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### Making Way for Comparative Theology in the Liturgy of the Word: In Dialogue with James L. Fredericks

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# Making Way for Comparative Theology in the Liturgy of the Word: In Dialogue with James L. Fredericks

SimonMary Aihiokhai

## P R E C I S

*For many centuries, some religious persons have intentionally entered into friendship with members of other religious traditions. Through such friendships, new appreciation for religious others and their faith have been realized. The friendship between Masao Abe, a Japanese Buddhist and philosopher, and James L. Fredericks, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian, is no exception. As Fredericks has acknowledged in several of his works, his friendship with Abe led to his renewed appreciation of his own Christian tradition as well as of Buddhism. An urgent concern that ought to be addressed by contemporary comparative theologians is to articulate ways the fruits of such interreligious friendships can be celebrated in their respective liturgical rituals. This work calls attention to ways such a project can be explored. Particular attention is given to the ways the Liturgy of the Word in the Roman Catholic Church's eucharistic celebrations can become the place where the riches of other religious traditions can be celebrated.*



## Introduction

**I**n a world rapidly being shaped by globalization, religious institutions are forced to re-engage their self-understanding in a way that accounts for otherness. This age can comfortably be called the era of interconnect-edness. Technology has facilitated this process by bringing together persons, goods, and services. In light of this reality, there is a renewed interest

in ways to build pluralistic communities. Religious persons and traditions are focused on proposing ideas on how to encounter each other and join forces to bring about social change. In this project, a renewed interest in the discourse on friendship has begun. Years ago, James Fredericks in his article, "Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization," sounded the alarm that called for people of faith to take seriously the complexities related to religious diversity that are brought about by the phenomenon of globalization.<sup>1</sup> As social and political boundaries are being blurred, other constructed boundaries are also either disappearing or being reconstructed. Are religions immune from this growing phenomenon of globalization? The quick response is no. Religions cannot speak of themselves in abstraction as though alterity is nonexistent. In our times, religious sects that try to do this quickly find themselves at the fringes of society and become agents of life-negation. Notable in Fredericks's work on this subject of globalization is his two-fold description of what globalization does to religion; it "frees religious communities from their connection with territory as well as threatening the connection."<sup>2</sup> This discomfort brought about by the proximity of the other is the graced possibility for the embrace of friendship by all parties.

As a theologian of the Roman Catholic tradition, I should point out that, while theologians (especially of the Roman Catholic Church) have embraced four approaches to dialogue among religions (dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience),<sup>3</sup> not much effort has been made to understand how the last of the four types of dialogue ought to play out within the confines of the liturgy. Even the reflection on dialogue by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue on the four types of dialogue presents dialogue of religious experience wrapped in a cautionary message, as though it were a dangerous form of dialogue in which only the wise can engage. In its words, "Dialogue of religious experience [is] where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with

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<sup>1</sup>James L. Fredericks, "Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, issue 27 (2007), pp. 51–66.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>3</sup>Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (May 19, 1991), no. 42; available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interrelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.<sup>4</sup> While the cautionary approach embraced by the Roman Catholic Church is understood as a way of preventing the temptation for those involved in it to fall into religious syncretism, it has also produced the effect of being embraced mainly by experts in their respective religious traditions. The question then must be asked whether those who are not trained in theology can be part of this form of dialogue.

In this essay, I want to further the conversation among Catholic theologians who are involved in both interfaith dialogue and comparative theology to include ways dialogue of religious experience can be embraced fully in the sacramental life of their church. It is my hope also that the insights gained from this work will be embraced by theologians from other religious traditions. To achieve this, I will focus attention on the centrality of the Liturgy of the Word within the broader framework of the celebration of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist that serves as “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life.”<sup>5</sup> I hereby claim that, if Christians are serious about interfaith dialogue and regard dialogue as a constitutive part of their Christian identity, then the fruits of such dialogue with other faith traditions must necessarily be part of their worship rituals.<sup>6</sup>

I intend also to articulate the parameters for a theological hermeneutic on friendship as the basis for viable interreligious encounters within the liturgical space. To achieve this, I will reflect on the contributions of Fredricks, one of the founding voices shaping the theological discipline of comparative theology in North America.

### Friendship as a Mode of Being

In his article, “Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue,” Fredricks argued for the acceptance of friendship as a theological virtue within

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church/*Lumen gentium* (November 21, 1964): no. 11; available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Encyclical Redemptoris Missio—On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate* (December 7, 1990), no. 55; available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html).

the Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup> I suggest the need to retitile this work; rather than friendship's being a new theological virtue within the Christian tradition, it ought to be called the forgotten virtue. Is this omission a subconscious one or a deliberate one? Friendship involves the opening up of one's heart to another with a reciprocal care for the good of each other. The other may be a stranger or an acquaintance, but there is a deliberate desire to want to relate with each other in ways not previously explored by the parties. In the words of Fredericks, "Every friendship, no matter how good or how old, once involved making a hospitable place in our lives for a stranger. After all, every friend, no matter how good or how old a friend, was once a stranger."<sup>8</sup> Friendship with the stranger shatters any urge to conceptualize the stranger as either less human or as possessing partial salvific truths. In the history of the Roman Catholic Church's engagement with other religions, the conversation has always been about respect for the other, their common human dignity with members of the church, and respect for the sacred beliefs and practices of other religions. However, there seems to be an absence of consistent advocacy for developing interreligious friendship. Even when interreligious friendship is emphasized, it is couched in terms that preference the Roman Catholic faith. As noted by Fredericks in relation to interreligious dialogue, "the fulfillment model has allowed interreligious dialogue to become something that is talked about more than practiced."<sup>9</sup>

Michel de Montaigne, one of the prominent figures of the sixteenth-century French Renaissance, explored the notion of friendship from an existential point of view,<sup>10</sup> based on how it played out between his friend Étienne de La Boétie and himself. Montaigne argued against the expectation of difference in perspectives among friends and concluded that friendship leads to the oneness of the parties by erasing all boundaries. As did Aristotle, he opined that friendship could only be between two persons. His reasoning was based on the intensity that exists between the parties to

<sup>7</sup>James L. Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," *J.E.S.* 35 (Spring, 1998): 159–174.

<sup>8</sup>James L. Fredericks, "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3 (Fall, 2003): 220.

<sup>9</sup>James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup>Michel de Montaigne, *Michel de Montaigne—The Complete Essays*, ed., tr., intro. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 187–199.

the friendship.<sup>11</sup> There is truth to his view and also a noticeable problem one must point out. It is correct that friendship can be intense and can create for the parties involved in it a way of relating to the world and to each other. However, to claim that, in friendship, all notions of difference are eradicated is to push the argument too far. The parties, despite the intensity of the friendship, always have the freedom to continue or not to continue in the friendship. Among the interreligious friendships entered into by Fredericks is that with Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara, a Buddhist monk. Fredericks stated categorically that their friendship was grounded in the fact that they inhabited different religious traditions. "By entering into dialogue without watering down our beliefs, both Bhanti Ratanasara and I have been enriched."<sup>12</sup>

Friendship serves as an appropriate model for shaping interreligious engagement, because it shields the relation from all vestiges of classism, either on the part of religious persons or in relation to their respective religious traditions. Fredericks skillfully concretized this point in distinguishing between *agape* and *philia* by affirming the virtue of tolerance.<sup>13</sup> Tolerance within the construct of *agape* is understood as unconditional, which bears the characteristics of strength and power validated by faith in the divine.<sup>14</sup> In the camp of the inclusivists, a sense of benevolence on their part over the other will always prevail. This can quickly lead to a form of paternalistic gesture of friendship that views the religious other as a pitiable heretic or apostate who can be won over by a loving gesture of civility and concern. Again, Fredericks pointed out the tendency to want to slip into the realm of self-glorification in the church's theological tradition of encounters when he called for a refreshing way of doing theology today. He wrote:

Unlike a theology of religions, doing Christian theology comparatively does not hope to establish a comprehensive account, or grand narrative, based solely on Christian faith, in which Buddhism or Islam, Hinduism or Confucianism appear as mere examples of a truth more clearly visible in Christianity. . . . Instead of distorting the "other" by construing it within a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>12</sup> Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, p. 107.

<sup>13</sup> Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Friendship," p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

grand narrative, Christian theologians encounter that other as a partner in a dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

Reciprocity, as a condition for authentic friendship, involves complete openness and willingness to encounter the other. It involves the actual practice of transparency and the absence of hidden agendas that militate against the sharing of experiences, even when such experiences highlight differences that may be conflicting. The possibility of reciprocity reduces the tensions that may arise from ideological differences for those brought together by the bond of friendship. Reciprocity is possible because, first, there is the groundrule that, in friendship, the bond of mutual trust holds sway. Mutual trust involves a coherent choice to encounter each other even when such encounters reveal one's weakness. It involves a sense of maturity and confidence in the good will of the partner. Second, upholding the theological view that friendship is a graced gift from God, all are invited to share the gift received reciprocally.

Here, we affirm the notion of gift further by seeing the parties to the friendship as also gifts in and of themselves to and for each other. As pointed out by Fredericks, concerning his friendship with Masao Abe, though their friendship is "paradoxical,"<sup>16</sup> by the mere fact that they inhabit two different religious traditions, this paradox itself has become a moment of grace for Fredericks to become more aware of what he called the "watch for epiphanies."<sup>17</sup> Reciprocity should not be understood on the basis of the content of self-disclosure; rather, it should be within the context of the depth of trust and openness toward each other. What this means is that it is wrong to think that, in interreligious friendship, the partners must ask the same questions or deal only with issues similar to their respective traditions. Difference is a necessary ingredient for authentic friendship. The encounters and the content of the friendship ought to be defined and received because each party to the friendship has different perspectives and narratives that they embody in their religious backgrounds.

Fredericks warned theologians to be careful lest they slip into the dangerous terrain of confusing interreligious dialogue and/or friendship as an

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<sup>15</sup> Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Fredericks, "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship," p. 223.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

aspect of the church's evangelization.<sup>18</sup> However, he failed to articulate for his readers a sufficient guide to navigate these two competing callings—dialogue and proclamation. Having spent more than a decade myself as a missionary in a religiously pluralistic context, the urge to want to conflate or at best link dialogue to proclamation is a real temptation. Yes, Fredericks has shown how the Roman Catholic magisterium has grounded interreligious dialogue within the church's evangelical witness, both *ad extra* and *ad intra*.<sup>19</sup> We must ask how one avoids the temptation. Fredericks seems to have held that they are two distinct callings.<sup>20</sup> Again, I am compelled to ask whether one can be called to both vocations at the same time. If this is the case, then how can one effectively proclaim the word and be faithful to the demands of interreligious dialogue? I am curious as to why comparative theologians have not addressed this dilemma, for it reveals a lacuna in our contemporary theological discourse on how to encounter other religions. We are still operating from the comfort of the academy. A pragmatic sense is needed to further the discourse in a way that accounts for both. Simply to state that evangelization is still necessary when faced with this issue, without any critique of what evangelization means, how it is done, what it aims to achieve, and how all these are tied to interreligious dialogue—the whole discourse will simply be superficial.

Vulnerability is a necessary condition and quality for interreligious friendship. Fredericks argued for vulnerability as a “value that is concretized in interreligious friendships.”<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, he argued that vulnerability is the grounds for the birthing of new hermeneutics on the truth. In this process, the other becomes a helpful guide and companion in that journey.<sup>22</sup> According to Joseph Mali, this entails mutual openness to learning from each other.<sup>23</sup> Fredericks has argued extensively for mutual growth in appreciation of his Christian faith and the Buddhist tradition of his

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<sup>18</sup> Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Fredericks, “Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue,” p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Mali, “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Model for Dialogue,” in Marinus Iwuchukwu and Brian Stiltner, eds., *Can Muslims and Christians Resolve Their Religious and Social Conflicts? Cases from Africa and the United States* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), p. 169.



friend Abe in such teachings on life and death.<sup>24</sup> The other who is encountered is the bearer of God's truth that disrupts the normal. The other who is not familiar invites one to learn how to see in ways that were previously unrecognizable. The same can also be said of the other. Through the encounters, both parties are invited to broaden their perspectives.

Fredericks introduced the motif of the stranger in his treatment of interreligious friendship.<sup>25</sup> Even the familiarity of the other in friendship does not eradicate the element of "strangeness" in the friend. This, while embracing the contributions of Emmanuel Levinas on the gift of the other who approaches one always as a trace, becomes the possibility for the "loss of security [and] also a loss of hopelessness, the ruination of our autonomy but also a liberation from our self-absorption. In encountering the Other, we are required to take seriously another center of meaning, value, and action; another orientation toward the world; another way of being human."<sup>26</sup>

### The Way Forward

It is inspiring for Fredericks to argue for solidarity as the highpoint for both interreligious friendship and comparative theology. However, I am compelled to ask how and to what extent this can address friendship in worship, since worship plays a fundamental role in shaping and validating the highpoints of religion. In the Christian religion, the age-old adage holds true to this day, *lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing). Some years ago, I experienced what I have termed collaborative worship. It involved members of the Catholic community in Ihievbe, a little town in midwestern Nigeria, who pray for the success of the ministry of their Muslim and indigenous religion neighbors. While this seems to be very much in line with the friendship and spirituality shared between Fredericks and Abe, one must ask what we are to make of the solemn intercessions at the Good Friday's Liturgy within the Roman liturgical rite, where the prayers specifically address the Jewish people. If Roman Catholics and many other Christian churches have expressly accepted the fact

<sup>24</sup> James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 149–150.

<sup>25</sup> Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

that the Jewish people's relationship with God has not been made redundant by the Christ event, why then do we still pray for the Jews that they "may arrive at the fullness of redemption . . . through Christ our Lord"?<sup>27</sup> This prayer reveals a contradiction in our theology of salvation and our theological stance in relation to Judaism. If God's covenant is valid with the Jewish people, then that same covenant ought to be sufficient for their salvation. Rather than pray for their redemption, a more interfaith prayer should be embraced, one that prays for the fidelity of the Jewish people to their unique covenant with Yahweh. This prayer ought to reflect a theology and liturgical praxis of interfaith hospitality. It is similar to what I have described above among Roman Catholics in the town of Ihievbe, Nigeria.

Rightly stated, the Second Vatican Council reminded Roman Catholics—and other Christians as well—of the central place of the liturgy in the Christian community. In the words of the council members, "it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree."<sup>28</sup> Everything leads to the liturgy and proceeds from the liturgy. If this is the case, then every Christian who takes seriously the demands of encountering persons of other faiths as shaped by the insights of comparative theology ought to begin to see the liturgical rituals as moments of encounter with the God of the other, as well as the place of utmost generosity by which the gifts and problems of the religious other are brought before the God of utmost alterity. Fredericks seemed to allude to this broader way of seeing the other in relation to the God of mystery:

My faith, tutored by the Catholic sacramental imagination, teaches me to watch for epiphanies. We should live life always ready to take off our shoes. In a world where the Word is always becoming flesh, my deepest spiritual instincts beg me to recognize in Sensei's Otherness yet another wondrous trace of the divine. Do I not see in the face of my friend the presence of a Mystery that both summons and beatifies? Is not this

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<sup>27</sup> *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1985), p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Second Vatican Council, "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy/*Sacrosanctum Concilium*," (December 4, 1963), in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), no. 7, pp. 24–25.

Mystery the same Otherness that led Anthony into the desert and Juan de la Cruz to an ascent into *Nada*? As a child, I was taught that the redwood trees prayed to their Creator—and that I could hear them pray if only I would quit the trail and listen hard enough. If this is true of redwood trees, how much more must this be true of my Buddhist friend? Sensei certainly invites me to quit the trail. If only I could listen hard enough, I would hear in Sensei's voice a hymn to the Creator.<sup>29</sup>

However, it ought to be noted that the encounter with the divine in the other cannot and ought not begin and end outside of the place of worship. Elizabeth Newman has called attention to a Christian distortion of worship that tends to see worship and hospitality as two distinct realities.<sup>30</sup> Though she was speaking of some Protestant views on worship, her critique can also be applied to how many Roman Catholics view the liturgy. Newman called attention to the fact that worship is itself hospitality in its concrete expression.<sup>31</sup> It is God's hospitality in which we are invited to partake. As good guests, we are supposed to bring along the joys, anxieties, aspirations, and hopes of everyone else. If, as stated clearly by Vatican II, the liturgy is the climax of Christian life, then it must be the place also where the religious other is most encountered, appreciated, and challenged. When one takes a critical look at the liturgical rituals, one does not see what comparative theology advocates. It is true that the religious other is recognized in our liturgical rituals, but it is solely to enact their conversion to the Christian faith. In the context of Roman Catholic liturgy, the focus is on the embrace of the Catholic faith by the religious other. How then must one proceed in light of these paradoxical realities?

Again, I turn to Levinas, a thinker who also influenced the writings of Fredericks. Levinas spoke of the proximity of the other in relation to the subject as one who evokes an ethical command. In his words, "I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche. The psyche can signify this alterity in the same without alienation in the form of incarnation, as

<sup>29</sup> Fredericks, "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship," p. 224.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the other is not encountered as an added burden from which the subject can comfortably walk away. Rather, the other is already present in the subject. To be a subject is to be called to embrace a vocation of responsibility. "It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is, even the simple 'After you, sir.' The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity."<sup>33</sup>

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed clearly speaks of the "communion of saints" as part of the creedal beliefs of Christians.<sup>34</sup> This *koinonia* (fellowship) that exists among the members of the church triumphant, the church militant, and the church suffering finds its full expression in the liturgy. When Christians gather to celebrate the liturgy, they stand in the place of all humanity to present before God, through Christ, the joys, sufferings, hopes, and gratitude of all humanity because of their baptismal identities. In a way, in baptism Christians are held hostage by all humanity. In baptism, they do not just become followers of Christ, and members of the church, but they also become children of God.<sup>35</sup> By being children of God, they become brothers and sisters of all believers in God. However, I should ask how aware Christians are of this interfaith *koinonia* that they are called to embrace through baptism and that they celebrate by participating in the liturgy. If one were to ask an average Christian what it means to be children of God, the usual response will be that it refers to other Christians. God's children are not restricted to the Christian faith. The validity of the Sinaitic Covenant proves the point that God's children can be found in other religious traditions.

The Sri Lanka theologian, Tissa Balasuriya, decried the lack of focus of the liturgy on the "concerns of humankind within temporal reality."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts 3, tr. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers; Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), pp. 114–115.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 247.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>36</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 240.

Balasuriya's lament ought to be taken seriously today.<sup>37</sup> How do our Christian liturgies speak to and how are they formed by the ongoing realities of globalization? The urge to centralize the liturgy has led, in my opinion, to celebrations that are at best an escape from realities. While it is true that the liturgy is an entrance into God's own space, it is a space we enter with and through the total realities shaping our lives in community. If this is the case, then Christian encounters with the religious and the profane in our globalized world ought to be constitutive elements of the liturgical celebrations. The rootedness in one's religious tradition that the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue calls for as a condition for dialogue of religious experience ought not to be seen as a justification for exclusivism within the liturgical space and rituals themselves. To be grounded in one's faith also involves openness to the other. As argued throughout this work, identity always comes to us from the other, and, as such, what Christians hold dear in the liturgical ritual should also be seen as the opportunity to be open to all external forces that face the Christian community.

The foundational rule for comparative theology is the acknowledgment that the religious traditions being encountered are able to teach us truths previously unexplored. It is recognition of the sacred that invites one to take off one's sandals and to submit oneself wholeheartedly to the experience of the encounter. Lest we forget this fact, Levinas advocated for a religious and philosophical truth, which the Christian tradition cannot dispute—that "Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself . . . The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification."<sup>38</sup> The journey of faith is a journey of substitution for the other. In Christianity, this journey is begun first by God, who reveals God-self to humanity by becoming one with God's creation.<sup>39</sup> Thus, to encounter creation is to encounter God who is with us. Reciprocally, humanity is invited through the gift of faith to submit its being wholly to God without reserve. By this free act of becoming the face and voice of God to the world,

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<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to my former student, Lisa Terranova-Pittelli, who exposed me to the work of Tissa Balasuriya. Our intellectual friendship over the years has been a source of fruitful enrichment for me.

<sup>38</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 124–125.

<sup>39</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation/Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), nos. 2–4; available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

humanity finds its purpose and realizes its identity—one who is called to become divine, made in the image and likeness of God, and who must make the world ready for God.<sup>40</sup> In the theology of the sacraments, the notion of substitution is very much at play. For example, through baptism, a Christian “puts on Christ” and becomes the face, voice, and message of Christ to the world (Gal. 3:27).<sup>41</sup> Reciprocally, Christ enters into a *kenotic* relationship with the Christian. Again, we must ask how the notion of substitution plays out in our Christian liturgies that speaks to the gift of the proximity of the religious other that embodies sacredness.

As noted by Aimé Georges Martimort, “The Christian liturgy inherited from the synagogue the practice of reading passages from the sacred books at every gathering for prayer.”<sup>42</sup> The argument continues to be made that, though the early Christians borrowed much from the Jewish Temple and synagogue worship, they gave these rituals a christological focus. Martimort is not exempt from this trend of reasoning. I should point out here that the christological bias does not completely eliminate Jewish motifs. Let us take, for example, the deliberations and the outcome of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:1–35. James, the Bishop of Jerusalem, favored a more compromised approach that also favored ritual practices found in Judaism. In his own words, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. For Moses, for generations now, has had those who proclaim him in every town, as he has been read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19–21).

It cannot be argued that James’s decision was understood within the framework of supersessionism. Rather, he saw Jewish ritual practices and regulations found in the Torah as legitimate in their own right and as being within the broader framework of God’s interactions and expectations of humans. There was no established framework for Christianity at this early stage of its existence to define the conditions for membership for gentiles.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., no. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Biblical texts are from *The New American Bible: Translated from the Original Languages with Critical Use of All the Ancient Sources* (Wichita, KS: Catholic Bible Publishers, 1970).

<sup>42</sup> Aimé-Georges Martimort, “The Dialogue between God and His People,” in Aimé-Georges Martimort et al., eds., *The Church at Prayer*, vol. 1: *Principles of the Liturgy* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987; orig.—New York: Desclée, 1968), p. 131.

James, being faithful to his Jewish roots, appealed to the Jewish faith's ritual practices, which he saw as a helping aid for validating the Christian faith, not the other way around. Recent biblical scholarship points to a strong link between the prohibitions found in Acts 15 and those in Leviticus 17–18.<sup>43</sup> The codes reflected the ritual practices required of gentiles intending to convert or to remain within Judaism.<sup>44</sup> The decision of James was not to break away from Judaism; rather, it was to create a pragmatic solution for incorporating gentiles into the House of Israel.

To buttress the point being made here, one finds in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* a retelling of the conversion of Helena, Queen of Adiabene, and her son Izates, who later became King of Adiabene.<sup>45</sup> Izates, wanting to convert to Judaism, was instructed by his mother, who had already converted to Judaism, and by Ananias, a Jew, to observe the Jewish customs without carrying out the ritual of circumcision, for fear that this would lead to a revolt in his kingdom if his subjects were to discover that their king has become a Jew. Josephus wrote that Ananias instructed Izates that "he might worship God without being circumcised, even though he did resolve to follow the Jewish law entirely, which worship of God was of a superior nature to circumcision. . . . God would forgive him, though he did not perform the operation, while it was omitted out of necessity, and for fear of his subjects."<sup>46</sup> Izates at first yielded to their advice, but another Jew advised him to go ahead and be circumcised, which he did.<sup>47</sup> From this account, one can argue that, at the time of the Council of Jerusalem, the decision to forgo the demands of circumcision for gentile converts to Christianity was very much in line with the practice of the day for gentiles who converted to Judaism.

Furthermore, biblically, it cannot be argued definitively that Paul favored a supersessionist approach to the issues related to Judaism and the reality of gentiles' becoming Christians. As noted by Ben F. Meyer, Christians for centuries have read into Romans 9–11 a supersessionist

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<sup>43</sup> See Terrance Callan, "The Background of the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (April, 1993): 284–297.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>45</sup> William Whiston, tr., *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, commentary by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), pp. 643–645.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 644.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

theology by asking questions that Paul never intended to ask.<sup>48</sup> In Meyer's words:

It is clear that the Pauline text was in several respects opaque to the gentile Church. Without elaboration or insistence Paul had supposed a certain set of questions vital to the earliest Christian thinking, such as the primary question in these chapters: how to make coherent sense of Israel's unbelief in Jesus? Paul furthermore had proceeded to deal with his questions and sub-questions in a way intelligible, no doubt, in his own time and milieu, but profoundly perplexing in a new time and new milieu. Paul's style included a way of drawing on biblical resources and notably on the biblical writers' election-historical schemes of thought. In Paul, questions and answers alike belonged to the horizons and perspectives—to the "code"—of biblical thought forms. But among gentile Christians a generation or two later, there was no longer the sheer wonder that even Gentiles could be saved. Having lost interest in Israel as the primary rightful heir to messianic salvation, and hence incurious respecting the intricate and remote resources that Paul had deployed in his passionate pondering of the destiny of Israel, gentile Christians could no longer lock easily onto Paul's level and line of discourse. As the burden of his meditation became progressively foreign to them, they had to find a different meaning in the text. It was not until the latter-nineteenth century that a philologically instructed historical exegesis in Germany finally broke through the constraint of classical theology and recovered the structural lines of the thought of the historical Paul.<sup>49</sup>

On another note, the task that comparative theology ought to address is to translate the fruits from the encounters with other faith traditions into the place where the totality of one's religiosity is celebrated, which is the liturgy. As a Christian theologian of the Roman Catholic tradition, I must thus consciously make an effort to look out for those moments of disruption in the liturgy where the religious other's voice becomes my voice, where the concerns of the religious other become my concerns, where the

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<sup>48</sup> See Ben F. Meyer, "Election-Historical Thinking in Romans 9-11, and Ourselves," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 7 (Fall, 2004): 171-181.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172. For other supporting scholarship on Pauline anti-supersessionist theology, see Larry Hurtado, "'Israel' and the People of God: Wright & Response," *Larry Hurtado's Blog*, March 23, 2014; available at <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2014/03/23/israel-and-the-people-of-god-wright-response/>.



pain and suffering of the other become mine as well, and where the hope of the other becomes my hope. To do this, I want to propose, with Balasuriya, that the sacred texts of other religious traditions be constitutive elements of the Liturgy of the Word for all sacramental celebrations. Though Balasuriya argued for this as a way of making Asian Christians who are converts from other religions be at home in the Christian liturgy, my reasoning goes beyond the comfort level of Christians, whether converts or those born into the faith. I argue for this because the inclusion of the sacred texts of other religious traditions demonstrates clearly a rich understanding of the work of God found in other religions, as attested to in relevant conciliar and post-conciliar documents. This calls for a deliberate focus and a willingness to embrace the gift of faith in God that the other religions bring to us—even in the seemingly contradictory narratives embraced by the others who are radically different from us.

The argument of the continuity of God's work throughout human history can become the theological justification for the embrace of the sacred texts and wisdom of other religious traditions. In my opinion, it is theologically problematic to argue, as have many Christian theologians for centuries, that Christianity supersedes all religions, or the theological argument used by Christian missionaries in colonial and post-colonial Africa that African indigenous religions were at best preparatory paths in view of the authentic revelation of God in Christianity. God's words cannot be considered outdated or superseded by a newer proclamation. In other words, if Islam is believed to be a monotheistic religion, as is the dogmatic position of Roman Catholics, then it is justifiable to claim that the revelation of God contained in the sacred texts of Islam can also be a revelatory means for encountering the divine for those who take its content seriously.<sup>50</sup>

Anscar J. Chupungo has called for the Roman Catholic Church to take seriously what he has termed "Liturgical Pluralism," by which he meant taking seriously the cultural realities of the people who celebrate the liturgy. As the church becomes culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse, the liturgy ought to speak to their realities and cultural locations. In his words:

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<sup>50</sup> See Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen gentium*, no. 16; available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

Pluralism, on the other hand, refers to the liturgical form or the exterior shape of the celebration. The form of every liturgical rite originates in a particular culture. The meal shape of the eucharist has a Jewish parentage, and so do the sacraments of baptism and anointing of the sick. They have come down to us vested, as it were, in Jewish culture. . . . It is important to note here that the role of the liturgical form is to render the theological content of the liturgy visible and tangible. It gives body to the content of the rite. But because the liturgical form is by nature and origin something cultural, it can admit variations according to the cultural milieu in which the local church celebrates the liturgy.<sup>51</sup>

Chupungco is repeating the conciliar position that encouraged the adaptation of the Roman Rite to the indigenous cultures of the people.<sup>52</sup> One cannot deny the fact that some great progress has been made in making the Roman Rite culturally relevant to the many cultures and peoples that make up the Roman Catholic Church. However, when one looks closely at the liturgical adaptations for which Vatican II called and how it has been carried out, one notices that adaptation has been focused solely on language, music, and roles performed by the laity in the eucharistic celebration. Adaptation seems to have been selective in ways that truncate the rich cultural expressions of the different peoples and cultures that make up the universal church. In Africa, culture constitutes the totality of the worldview of the people, including language, food, spiritualities, philosophies, environment, dress codes, gender roles, histories, memories, myths, stories, and so on. Adaptation of the Roman Rite has focused mainly on music, dance, language, and sometimes dress codes. The theological and religious worldview, stories, and sacred traditions found in their oral traditions are completely absent. Western theologians, especially liturgical theologians ought to be aware that in most non-Western societies there is no dualistic consciousness of the sacred and the secular. The sacred is the secular, and the secular is the sacred. To introduce a dichotomy into the intricate link between the two is to distort the sense of holistic consciousness. If African music, dances, and languages are worthy of introduction

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<sup>51</sup> Anscar J. Chupungco, *Worship: Progress and Tradition* (Beltsville, MD: The Pastoral Press, 1995), p. 162.

<sup>52</sup> *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), nos. 37–38; available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

into the Roman Rite, then it ought to be argued further that African myths, stories, philosophies, and memories also ought to be part of the liturgical celebrations. The fundamental reason for this stance is that the African religious worldview is always holistic and cannot be addressed in fragmented ways. To understand an African approach to the sacred, the totality of African cultural expressions ought to be embraced as a whole. The same case can be made as well for societies in Asia. The sacred texts of Asia cannot be excluded from the inculturating process of the liturgies in that continent.

Liturgical Pluralism, if it is to be taken seriously, ought to be holistic in all its expressions. It is true that as early as the fourth century, the Council of Hippo (393 C.E.) taught that “apart from the canonical books nothing is to be read in the Church under the name of divine scriptures.”<sup>53</sup> However, what is important here is that, prior to this council, nonbiblical texts that spoke to the religious worldview of the peoples and cultures were being used.<sup>54</sup> Liturgical tradition is not static. From the beginnings of Christianity, one finds a dynamic embrace of elements of the respective cultural expressions of the people. A detailed study of the Roman Rite and the other rites in Christianity attest to this truth. If this is the case, one can thus argue that openness to listening to the sacred texts of non-Christian religions within the Liturgy of the Word of the Roman Rite is not an anomaly but fidelity to liturgical openness.

Reflecting further, if the liturgy is the climax of celebration of all encounters with God and all of God’s creation, it follows that the liturgy must always be dynamic in nature. By dynamism, I am referring to a radical sense of openness to the surprises that encounters present. To predict the encounter is to slip into the realm of narcissism. The only voice and eye in such a place is that of the self. There will always be the blind spots and the unspoken words due to the limitations of the self. To speak and to see fully, one always needs the eyes and the voices of others. Thus, in the liturgy, Christians ought to recognize the legitimate voice and eyes of other religious traditions.

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<sup>53</sup> Quote from Robert Cabié, *The Church at Prayer: An Introduction to the Liturgy*, vol. 2: *The Eucharist, New Edition* ed. Aimé-Georges Martimort et al., tr. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 61.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

In my own faith journey, I have come to realize the benefit of embracing the other. Working as a missionary in Nigeria in the early 1990's and encountering a priestess of the indigenous religions whom I intended to convert to the Christian faith, I came to appreciate the gifts the religious others bring to us by their presence. Sometimes, it is only through the disruption of our way of doing things, brought about by the radical presence of the other, that we come to appreciate the relevance of always being open to surprises as a mode of encountering the divine. This priestess taught me what it meant to embrace a vocation wholeheartedly. My encounter with her taught me how un-Christ-like Christians can sometimes be when they become unreflective. Christian exclusivism led to the isolation of this priestess by the entire town. She was considered an agent of the devil. However, as I came to know her, I realized that she was truly a follower of God; my own fellow Christians in the town to whom I was ministering were the ones in need of conversion. This singular experience began my own journey of reflection, confession, and embrace of the religious other as the face of God that is always present in our midst.<sup>55</sup>

God is a God of surprises. To forget this fact is to stop knowing God. If the eucharistic liturgy "is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life," it follows that this is the place where Christians experience and encounter the God of surprises the most.<sup>56</sup> This is also the place where Christians are to become more radically open to all that God invites them to experience. The religious other cannot be "bracketed" and seen as a negative, one who must be converted to the Christian faith. The joys, anxieties, fears, hopes, and gratitude for the other should always be present in all that we do in the liturgy. How we understand and celebrate the liturgy ought to reflect a broader hermeneutic that is grounded in alterity as the pathway to encountering the divine. Our liturgies cannot be simply about memorials that speak to a time and a historical event to which contemporary society cannot relate except through mental aspirations and spiritual travels. The anamnestic experience of the salvific event should also speak to the here-and-now experiences faced by particular communities. By reading the

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<sup>55</sup> SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, "Interreligious Friendship: A Path to Conversion for a Catholic Theologian," in James L. Fredericks and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, eds., *Interreligious Friendship after Nostra Aetate*, Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 187–200.

<sup>56</sup> *Lumen gentium*, no. 11.

sacred texts of Muslims in a community in Nigeria, for example, Christians who participate in that liturgy would have more appreciation for the view that salvation history is God's history made manifest to us in diverse ways and yet united both in the one God of all and in our common humanity. Such a vision cannot allow for hatred of the other.

### Conclusion

Fredericks has questioned the legitimacy of the theology of religions due to its inability to enter into dialogue without prioritizing Christianity in a way that makes a judgment call on other religions. In his *Faith among Faiths*, Fredericks called for abandonment of this and an embrace of the emerging field of comparative theology. He grounded comparative theology within the broader framework of solidarity. His sense of solidarity is aimed at addressing the pressing needs faced by our world today—to address ways humans can live together in peace and harmony while respecting the differences we embody.<sup>57</sup>

The urgency of embracing interreligious friendship as the driving force behind comparative theology cannot be overstated, especially as our world currently experiences systemic narratives of hate motivated by religious ideologies. However, it is also consoling to note that, in societies faced with religious violence, examples abound of religious persons who attest to the fact that their friends in the dominant religions courageously risk their lives to save them from violent attacks. These examples confirm the argument that friendship definitely makes a difference in moving hearts and fostering peaceful relations in society. When people develop bonds of friendship, they enter into a deeper realm of understanding and appreciation of one another. Their respective religious beliefs are no longer viewed as threats but as a legitimate part of the relationship. Differences are embraced for what they are and can be seen as new interpretations on the issues that separate them as a result of the encounters. The friendship between Fredericks and his Buddhist friends teaches us how we can all be transformed if we sincerely embrace friendship as a vocation, one that leads us ever deeper into the mystery of God.

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<sup>57</sup> See Fredericks, "Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization."

I argued above that disruption in the liturgy ought to be embraced as moments of grace where God's generosity is experienced without the predictive expectations of human biases that sometimes stifle the rich process of encounter. I return to this point. It is important that theologians point out what we have lost in our liturgies as we strive to embrace rigid uniformity in rituals. It is true that uniformity in the liturgy was a helpful tool both for fighting heresies and for stabilizing political power in the Christian kingdoms in Europe during the era known historically as "Christendom." However, in today's world, rigid uniformity ought to be discouraged. In a world where genocides, religious terrorism, racism, tribalism, mass incarceration, and natural disasters have become part of our reality, one must ask how the liturgy can become a place where these evils are addressed directly. It is shameful to acknowledge that in our world today the place where the hatred of other religions is often taught is within the worshiping space. In Nigeria, for example, it is very common for pastors and priests on Sundays or imams on Fridays to preach sermons condemning other faiths as followers and religions of the devil.

A pragmatic way to address these contradictions is to embrace the sacred texts of other faith traditions and see them as deposits of God's salvific truths. This is already happening within the context of dialogue of theological exchange. It needs to be embraced also within the context of dialogue of religious experiences. If comparative theologians from the Christian tradition can comfortably read Vedic texts and the Qur'an and find within them insights that can nourish Christians, then it ought to be expected that those texts be read within the liturgy as well. To show that we are serious about dialogue and the friendships made through it, we ought to try consciously to make the voice of the other heard in our most sacred space. Friendship allows for disruption of all temptations to be narcissistic in one's self-perception. Until the time when the other's wisdom is embraced in the context of Christian worship rituals, interfaith dialogue and comparative theology will still reflect paradoxical elements that point to the primacy of the self rather than authentic solidarity with the other.

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