On Intercultural Theology and the Future of Interreligious Dialogue: A View from Los Angeles, California

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I grew up in a mixed Japanese-German American family, and my ambiguous looks were a constant source of both fascination and revulsion. Strangers would stop me and say, “Excuse me, but what are you?” To be honest, I didn’t quite know; whatever it was, it knew it couldn’t have been good. I was told that I was unnatural and against God’s plan. Racial slurs were regularly hurled my way, most of which weren’t even remotely applicable. I longed for people at least to get their slurs “right,” but I didn’t even know what that would be. Being mixed meant that I didn’t quite fit in with either side of my family. I didn’t look like the German side of my family. But while I looked like my Japanese family, I didn’t feel like I belonged there either. I still remember the fiery public debates about mixed women competing in the Nisei Week Queen pageant in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles (see King-O’Riain 2006). My Japanese American grandmother would try to make me feel better by saying that people were just upset because mixed women were more beautiful than the “pure” Japanese women; that only made me think that Japanese (including my grandmother and mother, both of whom I look exactly like) could not be beautiful--and that my own Japaneseness was a problem.

While my mother converted to Catholicism after she met my father, much of her family was, and remained, Buddhist. This didn’t seem strange to me until we moved from Southern California to the Midwest of the United States (St. Louis, Missouri), and my twin brother and I began attending a mostly white Catholic parish school. I got the clear message that only Christians were saved (“Try talking to your grandparents about the love of Jesus!”) and that to be Christian was to be white (proper Catholic kids were named after saints, not ancestors, and brown girls like me were never chosen for the crowning of Mary in May). I could never be white enough or Catholic enough.

But my story is much more than a tired, simplistic trope of the “tragic mulatto.” My early years were full of ancestors, saints, home altars, and a rich spiritual life. When I visited family in Los Angeles, we’d attend various Buddhist rituals and festivals, and I was captivated by my
grandmother’s home altar. The continued relationship my family had with its ancestors was deeply fulfilling to me. I was so inspired by the notion of a spirit-family. After the death of a favorite uncle, I was comforted by his ongoing presence. More than any other aspect of Catholicism, the communion of saints made sense to me. I saw saints as my spiritual ancestors. I built my own home altar and made little offerings to my favorite family and chosen saints. Although I worried I wasn’t properly Catholic, I felt close to my ancestors and saints. The world of beyond would accept me, even if I did not feel so accepted here on earth. Even in the darkest moments, my ancestors were with me.

The conflict between my ethnicity, spirituality, and everyday life did, however, make me angry and rebellious. I came to believe those in authority clung to their power without any real insight or spiritual depth. I ran away at fifteen with a tattoo apprentice, not long after we had met. He was, of course, covered in tattoos and piercings. I was fascinated with how he’d remade his body. He saw himself as a monstrosity and celebrated that in himself. I wanted to be just like him, free and completely self-made. When I finally went home, I found another way of rebelling. I was born again and turned away both from my old life and from institutional religion. It was far easier to start a new life than to face my old one; in any case, faith was much easier without the chains of authority.

When I went to university, I traded one very white Catholic Midwestern place for another one (South Bend, Indiana). I had a great education for which I am eternally grateful. But I was truly miserable there. Racial tensions were quite visible and felt personally. One semester at the University of Notre Dame, I was given an option in a Peace Studies class to present at a campus conference rather than take a final exam. My friend and I jumped at the chance. We designed a survey to gauge undergraduate attitudes towards interracial relationships. We presented along with a group examining LGBTQ issues at Notre Dame. We shared a number of similar conclusions. Beyond broadly accepted assumptions and stereotypes, interracial and gay relationships were both (and separately) frequently characterized by university students as “unnatural” and “ungodly.” There it was again. Unnatural. Monstrous. Luckily, by then, I could appreciate my multiplicity and was able to see that I could be Japanese AND German, Christian AND Asian American, Catholic AND feminist.

This ability to be whole through the multiplicities (and monstrosities) is what Rita Nakashima Brock calls “interstitial integrity.” Interstices are
the spaces between things; and in the body, interstitial refers to particular organs and fibrous connective tissues. For Brock, this image—illustrative of how Asian American women (as well as anyone living between worlds) find themselves between worlds and yet claim that space in connective, flexible, and restorative ways—also communicates a renewed image of the church as the Body of Christ. She says, “That tissue is full of live cells that hold together and nourish many diverse body parts even as it is neither the parts nor separate from them. Interstitial integrity requires a flexibility and coordination that remembers the codes and responds to present conditions” (Brock 1996, 48). Brock uses the spatial, physical and bodily image of interstitial integrity to describe the experiences of the crossing of cultures and constructs from it a re-envisioned Body held together precisely by the in-between spaces.

I now celebrate my multiracial, multireligious “monstrosity” and teach a seminar at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) called “Zombies, God, and Empire,” a course that centers on the dynamic between religion, culture, and power (and emerges from my own identification with the monstrous). We trace zombies back to their African and African diasporic religious roots and then shift to assess the representation of zombies and Voodoo in Western literature, film, and scholarship. We see how Western scholarship and popular culture often legitimizes racial and religious claims of superiority, and often in subtle, intersectional ways. But we do not only deconstruct. Zombies push us to rethink what it means to be human and to face who the real monsters are. We also examine how zombies have served as profound indictments of the status quo and undermined unjust structures of domination. Indeed, some contemporary zombie narratives that use the themes of zombie infection make powerful social, ethical, and theological claims about building an authentic human community in a fallen world.

So what do zombies and my own religio-cultural multiplicity tell us about the relationship between intercultural theology and other disciplines and subjects? First, cultural dynamics are fundamentally entangled with religion. Any theological or religious study that does not take culture into account is incomplete. Second, these dynamics are inevitably multiple and interactive. Culture, like religion, is not a singular, bounded whole. It is rhizomatic, united in fundamental and endlessly multiple betweenness (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Theological and religious studies cannot simply attend to “culture” or “cultural context.” It must be intercultural, attending to the plurality of cultural interactions from within. Furthermore,
these dynamics are intersectional in nature. Sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, gender, age, and other social and cultural markers have interlocking and compounding relationships. Theological and religious studies therefore have to attend to the ways in which cultural dynamics intersect in exponentially complicated ways. Finally, issues of power are inescapable. Attending to (inter)culture in theological and religious studies requires us to take into account the ways in which religio-cultural dynamics are also dynamics of power.

I end with a case in point. My colleague, Michael McNaught (Loyola Marymount University), and I have noticed over our decade plus involvement in Los Angeles interreligious dialogues that the groups are getting older without bringing in substantive numbers of the next generation. As co-chair of the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue, I have tried to involve younger participants. This has worked with our annual events, but not with our smaller monthly dialogues. Michael, too, has noticed this in the Los Angeles Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue, as well as in other formal dialogues the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese sponsors. He and I therefore have undertaken a research project on the future of interreligious dialogue in Los Angeles.¹ In our first phase of the project, we assembled a small group of local scholars² and conducted a small on-line survey of local dialoguers, religious leaders, and graduate students in religion, ministry, and yoga (106 respondents).

Michael and I expected clear generational differences in the kinds of dialogues and interreligious encounters that respondents preferred, but, across age groups, respondents overall were most interested in interreligious theological exchange.³ In looking at gender and race/ethnicity, however,

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² The working group includes Susan Abraham (Loyola Marymount University), Brett Hoover (Loyola Marymount University), Zayn Kassam (Pomona College), Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook (Claremont School of Theology), and Bruce Phillips (Hebrew Union College and the University of Southern California). Many thanks are owed to this brilliant group for their great help and numerous insights.
³ The breakdown by age groups on highest interest in theological exchange is: 18–24 years old (50%); 25–39 years old (36%); 40-59 years old (28%); 60–74 years old (39%); and, 75 years or older (67%). Overall, respondents answered the question of the type of interreligious encounter most interesting to them
other types of interreligious encounters emerged as strong interests. For example, while 25% of female respondents prioritized theological exchange, another 25% listed themselves as most interested in interfaith spiritual practice and yet another 25% named joint social action. While only 33% of Black or African American respondents were most interested in theological exchange, 67% prioritized everyday living, hospitality, and cooperation. 29% of Asian respondents listed theological exchange as their highest interest; another 29% listed joint social action. To the working group, the small data set and limited scope of the survey did not yield real conclusions about these demographic groups. However, the survey was at least suggestive of the extent to which gender and race/ethnicity ought to be important considerations in planning future dialogues. Additionally, the prevalence of theological exchange in past formal interreligious dialogues around Los Angeles spoke to us of the privilege white men have had in the city’s past interreligious dialogues.

And, finally, our project can illustrate how power and privilege may implicate interreligious studies and can underscore why intercultural theology must be attentive to power dynamics. As we discussed the survey, as well as its implications for the present and future of dialogue in Los Angeles, several group members noticed disturbing gaps in the survey in terms of race and ethnicity. Only eight of the respondents self-identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, only seven identified as Asian, and only three self-identified as Black or African American. Not only do these low numbers limit the conclusions the group can make about the future of interreligious dialogue among people of color, they also are seriously out of line with the demographics of Los Angeles County. This raises the questions of whether the survey distribution was flawed and/or whether the survey is generally accurate but reflects a lack of racial and ethnic diversity among Los Angeles dialogue participants. If the second, which we think is definitely in play (though we also have identified ways to improve

4 In comparison, 52% of male respondents listed theological exchange as the type of interreligious encounter they were most interested in; 18% listed social action; and, only 6% listed interfaith spiritual practice.

5 In 2015, the population of Los Angeles County was reported as: 9.1% Black or African American alone; 48.4% Hispanic or Latino/a; 15% Asian alone. (“Quick Facts” 2015).
the distribution and construction of future surveys), we have to begin to understand the ways in which interreligious dialogues have privileged white, male dialoguers and excluded persons of color. Taking into account such dynamics, we can strategize more effectively for the future. In this first phase of our project, we have only scratched the surface. But our resolution is that, as we proceed, we will place intercultural questions front and center; only from this intersectional position do we have real hope for the future of interreligious dialogue in Los Angeles.

References


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