TABLES OF PEACE:

CONSTRUCTING A THEOLOGY OF AN INTERRELIGIOUS WELCOME TABLE

by

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INTRODUCTION: ENCOUNTER

One of the challenges for any faith tradition is to find ways to welcome the other. The other is anyone who has a different set of theological beliefs, faith perspective, cultural heritage, or other marker of differentiation. Essentially, the other can be anyone who is understood as strange or unfamiliar. Compelled by the concept of hospitality, how one treats the other becomes a testimony to the tenets of one's faith. How does practicing a shared meal with people from various faith traditions inform, contribute to, or even alter one's understanding of hospitality? This question will serve as the rationale and focus for my Doctor of Ministry Project.

Practical Theological Approach

In order to pursue this question, I will be utilizing the practical theological method described by Mark Branson and Juan Martinez: "This approach to practical theology [is] a continual movement from experience to reflection and study, and then on to new actions and experiences."[1] This project and what happens afterwards will be an evolving process and perspective of how one might build community with individuals from other faiths. While it should be understood that this project emerged from within my own context, I imply that Interreligious Welcome Tables might be set in numerous communities.

I have constructed this project by sharing an encounter, considering the theological perspective of a cosmopolitan approach, interpreting scripture utilizing that theological

[1] Mark Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), Kindle locations 382-383, Kindle.

perspective, considering how food and faith are inextricably connected, and finally moving back to practice. As Branson and Martinez propose, this process can be messy; however, it can provide practitioners an opportunity to combine theory and practice in an immersive experience.[2] I believe immersion is precisely what is required when building community and developing new relationships with one's religious neighbor.

I will utilize a theological approach rooted in praxis and developed in conversation with alternative approaches for encountering the religious other. Through this project, I hope to clarify my own theological understanding of my religious neighbors as well as offer an approach for encounter that others might consider.

I will also utilize a few tools for developing arguments and making theological arguments. The first is a literature review. This review will examine two main theological fields of study. Cosmopolitan theology will be foundational for my examination of hospitality and its central place at the welcome table. This theological school of thought explores key concepts of hospitality within a global context and recognizes the complications and critical significance of practicing hospitality. I will review and highlight other works focused on the theological, philosophical, and practical aspects of hospitality. I will then argue for its centrality within an interreligious context.

The second focus of my literature review will be within the field of the theology of food. Here I will examine the theological significance of food and table sharing. I will argue that sharing food can be a sacred act when done with intentionality and reverence. I contend that when people gather to share food with one another they can have a religious experience shaped by food itself and the purpose for which they have gathered. I propose that interreligious table

[2] Ibid.

fellowship can have significant impact for those gathered around such tables and for one's community.

Another tool I use is an exegetical examination of John 14:1-7.[3] I am crafting this project from a Protestant, Christian perspective; therefore, it is important to examine what scripture says about the religious other. As a Christian, the Bible informs and shapes my religious perspective, and I believe what it has to say is critical to my understanding of the Interreligious Welcome Table. This text has been used as a text to exclude the religious other or argue against the validity of other religions.[4] I will suggest an alternative interpretation of the text in order to reclaim Jesus' teaching on hospitality and inclusion.

A final tool for my research is a survey.[5] I have created a survey and shared it with an interreligious community called the People of Faith for Peace of which I am a participant. I developed this survey to help me understand whether or not various participants have experienced hospitality in an interreligious context, as well as how they have been affected by sharing food with the religious other. I hope to learn from them what interreligious welcome looks like, and how one might build community in the midst of thoughtful and faithful dialogue while sharing hospitality and a meal together.

I have chosen to survey this community because they are a local group with whom I am familiar. I limited the scope of the survey to this group because they specifically incorporated a meal at every gathering. I wanted to learn from them how they understood sharing food within an interreligious context. Was this a utilitarian function to satiate hunger or did it hold religious

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[3] *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 1937.
[4] Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John XII-XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 630.
[5] See Appendix A.

meaning as well? This interreligious community and the responses to the survey have altered my understanding of community-building, hospitality, and table sharing. They have helped me gain an appreciation for immersing oneself into the lives of religious neighbors. They have given me a tremendous gift by helping me reframe my approach for welcoming the religious other and embracing difference without expecting conformity or homogeneity.

Encounter

Education, dialogue, and social service have been components of interfaith encounter.[6] These approaches to interreligious encounter have become first steps for many to engage the other. They are steps toward tolerance and understanding, but is there another step one could take? There are at least three possible perspectives of engaging the religious other: exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism.[7] The exclusivist approach seeks to ignore or denounce alternative beliefs of the religious other. An exclusivist adheres to the belief that there is only one valid religious perspective. Ariana Cisneros claims, "Exclusivists contend that their own tradition is the only repository of truth, and if they ever engage in dialogue with other traditions, they fail to question the form of dialogue that they in fact may be imposing on others."[8]

Inclusivists believe in the importance of valuing the religious perspective of another. Cisneros observes, "Inclusivists and their relativist kin, in turn, admit that the proper response to religious diversity is to recognize—although to a different extent—the legitimacy of values other

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[6] For an examination of these approaches to interfaith encounter see: Bud Heckman and Lori Picker Neiss, eds., *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths, 2008) and Kate McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

[7] Ariana Cisneros explains, "Traditionally in Western theology and religious studies literature, interreligious relationships have been classified into three categories: exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist." Ariana Cisneros, "Understanding Through Appropriation in Interreligious Dialogue on Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39: 2 (2011): 248.

[8] Ibid.

than their own."[9] Inclusivism attempts to accept other religious traditions; however, this acceptance can emerge from the position of religious superiority of the one offering "acceptance." From a Christian perspective, Namsoon Kang explains, "Religious inclusivism is obviously different from exclusivism, but it still maintains the Christian-centric view of religion, with 'the claim to Christianity's unique finality as the locus of the only full divine revelation and the only adequate saving event.'"[10]

The final approach one might take towards the religious other is pluralism. Pluralists recognize that each (non)religious perspective exists as part of the global religious landscape, and these perspectives should not be feared or derided because of the inherent differences. Kang claims that pluralists recognize numerous valid faith perspectives.[11] Pluralism does not seek to create space for the other, instead it embraces the preexistence of space for one's religious neighbor. Adherents of pluralism profess the multiplicity of ways people experience or understand salvation.[12]

Each of these perspectives presents challenges to one's particular faith. However, if one desires to have healthy and fruitful interactions with the religious other, it will be critical to move towards pluralism. Kang says, "The term religious pluralism is a contested concept and used differently depending on the disciplinary contexts. In the context of a theology of religion, scholars use religious pluralism in opposition to religious exclusivism."[13] Fully embracing the other without sacrificing one's unique and individual religious self-identity is a challenging notion for religious pluralism.

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), Kindle locations 2379-2382, Kindle.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., Kindle locations 2375-2378.
[13] Ibid.

How does one enter into dialogue or community with another from an alternative faith tradition while holding on to values and beliefs foundational to her or his faith of origin? This question is one interreligious interlocutors have been wrestling with for years.[14] Yet the importance and need for healthy encounter is more important now than ever.[15] Skepticism and fear of the religious other seems to be an insidious part of some American communities.[16] In the face of fear and violence there must be an alternative approach for community-building. How might one begin to build relationships with one's religious neighbor? To find space for encounter I propose an Interreligious Welcome Table.

Before exploring different approaches of encounter, it is critical to define two terms that seem somewhat interchangeable. The first is the term interfaith, a non-technical term which is used in everyday encounters. The second is interreligious, which is used more often in a formalized context. Interreligious, as Heckman and Neiss understand it, "is also used sometimes when the problematic aspects of 'interfaith' may be an impediment."[17] Interreligious tends to be more inclusive and recognizes the complicated nature of dialogue and encounter with the

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[14] In 1959, Howard Thurman wrote, "It is our faith that in the presence of God. … there is neither, male nor female, white nor black, Gentile nor Jew; Protestant nor Catholic; Hindu or Buddhist nor Muslim – but a human spirit, stripped to the literal substance of ITSELF!" His understanding of the need for humanity to recognize the value in the religious experiences of the other came at a time when the American culture was embroiled in racial injustice. Howard Thurman, *Footprints of A Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (New York: Harper, 1959), 107.

[15] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, author of *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, states, "To love X, he doesn't have to hate Y. To choose X, he doesn't have to reject Y. In other words, the very theologies that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have at their roots and that, of course, such violence between them through the centuries may actually be the wrong way of reading those texts." He suggests that despite differences between the doctrines and faiths of one's neighbor faith should not require adherents to hate or hurt members of another faith group. Jonathan Sacks interviewed by Robert Siegel, "'*Not In God's Name*' Confronts Religious Violence With A 'Different Voice,'" *All Things Considered*, aired October 8, 2015, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/2015/10/08/446980200/not-in-gods-name-confronts-religious-violence-with-a-different-voice.

[16] New York Police Department Chaplain, Imam Khalid Latif claimed, "The reality, unfortunately, is such that even leading into the elections we saw a gross increase in anti-Muslim bias and incidents." Latif claims that since the 2016 election prejudice and fear of the religious other is on the rise. "Muslim NYPD Chaplain On Faith, Fear And Getting Stopped By Airport Security," Terry Gross, *Fresh Air,* aired January 18, 2017, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/2017/01/18/510350067/muslim-nypd-chaplain-on-faith-fear-and-getting-stopped-by-airport-security.

[17] Heckman and Neiss, *InterActive Faith*, 6.

religious other. These terms will be used to describe the two aspects of interreligious encounter throughout the project.

To begin constructing an Interreligious Welcome Table, one must be willing to encounter the religious other. Encounter is the first step in a series one must take if he or she is determined to welcome and be welcomed by the religious other. How does one encounter the religious other?

The first way one could encounter the religious other and alternative faith traditions is through an educational approach. In this method one might attend a course in a higher educational institution to broaden and deepen one's understanding of the religious other. These courses may include the study of history, doctrine, theological belief, philosophy, ethics, and sacred writings of multiple or individual religious traditions.[18] Through study of the religious other, one gains insight and a better understanding of what the religious other believes.

Another way is through dialogue. Such dialogue might occur informally during encounters with interreligious neighbors in one's neighborhood or more formally through public forums or panel discussions held throughout one's community. These events provide space for one to ask questions of one's religious neighbor and listen as she or he describes beliefs, traditions, and rituals.[19] These events can help participants interact with a person from another tradition in order to learn and experience one's religious neighbor. They can be held in a variety

[18] Examples of texts that take this academic approach are: John Bowker, *Beliefs that Changed the World* (London: Quercus, 2007); Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa, eds., *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Houston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 1991); Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[19] One example can be found in a local interfaith group that offers a "Speakers Bureau," which offers speakers from a variety of faiths to come lead dialogue originating in a particular faith. "Speakers Bureau," *Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council*, http://www.kcinterfaith.org/speakers-bureau/.

of settings and offer participants a brief glimpse into the lives or cultural contexts of the religious other.

The third way can be described as an interreligious social justice approach. This method brings together a group of people from various faith traditions so that they can address community issues or risks. Kansas City for Refugees is one example of such an organization based in my community.[20] This group brings many faith traditions together to help resettle refugees across the metropolitan area. Such groups may resemble ecumenical ministerial alliances, but instead of members being exclusively from Christian denominations, they include numerous faith traditions.[21]

These arenas of encounter recognize the importance of embracing connection, coexistence, and cooperation with interreligious neighbors. Through such encounters one might begin to practice tolerance and acceptance of the religious other. These encounters create opportunities to learn about the religious other without necessarily building relationships. From a distance, they offer impressions of one's neighbor. Yet a question remains, is it possible to achieve more than acceptance or tolerance within a religiously diverse community? How might one practice hospitality with the intent to foster community-building and neighboring?

Interreligious Welcome Table: An Immersive Approach

I recognize the importance of dialogical, educational, and social justice approaches to interreligious encounter. I believe they are important components for robust learning about one's (non)religious neighbors. However, I do not think they should be the exclusive or even the preferred approaches for building community with individuals from other faiths. A move

[20] *KC for Refugees*, http://kcforrefugees.weebly.com/.
[21] McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 86-87.

towards tolerance and understanding is critical, but is it the end goal? Perhaps these approaches do not go far enough. Learning about another faith is a worthy enterprise, but immersing oneself in the life of another might offer deeper and lasting connection with the religious other. To tolerate the other, in its most simplistic form, is to make space for the other without necessarily valuing them. This implies that someone, presumably the one with more power, allows the other to share space. Tolerance does not necessarily practice dignity or mutual respect, nor does it build a foundation for community or hospitality.

Namsoon Kang explains:

> Although tolerance has its merit and is much better than intolerance, it still "remains a scrutinized hospitality, always under surveillance, parsimonious and protective of its sovereignty. … In the best of cases, it's … conditional hospitality." In this politics of tolerance, people may idealize or compliment the religious other as long as the religious other remains a safe and "toothless other."[22]

Kang's insight helps to explain how complicated hospitality and welcome are as theological concepts. Without realizing, some extend hospitality in hierarchical terms and with invisible strings attached. True hospitality and welcome cannot be mere tolerance; they must go further. Many faith traditions tout the importance of hospitality. Without question, tolerance is an important step when encountering religious others, but it cannot be the final one.

Before one explores a different approach of interreligious encounter beyond interfaith dialogue and education, it is critical to name and define what one means by hospitality. Why should hospitality be the foundation for interreligious encounter? As I have already alluded, hospitality is a contested concept. Often what is meant by hospitality is what Kang describes as "conditional hospitality."[23] The challenge of this approach to hospitality concerns the power dynamics at play when one attempts to offer hospitality to another. How can one truly welcome

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[22] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 2512-2516.
[23] Ibid., Kindle locations 2514.

the other without dignity, an attempt at equity, or embracing diversity? While it may be impossible to find a truly neutral space or to offer or receive welcome on equal terms, Kang suggests that hospitality is at its best when one makes the attempt.

Perhaps an example from the current political and social debate on immigration and refugees in the United States and other countries can flesh out the concept. Kat Chow reported on a march in Times Square to raise awareness of the importance of recognizing one's religious neighbor as a friend rather than an enemy. Chow writes, "'We're using the Muslim community as a scapegoat. We are being mean to the people who are the victims of terrorism. …"[24] Chow notes the continued skepticism and fear directed at Muslim immigrants and community members. Kang observes, "Discourse on hospitality has moved to the center of sociopolitical, economic, philosophical, and religious controversy, especially over such pressing issues as illegal immigrants, undocumented workers, refugees, asylum, and multiculturalism."[25] Debates like these shed light on the subterranean pretext. They are exploring the fundamental question of who belongs and in what way. Who is in, and who is out?

If hospitality is about inclusion or welcome, then such lines of questioning are founded on inappropriate premises. This is what Kang refers to as the "double-bind" of hospitality.[26] Hospitality is complex and nearly impossible to practice, yet it is one of the foundational tenets of many faith perspectives. Scholars within these faith traditions have been attempting to express the critical nature of hospitality. Kang argues for, "the cosmic belonging of all individual human beings as the ground of our hospitality, solidarity, justice, and neighbor-love."[27] It is the belief

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[24] "In Times Square, Protesters Take To The Streets To Say 'I Am Muslim Too,'" Kate Chow, *The Two-Way,* aired February 19, 2017, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/19/516137660/in-times-square-protesters-take-to-the-streets-to-say-i-am-muslim-too.
[25] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology,* Kindle locations 3614-3616
[26] Kang calls this a double-bind because it is both an "impossible" yet "possible" necessity of faith. Something that many faith traditions strive for yet many practitioners struggle to achieve. Ibid., Kindle locations 4319.
[27] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 3022.

that all have worth and value as part of being alive in the world. Throughout this project I will continue to explore the concept of hospitality in greater detail. Suffice it to say that it is perhaps the key practice necessary for authentic interreligious encounter, regardless of which methodology for encounter one employs.

The approach I recommend is the Interreligious Welcome Table. This is both a theological and physical place where people of all faiths can gather in an attempt to share food, life, and theological inquiry. Around the table, dialogue occurs. Education is also intrinsic. There is a deepening emotional and spiritual connection as well as a recognition of shared humanity. The Interreligious Welcome Table is a place where one can explore hospitality in deeper, broader, and riskier ways.

An Interreligious Welcome Table is unique and distinctive because it is an immersive experience wherein one takes seriously the concept of hospitality and its practice in the midst of interreligious community. It moves beyond what Kang describes as "religious tourism."[28] She argues that to deepen connections with one's interreligious interlocutors one must venture into the lives of the religious other. She argues for an immersive experience of the religious other.[29] An Interreligious Welcome Table does not seek encounter for encounter's sake. It does not tokenize or attempt to homogenize the beliefs or perspectives of the religious other; instead, it attempts to immerse the interreligious participants in the rituals, food practices, culture, and social life of the religious neighbor. Through this encounter one has the potential to create and deepen relationships with the religious other.

[28] Ibid., Kindle locations 2337.
[29] Ibid., Kindle locations 2470-79

Encounter Around the Table

Curious about what an interreligious community looked like, I began looking for examples around Kansas City. This search lead me to interreligious seminars, the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, and other interfaith events. Eventually, I was invited to participate in a new group that was forming called the People of Faith for Peace (POFFP). In December 2012 I was invited to attend this informal gathering of people who represented the three Abrahamic faith traditions. Wrestling with my own sense of inclusivity, I was eager for an opportunity to engage in dialogue. At the very least, I hoped to learn something about other faith traditions, but what I discovered was something far more catalytic.

At the first POFFP gathering, we met in the home of a Muslim family. Each of us brought food items to contribute to a potluck meal. After we filled our plates with cuisine representative of our global group, we began talking. We talked about work, play, children, grandchildren, aging parents, and a myriad of other topics. Then we had a focused time of sharing about Hanukkah. There was prayer, singing, as well as lighting of candles shared by a Jewish participant, and the rest of the guests were invited to participate.

Next, we had discussion about how each of our faith traditions understood the concept of peace. In this discussion, participants shared viewpoints from his or her faith tradition rooted in scripture or theological understanding in order to talk about each faith perspective on peace. This discussion about peace was similar to those one might experience from the educational, dialogical, or social justice approach illustrated above.

At the conclusion of the evening, we immediately began planning future meetings. We decided to meet in a couple of months and explore another topic through each unique faith lens. We began to call ourselves the People of Faith for Peace and decided to continue meeting in the

homes of various members of the group. At every gathering we had dinner, each bringing a vegetarian dish to share. We tried to consider the dietary restrictions of the other faiths represented. Table sharing became a central ritual of our quarterly meetings. We had a time of prayer, often shared by the host from his or her faith, and then we gave thanks to each other for her or his contribution to the feast. After the meal, people shared a presentation or topic concerning a theological perspective from one of the representative faiths. This sharing created an environment where no one was the expert and everyone was free to ask thoughtful questions of faith. It also provided the participant an opportunity to engage, observe, or even practice rituals from another faith perspective.

During a holy season like Advent, Sukkot, Hanukah, or Ramadan, someone would share about a practice of faith for the season. The leader of the discussion described a practice of their religious community. Depending on the season, the group occasionally shifted the meeting from a home to a worship space. Through this practice, the group met at least once at a mosque, church, and synagogue. These were enriching opportunities for increasing understanding of different faith traditions.

Over the past five years, the group has continued to meet and the dynamic and practice of the group has changed. While we still meet in each other's home, we have also begun to host events open to the public as well. One of those events was a rally held at the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City.[30] During this event, the group invited guest speakers from various faith traditions to offer words of solidarity and hope concerning refugees. The intent was to create a public statement that affirmed the faith traditions and the basic humanity of people immigrating to the Kansas City area.

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[30] Steve Mencher, "Interfaith Group Seeks to Welcome, Not Shun, Syrian Refugees," *Flatland KC*, December 14, 2015, http://www.flatlandkc.org/news-issues/interfaith-group-seeks-welcome-shun-syrian-refugees/.

Following the public rally, the group has become involved in other partnerships focused on practicing care and concern for refugee populations throughout the city. We have partnered with Della Lamb, Jewish Vocational Services, and the Somalian Refugee Community Center of Kansas City. While we have created these partnerships, we have also continued to maintain our original practice of sharing a potluck meal, inviting open and engaging dialogue, and a religious observance from one of the participants.

Four aspects of our gatherings stood out as critical components. The first was the shared meal. The potluck meal began to symbolize for me our unique faiths, cultures, and histories served in dishes I had never tasted before. On the surface it was a simple meal, but when I began to appreciate the origins and preparations of each dish, I felt like I was tasting a bit of each faith tradition. It is difficult to explain, which is why I am exploring this more deeply in the fourth chapter.

The second aspect of the POFFP meetings was the conversational opportunities. In the beginning these conversations where challenging. Each member was fearful of offending another. It took several months for us to develop trust and have deeper, richer discussions regarding our faith perspectives. Through those conversations, I gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. I began to see connections I never realized existed, and differences emerged without creating fear or distrust of the religious other.

These conversations were only possible because each participant committed to a particular style of dialogue, one not rooted in apologetics or a desire to proselytize. Rather, it was a style of dialogue intended to build relationship, understanding, and respect. Questions were encouraged while judgments were not. Critical thinking and tough questioning in pursuit of

better understanding were welcome. However, the group tried to avoid value statements. Conversations have been thoughtful, enriching, and considerate of various perspectives.

A third key practice of the POFFP has been to host the meals and conversations in each other's living spaces, our homes and neighborhoods. People tend to segment themselves into enclaves across the city.[31] To be introduced to a neighborhood can have profound implications for breaking through invisible barriers, and over time, people can find themselves being invited into larger events of a religious community.

A final aspect of POFFP's practice was the commitment to peaceful action. While dialogue and food are important, public action became an opportunity to shape the larger community. Perhaps the larger community could benefit from an interreligious perspective. As noted earlier, many within the United States have a fear, distrust, or even hatred of the religious other. What if people saw a community of interreligious representatives not only as friends but partners actively working together to help vulnerable populations across one's community? How would this impact the community at large? As altruistic as it may sound, I wanted to know the answers to these questions, and I believed that with the POFFP it could be possible to find them.

These aspects of the Interreligious Welcome Table may share some elements with other approaches of interreligious encounter. However, I will argue that it creates a space for deeper engagement and relationship-building. It offers the participants an opportunity to invest in the lives of one's religious neighbor; while at the same time, practicing vulnerability so one might be changed or challenged to expand one's religious perspective. Initially, this change may be disturbing, frightening, and complicated; however, it might strengthen and grow one's faith as

[31] Bill Bishop makes the argument that people tend to "self-segregate" for a variety of reasons. Religion being one of those reasons people choose to live in enclaves throughout a geographical area. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 45-54.

well. In practicing hospitality around an interreligious table, one is forced to move beyond religious tourism and embrace a neighboring practice of community-building. In so doing, one has an incredible opportunity to seek peace and alter one's understanding of neighbor.

Conclusion

In the pages that follow, I will develop an alternative approach, in contrast to the educational, dialogical, and social justice approaches, for engaging the religious other. I will establish my arguments within my own Christian tradition. Through theological reflection, hermeneutics, and experience I will claim that creating an Interreligious Welcome Table is a more immersive method.

In chapter one, I will examine theological concepts found in cosmopolitan theology. Paying special attention to hospitality, I will explore the complications and the necessity of practicing risky hospitality. This exploration is intended to suggest that the reader explore an alternative approach for welcoming one's interreligious neighbor. It is my working assumption that interfaith dialogue or comparative approaches might provide a starting point for engaging the religious other, but an Interreligious Welcome Table creates an atmosphere for hospitality and a co-immersion experience for creating an interreligious community.

In chapter two, I will explore a text from the Gospel of John to develop a hermeneutical re-interpretation of a pericope that has been used to stifle and even prohibit interreligious encounter. Examining John 14:1-7, I will offer an alternative reading and invite the reader to contemplate how being a Christian does not prohibit one from welcoming the religious other as a neighbor and friend. I will offer an interpretation that takes seriously Jesus' propensity towards hospitality and welcome.

In chapter three, I will investigate the theology of food and explore creating an Interreligious Welcome Table. Relying on the work of Lisa Hess, Angel Méndez-Montoya, and others I will highlight the spiritual nature of sharing food. There is a growing body of scholarly work exploring the sharing of food as a means to deepen one's practice and understanding of hospitality. I will then expand the concept of table beyond the Christian context to develop a theological and practical approach for creating an Interreligious Welcome Table.

In the final chapter, I will consider some of the risks and implications of the Interreligious Welcome Table. As I share my research, I will also suggest ways in which the welcome table might need to expand and grow as others examine the practice. Finally, I will propose reasons why an Interreligious Welcome Table is needed now in the United States' culture.

I hope to develop an alternative approach for welcoming and caring for one's interreligious neighbor in a way that puts into practice foundational tenets of one's own faith. Primarily the belief that faith calls adherents to practice hospitality. Whether this happens by sharing a meal or engaging in civil discourse, my desire is to develop a robust theology of hospitality and interreligious welcome. Wherever one encounters the religious other, doing so with empathy, compassion, and dignity will mean one must consider what hospitality is as well as how to effectively practice it with one's interreligious neighbor. The Interreligious Welcome Table takes into consideration this belief and creates space to share one's life with her or his religious neighbor in hopes of building community and peace in one's neighborhood and beyond.

CHAPTER 1: HOSPITALITY

The power dynamics involved with hospitality and the ways it is shared are at the heart of practicing an Interreligious Welcome Table. In this chapter, I will develop a working definition that will create a theological context for reading a text from the Bible and constructing an Interreligious Welcome Table. I will also define terms that inform and shape my understanding of hospitality. Finally, I will explore the practice of hospitality through the lens of cosmopolitan theology.

What is Hospitality

Christine Pohl, who has done considerable research on hospitality, writes, "Over the past few centuries, the scope of hospitality as a term has diminished. It now chiefly refers to the entertainment of one's acquaintances at home and to the hospitality industry's provision of service through hotels and restaurants."[1] The term has lost some of its meaning and therefore some of the more complicated aspects of its theological scope.

Hospitality, within a Christian context, has perhaps lost its more challenging expression. Pohl suggests, "Today when we think of hospitality, we don't think first of welcoming strangers. We picture having family and friends over for a pleasant meal."[2] Instead of welcoming strangers in one's home, we have opted for a familiar or safe version of hospitality. Welcoming friends and family is one thing. Broadening the concept of who might be family and friend is another.

[1] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 36.
[2] Ibid., 4.

Over time hospitality and the way it was practiced changed. Pohl notes, "Concerns about hospitality to needy strangers gave rise to the development of hospitals, hospices, and hostels, and eventually these more anonymous and distanced ways of responding to strangers became the norm."[3] From a concern for the other, people developed organizations and institutions to care for the needs that arise in a society. In turn, the stranger eventually became someone else's concern and responsibility. Culture institutionalized hospitality and created a separate space where encounter with the stranger was lost. This ultimately led to hospitality becoming an industry separate from the practice of a faith community.

In order to reclaim and reframe hospitality, it is important to develop a working definition. For the scope of this project, hospitality is a theological practice, not solely Christian but a necessary part of Christian practice and belief. Hospitality expands the concept of neighbor to those who share the planet, universe, and the entire cosmos. Hospitality places a great deal of importance on one's responsibility for the other. It is rooted in care for the other and occurs anytime one is willing to embrace the other as neighbor. Such an understanding and practice of hospitality is not safe. It does not welcome the other only on familiar terms or in ways that benefit the host or take advantage of the guest. Hospitality is a religious imperative that has roots far beyond Christianity.[4] It necessitates vulnerability and a willingness to open oneself to the stranger.

Crucial to understanding hospitality in more robust terms, there are three concepts one must consider: natality, pluralism, and tolerance. These concepts complicate and clarify the

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[3] Ibid., 7.

[4] For more insight into the hospitality beliefs of other faiths see the following: Andrew Shryock, "Thinking about Hospitality, with Derrida, Kant, and the Balga Bedouins," *Anthropos* 103: 2 (2008) and Jennifer Peace, Or Rose and Gregory Mobley eds., *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012).

complexity of hospitality. It is not a simple idea, but if one is to attempt to create community and befriend the other then she or he must be willing to understand and practice authentic hospitality.

Natality

In Namsoon Kang's *Cosmopolitan Theology*, she examines the concept of natality as defined by the philosopher Hannah Arendt. Kang quotes Arendt saying, "[L]ove of neighbor does not mean to love the other in his [*sic*] mortality, but to love what is eternal in him, his very own 'whence.' What is eternal in each and every individual human being is not mortality but natality."[5] In an attempt to recognize the other as valuable and worthy, Arendt focuses not on the common experience of death but life.[6] Birth and the fullness of life are the events all creation experiences. While all creation experiences beginning, it does not do so in the same way. This diversity of life is also a fact of life.

Diversity of culture, faith, language, etc. creates an innate uniqueness that should not be feared but embraced. Kang observes:

> Hannah Arendt draws attention to the notion of natality, to the uniqueness of each and every birth, as a substantial human condition for action in the world. According to Arendt, human beings are "initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth," which "is not the same as the beginning of the world."[7]

Natality creates theological space for both the uniqueness of each person and value of that person's singular existence. It does not tokenize the individual for what makes him or her unique

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[5] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 2566-2569.
[6] Hans Jonas, reflecting on Hannah Arendt's contributions to philosophy, shares, "We prick up our ears. With "natality" Hannah Arendt not only coined a new word but introduced a new category into the philosophical doctrine of man. "Mortality" had always occupied the reflective mind, and the *meditatio mortis*,the meditation on death, was never far from the center of religious and philosophic thought. But its counterpart, the fact that each of us is born and enters the world as a newcomer, has been curiously neglected in the immemorial reflection on our being." Hans Jonas, "Acting, Knowing, Thinking: Gleanings from Hannah Arendt's Philosophical Work," *Social Research* 44: 1, (Spring 1977): 30.
[7] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 2596-2599.

but instead suggests we have a fundamental connection through our shared entrance into life. Through the uniqueness of each life or birth, one recognizes the essential diversity that exists and celebrates it. From a Christian perspective, this diversity and commonality becomes a sacred recognition of the other as neighbor.

Natality becomes a central tenet for constructing an interreligious theology of hospitality. To hold a belief that one shares creation by virtue of natality is to move beyond tolerance towards a posture of acceptance, welcome, and even embrace. It promotes a belief that each of us shares a connection through birth without trying to homogenize or normalize every religious experience or belief to fit a common or universal faith. Natality offers unity within diversity. No one is asked or expected to abandon one's faith perspective. If one accepts the Arendtian belief in natality, then one can begin to develop meaningful relationships with the religious other without fear of losing one's unique religious identity, while at the same time remaining open to growth and change on one's own terms.

Pluralism

In the quest to further define hospitality, pluralism is an essential term that must be considered. Diana Eck, one of the leading scholars of religious diversity, shares the following definition of pluralism:

> Pluralism is not just another word for diversity. … Religious diversity is an observable fact of American life today, but without any real engagement with one another, neighboring churches, temples, and mosques might prove to be just a striking example of diversity. … Although tolerance is no doubt a step forward from intolerance, it does not require new neighbors to know anything about one another. Tolerance can create a climate of restraint but not one of understanding. … [Pluralism] does not displace or eliminate deep religious commitments, or secular commitments for that matter.[8]

[8] Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), Kindle locations 70-71, Kindle.

Pluralism attempts to see the beauty and complexity of the rich and diverse environment within which one lives. Pluralism recognizes diversity without following the impulse to elevate one's faith tradition above others.[9]

Through pluralism, one adopts the notion that other faiths are viable, valid, and have a unique perspective that ought to be heard. Accepting the importance of diverse religious perspectives also means that one must let go of the belief that his or her faith perspective is the only acceptable or true system of belief. At the same time, Eck argues, one does not have to jettison one's core religious beliefs for the sake of another.

Exclusivists within the Christian tradition might argue that it is possible to love the neighbor or enemy and still believe that her or his faith is inferior. Privileging one faith tradition over another is condescending and prevents one from truly embracing the religious other as neighbor.

The Dalai Lama has claimed:

> The challenge before religious believers is to genuinely accept the full worth of faith traditions other than their own. This is to embrace the spirit of religious pluralism. … The line between exclusivism - which takes one's own religion to be the only legitimate faith - and fundamentalism is a dangerously narrow one; the line between fundamentalism and extremism is even narrower.[10]

Building on this perspective of pluralism, one begins to understand the danger of extremism and exclusivism. The extremism that appears in the headlines is an insidious and dangerous element

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[9] Francis Clooney explains that in the context of pluralism, it is critical to recognize, value, and embrace the "particularity" of each faith that one engages. He warns Christians about approaches that elevate their religion above another. He critiques the approach of earlier comparative theologians, "James Clark … serially introduces ten major religions, to explain them and show how their partial and imperfect truths are included in the larger, superior truth of Christianity, the universal religion meant for all humans and not just for particular nations or tribes." Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 32-34.

[10] The Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2010), ix.

within many faith traditions and can lead to violence and practices that are contrary to some of the basic beliefs of Christianity such as love of neighbor.[11]

If one begins to consider other faith traditions worthy or valid, what does that say about the faith he or she practices? Put another way, does valuing the faith of another weaken one's own belief? These questions are the heart of the pluralistic conversation within the Christian perspective. If one is to take the pluralistic approach seriously, then one must begin to recognize that no single religious perspective, much like no scientific, philosophical, or economic perspective holds all the answers. Rather, if one is to gain a richer, more complex picture of the sacred, it is essential to learn from other faith perspectives beyond one's own. Through pluralism, one begins to see the gifts that other faith traditions might share with Christians and vice versa. Brian McLaren writes, "So, we Christians generously share our treasures with others, and we receive the gifts generously offered to us by Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, atheists, and others."[12] These gifts include the daily prayer practice of the Muslim, the invitation to meditation and mindfulness from the Buddhist, the exploration of tradition and scripture found in the Midrash of the Jew, and many others.[13]

In this mutual sharing, a more complicated picture of the divine begins to emerge. This can be unsettling, but it can be liberating as well. Francis Clooney, a comparative theologian, writes:

> [A]s believers, we must also be able to defend the relevance of the faith of our community, deepening our commitments even alongside other faiths that are flourishing nearby. We need to learn from other religious possibilities, without slipping into

[11] Nina Burleigh writes about the rise of radical Christian extremism within the U.S. armed forces. Nina Burleigh, "Trump Effect Inspires Radical Christians in Military," *Newsweek*, May 22, 2017, http://www.newsweek.com/christian-fundamentalists-us-armed-forces-national-security-threat-613428.
[12] Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 262.
[13] *The Great Courses: Great World Religions*, Lecture Series, http://www.thegreatcourses.com/sets/set-great-world-religions-2nd-edition-new-testament.html.

> relativist generalizations. The tension between open-mindedness and faith, diversity and traditional commitment, is a defining feature of our era, and neither secular society nor religious authorities can make simple the choices before us.[14]

Through the exchange of ideas and interreligious dialogue, one can deepen her or his faith. McLaren offers, "We don't force everything we have on them: giving is not imposing."[15] As noted in the responses from the POFFP, one receives and shares various interreligious perspectives, and through that sharing one discovers a depth and breadth that might have been absent without the interreligious encounter. One explained that hospitality was, "Intentional acceptance of the other. Intentional welcoming with open-hearts. Care for the comfort of all guests. Not showy, but warm and comfortable."[16]

Through the perspectives of pluralism offered by Diana Eck, the Dalai Lama, Brian McLaren, and Francis Clooney, the complex world of pluralism comes into focus. It cannot be simplified; rather, adopting pluralism as one's philosophical/theological perspective further complexifies the religious sphere. Yet this complexity should not be understood in negative terms. This complexity can add to the depth of belief and religious practice.

Tolerance

How one understands the other is a precursor to how one treats the other. John Esposito and Dali Mogahed explain:

> In a December 2005 Gallup Poll of American households, when Americans were asked what they most admire about Muslim societies, the answer 'nothing' was the most frequent response. The second most frequent response? 'I don't know.' Combined, these two responses represented the majority (57%) of Americans surveyed."[17]

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[14] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 7.
[15] McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*, 262.
[16] See Appendix A, question 3.
[17] John Esposito and Dali Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What A Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 1.

Through their research, they have discovered a growing skepticism or animosity within the United States culture regarding Muslims.

This fear and suspicion is complicated by misinformation and misunderstanding. Again Esposito and Mogahed note:

> The vast diversity of Islam and of mainstream moderate Muslims has been overshadowed and obscured by a deadly minority of political (or ideological) extremists. In a monolithic "us" and "them" world, Islam - not just Muslims who are radical - is seen as a global threat, and those who believe in an impending clash of civilizations are not only the bin Ladens of the world, but also many of us.[18]

Muslims and people practicing faiths other than one's own cannot be categorically labeled as outsiders or enemies.[19] Religious others are not people to be feared, and often can help Christians discover an alternative theological stance regarding the religious other. After all, as Esposito and Mogahed claim, "According to the Quran, diversity in belief, cultures, and traditions is part of God's intended creation and a sign of his [sic] wisdom."[20]

When encountering the other, one approach might be tolerance. Tolerance suggests co-existence or getting along with one's religious neighbor; however, it is not a flattery when someone tolerates another. In fact, it implies that one individual, usually the one with power and privilege within a given cultural context, allows for the other to take up space in one's neighborhood or community. Such a view is condescending and can be oppressive if one faith group creates space for another from a stance rooted in superiority and power. Tolerance motivated by a sense of superiority keeps the other in a less-than state and are treated as such.

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[18] Ibid., 5.

[19] One does not have to look far for news articles or documentary films regarding the skepticism, violence, or hate speech that some people feel for their religious neighbor. Here are three examples: http://www.npr.org/2017/02/23/516787802/in-response-to-rising-violence-muslims-run-for-office, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07k1dkj, or http://www.npr.org/2017/02/21/516488403/headstones-vandalized-at-jewish-cemetery-in-missouri.

[20] Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam*, 9.

For Christians, it is not a tenet of faith nor does it reflect the posture of Jesus to tolerate one's neighbor. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "love your enemy as yourself and pray for those who persecute you."[21] Namsoon Kang explains, "Jesus' radical commandment to love one's neighbor-and-enemy-as-oneself is a radical call for dissolving the seemingly rigid boundaries between the triad of I-neighbor-enemy— the boundaries that appear to be impossible to transgress, to dissolve."[22]

The Biblical mandate for loving one's enemy forces one to go beyond tolerance. It draws one closer to embrace and community. Douglas Hare suggests, "What is absolutely clear from the examples [Jesus] gives is that the Christian response must be *abnormal*; to *negative* attitudes and acts we must make *positive* responses."[23] Hare's commentary of the Matthew text above notes the abnormal nature of the Christian mandate to love the enemy. This abnormality of the response stands in stark contrast to the examples of hate and fear explored earlier. For Hare, "Genuine love has no ulterior motive; its purpose is simply to benefit the one loved, regardless of the response."[24]

A love ethic is the propulsive force for one to move beyond tolerance. In the Matthean text Jesus argues for an alternative way of welcoming the other. Jesus suggests we are to practice an abnormal version of hospitality and welcome. One that leaves tolerance in the rearview as the practitioner attempts something far riskier.

If tolerance is not the ultimate destination, then what is? Is it an understanding that all are brothers and sisters in the common human family? Is it to pretend that no differences exist

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[21] Matthew 5: 43-45, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1754.
[22] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 2554-2556.
[23] Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 59.
[24] Ibid., 60.

between various faith perspectives, to create some sort of assimilative or melting-pot-culture? Is it to respect others yet hold no one accountable for his or her faith perspective, even if it could potentially harm another? To explore these questions and develop an interreligious theological perspective which will serve as the foundation for developing an Interreligious Welcome Table, I will outline concepts found within cosmopolitan theology as described by Namsoon Kang. This theological perspective requires hospitality to be the backbone of the welcome table.

Reframing Hospitality

Leaving behind an anemic propensity for tolerance, we now turn our attention to reframing hospitality. In so doing, one immediately observes how challenging it is. One of the greatest challenges of authentic hospitality is the imbalance of power. Kang explains, "When there is a disparity of rights and power between two subjects— the host and the guest, the other, the foreigner— hospitality means fundamental welcoming, unconditional receptivity by the host toward the other."[25] She goes on to explain that one must seriously consider the kind of welcome being offered in the practice of hospitality and shares a utopian view of how one must continually strive to decrease the imbalance. One can successfully make the case that eliminating the imbalance of power is impossible. Within the guest/host relationship, someone is always in a privileged position for various reasons including: racial, cultural, economic, or other privilege.

Kang makes the argument that it is crucial to always make the attempt to welcome the other despite the impossibility of eliminating the power differentiation that exists. Kang states:

> Utopian thoughts play the role of shattering the logocentric design/institutionalization of the reality that suppresses the powerless, the voiceless— the subaltern. Utopian thoughts expand one's perception of who-one-is/who-the-others-are and motivate one to seek for an alternative world that seems impossible in the present reality.[26]

[25] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology,* Kindle locations 4121-4123.
[26] Ibid., Kindle locations 4373-4375.

This utopian ideal might be impossible; however, that should not prevent one from making the attempt to welcome the other in her or his uniqueness and despite the power differentiation that exists. This argument for a utopian ideal creates firm theological ground for treating strangers as friends, and it offers philosophical synergy with the concept of alterity. The cosmopolitan concept of alterity affirms the unique and singular identity of each member of creation.[27] Related to natality, alterity recognizes that individuals cannot be reduced to a categorical system or classification.

At the heart of practicing hospitality is one's understanding of neighbor. This has been the thread that weaves together the terms and concepts examined above. Answering the question who is or is not one's neighbor is no easy task. One can think of neighbor in geographical, tribal, and even universal terms. Some theologians have considered hospitality in broad, sweeping terms.[28] Pohl states:

> Defining anyone in need as our neighbor, as it seems the [Christian] tradition requires, can elicit two problematic responses. Because it is such a broad claim, it can remain an abstract commitment, something related to an attitude of care or compassion rarely translated into action. Another danger is that our responses to large numbers of "neighbors" can become general, superficial, and less personal. On the other hand, universal claims are an important corrective to personal one-to-one care that, though intense, can also be very limited and private.[29]

As Pohl suggests, there is a problem when one defines neighbor in such broad terms. Without specificity, one can fall into complacency and apathy. Without recognizing that the person standing next to you is indeed your neighbor despite the differences that exist, the impulse to care for him or her by nature of their very existence might be absent. How can one

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[27] Ibid., Kindle locations 2211-2218.
[28] For a more in depth looks at various perspectives regarding the theological aspects of hospitality see Pohl's exploration in her chapter "Reconsidering the Tradition." Pohl, *Making Room*, 61-124.
[29] Ibid., 76.

practice a hospitality that is not impersonal or too broad to be meaningful? How can practitioners move beyond the superficial and instead share hospitality in a way that connects, heals, helps, and sets the stage for authentic community?

Natality and pluralism moves the interreligious interlocutor a step closer towards practicing the complex and dangerous concept of hospitality. When one begins to conceptualize hospitality, questions arise. Who is in? Who is out? Who should have a seat at the table? However, when one assumes that she or he can answer those questions without limiting some other beloved Christian theological belief such as love, grace, or compassion then it becomes increasingly problematic. If God's grace knows no bounds, why would God choose to welcome some but exclude others? If God is love and if that love is indeed infinite, then how could anyone find themselves excluded from the table? Questions focused on determining who is in or out miss the radical and inclusive nature of a God whose love is limitless. Hospitality then cannot be limited to only those who share the same faith or are part of the same community. It must be larger.

In Kang's construction of a cosmopolitan approach of hospitality, she examines Jacques Derrida's interpretation of its complexity. Kang notes:

> Derrida repeatedly points out the ambivalence of the term hospitality and coins the term "hostipitality (hostipitalité)" to show the entanglement of hostility and hospitality, raising a fundamental question of the nature and the subject of hospitality. Derrida's hostipitality invites one to realize the undecidability, entanglement, and fine line between friend (favorable stranger) and enemy (hostile stranger), between hospitality and hostility, and to approach the issue of hospitality from a fundamentally new way.[30]

In Derrida's estimation, hospitality is further complicated through the attempt to identify who is friend or foe. It is a fine line one must constantly push against in hopes of eradicating the lines of

[30] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 3695-3700.

demarcation individuals attempt to draw between the privileged "us" and the outsider "them." It seems impossible to eliminate the inequity of power between guest and host.

Gideon Baker, a political scientist and philosopher, explains the complicated nature of welcoming the other. He writes:

> The *productive* tension between identity and difference at the heart of cosmopolitan ethics is captured by the ethics of hospitality, where our awareness of the identity of the stranger as a fellow human being seeking refuge is opposed by the irreducible difference of the stranger as Other - someone who, as a guest in a home not his [*sic*] own, suffers the violence of assimilation.[31]

Hospitality, if it is truly hospitality, must not force the other to adopt beliefs, practices, or perspectives that are not his or her own. Hospitality must ensure the safety and dignity of the other and in so doing discover something new about oneself and the other.

These borders that separate become politicized and elevated in the public eye in the debate over immigration. Again, Kang states, "The act of hospitality is a form of generosity by the host, whether an individual person or the state, but it often ends up being ruthless forms of the nonrights of the guests, once the guests seem to cross the borderline."[32] Kang describes the power of the passport to give privilege to some while imprisoning the unfortunate. Countries keep the immigrant at bay especially if they are perceived as a threat or rival.[33] When borders close, it challenges the Christian ethic of hospitality. While the closing of borders might make political sense for those who advocate or vote for the restriction of immigration, it rails against

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[31] Gideon Baker, "Cosmopolitanism as Hospitality: Revisiting Identity and Difference in Cosmopolitanism," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 34: 2 (April-June, 2009): 109.
[32] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 4218-4219.
[33] There is an argument against welcoming the immigrant or refugee into the United States based on a fear that such individuals pose a criminal threat to the citizenry. However, if one takes a cursory look at data collected then he or she would see that such arguments are unfounded. According to the American Immigration Council, "incarceration rates among young men are lowest for immigrants, even those who are the least educated." Rubén G. Rumbaut and Walter Ewing "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation," *American Immigration Council* (February 21, 2007), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/myth-immigrant-criminality-and-paradox-assimilation.

the theological imperative of hospitality. Welcoming the stranger, especially those seeking protection, refuge, or hope amid violence, is characteristic of even the most elemental understanding of hospitality.[34] The immigration discussion finds its core argument in one's understanding of hospitality and responsibility to the other.

One of the contributing factors for this "hostipitality" Derrida illuminates is the imbalance of power or difference between the host and guest and all of creation, as examined earlier. Kang suggests:

> The planetary hospitality of singularity is a discourse of hospitality about the rights of every singular being as guests who are equal with hosts. It is also a discourse of hypersensitivity to the marginalized, the subjugated, the excluded, the colonized, and the subaltern, including the concrete other, the distant others, and animals. Planetary hospitality should be of singularity, in which everyone involved in the exercise of hospitality must be treated as a singular, unique being.[35]

Singularity refers to the uniqueness of each individual, and resists the impulse to homogenize the other. Singularity is a complicating factor, but it can be embraced through significant focus and effort. Enter the Arendtian concept of natality. When one adopts the concept of natality, differences do not fade, but the singular other becomes valued and imbued with dignity. Dignity is not given by the host, but by the very nature of being alive. Recognizing the inherent dignity and singularity of all, one can then move closer to authentic hospitality.

Without question, hospitality that tries to balance power and privilege is complex, problematic, and perhaps impossible to practice. However, if one takes the challenge seriously it might be possible to practice hospitality with dignity. Approaching the other with a natalistic understanding of humanity thereby treating the other with dignity and value without

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[34] "For most of the history of the church, hospitality was understood to encompass physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationship. It meant response to the physical needs of strangers for food, shelter, and protection, but also a recognition of their worth and common humanity." Pohl, *Making Room*, 6.
[35] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 4226-4230.

simultaneously exercising privilege may be impossible, but Kang's theological approach necessitates that one makes the attempt. There is much to be gained when all gather around the table in hospitality.

Individuals have stratified host and guest, creating an imbalance of power and privilege in various contexts. Whether through socioeconomic, racial, or religious borders, it is not uncommon to adopt a belief that one's class/race/religion is superior to another.[36] Kang suggests true hospitality is experienced when the chasms between host and guest are filled in through intentional and reciprocal acceptance and welcome. Essentially, she suggests that one must be cognizant of difference without attempting to exercise one's privileged place in the community or culture.

Not everyone agrees with Kang's definition or description of how one might practice hospitality in an interreligious context. In Timothy Wotring's book review of Kang's work, he suggests:

> [R]eligions must change their exclusivist notions, especially in the age of globalization and the Internet. However, questions still remain towards the denunciation of religions for cosmopolitanism. Is then cosmopolitanism taking the place of religion? Is this not a kind of colonization, exactly what Kang fights against? Isn't exclusivity the harbor in which religions stay afloat?[37]

Here Wotring attempts to argue that such strong religious borders are what protect religions from losing their identities. Such exclusivity intentionally prevents a welcoming, diverse community in favor of a selective and homogenous one. However, can such an understanding of religious exclusivism prosper within the globalized and pluralistic context?

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[36] Ralph Ellis, Eliott C. McLaughlin and Madison Park, "Portland Stabbing Suspect Yells in Court: Free Speech or Die," *CNN Online* (May 31, 2017), http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/30/us/portland-train-teenager-stabbing-arraignment/.

[37] Timothy Wotring, "Book Review: Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World," *Black Flag Theology Blog* (September 5, 2014), https://blackflagtheology.com/2014/09/05/book-review-cosmopolitan-theology-reconstituting-planetary-hospitality-neighbor-love-and-solidarity-in-an-uneven-world/.

A term Kang shares to help the practitioner of this cosmopolitan approach of hospitality is glocalization. Instead of a worldview of strictly segmented cultures or hard borders, Kang imagines a utopian philosophical, political, and theological approach rooted in natality. Kang writes:

> I would like to fashion a glocalized narrative that vindicates the intersected and interconnected nature between the grand narrative and the small narrative, between the global and the local, while it questions and resists totalizing power and theories that have institutionalized, normativized, and naturalized various forms of social inequality.[38]

Kang again argues that if one is to practice authentic hospitality, one must realize that one's actions, beliefs, politics, and faith affect our neighbors. Her description of glocal contexts brings neighbors from countless countries of origin, faith perspectives, socio-economic, and even political perspectives into the very neighborhoods in which we live. It is a concept meant to draw humanity and all of creation closer together. Recognizing the proximity of the other creates an opportunity to enter into relationship, wherein community can be created.

The concept of glocalization is related to encounter. When one elects to encounter the other and develop a relationship, he or she begins to not only gain understanding of the other but perhaps develop a greater appreciation for other perspectives. By encountering someone from another faith, one has the potential to learn, relate, and build community that is diverse and rich. One of the POFFP participants described the experience of encounter saying, "I am much less shy around people I know to be of another faith, especially Islam. I make an effort to greet women wearing the hijab in a way that I hope indicates that I find them approachable and 'normal.'"[39] Through the experience of interaction with people of other religious traditions, this

[38] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 137-139.
[39] See Appendix A, question 4.

individual began to understand that being a "neighbor" to someone included a friendly greeting and conversation as an approach rooted in natality.

Ashutosh Varshney, a writer whose work examines conflict and community, described encounter this way: "by promoting communication between members of different religious communities, civic networks often make neighborhood-level peace possible."[40] For him, this glocalization of cultural, religious, political, and other points of view occurs at a grassroots level. It begins in the neighborhood and fosters community.

It is also helpful to describe what hospitality is not. Hospitality is not tolerance. Tolerance does not go far enough when one attempts to practice hospitality. It may be a starting point, but nothing more.

Hospitality is not mere friendliness. Christine Pohl writes, "When most of us practice hospitality, we typically welcome those with whom we already have some established bonds and significant common ground … It is one of the pleasures of ordinary life."[41] Being friendly, civil, or polite might be key attributes of hospitality, but it is deeper, richer, and far more complex. She goes on to argue that genuine hospitality takes significant risk when welcoming the "stranger."[42] If one is to attempt to practice hospitality, then one should be aware of those risks. Welcoming the stranger demands a certain level of vulnerability. Inviting someone into one's home or personal space can be frightening or unsafe. The hospitality enterprise is fraught with unpredictability. What if the guest does not appreciate the welcome or offer words of thanksgiving? What if they unintentionally break the traditions of the household in which they have been invited? Unpredictability, uncertainty, and vulnerability can endanger the welcome. It

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[40] Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Kindle locations 205-206, Kindle.
[41] Pohl, *Making Room*, 13.
[42] Ibid.

is part of the nature of hospitality. It is not risk-free. Yet if both parties, guest and host, can covenant to respect and honor one another in their uniqueness, then such hospitality can create an opportunity to build relationships. This mutual commitment to care for one another establishes shared responsibility for each to practice hospitality.

The motivation for practicing hospitality is not rooted in human propensity towards kindness. Rather, as Pohl and Kang have independently argued, it is grounded in dignity and respect for the other. Practicing hospitality does not ignore the unique identity of the other. Instead, it requires one to embrace, welcome, and value that identity, while at the same time never neglecting one's own. This is perhaps the greatest challenge of hospitality.

Interreligious Hospitality

Critical elements of identity, dignity, and neighbor became foundational to the development of an Interreligious Welcome Table through the response to the questions I asked the POFFP. "What have you found most life-giving by participating in this community? What has been most challenging?"[43] One of the respondents noted:

> The most life-giving is to have it reinforced that my community is made up of people of faith not people of a particular religion. I gravitate and need people of faith in my life. That's my litmus test for a meaningful interaction. If you have faith then I might have more in common with you than if you and I shared the same religion.

This response brought distinct clarity to something I had been wrestling with for some time. How does one participate in an interreligious context without sacrificing elements of one's religious perspective?

When I began participating in the POFFP, my approach of hospitality in the interreligious encounter was focused on finding the common ground. What are the commonalities that

[43] See Appendix A, question 7.

interlocutors can define and debate? From there, I attempted to build friendships and a sense of community. However, after reading the responses to the survey I sent, I began to see hospitality in different terms. Explicitly, I developed a definition of hospitality that demands one's identity be recognized and affirmed without sacrificing the essential elements of faith of the guest or host. Adopting the arguments developed through a cosmopolitan perspective of hospitality, I formed a definition that embraces the differences between the participants of the POFFP rather than trying to smooth them out in an attempt to forge friendships. It is a version of hospitality that encouraged me to move beyond religious tourism, and dive deeper into the faith of my religious neighbor.

Had I continued down the path of commonality and sameness, I would have missed one of the most important aspects of authentic hospitality. Unique faith expressions add to the interreligious context. However, what they bring to the encounter can be easily lost if one insists on diluting her or his beliefs or those of another. Again, it must be noted that hospitality is not a safe enterprise. Kang writes:

> Here the singularity of the arrivant is significant because, whoever the arrivant is, the arrivant has her or his own uniqueness in simply being who s/he is as human. When there is a disparity of rights and power between two subjects— the host and the guest, the other, the foreigner— hospitality means fundamental welcoming, unconditional receptivity by the host toward the other.[44]

If one begins to understand hospitality through terms such as natality, pluralism, glocalization, and identity, then the resulting picture of hospitality moves beyond kindness, friendliness, tolerance, and welcoming those with whom one has already developed a relationship. As a Christian, one looks to the teachings of Jesus who shared hospitality with the stranger in ways that were counter-cultural and challenging within his historical context. If one is

[44] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 4120-4123.

to take seriously the mandate from Matthew 5:43-45 wherein he challenges the crowd to "love your neighbor as yourself," then one must establish a robust understanding of hospitality.[45] Kang writes, "My theological rationale for defending the spirit of cosmopolitanism is the core Christian message of neighbor-love-as-self-love. Jesus' greatest command, 'Love your neighbor/ enemy as yourself,' is by no means just a personal, emotional matter."[46] Loving one's neighbor, from a cosmopolitan perspective, means recognizing that everyone sharing this planet and perhaps beyond is one's neighbor. Therefore, it is imperative to love everyone and show hospitality to everyone, including one's interreligious neighbor.

Hospitality requires one to reach beyond emotion and safe interaction in an attempt to care for the other as members of the same glocal community, neighbors. This care includes contributing to health and wellbeing, sharing resources, and ensuring a safe environment for one's neighbor. Through such care one begins to build the relationships and support necessary to build an interreligious community. This kind of hospitality cannot be concerned with conformity or viewing the other as somehow less-than. Phrases used by Christians like "the least of these" can become problematic because the person using the term has already (un)intentionally subjugated the other in light of some preconceived difference.

While I have tried to explore the concepts and extreme complications of hospitality, I am still unsure that I can adequately define it. Perhaps it is undefinable. I believe Kang comes close when she describes the gaze of hospitality:

> Cosmopolitan gaze is to look at the individual person in the face and to acknowledge the fundamental value and rights simply because of being human with face. One's face precedes, I argue, one's proper name and any kind of identity marker. In this sense, one should ground cosmopolitan justice and rights not in one's citizenship, national

[45] *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha,* 1781.
[46] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 409-411.

> belonging, or any identity marker, but rather in the very face, the bearer of human singularity.[47]

This definition and description of a cosmopolitan approach of hospitality is the approach required for practicing an Interreligious Welcome Table. It is a pre-requisite for engaging the religious other in a way that does not require a person to relinquish or diminish his or her unique identity while at the same time establishing an interreligious community built on dignity and mutual respect. This kind of hospitality recognizes and embraces the religious other as neighbor and invites the faithful other into an opportunity to build relationships of understanding and care. Such hospitality strives to be aware of power differentials and consistently struggles to diminish them. It is a willingness to enter into the experience of faith beyond one's own tradition with an intent to learn, grow, and welcome the religious other. This is hospitality that is deep and rich, and the working definition that creates the foundation for the rest of this project.

The Interreligious Welcome Table can be a place where one practices and experiences this kind of risky hospitality with people from various faiths. At the table one begins to recognize, through the sharing of food, faith, and dialogue, that our neighbor might be everyone, including the religious other. One might discover, by practicing hospitality and attempting to move beyond hierarchy and privilege, rich conversations and communities that move closer to peaceful and unique human experiences. These experiences have the power to not only alter one's perception of the religious other, but also draw participants closer together while at the same time effecting positive change within the larger community.

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[47] Ibid., Kindle locations 4026-4029.

Encounter Shaping Theology

The People of Faith for Peace have helped me understand the difference between shallow and deep hospitality. Through their practice of hospitality and welcome, I have come to discover and better understand that what I thought was hospitality was merely surface-level friendliness and religious tourism. Being part of the POFFP has taught me that to truly practice hospitality one must take risks. One must recognize, value and even embrace diversity. One must begin to see everyone as neighbor and then begin to develop a love of neighbor that is truly welcoming. Being involved with the POFFP interreligious community has helped me to shape and reshape my understanding of what hospitality means.

There are numerous challenges, risks, and harms involved with such hospitality. The first is to risk losing one's unique faith perspective and identity. Participating in an interreligious community means one must be willing to recognize that her or his faith perspective might change by engaging the religious other. Yet, if the group is to be truly welcoming, then its members must allow each person to express his or her faith perspective without the pressure to change or convert to another way of thinking. As Francis Clooney practices comparative theology by reading and studying Hindu texts, he notes, "Comparative theological study is a learning calculated to get inside us; studying another religious tradition patiently and in detail changes how we experience ourselves and our world."[48] The purpose of this interreligious encounter and practice of sharing hospitality will cause change. Instead of fearing this change, one might experience religious growth.

Another risk a person takes is engaging in conversation with a person from another faith, even if they are perceived as enemy. At one of the educational events I attended, I heard a

[48] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 155-156.

Muslim woman share with the crowd how she was afraid for her children to go to school following the events of 9/11.[49] Her fear of reprisals because of her children's faith dramatically altered the way they participated in the community in which they lived. To gather around table with the religious other is to practice the risky hospitality that loves neighbor and even perceived enemy and to begin to recognize and empathize with the fear of the religious other. It is challenging to build trust when both parties are fearful or skeptical of one another. However, through the POFFP, I have seen how that trust can move the conversation and the community forward to help people feel welcome and dignified.

The discomfort one might feel trying to navigate the various practices of faith that make up such an interreligious community is another risk of interreligious encounter. Each faith tradition has different beliefs regarding food, dietary restrictions, prayer, and sacred texts, which are fundamental to the practice of the faith. The POFFP have often shared prayers before the meal, which is challenging because group participants try to take into account the feelings or beliefs of others. This can cause harm, especially if the group makes a commitment not to diminish or weaken the identity of the religious other. To find a balance in something as complex as prayer is a risky enterprise, and can be almost impossible to do. Such practices can be prefaced with an explanation of the prayer practice or faith perspective and then performed without fear of offense. This only works, however, if participants make a commitment to experiencing the faith practices and rituals of others.

[49] "Muslim Dialogue," panel discussion at Prairie Baptist Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, April 20, 2013.

The harm of dehumanization might occur should one consider participating in an interreligious community. This occurs when we essentialize or tokenize the other.[50] As Kevin Blue has noted, "Like Jesus, we must be concerned for the whole person."[51] Relying on the Arendtian concept of natality, if we are to enter into community with the religious other we must be conscious of the tendency to label and categorize and instead opt for self-identification. For when one, as Kang suggests, "create(s) one's own categories that make one distinct from other categories," we recognize our unique, invaluable nature.[52]

In a similar vein of dehumanization and discomfort is the risk of offensive behavior or belief. To avoid the harm of offending one's interreligious neighbors one must become aware of prejudices or bigoted attitudes one might hold. Such attitudes arise out of ignorance of other faith perspectives. Most often one has been taught a specific religious perspective or faith tradition and is therefore unaware of alternative points of view. If a Christian has the courage to ask questions of a person from another tradition, one does so with a particular theological lens concerning God, Jesus, Cosmology, and a host of other religious categories. To engage in something as complicated as interreligious dialogue is no simple task. One must be aware of her or his ignorance and develop thoughtful and critical engagement techniques for creating interreligious community.

According to Kang, what is meant to be welcome and hospitality can quickly turn into hostility. An example might be the invitation to a shared meal. If one were to create an event

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[50] Namsoon Kang explains, "All kinds of identity politics and advocacy movements have a strong tendency toward homogenization, ghettoization, and essentialization." Ultimately, essentialization refers to viewing a person in a category that is defined by the observer not the observed. Tokenizing a person places the individual within preconceived categories without recognizing the layers of complexity of personhood each individual intrinsically carries. Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology,* Kindle locations 729-730.

[51] Kevin Blue, *Practical Justice: Living Off-Center in a Self-Centered World* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 101.

[52] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology,* Kindle locations 430-431.

where people from various religious perspectives would come, dialogue, and share a meal together, it would be crucial to understand the dietary needs of those attending the gathering. Just as one would not invite a relative to one's home to share a steak dinner knowing that the relative is a vegan, we must also use extreme caution when trying to create a welcoming space for authentic relationships to be forged.

Finally, harm to the religious other can occur if the guests invited come with specific agendas in mind. For instance, if one invited people for a dinner party from a variety of religious perspectives without sharing the intent of such an event, some might come with the hope of proselytizing their fellow guests. Authentic community and faith-filled hospitality cannot be practiced if the guests are pressured to give up their unique religious perspective and are coerced to join an alternative faith tradition. Rather, community and hospitality occurs when all are welcomed for who they are without fear or expectation to become something or someone else. Undoubtedly, the list above is far from exhaustive, but it serves to help one recognize some of the pitfalls and perils of creating a community within an interreligious context.

Participating in the POFFP has changed the way I understand my faith and the faith of others. It has also helped me recognize the importance of taking risks for the sake of hospitality and community. One does not attempt to belong to such a community without a willingness to grow or change. Practicing hospitality this way celebrates the natality of the religious other. Through this experience, I have become convinced that Christianity is not the only way to experience the Divine. However, my Christian faith perspective has been deepened as I have learned what it means to truly love my interreligious neighbor.

While I have seen similarities as well as differences between the various faiths, it is important to discipline oneself to avoid harmful comparative techniques, where the end result is

to determine which theological perspective is superior. It is impossible not to compare, yet when one does so with the goal of learning and valuing one another's faith it can be an incredibly rich experience. One must try to recognize the singularity of each individual within the context of a cosmopolitan approach of hospitality. While I try to resist the urge to compare my beliefs with those of another, I find that through conversation and interaction this is a natural part of the learning process.

One survey respondent put it this way:

> The other challenge I face is in comparing my faith community to that of others. I have a bit of the religious envy sometimes. I feel as if other communities have progressed in ways that mine has not. And so it is difficult to live in this blurry space where you relate to one community spiritually and another one religiously and yet another one communally.[53]

This individual has wrestled with the difficulty of comparing and contrasting one's faith with another. It seems to be a natural response; however, this comparison might not be detrimental or negative. Francis Clooney writes, "[A]s a theological and necessarily spiritual practice, *comparison* is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other."[54] If it is possible to compare without making the other feel less-than, then perhaps both parties might learn something new. By practicing hospitality that values natality, singularity, identity, and dignity, comparisons can be made in such a way that does not diminish the perspective of either religious stance and invites participants into a process different from religious tourism.

At various points in my time with the POFFP, I have felt discomfort. Many of these moments have arisen during conversations regarding various theological concepts such as angels, the after-life, interpretation of scripture, and others. Some geo-political discussions have been

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[53] See Appendix A, question 7.
[54] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

challenging as well, and have strained this concept of hospitality. One survey respondent stated, "The one time we dialogued about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was different for me, doing it as a group. We have only had one such meeting for this dialogue topic- at least that I have attended."[55] When the POFFP has explored topics that can be somewhat controversial, participants have had to make concerted efforts to practice hospitality in ways that recognize and even embrace difference.

One of the other challenges of hospitality has been the time required to learn about other faith perspectives beyond my own. I have spent a considerable amount of time studying other faiths, especially Islam, due to my unfamiliarity with many aspects of the Muslim faith. I felt other members of the group from different faith backgrounds had an advantage because they were extremely familiar with the Christian faith even if it was not their faith of origin. While this has been difficult, it has also been extremely rewarding, and I have gained a tremendous appreciation for the other faiths represented in the POFFP.

Conclusion: Why Now

Why is the concept of practicing hospitality at an Interreligious Welcome Table important now? Have people of the Christian faith not explored hospitality *ad infinitum*? What can one learn from hospitality within and beyond the Christian context that might help readers in today's global context?

According to Marc Sageman, former CIA officer, "There is a very disturbing trend at least of some people within the (Trump) administration that [seems] to go back to this notion of

[55] See Appendix A, question 7.

clash of civilization between Islam and the West."[56] Members of the United States Government and its citizens have continued to express concern regarding people of faiths beyond Christianity. Whether it is the defamation of Jewish gravestones or the ban on immigrants from largely Muslim nations, there is a swell of fear and skepticism of the religious other.

A fear of the other has taken hold within the psyche of the United States political arena and within the souls of people of faith. According to Phyllis Schlafly, author and proponent of an exclusive perspective of the Christian faith, "Instead of doing his duty to keep bad people out of America (or remove them if they manage to sneak in), Obama is bringing us even more diversity by accepting thousands of refugees from terrorist-harboring countries such as Syria and Somalia."[57] Schlafly's tone is not one of acceptance or even tolerance. In fact, she argues for an end to diversity in the United States. For some, diversity, especially religious diversity, is a problem to be dealt with rather than a beauty to be embraced.

Others beyond Schlafly argue for a ban on tolerance and welcome of the religious other. David Barton, founder of the Wall Builders organization, has also argued:

> Christian America welcomed all religions, with Muslims arriving here by 1619, Jews establishing their first synagogue in 1654, and Buddhists, Hindus, and others also being present from the early days. Significantly, only America extended (and continues to extend) a free-market religious tolerance to others while still preserving the core societal values of our Christian heritage. But the culture has begun to shift. The level playing field is being eroded. As in Europe, Christianity is being knocked down and Islam elevated.[58]

For pundits like Barton, the United States has left its Christian roots and now Christianity is losing its influence and power in United States politics. This is perceived as a bad thing for the

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[56] "Experts Say Trump's New Travel Ban Targets People Rarely Linked To Attacks," Marc Sageman interviewed by Ari Shapiro, *National Security,* aired March 6, 2017, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=518858294.
[57] Phyllis Schlafly, "How Much Diversity Must We Tolerate?" *Eagle Forum* (June 24, 2015), http://www.eagleforum.org/publications/column/how-much-diversity-must-we-tolerate.html.
[58] David Barton, "Calling Muslims to the Capitol?" (December 29, 2016), https://wallbuilders.com/calling-muslims-capitol/.

United States and its people. Some feel and believe that the religious other is to be kept at arm's length and treated as less-than. However, this posture does not seem to correspond with Jesus' injunction to love one's neighbor. It would be challenging to make a case for Christian hospitality practiced in a way where the stranger is not cared for or welcomed.

Now seems to be an opportune moment to revisit hospitality and consider an alternative narrative to the ones I have shared above. There are numerous works focused on hospitality and the importance of reclaiming its impact in today's environment. Despite the voluminous resources that exist on the subject, the political, social, and religious environment has yet to fully embrace the kind of hospitality I have described. Instead, some Christians have opted for a version of hospitality that protects and cares for those who have already conformed to a theological or philosophical perspective that fears or even hates the religious neighbor. They may believe in the importance of hospitality, but it is a hospitality that extends to those already known rather than the stranger. It is a version of hospitality that is safe because of its propensity for privilege to view the religious other as a threat.

I have made a case for hospitality shaped by natality, cosmopolitan theology, and dignity for the other. Hospitality is the foundational theological concept shaping the experience and practice of an Interreligious Welcome Table. In the following chapter, I will examine a passage of Scripture through the lens of this theological construct for the sake of establishing a Christian approach for the Interreligious Welcome Table.

CHAPTER 2: A WAY

Writing from a Christian perspective, it is necessary to explore what scripture might say about welcoming the religious other. Interpretations of the Bible have been a source of both welcome and exclusion. By examining John 14:1-7, I will review a text that can be interpreted both ways.[1] Through this exegetical exercise I hope to invite the reader to consider an interpretation rooted within cosmopolitan theology and a perspective that seriously considers the challenges and necessity of hospitality.

In verse 6, Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." According to Raymond Brown, "When we turn to the exegesis of John [14:6], we find that in saying 'I am THE WAY,' Jesus is not primarily presenting himself as a moral guide, nor as a leader for his disciples to follow … Rather Jesus is presenting himself as the only avenue of salvation."[2] This message of exclusion is not unfamiliar. While this text has been used to argue against the validity and sacredness of other faiths I suggest an alternative reading, an exegesis rooted in a cosmopolitan theological perspective.

Fear of the other often becomes a contributing factor for violence. How does one overcome hatred and violence caused by fear and suspicion of the religious other? Fear can be fueled by one's beliefs, an understanding of sacred texts, or a community that adopts an attitude of hate or skepticism of diversity. Fear is a powerful force in our culture, but the Christian faith has had a preference and propensity for hospitality, love, and compassion, which have the

[1] *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, 1937.
[2] Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John XII-XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 630.

potential to rise above fear. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this can be found in John 14:1-7. Here one observes Jesus' display of comfort and compassion toward his disciples, even as he wrestles with his own uneasiness about the future. As I examine this text, I will explore various interpretations, and develop interreligious theological responses that extend hospitality and welcome. I will also explore the text in order to develop theological claims that help re-orient one's posture towards inclusion rather than exclusion and oppression.

Finding a Way: Exegesis

"The Final Discourse" in the Gospel of John is a text filled with anxiety and fear.[3] I have chosen to explore a small portion of that discourse, John 14:1-7, which will limit the discussion to the scene immediately following Judas' exit from the meal (John 13), but before the shift of subject that occurs with Phillip's question concerning his need and desire to see the "Father." Here one encounters a beautiful, yet haunting scene, where the reader finds Jesus doing what friends and family do when crisis, turmoil, or tragedy strikes. Jesus offers words of comfort and a pastoral response to those who have become agitated and confused having heard the news Jesus shared with those gathered around the table. Jesus observes that the disciples are upset, disturbed, and shaken with inward turmoil and angst; the author uses the Greek word *ταρασσο* (*tarasso*) to describe Jesus' emotional state (v. 1).[4] According to Gail O'Day, "[it is] a verb used three times previously in the Gospel to describe Jesus' condition of distress. In each of these three uses, the verb refers primarily to Jesus' agitation and disturbance in the face of the power

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[3] Brown states, "The Last Discourse is Jesus' last testament: it is meant to be read after he has left earth." Ibid., 582. The last discourse includes the end of Chapter 13 through 17:26. Ibid., 545.

[4] *Tarasso*, *Ego Eimi*, and *Ginosko* are Greek words that I have translated myself and provided the transliteration with the help of a Greek-English Lexicon. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 3rd. ed. (Chicago: Chicago Press, 2000). For the Greek New Testament, I have utilized Nestle-Aland. *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Deutshe Bibelgesellshaft, 2006).

of death and evil, not simply to his sadness."[5] One can sense the deep emotional strain that Jesus' words have caused. The disciples are beyond despair, they are heartbroken and depressed, seeing only darkness in their future.

Jesus, in the midst of his own *tarasso*, begins his remarks with a mild platitude.[6] In essence, he asks his followers not to be worried or distressed, but he then delves deeper by expressing a vision of hope through the metaphor of rooms/dwelling places being prepared for the community. Jesus encourages them to trust that everything will work out, if they will continue to stay the course revealed throughout his ministry. The Gospel writer uses the Greek word *μοναί* (*monai)* to describe these dwellings.[7] In some translations *monai* are interpreted as mansions or dwelling places instead of rooms.[8] Originating from the verb *μένω (meno),* this word clues the reader in to the possibility of both physical and spiritual dwellings.[9] It can represent both a physical space as well as a spiritual connection to the divine. It serves as a reminder of God's dwelling with the community of faith. Jesus seems to suggest that this dwelling is ongoing and current within the first century community.

To help comfort the disciples, Jesus offers hope by reminding them of God's constant, abiding presence. Through the Holy Spirit, those who are left behind to carry on the work and

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[5] Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Luke John, vol. 9,* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 740.

[6] John 13:21 Jesus' own spirit was filled with trouble, the Greek *εταραχθη* (*etarakthe*, the aorist form of *tarasso)*. In the midst of his own personal anguish, he now turns to offer comfort to his closest friends. These verses contain the words of someone who understands what they are going through, because he has felt the same despair and heartache over the loss and betrayal of someone close to him. Danker, Fredrick *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament,* 990.

[7] Robert Gundry suggests, "We are not at first to regard the 'abodes' as rooms in heaven which are being constructed for us by the architect of the Celestial City. For throughout the Upper Room Discourse the leitmotif 'abiding' ;14 is a present spiritual experience … Could it be clearer from context that the first thing we are to think of when reading, 'In my Father's house are many μοναί,'' is not mansions in the sky, but spiritual positions in Christ, much as in Pauline theology?" Robert Grundy, "In my Father's House are many Μοναι," (John 14:2), *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 58: 1, (January 1, 1967): 70.

[8] See the *King James Version* (Urichsville: Barbour Publishing, 2011), or *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

[9] Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 630-31.

ministry that Jesus began will have all the room and guidance they need to accomplish any ministry set before them. As one reads the entire book of John and becomes a witness to the inclusive ministry of Jesus, one notices a ministry rooted in hospitality.[10] Stories of Jesus' hospitality in John are not meant for only one group of people or sect within the context of only one faith perspective.

Two examples, in particular, point to Jesus' inclusive perspective. The first is his conversation with the woman at Jacob's Well in John 4. Here Jesus speaks to a woman from a different religious perspective and proposes that a time is coming when physical worship spaces will have little to do with worship (vv. 19-24). Despite their perceived differences, Jesus welcomes her and embraces her as spiritual neighbor and offers her water that never runs out (v. 10). He offers hospitality to a stranger in a way that does not judge or exclude but embraces and welcomes.

The second example can be found in a healing text later in chapter 4. Jesus is approached by a "royal official," who asks Jesus to heal his son (vv. 46-49). There are no indications in the text that this official was Jewish. It is possible he was a Gentile.[11] Jesus once again decides to offer hospitality and healing to a stranger and likely a religious other. These two examples suggest that Jesus was willing to offer hospitality to a variety of individuals and communities. It was an important piece of his ministry.

Some texts, however, do have an exclusionary tenor, most notably those texts concerned with religious leaders who have been conspiring with Roman authorities.[12] Yet, despite these

[10] See John 2:1-12, 3:1-21, 4:1-42, or 4:46-54 to find narrative examples of how Jesus shares a message of welcome, hospitality, and inclusion to a variety of audiences and people from different Jewish sects of the first century world.
[11] *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1916.
[12] See John 10:1-21 or 12:9-19.

instances much of Jesus' teaching and ministry within John is inclusive of a broad audience and provides plenty of room for those who long for welcome and hospitality.

As the scene in John 14 unfolds, Jesus assures his friends that they know the way to the place where he is going and so they can move beyond their fear into faith (v. 4). The pragmatist and oft-labeled doubter, Thomas, speaks up at this point: "Master, we have no idea where you're going. How do you expect us to know the road" (v. 5)?[13] Thomas is confused, frustrated, and like the reader, longs for clarity. Tell us what you are talking about Jesus, and we will gladly follow! Thomas expects a map to this place so that, should the day come when Jesus' words about departure are fulfilled, the disciples can find the route.

Instead, Jesus responds to that specific question with another metaphor. The author of John decides to clue in the reader at this point; the faith community will begin to explore a theological insight into the nature of Christ. The reader notes Jesus using one of his *εγο ειμι* (*ego eimi)* phrases. Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6). The author invites the reader to see beyond the words on the page, beyond the metaphor, and into the identity of Jesus. Before one can fully explore what the author attempts to convey, it would be prudent to examine this phrase within its narrative context.

The author uses the *ego eimi* phrase in two different ways throughout the Gospel of John. The first is without a predicate nominative.[14] These are moments when Jesus says, "I am," and they serve as allusions to the book of Exodus 3 where God reveals the divine name to Moses. Jesus, in the Fourth Gospel, is not just saying "I am." He is saying "I AM." The Johannine

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[13] Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 1949-1950.

[14] For a detailed list of the two different forms of *ego eimi* see Figure 10 in O'Day. *The New Interpreters Bible: Luke John*, 602. There are 9 instances where Jesus uses the "I am" phrase in order to self-describe a Christological truth. This is unique to the Gospel of John. The Synoptics do include various modes of identification but are more subtle than those Christological formations that we find in the last of the four Gospels.

community developed an elevated Christological perspective of Jesus that claimed theological perspectives not seen in the Synoptic Gospels. The Synoptics do not have the same *ego eimi* constructions that allude to Jesus' divinity found in John. Robert Kysar notes, "we can conclude that the Evangelist was making an exclusive claim for Christ with the use of the 'I am' sayings."[15]

In the second usage of *ego eimi*, which contains a predicate nominative, one finds the gospel writer sharing Christological belief and understanding through the use of metaphor. These are common elements found in everyday life, yet serve to deepen one's understanding about the nature of the Christ and his work. For instance, as Gail O'Day notes:

> Jesus' first discourse [John 6:35] opens with his bold self-revelation: "I am the bread of life." The bread the crowd requested is already before them, and Jesus proclaims, is the very person of whom they have made their request. … In these "I am" sayings, Jesus identifies himself with symbols that come from the common fund of ancient Near Eastern religious and human experience. Through these common symbols, Jesus declares that people's religious needs and human longings are met in him.[16]

The symbol of bread is a common element, but the author transforms that element into something theologically profound.

These "I am" phrases are unique to the Gospel of John. The other/earlier gospel writers do not contain the same kind of Christological formulations. One does see, as in Luke 22 and other places, metaphorical constructs, but they are not used in the same fashion one finds in John. Being the last written Gospel, the writer has had a greater amount of time for his or her Christological understanding about Jesus to evolve. That evolution, influenced by many historical factors including the destruction of the Temple and splintering within the sects of

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[15] Robert Kysar, *John The Maverick Gospel,* Revised ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 48.
[16] O'Day. *The New Interpreters Bible: Luke John*, 601.

Judaism, gave rise to a different chronology, understanding of the oral tradition, and theological interpretation within this Gospel.[17]

Scholars disagree with exactly what the author of John intended through the "I am" sayings. Satokoa Yamaguchi suggests, "There are two ways of understanding this. The first one takes Jesus' 'I am' sayings as Jesus' divine self-revelation; the other takes Jesus as not revealing himself, but as revealing the god."[18] The second understanding makes the stronger case given one of the major themes throughout the Gospel are signs, which Jesus uses as a means to point to the work God is doing in the cosmos. These signs act as way-finders, which direct one's attention to God's immanent presence in the world.[19]

"I am" may serve to make a connection with the divine name of God, but coupled with the metaphor of "way, truth, and life," it suggests cosmic implications of following the way of Jesus, who constantly points to God. Jesus might be revealing something incredible about his divine nature, but without doubt he is revealing how accessible God is for humanity.

This cosmic reordering is alluded to through the other "I am" sayings which contain predicate nominatives. In John 6:35 Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" and in 8:12, "I am the light of the world." He also uses the metaphor of the "good shepherd" and "the true vine" all of which imply a deeper understanding beyond the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth.[20] These other verses lift up common, terrestrial elements within the ancient culture and imbue new meaning in order to flesh out the Johannine formula for Christological identity. Metaphors of light, bread, and shepherds all illuminate various aspects of Christological identification the

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[17] Ibid., 504.
[18] Satokao Yamaguchi offers helpful insight in understanding the nature of the "I am" sayings. Satokao Yamaguchi, "'I am' Sayings and Women in Context," in *A Feminist Companion to John,* ed. Amy-Jill Levine, vol. 2 (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 38.
[19] O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke John,* 496.
[20] Ibid., 602.

community believed to be important. Seeing, sustaining, and guiding are roles that Jesus fulfilled within his ministry. The community must be aligned with Jesus' message and respond by sustaining and guiding others.

The "I am" sayings are profound, theologically challenging, and cryptic, but verse 6 is perhaps the most difficult for modern English-speakers to understand. Many things are lost in translation including the use of "the."[21] "The" is often interpreted to mean singularity, the-one-and-only. Therefore, in verse 6, a possible interpretation is that Jesus is "THE ONLY way, truth, and life;" however, I do not think this is what Jesus implies. The Greek definite article helps the reader understand the noun with which it is coupled. "The" serves as a marker in the language and not as an exclusionary article of speech intended to claim an exclusive truth over all others. According to William Mounce, "Almost all nouns are preceded by the article."[22] As Mounce goes on to claim, "[one discovers] that the Greeks do not use the article the same way we do. They use it when we never would, and they omit it when English demands it. Languages are not codes, and there is not an exact word for word correspondence. Therefore, we must be a little flexible."[23] Modern day interpreters can read the "I am" phrase in a way that excludes all other religious perspectives; however, this is not the only way to understand the phrase. The Gospel writer was following the common practice of properly identifying the noun rather than making a claim that Christianity is the one and only valid religion.

Having explored the idiosyncratic nature of the "I am" phrases within John, perhaps it is worth asking another question of verse 6 before exploring other topics. Did Jesus truly say, "I am

[21]William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 6. Mounce describes the nature of the "Definite Article" and the subtle yet distinct differences between Greek and English.
[22] Ibid., 38.
[23] Ibid., 39.

the way, and the truth, and the life?" There are no other such phrases found in the Synoptics or other Christian Scripture writings. John Cobb notes:

> Many of the verses that most disturb us today are from the Gospel of John. Here much is placed on the lips of Jesus that is radically different from what he says in the Synoptics: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Generations of scholars have argued that few if any of these discourses are actually verbatim expressions of Jesus' own teaching.[24]

Would Jesus, a practicing Jew, draw such comparisons with the divine name as one sees him doing here and other places in this Gospel? The divine name was not even allowed to be spoken because of its sacred nature, would Jesus have really gone so far as to use the close association of *ego eimi* as a reference to the name of God as part of his self-identification?[25]

One quickly sees that the outline the author traces of Jesus within John looks shockingly different than those in the Synoptics. Paul Anderson, reflecting on the work of E. Haenchen, claims:

> It is not possible that both the Jesus of the first three Gospels and the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel are historically true at the same time, since the greatest differences obtain between them not only in the mode of speech, but also in the way evidence is adduced and in the kind of activity; it is also not possible that the first three Evangelists invented Jesus' teachings, morals, and way of teaching; the author of the Fourth Gospel could quite possible have concocted his Jesus.[26]

Can this iconic phrase of Jesus be historically true? It seems unlikely. However, as the Gospel writer would invariably argue, there is truth in the words whether Jesus said them or not. What is

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[24] John Cobb Jr., *Christian Faith and Religious Diversity: Mobilization for the Human Family* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 9.

[25] Harold Kamsler says, "The Name of God in its original form hundreds of times in Torah scrolls but is not ever, under any circumstances, pronounced by the reader. Indeed, it would appear that since the destruction of the First Temple almost 2,600 years ago, it has not been pronounced - except by one man, in one specific place and on one specific day each year: that is, the High Priest (Kohen Gadol), in the Second Temple, at one point in the Yom Kippur service." Harold Kamsler, "A Note on the Prohibition of Uttering the Name of God," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31: 4, (October-December 2003): 263.

[26] Paul Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 2-3.

at issue is how those words were understood in the context of the Johannine community, and what might be inferred in our own context.

It is Thomas' question that sets the context for interpretation. Jesus responds to a friend during an emotional crisis. Thomas and the other disciples are worried about Jesus' impending death and the future that awaits them if they continue down the current path. Thomas, as well as the other disciples, feels lost and unsure, and so asks a practical question. How does one who will be left to carry on the ministry find her or his way forward without Jesus as guide? Jesus responds by saying they have walked the way, seen truth, and experienced life as they have journeyed together.

For a deeper understanding of Jesus' response, it is important to note what Thomas did not ask. His query was not aimed at understanding different faith traditions or their worth. Diana Eck poignantly reminds the exegete:

> If "I am the Way" is the answer, what exactly was the question? … It is the pastoral response to an anxious question. It was poor uncertain Thomas who asked the question that night, as John tells it. … And what did Thomas ask him? Did he ask, Lord, are Hindus to have a room in God's heavenly household? Did he ask, Lord, will Buddhists make it across the sea of sorrow on the raft of the Dharma? Lord, when the Prophet Muhammad comes six hundred years from now, will he hear God's word? No, on that night of uncomprehending uncertainty he asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" And Christ answered, "I am the Way…" It was a pastoral answer, not a polemical one. It was an expression of comfort, not condemnation.[27]

Jesus' response must be understood within this context. The Christian community claiming exclusive ownership to the divine entirely misses the point he makes. If Jesus said these words at all, he said them to provide comfort and extend compassion to a group of friends and partners in ministry.

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[27] Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 94.

To ensure this message of hope is getting through, Jesus adds that they have already experienced God, or at least a way to God (v. 7). Jesus wants the disciples to understand that they have the knowledge necessary to continue this journey of ministry and faith. The concept of *γνωσισ* (*gnosis*), which means knowing, is one of the other major themes found in the Gospel of John. "Knowing" is repeated twice in the final verse of our pericope and the repetition alerts the reader to the importance of Jesus' insight. *Γινωσκετε (from the root ginosko)* means to grasp or attain something intellectually or to know someone in a meaningful way (v. 7).[28] This kind of knowledge comes only through an ongoing process of learning and transformation. It comes through relationship and investing time in someone. The author of this work hopes the community will come to know who Jesus truly is by hearing the story that one finds within the pages of this Gospel and by living out that story within the context of community. It is knowledge gained once one has grasped the nature of Jesus' identity shared through the "I am" sayings and other metaphors throughout the Gospel.

The author, in keeping with the comforting nature of the final discourse, intends for the community to be aware of God's constant presence. Jesus says that those who know him, know God. They "*ginosko"* God because they have been in direct contact with Jesus and have learned from him who God is. God is not some far-off being, but the divine parental figure who cares and comforts those who long for that nurturing relationship. God is visible and present within the community, which should bring an even deeper sense of God's caring and concern for the faithful.

This small segment of John points to the uniqueness of the Gospel's perspective. We find in John an extremely developed theological and Christological construct. The "I am" sayings one

[28] Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 199-1201.

reads throughout John bring a distinctive approach that make it, in the words of John Kysar, a "Maverick Gospel."[29] As alluded to earlier, the Johannine community cares less about the historical nature of Jesus and more about the spiritual knowledge regarding the nature of Jesus and his ministry. Kysar states, "religion elaborates on the nature of its founder until eventually something like a final and "orthodox" view emerges. … The truth of the claim is usually hidden in the obscurity of history, but it is clearly witnessed to by the adherents of the faith."[30]

Emerging Theological Claims

What are some theological themes that emerge from the text? *Tarasso* is an interesting place to begin. Disturbing and troubling theological claims have been made of this Gospel and this text in particular. Such claims have led to exclusivism, elitism, racism, sexism, and other religious travesties.[31] Can those theological places of unease and tension be reclaimed and reinterpreted to offer good news instead? What about people of other faiths and how one might be called to welcome or embrace them in the name of Christian hospitality?

The first theological claim I intend to make from the text is God's immanent presence amongst community. The Johannine community was in need of a God who stood in solidarity with their plight. Namely, they needed a God who would not abandon them, even as they had experienced excommunication from their synagogues and the prospect of carrying on a faith tradition without the physical presence of its founder.[32] They yearned for a God who cared for them amid localized oppression and persecution from the Roman government. The Johannine

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[29] Kysar, *John The Maverick Gospel*, ix.
[30] Ibid., 27.
[31] See Jill-Levine, *A Feminist Companion to John.*
[32] For more insight into the historical context of John and expulsion from synagogues see: David DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 401.

community longed to hear the words from Jesus that they were not alone and that they were on the correct path, which would put them in touch with God and eventually an eternal resting place of safety and peace. This pericope offers exactly what they needed by sharing a Christological understanding that Jesus had revealed this path and in the following verses, establishes a hope for the Spirit of God who would continue to guide them (vv. 16-19).

In subsequent verses, we find Jesus promising a companion who would be the guide and advocate on this way of faith. The author of John expands her or his theological teaching by reminding the community of God's Spirit who is always near and moving amongst the people even if Jesus' corporeal presence cannot be seen. These are words and theological insights intended to instill hope and comfort for those keenly aware of loss and grief.

Another theological claim I assert is that the modern Christian must formulate his or her theological understanding in the midst of current contexts. The Gospel of John and especially this passage engenders a desire to develop a meaningful and pragmatic Christology. The entire gospel is focused on the identification and knowledge of who Jesus is. However, the process of recognition and Christological formation is ultimately left up to the reader and her or his community of faith. It is through Jesus' signs and the encounters he has with various characters that the reader is invited to formulate her or his own understanding of Jesus. Gerard Sloyan suggests, "Johannine thought is not a shouting match. Neither is it a denial of all that most people on the earth hold dear as their way to God, or simply their 'way.'"[33]

When understood this way, perhaps subsequent generations of Jesus' followers must do the hard work of redeveloping their Christological understanding, thereby making Jesus' teachings meaningful for one's time and place. Such a claim offers the modern-day reader the

[33] Gerard Sloyan, *John: Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 180.

same license and mandate to develop a Christological understanding that is consequential for our world. Instead of approaching Christology in exclusive terms, it might be prudent and faithful to envision a pluralistic Christology that does not pit one faith perspective against another. Theology is an ever-evolving process, which can be witnessed by the growing number of theological lenses one can trace throughout history. One's Christology must be in tune with the increasing global understanding of the world, especially if one is to be a practitioner of Jesus' teachings on hospitality.

Another theological claim I propose is the inclusive nature of Jesus' message. Perhaps the most devastating use of this text has been in its exclusivist interpretation and implementation. Sloyan remarks, "Images of bumper stickers arise in which a single index finger is held aloft. 'One way,' they proclaim, defiantly eliminating all who think otherwise about the gospel and all Jews and all Muslims … who have some good ideas about the 'way' … but distinctly non-Johannine ideas about God." [34] With such images within our modern culture, it is little wonder that Christianity has been perceived as being hostile and domineering. Satokao Yamaguchi claims:

> The exclusivist and universalist claims of this Christology - that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish man who lived in first-century Palestine, was the Only Son of God, the Messiah (Christ), the Savior of the world, and the once-and-for-all incarnation of God - have been used not only to oppress women but also to justify Christian white racism and various forms of Western colonialism throughout Christian history.[35]

The theological claim made is that Christianity is the only way to God. John Cobb observes, "John's Gospel is the most Christocentric of all, and much of its language suggests a radically negative view of religious traditions other than Christianity, including Judaism (cf. John

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[34] Ibid., 179.
[35] Satokao Yamaguchi, "'I am' Sayings and Women in Context," 34.

8:42-44)."[36] This seems counter-intuitive since Jesus was a Jew, yet interpretations of the Gospel of John in particular have often been a source of anti-Semitism and has served as a proof-text against other religions.

Influenced by a perceived theological supremacy, Christianity has often become the oppressor of other faith groups, cultures, and the environment. Jürgen Moltmann notes, "Apart from the devastating ecological consequences of this modern conquest-religion of the West, the division of person and nature was sealed through it. The human person is understood as natureless and nature as personless."[37] This division of person/nature works against concepts of natality and the dignity inherent in all creation. It works against the understanding of hospitality developed through the preceding chapters of John. It contrasts the present pluralistic and diverse culture in which Christians currently live their faith.

There are at least two motivations at work when interpreting Jesus' "I am" saying found in verse 6 in exclusionary terms. One is a belief in the inerrant or infallible nature of scripture, which is a difficult hermeneutical approach to employ in the fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John presents a unique perspective that challenges the Synoptics' narrative of the life of Jesus. These conflicts make it almost impossible to hold to such an interpretive perspective. This type of eisegetical reading also ignores the context of verse 6, which was never intended to condemn other faiths. The other motivation is of a sociological nature, and stems from a human desire to dominate the other in order to attain success, respect, power, advantage, etc. Moltmann's statement speaks to this perspective. For the sake of holding power over another, one tends to

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[36] John Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 4.
[37] Jürgen Moltmann, "God is Unselfish Love," *The Emptying God: A Buddhist - Jewish - Christian Conversation*, eds. John Cobb Jr. & Christopher Ives, (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 118.

adopt a less-than worldview of others and even of nature itself. A perspective like this flies in the face of Christian hospitality and welcome.

If one were to read the text uncritically, or remove verse 6 without care for context, it would be possible to embrace a Christian imperialist approach to faith. This approach to faith views Christianity as the supreme expression and pathway to God and is guided by a divine mandate to convert the rest of the world, regardless of the culture or faith traditions of others. Yet, once a person sees the relationship between the response Jesus offers and the initial question asked, there can be little doubt that what both Jesus and the Johannine community are concerned with is the presence of God during tragedy and loss. The disciples longed to hear that God had not abandoned them to the fate of the Roman imperialist culture; rather, through the teachings and ministry of Jesus, they had been given a way, a truth, and a life filled with hope. Perhaps that kind of hope is exactly what any forced convert or colonized group needs to hear so that one can find life and truth in the midst of oppression. Perhaps it is what an oppressive people need to hear to change course and avoid imperialistic tendencies.

There remains little doubt that the author of John wanted to impart some theological truth about the nature of Jesus to the community, but that truth has little to do with Jesus being THE-one-and-only way to experience God. Rather, another theological insight emerges. Jesus is the revealer of truth, life, and way for those early disciples as well as the emerging Johannine community and for Christians, continues to be analogous. Therefore, what was meant to comfort a fledgling Christian community was never intended to serve as a Christological imperative to deny the value of other faiths. Obviously, for those who were the first adherents, as well as modern followers of Christ, Jesus serves as the shepherd along the path to God. This Christological claim has been orthodox since the beginning of the movement. Yet, surely

Christianity cannot claim ultimate knowledge concerning the eternal fate of those who find other faiths to be more appealing and life-giving than Christianity.

At the very least, whatever one's belief regarding other faiths, one cannot make a cogent argument against the validity of other faiths using the passage explored here. It may serve as a popular proof-text for some, but it is too great a leap to make the claim that Jesus, through the "I am" sayings, spoke against the value of other religions. Without a doubt, verse 6 points to a Christological belief about the nature and identity of Jesus as understood by a first-century community of faith. For that community, Jesus was the expression of God, the mysterious incarnation, who points not to himself but always towards God. If Christians are to take seriously the teachings of Christian hospitality, one's understanding of Christ must move beyond an exclusive understanding of God to a pluralistic one.

The Gospel of John has been used to exclude and oppress, but I would argue it can be a Gospel of radical inclusivity.[38] The examples of Nicodemus, the unnamed Samaritan woman, and the healing of an unnamed man born blind are rich examples of the inclusive nature of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. In the case of Nicodemus, one discovers Jesus talking with the proclaimed enemy, a Pharisee, and sharing tremendous theological insight into the nature of the Spirit.[39] With Nicodemus, Jesus is engaged in dialogue with those who have publicly opposed his teachings, which reveals a willingness to dialogue, even if the dialogue seems intense and bewildering. Immediately following the story of Nicodemus, the reader is introduced to the woman from Samaria, which is a fascinating tale that breaks multiple cultural and religious

[38] Diana Eck succinctly states, "Some Christians speak not only of the 'uniqueness' of Christ but of the 'exclusiveness' of Christ. It cannot be said too plainly, however, that exclusivity is utterly contrary to the Jesus we meet in the synoptic Gospels. In fact, many who are exemplars of faith and recipients of loving mercy in the Gospel narratives are those we might call 'people of other faiths': the Roman centurion, the Syro-phonecian woman, the Greek Cornelius, the good Samaritan. Jesus did not see 'Christianity' and 'Judaism,' or the other 'isms' we use to categorize people of faith today. He saw faith." Eck, *Encountering God,* 95.

[39] The story of Nicodemus is found in John 3.

norms.[40] In this story, one discovers a nameless woman whom Jesus approaches in broad daylight and has a theological conversation regarding "living water." Finally, in the story of the man born blind, one sees the inclusive nature of Jesus as he breaks with his religious tradition to perform a "sign" of healing on the Sabbath day.[41] He touches an unclean stranger so that the blind man and others might recognize his sheer disregard for cultural and religious boundaries, which serve to separate more than protect.

These examples found in the Gospel of John point to a theology of inclusion rather than exclusion. There are others, but one is sure to note that the Gospel writer is interested in sharing a theological understanding of a God who does not abide by artificial social constraints, which prevent the faithful work of welcome, inclusion, and hospitality. As evidenced through the three individuals I noted above and the nature of Jesus' response found in John 14:1-7, it is clear that Jesus cares more about extending hospitality and offering welcome than he does about excluding others from the love of God.

Exclusive elements within John might exist. Clearly, John takes issue with certain members of the Jewish religious leaders, especially those who conspire with Roman officials. The writer refers to them as "The Jews."[42] However, this is not a wholesale exclusion of a particular faith group; rather, it is a complaint lodged at a very specific group who had become the forerunners to the persecutors of the Johannine community. This language is unfortunate, and must be understood as a product of a certain culture, community, and time in history rather than

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[40] I note this narrative once more because it adds complexity to one's understanding of hospitality. Following the story of Nicodemus, the reader is introduced to the Samaritan woman in John 4. Here Jesus again discusses the nature of worship and God's inclusive nature.

[41] Another example of Jesus' inclusive message can be found in John 9. These stories, while I have only briefly mentioned them here, make the case that Jesus' message within the Gospel of John included a variety of people and faith perspectives. To make a consistent argument for the inclusivity and hospitality found in John 14, these other texts help to support the inclusive motif for which I have argued.

[42] See John 20:19-23.

a prescription for hatred and oppression of some Jewish communities who perceived this new sect of Judaism to be a threat to the tradition.

Given the context of John 14:1-7, both narratively and theologically, it becomes virtually impossible for one to make the theological claim that Jesus' statement was intended to exclude every other religion or anyone who found themselves on the outside or fringe of Christianity. Nevertheless, this approach has been a popular theological interpretation of this text. However, it is an interpretation Christians must resist. One of the beautiful theological traditions handed down to Christians by the Johannine community is the mandate for the reader to discern the identity of Jesus, which means Christians are constantly called to (re)develop their own Christological understandings to better discern what Jesus might be revealing about God. For the Gospel writer, when the community of faith does their work well, they will not only discover their way, truth, and life, but also come to realize just how close God has been in the process.

Whatever hardship and heartache the Johannine community faced they could overcome because they knew God was near. Hope had come in the very nature of Jesus' words about "the Father" (v. 7). If one sees or knows Jesus, then one knows God. God is near the community and will be revealed as the Spirit continues to empower the community to do the work of the church. This is good news! God is closer than one might imagine, and with that knowledge, hope is born.

Embracing the Other: An Interreligious Interpretation

Having named some theological claims from the text - the inclusive nature of Christ, the evolution of one's Christological understanding, and the immanent nature of God - it is helpful to develop responses based on the interpretation of the text. There are at least four responses that can be gained from this exegetical and theological perspective, specifically as it relates to how one understands and welcomes the religious other.

The first is the theological importance of creating a safe environment to explore challenging questions of faith. If a faith community refuses to invite questions or stifles exploration, practitioners tend to revert to unexamined, embedded theologies. However, when a faith community creates safe spaces for theological exploration, then people can develop practices that are life-giving, expansive, and welcoming of other perspectives.

Safe environments of exploration are established in the midst of deep trust and vulnerability. They are places where questions are encouraged and not immediately answered by some spiritual expert but discussed and considered within a caring and hospitable community. Meaningful theological reflection occurs when people are introduced to challenging ideas and discuss them openly with a trusted group of peers. Of course, a group like this can only be developed over time and through intentional planning. This was the experience of some within the People of Faith for Peace.

One survey respondent stated:

> I have more understanding, and therefore more humble curiosity about their values and their faith. I would say that my participation, at a time of such disruption in this country, has caused me to think about words like "neighbor" where I really didn't before, and to expand the size of my neighborhood.[43]

Another member responded saying, "I saw a need to bring together local members of the [three] Abrahamic faiths largely because of conflicts in the middle east, in particular between Israelis and Palestinians and saw this spilling over into our regional faith groups."[44] On the surface, these responses may not seem theological in nature. However, a closer examination might reveal the growing sense of hospitality and inclusivity that such a group can offer if the invitation is broad, genuine, and inclusive of various theological perspectives. If such a group can create an

[43] See Appendix A, question 4.
[44] Ibid., question 1.

environment open to theological questioning and exploration, perhaps a shift or growth of one's theological perspective can occur. This helps to ensure that the religious other feels welcome and embrace because of, rather than despite, their beliefs.

One helpful image for faith development comes from the language used in John 14:1-7. The language of "journey" or "way" has served as a guiding metaphor for faith. Rather than an event or final destination, faith might be a process, which includes practices like prayer, silence, faith sharing, and service. Developing small interreligious groups that utilize such practices can help create a sense of the sacred within the community, thus moving faith beyond intellectual exercise to application within the context of everyday life.

A second theological response is the mandate to practice radical inclusivity. Perhaps one of the most disturbing theological assertions is the exclusive claim some Christians might make on the afterlife or on God. Verse 6 has been tragically misused and misunderstood to give weight to such claims. As argued above, the context clearly points to a necessary reinterpretation so that one can counter Christian exclusivist perspectives in favor of a pluralistic or glocalized understanding of faith and culture.[45]

Pluralism often comes with baggage. According to Diana Eck:

> Pluralism is not simply relativism. It does not displace or eliminate deep religious commitments, or secular commitments for that matter. It is, rather, the encounter of commitments. Some critics have persisted in linking pluralism with a kind of valueless relativism, in which all cats are gray, all perspectives equally viable and, as a result, equally uncompelling.[46]

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[45] Namsoon Kang states, "As long as people try to patronize, dominate, and control others, whether based on gender, race, and ethnicity, sexuality, religion, nationality, and citizenship, age, or social class, the colonial mentality permeates and operates in the very act of mission." Namsoon Kang, "The Bible In and For Postcolonial Mission," in *Postcolonial Mission: Power and Partnership in World Christianity,* eds. Desmond Van der Water, Isabel Phiri, Namsoon Kang, Roderick Hewitt, Sarojini Nadar, (Upland: Sopher Press, 2011), 111.

[46] Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, Kindle locations 71.

To embrace a more pluralistic approach to faith and especially one's interaction with people from other cultures and traditions is to practice radical inclusivity as handed down to Christians through the teachings of Jesus. The practice of religious pluralism does not require a sort of moral or ethical relativism wherein all sense of right and wrong are awash in a sea of ambiguity. Instead, religious pluralism invites the adherent to recognize the moral imperative of caring for and partnering with others for the sake of hospitality without neglecting that which makes one's faith perspective unique. These practices may seem altruistic in nature, but they are nonetheless part of the core teachings of Jesus, and therefore worthy of Christians' attempt even if it creates a certain amount of discomfort and distress. Christians can rest assured that this kind of inclusivity puts us firmly on the way of Christ and will lead to truth and life as she or he embraces those whom we identify as other.

As Christians share a message of radical inclusivity, there will invariably be the classic question of whether or not they are in fact Christians? In response Marcus Borg offers:

> Christianity is home. If I had been born in a Muslim country to a Muslim family, I probably would have been Muslim. The reality for me is that Christianity feels like home and is where I have experienced the divine through Jesus… The God of the universe has been known not just in one religion but in the enduring religions of the world. Other faiths are just as valid.[47]

Borg's response points to the nature of natality and core tenets of a cosmopolitan theological approach. All life is imbued with dignity and can be considered sacred, regardless of whether it finds its home in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, another faith tradition, or no faith tradition.

The church's response should not be to convert every part of creation to understand God in only one way. Diana Eck offers, "Christians cannot speak of Christ as exclusive, but perhaps

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[47] Marcus Borg, "A Tale of Two Christianities," lecture at First Christian Church (DOC), Columbia, Missouri, (March 25, 2011).

we can speak of commitment as exclusive. We can recognize both the truth of other glimpses of the Divine and the power of other communities of faith."[48] According to the text, Christians are called to help people discover truth, life, and a way that is representative of that call. The way of faith appears to be variant and full of meaning. One can promote diversity as a sacred ideal or condemn it and propagate a posture of dominance and forced conformity. The latter blatantly contradicts Jesus' inclusive nature explored above.

A third theological response brings one back to hospitality and its crucial place at the Interreligious Welcome Table. Lee Camp offers, "This exclusive commitment to the way of Christ, as opposed to a commitment to the merely intellectual or imperialist assertion of the authority of Christ, gives rise to another important Christian practice, particularly in our conversation today: Christian hospitality."[49] Hospitality is a recurring theme within the Biblical text and throughout the Gospel of John. Christians, in our pluralistic context, can learn a great deal about the Christological significance of hospitality and welcome.

John 14:1-7 does not exclude other religions as some might believe. It provides a testimony of the broad and inclusive hospitality that Jesus offers to the Christian community and the world. While it is true that Jesus' proclamation of being the way, truth, and life was meant for a first century audience consisting of followers of Jesus' teachings, Jesus never suggests that other faiths are invalid or false. In this text, he is silent on the issue of other faiths, but Jesus is intent on providing an atmosphere of comfort and peace for his disciples.

It is Jesus' motivation for comfort in this text that drives the theological concept of hospitality. Is that hospitality meant for Jesus' disciples only, or does it extend to people of different faiths? If one is looking for an answer in this text, instead of looking at the often

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[48] Diana Eck, *Encountering God*, 95.
[49] Lee Camp, "Theological Ground for Peaceful Co-existence," *Restoration Quarterly* 49: 4 (January 2007): 245.

misunderstood verse 6, perhaps one should redirect his or her attention to verse 2. Here Jesus reminds those followers of the way that there are many rooms. Room enough for all.

These *monai* represent the imminent presence of God within all of creation. It is why the Gospel, in its opening lines, makes such broad cosmological description of the *Logos*, the word of God.[50] This theological claim is meant to encompass the entire world. There is room for all. While the Johannine community, and the Christian community writ large experiences that proximity within the context of Christianity, it does not necessarily or inherently exclude those who practice other faiths, as they too live within the context of creation. The rooms prepared by Jesus might be more inclusive than previously imagined, if one practices the theological and philosophical concepts of natality and hospitality. Throughout the Gospel of John Jesus is invited and invites others into shared spaces of fellowship and hospitality.

Within the current interreligious context, I would argue that those rooms, spiritual or physical, might be occupied by people who adhere to other faiths beyond Christianity. It is possible to construct a reading of the John 14 text that includes and welcomes others around the table beyond those first or twenty-first century Christians. Perhaps there is room around the table for other faiths as well. Perhaps God's welcome, as exemplified by Jesus' own ministry with various people within the first century world, is much broader than one might suspect.

The final theological response involves the ancient tradition of a potluck. Setting is key for any biblical narrative and to ignore it is to miss a vital element of the text. The final discourse takes place at the dinner table. Gathered around a table for a meal, Jesus practices the art of

[50] John 1:1-5 begins the Gospel with extremely poetic and theologically rich statement about Jesus being "word" and "light." Gerard Sloyan comments, "The Fourth Evangelist nowhere attempts to *prove* the marvelous allegation that underlies his Gospel, namely that Jesus is sent from the God with whom he has always enjoyed unspeakable intimacy (12:44; 13:20)." This intimacy is now given to the community and the world as a gift from the imminent presence of God within all of creation. Sloyan, *John*, 20-21.

community, care, theological instruction, as well as Christological identification. Table appears to be an excellent setting for overcoming *tarasso* and practicing healing and hope by sharing bread and conversation. This simple act of sharing food is perhaps one of the most holy things I have ever experienced. It was around the table that the disciples were invited into dialogue and wholeness on the brink of a traumatic event wherein they would lose their guide and spiritual leader. Today, the table might serve as a place where all people, regardless of faith tradition might find an invitation to dialogue, healing, and wholeness.

Given its interreligious context, the POFFP and other interreligious communities must note dietary restrictions and practice appropriate food preparation to ensure the full welcome and inclusion of all gathered at the table. Real people of faith learning about other faith traditions around the dinner table can be a truly sacred act. As one survey respondent reflecting on the shared meal stated:

> The spiritual effect is that it took what would have otherwise been a clinical educational experience and made it social and warm. Food is the icebreaker that gives warmth to any context. You would not have a potluck at a board meeting. So although we are having structured conversations with an agenda in mind, by sharing food, we are elevating the context to being one of love and friendship and not business and protocols.[51]

Gathered at such tables, one can talk about a growing number of theological discussions including faith experiences, views of the afterlife, religious holy days and their meanings, and the importance of peacemaking. Through discourse, one comes to better understand and relate to the other and can begin to ask questions that might seem taboo. Sharing a meal with strangers might provide an incredible setting for immersing oneself in the life and faith of the religious other. If one welcomes another around table and in one's home, then one begins to prepare to face ever-changing glocal contexts and live without fear of the religious other.

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[51] See Appendix A, question 5.

People of faith share a meal when they grieve, commemorate births or anniversaries, celebrate holidays, or just because they feel like it. A meal can be a place of theological exploration even before any discussion has started or sacred text examined. One must never underestimate the healing and welcoming atmosphere of the shared meal.

Conclusion: Way, Truth, and Life

In John, Jesus describes faith as a journey, a way. The way may seem unclear at times, and there might be disturbing scenes and troubling travelers along the path. Still, Christians press on, trusting that God is as near as Jesus claims. For those who claim to walk the way of Jesus, they can find comfort in the words he shared with those first-century disciples and in the freedom to reinterpret those words within one's own experiences and expressions of faith.

A reading of John 14:1-7 that makes room for others around the table can be challenging and unfamiliar. It can cause discomfort for those who have thought of God's welcome in exclusively Christian terms. Nevertheless, discomfort must not prevent Christians from exploring the theological possibilities of welcoming the religious other. The text we have examined certainly does not exclude the religious other. While some might make the case that it does not include either, I have argued that hospitality and welcome of the other is core to the ministry and nature of Jesus found throughout John and particularly this pericope.

This hospitality must not end at the boundaries of one's own faith community. Such a practice of hospitality severely limits an understanding of an immanent God. Throughout the Gospel of John Jesus preached the nearness of God with all creation. For followers of Jesus, that nearness is celebrated around the Communion Table. In the following chapter, I will argue that it is around table where one might practice hospitality and welcome of the religious other. By sharing food and immersing oneself within an interreligious community, one might discover a

meaningful setting for practicing hospitality and an Interreligious Welcome Table that considers one's glocal context.

CHAPTER 3: INTERRELIGIOUS WELCOME TABLE

Community happens around the table. This table is not only a physical object, it is also a spiritual practice of sharing food.[1] I suggest that sharing a meal within an interreligious context can also be a sacred act that has the potential to deepen spiritual practice and understanding as well as creating a space for community-building and peacemaking.

In reading John 14, one must pay attention to the setting of the narrative. The disciples gathered around table and shared a meal. In so doing a troubled community discovered hope, hospitality, and healing. Centuries later, Christians still gather around the table. Known by many names, Communion, Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, the Welcome Table is a central act of worship for Christians. The table is where I was formed by the welcome of those gathered every Sunday morning. From this foundation, I began to wonder if the table could be a setting for hospitality and welcome within an interreligious context. While I have traditionally understood Communion in strictly Christian terms and contexts, I suggest hospitality and welcome are universal, regardless of one's faith. Such an expansion can be considered through the examination of the theological significance and possibilities found through table sharing.

[1] Jennifer Ayres states, "At the center of the Christian tradition sits a table…At mealtimes, Jesus and the disciples shaped a beloved community, a community that understood sharing, hospitality, and attention to material needs to be at the heart of their life together." Jennifer Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco: Baylor, 2013), 55.

Three Reflections on Food

To explore the welcome table in theological terms I will draw upon a growing body of work in the field of the theology of food.[2] Food is critical for life and has implications for faith. Jennifer Ayres claims:

> Food matters … Beyond its immediate nutritional content, food is an avenue for strengthening affective and familial bonds, celebrating life events and delighting in artistry, and building community. When families, friends, and communities of faith gather around tables to break bread together, they are reconnected with one another.[3]

To share a meal is a social, cultural and spiritual affair. So much more is going on around the table than simply enjoying a good meal. It is a social endeavor that affects us in ways that are not instantly recognizable when viewing food as a utilitarian exercise.

To explore more deeply the concept of theology and food one must begin with food and eating itself. There are at least three aspects of eating. The first is the physical nature of a meal. This would include things like ingredients, preparation of a meal, and ingesting the food. Angel Méndez-Montoya states, "Eating is vital, for without food we perish. In one way or another, all living organisms need to eat or ingest a substance for their growth and survival."[4] There is a natural, utilitarian function of eating food for survival. However, Montoya also implies, "[F]ood is not 'just food,' but an expression of multiple connections within our bodies, the earth, local and global economies, and finally God."[5]

The second aspect of eating has to do with the context, setting, and guests of the meal. There is something within human nature that longs for community and table sharing. Rachel

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[2] For introduction to the field see: Angel Méndez-Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Lisa Hess, "Being Shaped by the Ritual Practices of Others: A Classroom Reflection," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 16: 4, (October 2013): 338-345.
[3] Ayres, *Good Food*, 2.
[4] Ibid., 1.
[5] Montoya, *The Theology of Food*, 42.

Stone reflects, "Our English word *companion* comes from the Latin for 'with' (*com*) and 'bread' (*panis*) - a companion is one with whom you eat your bread. Food being as importantly generative of relationship as it is to bodily growth, eating together is a universally important human activity."[6] Companionship and friendship are closely related to welcoming and neighboring.

Sharing a meal with someone is a neighboring practice, but is it a spiritual one? Quoting Sergei Bulgakov, Montoya writes:

> "And not only this bread, but every particle of the food we eat (and every atom of the air we breathe) is in principle the flesh of the world." The world is the flesh that nourishes; it is that which sustains life, and connects to the history of the entire universe. "Food in this sense uncovers our essential metaphysical unity with the world."[7]

Montoya suggests a cosmological connection between humanity, all living things, God, and yes, food. For Montoya, this connection is simultaneously physical and spiritual. He dubs this theological perspective the "twofold practice [of] alimentary theology." It is both a theology concerning the importance of food, and theology "as food."[8] Food is not just about the physical act of eating, it includes the transformational process of the act of eating and sharing food.[9]

According to Diane Ackerman, "Humans rarely choose to dine in solitude, and food has a powerful social component. … If an event is meant to matter emotionally, symbolically, or mystically, food will be close at hand to sanctify and bind it."[10] Sharing a meal with another can be an intimate and sacred act. In this sense, eating is not just eating. It is not merely utilitarian; however, the meaning of food and the way in which it affects someone emotionally or spiritually

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[6] Rachel Stone, *Eat With Joy: Redeeming God's Gift of Food* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 67.
[7] Montoya, *The Theology of Food*, 95.
[8] Ibid., 3.
[9] Ibid., 1.
[10] Diane Ackerman, "The Social Sense," in *Food and Faith: Justice, Joy, and Daily Bread,* ed. Michael Schut (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 25-26.

will greatly depend on one's theological/philosophical understanding of the meal. I propose that sharing food is a social and spiritual activity that can have tremendous impact on guests and hosts.

There is a third aspect of food worth consideration, which is the spiritual nature of sustenance. I have already indicated that eating is sacred. Montoya, reflecting on the work of Alexander Schmemann, suggests, "eating is not simply a utilitarian function, but rather is ultimately a sacramental act that sustains, gives meaning to, and transforms the life of humanity into a greater communion with God."[11] Montoya and other food theologians claim that there is a sacred element in the meal itself. Something transformational, transcendent, and immanent happens when people gather around a table to share a meal. For Christian food theologians, this sacredness may have its roots in the understanding of Eucharist. However, it is possible to broaden one's understanding to include more than two elements of bread and wine and consider other dishes as well as other tables.[12] Montoya notes, "Food is also a construction of people's identities: national, political, economic, social, cultural, religious, somatic, sexual, and so on."[13] Sharing food becomes a way we can experience and connect with the sacred as well as our interreligious neighbor. By eating food together, one is able to immerse oneself into the life of the other.

Many faiths note the spiritual significance of food and its ability to shape and be shaped by one's belief.[14] Some faiths permit the eating of meat, others do not. Some faiths prohibit the

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[11] Ibid., 87.
[12] Ibid., 95-97.
[13] Ibid., 42.
[14] Montoya claims, "To the observant Jew, the practices of both the prescriptive and proscriptive dietary laws are analogous to the transformative reality of the Sabbath … Analogous relations between eating and awareness of God's love or will may be seen in Islam, as in the Ramadan fast and the feasting that follows. To Christians, food can be thought of as an expression of agape. Eating can be the means not only of physical and emotional change, but also of spiritual transformation." Ibid., 2.

consumption of alcohol, others do not. What one ingests becomes not only a matter of survival but a matter of faith as well. A simple food item like bread might be a theologically powerful opportunity to not only strengthen or challenge one's faith but to build a welcoming and hospitable community of various faith perspectives as well. When people of faith consider food in theological terms, food begins to take on new meaning and provide new ways of sharing faith and fellowship with others.

This sharing of food has been labeled as table fellowship within Christian contexts. It is what church participants do at a potluck, wedding reception, or funeral dinner. Sharing food, conversations, milestone moments, or a simple lunch during the week can become sacred intentionally or unintentionally. However, when done with intention, sharing a meal can foster theological discovery and growth within a variety of settings, including those beyond one's own faith tradition. Each of these aspects of food and fellowship are included in alimentary theology. They are intertwined and impossible to separate. Food and table sharing is theologically complex.

While I write from a Christian theological perspective, I contend that one can develop a theology of food within a multi-religious context. Enjoying food with one's religious neighbor can provide an opportunity to practice alimentary theology, a physical and spiritual sharing of food. In so doing, one physically and spiritually ingests the food of another's religious perspective. This table fellowship becomes an opportunity to share one's faith tradition with another through one of the most basic yet complex elements, food. If one were to consider such a practice, what might be the implications for guests?

Eating Practices Within Abrahamic Faiths

Throughout history faith traditions have developed complex and varied eating practices. These practices exhibit deeply held theological perspectives and reveal much about crucial pieces of faith. In considering the concept of an Interreligious Welcome Table, it is helpful to review some of the eating practices of faiths within the Abrahamic Tradition to provide a context of religious meal sharing within a faith community. While there is still an incredible amount of work to be done in this field of study given the breadth of religious perspectives on food, I will limit the research of this project to eating practices of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian traditions.

For these Abrahamic faiths, religious festivals or ritualized meals serve to connect the celebrant with the narrative of faith, fellow worshipers, complete strangers, and God. These meals may have begun as a way to remember the stories of the past but evolved over time and continue to evolve in modernity. For the communities that enact sacred meals, they become ritual, sacramental, and eventually take on a life and meaning of their own. Each tradition began to recognize important symbols and elements that they then incorporated into meal sharing.

According to Sonia Zylberberg:

> Religious symbols are powerful mechanisms; they are often the consequences and tangible results of centuries of religious activities and thoughts. They carry within them traces of these processes and invoke and evoke history and tradition by their very presence. Whether initiated consciously and purposefully or not, they can take on a life of their own and evolve over time in unforeseen and unexpected ways."[15]

These symbols, regardless of the setting, emerge from everyday life. They are familiar, mundane. Given the proper context, however, they become sacramental sustenance. These symbols feed more than the body; they strengthen the soul and bond the community.

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[15] Sonia Zylberberg, "Oranges and Seders: Symbols of Jewish Women's Wrestlings," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 5 (Fall 2002): 148.

Among Christian faith perspectives one can find a variety of eating practices reflective of Christian beliefs. Some Christian denominations believe it is appropriate to consume alcohol, while others do not. Other Christians create eating practices embracing vegetarianism to stand in solidarity with vulnerable animal populations in the world.[16] Others believe that one's diet has little to do with faith.

From its earliest days, the first century church practiced the "love feast." This meal was for everyone in the community of faith. It was an opportunity for the community in the midst of its diversity to come together around table, share food, and talk about faith and life. A critical theological concept one discovers at the heart of this table is hospitality. Jennifer Ayers has studied and written about the importance of food practices and the Christian faith. Ayres shares about the importance of a shared meal within the context of faith:

> The practice at Corinth - in which the most privileged individuals arrived first at the table, gobbling and slurping up everything laid out there with little concern for the poor and hungry in the community - flew in the face of admonitions to give thanks, "discern the body," and "wait for one another" in that shared meal … At the table, we learn who we are: as individuals, but also as members of a community and even more, as members of God's creation.[17]

When churches in the first century neglected the hospitality of the table, Paul chastised them and attempted to guide them back to a more hospitable approach to the welcome table.

Over many centuries, the Eucharist evolved and the liturgy surrounding the practice of the feast became codified and ritualized. Various theologies emerged that put Eucharist at the center of Christian praxis. Alexander Schmemann describes that theology as the life force of the Christian celebrant. Schmemann claims, "We know that real life is 'eucharist,' a movement of

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[16] Kristin Largen, "Neighbors, Neighbor-love, and Our Animal Neighbors," *Word and World* 37: 1 (Winter. 2017): 44.
[17] Ayres, *Good Food*, 56.

love and adoration toward God, the movement in which alone the meaning and the value of all that exists can be revealed and fulfilled."[18]

The Lord's Table is a crucial liturgical element of the Christian faith. It is a bold statement of faith. However, at its core it is simply, yet profoundly food; symbolic, sacred, and sacramental food to be sure but food nonetheless. This food invites the practitioner to remember God's sustaining and life-giving power. At communion, the Christian remembers the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in so doing enters into a holy moment of worship intended to invite the worshiper to reflect on our interconnectedness with God and one another. Again, Schmemann suggests, "God remembers us and [God's] remembrance, [God's] love is the foundation of the world. In Christ, we remember. We become again beings open to love, and we remember."[19]

Even though Eucharist originated within the context of a full meal shared with a worshiping community, its current expression is more ritualized through the elements of bread and wine. Beyond a ritualized meal sharing, Christians informally engage in shared meals during other seasons of faith. Potluck or fellowship meals are shared to bring the church together and develop ties of friendship and community. Funeral meals are shared when families within the church experience the loss of a loved one. Shared meals during Thanksgiving offer the Christian community a chance to practice gratitude and hospitality as they consider God's presence during all seasons of life.

Within other faith traditions, one can find food at the center of faith practice. There are two feast days within the Muslim tradition where participants reflect on their beliefs. Haya

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[18] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), Kindle locations 431-432, Kindle.
[19] Ibid., Kindle locations 454-456.

Lazarus-Yafeh states, "Islam has only two official festivals ("al-Idan") … [and] Id al-Fitr."[20] These feasts serve as an invitation to the community to mark and celebrate significant moments of Islamic faith. Muslims invite friends and family members to enjoy these feasts in community.

Not only are there special feast days within Islam, Muslims also adhere to certain dietary restrictions similar to Jewish kashrut practices. These practices are outlined in Qur'anic texts and the Hadith.[21] Food and its preparation influence the faith practice for Muslims.[22] As part of the dietary practices of Islam, one of the five pillars of the faith is to practice a fast. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims all over the world fast from dawn to dusk. At the end of this month of fasting, the community comes together to share the al-Iftar feast. According to Khurrum Mirza and Nayed Bakali:

> The end of Ramadan is marked by the celebration of Eid-al-Fitr, one of the two main celebrations of the Islamic calendar. This holy day is marked by communal prayers in the morning, usually in the local mosque or a larger place of assembly followed by activities with family and friends.[23]

The Eid al-Adha is another religious meal that occurs after one has made the Hajj to Mecca. James Toronto and Cynthia Finlayson describe the feast:

> Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice), occurs at the end of the Hajj when the faithful who can afford to do so sacrifice an animal (usually a sheep or goat, but often a cow or camel) in commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael (see Qur'an 37:100-111). The meat from the sacrifice is divided into thirds: one-third for the immediate family, one-third as a gift to neighbors and friends, and one-third as a zakat offering for the poor.[24]

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[20] Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Muslim Festivals," *Numen* 25: 1 (April 1978): 52.
[21] David Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (University of California Press: Berkley, 2011), Part IV.
[22] Freidenreich offers, "Indeed, both the limited set of meat-related regulations endorsed by the Qur'an and its rhetoric regarding the Jews and their more extensive dietary norms closely resemble those articulated by Christian authorities." Ibid., 165.
[23] Khurrum Mirza and Naved Bakali, "Islam: The Fundamentals Every Teacher Should Know," *Counterpoint* 346 (2010): 54-55.
[24] James Toronto and Cynthia Finlayson, "Islam: An Introduction and Bibliography," *Brigham Young University Studies* 40: 4 (2001): 22.

The Feast of Sacrifice extends beyond the worshiping community and celebrants welcome family, neighbors, and even strangers to participate in a shared meal. While they may not actually sit at table with those in need, Muslims will share the food with others to care for others in need.

These two ritualized meals within the Muslim faith are examples of how powerful ritual meals can be. They are able to bring people together to share in a common human experience and need. Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr both serve to bring together family, friends, strangers, and a community of faith for food, prayer, and ritualized thanksgiving.

A third faith tradition concerning food can be found in the Jewish Seder meal. Like Muslims, Jews also follow certain dietary restrictions as part of their faith practice. These restrictions include not only prohibition of some foods, but also restrictions on how food is prepared. Uzi Rebhun and Shlomit Levy explain, "Observance of the Jewish dietary laws is measured here according to whether or not utensils for meat and dairy foods are separated at home, or whether the respondent observes Kashruth, keeps Kosher."[25] Keeping Kosher can be practiced differently in different countries or cultural contexts within the Jewish community. A similar acculturation can occur within Muslim and Christian contexts around the world.

The Seder or Passover Feast is the oldest of the feasts discussed so far. According to Oliver McQuillan:

> Jews have celebrated Passover since about 1300 BC. It was traditionally one of the three 'pilgrim' feasts when Israelites made a pilgrimage to offer sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. The feast lasts seven days in Israel, eight outside. Pesach is also the name of the sacrificial offering of a lamb that was made in Temple times. Other names for Passover include the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and the Festival of Freedom.[26]

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[25] Uzi Rebhun and Shlomit Levy, "Unity and Diversity: Jewish Identification in America and Israel 1990-2000," *Sociology of Religion* 67: 4 (Winter 2006): 398.
[26] Oliver McQuillan, "Sabbath Worship (1) – The Jewish Feast of Passover," *The Furrow* 60: 4 (April 2009): 213.

As part of this feast, there are several food items, serving as culinary metaphors, which help tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The food, wine, and hymn all serve to remind the Jewish people about their theological roots and escape from slavery. McQuillan claims, "The bread is blessed and ceremonially broken and the wine is blessed and poured. At its conclusion are Psalms of praise, and often songs are sung. The Seder is complete with the declaration: 'Next year in Jerusalem!'"[27] Certain dishes are prepared as part of the meal: bitter herbs, unleavened bread, wine, shank bones, or hardboiled eggs.[28]

Why this specific fare? Why did the faith community feel like these food items should become religious symbols for the Exodus narrative? Baruch Bokser explains:

> The ordinary becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by being there. It becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way. The ritual thus "serves as a focusing lens, marking and revealing significance … a [mode] of clarification." Therefore, "sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement.[29]

Any element might have served, but once the community ritualizes something, the element begins to take on additional meaning and often affects the spiritual life of those partaking in the ritual.

Passover tasks the worshiping community to remember who they are and how God brought them into freedom. McQuillan states:

> [W]hat is special about [Passover] is that the principal element is the supper, the Seder, an elaborate ritual evening meal (the word Seder means rule) celebrated by all the family in memory of the liberation of the children of Israel who were led out of Egypt by Moses as told in the Book of Exodus.[30]

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[27] Ibid., 218.
[28] See Baruch Bokser, "Ritualizing the Seder," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56:3 (Autumn 1988): 448.
[29] Ibid., 445.
[30] McQuillan, "Sabbath Worship (1) – The Jewish Feast of Passover," 213.

Here one can see how the ritualization of eating and elevating table elements through theological reflection can alter the community in a profound way. It reminds practitioners of their history. It can instill the importance of theologically important beliefs.

It appears that there might similarities between the sacred meals of the Abrahamic faiths. However, it is crucial one does not essentialize the religious other and minimize the incredible diversity and beauty that each tradition offers.[31] It should be made clear that each faith has unique ways of enacting ritualized meal sharing. As one begins to examine the importance of ritual and sacrament, one should avoid minimizing the differences between these three faiths and instead celebrate them.

Defining the Interreligious Welcome Table

Considering the possibilities of imbuing religious meaning and spiritual depth through meal sharing, I propose it is possible to institute a shared meal amongst varied faith traditions. What are the key ingredients for such a meal? How might an Interreligious Welcome Table create opportunities to practice hospitality and develop community?

The very act of eating is somatic, incarnational, and spiritual. Without intentional reflection, however, the second and third elements of eating can be lost. In the context of a fast-food culture, it is easy to view food as solely utilitarian.[32] Christopher Smith and John Pattison, drawing insight from the Slow Food movement, suggest:

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[31] Namsoon Kang warns, "All kinds of identity politics and advocacy movements have a strong tendency toward homogenization, ghettoization, and essentialization." Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 729-730.

[32] Christopher Smith and John Pattison note, "[S]ociologist George Ritzer has termed 'McDonaldization'— that is, 'the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.' Ritzer identified four dimensions of McDonaldization: efficiency, predictability, calculability (quantifiable results) and control— or at least the illusion of control." Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2014), 13-14, Kindle.

> The International Slow Food Movement was formed as an act of resistance against fast life and the homogenizing effects of globalization— what Alice Waters, the executive chef and co-creator of Chez Panisse restaurant calls 'global standardization'— and the attendant loss of natural and cultural diversity.[33]

In order to stem the tide of such homogenization, one might consider an Interreligious Welcome Table where diversity is embraced, ingested, and celebrated.

I began with a theology of food, and would like to consider journeying beyond the Christian perspective from which I am most familiar. How might welcoming other faith traditions expand a theology of food to include the religious other? Can sharing food prepared by hands from another faith tradition become a religious act and can such a meal enrich faith?

I would argue that whenever a person gathers around the dinner table to share a common meal with the religious other, noting the religious dietary perspectives of the guests, can be a sacred act. This is the foundation of an Interreligious Welcome Table. It is an embodied approach towards the religious other. Considering the incarnational nature of any meal, one might consider eating food as physically taking in another culture or faith and reflecting on how that experience can alter the individuals who participate. Such a table physically and spiritually embodies the perspectives of faith explored thus far, namely the uniting of hospitality, cosmopolitan theology, and theology of food.

This Interreligious Welcome Table has the potential to invite unity without demanding uniformity. To be truly welcoming, truly hospitable, this table must recognize the alterity of the religious other. It must consider the faith traditions of the religious other and make room for a variety of faith expressions especially as it relates to food preparation, menu items, and the purposeful practice of letting go of power or privilege. At the Interreligious Welcome Table,

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[33] Ibid., 12

people must come to share and participate without an agenda of conversion or conformity and be willing to be immersed in traditions beyond one's own.

The Interreligious Welcome Table is intended to create a space for deep faith exploration while attempting to avoid what Namsoon Kang calls, "religious tourism."[34] An example of religious tourism occurs when one visits a mosque, synagogue, or temple in order to observe rather than participate in religious practices. Kang suggests that Christians engage in religious tourism when, "Christian supremacy remains intact, implicitly or explicitly… religious plurality ends up reducing other religions as add-ons to Christianity."[35] This tourism is surface-level engagement with the religious other. Religious tourism is challenging to avoid, especially when one views the religious other in a subordinate way rather than as religious equal or neighbor.

At the Interreligious Welcome Table, one has the opportunity to engage in hospitality that truly welcomes the other as neighbor. It is risky in the sense that one enters such a context knowing that he or she might experience a theological shift in perspective or at least perception of the religious other. It is an embodied experience because at the table, when one prepares a dish to be shared, one is physically and spiritually offering a dish that is representative of what is religiously important to them. The food one might bring to share at such a table becomes representative of one's faith, culture, taste, or other aspect of identity of who she or he claims to be. This table has the potential for participants to both invite and be invited into deepening relationship with the religious other in hopes of building authentic community.

[34] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 2333-2335.
[35] Ibid.

Examples of Interreligious Table Sharing

Sharing a meal with someone, including the religious other, can be a sacred act. So can immersing oneself in the dietary practices found in the faith traditions of the religious other. Lisa Hess, a theologian and professor, wanted to expand her theological understanding of eating through the lens of Jewish *Kashrut* practices. She describes the experience:

> Regardless of whether one is close to it by inheritance or choice, "kosher" and "Jewish" are minimally, popularly associated—whether by intention of the observant or presumption of outsiders. From those who observe, in this study, I understand kashrut to offer to some a precious opportunity, to others an intermittent burden, while for others it can mean an unreflective custom while living into human fullness, sharpening teeth of identity against the irrepressible wisdom of the Sages, whether they like it or not.[36]

Hess recognizes the theological complications of eating and sharing in meals within another religious context. To better understand some of those challenges, she began an ethnographic study of a group of Jewish and Christian participants around table sharing. She practiced kashrut and through the practice grew in empathy, understanding, and greater self-awareness.[37]

In order to understand and engage in the faith practices of another, Hess kept kashrut eating practices for four weeks. In that time, she engaged in dialogue with other religious interlocutors who were practicing kashrut as well. After the experience, she reflected on her understanding of the writings of Paul and the complexity of breaking away from the law found in the Hebrew Scriptures and the eating practices of the first century church. Hess observes, "Scriptural polemics have created, intentionally or not, habits of derision and of presumption oblivious to the lived reality that kashrut has a powerful wisdom to it, even if (perhaps especially because) "we" cannot conceive it within our own traditional categories."[38] She concludes that

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[36] Lisa Hess, "Encountering Habits of Mind at Table: Kashrut, Jews, and Christians," *Cross Currents* 62: 3 (September 2012): 331.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 335.

law and faith are intricately connected, and there is a freedom in embracing those connections.[39] Through her engagement with the eating practices of another faith tradition, Hess discovered how her faith might be altered or even strengthened by the faith of another.

Hess offers one example of how one might engage the religious other through eating practices, but there are others. In her book, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family*, Susan Katz Miller describes her family's choice to raise her children in the two religious traditions to which her and her husband belonged. Susan, a Jew, and husband Paul, an Episcopalian, decided it was important to raise their children within in the two religious traditions rather than choosing one and neglecting the other. She asserts that in some way many relationships are interreligious in nature. "Whether Jews or Christians or Hindus or Buddhists, no two individuals have identical beliefs and practices; thus, every marriage could be considered an interfaith marriage."[40] What she implies is that people of various faiths might learn from interreligious families how to develop practices, which consider and affirm the beliefs of another.

Miller conducted a series of interviews with interfaith couples and researched several interfaith communities throughout the United States to discover the impact of celebrating both faith traditions within a single family unit. She suggests there are consequences for this interreligious family approach that might be informative for individuals who long to discover ways of welcoming the religious other. Miller notes that one of the most challenging aspects is finding faith communities that will support the decision of an interfaith couple to marry and

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Susan Katz-Miller, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), xii.

choose to hold on to both faith perspectives as opposed to sacrificing one and convert to the other. Miller laments:

> For many interfaith couples, finding supportive clergy remains one of the greatest challenges of raising children with both religions … The daring clergy who work with families who have chosen both religions are a distinct minority. Like the families, they must weather the skepticism of their peers: why would they agree to "share" these families with other clergy? Do they, by definition, "dilute" their beliefs in order to do so?[41]

Historical examples of interreligious or intercultural meals also exist. In 1944, Howard Thurman, the great civil rights advocate and co-pastor of The Church for The Fellowship of All Peoples, wanted to find ways to bring people from various beliefs and cultures together. Thurman describes the development of an "Intercultural Committee" that would host a "series of periodic international Fellowship Church dinners. The motif of each dinner being intergroup or intercultural in character …"[42] At the dinner table, participants encountered the other. They learned about the cultural differences and even religious differences without the intent to homogenize or alter another's religious perspective. Over 70 years ago, a bold pastor attempted to create a space around table where people from various faiths and cultures might gather to encounter the religious other and develop community.

Recently, after the 2016 presidential election, people (re)discovered how food and conversation can promote understanding of other perspectives beyond one's own. During the first 100 days of the Trump administration a group called "The People's Supper" began hosting dinners across the United States.[43] The purpose of these meals was to help people find a public space where they might have civil dialogue and learn more about people in their own

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[41] Ibid., 107.
[42] Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 64.
[43] Heather Abbott, Jennifer Bailey, Lennon Flowers, Micky Jones, and Emily May, "The Peoples Supper," (2017), https://thepeoplessupper.org/.

community. Rob, a guest of a meal in Washington DC, noted, "There is a spiritual quality to strangers dining together. Opening their minds and heart to one another, and seeking personal meaning and purpose, in our complicated and confusing world."[44] These dinners created space around the table for people from different political parties, cultures, and religious perspectives to share life and conversation especially in politically or religiously challenging times.

A final example that speaks to the power of food and table sharing can be found in a television series entitled, "Breaking Borders."[45] Hosted by a reporter and a chef, the two go to various places in the world where there is conflict and violence and create a meal where people can come, dialogue, and share a variety of perspectives around the table. These conversations and meals are not simple nor are they free of conflict or differing opinions. However, gathered around a table, sharing a meal, and learning more about one's neighbor creates an opportunity for participants to explore complicated political and religious subjects.

These examples serve to illustrate how food, eating practices, and dialogue can coalesce to establish a rich environment where difference can be embraced and community formed. Around such a table, one has the opportunity to practice the kind of hospitality that can foster community without conformity.

Other Approaches to Encounter

There are several approaches one might take to encounter, learn from, or develop a relationship with someone from another faith tradition. Why would one choose an Interreligious Welcome Table over others? An alternative approach I have experienced comes from theological

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[44] Ibid.
[45] *Breaking Borders*, featuring Mariana Van Zeller and Michael Voltaggio, aired Spring 2015, on *Travel Channel*, http://www.travelchannel.com/shows/breaking-borders/articles/breaking-borders.

education and interfaith dialogue. These approaches to other faiths occur through dialogue, research, interreligious seminars, or panel discussions.

Heckman and Neiss suggest, "Interfaith dialogue is when persons of different faith traditions or broader religious families interact … Interfaith dialogue is more typically used by the Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam …."[46] Interfaith dialogue can be casual or constructed. This dialogue can occur in an academic setting, and described as "Interreligious dialogue."[47]

Kate McCarthy offers another definition for interfaith dialogue, "a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow …."[48] McCarthy's definition explores the broad potential for engaging others from various faiths. She shares this definition to describe the two aims of interfaith discourse. The first aim is to educate in an informal setting. This kind of education is happening outside the halls of academia and within the coffee shops and farmer's markets across the United States.[49] While the likelihood that people will encounter different faith practitioners continues to increase, the knowledge one has or basis from which one attempts to engage in dialogue is often limited by what he or she does not know about the religious other or her or his own religion. The other major challenge of engaging the religious other is that what a person thinks she or he knows can be influenced by misinformation and misunderstanding. An example of this can be found in debates concerning Muslims who are citizens, refugees, or immigrants living in the United States. These debates can

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[46] Heckman and Neiss, eds., *InterActive Faith*, 6.
[47] Ibid.
[48] McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America,* 19.
[49] Diana Eck writes, "make no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth. Eck, *A New Religious America*, Kindle locations 4.

become malicious and even violent.[50] Such are expected outcomes when there is a lack of knowledge about another's religion or worldview.

The second aim of interfaith dialogue is to engage in personal or communal transformation. From a desire to deepen or alter one's theological or even sociological perspective, one may seek to cultivate relationships with people who practice religions other than one's own. While this change may be more self-oriented, it can also change the level of engagement within a community. To grow in understanding, a person may seek to encounter someone from another faith and be exposed to an alternative faith tradition. In so doing, one can build a community with a multiplicity of religious beliefs and practice that might not have existed otherwise. This is what Hess has attempted in her practice of Kashrut and with her interreligious classroom pedagogy.[51]

Such movement beyond exclusivism engenders community and positive interactions with religious others. When one seeks to encounter the other, the hope for openness and growth can become a catalyst for developing authentic and meaningful community. As I have illustrated, academics, clergy, and many community members have taken steps in creating space to talk with one another about a variety of topics including religion, politics, and humanitarian concerns.

Regardless of the approach, there are pitfalls and complications which can arise through the process. Conflicts are unavoidable because people have differing worldviews. Sallie King states, "Interreligious dialogue is by definition the encounter of two worldviews"[52] In order to create an environment conducive to promoting dialogue, one must understand that each

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[50] Greg Allen reports, "A pastor in Gainesville, Fla., says he will not back off plans to burn Korans… to commemorate the anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The top commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, says the church's plans could put the lives of Americans at risk and hurt the war effort." "Pastor To Proceed With Koran Burning," Greg Allen, *All Things Considered,* aired September 7, 2010, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129706363.

[51] Hess, "Being Shaped by the Ritual Practices of Others: A Classroom Reflection," 342-343.

[52] Sallie King, "Toward a Buddhist Model of Interreligious Dialogue," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990): 121.

representative will have certain religious perspectives that will differ from others. How one approaches the encounter will have tremendous impact on the outcomes.

Depending on the approach such dialogue takes, it can change the tone of the dialogue and dramatically alter the atmosphere of learning. To enter the dialogue pretending to divest oneself of pretense or religious self-identity will not help the conversation or create a meaningful experience. King again explains:

> It is certainly true to insist that I, and everyone else, as an individual, have a particular identity, including a particular religious identity, constructed by my experiences. It is not right to enter dialogue saying 'I am a Christian or I am a Buddhist' as if I had never heard of the other tradition.[53]

It is critical, therefore, when engaging in interfaith dialogue to recognize each participant brings an already formed religious identity.

Holding King's insights in mind, one begins to see some of the benefits of interfaith dialogue. The first is being introduced to another religious tradition, which can offer tremendous benefit for those brave enough to attempt it. According to Brian McLaren, there can be a palpable fear of the religious other. McLaren states:

> In the Bible I read about love, love, love, but in various Christian subcultures in which I've participated, I keep encountering fear, superiority, and hostility. In a wild array of forms, the message comes to me from the centers of religious power: I can't belong to our us unless I am against our them.[54]

[53] Ibid., 122.
[54] McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road*?, 14.

If one does not experience fear or hostility of the religious other, there can still be a substantial dose of skepticism. Yet as one encounters another faith perspective, fear and hostility can dissipate and alter our preconceptions of the other.[55]

Moving from introduction to familiarity is another benefit of interreligious encounter. This occurs as one experiences a different culture, worldview, and history beyond one's own. Reflecting on the work of Raimon Panikkar, Cisneros explains, "For a truly cross-cultural religious understanding we need a new revelatory experience."[56] A positive interfaith encounter can create a new and exciting opportunity to understand the world and the religious other in a more compassionate and caring way, and dialogue is the initial step on the journey towards familiarity. Yet for robust dialogue to occur one must not lose sight of his or her religious perspective.[57]

A final benefit of interfaith dialogue is that one's religious perspective and worldview can shift. Encounter by way of dialogue can move the participants towards a posture of tolerance and acceptance. Through interfaith dialogue one begins to see the world in less black and white terms. No longer is a person solely defined by her or his religion but they begin to grow into a new, broader understanding of the religious other. Categories structured around us and them can begin fade as one comes face to face with the religious other.

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[55] Sallie King shares, "We do not, though, give enough attention to the fact that simultaneously each individual who engages in dialogue is undergoing change. Hearing the dialogue, hearing the views of others is itself enough to cause change in each individual's religious identity. But we often fail to acknowledge that this is happening, and as a result fail to recognize the necessity of interior dialogue, that is, the necessity of consciously attending to the changes going on in one's own individual religious identity in response to the encounter with others." King, "Toward a Buddhist Model of Interreligious Dialogue," 123.

[56] Cisneros, "Understanding Through Appropriation in Interreligious Dialogue on Ethics," 255.

[57] The Dalai Lama offers this observation when attempting dialogue, "As a first step, it is vital to have some understanding of the key aspects of faith traditions other than one's own. This especially critical if one is not to succumb to the easy option of believing that all religions are fundamentally one, or that even if they are not so at this stage, a truly universal religion will emerge eventually in the world." The Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, 133.

Interreligious Education

Ariana Cisneros claims, "A number of formal interreligious initiatives, local to global, large to discreet, have been launched since the convening in 1893 of the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago."[58] The interfaith dialogue approach is over 120 years old and continues to be the beginning point for those interested in learning more about her or his religious neighbors. Yet, despite the longevity of the movement, there still exists a great deal of skepticism, fear, and trepidation concerning interreligious encounter.

According to John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, "one-quarter of Americans, 22%, say they would not want a Muslim as a neighbor; less than half believe U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States."[59] Another example can be found in the growing animosity towards Jewish neighbors as well, in the destruction of gravestones in Missouri and other places across the United States.[60] Despite the best efforts of many, there still seems to be a considerable challenge in bringing together people from differing faith perspectives to build a sense of community.

To confront the fears and misunderstandings of the religious other, educational institutions and some faith communities have focused on research, round table discussions, seminars, and mutual learning. According to Kate McCarthy these educational approaches are, "formal encounters between clergy and scholars of diverse religions, in a spirit of openness and tolerance, with the goals of promoting mutual understanding and enrichment, not conversion."[61]

One of the goals of interreligious education is to provide accurate information about the faith and practices of religious others to diminish the fear of the unknown and provide multiple

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[58] Cisneros, "Understanding Through Appropriation in Interreligious Dialogue on Ethics," 247.
[59] Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, *x*.
[60] "Headstones Vandalized At Jewish Cemetery In Missouri," Rachel Lippman, *All Things Considered,* aired February 21, 2017, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/2017/02/21/516488403/headstones-vandalized-at-jewish-cemetery-in-missouri.
[61] McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 18.

perspectives of faith without proselytizing participants. One of the approaches that some interreligious educators have used is the comparative approach. McCarthy states, "Comparative theologians are interested in studying other religions on their own terms and then exploring their own Christian faith using what they have learned about the other religions."[62] Comparative theology recognizes, affirms, and values the unique religious beliefs the religious other. Differences emerge as one begins to study several faith traditions, and through those differences one can compare the distinct beliefs and practices within each tradition.

At an interreligious panel discussion at Central Baptist Theological Seminary on October 24, 2014, I observed an educational panel discussion about developing a growing "respect for the lived religions of others."[63] Rev. Tobias opened the conversation by sharing a story about his grandfather who was a theologian in Germany during World War II. He said, "A pluralistic society induces fear of the other."[64] He suggested that when a society does not claim a universal perspective and there are various beliefs within a community then fear of the other or stranger can emerge. Fear of those who might be different arise because of a perception that the other is somehow enemy or threat.

Yet we have freedom to choose how to deal with that other. Strategies and constructs exist for how to deal with those fears. Fear is a powerful emotion. Some fears are real, others are used to manipulate. This is often done by "Othering" someone.[65] Those who are not "us" must be "them." A false dichotomy emerges that unnecessarily pits one against the other; however, giving into such a polarizing view does not have to be one's response to the other.

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[62] Ibid., 37.
[63] Molly Marshall, Tobias Schlingensiepen, Joseph Arsenault, Mark Levin, panel discussion at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, (October 24, 2014).
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

This fear can turn violent if the community does not attempt to work together or find some way to value the other. In response to this kind of fear and hatred, Dr. Marshall, President of Central, recommended that the only way forward is to speak. "Keeping silent is a terrible thing."[66] While the panel discussion created an opportunity to engage a specific topic as it relates to violence and fear of the other, it did little to provide opportunity to build relationship. Dr. Marshall suggested that many seminaries struggle to find ways to help students engage the religious other.

Interreligious educational opportunities provide numerous benefits for those who participate. Students develop a sense of collegiality and intellectual perspectives are formed that include the religious other. Such education helps to create a foundation for further engagement. If one hopes to have meaningful dialogue and encounter with people from other faiths, then learning about their faith is a key component of the endeavor.[67] Interreligious education also establishes a forum where individuals can counteract and debunk misinformation or prejudices that abound in the public sphere. The more one learns about the religious practices and beliefs of another, the more she or he can contradict those who would propagate a message of fear and misunderstanding.

Interfaith Social Service

Within the scope of interfaith dialogue and interreligious education lies another approach to interreligious engagement. Such encounter occurs through interfaith social service groups,

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Diana Eck writes about her experience as a professor at Harvard with interreligious education, "I was fortunate to have the stimulating company of a group of fifteen secondary school teachers who came to Harvard for an NEH summer seminar on World Religions in America. This was one of the most rewarding teaching experiences I have ever had, and it gave me a burst of energy in my final months of work." Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, Kindle locations 92.

which are often constructed in the vein of ministerial alliances. These groups tend to focus on social concerns like food scarcity, home insecurity, or after-school programming.[68] Several examples of these interfaith groups exist around the country.

One group, the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council (GKCIC), has engaged in the various interfaith opportunities listed above. Their mission statement reads, "We are growing a sustainable, pervasive culture of knowledge, respect, appreciation, and trust amongst people of all faiths and religious traditions in the greater Kansas City community."[69] The GKCIC holds events such as: book clubs, human rights day events, speakers bureaus, and table of faiths luncheons.[70] The GKCIC has had a strong commitment to social justice issues throughout the community. They have held public forums concerning interfaith cooperation and educational opportunities meant to diminish the fear of the religious other. GKCIC also makes public statements against violence and hatred perpetrated throughout the community and world.[71]

A new addition to the Kansas City interfaith landscape is the KC for Refugees organization. Their mission statement reads, "We are an interfaith organization that seeks to unite all who have a passion for welcoming and supporting those who have been forced to flee their home countries and settle here in the greater Kansas City area."[72] Under the leadership of

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[68] According to McCarthy, there are hundreds of interreligious groups with more being created each year. While these interfaith councils work together to assist their larger community, many have struggled to create meaningful worship services or an atmosphere for theological reflection. She argues that attempts of interfaith worship, "are often uncomfortable affairs." Yet the purpose of most councils has been to increase awareness and understanding of the Other without attempting to essentialize any religious tradition. "[T]hose doing local interfaith work seem to find their greatest connections and insights as they do the mundane work of community life - planning a potluck, writing a press release for the newspaper, or hosting a forum." McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America,* 101-125.
[69] "About Us," *Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council*, http://www.kcinterfaith.org/about-us/who-we-are/.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] "Our Story," *KC For Refugees*, http://kcforrefugees.weebly.com/our-story.html.

Sofia Khan, this social justice centered ministry has helped numerous refugees feel welcome and receive resources for day-to-day living.[73]

Groups like the GKCIC or KC for Refugees gather around social justice concerns as interfaith partners to address needs within the communities they serve. Through these actions, they can meet countless needs of the larger community while at the same time provide interfaith encounters intended to develop friendship and collegiality.

The Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue/Education

The approaches I have listed above come with many benefits that I have named; however, there are complications with such approaches as well. Whether in informal dialogue settings or more formalized educational settings, the conversation can turn towards a comparative approach of religion. Within the interreligious educational setting this comparative approach might be a necessary component for learning to occur.

José Cabezón observes, "Put another way, it is important to be aware of the weaknesses of one's own and others' religious traditions as it is to be aware of their strengths; and this, of course is the function of polemics - to point out weaknesses, and by implication, strengths."[74] Within a dialogical approach towards interreligious encounter, the practice of comparing strengths and weaknesses of faith practice can become problematic. The approach to philosophical discourse established by Hegel still has strong influence on how one approaches

[73] Ibid.
[74] José Cabezón, "Scholarship as Interreligious Dialogue," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 18, (1998): 92.

encounter.[75] In such an approach, individuals examine two distinct perspectives or ideas and synthesize meaning through a method of comparison and examination of pros and cons contained within each perspective. Such an approach may be ideal when engaging scientific and philosophical topics but is challenging when examining one's own faith practice or the faith practice of another especially if approached in evaluative terms.

Some have taken a different approach to comparative theology.[76] Francis Clooney defines this theological approach as:

> *[C]omparative* and *theological* beginning to end - marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.[77]

This method of theological exploration is not meant to observe only, but to invite change.[78] This change is not to move others to think and believe in similar terms, but it is meant to deepen, challenge, grow, and explore one's own faith through deep learning of another.

When first examining this comparative theological perspective, one might note the "comparative" description of the work and perhaps feel skeptical about its ability to avoid evaluating the religious practices of another. However, this comparison is not necessarily evaluative. Clooney explains:

> It is therefore not primarily a matter of evaluation, as if merely to compare A and B so as to determine the extent of their similarity and which is better. Nor is it a scientific analysis by which to grasp the essence of the comparable by sifting through similarities

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75 The Hegelian approach of creating a dialectic between two ideas and eventually synthesizing an overarching logic tends to put ideas, philosophies, politics, or theologies in polar opposition with one another in an attempt to understand in greater detail that which is being explored. However, Gustav Miller argues that Hegel did not always follow this method perfectly and should therefore not be the preferred approach for every dialogue or convergence of ideas. Instead, dialogue is nuanced, hard to codify, and critical for deepening one's understanding. For more about this argument see, Gustav E. Mueller, "The Hegel Legend of 'Thesis - Antithesis - Synthesis,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19: 3 (June 1958): 411.

[76] For an introduction to this theological approach see: Clooney, *Comparative Theology*.

[77] Ibid., 10.

[78] Ibid.

> and differences. Rather, as a theological and necessarily spiritual practice … *comparison* is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other.[79]

Understood in this way, a comparative theological approach to interreligious encounter recognizes and embraces the plurality of the global religious context and embraces the diversity found therein. In this sense, it respects the alterity of each practitioner and invites robust examination both self-reflective and of the religious beliefs of the other.

Yet a significant distinction does exist between cosmopolitan theology, comparative theology, and the dialogical/educational approach that is critical to note. Although these approaches hold much in common, the cosmopolitan approach seeks to eliminate what Kang describes as "religious tourism."[80] Kang suggests:

> What students need to learn in the era of multireligionism is not mere information but a deep and critical perspective through which they can find not only the visible information-out-there but also the hidden, distorted, suppressed, invisible knowledge about a specific religion and its relation to other religions so that they commit themselves to a radical engagement with the everyday reality in which people should materialize the religious core values in their day-to-day reality.[81]

This "radical engagement," is challenging at a one-time panel discussion, interreligious service project, or in a semester-long course at a higher education institution. It is not impossible, but it does have challenges.

In the broad category of theology of religion, Clooney says, "[it] reflects from the perspective of one's own religion on the meaning of other religions, often considered merely in general terms."[82] In the more narrow field of comparative theology, judgments are not made of the religious other, but of one's own religious tradition in light of the tradition of the other.[83] As

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[79] Ibid., 10-11.
[80] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle location 2229-2540.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 14.
[83] Ibid., 15.

Clooney has defined his own practice, he does this engagement by reading and researching religious texts from two different faith traditions and then creates comparative theological insight that shapes his own faith perspective.[84]

Lisa Hess describes an alternative approach of interreligious engagement:

> Landing into an interfaith friendship without any intention of "pursuing interfaith dialogue" opened a new doorway into a higher education teaching collaboration integrative of disciplinary contributions yet undeterred by them. The *companionship* framed the method, in other words.[85]

It is this *companionship* that has the theological fortitude to transform the one willing to make the attempt to engage in the religious traditions of another faith. Opening one's home to the religious other without an ulterior agenda to transform or convert the religious other but instead to be open to theological change in one's own life might be the catalyst for growth. Opening one's home in order to practice vulnerability, welcome, and a willingness to do the hard work of hospitality so one might deepen faith and companionship can create opportunities to invest in the life of one's religious neighbor.

One begins to see in practice the major difference between comparative, educational, and dialogical approaches and the Interreligious Welcome Table. Hess, Kang, and others suggest an alternative way to engage the religious other in a physically, emotionally, and spiritually immersive way. This shifts the dialogue, study, encounter, and practice beyond a one-time event such as a seminar, panel discussion, or a semester-long course of study to an immersive experience designed for community-building and neighboring. This approach is an investment in the lives of the religious other, and an exercise in hospitality wherein the participant's investment

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[84] Ibid., 57-68.
[85] Emphasis on "companionship" is mine. Hess, "Being Shaped by the Ritual Practices of Others," 341.

is reciprocated by the religious neighbor. Kang calls it being an "active participant" rather than a religious tourist.[86]

There are at least two factors that separate the Interreligious Welcome Table from other approaches. The first is setting. Rather than educational institutions or public forums, the table is set in homes of participants or in an agreed upon location like a restaurant or even religious space. The setting is intended to create an atmosphere for welcome, hospitality, and life-sharing.

The second is the presence of food. Some educational events or panel discussions include food as part of the gathering. Table sharing can and does occur; however, I would suggest that when one brings a dish to share, over multiple gatherings, and with the same group of individuals, an alimentary theology begins to take shape. Alimentary theology, as defined by Montoya, "is an envisioning of theology *as* nourishment: food as theology and theology as food… it addresses some of the spiritual and physical hungers of the world, and seeks ways of bringing about nourishment."[87] This approach moves far beyond religious tourism and instead develops a spiritual practice of theology within the context of sharing food, examining theological perspectives of the faith representatives gathered around the table, and immersing oneself in the concerns and lives of one's interreligious neighbor.

At this table, one must practice hospitality, embrace natality, and be willing to be changed. Again Montoya writes:

> Language, cultural and social constructions of the world, physical, chemical, and bio-neurological impulses - all enter into contact and interact with the sense of taste in such a way that these interactions also cast some light on the world. It is as if through tasting the world is made: re-created or recrafted.[88]

[86] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 4446-4452.
[87] Montoya, *Theology of Food,* 29.
[88] Ibid., 63.

Through the sharing of food, one ingests and embodies the perspective of the other not to destroy, dominate, or consume, but rather to allow the internalized perspective of the other help grow one's own understanding of the religious other, to be nourished by the religious other. In hopes of practicing this alimentary theology, one eats and prepares food with intention, and one enters dialogue and relationship with intention. In so doing, participants are re-created.

This intentionality is not simple. It is complex and challenging. As Mark Branson and Juan Martinez note, "When persons of different cultures share life, once we get beyond music and food, the complexities increase."[89] Participants within the Interreligious Welcome Table must be purposeful and intentional in setting the table to ensure that all welcomed and are treated with dignity, respect, and as unique individuals with one-of-a-kind theological beliefs to be shared.

I am in no way suggesting that comparative theologians or other educational/dialogical facilitators to interreligious encounter are mere spectators when it comes to interreligious engagement. What I am suggesting is that the Interreligious Welcome Table provides an atmosphere where food, fellowship, dialogue, and theological exploration are welcome from the very first moment through the entire lifespan of a group willing to engage in this alimentary theology. Herein lies the fundamental difference between these approaches and why I suggest that if one is to attempt to develop interreligious community, the Interreligious Welcome Table is one approach for creating an opportunity where one might move beyond religious tourism and into an immersive interreligious experience.

[89] Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, Kindle locations 76.

Creating an Interreligious Welcome Table: Learning from the People of Faith for Peace

Throughout this project I have been arguing for a theological framework utilizing the concepts found within practical theology. This is a theory of praxis in the midst of action while one engages in continual reevaluation of action or belief.[90] My belief and understanding of the Interreligious Welcome Table have been shaped and reshaped through my engagement with the People of Faith for Peace (POFFP) and through their responses to a survey.[91]

This interreligious faith group has attempted to practice a version of the Interreligious Welcome Table as described above. Through their quarterly potluck meals and gatherings, I have observed, participated, and been welcomed into a community where various religious perspectives are shared and celebrated. They have worked to embrace the alterity of the religious other. They have challenged themselves to extend hospitality to the religious other. Intentionally or unintentionally they have practiced an alimentary theology, which has had an impact on my faith and the faith of other participants.

For some members of the POFFP the meal sharing was an opportunity to try food from other cultures and faith perspectives. One respondent noted, "[It] introduced me to new dishes."[92] Another participant shared a different perspective:

> Eating "family style" is such a human thing. It unites us all, especially when at table. We share our efforts at preparation. Even thinking about each other as we decide what to bring, when we shop, and as we cook. The "inter-religious" is just an interesting aspect of who we are [as] friends and learners.[93]

While not everyone experienced interreligious meal-sharing as an alimentary theological experience, several noted the importance and sacredness of the shared meal. Those who did not

[90] Ibid., Kindle locations 392-408.
[91] See Appendix A.
[92] Ibid., 5.
[93] Ibid.

experience the meal as alimentary theology noted the utilitarian aspect of eating together. The meal was an occasion to eat other dishes and satisfy hunger. This suggests that the meal can serve multiple functions simultaneously. The function that deepened my experience of the meal and interreligious gathering was the reflection on the possibility of the shared meal to spark theological reflection and inquiry.

Through this experience, my concept of how one might engage the religious other has significantly changed. Instead of trying to embrace commonality and diminish differences between my interreligious neighbors, I have begun to embrace the importance of celebrating and espousing that difference while allowing the table to alter my faith. In the vein of Lisa Hess, I have been invited to eat the food from other faith traditions beyond my own. I have also been invited to pray with my Muslim and Jewish friends in their religious tradition.

In light of my encounter with the POFFP and their reflections on the experience, I believe there are five critical pieces for creating an Interreligious Welcome Table. First, it is vital to find an appropriate physical space for the gatherings. Offer a potluck meal which is carefully planned and considerate of the different dietary laws of the participants. Choose theological topics of discussion from the traditions represented at the table. Invite sharing of life experiences and events. Welcome participants to lead in some kind of ritual from his or her faith. These five elements serve to establish a foundation for the welcome table and create an opportunity for individuals to become active participants in interreligious theological formation, not religious tourism.

Where one sets the welcome table is important. Different atmospheres are established in the halls of higher learning, in the context of a religious institution, or in someone's home. Yet,

to invite strangers into one's home can be problematic and challenging.[94] In the name of hospitality, how can one begin to diminish the gap between host and guest to be fully welcomed as oneself? Perhaps rotating the location of the gatherings becomes important. It gives all a chance to be host and guest. It provides an opportunity for each host to model vulnerability and practice welcome and offers each guest an opportunity to learn from others how to welcome one another employing the concepts of natality and hospitality.

It is possible to set these tables in other locations as well, but one must always hold the principles of hospitality in mind in order to lessen the imbalance of power and privilege. As noted earlier, avoiding an imbalance altogether may be impossible, but an attempt must be made if the table is to be truly welcoming. Setting tables in places of worship might also be beneficial for creating opportunity for others to learn and experience holy places from other faith traditions.

Second, food plays a critical role for welcoming others at the table. When I was invited to the POFFP to share a meal and build community with interreligious participants, I was extremely nervous and excited. What dishes would be appropriate so all might eat without reservation or violating a dietary restriction of which I might be unaware? Fortunately, the participants established ground rules about what dishes to bring. I was a practicing vegetarian at the time, so it made me feel welcomed knowing that everyone was aware and concerned about the dietary restrictions of others. However, I was unsure about food preparation or other religious rules concerning food for the other participants.

One participant brought shrimp to our first gathering. I grew anxious for some of the Jewish participants. No one said anything, but not everyone selected a portion from every dish.

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[94] Kang notes the complications of practicing hospitality in the context of one's home when she says, "'Come, come to me, feel at home,' 'But you should respect my house, my language, my rules, the rules of my nation … 'You are welcome, but under some conditions.'" Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 3860-3861.

There was nothing at the dinner that impacted my religious practice, so I left feeling extremely welcomed and cared for. However, one survey participant commented, "I do want to say that when this group first started out, there wasn't the sensitivity to religious dietary needs. As time progressed and the group evolved (some people left and others joined) it is now a more accepting group who is thoughtful of dietary needs."[95] Eventually the group began to learn more and more about the eating practices of our interreligious neighbors, and attention to those practices helped formulate connection and community as we began to care more deeply for one another. This sharing of food unites and sustains. As Montoya has implied, when people gather to share food they may find connection with one another and nourishment for the soul.[96] When gathered at table with the other, one begins to notice and experience a deep connection with the other.

Third, it is critical to invite theological conversation. Each time we gathered, someone would share a theological topic from her or his faith. We explored theological concepts such as the afterlife, service to the community, and interpretation of scriptures. After we had gathered for a few months, we began to explore various political or current cultural topics effecting the different religious communities. Once the topic was about conflicts in the Middle East and the conversation turned towards the tensions between Israeli and Palestinians. The conversation intensified because the focus turned to geopolitical concerns. One member reflected, "[O]nce we got temporarily imbalanced in our communication when we discussed - without sufficient empathy toward two of our members - a middle east conflict which most of us felt was imbalanced from a power/oppression standpoint."[97] While some of these topics have been challenging for various reasons, they eventually helped create empathy and develop a broader

[95] See Appendix A, question 5.
[96] Montoya, *The Theology of Food*, 95.
[97] See Appendix A, question 7.

understanding of one's religious neighbors and the challenges he or she might be facing within various contexts.

It took several months for us to develop trust and open up so we could have more complex discussions regarding our faith perspectives. Through those conversations, I gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. I began to see connections I never realized existed, and differences emerged without creating fear or distrust of the religious other. These conversations were only possible because each participant committed to a particular style of dialogue. That style is not based on apologetics or a desire to proselytize; rather, the hope of dialogue was to build relationship, understanding, and respect. Questions were encouraged while judgments were not. Critical thinking and tough questions in pursuit of better understanding were welcome. However, the group avoided sharing value statements regarding his or her theological understanding. Most conversations have been thoughtful, considerate of various perspectives, and enriching.

Fourth, guests at the table must be willing to invest in the lives of interreligious neighbors. As we continued to meet, something else was happening beyond setting, food, and dialogue. We began to talk about what was going on in each other's lives. We started developing an overall concern and care for those gathered around the table. Writing from a strictly Christian perspective, Norman Wirzba states, "The goal of life is to enact relationships with each other so that the life people experience here and now can share in the divine, Trinitarian life that creates, sustains, and fulfills creation."[98] I would argue that these relationships can include others beyond one's own faith. If one is bold enough to consider how those relationships can grow, alter, and

[98] Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 148.

deepen one's own faith and contribute to the same in the faith of the interreligious other, then table sharing can be a place where one interacts with the religious other and the sacred.

Eventually, we became more than theological and dialogical explorers. We became neighbors. We became friends. This is no small matter: to develop relationships with a person from another religious tradition takes time and effort. Yet, it has the potential to change the dynamics of communities large and small and hopefully increase cooperation and hospitality.

The final piece of the Interreligious Welcome Table is the incorporation of religious rituals or practice from faith traditions represented in the group. Perhaps the most discomforting proposition of the Interreligious Welcome Table is to suggest that people of one faith engage in the practices of another. Hess, as an educator, reflects on the challenges for people to engage in such activity. She states, "This course instigated a most difficult challenge for me in this respect, which was a willingness to be shaped by the practices of others and the quite vulnerable teaching moments that followed."[99] However, she recognizes the deep learning that can occur and the growth within her own understanding of faith as she practiced elements from a different faith tradition.[100]

At each gathering of the POFFP there is prayer from one of the Abrahamic traditions. There is also a brief explanation of some religious ritual of the season. During Hanukkah, one of our Jewish friends lit the candles of the Menorah, led us in a Jewish song for the season, and offered a prayer in Hebrew. While the rest of the faith traditions had little experience with the ritual, the POFFP attempted to follow along and engage in the practice so as to learn more about the practices of the religious other.

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[99] Hess, "Being Shaped by the Ritual Practices of Others," 342.
[100] Ibid.

Does such engagement in the religion of another weaken or diminish one's own faith? Another concern is whether or not this is proselytizing or an attempt to convert the religious other. I have suggested that the Interreligious Welcome Table never requires one to participate in the practices of another to be welcomed. One can come to such a table and observe a practice from another faith tradition without feeling like he or she must offer the prayer, sing a song, or light a candle. However, witnessing the rituals of another faith can alter one's own. Clooney says:

> Comparative theologians therefore can respect and take into account commitment to the truth known and believed within our particular traditions. Along the way, they can defend truth's value in the context of religious diversity, allow the light of comparative study to banish misunderstandings regarding truth claims, rule out exaggerated opinions regarding the truth of their own tradition, and achieve fresh insight into the creeds and doctrines precious to their community. In all of this, they remain responsible to their home community, and in a different but real way to the other community whose texts they have been studying.[101]

I would suggest the same is true for ritual, prayer, or other types of interreligious experience. The Interreligious Welcome Table approach can create opportunities to experience a faith practice beyond one's own without feeling as though he or she is abandoning something fundamental to one's faith of origin.

At the end of Ramadan 2014, I was invited to participate in an al-Iftar meal at a local mosque. Friends had invited me to take part in food, fellowship, and prayer. As dusk descended we went into the Mosque to pray. Afterwards, I learned much about Islam during the conversations I had with new friends around picnic tables set up outside the mosque. There was something life-changing about the welcome I experienced with a group of faithful people from a tradition that was different from my own. The experience impacted the way I understood a ritualized, shared meal with people from another faith, and how it can change one's perspective.

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[101] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 122.

While this was an extremely powerful experience, I did not feel the need to convert nor did I feel like I was losing some part of my own faith. Yet, I must admit that I was changed through the welcome I received. I discovered the importance of embracing diversity over commonality. The welcome I experienced also helped me imagine the possibility of developing community by sharing food, dialogue, and theological exploration. Despite not being a practicing Muslim, I discovered meaningful spiritual connection through the hospitality this community shared with me.

This invitation came because I had spent a significant amount of time in the homes of Muslim families through the POFFP. I was given the opportunity to join this faith ritual because of the friendships we forged. Over time, I was able to build a sense of trust and mutual respect that prompted some of my Muslim friends to invite me to one of their meaningful rituals of sharing food and celebrating the end of Ramadan. This is just one example of how an Interreligious Welcome Table extends hospitality and is meant to engender a sense of connection with other faith traditions and practices and offer opportunities to deepen one's own faith while learning more about the faith of another.

Conclusion

The growing diversity within our glocalized culture here in the United States and around the world makes one keenly aware of the religious differences that exist in our world. I affirm the importance and necessity of Interreligious Welcome Tables as a way to not only encounter the religious other, but to welcome the other as neighbor. I firmly believe that such a table offers practitioners the opportunity to move beyond tolerance or religious tourism towards authentic hospitality, theologically delicious cuisine, and embracing interreligious neighbors. If one is willing to attempt to host or be a guest at an Interreligious Welcome Table, perhaps he or she

might discover the benefits of community and how such a community might foster peace in one's neighbor, city, and world.

CHAPTER 4: BEYOND ENCOUNTER

Encountering the religious other is unavoidable given the increasingly globalized context of the postmodern world. Communities across the United States and elsewhere can benefit from an Interreligious Welcome Table approach of embracing the religious other as neighbor. I have outlined an approach of encounter that takes seriously the Christian tenet of hospitality informed by a cosmopolitan theological understanding, a reading of scripture utilizing an interreligious theological lens, and the theological complexity of food. I describe this approach as an Interreligious Welcome Table in hopes of reflecting my own uniquely Christian expression, while recognizing that mine is not the only nor the ultimate faith perspective. I, therefore, suggest that this table can offer a meeting space and foundation for building an interreligious community.

Preparing an Interreligious Welcome Table

Hospitality is never risk-free. Neither is constructing an Interreligious Welcome Table. There are many challenges that might diminish the welcome of the table. I have already noted a few, especially concerning dietary practices. It will be of utmost importance to be considerate of the religious other and their faith tradition regarding what kind of food can be shared. I have also noted other concerns regarding topic selection and warning against coming with any sort of ulterior motive of proselytizing or attempting to convert the religious other.

So how might one begin to set an Interreligious Welcome Table? The first step is to learn about other religious traditions. Before meeting with people of other faiths, I suggest reviewing

The Great Courses lecture series entitled "Great World Religions," or perhaps a work by Karen Armstrong entitled, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*.[1] These resources are excellent entry points for learning about the tenets of Abrahamic faiths, and the "Great World Religions," series offers insights to five world religions. While they are not exhaustive, these resources provide key information for exploring other religious expressions. It is important to note that one cannot fully know everything about another religion because, like Christianity, there are many expressions. However, if we are to engage and welcome the religious other, it is important to develop a common language. These courses and additional sources can help.

Second, allow everyone to speak for themselves. In line with Kang's understanding of self-categorization, it is necessary that individuals have the freedom and the invitation to express their beliefs and perspectives rather than essentializing or tokenizing the religious other.[2] For instance, one must not assume that what he or she has read in the news about a small group of Muslims in one part of the world is representative of the theological perspective of others. The same holds for Christians, Jews, Buddhists, or other faith traditions. The way one begins to understand one's neighbor is by practicing risky hospitality and welcome without assumptions.

Third, begin to build relationships with the religious other. Of all these practical steps to prevent harm, this will take the greatest amount of effort and time. One must be willing to invest in the lives of another. Robert Lupton notes in his book, *Toxic Charity*, that if we are to experience and participate in true transformation we must be willing to "invest" in a

[1] The series can be found at http://www.thegreatcourses.com/sets/set-great-world-religions-2nd-edition-new-testament.html. See also, Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).
[2] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 2330-2335.

community.[3] He calls this process "reneighboring."[4] Reneighboring is not a quick solution for making peace in the world. It takes a great deal of time to develop trust-filled relationships with the religious other, especially in a world where skepticism and fear has fueled hate-filled speech and violence. Lupton again states, "Trust is the foundation of all human relationships. … Trust is also the essence of faith."[5] If we are to practice genuine faith, we must develop trusting relationships with other religious perspectives. To do so is to become a peacemaker.

Finally, do not ignore or neglect the spiritual nature, quest, or journey of all gathered in an interreligious sacred space. One might be tempted to neutralize or sterilize an interreligious gathering space for fear of offending the other. Yet, to deny the unique religious identity and need for spiritual exploration of each person is to inflict harm by neglecting a fundamental aspect of one's identity. Rather, one might invite each to share a spiritual element of each faith tradition as a way to begin the gathering time so as to recognize the spiritual nature of the community. Praying together as an interreligious community is possible and can be beneficial as long as the prayer considers the makeup of the community; however, it is unnecessary to alter one's faith perspective when offering the prayer.

As I have claimed, ritual serves as a powerful way to bring people from various faiths together in a time of spiritual questioning. The Prayer of Examen is a ritual that invites all to participate.[6] While this prayer originates from the Christian tradition, it can be easily adapted to an interreligious context by asking questions like: What was the best part of my day? What was the worst part? Where did I experience the holy or sacred? What am I looking forward to

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[3] Lupton, Robert, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 136.
[4] Ibid., 156.
[5] Ibid., 61.
[6] To learn more about the prayer of St. Ignatius visit http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/how-can-i-pray.

tomorrow? This prayer is one way to check in with people and listen for how the divine has been prevalent or moving in the lives of those gathered. If there are members from the Buddhist, Hindu, or non-Abrahamic tradition, parts of the prayer practice can still be used, but one should be mindful that participants will not use the same language to express faith or practice. This diversity is part of the beauty of the Interreligious Welcome Table and must be embraced rather than ignored or homogenized.

Above all, do no harm. By practicing these concepts, one may avoid many potential harms; however, engaging in welcome and hospitality is risky. The best one can do is to be caring and patient as she or he opens oneself to welcoming the religious other and building community. Being quick to forgive and accepting the forgiveness and grace of the religious other can also be a spiritually enriching experience.

Potential Benefits of an Interreligious Welcome Table

Conversations and relationships of an interreligious nature will, invariably, be challenging, complicated, and complex. To create community, we must consider developing hospitable and caring relationships with members of other faith traditions. I believe one must seriously consider these concepts to develop such relationships. If one is willing to accept the challenges and practice risky hospitality, one can truly become a peacemaker in this pluralistic and diverse world.

A welcoming community begins to emerge through the relationships one develops with his or her religious neighbor. This community can change behavior and respond when neighbors are in need. When members of POFFP advocate for people, such as refugees, they reinforce the notion that everyone is neighbor, especially those in need who long for solidarity. One survey response stated, “I find it most life-giving when we limit ourselves to fellowship, sharing about

our traditions, and a little community service/activism."[7] Distance between oneself and one's neighbor is an illusion.

Reflecting on how participation in the POFFP has shaped one's concept of neighbor, another survey respondent suggested:

> To me, a neighbor is someone who can live next door, on the same street or neighborhood. It can also mean someone who lives in the same community. Being with POFFP has shaped the way I see "neighbor" in that everyone in the group is my neighbor, whether one lives in Lee's Summit, KCMO, or Overland Park. So even if we don't live in the exact same city or subdivision, I consider each person in POFFP my neighbor. It's a good feeling. I appreciate that several of us were able to go to [a Senator's] office to advocate for refugees, for example.[8]

A practice of encounter, sharing a meal, genuine hospitality, and theological exploration can lead to advocacy, which can have a tremendous impact on the practitioner and larger community. When one invests oneself in the life of the other he or she develops a connection which can lead to becoming an ally for individuals who feel as though their faith tradition or cultural heritage is in danger.

Beyond the potential of creating community and engaging in advocacy, a final benefit of gathering around an Interreligious Welcome Table is the potential for spiritual and theological growth. Reflecting on her own experience of engaging in the eating practice of Kashrut, Hess writes:

> I yearn to testify within my own tradition's habits: to an ancient wisdom that honors life and its sacrifice for others' nurture, to the companionships that allowed me to encounter this wisdom, and to the beautiful complexity of living within such wisdom surrounded by 'others' and 'outsiders,' many of whom have been hostile over the centuries.[9]

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[7] See Appendix A, question 7.
[8] Ibid., 4.
[9] Hess, "Encountering Habits of Mind at Table: Kashrut, Jews, and Christians," 335.

When one is willing to immerse oneself in the religious context of another, she or he has an opportunity to develop greater understanding of that faith tradition and possibly deepen one's connections with her or his neighbor.

This theological growth does not mean that one forsakes the faith tradition of her or his roots. Instead, one begins to reinterpret embedded theological perspectives as they are altered when one encounters another perspective. Within Christianity, such a change can occur by encountering another theological perspective or through a challenging life circumstance. This may initiate self-reflection concerning one's theological beliefs. However, when one encounters another faith tradition, one is challenged to also consider alternative perspectives in a variety of theological categories.

Initially, such an encounter may be unsettling. Clooney observes, "Some find themselves under siege, threatened by a bewildering range of religious possibilities; some withdraw and demonize the others; some … begin to forget their identities."[10] These scenarios may serve as cautionary tales for those observing the growing diversity in our current cultural context that might keep us from engaging the religious other. However, Clooney also suggests, "Exchange across religious borders must be distinguished not simply by historical necessity, but also by recognized *need* and even positive desire to learn from the other, with a capacity to be transformed in that learning."[11] The Interreligious Welcome Table is a place where one might be transformed by the faith of the religious other not converted, proselytized, or forced to conform. This table recognizes and embraces the natality of each participant and immerses the practitioners into lived experiences of faith that go beyond religious tourism.

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[10] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 3.
[11] Ibid., 82.

Fear, Hatred, and Political Rhetoric

Never underestimate the power of fear to incite people to violence and hatred. While the Christian message includes love of neighbor and caring for disenfranchised, pastors have also preached harmful messages of exclusion regarding the religious other.[12] Whether on the news, social media, or from the pulpit, the religious other can be subject to prejudice and abuse.[13] Fear can quickly turn to violence. Some have suggested that political rhetoric and action using the language of fear has directly influenced the United States populace, and as a result, there has been an increase in violence towards one's religious neighbor.[14]

The British Broadcasting Corporation captured this fear in a documentary entitled, "United States of Hate: Muslims Under Attack."[15] In this disturbing look at how some citizens of the United States view Islam, the viewer can watch how a citizen's militia in Arizona take it upon themselves to threaten and intimidate Muslims who are going about their day. Some of the harassed individuals try to engage the antagonists in dialogue, but it devolves into vitriolic and hate-filled shouting.

This hatred and fear does not occur only at the grassroots level. It can be found at the pinnacle of the United States political system. During the 2016 presidential race, Donald Trump argued for, ""a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our

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[12] Harvey Cox explores the growing fear of the religious other and the importance of interreligious encounter. He states, "Why have relations among the ancient spiritual traditions of the human family, which many believed were improving a few years back, turned rancorous and even violent as new outbreaks of separatism, xenophobia and hostility erupt?" Harvey Cox, "Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue," *The Christian Century* 105: 24, (August 1988): 731.

[13] Shannon Dooling claims, "Reports of anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. are up 86 percent so far this year, according to data released by the Anti-Defamation League." "Fearing Anti-Semitism, Some American Jews Are Reclaiming German Citizenship," Shannon Dooling, *Around the Nation,* aired May 9, 2017, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/2017/05/09/526706661/fearing-anti-semitism-some-american-jews-are-reclaiming-german-citizenship.

[14] "On Political Rhetoric and Political Violence," Lulu Garcia-Navarro, *Weekend Edition*, aired June 18, 2017, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/2017/06/18/533402751/on-political-rhetoric-and-political-violence.

[15] Steph Atkinson, "United States of Hate: Muslims Under Attack," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, July 5, 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07k1dkj.

country's representatives can figure out what is going on."[16] While politicians might not have the purest theological reasoning for arguing against the religious other, there are also some Christians who believe Christianity is the only true and authentic religion.

Biblical passages like John 14:1-7 have been interpreted to claim Jesus as the sole path for salvation. A literal reading of such texts proffer interpretations claiming Jesus as the only way to experience God's grace and salvation, placing all other religious expressions in opposition to Christianity. Other theological perspectives assert that the land, the United States, has been given to its current residents by divine providence and should be protected at all costs. Kelly Monroe-Kullberg, founder of The Veritas Forum at Harvard, writes, "it's appropriate to explore what is meant, in Scripture, by the usefulness of hedges and fences, the importance of just weights, and the sheer folly and even sinfulness of those who spend what they have not first saved."[17] Kullberg suggests that there are moments when one should protect what one has received through God's will and keep it for him/herself.[18] From this perspective, the protection and care of its citizens should be valued over welcoming unknown people, especially the religious other, into the community or welcoming those who have a religious perspective different than one's own.

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[16] "Trump On His Plan To Ban Muslims: 'Not Politically Correct, But I Don't Care,'" Don Gonyea and Domenico Montanaro, *Morning Edition*, aired December 2015, on *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/2015/12/08/458875362/trump-on-his-plan-to-ban-muslims-not-politically-correct-but-i-don-t-care.\.

[17] Kelly Monroe-Kullberg, "On immigration, viewing the whole counsel of Scripture," *Onfaith* (blog), 2010, https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2010/06/14/on-immigration-viewing-the-whole-counsel-of-scripture/6177.

[18] Mark Roberts states, "Kullberg sees in Scripture a precedent for national boundaries and, apparently, even fences. She challenges us to take seriously our need to be fiscally and morally responsible as a nation." Ibid.

Promised land theology gives way to protectionist or hyper-nationalistic political platforms. If indeed the United States is the new promised land, then it is the duty of faithful followers to repel foreigners or perceived invaders who might have other faiths and plans to alter the country's ideals. Some believe that the United States is a Christian nation and the land is promised to those who follow the teachings of Christ.[19] Those who are not Christians then become threats to the faith and to the current inhabitants of the promised land.

In some passages, the Bible warns the faith community to practice caution when interacting with people outside the community.[20] Some argue that it is the duty of faithful United States citizens to build walls of protection in order to keep out those who are different or follow other faiths. Phyllis Schlafly, reflecting on terrorism and immigration in the United States said, "Trump was right to include the children of immigrants as part of the immigration problem. The Orlando shooter Mateen was born in the United States, but a witness said he referred to Afghanistan as 'my country.'"[21] Diversity for diversity's sake will be suspect for those who believe that the United States were given to them, specifically, by God and specifically in a Christian context. Such views incite fear and even anger of the religious other who might be trying to make a home in the United States.

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[19] See: Barton, David. "Calling Muslims to the Capitol?" *Wall Builders* (blog), http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=39133.\; Phyllis Schlafly, "The Schlafly Report," *Eagle Forum*, November 2015, http://www.eagleforum.org/publications/psr/nov15.html; Phyllis Schlafly, "How Much Diversity Must We Tolerate?" *Eagle Forum*, June 2015, http://www.eagleforum.org/publications/column/how-much-diversity-must-we-tolerate.html.

[20] Deuteronomy 7:1-6 or Joshua 23:1-13 are a few scriptural examples where the Israelites are warned about the neighboring countries and peoples.

[21] Schlafly, "Trump's Muslim Ban Gains Support," *Eagle Forum*, (July 2016), http://eagleforum.org/publications/column/trumps-muslim-ban-gains-support.html.

Another Way

In the face of fear, hatred and violence aimed at the religious other, is there another way? After the 2016 presidential election, reporters noted a growing sense of angst amongst various demographics throughout the United States.[22] It is why there have been grassroots movements to bring people together around tables to share food, dialogue, and humanity.[23] Meals like these do so much more than satiate physical hunger. The food itself invites welcome and hospitality. Dialogue and immersive experiences around the table help people connect with one another in powerful ways. Those connections can help one move past any particular theological or political agenda or belief and provide an opportunity for participants to better understand one another. Through understanding, the welcome might be expanded to include strangers who belong to other faith traditions or political persuasions.

Given the state of interreligious anxiety and skepticism that exists in the United States and other places in the world, there exists an opportunity to build community and welcome the religious other as neighbor. Learning about the faith of another through research or going to seminars is one way to gain an understanding and appreciation about the religious other. Engaging in dialogue at a public forum is another way to encounter the religious other in an attempt to gain insight into other beliefs. I am convinced that setting a table, sharing food, engaging in religious practices that are different from one's own, and building relationships with those gathered around a table over multiple meals can immerse practitioners into a truly engaging and meaningful experience with the religious other.

If one takes seriously the Christian mandate to enact, practice, and share hospitality, then it would be impossible to neglect, ignore, or merely tolerate the religious neighbor. Practicing

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[22] Garcia-Navarro, "On Political Rhetoric and Political Violence."
[23] Abbott, Bailey, Flowers, Jones, and May, https://thepeoplessupper.org/.

hospitality in the ways I have outlined means it would be impossible for Christians to disregard the struggles and needs our religious neighbors might be facing. Christians must consider our responsibility for our religious neighbors as global citizens struggling to find peace, safety, and resources, which seem to grow more scarce in the mad scramble for more. The Dalai Lama has noted, "There [is] no other choice but for followers of the world's religions to accept the reality of other faiths. We have to live together. In order to live happily, we must respect each other's traditions."[24]

If Christians can let go of a false belief that other religious expressions are invalid or somehow less-than, then perhaps we might be able to make room around an inclusive, welcome table for all to experience a sense of community and hospitality. Could it be that the welcome of Christ extends beyond the limits Christians have placed on it? Through the lens of cosmopolitan theology and a philosophical perspective rooted in natality, one's welcome of the religious other can increase. If one were to choose this way of reading scripture and seeing the religious other as neighbor, then one might forgo tolerance and instead embrace the religious other as a human, friend, and neighbor. Desmond Tutu suggests, "There is nothing wrong with faiths. The problem is the faithful."[25] His sharp clarity calls Christians to reconsider any theology that hesitates to make room for the religious other.

Implications of an Interreligious Welcome Table

Practicing an Interreligious Welcome Table has the potential to effect change at a grassroots level and perhaps beyond. In my experience of the table, I have witnessed three

[24] The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery, 2016), 70.
[25] Ibid.

distinct implications. The first is a theological/philosophical reframing of neighbor. I have observed a deepened connection with the participants of the POFFP, and I have also noticed how my interactions with various interreligious individuals beyond the POFFP has shifted. The labels I falsely created fell away, and the unique identities and differences were enhanced. As I grow to appreciate the differences of the religious other, I no longer attempt to look for commonality and sameness. Instead, I have gained a greater appreciation for the complexity and uniqueness of the religious other.

Through my interactions with the religious other, I have also dropped "other" as an identifier of difference. I choose instead to refer to individuals from other religious traditions as religious neighbors. While this example is anecdotal and may merely be unique to my personal experience, I still find it informative and, as Kang might describe, "utopian" in the best sense of the word.[26] I believe it illustrates the possibility of the Interreligious Welcome Table to shift theological perspectives and, through an immersive experience with one's religious neighbor, discover that one's neighbor is quite simply everyone.

A second implication is the solidarity found at the welcome table. I have seen how the POFFP has engaged in public action to advocate for Muslim rights or support efforts to welcome refugees. It is possible that each participant in the POFFP would have been active in such causes before gathering around the table, but they are the reason I attend rallies and other public events to advocate for the dignity and rights of religious neighbors. Being part of an Interreligious Welcome Table has not only affected my theological understanding of other faith traditions, it

[26] Kang says, "Here utopia signifies the viewpoint of the ideal but fundamentally realizable, running against a general perception of a utopia as merely an unrealizable dream. Paul Ricoeur rightly illustrates in his engagement with Karl Mannheim's notion of utopia that 'a utopia shatters a given order; and it is only when it starts shattering order that it is a utopia. A utopia is then always in the process of being realized.' Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kindle locations 161-164.

has emboldened me to be an ally for my religious neighbor. As I have shared food around table, I have become connected to my religious neighbors in a profound way. Such connections have the power to change not only belief but prompt action as well.

A final implication I will share is the ability of the welcome table to help comfort a community in the midst of turmoil, distress, and *tarasso*. Frazier Glenn Cross, a former Ku Klux Klan member and anti-Semite, was responsible for shooting and killing three individuals at the Jewish Community Center of Johnson County, Kansas.[27] This is one example, in the community where I live, where the fear of the religious other has ripped people apart. Our interreligious community, in the face of this tragedy, responded in ways that speak to the faith practiced in solidarity with those in the midst of suffering. Already having a strong connection with our religious neighbor, the POFFP came together to pray for one another and the community. Together we attended prayer vigils and talked about the devastation that hatred breeds and the need to stand together. Much like the Johannine Community, the table offered space for healing and reconciliation to occur. In the face of tragedy, it can be a tremendous place of comfort.

The Need to Evolve

I recognize that such an enterprise needs to evolve and grow. It cannot be a formula to follow, rather it must serve as an invitation to welcome even more neighbors to the table. Those interested in preparing this kind of feast must consider the diversity of those who might find welcome at table. Throughout this project I have highlighted one expression of the Interreligious Welcome Table through the POFFP, but I do not believe that the welcome need only include

[27] For more information see: Laura Bauer, Dave Helming and Brian Burnes, "Man with history of anti-Semitism jailed in fatal shooting of three at Johnson County Jewish Centers," *Kansas City Star*, April 13, 2014, http://www.kansascity.com/2014/04/13/4957486/one-reported-dead-in-shooting.html.

those of an Abrahamic faith tradition. The POFFP intentionally chose to narrow its focus to the Abrahamic faith traditions so that they could explore scripture, theology, and some shared history. Originally, this focus was not intended to keep other faiths from enjoying welcome. In fact, several of the POFFP members belong to other interfaith groups in their community because they strongly believe in the importance of welcoming one's religious neighbor.[28] Yet, through its narrow focus, other voices of faith have been missing at the table.

Principles of the Interreligious Welcome Table can and should be applied in ever-expanding ways. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, or other faith traditions should be welcome at the table. The dangers and possible pitfalls are the same as are the benefits for a community willing to engage one's religious neighbor around a welcome table. The limited scope of this project was not intended to exclude but to focus. I suggest it might fall to other interreligious interlocutors to endeavor to welcome more of one's religious neighbors around the table.

Another way the Interreligious Welcome Table might evolve beyond what I have written here is to further develop an interreligious theological perspective that is accessible to a broader audience. This theology cannot be a search for commonality or an attempt to homogenize belief into something that diminishes the grand, unique, and diverse faith traditions from which theologians might originate. Cosmopolitan theology might be a starting point, but I think more work can be done to develop a theological perspective that embraces alterity and gives permission for people of various faiths to be immersed in the practices and rituals of other faiths. What are the implications for such a practice? How might this continue to change the way one understands one's home faith? These are questions that must be explored further. I propose that the Interreligious Welcome Table might be the context for such theological exploration.

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[28] See Appendix A, question 6.

Conclusion: The Welcome Table

Home, hermeneutics, hospitality, natality, and food all serve as foundational elements for setting an Interreligious Welcome Table. It may be easier to practice welcome and to share hospitality with those who think and believe like we do; however, the world is becoming more diverse, complex, and closer every day. Given this reality, how are people of faith to live? Can one remain distant from the faith traditions of one's neighbor? Should people of faith view the religious other as a threat or as somehow impinging on one's own faith tradition? Is it possible to ignore our pluralistic environment and cling to some idealized moment in time when one's faith might have been the religious power or majority? These questions do not have simple answers, but the answers might emerge and become more complex as one begins to encounter the religious neighbor around a table.

Encountering the religious neighbor is one thing. Immersing oneself in the life, culture, customs, and traditions of said neighbor is something different and perhaps more transformative. Beyond encounter, immersion may be what is required if one is to truly welcome and be welcomed by religious neighbors. Encounter can happen in the classroom, at an interfaith seminar, or an interfaith community service event. Immersion is when one takes additional steps to invest in the lives of one's neighbor. Immersion is challenging and complex. It is risky and can be offensive if done poorly or if participants are not intentional about creating welcome space for the religious neighbor.

While immersion into the lives of one's religious neighbor carries certain risks, I believe it is worth it to welcome one another around an Interreligious Welcome Table in hopes of creating peace and building community. Breaking bread with one's religious neighbor presents participants with an opportunity to enter into the life of others. Montoya suggests, "If God is

superabundant sharing, then theologians must look at how - or not - this divine sharing is repeated in the world's daily exchange of food."[29] By sharing at table together, one not only embodies, digests, and transforms one's theology, we also experience a sacred sharing of life and faith.

The table serves as both a metaphorical and physical invitation to welcome one's religious neighbor as a companion. Such metaphors are needed when communities have difficulty understanding one's neighbors or when one has given into fear or hatred. The Interreligious Welcome Table provides space for one to explore the faith of another and reconsider the embedded theological perspective one might carry regarding the religious neighbor.

Eating with another offers guests the opportunity to go deeper in faith, life, hospitality, and community. Wirzba observes, "Eating makes our life possible, but food is not itself the 'liveliness' of life. Eating invites us to commune with others, but it also invites us to discover and commune with the source and sustainer of all life."[30] Imagine a bountiful table prepared, a table set by human hands and originating in one's connection with the divine or the sacred. Now look at the guests invited to dine at the table. Perhaps they are all from the same faith or no faith, or maybe there is room at the table for a great diversity of faith perspectives.

If, as I have suggested, the welcome table might be expanded to include many faith traditions, then perhaps concepts like hospitality, natality, alterity, welcome, and neighbor are much larger and infinitely more complex than first conceived. I affirm that welcoming the religious neighbor around table is worth the risk. When we welcome our religious neighbors around the table and receive welcome as well, I believe we have a tremendous opportunity to

[29] Montoya, *Theology of Food*, 112.
[30] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 29.

create peace in the world and build a caring and compassionate community. This is the power and possibility of the Interreligious Welcome Table, and all are invited.

APPENDIX A: PEOPLE OF FAITH FOR PEACE SURVEY

1. When did you first participate in the People of Faith for Peace (POFFP), and why did you join POFFP?

2. Since joining the POFFP, have you experienced hospitality? If so, in a few sentences describe the experience.

3. Based on your experience how would you define hospitality?

4. How has being part of the POFFP effected the way you view your neighbor, and how would you define neighbor?

5. How has sharing a potluck meal with interreligious participants affected you?

6. Have you participated in any other interfaith experience, and if so, how has your experience in the POFFP been different?

7. What have you found most life-giving by participating in this community? What has been most challenging?

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