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# Locating the Place of Interreligious Friendship in Comparative Theology

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## ABSTRACT

Each religion has at its core a commitment to the flourishing of life. Themes of relationality, hospitality, and friendship are pathways for promoting their mission to bring about the flourishing of all. James L. Fredericks, a Roman Catholic theologian with specialization in comparative theology, has spent his adult life working intentionally to enter into friendship with people of other faith traditions. In some of his works, he describes how such friendships have led to growth in his understanding of his own Catholic-Christian faith traditions. Interreligious friendship is not about proselytization, it is rather about exploring God's truth in the safe space of admiration, openness, trust, embrace of vulnerability, and discipleship in the presence of the other who bears the gift of divine grace by their presence.

**KEYWORDS:** *agape*, Buddhism, Christianity, the Church, dialogue, friendship, hospitality, interreligious, theology, tolerance.

## INTRODUCTION

As our world is faced with unending violence motivated most often by illogical hatred of others, it is imperative that people of faith take seriously the gift of friendship. As noted by Pope Francis, friendship is at the heart of Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Christians, if they are to embrace Christ fully, must necessarily take seriously the practice of friendship as a gift from God. Christ is God's visible expression of divine friendship. To this effect, Christians ought to study what friendship means in relation to the gift of Christ to the world.

In an article titled, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," James L. Fredericks argues for the acceptance of friendship as a theological virtue within the Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup> May I quickly call for the need to retitle this work; rather than friendship being a new theological virtue within the Christian tradition, it ought to be called the forgotten virtue.

I intend to accomplish the following in this article: articulate the parameters for a theological hermeneutic on friendship as the basis for a viable comparative theology in a global context. To achieve this, I will reflect on the contributions of the theologian James L. Fredericks, one of the founding voices shaping the theological discipline of comparative theology in North America.

#### EMBRACING FRIENDSHIP

Friendship involves the opening up of one's heart to another with 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>3</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 give preference to the Roman Catholic faith. As noted by Fredericks, "the fulfillment model has allowed interreligious dialogue to become something that is talked about more than practiced."<sup>4</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 the religious persons or in relation to their respective religious traditions. Fredericks skillfully concretizes this point when he makes a distinction between *agape* and *philia* by affirming the virtue of tolerance.<sup>5</sup> Tolerance within the construct of *agape* is understood as unconditional and this bears the characteristics of strength and power validated by faith in the divine.<sup>6</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 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 points out the tendency to want to slip into the realm of self-glorification in the Church's theological tradition of encounters when he calls for a refreshing way of doing theology today. He writes,

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 constituting it within a grand narrative, Christian theologians encounter that other as a partner in a dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

Fredericks has called to question the legitimacy of theology of religions due to its inability to enter into dialogue without prioritizing Christianity in a way that a judgment call is made on other religions. In his work, *Faith among Faiths*, Fredericks calls for an abandonment of this and an embrace of the emerging field of comparative theology. He grounds 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>8</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 plagued by religious violence, examples abound of religious persons attesting 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 each other. Their respective religious beliefs are no longer viewed as threats, but as legitimate parts of the relationship. Differences are embraced for what they are, and sometimes as new interpretations on the issues that separate them as a result of the encounters. The friendship between James 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.

## CONCLUSION

Fredericks warns theologians to be careful else they slip into the dangerous terrain of confusing interreligious dialogue and or friendship as an aspect of the church's evangelization.<sup>9</sup> However, he fails to articulate for his readers, a sufficient guide to navigate these two competing callings—dialogue and proclamation. Having spent more than a decade as a missionary in a religiously pluralistic context myself, the urge to want to conflate or at best link dialogue to proclamation is a real temptation. Yes, Fredericks has shown how the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church has grounded interreligious dialogue within the Church's evangelical witness both *ad extra* and *ad intra*.<sup>10</sup> The question must be asked, how does one avoid the temptation? Fredericks seems to opine that they are two distinct callings.<sup>11</sup> Again, I am compelled to ask the question, can one be called to both vocations at the same time? If this is the case, how then can one effectively proclaim the word and be faithful to the demands of interreligious dialogue? I am curious as to why this dilemma has not been addressed by comparative theologians. This dilemma reveals a lacuna in our contemporary theological discourse on how to engage 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 both are accounted for. To simply state that evangelization is still necessary when faced by 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.

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 mine, where the pain and suffering of the other become mine as well, and where the hope of the other becomes my hope. This calls for a keen focus and willingness to embrace the gift of faith in God that the religious other brings to me even in the seemingly contradictory narratives embraced by the other who is radically different from me.

#### NOTES

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2. James L. Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 159–174.
3. James L. Fredericks, "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 220.
4. James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 21.
5. Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship," 168.
6. Ibid.
7. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, 27.
8. James L. Fredericks, "Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 27 (2007): 51–66.
9. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, 105.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.