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#### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Ahiokhai, Simon, "Rethinking Shared Spaces in an Era of Diversity: Towards an Imagination of the Human as a Holistic Being" (2022). *Theology Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 42.

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5-15-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Ahiokhai, SimonMary "Rethinking Shared Spaces in an Era of Diversity: Towards an Imagination of the Human as a Holistic Being," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 5. (2022) :8-36  
Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol24/iss1/5>

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**Rethinking Shared Spaces in an Era of Diversity:  
Towards an Imagination of the Human as a Holistic Being.<sup>1</sup>**

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What does it mean to be a holistic person in an era of diversity? This is the question that faces our world today as communities attempt to make sense of the multiple factors that define our collective human existence. Societies radically shaped by the secular ideals of the Enlightenment, especially those in the Northern Hemisphere, have embraced a bifurcated humanity where the secular and the profane are considered incompatible in shared spaces, spaces where human productivity is fully at work. Individuals are expected not to express their religious commitments in such spaces, e.g., the workplace, as though religion were a source of great division and not a source of unity. In an era of pluralism, one has to ask the pertinent question: How feasible is this bias against the religious, as persons from diverse cultural and religious loci attempt to build healthy communities within shared spaces? To address this question, this paper attempts to demonstrate the relevance of spirituality in shaping and forming communities of wholeness that allow for the flourishing of each person as a member of webs of relationships. This work essay will first offer a critical analysis of the workplace as a space of identity crises with the intent to make space for the relevance of an inclusive spirituality for human flourishing.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay came out of a lecture I gave to the executives of the Columbia-Willamette YMCA on imagining the place of spirituality in the workplace, Monday, October 4, 2021. The title of the lecture was “The Role of Spirituality in Holistic, Equitable Communities: Rethinking the Workplace in an Era of Diversity.”

**Shared Spaces as Places of Identity Crisis:  
A Critical Evaluation of the Enlightenment**

If one were to ask the question “What is the issue that best defines our world today?” the answer would be that of identity construction. There seems to be a crisis of identity defining the contours of human existence in the twenty-first century. The emergence of “others” in traditionally understood monolithic spaces defined by religion, race, gender, and language has led to this unforeseen violence: clashes of identity have arisen in the United States, with the rise of White supremacists, and in many other nations—India, Nigeria, Hungary, and Myanmar, to name only a few—with political, religious, and cultural ideologues seeking a return to the era of institutionally backed practices of racial, gender, and religious discrimination and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. These clashes force us to focus on how human encounters ought to be reimagined today in ways that allow for the sense of wholeness that ought to define the human condition. As noted by Héctor A. Acero-Ferrer, “perceptions, interpretations, and aspirations frame the imaginative space within which concrete realities are assessed and re-assessed by human communities throughout history.”<sup>2</sup> Following Acero-Ferrer’s train of thought, one has to ask the question: What shapes these perceptions, interpretations, and aspirations? Acero-Ferrer, appropriating insights from Paul Ricoeur, argues that a dialectical movement between the need for stability (“ideology”) and the desire for change (“utopia”) offers the guiding principles by which human communities “develop their sense of self as either a continuation of previous efforts or a radical rupture with traditional trajectories, shaping its understanding of reality and action in the world. Hence, the action of the community is

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<sup>2</sup> Héctor A. Acero-Ferrer, “Imagining Borders, Imagining Relationships. Can We Build Enlarged Communities through Narrative Imagination?” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 5 (2019): 448.

ultimately guided by the outcome of this creative tension (or dialectical relation) between ideology and utopia as they shape collective imaginaries.<sup>3</sup> Acero-Ferrer goes on to argue that although ideology has sometimes legitimized “pathological tendencies” that hold the imagination of the community captive, a proper escape from this aridity of imagination lies within the framework of utopias. In dialogue with Ricoeur, he defines utopias as “‘implying alternative ways of using power,’ that ‘call established systems of power into question’ in seeking a new order of societal affairs.”<sup>4</sup>

Though utopias do offer an escape from stagnant notions of communal identities, one has to critique the view articulated by Ricoeur and Acero-Ferrer. How is community to be understood within the framework of a post-Enlightenment context? I am being more intentional here by locating the question within a particular socio-cultural, political, and hermeneutical context. If one is to give legitimacy to the realities that have shaped our world, one has to take seriously the reality of the Enlightenment and its influence on global dynamics. The Enlightenment offered most Western societies an epistemological map for navigating and creating a new world order that was meant to usher in an era of progress radically defined by freedom and individual self-affirmation. The period of the Enlightenment also saw the emergence of the nation-state, later exported as a colonial reality shaping non-Western societies and civilizations. The nation-state was meant to embody a cohesive identity defined by shared historicities and values. But one has to ask the obvious question: Are these historicities and values shared or imposed? Epistemic location will affect one’s ability to critique what is assumed

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<sup>3</sup> Acero-Ferrer, “Imagining Borders,” 450.

<sup>4</sup> Acero-Ferrer, “Imagining Borders,” 454.

to be shared. To those at the center of the discourse, it is obvious that such historicities and values are derived from a cohesive sense of social identity. Those at the margins reach very different conclusions. As Enrique Dussel notes in his close examination of modernity as a consequence of European Enlightenment, the centrality of Europe in discourse about modernity cannot be ignored. “Europe as the center of modernity changes the very understanding of modernity” because of its inherent inconsistencies in relation to how Europe has related to other regions of the world.<sup>5</sup> Walter D. Mignolo sheds light on the inconsistencies evoked by the notion of the Enlightenment by calling attention to the inherent hierarchy of being that defines the imagination of the human within European societies. Critiquing Immanuel Kant’s argument that “the fountain and origin of all knowledge is pure reason and experience,” Mignolo problematizes Kant’s perspective by shedding light on the innate coloniality of knowledge that has defined the imagination of the human subject shaped by the Enlightenment tradition. Moving away from the grandiose claims sometimes made by subjects of the Enlightenment, Mignolo argues for a decolonial approach that takes seriously the role of context in the shaping of knowledge and identity constructions. In his words, “knowledge starts in and from the heart, and ... the mind categorically processes what the heart dictates.... The heart senses not just the universality of human beings but also that the body feels according to its location in the colonial matrix of

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<sup>5</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 26.

power.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, “you are where you think, thinking makes you, rather than the other way around.”<sup>7</sup>

Following Mignolo’s thought process, one is forced to reengage Acero-Ferrer’s point about the dialectical movement of ideologies and utopias in constructing human communal identities. The world imagined by the European Enlightenment is not a neutral world. It is rather a political construct aimed at promoting an exclusionary agenda that denies the experiences and insights of persons judged to be outside of the European imagination. As Mignolo writes,

if knowledge starts in and with the senses and in our (human beings’) experiences, the senses and experiences of, for example, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, an enslaved African who was shipped to the Caribbean and then taken by his master to London, where he was liberated, cannot be the same as those of Kant.... The point is that what Kant names “sense and experience,” which is the most basic body-reaction to the environment (seasons of the years, as well as people and institutions), is connected to the geo-historical configuration of *that world around us*.<sup>8</sup>

As Mignolo rightly concludes, the perspective of Cugoano is missing in the European imagination of what a communal identity is, especially when that identity is rooted in the Enlightenment epistemic bias. He poignantly notes,

there is no modernity without coloniality; hence modernity/coloniality. Modernity is constituted by rhetoric: the rhetoric of salvation by conversion, civilization, progress, and

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<sup>6</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 203.

<sup>7</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 203.

<sup>8</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 204.

development. But in order to implement what the rhetoric of modernity preaches, it is necessary to drive the juggernaut over every single difference, resistance, or opposition to modernity's salvation projects.<sup>9</sup>

The end product of such an imperial posturing has a hegemonic role of validating narratives, identities, experiences, and communities that serve its interests. How then is one to upend such a hegemonic process? For Mignolo, one must begin with the perspectives of those who have been erased or silenced: the perspective of Cugoano must be the starting place.

Before addressing the turn to Cugoano's perspective as the legitimate response to the colonizing logic of the Enlightenment, it is proper to state clearly the consequences that arise from embracing the hegemonic logic of the Enlightenment tradition. First, to shape society and social spaces that our bodies occupy by embracing only the experiences of those who are at the center of such spaces is to achieve an incorrect notion of how identity is being constructed within such contexts. For example, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry for the topic, "Enlightenment," William Bristow writes:

Taking as the core of the Enlightenment the aspiration for intellectual progress, and the belief in the power of such progress to improve human society and individual lives, this entry includes descriptions of relevant aspects of the thought of earlier thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Bayle, Leibniz, and Spinoza, thinkers whose contributions are indispensable to understanding the eighteenth century as "the century of philosophy *par excellence*."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 205.

<sup>10</sup> William Bristow, "Enlightenment," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/enlightenment/>.



Are these thinkers the custodians of the philosophical tradition? Not unless philosophy has been given a specific definition, which seems to be the case. The list has neither a global representation nor women philosophical thinkers. What would such a list look like if perspectives such as Cugoano's were accounted for? One can thus say that the Enlightenment embarked on an incomplete knowledge production because its generalizations attempt to erase knowledge productions from cultural contexts other than the dominant European one.

Second, if Kant's definition of the Enlightenment is to be taken seriously, as Bristow does, one notices a problem that cannot be ignored. Kant defines the Enlightenment as man's release from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!' – that is the motto of enlightenment."<sup>11</sup>

I offer two observations about Kant's definition of the Enlightenment. First, when Kant speaks of the Enlightenment as "man's release from his self-incurred immaturity," he is definitely not referring to all of humanity. Kant was convinced that persons of African or Chinese descent were incapable of embodying the ideals of the Enlightenment, as well as unable to be agents of knowledge production.<sup>12</sup> As Mignolo notes in his critique of Kant, "Kant devalues and dismisses epistemic differences. Epistemic differences go hand in hand with ontological ones: 'Show me a

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (30 September 1784), in <http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/KantOnEnlightenment.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, "On the Different Human Races (1777)," in Jeff Bowersox, *Black Central Europe*, <https://blackcentraleurope.com/sources/1750-1850/kant-on-the-different-human-races-1777/>.

Negro that has shown talent,' or "What trilling grotesqueries do the verbose and studied compliments of Chinese contain!"<sup>13</sup> Second, Kant displays a false understanding of the human person. Kant believes, as do many Western thinkers of the Enlightenment, that the human person is ontologically constituted as an individual and as such, must necessarily protect its turf from the collective, or the other, especially when the other is seen as a threat to the individual's self-affirmation.

Exploring this bias for the individual further, I turn to Hannah Arendt. In her critique of René Descartes' prioritization of the thinking subject as the source of all meaning, Arendt writes, "The outstanding characteristic of Cartesian doubt is its universality, that nothing, no thought and no experience, can escape it."<sup>14</sup> Arendt makes the point that Cartesian doubt has produced "two nightmares" that continue to radically define our world and our existence. The first is the doubt that defines "the reality of the world as well as of human life.... The other concerns the general human condition."<sup>15</sup> Though Arendt does not spell this out, Cartesian doubt creates the possibility and the coloniality of power that allow the gaze of the individual(istic) subject to strip away the inherent dignities of the universe and its content. When one studies closely the emergence of European imperialistic ambitions in the era of industrialization, one notices that there is a close connection between the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) and a thinking process that reduces the given inherent otherness of the universe to the biased conclusions of the subject. "Subject" is understood here to mean agents or systems of

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<sup>13</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed., new foreword by Danielle Allen, introd. Margaret Canovan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 275.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 277.

imperialism, and these include the actual production of knowledge and recognition of knowledge; the recognition of the contours of history; the removal of spirituality from shared spaces and the enthronement of a new type of secular religion that is exploitative—capitalism; the reimagining of the economic order, moving away from European feudalism into the European era of exploration and exploitation that culminated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the era of colonialism, neo-colonialism; and the capitalist system operating even to this day. Cartesian doubt is very much at play in Kant’s understanding and definition of the Enlightenment. Cartesian doubt, while delegitimizing the claim to knowledge production by non-European cultures and societies, affirms the primacy of the European subject as the source of knowledge production.

The second observation from reading Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment has to do with a false sense of “the human condition,” if I may use the term coined by Arendt. Arendt’s explanation of Cartesian doubt offers a clear understanding of Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment. She notes:

Introspection, as a matter of fact, not the reflection of man’s mind on the state of his soul or body but the sheer cognitive concern of consciousness with its own content (and this is the essence of the Cartesian *cogitation*, where *cogito* always means *cogito me cogitare*) must yield certainty, because here nothing is involved except what the mind has produced itself; nobody is interfering but the producer of the product, man is confronted with nothing and nobody but himself.<sup>16</sup>

Descartes never addresses the fact that the content of cognition is itself derived from the spaces that the thinking subject occupies. Those realities defining the content of cognition are a

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 280.

legitimate proof of the fact that the human person is radically defined by an ontology of relationality. As Emmanuel Levinas writes,

to address someone expresses the ethical disturbance produced in me, in the tranquility of the perseverance of my being, in my egotism as a necessary state, by the interruption of the ‘conatus essendi’ [effort to be] (an expression of the being of being in Spinoza)... Thinking the other person is a part of the irreducible concern for the other. Love is not consciousness. It is because there is a vigilance before the awakening that the *cogito* is possible, so that ethics is before ontology. Behind the arrival of the human there is already the vigilance for the other. The transcendental *I* in its nakedness comes from the awakening by and for the other.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, to speak of the subject is to immediately acknowledge an identity of subjectivity that always comes from the other who, although existing outside of the subject, evokes an ethical responsibility within the subject toward that other. There is no subject unless there is first the other. To then deny authentic rationality to those of African and Chinese descent, as did Kant in his understanding of the Enlightenment and its consequent knowledge production, is to speak of an incomplete narrative. To deny the otherness of reality outside of cognition as found in Cartesian doubt is to ignore the fact that consciousness never occurs in a vacuum. It may be relevant to take seriously the observations by Boaventura de Sousa Santos about contemporary society: “Today the sociology of absences is the inquiry into the ways colonialism, in the form of the colonialism of power, knowledge, and being, operates together with capitalism and

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<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 97 – 98.

patriarchy to produce abyssal exclusions, that is, to produce certain groups of people and forms of social life as nonexistent,”<sup>18</sup>

A third consequence of embracing the hegemonic logic of the Enlightenment tradition is this: The bias for introspection as a pathway to a particular understanding of knowledge production within the Enlightenment tradition is itself a delegitimizing force that renders the ones appropriating such a bias victims of erasure themselves. In his introduction to Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Jean-Paul Sartre offers a relevant insight. Though his focus is on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, it is pertinent to the argument I am making. In Sartre’s words,

moments of colonialism, they sometimes condition one another and sometimes blend.

Oppression means, first of all, the oppressor’s hatred for the oppressed. There exists a solitary limit to this venture of destructiveness, and that is colonialism itself. Here the colonizer encounters a contradiction of his own: “Were the colonized to disappear, so would colonization—with the colonizer” There would be no more subproletariat, no more over-exploitation.... The impossible dehumanization of the oppressed ... becomes the alienation of the oppressor.<sup>19</sup>

Sartre sheds light on how the anthropological vision of the oppressed by the oppressor defines the very existence of the identity the oppressor has acquired via the oppressive structures. Consequently, any form of liberation of the oppressed must necessarily lead to the death of the current identities of the oppressor. It must necessarily lead to a double form of liberation, one for

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<sup>18</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 25.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Introduction (trans. Lawrence Hoey), in Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, exp. ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1967), xxvii - xxviii.

the oppressed and the other for the oppressor. This point thus makes it vital for a reengagement with the Enlightenment tradition to take place in such a manner that what has been erased by this Western European tradition be given its legitimate place if we are to understand fully the breadth and depth of our diverse human experiences and ways of living our lives in shared spaces.

Fourth, at the heart of the Enlightenment tradition is a response to the social understanding of religion. For Kant, who is considered the face of the Enlightenment due to how deeply his views have shaped the Enlightenment tradition,<sup>20</sup> religion is about controlling public behavior in society and thus leads to the restricting of human freedom. A sure way to overcome this restriction is to insist on the right of the individual to be the source and guide of their life and destiny. In Kant's words, "I have placed the main point of enlightenment—the escape of men from their self-imposed immaturity—chiefly in matters of religion because our rulers have no interest in playing guardian with respect to the arts and sciences and also because religious incompetence is not only the most harmful but also the most degrading of all."<sup>21</sup> Without denying the fact that religion has sometimes been used and is even being used today as a deliberate form of social control (a good example is the history of the tensions arising in northeastern Nigeria with regard to the agenda of the religiously fundamentalist group, Boko Haram, to control that region of the country and force everyone to embrace its version of political Islam), to simply reduce all religions to the level of pietistic tools for social control that go against the demands of rationalism reveals a shortsighted understanding of the place of religion in human society. Furthermore, by positioning religion as a problematic reality that

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<sup>20</sup> Phil Badger, "What's Wrong with The Enlightenment?" *Philosophy Now* 79 (2010), [https://philosophynow.org/issues/79/Whats\\_Wrong\\_With\\_The\\_Enlightenment](https://philosophynow.org/issues/79/Whats_Wrong_With_The_Enlightenment).

<sup>21</sup> Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"

hinders both individual self-affirmation and the primacy of reason, Kant’s logic—one that seems to be at the center of the Enlightenment tradition—delegitimizes a humanity that appropriates the relevance and truths of religion. This becomes even more evident when one studies closely the colonizing imagination of cultures and peoples by European missionaries and colonizers. Such cultures and peoples become, in the words of Walter Mignolo, victims of European “imperial epistemology” that tends to “roll over epistemic differences.”<sup>22</sup> To do this cleverly, imperial epistemology “invents such terms as *tradition*, *folklore*, and *myth*” as descriptors of cultural knowledge production by cultures and peoples from other continents. It reduces those cultures and peoples to epistemic footnotes while prioritizing the knowledge production of cultures and people from Europe (Whites).

Fifth, the Enlightenment tradition is deeply cultural, with a geopolitical agenda that universalizes the European intellectual tradition as though it were an *a priori* truth. The logic of imperial epistemology is grounded in the bias against that which is not European. The following axiom captures the logic of European imperial epistemology: *Outside of Europe there is no knowledge; rather, there is simply opinion*. Buying into such a proposition allows for the erasure of the reality of pluralism, whether religious or cultural. This axiom legitimizes the desire to want to Europeanize the other, be it the individual or society. The French colonial principle of assimilation is a testament to this imperial agenda of Europeanizing the other. Franz Fanon captures this logic of the Europeanizing of the other perfectly when he writes about the assimilation of the Antillean man into the French cultural way of life and logic of knowledge production:

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<sup>22</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 206.

All they ask of the black man is to be a good nigger; the rest will follow on its own. Making him speak pidgin is tying him to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a *visible appearance* for which he is not responsible. And of course, just as the Jew who is lavish with his money is suspect, so the black man who quotes Montesquieu must be watched.... When a black man speaks of Marx, the first reaction is the following: “We educated you and now you are turning against your benefactors. Ungrateful wretches! You’ll always be a disappointment.” ... The fact is that the European has a set idea of the black man, and there is nothing more exasperating than to hear: “How long have you lived in France? You speak such good French.” ... There is nothing more sensational than a black man speaking correctly, for he is appropriating the white world.... The black man has put himself on an equal footing; the game is no longer possible; he’s a pure replica of the white man, who has to surrender to the facts.

Fanon continues:

After everything has just been said, it is easy to understand why the first reaction of the Black man is to say *no* to those who endeavor to define him. It is understandable that the Black man’s first action is a *reaction*, and since he is assessed with regard to his degree of assimilation, it is understandable too why the returning Antillean speaks only French: because he is striving to underscore the rift that has occurred. He embodies a new type of man whom he imposes on his colleagues and family. His old mother no longer understands when he speaks of her *pij*’s, her ramshackle dump, and her lousy joint. All that embellished with the



appropriate accent.... The Antillean returning from the *metropole* speaks in Creole if he wants to signify that nothing has changed. It can be sensed on the docks where friends and relatives are waiting for him—waiting for him not only in the literal sense, but in the sense of waiting to catch him out. They need only one minute to make their diagnosis. If he says: “I am so happy to be back among you. Good Lord, it’s so hot in this place; I’m not sure I can put up with it for long,” they have been forewarned—it’s a European who’s come back.<sup>23</sup>

If the Enlightenment tradition hopes to birth forth a vision of the human that is truly enlightened, it must reject the generalizing view of religion as something that does harm to the human person as a creature defined by rationality. To do this, an intentional embrace of a decolonial epistemology is needed. As Mignolo argues, this means that one makes the “necessary shift of the geography of reason and to start reasoning from the senses and experiences of people like Cugoano.”<sup>24</sup> Why this epistemic shift? Mignolo argues the following: “Knowledge is of the essence. Thus, coloniality of knowledge means not that modern knowledge is colonized, but that modern knowledge is epistemically imperial and ... devalues and dismisses epistemic differences.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, rather than a shift into the domain of comparative epistemological methodology that Mignolo argues has “served the interest of Western epistemology to remain on top, controlling all other forms of knowledge,” he argues for a

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<sup>23</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), 18–20.

<sup>24</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 205.

<sup>25</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 205.

“Panikkaran imparative [sic] method.”<sup>26</sup> This method, according to Raimon Panikkar, is “the effort at learning from the other and the attitude of allowing our own convictions to be fecundated by insight of the other.”<sup>27</sup> Furthering Panikkar’s thought, Mignolo makes a distinction between the comparative method and the imparative method. In his words, “in contradistinction to the *comparative* method, which privileges dialectics and argumentative reasoning (system and architectonic), the *imparative* method (for Panikkar, diatopical hermeneutics) focuses on dialogue, praxis, and existential encounters—that is, reasoning from the senses and, in my argument, from the locations of the bodies in the colonial matrix of power.”<sup>28</sup>

Why diatopical hermeneutics? Panikkar argues that “Diatopical hermeneutics stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other without assuming that the other has the basic self-understanding as I have. The ultimate human horizon, and not only different contexts, is at stake here.”<sup>29</sup> As noted by Mignolo. “my understanding of the other may be, and often is, irrelevant to how the ones understood by me understand themselves and of how they would understand me trying to understand them.”<sup>30</sup> An appropriation of the imparative method advocated by Panikkar offers a pathway for arguing for the relevance of spirituality, broadly understood, as a means for legitimizing the role of religion in shaping the human person as a

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<sup>26</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 208.

<sup>27</sup> Raimon Panikkar, “Aporias in the Contemporary Philosophy of Religion,” *Man and World* 13, nos. 3–4 (1980): 370.

<sup>28</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 208.

<sup>29</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross Cultural Studies* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 61.

creature occupying social spaces. On that note, it is proper to explain the human through the eyes of religion.

### **Rethinking the Human: Making a Case for Inclusive Spirituality**

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a church council convoked by Pope John XXIII, was primarily interested in responding to the signs of the times. The world of the twentieth century was trying to figure itself out after the traumas of two world wars, the enduring legacies of slavery, the exploitative policies of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the racial segregation in American society, the right of women to their own bodies, and ways of being Christian in a post-Christendom world. In light of all these challenges, the Roman Catholic Church decided to articulate a pastoral response in a manner that allowed for inclusivity and engagement with the world after centuries of paranoid flight from the world. Among the questions raised by the Council was how to articulate a vision of the human that was truly free. Whereas the Enlightenment tradition had defined freedom as a rejection of religion and an embrace of rationality, the Council chose to center religion within the discourse of human freedom. Thus, in the conciliar document *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council declared the following:

The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.... Therefore the right

to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature.<sup>31</sup>

By locating religious freedom within the very constitution of human nature, the Council opened up the pathway for the possibility of embracing religious diversity as a way of being fully human. The previously held view of privileging Roman Catholicism as the only way to be authentically religious was no longer tenable. Diversity is inherently part of the human condition. Even within the framework of religious freedom, the primacy of religious diversity is to be upheld. Hence, the Council taught,

the Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.<sup>32</sup>

What are the implications of arguing that human freedom also involves freedom to practice religion? Is the religious dimension of the human within the private domain only? The Council argued to the contrary. If the human person is ontologically constituted by a sense of yearning for God, then in order to be authentically human, one has to embrace one's religiosity in all aspects and places where human life plays out. With this understanding in mind, the

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<sup>31</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), 2. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html).

<sup>32</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.

Council made the following bold statement in the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest bonds.<sup>33</sup>

The affirmation of religious freedom calls for a particular way of being in the world. This is at the heart of the statement articulated above by the Council. If the concern of the church is the well-being of all humans in God's world, then Christians ought to take seriously holistic wellbeing and not just some aspects of human development. On this note, Pope Paul VI further elaborated the vision of the Church in a world in need of reimagination to allow for the flourishing of all persons. In his words:

The development we speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man. As an eminent specialist on this question has rightly said: "We cannot allow economics to be separated from human realities, nor development from civilization in

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<sup>33</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 1, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

which it takes place. What counts for us is man—each individual man, each human group, and humanity as a whole.”<sup>34</sup>

This emphasis on holistic engagement with the human condition in a manner that allows for the flourishing of the human person is the very vision guiding the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) as a global organization.

The YMCA was founded in 1844 as a Christian organization by Sir George Williams. Its primary focus was to “support young people to belong, contribute and thrive in their communities” by embracing Christian principles that affirm holistic and integral formation of the human person.<sup>35</sup> The core of the Christian way of life is for Christians to become, as did Jesus Christ, the source of life for all (John 10:10). Thus, the YMCA strategically engages in the formation of young people (it is no longer exclusive to men) to allow for

empowering, inspiring and mobilizing young people to find and share their voice on the issues that matter to them and to the world. The YMCA helps young people to better themselves, to better their communities, and to better their world. It gives them the *Space* to bring about *Transformation* in themselves and their communities and make a positive difference—an *Impact*—as a result.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Paul VI, Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, 14. [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html).

<sup>35</sup> “YMCA and YMCA England,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20170317233418/http://www.ymca.org.uk/about/ymca-ymca-england>.

<sup>36</sup> *World YMCA*, “The Global YMCA Movement and the World Alliance of YMCAs: Empowering Young People—Space, Transformation, Impact,” <https://www.ymca.int/about-us/>. Emphases and capitalizations in the original text.

It is not surprising that the YMCA continues to shape the lives of young people around the world. Four strategic areas are of concern to this movement: “Health—nurturing the young in body, mind and spirit; environment—channeling young people’s commitment to climate justice and sustainability; civic engagement—amplifying youth voices and actions in communities; and employment—preparing young people for decent jobs and sustainable livelihoods.”<sup>37</sup> A question thus arises in light of the current dispensation of our world: how is space to be understood in the work of the YMCA? In the Enlightenment tradition, especially the views of Kant, religion has nothing to do in the public space because religion is seen as a source of dehumanization, since it forces the human person to reject the freedom to decide their destiny. Though the YMCA’s approach to the place of human activities within shared spaces has been shaped by Christian values, as is also the case with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, in the context of religious pluralism that plays itself out in shared spaces, a reimagination of religiosity within shared spaces is needed. For this reimagination, I turn to the insights of Terrence Tilley.

In an era of cultural, religious, and ideological pluralism, the starting point for any discourse on the transformative state of the human condition as radically defined by freedom of, or without, religion, ought to begin with a broad understanding of faith. This approach is needed today because spaces that our bodies occupy are no longer monolithic in nature. Tilley defines faith as “the relationship between one and the irreducible energizing source of meaning and center of value in one’s life.”<sup>38</sup> This definition allows for all human persons to consider their lives as radically oriented towards that source of purpose in their lives. This definition also moves the focus of the human from the domain of the subjective individual to the domain of the

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<sup>37</sup> “The Global YMCA Movement.”

<sup>38</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn’t* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 26.

other. As Tilley rightly notes, “the key to understanding the shape of my faith is how I value the status of the “other”: Do I apply the Golden Rule morally because all beings are worthy of my care...?”<sup>39</sup> Faith is thus to be understood as the source of our relational connectedness with others. However, it is not any type of relational connectedness. It is the foundation of all that defines one as a creature oriented towards otherness. Quoting Dag Hammarskjöld, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, who wrote in his diary, “Give me something to die for! ... Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, great enough to die for,” Tilley calls attention to the bankruptcy inherent in a narcissistic way of living, whether within the context of religious exclusivism or that of secular rejection of relational connectedness with others.<sup>40</sup>

The orientation towards otherness that faith evokes in human beings forces one to reflect on the existential questions that Tilley perceptively articulates: “Why would we or they *die* for something? What makes a drowning child or invaded nation or dying sister or religious faith or condemned stranger or peace among nations worth risking—and perhaps sacrificing—one’s life for?”<sup>41</sup> Reflecting on the mission of the YMCA in light of Tilley’s explanation of faith, one has to conclude that the radical orientation towards otherness that faith evokes is the driving force behind the vision of the human that an organization such as this intends to bring about. However, to ensure that a slip into an exclusive vision of the human as a religious being understood within a particular religious tradition does not hold the imagination of the human captive in an era of

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<sup>39</sup> Tilley, *Faith*, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Tilley, *Faith*, 46–48.

<sup>41</sup> Tilley, *Faith*, 48.



reimagining shared spaces, a deliberate attempt has to be made to center faith within the context of spirituality. Here, I am using “spirituality” as a mode of interpreting one’s connectedness with all that one encounters. It is to be understood as trans-religious in the way it operates in the life of the human person. Just as faith evokes relationality in the lives of all humans, whether within the context of the religious or the secular, spirituality involves a sense of awareness in that relational connectedness with that in which one has faith. Within the context of religious faith, the Constitution of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, a Roman Catholic congregation (order) of men, defines such a spirituality as “practical union.” “Practical union,” it states, “is like an instinct of heart for a person who, having made the sacrifice of self, has become ‘free ever after to devote himself [or herself] completely to others and to bring them along to God.’”<sup>42</sup>

Just as faith orients humans to otherness, practical union calls for a sense of awareness of the other that one is encountering. This awareness demands of one an existential commitment to being an agent of goodness for the other whom one encounters. It means taking seriously one’s role in being an energizing source of life and meaning for others with whom one is in proximity. However, it ought to be stated categorically that the other to whom faith orients one to is not defined by the intentionality of the subject. To allow the intentionality of the subject to define the other is to create a narcissistic reflection of the subject in the other. To understand the otherness of the other toward whom the subject is oriented by faith, Jacques Derrida introduces the following insights on the conceptualization of hospitality towards the foreigner:

The foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for

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<sup>42</sup> Congregation of the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, *Spiritan Rule of Life* (Rome: Scuola Tipografica S. Pio X, 1987), 88.

hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. this personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence. That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him?<sup>43</sup>

Furthering Derrida's articulation of the otherness of the other, Emmanuel Levinas argues for responsibility for the other as the legitimate form of existential orientation toward the other that faith evokes. Levinas's perspective is important because it is beyond the religious understanding of relationality. For him, ethics is first philosophy demanding that one be responsible for the other all the way. Consequently, he argues,

the tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other. To say: here I am [*me voici*]. To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit, that's it. The incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality (I do not see what angels could give one another or how they could help one another). Dia-chrony before all dialogue. I analyze the inter-human relationship as if, in proximity with the Other beyond the image I myself make of the

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 15, 17.

other man his face, the expressive in the Other (and the whole human body is in this sense more or less face), were what *ordains* me to serve him. I employ this extreme formulation. The face orders and ordains me. Its signification is an order signified. To be precise, if the face signifies an order in my regard, this is not in the manner in which an ordinary sign signifies its signified; this order is the very signifyingness of the face.<sup>44</sup>

By introducing the face of the other as that which the subject encounters, Levinas locates relationality within the domain of ethics. This is similar to Tilley's understanding of faith as that which evokes in all of us the need to orient ourselves toward others. Hence, Tilley makes the connection between faith and actions, noting, "for when we act, we act for reasons or purposes. Sometimes these are implicit, sometimes explicit."<sup>45</sup> Stated succinctly, subjectivity is itself ethically grounded. Consequently, Levinas writes, "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject."<sup>46</sup>

In our times, as our world struggles with the ills of the neoliberalism that has wrought so much evil, it is important that Levinasian insights be centered in our discourses on what subjectivity entails. This becomes even more urgent when one takes seriously the insights of Achille Mbembe, who writes:

The new order of things has serious implications for traditional understandings of reason, the political, freedom, and self-government. Since modernity, every project of genuine

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<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 97 – 98.

<sup>45</sup> Tilley, *Faith*, 100.

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.

human emancipation has aimed at preventing the human from being treated as an object and ultimately from being turned into waste. If, under the empire of the digital and the Eros of consumption, the human also begins to desire to be an object or to have some of its attributes or to see to it that objects and other animate and inanimate entities are also endowed with the same rights as humans, what does this signal in terms of the future of the political as such?

Already in the making, a new kind of human being will triumph. This will not be the liberal individual who, not so long ago, we believed could be the subject of democracy. The new human being will be constituted through and within digital technologies, and computational media.<sup>47</sup>

Mbembe rightly points out the disconnect in the vision of the human that contemporary neoliberal capitalism has exposed. Whereas technology is supposed to birth forth a strong relational connectedness with others, it has created a fantasy of radical narcissism that prevents the subject from fully going beyond itself to encounter the other, especially when the other embodies difference in all its expressions. The type of human that is being shaped for our times by neoliberal capitalism, Mbembe argues, has become “their own spectacle, their own scene, their own self-curation and exhibition.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Insights on the human from the Global South must be taken seriously if spaces as places for social interactions are to be fully understood. The apt critique of the locus of knowledge

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<sup>47</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necro-Politics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 114.

<sup>48</sup> Mbembe, *Necro-Politics*, 114.

production in western epistemology by the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos is worth repeating here. “The epistemologies of the North are grounded in the idea of the rational subject, a subject that is epistemic rather than concrete or empirical.”<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, unlike northern epistemologies, for “epistemologies of the South, embodied knowledge comes alive in living bodies ... the ones conducting the struggles against oppression; they are the bodies that suffer with the defeats and rejoice with the victories. Both individual and collective bodies are social bodies.”<sup>50</sup> Since all bodies, whether individual or collective, are social bodies, any articulation of shared spaces ought to take into cognizance the holistic vision of the human. The bias against religion within the Enlightenment tradition leads to a truncated vision of the human.

However, one must also factor into the discourse the reality of religious diversity, including the realities of atheism and agnosticism. This recognition of the pluralistic realities shaping the human person as a socio-relational creature ought to allow for an embrace of an understanding of faith as the source that drives the human person to be intentionally present to others in a manner that brings about the flourishing of life for others. In so doing, we must intentionally read the signs of the times in a manner that allows for discernment of the new forms of structural narcissism unfolding in contemporary society, forms of narcissism that pretend to be a form of religion. The rise of demigods who appropriate religious rituals to ensure that they shape the collective psyche of societies seem to be the norm today in our world. These demigods advocate for a narcissistic form of nationalism that sees all others as a threat to their flourishing. This phenomenon ought to be engaged and called out for what it is because of its ability to

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<sup>49</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 87–88.

delegitimize an authentic religiosity that ought to promote radical relational connectedness. Religion risks being invalidated if religious persons do not step forward and become the visible agents of authentic hospitality towards all. The praxis of relationality as influenced and shaped by one's commitment to religious identity offers our world a credible picture of what role religion can play in bringing about a more connected world. In other words, an embrace of the religious commitment to be there for all evokes the understanding of what it means to be a Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25 – 37).<sup>51</sup> Such a commitment to goodness and mercy towards all is radically rooted in freedom. The priest and the Levite who saw the wounded man by the roadside but were more interested in preserving their religious purity because their religious positionality prevented them from touching those considered to be unclean; the Samaritan, on the other hand, embraced his freedom, one that called for mercy and empathy to be the highest good above all religious and social restrictions. True religious freedom brings about radical connectedness and not insular existence.

Consequently, to speak of freedom is to be inclusive of the freedom to be religious or spiritual and to recognize the role of faith in defining the life of the human person. To speak of the human is to factor into the discourse the experiences of persons like Cugoano. It is to decolonize the epistemic narrative of the Enlightenment whose logic is erasing of difference. It is to begin the discourse with those who are at the margins or who have been erased historically from such discourses. Dialoguing with Sartre, Lewis Gordon writes: “The body is our perspective in the world. This perspective has at least three dimensions the dimension of seeing,

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<sup>51</sup> Biblical citation taken from *The New American Bible* (Wichita, KS: Catholic Bible Publishers, 1970).

the dimension of being seen, and the dimension of being conscious of being seen by others.”<sup>52</sup>

None of these three dimensions can be relegated to the domain of the private. They occur in the public spaces that our bodies occupy as social bodies meant to interact with otherness in all its manifestations. Gordon makes a salient point here:

No human being is a subject alone, nor an object alone. It is even incorrect to say that a human being is “both.” A human being is neither a subject nor an object but instead, in the language of Simone de Beauvoir and [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty, “ambiguous.” This ambiguity is an expression of the human being as a meaningful, multi-faceted way of being that may involve contradictory interpretations, or at least equivocal ones. Such ambiguity stands not as a dilemma to be resolved, as in the case of an equivocal sentence, but as a way of living to be described. The phenomenological task at hand is thus to draw out a hermeneutic of this ambiguity.<sup>53</sup>

Gordon’s insight is much in line with the argument being made by Levinas, who problematizes western ontology on subjectivity by turning to alterity as the locus of identity construction in a manner that decenters the subject while allowing ambiguity, which defines otherness, to reign supreme. While the Enlightenment tradition has helped to free the human mind from religious fundamentalism, it has also created a different type of fundamentalism—rigid rationality that sees all things religious as suspect. Faith, understood as an ethical orientation towards otherness, can become the tool for reimagining social spaces where human interactions occur.

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<sup>52</sup> Lewis Gordon, “Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility,” in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 71.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, “Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility,” 72.