of the recorded data on the status of the church in the United States has pointed the same direction for a number of years—the church is in decline. As a result of this fact, it is necessary for the church in North America to make significant shifts in its ecclesial and missiological models in order to address contemporary realities. In "Three Innovations in American Christian Witness for the Coming Decade," **Jonah Fox** proposes that the church must: abandon Christendom power, adopt the holy ordinary, and engage in bold humility as an effective missiological path forward for the church in the United States.

Finally, we conclude the essays in this section with a review article by **Rohan Nelson** of *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse* (By Janet Pais. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1991. ISBN: 978-0-8091-3226-3. iii & 172 pages). **Nelson** identifies *Suffer the Children* as arguably the earliest major work belonging to the small theological movement known as Child Liberation Theology. After situating Pais' work in the context of changing societal attitudes toward child abuse, this article frames the book as a response to the works of Swiss psychologist Alice Miller. Following a chapter by chapter summary, Nelson contrasts Pais' theology with feminist theologies of the time and explores her uniquely high view of children. Until recently the book has received little recognition, thus consideration is given to the ongoing significance of Pais' questions.

The Focus essay for the January issue is **Karen L. Bloomquist's** reflection on "Seeing-Remembering-Connecting Crescendo at the Anniversary of Ordaining Women and in a Time of Political Crisis." Bloomquist argues that acts of seeing, remembering, and connecting have become crucial today, not only in light of fifty years of ordaining women in Lutheran churches in the U.S., but also in light of the inter-related crises and polarization occurring in our society.

These essays explicate a variety of theoretical and practical complexities of navigating interreligious and intercultural spaces, which the *Currents* staff hopes will stimulate our readers' reflections on their own experiences with these complex spaces.

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