

# ECUMENICAL TRENDS

Vol 50 No 1 ■ Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute ■ January/February 2021

*A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021 We Must Begin With Love: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Unity Grounded in Justice

By Teresa Hord Owens

*Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the 'fight with fire' method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love – which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies – is the solution to the race problem.*

~Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

~John 13:34-35, NRSV

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

~John 15:5, NRSV

The work and words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., continue to be an important source of inspiration for people around the world. However, the power of his witness and his word are grounded in a deep theological commitment to the teaching of Jesus Christ, and moreover in a vision of how those teachings can be the foundation for nonviolence, racial and social justice, and the building of what King described as “the Beloved Community.”

*continued on page 2*

*The Rev. Teresa Hord Owens is the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). A Disciple since young adulthood, Hord Owens was Dean of Students at the University of Chicago Divinity School and pastor of First Christian Church of Downers Grove, IL, prior to her election. Her ministry and intellectual interests include the theology of reconciliation, cultural intelligence, developing inclusive and multi-cultural congregations, and the mentoring of youth and young adults.*

### ☪ IN THIS ISSUE ☪

#### Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021

#### We Must Begin With Love: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Unity Grounded in Justice

TERESA HORD OWENS.....1

#### A Baptist Comment on *Fratelli Tutti*

CURTIS W. FREEMAN.....4

#### An Anabaptist Comment on *Fratelli Tutti*

STEPHEN S. WEAVER.....6

#### Writing Difference, Reading the World: A Roundtable of Ecumenical/Interreligious Journal Editors on the History and Future of a Shifting Field

STEPHEN G. BROWN, NELLY VAN DOORN-HARDER, AARON HOLLANDER, TERRY REY, AND AXEL TAKÁCS.....8

#### Book Review

*Unity as Prophetic Witness*, by Michael Kinnamon  
JOSEPH D. SMALL.....25

Christians in particular must reclaim this theological and biblical understanding of Dr. King as an example of what it means to live the Gospel. We must begin with love.

For Christians, love is more than just an ethical principle; Jesus tells us it is the greatest commandment. We are to love God, and we are also to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus raises the bar, so to speak, in his final discourse in the gospel of John. He gives a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34). I am convicted by the magnitude of that commandment when I reflect on the magnitude of Jesus' own love. Indeed, Jesus' very presence among us is a reflection of God's limitless love, if we believe that Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine. To love one another as Jesus has loved is a tall order, indeed. But it is, says Jesus, the evidence that others will have that we are his disciples (John 13:35). If others are to be able to witness this love, it must be more than words, more than platitudes, more than empty expressions.

In John 15:5, Jesus tells his disciples that only if they "abide" in him, are rooted and grounded in his presence and example, will they be able to bear the fruits of love. And what are these fruits? Not, clearly, a promise always to like our neighbor or agree with our neighbor. The human condition guarantees that we will have conflict, not least because

we desire to identify with those who are most like us and join ourselves with them, making our similarity the basis for allegiance. If we abide in Jesus, however, we are rooting ourselves in something more powerful than these instincts. When Dr. King makes his wonderful case for abiding in love, and for nonviolence as the methodology that springs from love, it is not because that way is easy, but because it is the only way to bear the fruit of reconciliation and Beloved Community.

Love keeps us properly oriented as followers of Jesus insofar as it keeps us focused on our neighbor. This is more crucial than ever, because in today's polarized society, it is hard for many of us even to comprehend how those with whom we disagree can believe and act as they do. Some understand Christianity in ways that enmesh it with nationalism, not only privileging patriotism as a moral necessity but also naming particular forms of Christian dogma as the only suitable expressions of that patriotism. Others encounter the teachings of Christianity primarily as spiritual grounding for their existing stances on the social, cultural, or political issues that matter to them. When we are so focused on our own immediate needs or preferences, failing to see and understand how systemic violence continues to degrade our neighbor, we are not abiding in Jesus, and we are not loving as he loves. To imagine God's limitless love in action is to imagine a new world where Jesus' commandment to love one another can be realized and where our decisions are based on what will benefit us all.

The failure to abide in Jesus is seen also in widespread biblical illiteracy among Christians, and often in a lack of theological reflection on how what we say and do bears (authentic or hypocritical) witness to that commandment to love as Jesus as loved us. We focus more on what political parties and influential persons are saying than on what it would require of us to abide in Jesus' love and, from that grounded place, to make the choices necessary to build a world consistent with that love. That is why Christians must be grounded in the biblical and theological understanding of who Jesus is and how Jesus calls us to live. Jesus himself warns, "apart from me you can do nothing." Love must

*continued on page 3*

*The human condition guarantees that we will have conflict, not least because we desire to identify with those who are most like us and join ourselves with them, making our similarity the basis for allegiance. If we abide in Jesus, however, we are rooting ourselves in something more powerful than these instincts.*

---

#### **Ecumenical Trends**

EDITOR, Rev. James Loughran, SA ■ ASSOCIATE EDITOR, Dr. Aaron Hollander ■ Ecumenical Trends, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 1960, New York, NY 10115 ■ Business and Subscription Office, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333.

Manuscripts sent to the editor should be in either WordPerfect or Microsoft Word. Submit texts using the software above via e-mail to [ecutrends@geii.org](mailto:ecutrends@geii.org). *Ecumenical Trends* is published six times a year (bi-monthly) by Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute. *Ecumenical Trends* is a member of the Associated Church Press and the Catholic Press Association. This periodical is indexed in the Catholic Periodical and Literature Index (CPLI), a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, USA. email [atla@atla.com](mailto:atla@atla.com); website [www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com). Subscription Rates: Print and digital version, US Domestic \$30.00 USD/1 yr; \$55.00 USD/2 yrs. International \$42.00 USD/1 yr.; \$77.00 USD/2yrs. Digital version only: \$15.00/ 1 yr. Bulk rates are available upon request. Address for Subscriptions: Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333 (ISSN 0360 9073) Periodicals Postage Paid at Garrison, NY 10524 and additional Mailing Offices. Website: [www.geii.org](http://www.geii.org)

*We focus more on what political parties and influential persons are saying than on what it would require of us to abide in Jesus' love and, from that grounded place, to make the choices necessary to build a world consistent with that love.*


be a commitment to living in accordance with the value of our neighbor, not just a habit of speaking about this value. If we are abiding in Jesus, and he is in us, the decisions we make every day are guided by our neighbor's priority of place in our lives. Otherwise, we are not being accountable to the very essence of Jesus' teaching, and we will not have the spiritual resources necessary to build the Beloved Community in our world.

Dr. King's dream of the Beloved Community is a reflection of his own deep abiding in Jesus, rooting himself in both the value of love and, more importantly, the way of love. The depth of Dr. King's commitment to this way of love in order to bring reconciliation was not fully understood in his own lifetime, and it is not well understood even now. We know from the history of the world (especially in places such as South Africa and indeed the United States) that until we tell the truth about injustice, name our complicity in it, and recognize the societal costs that must be paid to repair it, reconciliation cannot happen. Even when we pass laws to inhibit oppressive actions, we will still not have dealt with the state of our hearts and minds. Racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia are real and evident throughout our society. If we as Christians are offering a way forward, it must be the road of love. We must understand that love fuels not just mercy but justice, for only justice ensures that our neighbor is valued no less than we value ourselves. When we abide in Jesus' love, we have the spiritual resources, those fruits of the Spirit, that equip us not only to show compassion but also and especially to demand that justice prevails, doing the hard work of dismantling forms of oppression that harm our neighbor.

As we pray for unity, we must remember that we will not be able to live in unity without grounding what we believe, who we are, and how we engage the world in that commandment to abide in this limitless love of God, revealed through Jesus Christ, to which Jesus commands us to be faithful. Unity is a gift from God, yes, but it requires that we live into it, making space in ourselves for it. Unity is

not a state of total agreement, but rather a state of honoring all that we each are. If we believe in God, we must acknowledge God's limitless love for all beings, a love that defines who God is. We as creatures of this loving God cannot limit or define exceptions to that love without limiting God – which we simply have no right or authority to do. And if we are truly abiding in the teachings and the love of Jesus Christ, we will understand that there are some roads that love simply cannot take. Love cannot take the road of racism, misogyny, homophobia, or xenophobia. Love cannot turn a blind eye to poverty, and it demands that we take the road where all have enough and can flourish as our Creator intended. Love must be taken seriously, beyond platitudes, insisting that our work together is dedicated to cultivating its fruit.

*When we abide in Jesus' love, we have the spiritual resources, those fruits of the Spirit, that equip us not only to show compassion but also and especially to demand that justice prevails, doing the hard work of dismantling forms of oppression that harm our neighbor.*

Dr. King spoke to us from a place of deep abiding, a place that he understood must ground all that Christians believe and do. The path of nonviolence, the work of reconciliation, the commitment to love – all begin with a deep commitment to understanding and obeying this commandment from Jesus. Such commitment will require that we continually ask ourselves how we are valuing one another in ways that enable our society and its institutions also to value each one of us in tangible ways. Such commitment is the fruit of our abiding in Jesus. This commitment will ground us in the limitless love of God as reflected in Jesus, and it will hold us accountable to the work of justice and reconciliation as we build the Beloved Community. Without this commitment, without our abiding, we can do nothing, and we cannot bear the fruit that Jesus calls us to bear. But when we abide in love, we are equipped to walk the often-bumpy road that leads us to truth, reconciliation, healing, and justice. 



# A Baptist Comment on *Fratelli Tutti*

By Curtis W. Freeman

About half of evangelical Protestants and roughly two thirds of non-evangelical Protestants in the U.S. view Pope Francis favorably. My guess is that most Baptists probably fall somewhere in between. This generally positive perception can more likely be traced to the pope's affable public personality than to what he has actually said or written. This oversight is unfortunate because Pope Francis is an excellent preacher, a great communicator, and a gifted theologian.

Yet Baptists may still wonder why they should read the pope's latest encyclical, which borrows its title from the familiar admonition of Saint Francis that those in his order were "all brothers and sisters." These terms of familiar address are common in Baptist congregations. But Pope Francis makes it clear that these words extend to the widest possible range of social friendships, crossing the boundaries of race, class, and creed by recognizing all people as part of a single human family. We are all sons and daughters of Earth. We are all brothers and sisters. Everyone. That is who this letter is written to, and that is why Baptists should read it.

Those who venture into the text will immediately be struck by the dark vision of the storms that threaten to destroy the fragile ties that bind humanity together. The horizon is filled with clouds of consumerist individualism that degrade historical consciousness, a throwaway culture that devalues human life (especially the weak and vulnerable), and the debilitating forces of globalization, technocracy, and pandemic that deceive us into believing that the only way to survive is for to care for ourselves alone. Following this way leads to xenophobic thinking that denies basic human dignity to those who live outside our national borders. It tempts us follow the illusions of communication devoid of community, information without wisdom, and consumption over creation.

Having set up the problem, Pope Francis turns our attention to Scripture, and in particular to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), which provides a Gospel prescription for reweaving the world's social fabric by loving God and neighbor. It teaches us that we cannot be indifferent to the pain around us. It challenges us to get out of our isolation and to enter into solidarity with those who suffer. Jesus makes it plain that community can only be rebuilt by identifying with the vulnerability of others, by rejecting a society of exclusion, and by acting as a neighbor. He tells us that there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who love and those who refuse to love.

In many Baptist churches, this is where the sermon might end, and the preacher would begin the altar call. But Pope Francis is just starting to preach. He has yet to explain

what the parable means for us today. His first challenge is to the notion of private property as a natural right as well as to the free market economy as a good that supersedes the needs of people and especially the dignity of the poor. He reminds us that, according to the Gospel, "the right to private property is always accompanied by the primary and prior principle of the subordination of all private property to the universal destination of the earth's goods, and thus the right of all to their use" (§123).

Next, the pope points our gaze to the complex challenge of immigration: if we see through the lens of the Good Samaritan, we cannot ignore the reality that the immigrant is our neighbor. The parable forbids us to close our borders to the world outside, and commends us to "welcome, protect, promote, and integrate" immigrants into our common life (§124). Our moral vision cannot allow immigrants to remain outcasts in society, but must instead make room, especially for the most vulnerable refugees fleeing violence and danger, ensuring their safety and integrating them into society. And among those already participating in and contributing to our society, we must provide and protect a path to full citizenship.

At this point, some Baptist readers may protest that the Pope has shifted the subject from religion to politics, which is precisely where the argument turns. He contends that the world needs "a better kind of politics." Not a politics of Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals, but a politics of charity. Following the Samaritan way means rejecting both political populism that exploits the vulnerable for its own purposes and political liberalism that serves the economic interests of the powerful (§155). The politics proclaimed by the church as needful for the world is one that not only recognizes but concretely treats all as brothers and sisters. It is a politics of charity that seeks the good of all people. Charity cannot, then, be limited to purely private acts. Helping an elderly person across a bridge is an act of personal charity, but building a bridge for all to cross is an

*continued on page 5*

***The Rev. Dr. Curtis W. Freeman is Research Professor of Theology and Director of the Baptist House of Studies at Duke Divinity School. He is an ordained Baptist minister, is a member of the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Christian Unity, and was a participant in the second phase of the Baptist-Catholic international bilateral dialogue (2006-2010). He is the author of several books, including Contesting Catholicity: A Theology for Other Baptists (2014), Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity (2017), and Pilgrim Letters: Instruction in the Basic Teaching of Christ (2021).***

act of political charity. Politicians who seek to practice the politics of charity must learn to sow seeds of goodness rather than discord and division. They must ask, “How much love did I put into my work?” (§197).

*Following the Samaritan way means rejecting both political populism that exploits the vulnerable for its own purposes and political liberalism that serves the economic interests of the powerful (§155).*

The sticky question underneath much of this political reflection is the fact that we live in a pluralistic world where a shared belief structure is no longer the default position of the whole society. All beliefs are contested and contestable. For those committed to the Samaritan way through this present reality, the only path forward is dialogue, which cannot be done by merely exchanging opinions on social networks. It can only happen when real people in real time engage in conversation with one another, with the aim of pursuing social interests, consensus, and truth. The new, repaired social reality Francis imagines is like a soccer ball, a polyhedron, “where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations” (§215). He urges us to continue engaging one another by seeking points of contact, building bridges, and planning projects that include everyone.


The penultimate chapter explores paths of healing the wounds of the past through renewed encounter. Taking the Samaritan way means pursuing peace by seeking reconciliation and forgiveness. For those who walk in this path there is no room for war or the death penalty. Both are false solutions and failures of the imagination. In simple and sweeping prose, Pope Francis dismisses the possibility of a just war because the risks will always outweigh the supposed benefits (§258). Instead, he proposes taking the money spent on military expenditures and setting it aside to establish a global fund for the alleviation of hunger and the development of infrastructure (§262). Similarly, he denounces the death penalty as a moral failure that denies the unalienable human dignity of the executed, and he argues that those committed to the Samaritan way must advocate for its abolition worldwide (§263).

The final chapter appeals to people of all religious traditions to recognize the inherent dignity of all people, who bear the visible image of the invisible God. In words that resonate with the historic Baptist convictions, Pope Francis

warns of the great suffering caused by denying the freedom of conscience and religious liberty (§274). Moreover, he argues that Christians must also protect and promote the religious freedom of non-Christians, especially where they are minorities (§279). Christians and non-Christians must learn to converse and act for the common good and in service of our common humanity. Pope Francis concludes with a call to build peace “by opening paths of dialogue and not by constructing new walls” (§284).

How might Baptists receive this strong appeal from their Brother Francis? It depends on which Baptists we are talking about. The admonition to follow the Samaritan way and the politics of charity when it comes to private property, market capitalism, foreign immigration, just war, capital punishment, and interreligious dialogue will likely be met with strong resistance by those who openly identify their faith with the politics of Wall Street, extravagant wealth, exceptional nationalism, closed borders, state militarism, capital punishment, and religious exclusivism. They will likely perceive this text to be the misguided ramblings of a sincere socialist or a bleeding-heart liberal. It will simply confirm their unchallenged assumption that the Roman Curia is in cahoots with the Media, Globalists, Socialists, Liberals, and/or Infidels who conspire to propagate a false gospel that stands diametrically opposed to biblical Christianity. If they were to read *Fratelli Tutti*, I suspect it would simply validate their suspicions.

*How might Baptists receive this strong appeal from their Brother Francis? It depends on which Baptists we are talking about.*

But what about Other Baptists – those who do not see themselves as schismatic sectarians, but rather understand their dissent as that of an alternative community of contested convictions within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church? How might they read this invitation to see themselves as brothers and sisters sharing a common humanity with all sons and daughters of Earth? I imagine that they might be happily surprised to find such a simple and clear statement of what Christian faithfulness looks like today. Love loudly and live boldly. Make friendships and be good neighbors. Protect the weak and vulnerable. Welcome the stranger and share with others. Pursue peace and practice charity. Give liberally and forgive freely. And above all do not lose faith or give up hope. I think they would probably give Brother Francis an open invitation to be the guest preacher in their church any Sunday. 

# An Anabaptist Comment on *Fratelli Tutti*

By Stephen S. Weaver

John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, famously put to music, was my soul's first impulse upon my initial review of Pope Francis's *Fratelli Tutti*:

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
forgive our foolish ways!

The poem's fifth stanza, especially, came to mind:

Breathe through the heats of our desire thy  
coolness and thy balm  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire  
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm!

If the robust, ascendant modernity of 1872 provoked the poet to write these words, what would he say today? His counsel might very well echo that of Francis.

For all of our edginess, pressing forward with our elbows out, this age does not appreciate the prophetic office in the bishop of Rome. Bishops, and especially this one, are to be pastoral in words and deeds, it is thought – even if, as in the case of St. John Paul II, the words and deeds were wonderfully subversive. Pope Francis, on the other hand, seems determined to stick his finger in the eye of friend and foe alike. We are not sure we like this. One imagines some cardinal somewhere leaning on an aide, “Can you get him to tone it down a little?”

However, if Francis's office means anything in my limited understanding of it, he is to address how things ought to be in the Church and in the world. (We radical reformers have no remotely equivalent platform. Merely attempting statements or declarations from our narrow slice of Christianity – spare us...) I believe it was Chesterton in the modern age who framed how the Church being the Church determines the lineaments of the world, though there are many echoes of this same sentiment down through history. And this determination is what we find in *Fratelli Tutti* – although, what is more remarkable, Francis is not saying anything truly new in his encyclical. It may sound “new” to the extent that we have forgotten our charter and history. We are far from the rhumb line, bearing down on the reef, in the many crucial human and global matters that he addresses.

We all come from somewhere. I come from a church tradition that values Sermon on the Mount authenticity and realized eschatology. One of the charges levied against us over the centuries was that our posture of discipleship was not practical. Christendom needed propping up – Anabaptists were perceived as sappers and bomb throwers. “How will you defend against the Turk?” was later replaced by “How will you defend against the Hun?” In my limited opinion, we never had a satisfactory answer to that charge, which is okay. The Church is to be the Church. Let the world

worry about the menace *du jour*. Pope Francis seems to take a similar tone in his encyclicals, and especially this one, a summation of all that he wrote before. I can hear Catholic politicians in the West say, with some degree of exasperation, “But what are your recommended policies?!” Francis, it would seem, would reply, “that is for you to cypher.”

*Francis is not saying anything truly new in his encyclical. It may sound “new” to the extent that we have forgotten our charter and history.*

I, for one, find *Fratelli Tutti* to be a breath of fresh air. Anabaptist realized eschatology would refer Francis' diagnosis of the corrupt but alluring globalized economy to St. John's apocalyptic image in Revelation 17:1-2 (alluding to Psalm 75:8):

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.’

If this is not a picture of the dominant West, I don't know what is. Evangelicals and Charismatics in the USA believe that the Revelation of St. John is a show to be watched. Francis, by implication in this encyclical, reminds us that we are deeply implicated with Babylon, and she is intoxicating to the point of worship. (See St. John's reaction in Revelation 17:6: *When I saw her, I was greatly amazed* – the term here is *ethaumasa*, suggesting the wonder appropriate in the presence of a divine being.) We have drunk deeply of Babylon's assumptions, technology, and ways of being, not only to the point of rank, biblical unfaithfulness,

*continued on page 7*

*The Rev. Stephen S. Weaver is a bishop and assistant moderator in Lancaster Mennonite Conference, a fellowship of Anabaptist churches. He and his wife Ann (and their two daughters) have served and lived in inner-city Philadelphia and in South America. He intercedes for, loves and attempts to serve the pilgrim Church and her stewards in the world. His favorite saint is Teresa of Avila, of whom he considers himself “her wayward child.”*



*We have drunk deeply of Babylon's assumptions, technology, and ways of being, not only to the point of rank, biblical unfaithfulness, but also effecting the destruction of the commonweal of the planet. The Pope, in this respect, might not be strong enough with his language.*


but also effecting the destruction of the commonweal of the planet. The Pope, in this respect, might not be strong enough with his language.

There are those voices who will charge that Francis is playing into the hands of environmentalists, secular or otherwise. They will charge that fraternal language on this scale plays into the hands of socialism. They will wring their hands over what the practical implications of this might mean for the global economy. But such voices betray their idolatry and reductionist lenses. Let us remember that socialism in all its variants is but a Christian heresy. Christianity came first, not the other way around. Contemporary environmentalism is but a shadow of the first great commission of Genesis 1:28-31a, shorn of its Giver and his image. And the global economy? Well, I'll let Jesus address the ethics of our global economy. Francis does no more than point us to our true north.

Francis roots his encyclical in Luke 10. He could not do better. "Who is my neighbor?" are the weasel-words of the West in the twentieth century. Love your neighbor as yourself? No problem – at least *they* are not my neighbor! Exceptions are made to the point of denying our faith. But the "Samaritans" among us are showing the way, making prophetic appeals that rightly disturb those who are more inclined to trust our popular "order of preachers" (who purchase airtime or are celebrity preachers). Prophetic voices, including Francis', are all too easy to write off or dismiss in the worst *ad hominem* manner. But we dare not do so. With what can only be labeled as extraordinary restraint (he cites it only parenthetically), the Pope hints at Jesus's words in Matthew 25:45-46: *Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not [care for] one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*

The philosopher Arthur Holmes stated, in his book of the same title, that "All truth is God's truth." Francis appeals to a consensus about all of these things that is higher than the prevailing philosophies and vision of the West. For this, he is to be commended. *Metanoia* (repentance and forgiveness), his practical response to our global social dysfunction, can only flow from Love and Truth. Else, we are cast upon the endless cycles of the aggrieved and their retribution. To our contemporaries, the pope's orientation can only appear to be weakness. Being wed to power so long in the West, we struggle to comprehend anything other than power's temporal solutions and benefits. Yet repentance and forgiveness are able to name, document, and remember in their clemency. Repentance and forgiveness call us to a studied silence among the rubble of our deeds. Have we lost the capacity for charity and magnanimity evidenced by a Nuremberg or a Truth and Reconciliation Commission? (Some might trip over the sentences handed down at Nuremberg – let's not miss the forest for the trees.)

*To our contemporaries, the pope's orientation can only appear to be weakness. Being wed to power so long in the West, we struggle to comprehend anything other than power's temporal solutions and benefits.*

Pope Francis closes with prayer, the posture of the marginalized Church of the first centuries, and, I might add, the posture and clarion call to the Church of St. John in his Apocalypse. This is good because it returns the Church to her true militancy and power. In 1935, Stalin reportedly said, "The pope, how many divisions does he have?" In the eschaton, it matters not. Things are not as they seem. Pope Francis is calling us higher. Only those committed to the petty divisions among us, which he correctly admonishes, would reject his counsel. All of us who name Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords ought to see the here-and-not-yet new heavens and new earth in his words. If we ignore them, we do so to our eternal peril. Let us at least unite around this counsel if we have any hope for it being perceived by the world. In his prescience, Jesus said that this is how the world would finally perceive that we all share an ontological oneness with God. 

# Writing Difference, Reading the World: A Roundtable of Ecumenical/Interreligious Journal Editors on the History and Future of a Shifting Field

---

By Stephen G. Brown, Nelly van Doorn-Harder, Aaron Hollander, Terry Rey, and Axel Takács

An increasingly urgent need in interreligious studies and the interfaith movement alike has been to reckon with the power and provenance of divisions *within* the traditions under consideration. At the same time, ecumenical efforts and analyses (in Christianity particularly but not exclusively) do not exist and have never existed except contextualized by multireligious societies and global horizons. And both “interreligious” and “ecumenical” affairs, as conventionally understood, are inextricable from political – as well as psychological, cultural, economic, and ecological – dynamics that cannot be reduced to religious interpretations. The several journals that seek to coordinate and disseminate scholarship dealing with the dynamics of religious difference on common ground (including *Ecumenical Trends*) have each approached these entanglements differently, shaping distinct (though intersecting) conversations in which the relations between ecumenical, interreligious, and political affairs are variously delineated.

In celebration of the 50th year of the publication of *Ecumenical Trends*, we offer the following discussion look-

ing both behind and ahead. The roundtable began as an online session at the 2020 European Academy of Religion, organized by Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute and co-hosted by the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network. It has since been transcribed, distilled, and collaboratively edited by the participants, yielding a more polished and unified effort by the editors of diverse English-language ecumenical/interreligious journals to consider how their respective scholarly vehicles seek to make sense of the unstable borders and frontiers in the field, as well as how these journals deal (and should deal) with matters of public urgency in which religious difference and division are implicated. Ultimately, the dialogue below represents a collaborative effort to take stock of how our journals, each of them in a different institutional context and position on the ecumenical landscape, contribute to shaping a shifting field and serving a public whose religious differences are always being negotiated on common and contested ground.

*continued on page 9*

---

*Dr. Stephen G. Brown has been editor of the Ecumenical Review since 2017. He was previously managing editor of Ecumenical News International. Originally from Britain, he studied theology in Cambridge and East Berlin, and wrote his PhD on the role of the churches in East Germany leading up to the peaceful revolution of 1989.*

*Dr. Pieterella (Nelly) van Doorn-Harder is co-founder and the co-editor of Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology (ISIT). She teaches religious studies at Wake Forest University, NC, and also holds a Professorship in Islamic Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her research straddles the areas of Islam in Southeast Asia and Middle Eastern Christianity, with foci in gender, spirituality, leadership, and freedom of religion.*

*Dr. Aaron Hollander is Associate Director of Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute and Associate Editor of Ecumenical Trends, currently serving also as Vice President of the North American Academy of Ecumenists. He is a scholar of ecumenical theology and lived religion, whose research foci include the dynamics of interreligious conflict and coexistence, the aesthetic textures and political functions of holiness, and the circulation of theological understanding beyond explicitly religious settings.*

*Dr. Terry Rey is the editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies. Formerly a Professor of Sociology of Religion at the Université d'État d'Haïti, Terry Rey is now Professor of Religion at Temple University. He is the author of dozens of scholarly articles, chapters, and reviews, and author or editor of seven books, including Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy (Routledge 2007) and The Priest and the Prophetess: Abbé Ouyvière, Romaine Rivière, and the Revolutionary Atlantic World (Oxford 2017).*

*Dr. Axel Takács is the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Interreligious Studies and an assistant professor at Seton Hall University. His research interests include interreligious theology, Islamic studies, poetics and theories of the imagination and the imaginary, and constructive Catholic theology.*



Following brief discussions of the history and priorities of each journal, the roundtable continues with open-ended discussion of the issues at hand, again collaboratively edited to produce a document of genuine “ecumenical” quality in reflecting from several divergent perspectives on the shared future of our work between the academy, religious institutions, and the public sphere.

**Stephen G. Brown, for *The Ecumenical Review*:** *The Ecumenical Review* is the oldest of the ecumenical journals under consideration here, with its first issue appearing in the week before the founding Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in Amsterdam in 1948. The identity of *The Ecumenical Review* has, of course, been closely connected to the World Council of Churches (which today brings together about 350 churches from mainly Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and independent backgrounds), but its history goes back even further back – to the 1930s and the discussions to bring the two great ecumenical movements of the time (Faith & Order and Life & Work) together.

The establishment of an authoritative ecumenical journal was identified as one of the seven tasks for the projected World Council of Churches, even in advance of the Council’s founding. That task was fulfilled, and over its more than 70-year existence *The Ecumenical Review* has been published by the World Council of Churches as a forum for debate and discussion about burning ecumenical issues. It has been a chronicler of the activities of the World Council of Churches, but also has sought to balance the WCC’s ecumenical vision and reality with activities and scholarship taking place beyond the institutional boundaries of the WCC. In other words, although it has been and continues to be published by the WCC, the *Ecumenical Review* is not the Council’s official organ.

In his introduction to the first issue in 1948, Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft (the first General Secretary of the WCC and the founding editor of *The Ecumenical Review*) spoke of the journal being part of the “ecumenical conversation” between churches, bringing them together in true fellowship. Yet, at the same time, this ecumenical conversation needed to reflect a struggle for that truth that transcends all churches and human beings. Visser ’t Hooft’s editorial articulated a hope that readers would not only tolerate but welcome “uncompromising frankness of speech” around difficult and controversial matters. Without this, he said, “how can we come closer to each other?”

And so, one of the key tasks for the *Review* in the first years of its existence was to widen the ecumenical conversation beyond the members of the WCC, to include in the conversation those churches that were not part of the institutional ecumenical movement. For example, even if there was at the time no institutional relationship between

the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, the pages of the *Review* were open to Catholic scholars (such as Yves Congar); so too, the Russian Orthodox Church was not then a WCC member, yet the *Review* offered ongoing assessment of ecclesiological developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In a way, although there were very few (if any) endowed chairs in ecumenical studies or ecumenical theology, *The Ecumenical Review* offered itself as what we might today want to call a virtual department of ecumenical studies and theology. For example, during the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, the *Review* undertook a rigorous and much-valued commentary on the Council’s developments.

So much for the beginnings of *The Ecumenical Review*. But where would we locate it today? I would say that the journal has essentially four main functions. First, it continues to articulate the ecumenical vision or visions, and it offers a space for debate and discussion on the challenges facing the ecumenical movement. Second, it strives to be an academic resource and to stimulate research, including interaction between theological or ecclesiological discourse and the secular scholarly disciplines. Third, the *Review* maintains the ecumenical memory and history, serving as a trusted repository of that history. Finally, and not least importantly, it supports ecumenical education and formation, helping to nurture each new generation of ecumenical scholars and researchers.

In this light, we can consider how *The Ecumenical Review* engages with interreligious issues and with what might be called extra-religious issues (or “non-theological” issues). Maybe this is too simple an answer, but the World Council of Churches is concerned with the whole of the *oikoumenē*, the whole inhabited world, which cannot be tidily portioned up into Christian and non-Christian, religious and secular. I already mentioned how the *Review* was the product of efforts to bring together the movements of Life & Work (which dealt with issues of society and how churches needed to work together to deal with the realities of violence, injustice, and eventually ecological disintegrity) and Faith & Order (which sought to find ways to overcome the confessional differences between churches by way of theological and ecclesiological discussions). Accordingly, the focus of the *Review* has always been wider than doctrinal or theological considerations. While for some interpreters the focus of discussions about ecumenism and the ecumenical movement is fixed very firmly on explicit efforts for inter-confessional unity, neither the WCC nor *The Ecumenical Review* has ever considered its mandate to be limited in this way.

At the same time, there have been different priorities in the foreground at different phases in the history of the

*continued on page 10*

*While for some interpreters the focus of discussions about ecumenism and the ecumenical movement is fixed very firmly on explicit efforts for inter-confessional unity, neither the WCC nor The Ecumenical Review has ever considered its mandate to be limited in this way.*

*Review.* In the 1950s and early 1960s, for instance, there was a strong focus on what would be needed to open up the ecumenical movement from being a largely Protestant endeavor to something more diverse, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Later, in the late 1960s and the 1970s, it became more of a forum for conversation among the WCC's member churches with particular emphasis on issues related to church and society, not least the struggle against racism.

It is also important to point out that *The Ecumenical Review* is only one of three journals produced by the World Council of Churches, alongside the *International Review of Mission* (whose history goes back even further, being founded in 1912, two years after the great international missionary conference in Edinburgh), and *Current Dialogue* (which this year celebrates its 40th anniversary and was one of the first journals, if not the first, to deal primarily with interfaith or interreligious relations). This does not mean, of course, that *The Ecumenical Review* ignores issues of mission or interreligious relations; it is a matter of relative emphasis, as the three journals are intended to complement each other.

So it is not the case that *The Ecumenical Review* is moving in a direction that many departments of ecumenical studies have moved, that is, by bringing interreligious issues more to the core of its purview, or by situating ecumenical issues as a subset or sidecar to reflection on interreligious challenges. And yet, again, the focus of the *Review* does need to reflect the realities of the *oikoumenē*: if "ecumenical" signifies the real conditions of our one, inhabited earth, it must include understanding of and concern for interreligious relations. We have indeed expanded our vision over the years, not by prioritizing interfaith relationships as such (*Current Dialogue* already does this well), but by charting the interfaces of the church and the Christian ecumenical movement with wider issues in society (including, but not limited to, the ways that these issues animate other religious communities). For example, recent issues have dealt with

the theology of the Oikos, with the created world and environmental sustainability, with global manifestations of racism, and with the ecumenical challenges of speaking truth in a digital age. And this past year, an issue focused on the power of Christ's love in the midst of pandemic: what are the fundamental issues that COVID-19 has raised for theology, for churches in their life and worship, and for the wider society?

Finally, in terms of the audience of *The Ecumenical Review*, I think we could speak in terms of three overlapping circles. The first is that of theologians and scholars, what we might call the academic audience. The second would be the circle of ecumenical leaders and staff in World Council of Churches member churches as well as in other churches and agencies worldwide who value the insights appearing in the journal. And the third, widest circle is that of the ecumenical public: ecumenically or globally minded Christians, or indeed those of any tradition who wish to understand the common and contested life of the churches. Looking back over the last 70 years or so, we can see a shift in the journal's focus in terms of those three publics or three core audiences: a shift from the wider ecumenical public, which I think was the primary audience in the early days when the conversation had to be carried on beyond the institutional boundaries of any church, through to the 1960s and 1970s, when member church staff and leadership were taking greater responsibility for interchurch affairs, now to the present with greater prominence on the academic core of theologians and scholars, while at the same time offering the *Review* (like the other WCC journals) as a resource for ecumenical fellowship. Throughout this history, an animated dialogue has continued between ecumenical theology and wider conversations in the academic world, across a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches to urgent contemporary problems.

**Terry Rey, for the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*:** Like *The Ecumenical Review*, with its birth coinciding with a major turning point in twentieth-century ecumenical history, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (JES) was founded by two Roman Catholic theologians (Leonard and Arlene Swidler) in 1964 – in the midst of and directly inspired by the Second Vatican Council. At the time, Len Swidler was on the faculty at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. He held a doctorate in history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, as well as a licentiate in Catholic theology from University of Tübingen. While in Germany, he had befriended and worked closely with Professor Hans Küng, who was one of the most liberal and ecumenically minded theologians involved in the Council and, of course, one of the giants of Catholic theology in our time. This background inspired Len in founding the journal along with his wife Arlene, who

*continued on page 11*

was an acclaimed author and theologian in her own right (working especially on women in the Catholic Church) and who became the managing editor of JES. In 1966, Len took a faculty position at Temple University in Philadelphia, and JES came with him; it remains housed at Temple today.

The journal was never only about ecumenism in the sense of inter-Christian conversations, as even in its earliest days it served as a platform for Jewish-Christian dialogue. Moreover, this interfaith horizon of the journal found a welcome place and supportive intellectual home at Temple because the Department of Religion was launched – after the university’s School of Theology departed in 1958 – with an orientation in line with Max Mueller’s famous assertion that if you know only one religion, you do not know any at all. Swidler was one of the first members of this department, combining Catholic thought with interreligious dialogue.

By the end of the 1970s, the department counted 22 full-time tenure track faculty members and 175 doctoral students, although things changed considerably in the last two decades of the twentieth century: the department shrank in size and, like most major programs in the field, it abandoned the “world religions” model with its perennialist implications. But the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* remained housed here, and it stayed consistent with its originating ethos of interfaith studies being completely integrated with scholarship on ecumenism (as conventionally understood). The journal also internationalized, with some of the world’s leading theologians and humanists serving on its editorial board over the years.

All the same, while it is generally accepted to be forward-thinking in terms of interfaith dialogue, the journal has been slow to accommodate more theoretically challenging approaches stemming from postmodern and post-

colonial thought, which have had a resounding impact on religious studies more broadly. Such claims as J. Z. Smith’s that “religion” itself is a scholarly invention, for instance, do not seem to have shaped the contributions JES receives and publishes.

For much of the journal’s history, it remained beholden to the world religions model that prevailed in the academy of religion. Until last year, there was not a single article published in JES on Baha’i, and it is only this year that the very first article on Orisha devotion is appearing – this despite the fact that in our world today there are over 100 million people practicing some variant of traditional religion. And the world religions model has had other consequences for how the journal has framed the conversation taking place in its pages. The different terms with which we framed this conversation – ecumenical, interreligious, political or public (that is, including religious but not only religious) – are certainly worth distinguishing, but from my perspective as an Africanist and a Caribbeanist, many distinctions we draw as scholars and religious leaders (between “religions” and “ideologies,” or between “folk” and “world” religions) are situated in colonialist paradigms and forms of privilege that emerged out of a history of domination. This would signal to me the urgency for ecumenical and interreligious studies to do some serious self-reflection on the implications of such postcolonial insights.

In the three years that I have been tracking such things, the readership at JES seems to be in decline, and the number of articles submitted for our consideration is also declining. But this does not in itself indicate that the priorities of our readers are elsewhere. The proliferation of academic journals – some of which are for-profit, deceitful, and predatory – is surely part of the situation, as is the Open Access movement, which is gaining steam (and which, I would say, is a good thing on the whole). But this also poses challenges for JES, as I would imagine for all academic journals, especially ones that are underfunded and understaffed institutionally.

I certainly don’t mean to sound pessimistic. Excellent scholarship is still being published in each issue of JES, and the journal is more diverse than ever, not just in terms of the subject matter, but also in terms of the identities of the authors who submit articles and the reviewers who applied on them over the last few years. For example, I would estimate that nearly 20% of our submissions have come from West Africa, especially Nigeria. This leads me to conclude with a word of caution for the field and the journals in particular: it is no fault of our own that English is the hypnotic language of academia, but as submissions are increasingly sent from non-English-speaking parts of the world, our journal is facing a mountain of challenges on the editing

*All the same, while it is generally accepted to be forward-thinking in terms of interfaith dialogue, the journal has been slow to accommodate more theoretically challenging approaches stemming from postmodern and postcolonial thought, which have had a resounding impact on religious studies more broadly.*

*continued on page 12*



front. That could be partially my own fault for not wishing to reject an article simply because the English is faulty – this strikes me as unfair, especially when the submission is coming from a developing nation. For our journal to remain relevant on more than just an academic level, I believe it needs to invest more time and energy and hopefully funds into supporting such scholars in publishing their work, and not solely in English. But here again we are thrown against the harsh realities of a history of colonialism that are not easily disentangled.

**Aaron Hollander, for *Ecumenical Trends*:** As we are proceeding in chronological order, introducing each journal in the order in which it was first published, *Ecumenical Trends* is the third that we will cover, before turning to the two dedicated interreligious studies journals.

*Ecumenical Trends* is the journal of Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, and it is conceived as a ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement; the history of the journal will be known to some, but I suspect not all, of our readers. *Trends* is much younger than the Society of the Atonement, beginning in 1972 as a merger between two other periodicals. The first of these was known as *The Lamp*, which began to be published in 1903 by Fr. Paul Wattson, the founder of the Society of the Atonement. It was a monthly confessional periodical dedicated to Catholic life in the modern world, and the sense of “Catholic” here explicitly included Catholic life within the Anglican Church, to which Fr. Paul and his Society still belonged at that time. The motivating vision of *The Lamp*, then, was ecumenical, even as its ecumenical vision was what we would today call an “ecumenism of return,” aiming to instill Catholic values and orientations in the hope of facilitating the entry of “separated churches” into communion with Rome. After Fr. Paul’s death, however, *The Lamp* gradually shifted in focus, increasingly into analyses of issues of church and society – more along the lines of something like *Christianity Today*, in the sense of being a magazine meant for educated but popular consumption.

The second periodical that was merged into *Ecumenical Trends* was known as *Faith and Order Trends*, which was published by the National Council of Churches. This journal was intended to engage with the scholarly and theological issues at the forefront of ecumenical conversation, in the US context specifically. But by 1970, the NCC was struggling to keep publishing *Faith and Order Trends*, and Graymoor Ecumenical Institute (which was founded shortly after Vatican II and had not yet added “Interreligious” to its name) took over its publication, integrated its forward-looking “trends” approach with the accessibility of *The Lamp*, and replaced both periodicals with *Ecumenical Trends*. It is worth noting how similar the timing and logic are here to

those of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* – Vatican II’s injection of Catholic energy into the ecumenical movement and vice versa was in no small part responsible for both of these journals, even as their pages then and now are by no means limited to interpretations by Catholics.

*Vatican II’s injection of Catholic energy into the ecumenical movement and vice versa was in no small part responsible for both of these journals, even as their pages then and now are by no means limited to interpretations by Catholics.*

So *Ecumenical Trends* became a hybrid vehicle, academically informed but publicly accessible, not only for engaging issues of church and society (as *The Lamp* prioritized) but also for reporting on current events and documents in the ecumenical sphere and inviting scholarly reflection on those developments. In terms of the relationship between the ecumenical and the interreligious components of the journal’s purview, it was in 1991 that Graymoor Ecumenical Institute was renamed Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute – the Institute as a whole (and *Ecumenical Trends* with it) was acknowledging and formalizing an expansion in scope that had been a long time coming. We can note again the significance of this specific timing: the World Council of Churches celebrated its Ninth General Assembly in Canberra (Australia), at which there was a robust Roman Catholic observational presence and at which interreligious issues had come very strongly into the foreground of ecumenical conversations. And, of course, the dissolution of the Soviet Union had redrawn the geopolitical map and opened mental space for new priorities of social and ethical engagement by the churches. But we need to appreciate that bringing interreligious questions into the ecumenical foreground is by no means a concession to contemporary predilections or fashions – these questions have been part of the ecumenical conversation from the very beginning, for instance in the reports of the World Missionary Conference of 1910, in which a commitment to understanding the social dynamics and intellectual texture of “the non-Christian world” was held to be completely indispensable for participants in the proto-ecumenism of the day.

Since 1991, then, *Ecumenical Trends* has provided a forum to wrestle and reckon with precisely the kinds of questions

*continued on page 13*

this roundtable is considering: not just with regard to the entanglement between interchurch and interreligious dynamics, but also with regard to the church and society questions that motivated *The Lamp*, now resolutely updated with a more capacious understanding of the churches' involvement (often in ways that escape their participants' conscious notice) in all manner of sociocultural challenges, divisions, and upheavals. We recognize also the divisions (and accordingly, the ecumenical imperatives) *within* and not only between religious communities – as these are, in many cases today, the divisions with the greatest power to corrode efforts at unity and peace. Recognizing the entanglement between “ecumenical” and “interreligious” issues is not about collapsing the two and making them synonymous (since, of course, encounters and discussions between those who identify as belonging in some way to “the same religion” are conditioned and oriented differently than those between people who do not). Rather, it is a recognition that each is always implied and entailed in the other, and that the distinctions get fuzzier the closer we look at them. Attending to this complexity is itself part of the purpose of holding these conversations together.

That said, there is still a tension that has to be negotiated here. *Ecumenical Trends* is a site for the exchange of different perspectives on ecumenical affairs, and there are plenty of authors and plenty of readers who would distinguish much more sharply between ecumenical and interreligious and political issues – up to and including the perspective that they should really be kept at arm's length from one another rather than being allowed to impress upon the others' distinctive agendas. We may not share that perspective as editors, but we still need to reach and be in conversation with those who do share it; the challenge is to provide a space to accommodate real difference (hopefully within a horizon of shared commitment to productive, good-faith disagreement). When we come to a potentially divisive issue – and this goes not only for the general framing questions but specific theological, ecclesiological, ethical controversies as well – we have to be able to accept those tensions

as themselves part of the ecumenical landscape, worthy of our consideration even and maybe especially if we disagree.

So the solution, I think, is neither to come down with an iron fist and say “our way or the highway,” nor to sidestep the questions and just say that anything goes. We still have to be able to proceed on the basis of moral and intellectual commitments with regard to the shape and purpose of the field – likewise when we produce issues of *Ecumenical Trends* dealing with, for example, the legacy of slavery and the complicity of the churches in systemic racism. We take these kinds of engagements to be morally justified and necessary, but we recognize that they may be potentially alienating to precisely those members of our society and our churches with whom it is most urgent to be in ongoing communication on these topics. There is, of course, a clear parallel here with what happens in ecumenical/interreligious conversations themselves.

*Ecumenical Trends* is intended to be responsive to current and emerging realities, and therefore to what is most needful in our moment, in our context. But this applies not only to the contents of our issues, but also to the role that we are or could be playing as a journal in order to help strengthen relationships and heal divisions between (and within) religious communities, supporting constructive religious interaction in the public sphere. And in this sense, we are obligated to open up to new questions, potentially very uncomfortable questions, questions that we or the ecumenical movement may not yet have thought ourselves equipped to engage, which nevertheless are shaping our moment and demand our attention. For example: young people are thinking about and engaging in religious ideas and practices in ways that are flagrantly misunderstood and misrepresented, both in the media and in mainstream ecumenical conversations about youth and religion. We have to be thinking about evangelical and Pentecostal perspectives on faith and society in more textured ways than have been customary. We have to be thinking about multiple religious belonging, and we have to be not just hand-wringing over “the nones” but engaging in actual ecumenical conversations that take those perspectives into account and take them seriously. We have to be thinking about the deepening polarization in the US and much more broadly around the world as a kind of sectarianism, which is in desperate need of ecumenical analysis and intervention, being theologically saturated even when it is not explicitly coded as religious.

Our perspective at *Ecumenical Trends* is that the field – not only the academic guilds of ecumenical studies and interreligious studies but also the many others who are dedicated to negotiating religious difference and overcoming religious division – dare not ignore these kinds of questions.

*continued on page 14*

*We recognize also the divisions (and accordingly, the ecumenical imperatives) within and not only between religious communities – as these are, in many cases today, the divisions with the greatest power to corrode efforts at unity and peace.*

And if “ecumenical trends” is going to mean anything, it has to mean having the courage and creativity to stick our noses into newly emerging issues, seeing what turns up and what it might mean for our communities, even when we do not have decades of prior precedent for doing so.

**Axel Takács, for the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*:**

The *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) was founded in 2009, so we have come to the journals native to the twenty-first century. JIRS was originally the creation of two graduate students: Stephanie Varnon-Hughes was at Union Theological Seminary, and Rabbi Joshua Stanton was attending rabbinical school in Jerusalem. As they were assessing the resources available to them, there seemed to be a dearth of journals, in the libraries of religious and theological studies, that were dedicated explicitly to interreligious work. At the same time, they noticed an increasing number of graduate students and younger scholars working at the intersection of multiple religions, some doing so confessionally and others non-confessionally, and many in tandem with interfaith organizations beyond the academy. Some were involved directly in interreligious dialogue and others were engaged more behind the scenes in analyzing what was taking place in their own or in other contexts, but these younger scholars all shared a commitment to working in more than one religious tradition and working on questions of public significance at the interfaces between traditions. It was a sort of liminal space, involving comparative work, some ecumenical questions, a mix of dialogue and scholarship, a mix of confessional and academic and activist approaches. And there was a gap, at least in the North American context: where (for example) could an interfaith community organizer publish an academic reflection on their own work in the field as a scholar-practitioner or an activist-theologian? There needed, in other words, to be a space to discuss in a scholarly way what was already flourishing on the ground.

JIRS sought to be that space, to consider what is happening in this or that community or institution, and to consider what works, what doesn’t work, and so forth. Interreligious studies itself was imagined as an interdisciplinary field and then the journal aimed to be a conduit for publishing and communicating what was going on in that field. I would describe the purview of JIRS as being the second-order analysis of first-order interreligious work. That first-order interreligious work might be theological in nature, in the sense of dialogues on theological problems or traditions, or it might be more pragmatic in nature, for instance with regard to interfaith justice work or the relationships between religious communities in a shared social landscape, but in either case the work of interreligious studies as a scholarly field is to take a step back and consider what’s happening, and why, and to what effect.

The journal’s audience turned out to be – perhaps unsurprisingly – quite broad, not only in the academy (with people teaching or writing in interreligious studies) but also people involved professionally or para-professionally with interfaith dialogue. We do publish, then, our fair share of theory-driven pieces, but a lot of the articles deal more with discussions of best practices in pedagogy, community leadership, interfaith organizing, and so forth. JIRS is meant as a resource for on-the-ground work, for people who might want to implement some version of what they learned in an article, but in turn, this pragmatic emphasis is itself highly informative for those doing the second-order analysis of interfaith processes.

Now, as editor-in-chief for the last four or five years, I have worked to reimagine the journal as making space also for public theology, as well as for a kind of interreligious reassessment of religious studies as such, where interdisciplinary and intersectional analyses have underscored how race, class, gender, sexuality, and more, all constitute the contexts in which interreligious actors and leaders operate. If anything, what the study of religion has demonstrated is that all religion is in effect *inter-religion*. Whether we are speaking of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or other traditions, all emerge (and continue to emerge, rather than ever being pinpointable as something fixed and entire) in conversation with the cultures and religions that are already present around them. No religious tradition emerges in a vacuum, and no tradition can remain in a vacuum, even when attempts are made to isolate it and keep it from contamination. Even the imagination of religious others, and the articulation of a tradition’s distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other possibilities, constitute an interreligiosity that cannot be extracted or sidelined in assessing what that tradition is. This way of thinking about religion is, of course, a departure from and critique of older twentieth-century models for the study of religion, which relied on the careful *disentanglement* of traditions, the demarcation of boundaries where one tradition ended and another began, the creation of essences of each religion, and the careful work of distinguishing, for example, religion from magic, religion from secular ideology, religion from other cultural forms and processes, and so forth. Likewise, in theological studies, a parallel argument can be made – that theological ideas and the ways of articulating and addressing theological problems have all developed in the context of negotiating religious difference,

*continued on page 15*

*If anything, what the study of religion has demonstrated is that all religion is in effect inter-religion.*



negotiating multiple religious cultures. All theology, in this respect, is interreligious theology – even if it is not often self-consciously interpreted this way.

Part of the function of JIRS, then, is to offer the opportunity to explore and work through what it means for the study of religion, and for the pursuit of theology, when these recognitions are taken seriously, when this interreligious quality that is so often in the background is instead underscored or elevated into conscious consideration. Some examples would be helpful. How, for instance, would a scholar of South Asian religions write an article on Muslims practicing yoga in the sixteenth-century Mughal Empire – not just as an area studies piece, but highlighting the interreligious nature of the phenomenon and developing theory on that basis? Or, how might a Christian theologian write an article on early Native Mexican devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe? Certainly, interreligious analyses could be productive in considering – like Terry signaled – how Yoruba devotional traditions have interacted with Christianity and Islam, both in Africa and in Latin America. And the list goes on.

*Part of the function of JIRS, then, is to offer the opportunity to explore and work through what it means for the study of religion, and for the pursuit of theology, when these recognitions are taken seriously, when this interreligious quality that is so often in the background is instead underscored or elevated into conscious consideration.*

Presently, JIRS is published by Boston University School of Theology, Hebrew College, (which now houses the Miller Center for Interreligious Leadership), and Hartford Seminary. And the journal needs to triangulate and integrate those institutions' various priorities, but the structure also functions to spread out responsibilities by drawing inspiration from the different institutional contexts, based on the academic expertise housed at each. This is one working model of collaboration that has been successful so far – a model that allows us, hopefully, to meet the challenge of holding very diverse work together in one framework.

So to summarize where we are standing in terms of this big-picture problem of defining the field, drawing boundar-

ies, and so forth: I really appreciate the definition of interreligious studies provided by Kate McCarthy in the book *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018: 12), and I want to share it as it proves very helpful in framing what JIRS is trying to do as well. Interreligious studies, as McCarthy describes it, “is a sub-discipline of religious studies that engages in the scholarly and religiously-neutral description, and in the multidisciplinary analysis and theoretical framing, of the interactions of religiously-different people in groups, including at the intersections of religion and secularity. It examines these interactions in historical and contemporary contexts and in relation to other social systems and forces. And, like other disciplines with applied dimensions, it aims to serve the public good by bringing its analyses to bear on practical approaches to issues in religiously-diverse societies.”

I would add, however, that as an editor I have tried to give an increased attention to interreligious theology or theological work written by scholars who are confessionally religious – whether they are part of a community's leadership or not – and who are trying to bring the public aspect of their studies into the foreground. As far as the non-confessional or non-theological articles approach interreligious studies, they tend to be about how religious communities and traditions intersect with aspects of secularity: the state, the economy, public education, geopolitical forces, international or intercultural tensions, and so forth. This is all very important but not sufficient for getting at the full picture of what interreligious studies is or could be. Insofar as the history of interreligious work is indebted to ecumenical studies, it has to leave room for the conditions of ecumenical division and exchange (which are often robustly theological), insofar as these are clearly entailed in interreligious relations, whose players are engaged in all manner of “intra” religious negotiations. This is not to say that there's anything wrong with interreligious studies dedicating sustained attention to the secular social sciences or the so-called secular dimensions of religious interactions. As Aaron was saying, we keep realizing through the many critical lenses available to us that none of these interactions are happening in a vacuum, and none are adequately understood if we fail to engage with these secular or non-theological aspects.

I would say that interreligious studies, and thus also the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, is in a way a natural offshoot of one of the most important takeaways from the study of religion in the late twentieth century, as I mentioned before: religious beliefs and practices and identities cannot be viewed as isolated causes of individual or group behavior. Just as nobody's identity is *only* as “a Christian” or “a Muslim,” so too nobody's religious affiliation is “the single cause” of their political activity, whether peaceful or vio-

*continued on page 16*

*Insofar as the history of interreligious work is indebted to ecumenical studies, it has to leave room for the conditions of ecumenical division and exchange (which are often robustly theological), insofar as these are clearly entailed in interreligious relations, whose players are engaged in all manner of “intra” religious negotiations.*

lent. Accordingly, as we have increasingly recognized how religion is infused with and responsive to cultural, social, political, and economic values, and is often sponsored by national authorities or financially powerful institutions, we have needed more sophisticated intellectual tools for viewing the interactions between religious communities in this same light – and not only the interactions between what we recognize as religious traditions (in that “world religions” sense that Terry was discussing) but also the interactions and exchange between contemporary imaginaries or ideologies, such as capitalism, nationalism, and so forth, which can shape people’s lives in ways that cannot be so unambiguously distinguished from religious influence. Whereas thirty or forty years ago, articles would be written on why a certain religious belief causes or does not cause a particular political behavior, JIRS aspires to attend productively and diversely to these complex forces at play, not reducing any of them to another or essentializing any of them as belonging to a fixed conception of a given religious tradition. Religious studies came to appreciate – and now interreligious studies brings this appreciation into the foreground – that the reality is much more complicated and in need of more sensitive instruments of interpretation.

**Nelly van Doorn-Harder, for *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*:** These many academic and para-academic dynamics that Axel has been discussing, I think, are very closely connected with the reasons that underlie the emergence of my own journal, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* (ISIT), albeit with some important differences given the European context rather than the American context.

ISIT was founded only in 2015, with its first issue released in 2016. The background here is that the move-

ment of studying interreligious engagement, along with what they call intercultural theology in Europe, was very much driven by individuals. In Amsterdam there was Henk Vroom, who, in cooperation with several national and international colleagues, founded in the 1980s a journal called *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* (SID), which he edited almost up to his death in 2014. Then in 2005, in connection with SID, Vroom launched the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS). I remember being at the founding meeting for ESITIS, and I was extremely ticked off, I must say, because they were talking about and celebrating the “founding fathers” of the society, with a podium full of men only. For a couple of years, I could not help thinking that this was a major blind spot in thinking about whose insights and priorities would shape the field.

But over time, Henk and I started to work together at the Center for Islamic Theology that he had launched at the Free University of Amsterdam. And as the network widened into other European countries, Africa, Asia, and the USA, and as new questions began to be raised that were closely or loosely connected with the interreligious and intercultural realities in those various contexts, we became aware of the fact that we had to change the position of the SID journal in connection with the organization. The journal was not online at the time, and – as Terry already discussed – new challenges were arising regarding open access policies and the unfulfilled need to connect with the rest of the world. The reality in Europe (and I think it was the same in America) was that a lot of international students would come from Africa and Asia to get their Masters and PhD from European universities, and then go home and stay in touch with their doctoral supervisors as they proceeded to develop research agendas and new research methods commensurate to their own contexts. A remarkable, refreshing intercultural exchange was possible, but we were not living up to that possibility. These scholars (and specifically, where we are concerned, these scholars dealing with interreligious studies and intercultural theology) needed a platform, but SID became more and more difficult to access because it was (and still is) only in print and very expensive, especially for international colleagues. So this led to an honest reckoning with how we could more effectively and ethically include our colleagues based in Africa and Asia. How could we highlight the issues that they were facing in their environment and draw on the insights that we as Europeans were too easily overlooking in their academic work – even though we were often the ones responsible for training these scholars.

And so, we started to look for another publisher, and Equinox was willing to take it on and share with ESITIS the responsibility for the journal. This was important to us, because one of our goals was to connect the European

*continued on page 17*

academy not just with Africa and Asia, but also with the Americas – as someone who is from Europe, but lives and teaches in the United States, it is especially clear to me that the discussions in these settings are very different in some ways, even as they overlap in others (for instance, in engaging with the interreligious dynamics of racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and so forth). In Europe, of course, we have many different countries facing different challenges, and this diversity is a strength for the journal and its surveyance of the field. I have come to realize that a lot of the discussions in the US context are very different from analogous discussions in Europe – as is quite apparent when surveying the programming at the American Academy of Religion; I was part of the AAR committee that approved the fairly new unit for Interreligious and Interfaith Studies, and the panels that have been hosted under that unit have made this reality quite clear. Not only the contents of the discussions are different, even when dealing with overlapping questions; even the topics themselves, the way the questions are framed, are often quite different as well. This is why we decided to launch a new journal and try to connect the different parts of the world, providing space for people to encounter the ways that analogous questions are being posed and addressed by others, in different ways.

*A remarkable, refreshing intercultural exchange was possible, but we were not living up to that possibility.*

Coming back to ESITIS, the society which sponsors the journal, I want to note that this society has always been focused not only on interreligious work but on productive interdisciplinary engagement as well, and I think this is significant in terms of our roundtable. Interreligious studies needs not only theology and religious studies, but also anthropology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and so forth, and this was one of the goals of ESITIS from the beginning. This was not just for the sake of theoretical richness but also from a practical point of view: we looked for conversation partners in many different fields, and not only in the academy but in all kinds of social positions, for instance, people who are pastors or other kinds of community leaders, or more generally, interfaith practitioners. We have tried to cultivate a conversation that is attractive not just to academics but also to the larger public, insofar as the interreligious questions we are raising are of urgent importance in many sectors. Such an interdisciplinary and even inter-institutional approach can risk feeling like participants

are losing something of their distinct professional identity, but on the other hand, there is something fresh and daring about attempting to keep these connections alive by way of the journal and in conferences every other year.

Our focus at each conference, which also feeds into the journal, is usually quite timely – the most recent, held in Sarajevo in 2019, was connected with the local discussions there on decoloniality and transitional justice, tracing back to the civil war. For our next conference, planned for 2021, we have been considering the topic of “sacred protest: religion, power, and resistance in an era of populism.” Basically, what we are trying to do with these gatherings is to inspire research about the shared theme, and to cross-fertilize the many different contexts in which people are thinking and working by exposure to one another’s approaches.

I will conclude by returning to one of the questions with which we prepared for this roundtable: what are some of the greatest *challenges* to the work of the journal as it surveys and helps to shape the field? Maybe because I am the only woman in this group, I see this with particular clarity: one of our challenges is to cultivate enough work dealing seriously with gender as an interreligious consideration. Many of the materials associated with interfaith dialogue remain very binary, and more often than not they represent a male-to-male platform of engagement. Questions arise as to what is being left out of the conversation, and so then also, out of the second-order analysis of such forms of engagement. And if we go further and think about different forms of sexuality and the role of religious understanding in how societies are dealing with the transgender activism that has intensified in recent years, we find that there is still very much we are not engaging with adequately. Sometimes we have to try simply to find individuals who are willing to write on such things, and preferably to help create a circle of people writing on new issues who can build on one another’s insights and engender a livelier, more widespread conversation.

Another major challenge relates to the conferences, and recalls something that Terry brought up, namely, disproportionate resources when it comes to our attempt to create a truly international intellectual community. ESITIS is basically run by the work of volunteers, and there has never been much money involved – it really is just a group of engaged scholars who are committed to meeting with each other and learning from one another. But that means that there are very few resources for assisting participants without institutional support to travel, or for assisting those who might want to attend but would need to travel a far greater distance at far greater cost – for instance from African contexts or indeed from the Americas. Staying in close contact with each other is very important, and our vision is to create a network that connects Europe with these many other con-

*continued on page 18*



texts in the rest of the world, but the economic inequalities become front and center when we face the logistics. The journal can rectify some of this, as we are able to be deliberate about seeking out contributions from Africa, from Asia, and so forth, but the conferences are where much of the conversation is driven forward. Perhaps the successes of holding conferences online, as we have had to do this past year, will result in new models for engaging more equitably worldwide.

*Staying in close contact with each other is very important, and our vision is to create a network that connects Europe with these many other contexts in the rest of the world, but the economic inequalities become front and center when we face the logistics.*

A last major challenge to mention is the challenge of selecting the topics that matter, topics that people are really concerned with (and not just in our university departments). Of course, there are so many topics that matter, and it is a huge responsibility for a journal to make the decision to feature some and not others. We are always trying to discern what discussions will actually be usable in our readers' teaching, in their work environments, and in their interfaith practices. To the extent that our journals intend to make a difference, we have to keep in mind that the conversation we are trying to host and shape does not take place in a vacuum.

**Aaron Hollander:** With these rich histories in view, we can turn to some of the issues that connect the different journals and their respective agendas. One such theme, of course, is the challenges faced by our journals at the present moment – including the pragmatic challenges of readership and accessibility (especially international accessibility given changing demographics and patterns of authority) but also including what we have identified as the overwhelmingly male, and overwhelmingly white, leadership of the field: what insights are going unnoticed, or remaining marginalized, in such an intellectual environment?

The other issue I would highlight is that of the moral horizons of ecumenical and interreligious studies, and the question of what role the journals claim for themselves in pursuing constructive purposes. In other words, if given the opportunity to conceive of ecumenical studies or inter-

religious studies more along the lines of political science (defined by its subject matter, irrespective of moral positioning), or on the other hand, more like peace and conflict studies (dedicated to a subject matter but organized and oriented by a moral commitment), it seems to me that all of us are saying that our journals fall closer to that latter conception of the field. In this case, can we get a little clearer on the contours of this moral alignment? Is there something we share in this regard, even recognizing that each journal may be primarily ecclesial in audience, primarily academic, or something in between?

**Axel Takács:** Taking up the question of pragmatic challenges first, I wonder which of our journals are open access and which are behind a paywall. It may be useful just to get a sense of the different configurations here. For our part, JIRS is open-access. There was a period, about a year or two ago, when we were considering whether we should change this, and most of us were pretty adamant that we need to remain open-access. We use the online PKP journal platform, which does its own Google Scholar and internet metadata indexing, so we are able to learn a lot from the wider reach of the journal; but also, as soon as you put in a paywall, it narrows the audience, and we wanted to be accessible to people who are not affiliated with an academic institution – interfaith organizers and such. So we remain open-access as a matter of principle; but again, our structure is to be jointly sponsored by BU School of Theology, Hebrew College, and Hartford Seminary. All these institutions contribute to financing the operation. The financing is spread out, but the burden would otherwise be substantial.

**Stephen G. Brown:** We are a hybrid journal in this respect – we have some articles which are behind a paywall for subscribers, and others which are open access. Our publisher, Wiley, has got an increasing number of national agreements, for example, with Germany and the United Kingdom, so that if you are attached to a qualified institution in one of these countries then your articles can be open access. But these arrangements are neither widespread nor always consistent.

**Nelly van Doorn-Harder:** ISIT is not totally open access, there is a paywall, but it is a very weak paywall; basically, if you subscribe (and it is pretty inexpensive to do so), then you have access to all the issues and can download them all. We certainly are not trying to exclude anyone from reading the contents, but the paid subscription format is one of the conditions of our arrangement with the publishers, who are assuming many of the costs of publication.

**Terry Rey:** Our journal is not open-access; it generates profits annually, and those profits go to the institute that is

*continued on page 19*

connected to the journal, the Dialogue Institute. This raises a question that was more or less explicit in all of our presentations: what are the relationships between the journal itself and the donors, the institutions, the presses, and so forth, which sponsor it and keep the lights on? Under what circumstances might such arrangements infringe upon academic freedom? What are the consequences of a shortage of resources and the difficult decisions that might need to be made to keep a journal operating – and how do these contingencies impact the shape of the field more broadly?

**Aaron Hollander:** *Ecumenical Trends* is not open-access like JIRS is, but as with many aspects of our publication we are in a hybrid position. There is a paywall for online access to the journal, and of course print subscriptions are paid (although there are always free samples available for anyone who visits us!), but the cost of online access is very low, and it includes the ability to download past issues as well. The operation of the journal is not a for-profit enterprise, and so while we need subscriptions to keep the issues coming out, there is no red tape whatsoever around sharing the journal, online or otherwise. If a student is looking for a particular article and their library does not have the journal, we will happily send them an issue in the mail. We encourage authors who publish in *Trends* to share their article broadly, to post it on their personal websites, to disseminate it however they see fit. That is a breath of fresh air, I must say, for authors who are used to receiving strongly worded, threatening letters about not posting their own published work for others to read.

**Stephen G. Brown:** I see three main challenges, at least with regard to the current situation of *The Ecumenical Review*, but these clearly overlap in some ways with what the other journals are facing. One is the question of identity: what does it mean for a journal to have an “ecumenical” identity, whether the journal in question is associated with a specific religious community (like *Ecumenical Trends*) or with a secular university (like the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*). Aaron and Terry, is “ecumenical” still the right

term to use for the work that your journals are stewarding, particularly in light of the broadening of focus that you both described?

The second issue is not only a question for the journals we represent here, but also more broadly for the field: how do we interpret and respond to the hegemony of English in the academy? Of course there are many excellent journals in other languages too, but those in English have unquestionably wider and more diverse audiences, as English remains a *lingua franca* (so to speak) for the global academy. If we were to start publishing articles in French or German or Arabic, as Terry raised as a possibility, then on the one hand the accessibility of those articles will be very limited and they risk being overlooked. On the other hand, particularly with the academic journals that are expected to have demanding quality standards, then it is in effect an exclusionary approach to say that we publish only in English and then contributions have to meet a standard of fluency in English. I know that if I am writing an article in German or in French I can never get the nuances right. And the same often (not always, of course) goes for people for whom English is a second or third language and they are submitting to the English journals. What can we do to make sure that we are not missing out on important contributions?

And the third issue I see, which is in no way limited to our field: what does it now mean to be a journal in an online world? We have already begun discussing accessibility. With commercial publication, articles are often locked behind paywalls, to which open-access offers an alternative, but the costs here are often passed on to authors. Either way there is economic exclusion at work (when we think about who has access to these journals, particularly outside of the academy), and the ethics of all this continue to evolve. Moreover, the newer journals have emerged in this online environment and may be more dexterous in this regard, but the older ones are used to putting together carefully curated issues over a longer period of time, which would take a theme or an area of study and have a range of different authors addressing that theme from their own perspectives. This curation provides added value, and the final product is a resource precisely *as* a whole issue. But now, it is much more common for people to find articles through search engines, and articles need to be retrievable individually, which is how they are increasingly used. What does that mean for our editorial enterprise, where we are used to (and reasonably committed to) the curation of thematic issues where each article adds value to each other article by its presence and juxtaposition? And when articles are most easily accessed online, in databases where they appear in response to search terms rather than in the course of reading an issue of a specific journal, what does this mean for the identity of

*continued on page 20*

*What are the consequences of a shortage of resources and the difficult decisions that might need to be made to keep a journal operating – and how do these contingencies impact the shape of the field more broadly?*

a journal – does every article, now, need somehow to represent the values and orientation of the whole journal?

**Nelly van Doorn-Harder:** In terms of carefully curated and thematically integrated journal issues becoming less the order of the day, I would not say that we are suffering in this respect, because even if people are discovering a particular article by way of a search engine, once they click through they will arrive at the entire table of contents. I do this all the time: I might go looking for something in particular but then see that the whole issue has other discussions that relate to what I originally was looking for, which I might not have seen otherwise. It is like browsing in a library – you go looking for something and find much else of interest. So I think we should not despair of creating curated, thematic issues, even if people are finding individual articles differently than they once did.

As for the language issue that Stephen raises, one of the trends worldwide (and I could give specific examples from Indonesia, where I am most familiar with the local situation) seems to be that it is a requirement for tenure and promotion to write articles in English and place them in international journals. And there might be a scale of sorts, by which the relative weight of certain publications or even certain languages (usually English, French, and German) is determined. So what we do, when we get an article submission that is very interesting but the English proficiency is really unacceptable, is ask the author if they can find someone to help them clean up the English before resubmitting the article, and if not, then we try to find a volunteer who can help work with the author. This does not always work, and we know there are some important articles that fall through the cracks because of a language barrier. The goal here is to give authors a leg up when they need it, and not to pre-judge the quality of the article on the basis of the language – even if ultimately the publication will require getting the language in order. But the reality is that many scholars worldwide do not have access to specific languages in which other authors may want to publish, but they do have access to English, and so in this sense (and I am speaking as a non-native English speaker myself) publishing in English enhances accessibility broadly even as it might create obstacles in specific cases.

**Terry Rey:** With regard to publishing non-English articles or gatekeeping out articles with insufficient English proficiency – the possibility does exist to provide quality translation services for international scholars, and this seems like the most equitable approach to making sure that such scholars' work can be adequately featured, but of course this requires resources, time, and willpower on the part of sponsoring institutions, which have to make it a priority (over other possible uses of the time and money).

Stephen raises an excellent question about the limits of “ecumenical” as a descriptor for what we are doing in a journal that has evolved and broadened in its scope – I have thought a lot about this and have discussed it with my colleagues, and when I introduced myself to our readership as the new editor, I took inspiration from Len Swidler and did an etymological inquiry, taking up every single word in the title of the journal, including “of” and “the,” and I broke them down and put them back together to reflect on what the journal is and what it might be for. So in that light, I remain comfortable with “ecumenical” – thinking, as we have been doing in this conversation, about the all-inclusiveness of “one, inhabited world” and about the many layers of difference and division and relationality that constitute this world. However, not everyone is going to read the piece and agree with such an etymological approach, and the term “ecumenical” does have certain connotations that, quite frankly, alienates a number of my colleagues in my department. There are, unfortunately, only a few of my colleagues who are interested in collaborating with the journal or even refereeing articles for us; this is, I think, a telling situation.

And accessibility is also an issue that has been close to my heart for a long time – not only the accessibility of the journal itself, but also of the ideas presented within it, the discourse that we are engaged in cultivating and disseminating. When I was a student at Temple, and Len Swidler had me reading Raimundo Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, I found it to be an amazing book, beautiful and persuasive in its argument, but also highly inaccessible in terms of the language. And as I said during the seminar: this is really powerful, but it also drives me crazy, because who on earth who really needs the benefits of this kind of thinking is going to be able to understand it, let alone apply it in society? Well, that is exactly the point of the Dialogue Institute, to host the journal and take in the high-octane academic discourse, but also to break it down and convert it into more immediately accessible, practicable forms. They are an outreach organization in this respect: they do interfaith diversity training in corporations, and they bring young people together on inter-community field trips, and so forth. That is just one possible approach to the problem of accessibility, but it is reflected in the arrangement whereby the journal and the institute remain attached to this day.

**Axel Takács:** What is interesting for me about the international scope of all our journals is less the fact that that we receive articles where the English could be better, needs editing for native sense, and so forth. Rather, it is that sometimes we receive articles from different parts of the world where it can be difficult (for me) to separate whether I am reading it and giving an objective academic critique of the

*continued on page 21*



argument or whether I am just reacting to its claims on the basis of Western norms regarding what we expect an article to do. To some extent, it is reasonable to say that the journal is based here and so has to be accountable to an academic landscape that is contextualized by and depends on these norms; but on the other hand, the work itself is often really worthwhile and should be taken seriously in spite of its divergence from academic conventions.

For example, occasionally we receive articles about some interfaith work in a part of Africa or South Asia, describing the institutions dealing with some local issue and explaining how they are going about it. Surely there would be some in our audience who would value reading such a piece. But we have to consider whether there is an argument beyond explaining what is going on in that context. Or in other cases, there *is* an argument made, but the argument is that interreligious harmony and peace are possible in our time. That is fine for authors and audiences to believe and commit themselves to, but it is not an academic article – we just can't take it in the journal! On the other hand, I want to be able to share the work that people are doing in these many different settings, to expand the horizons of what kinds of interfaith activity our readers know about. So where do we draw the line as editors between expanding the authorship and holding to the standards of our institutional and academic contexts? I would try to separate out the hegemonic expectations I have been steeped in, with regard to what an article is supposed to be or to do, from what I think the actual contribution of an unconventional article might be.

I do think that, in responding to these challenges, the field of interreligious studies has a place in the secular academy, not least to trouble the waters a little with regard to these expectations. Our journal is making the case for this, but it has to be a delicate attempt, both to meet the standards of the academic guild, and at the same time to show that the perspectives of interfaith practitioners and those of non-religious professionals, scholars taking a scrupulously non-religious approach to religious phenomena, can be held together and speak to one another fruitfully. We are now trying to organize a conference on this – to look not only at the interreligious work happening in divinity schools and seminaries, and in secular religious studies departments, but also at why interreligious studies is beneficial for doctors, nurses, lawyers, business professionals, public policy professionals, and so forth.

This is a different issue, though, from the challenge that Aaron raised about making space for differing views on the nature and purpose of ecumenical or interreligious work, or for differing moral and political perspectives. I mean, if someone writes an article detailing something that is totally adverse to the moral principles of the journal, for instance, arguing some point of white supremacist rhetoric

*...it has to be a delicate attempt, both to meet the standards of the academic guild, and at the same time to show that the perspectives of interfaith practitioners and those of non-religious professionals, scholars taking a scrupulously non-religious approach to religious phenomena, can be held together and speak to one another fruitfully.*

about Jews or Muslims, even if it seems well-organized and has plenty of academic documentation, we are not going to publish something like that. There has to be a span of what is appropriate or acceptable (what's known as an Overton Window); the perspective that anything goes so long as it is couched in academic convention is, in effect, its own immoral choice.

**Aaron Hollander:** But that still concerns the outer limits of what the moral orientation of the journals and the field can tolerate – I still would like to dig into the positive moral commitments that shape what we are trying to do by way of these journals in the field, in our institutions, and in society.

Before we get there, let me also respond to Stephen's questions as others have done, as I think these are important issues that have kept coming up in all our comments. First, on the question of access and accessibility: in spite of the flexibility we have around sharing articles through professional networks, *Trends* is still not nearly as accessible as we could be (in terms of people actually finding the journal in the first place), and this gets at Stephen's question about the role of the journals in a fast-paced, sound-bit online culture. It is not just about the availability of print or digital issues, but also about the pace with which we are able to publish and react to the "trends" of the ecumenical/interreligious landscape, and about who sees it when we do so. Last year, we made the decision to transition from publishing *Trends* eleven times a year to publishing it six times a year, on a bimonthly schedule, and the rationale here was that it would allow us to be more strategic about issues, to think more in terms of thematic continuities, to invite people to read and reflect on new documents, to draw in a more deliberate

*continued on page 22*

way on research perspectives, and so forth. The bimonthly schedule has improved the overall quality of the journal, but it slows down the pace, and there is a consequence to that. When you think about the articles that blow up online and are shared widely – whether from *The Atlantic*, or *Rolling Stone*, or closer to our own field, from *Commonweal* or *Christianity Today* – we are not able to do what they are doing: highly accessible, highly shareable, and near-immediate reaction to something happening in the world.

By contrast, it takes us at least two months to publish a reflection on a current event or development (except in cases where we have advance access to a new document, or something like this) – and this is on the quicker end of the spectrum in the journal world! There are pros and cons, of course – we stand by the merits of careful research and a pace of reflection that doesn't succumb to the contemporary sense that anything worth saying has to be said immediately or it falls out of the public interest. But on the other hand, is there more we should be doing to keep up with the pace of our world? There are a lot of possibilities, and the fact of the pandemic has certainly pushed us to think of new ways of stewarding the conversation.

On Stephen's other question, about the utility of "ecumenical" as a framing of what we're doing once we expand into interpreting inter-religious and extra-religious division and reconciliation – like Terry, I have spent a lot of time thinking about this and have written about it elsewhere. I do think that it is important to retain the term *ecumenical*. I absolutely recognize that it can be alienating in some corners of the academy, and I respect the reasons why it would be alienating, in light of the twenty-first-century backlash against the twentieth century's various ambitions to unification, globalism, and so forth. As Pope Francis so capably presents it in his new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, such universalizing projects (including the ecumenical movement, as has had to be reckoned with over the past few decades) can covertly or overtly support the concentration of power among the wealthy and the increasing marginalization of the most vulnerable of history.

But at the same time, it is very important that these reasonable concerns with globalization and ideological totalism not lead us to throw out ecumenicity as if they were synonymous. So too, it is not productive to *replace* ecumenical studies with interreligious studies in the scholarly world. For people working in interreligious studies (and I count myself as one of them), it would be a grave error to say that ecumenical studies had its day, and now we need to move on and do something wholly new. This is because ecumenical studies and the ecumenical movement have resources and have worked through problems that interreligious studies, as an emerging discipline, is now wrestling with – especially insofar as interreligious studies has to be

*As Pope Francis so capably presents it in his new encyclical, Fratelli Tutti, such universalizing projects (including the ecumenical movement, as has had to be reckoned with over the past few decades) can covertly or overtly support the concentration of power among the wealthy and the increasing marginalization of the most vulnerable of history.*

able to account productively with intra-religious division if its analyses are to be realistic.

I would argue, in fact, that a thoroughly twenty-first-century ecumenics, inclusive of and responsive to its ambiguous history, is possible and needed – we cannot just rely on sanitized neologisms that jettison every colonizing or totalizing vestige, we have to take responsibility for that history and continue to wrestle with it. I think that the etymological approach raised by Terry is promising, because "the ecumenical" includes attention to that common ground itself, that *oikoumenē* or inhabited world or common dwelling that is shared and contested by all of us, which has always been thoroughly interreligious as well as trans-religious, indeed trans-human. *Oikoumenē* is the physical (that is, not just the cultural) space of our inhabitation and interdependence, however much we embrace or resist that interdependence. This kind of framing of ecumenics, attentive to all these successive layers of the relations between religious communities, offers us immediate access to an ecological line of inquiry relating to the environmental precarity and asymmetry that are entailed in our contemporary divisions. Interreligious studies can have this in hand as well, and indeed must have it in hand in order to do justice to its subject matter, even as the newer field's priorities are often different and the integrity between these different registers can be less of a core analytical commitment.

This was a long way of circling back around to the question of our moral priorities as a shifting field and as instruments of fertilizing and cultivating that field – because "ecumenical," to me, suggests not only the classic orienting horizon of Christian unity, but also a disposition or under-

*continued on page 23*

lying ethical alignment that I might describe as an antonym to sectarianism – that is, as a collaborative, rather than a competitive, mindset in negotiating religious (and other ideological and cultural) difference. Those of us working in ecumenical studies and interreligious studies – whether as disciplines in the academy, or in the ecumenical field and the interfaith movement, or simply in civil society and our efforts as a civilization to wrest some kind of common good from an intensifying culture of cruelty and self-interest – have not only an opportunity but an obligation to resist sectarian framings of morality (i.e. actions are acceptable when they benefit us, but not when they benefit them) and of reality (i.e. their experience of what is taking place is invalid because of who they are). We have to be an engine for generating alternatives to the sectarian social dynamics that are deepening not only in the United States but globally as well.

**Nelly van Doorn-Harder:** Whatever we call ourselves, the intersection between different fields is very difficult to prevent, as it is to draw firm lines between “inter” and “intra” religious, or between an etymological framing of “ecumenical” and a more historical framing that looks at what the prevailing patterns are, and so forth. As Axel pointed out, we all have to make judgements about how to draw those lines and what we will prioritize. We may take some articles and put them through the review process, and with others we may just send them on and say that it is not really our place to publish them. But in the end, the foundation of our journals is the *network* – both a network of organizations, of institutions that allow bring people together in various ways, and also a network of the people themselves, a community that grows and changes and wants to have discussions together about certain topics. Wherever that discussion leads, the community will naturally have a wide range of perspectives on the utility of “ecumenical” as a scholarly term, whether it is old-fashioned or not, what it includes and does not include, and so forth. But it is the community that the journals depend on and are talking to, and this is where the question of accessibility and the after-effects of colonialism comes up again, as we were discussing earlier. If the point of our journals is to serve and grow a community of conversation, then whom are we including and excluding, and why?

I should say, on the question of language and the dominance of English, that when ESITIS meets in different contexts every other year, we never meet in a country that *only* speaks English (since the very first meeting, which was in the UK). English is indeed a *lingua franca* for the Society’s members and for most of the papers that are given, but the meetings move around and enable different people to get involved and have their own language and culture front and center in the community’s conversation. And in this way the network expands; when it comes to the individual members,

yes, there are many who do not speak English very well, but we are all part of the community nevertheless, and we are able to work though the language issues together. Of course, what is happening in person at the conferences is different than the difficult choices that have to be made for publishing articles, as we have discussed. When your journal is open-access (and I think this is actually an enviable position), you can broaden the linguistic scope more easily, without the risk of losing subscribers. There are blogs and podcasts that do so, offering excellent content in multiple languages – and we are thinking about it as well. How do we expand the conversation without doing a disservice to those who are already part of it?

**Axel Takács:** I would say that, broadly speaking, the field of interreligious studies itself is marked by teaching practices that are aimed at helping students and scholars alike to understand how systems, structures, ideologies, and the like emerge and maintain inequitable power relationships. Interreligious studies helps us critically analyze these relationships as we apply that second-order analysis of first-order interfaith dynamics or dialogues – it helps us realize what is really at stake. For instance, where disagreements over public expressions of religious devotion are actually rooted in colonial legacies, or class conflicts, or the like. And I think that this kind of disentanglement offered by interreligious studies is helpful also in appreciating the moral commitments of our work – to try to make visible those invisible marks of the economic, cultural, political, and ideological powers that exert pressure on all forms of interreligious engagement, and to equip people to resist this pressure where it is hegemonic and not in the service of equitable human flourishing.

**Aaron Hollander:** And it is really refreshing to see interreligious studies lay its cards on the table in this respect, that is, being open and honest about its commitments and the positioning of its scholars (as ecumenical studies has long been able to do, rooted as it is in a confessional project; but again, this has been at the cost of its academic marginalization). Being quite so overt about the moral commitments that shape our methods and questions is a bugbear in the academy – yet interreligious studies, in my experience, has not imposed a rhetorical shibboleth of objectivity on its practitioners. In this and other ways, the newer framework is opening space for intellectual work apart from the stale binaries by which religious studies in particular has been constrained – interreligious studies shares this with ecumenics, which at its best has long occupied a productively uncomfortable space between theology/ecclesiology and the social scientific study of religion.

*continued on page 24*



**Terry Rey:** On the big question of moral horizons, which is extremely important: I perceive the work that JES is doing (and also my own scholarship in the field) as aimed at redressing interreligious *misunderstandings*, which have been disastrous throughout history and of course continue to be so today in many parts of the world. As Stephen Prothero makes clear in his book *Religious Literacy*, religious *illiteracy* is not just ignorant, it can be extremely dangerous. My students appreciate this risk, and they respond well to the suggestion that religious literacy is everyone's responsibility. When I take them to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, we visit the Sabbath elevator, and the kosher pantry, and the gender-divided Islamic prayer rooms, and we meet with chaplains, and so forth. Students quickly see that whatever we can contribute to raising the level of interreligious literacy in our society will contribute, in whatever small way, to a more robust ethical culture.

*Students quickly see that whatever we can contribute to raising the level of interreligious literacy in our society will contribute, in whatever small way, to a more robust ethical culture.*


**Aaron Hollander:** But part of the recognition that "religions" aren't unitary, isolated entities is that "religious literacy" has to mean something different than being able, say, to recite the three dominant Hindu traditions, and the fourfold way of Buddhism, and the five pillars of Islam. If religious literacy is not just to be a reinscription of the old world religions model – with all of its colonial baggage and insensitivity to the intra-religious divisions and intersectional dynamics that are definitive of what religion is and always has been – then it has to be *interreligious* literacy, capable of appreciating internal diversities, cross-fertilization between traditions over time, and so forth. There again is your Max Mueller aphorism updated for our time – "the only religious literacy is interreligious literacy"!

**Axel Takács:** Right, and so much of this has to do with the funding of the humanities in our university system, and the neoliberal attitudes taken toward the role that the humanities play in our education. If a "world religions" class can satisfy a compartmentalized distribution requirement, without obligating anyone to learn new ways of doing things, then that is good enough in many institutional contexts. An "introduction to interreligion" might be more productive in

terms of actually equipping students to perceive how different traditions and cultures continually feed off one another and reshape themselves in light of shared goals and divisive identity practices, but it will not necessarily have the same kind of support from universities that are putting their institutional energy into "professionalizing" their students, reproducing the status quo, and staying afloat financially.

**Nelly van Doorn-Harder:** Our students need an interreligious consciousness no matter what they are doing (as I would hope would be clear to those responsible for professionalization metrics), but especially if they are studying religion or theology. If I am teaching Islam, of course, I cannot *just* teach Islam – I have to position its emergence in a certain environment and pose questions around its development in relation to Christianity, and so forth. The same is true, though much less appreciated, in confessional theological education. Think what it would mean for people training as religious leaders to be trained rigorously in the ways that their own traditions have been entangled with other traditions, have been given the shape that they have in no small part as the result of interactions with religious others. Whatever one happens to think of this (and it is doubtless a controversial prospect), these are the questions that the younger generation is posing, in the universities and the religious communities themselves, and it is our responsibility as journals to reflect and nourish that conversation.

**Stephen G. Brown:** This has been a fascinating conversation! Our journals are very different, yet it is so interesting to see the resonances between their histories and approaches.

**Aaron Hollander:** And those resonances and continuities are by no means exhausted. I trust that what we have produced here is only a foretaste of more substantial collaborations to come. Thank you all for your insights, for your participation in this roundtable, and for your leadership in our continually evolving field. 

*Think what it would mean for people training as religious leaders to be trained rigorously in the ways that their own traditions have been entangled with other traditions, have been given the shape that they have in no small part as the result of interactions with religious others.*

## Book Review

# Remembrance of Things Past

**Review of *Unity as Prophetic Witness: W. A. Visser 't Hooft and the Shaping of Ecumenical Theology*, by Michael Kinnamon.**

Fortress Press, 2018. 226 pp. \$34.00. ISBN 9787-1-5064-3018-8.

*Reviewed by Joseph D. Small*

The novelist Gore Vidal observed that “The past, for Americans, is a separate universe with its own quaint laws and irrelevant perceptions” (*The Golden Age*, 445). Few American church members, pastors, and theologians know much about the history of the ecumenical movement and even less about one of its seminal figures, W.A. Visser 't Hooft, first general secretary of the World Council of Churches. Michael Kinnamon's *Unity as Prophetic Witness* more than fills the gaps by providing a form of *resourcement*, drawing on “ancient” mid-twentieth-century ecumenical history as a source for contemporary ecumenical renewal.

*Unity as Prophetic Witness: W.A. Visser 't Hooft and the Shaping of Ecumenical Theology* is neither nostalgia for lost ecumenical glory nor hagiography of a revered leader. Kinnamon provides a judicious examination of Visser 't Hooft's role in the formation, direction, and development of the World Council of Churches. The narrative is appreciative, emphasizing Visser 't Hooft's theological and organizational leadership while also giving voice to critiques of his direction. Throughout, Kinnamon identifies enduring elements of Visser 't Hooft's commitments and points to possibilities for their retrieval.

*Unity as Prophetic Witness*'s introduction and four chapters take the shape of a five-act drama in which, of course, the climax comes in act three. In act one, Visser 't Hooft is introduced through Kinnamon's experience while he was a young WCC staff member with the retired WCC general secretary. Although at that point he had been retired for only sixteen years, “even then,” Kinnamon relates, “the elderly general secretary was viewed by many as a relic of an earlier era” (1). But Kinnamon took every opportunity to spend time with him, time that was informative, stimulating, and challenging.

Kinnamon expresses his enduring gratitude for what he learned as well as how he was challenged: “Another time he asked me, ‘Do you read your New Testament every day in Greek?’ When I admitted that I didn't, he responded, ‘Then do not pretend to be a theologian’” (6). This small anecdote typifies Visser 't Hooft's capacity for maintaining serious, sustained theological engagement while carrying signifi-

cant administrative work, joining both in a creative pattern of ecclesial responsibility. This should serve as a pointed challenge to contemporary pastors, bishops, and church officials.

For those who have little or no knowledge of him, Kinnamon introduces readers to a Visser 't Hooft who, even now, is more than a relic. We are shown a person who, “more than any other figure in the movement, sought to integrate these disparate priorities – doctrinal reconciliation, common work for peace and justice, shared service to refugees and others in need, a cooperative approach to mission and evangelism, renewal of the church through education and the full inclusion of laity, women, and youth – in a compelling vision of the church and its engagement with wider society” (3). In our time, when a fresh articulation of the ecumenical vision is necessary, Kinnamon offers an exploration of the wide range of Visser 't Hooft's thought and action that suggests possibilities for our time.

*In our time, when a fresh articulation of the ecumenical vision is necessary, Kinnamon offers an exploration of the wide range of Visser 't Hooft's thought and action that suggests possibilities for our time.*

Act two, “The Shaping of an Ecumenical Theologian,” traces the influences that fed Visser 't Hooft's remarkable theological apprehension of the calling to work for visible unity of the church. The influence of Karl Barth, the social gospel, and the World Student Christian Federation were all significant, but it was the German Church Struggle of the 1930s that brought these and other interests together in a cohesive outlook on the church's designated place in the world: a visible embodiment of the gospel.

*continued on page 26*

*Dr. Joseph D. Small served as director of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Theology and Worship from 1989-2011. He has been an adjunct faculty member at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and is currently church relations consultant to the Presbyterian Foundation. Dr. Small has written numerous monographs, book chapters, journal articles, study series, and theological papers, including A Pastoral Rule for Today, with John P. Burgess and Jerry Andrews (2019); and Flawed Church, Faithful God (2018).*

Visser 't Hooft was Dutch, not German (as Barth was Swiss, not German) but he understood the stand of the Confessing Church as “the great ecumenical event of our time” (28). It deepened and strengthened his conviction that the church is to be “a fellowship which transcends all frontiers of nation or race or class” (29). In order to be that fellowship, the church must have theological integrity, understanding that theology is inherently political. As the Confessing Church and its Barmen Declaration made clear, it is the church’s theological vocation that enables it to oppose the ideologies and systems that distort or deny the gospel.

*Visser 't Hooft was Dutch, not German (as Barth was Swiss, not German) but he understood the stand of the Confessing Church as “the great ecumenical event of our time” (28). It deepened and strengthened his conviction that the church is to be “a fellowship which transcends all frontiers of nation or race or class” (29).*

Kinnamon’s achievement throughout *Unity in Prophetic Witness* is enhanced by letting Visser 't Hooft speak for himself. Rather than simply telling us about his views, Kinnamon has mined the huge corpus of Visser 't Hooft’s publications to bring his voice to our hearing. Act three provides the climax by setting out six key texts in which Visser 't Hooft’s theological and organizational acumen are on full display. Rather than giving summary statements of the texts’ themes, I echo Kinnamon’s methodology by offering brief excerpts that illustrate the range and depth of thought contained in the documents:

• *The Ground of Our Unity*. “What we are called to do is to manifest what is inherent in our common call, to liberate the Church of God from the man-made prisons in which we have sought to capture it, to make visible to ourselves and to the world that we are partners in one heavenly calling. ... If we are really partners in the same call, Unity – visible, convincing unity – is not a matter that Christians can be for or against. It does

not admit of neutrality. This is part of our Christian commitment” (68).

• *How Does Unity Grow?* “We need a theology of the ecumenical movement because a Christian movement without theology is like a ship without a rudder. If one acts without any realization that theological issues are involved, one is likely to follow non-theological principles which are only a nice expression for worldly motives” (75).

• *Renewal and Unity*. “Why is it then that two intrinsic qualities of the Church which are so closely related to each other in the New Testament appear to us as alternatives or even mutually exclusive goals? I believe that the reason is that we have consciously or unconsciously secularized both notions. I take secularizing in its literal sense of adaptation to this age as opposed to orientation toward the new age. It is our lack of truly eschatological perspective which makes it so hard to take renewal as seriously as unity and unity as seriously as renewal” (94).

• *The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement*. “It seems to me that no amount of resolution-making and moralizing can help us in our present predicament if we do not first recover in theology, in our teaching, and in our preaching the clear biblical doctrine of the unity of mankind and so give our churches the strong foundation for a new approach to the whole question of world economic justice... It must become clear that church members who deny in fact their responsibility for the needy in any part of the world are just as much guilty of heresy as those who deny this or that article of the faith” (104f).

• *The Rediscovery of Christocentric Universalism in the Ecumenical Movement*. “That we really believe that Christ is the Saviour of all can only become a convincing faith if the Church breaks out of its too introverted life, shows clearly its concern for the spiritual and physical needs of all men and manifests that it is not a national, an ideological, a racial, or a continental church, but the Church which is at home in every nation and yet does not belong to any nation” (128).

• *The Significance of the World Council of Churches*. “This is the dilemma which dominates the whole existence of the Council. Its member churches are as yet unable to *be* together as the one Church of God; but they are no longer able to regard their fellow-members as being outside the Church of God. They cannot unite, but neither can they let each other go. They know there is no unity outside truth, but they realize also that truth demands unity” (135).

*continued on page 27*



What has been the outcome of Visser 't Hooft's efforts – of all the speaking and writing and acting and forming of an ecumenical consciousness and the embodiment of that consciousness in the vision and organization of the World Council of Churches? Acts four and five play out implications of the climactic presentation of his vision. In act four Kinnamon summarizes Visser 't Hooft's ecumenical vision under the rubric of "the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world." Once again drawing on Visser 't Hooft's own words, Kinnamon sets out a fulsome description of an embodied vision for the possibility and necessity of the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches.

Yet act four ends on a somber note: "In 1983, less than two years before his death, Visser 't Hooft spoke to students at the Ecumenical Institute at Chateau de Bossey about the future of the WCC. He began by telling them that three convictions, foundational to the ecumenical movement (and his own theology) were now being called into question: that it is Christ-centered, Bible-centered, and church-centered" (177f). While he did not dispute the cogency of some of the critiques, Visser 't Hooft understood them as refinements rather than rejections. Others called for a more thorough recalibration of the ecumenical movement and its instrumentalities.


The final act is played out in two scenes. The first is a summary of comprehensive critiques of the past represented by Visser 't Hooft and the necessity of a "paradigm shift." Both Konrad Raiser, fourth general secretary of the WCC and Wesley Ariarajah, a former deputy general secretary, critiqued the originating vision of the WCC, perceiving theological deficiencies and organizational limitations. Their efforts were central to bringing about a "paradigm shift" in the theological understanding of the ecumenical movement, and alterations to the mission of the WCC and other ecumenical agencies.

Kinnamon's tracing of Raiser's "paradigm shift" and Ariarajah's "wider ecumenism" acknowledges their concerns but avoids explicit evaluation of their effects. The WCC, together with other expressions of conciliar ecumenism, is now a diminished presence in both the world and the churches. In many respects, it has become what Visser 't Hooft warned against at the first WCC Assembly in 1948: "If the ecumenical movement becomes an ecumenical institution, its days are numbered" (143). But Kinnamon's purpose is not to criticize or lament the current state of the ecumenical movement or the World Council of Churches. Instead, in the second scene of the drama's concluding act, he acknowledges that while it is not possible to return to the past, "As a longtime participant in the ecumenical movement, I am convinced, however, that there are elements of

*The WCC, together with other expressions of conciliar ecumenism, is now a diminished presence in both the world and the churches. In many respects, it has become what Visser 't Hooft warned against at the first WCC Assembly in 1948...*

Visser 't Hooft's vision that are essential for Christians, then and now" (195).

Michael Kinnamon concludes his exercise in *ressourcement* with a constructive retrieval and expansion of key elements in Visser 't Hooft's thought and work. Brief but substantial sections focus insights from the ecumenical heritage on possibilities for the ecumenical future: the importance of a solid theological foundation, the necessity of the church, the continuing relevance of conciliar ecumenism, the value of patient impatience and impatient patience, as well as maintaining the necessary tensions between unity and justice, universal and particular, Christian witness and interfaith relations, liberal and conservative.

Sixty-five years ago, Visser 't Hooft wrote that, "Each generation has its specific task. ... In order to know our next assignment we must know what assignments were given to previous generations" (209). Michael Kinnamon concludes his superb book with his hope that, "this examination of how Willem Visser 't Hooft saw his task will help this generation see its own more clearly" (209). Readers of *Unity as Prophetic Witness* will look at today's ecumenical movement with sharpened vision, renewed hope, and energized commitment. 

*Readers of Unity as Prophetic Witness will look at today's ecumenical movement with sharpened vision, renewed hope, and energized commitment.*

# ECUMENICAL TRENDS

Graymoor Ecumenical  
& Interreligious Institute  
PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333

Periodicals  
Postage  
PAID  
at Garrison NY  
10524  
and Additional  
Mailing Offices

## Subscribe Today Read every issue of ET!

Every issue of Ecumenical Trends contains the valuable news, articles, and information you want. Don't miss an issue: subscribe today!

Order online at [www.geii.org/subscribe](http://www.geii.org/subscribe) or mail this form with payment. My payment of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed.

### Print and digital version

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year \$30.00 United States | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years \$55.00 United States |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year \$42.00 International | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years \$77.00 International |

### Digital version only

- ☐ 1 year \$15.00

Please enter my subscription to Ecumenical Trends for:

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/STATE/ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail payment to:

### Ecumenical Trends

Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute  
PO Box 333, Garrison, New York 10524-0333  
Tel: 845-690-1088  
Email: [ecutrends@geii.org](mailto:ecutrends@geii.org)



Printed on recycled paper.