

TRANSFORMING
INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

*Catholic Responses to Religious
Pluralism in the United States*

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INTRODUCTION

Challenges and Opportunities of Catholic Theology and Religious Pluralism in American Society

The religious diversity of the United States of America offers many blessings and opportunities and also poses profound paradoxes and challenges for Christian theology. European American Christians have traditionally celebrated their history of respecting religious liberty and welcoming newcomers, and today Christian theologians from all backgrounds are actively developing new and promising relationships with followers of other religious traditions in America. Yet the history of Christian responses to religious diversity in the United States is complex and conflicted. Even though the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America promises the free exercise of religion to all, enslaved African American Muslims were not generally allowed to practice Islam; and U.S. government officials repeatedly prohibited American Indians from performing their religious ceremonies. Much has changed in American Christian interreligious relations in the last seventy years, and today many American Christians enjoy cordial, respectful relations with their interreligious neighbors. Nonetheless, recent years have witnessed new expressions of religious animosity and bias against immigrants, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hispanics, American Indians, and African Americans. Both the history and the present context of interreligious relations in the United States contain terrible tragedies as well as important breakthroughs, presenting Christians with both formidable challenges and distinctive opportunities.

A Diverse and Conflicted Heritage

To understand and address the challenges of the current situation, it is important to acknowledge that Catholics and other Christians in the United States inherit a complex, ambiguous, and often tragic history of relations with other religious traditions. Religious diversity was present in North America before the arrival of the first European Christians; the original inhabitants of the continent practiced a wide variety of religious traditions that permeated all of life and culture.¹

¹ Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005); Lee Irwin, ed., *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

However, using the terminology of religion for American Indian practices can be misleading because the indigenous peoples did not identify one aspect of their lives as religious in contrast to other dimensions; it was usually Catholic and Protestant missionaries who initially made distinctions between certain activities of American Indians, such as dancing, that they deemed religious (and that were usually forbidden to Native Christians), and other activities, such as planting crops, that they assessed as economic or cultural and that were allowed to continue.²

Living with religious diversity challenged Christians in North America from the time of the first European settlements. Generation after generation, people arrived from many places around the world, bringing a wide variety of religious practices and beliefs. While many migrants came freely, many came in conditions of bonded labor; and millions of Africans were brought in bondage to suffer the horrors of chattel slavery. From the beginning, European Christians in North America have interpreted religious diversity in contradictory ways. Frequently there were conflicts, harsh judgments, and persecutions based on differences of religious belief and practice. Some early English settlers in New England set an ominous precedent by viewing the indigenous peoples as “heathens” or as the biblical “Amalekites.” Interreligious encounters were recurrently marked by hostility and misunderstanding, even violence.

Given the long history of religious intolerance and animosity in Europe and the Mediterranean, it is not surprising that Christians in America faced turbulence in interreligious relations. What is remarkable is the emergence and development of alternative perspectives that sought to accept religious differences in the New World. In the seventeenth century Roger Williams challenged the intolerance of the Massachusetts Bay colonialists; sought harmonious relations with the indigenous peoples; and guaranteed “soul liberty,” or religious freedom, in the new colony he founded in Rhode Island. This launched one of the most important American developments in living with religious diversity: the establishment of policies regarding religious freedom. Following the lead of Roger Williams in the seventeenth century, many Christians in North America advocated for religious freedom, and the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States promises the free exercise of religion. In this climate Christians in the United States have often hoped for blessings of interreligious peace, freedom, harmony, understanding, and cooperation.

Nonetheless, the clash between hostility and generosity, intolerance and acceptance has shaped American interreligious relationships down to the present. From the colonial period to today, hopes for respectful interreligious relations have intertwined with conquests, oppression, and the construction of racial categories to justify domination. Religious and racial categorizations have entwined throughout

² Severin M. Fowles, *An Archeology of Doings: Secularism and the Study of Pueblo Religion* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

colonial and American history, with often poisonous results. Spanish and Portuguese thinkers pioneered modern racial categories to justify the enslavement and conquest of peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.³ During the latter part of the seventeenth century British Americans in Virginia developed racial categories for viewing people as “white,” “black,” and “red.” Historian Alan Taylor describes the process of creating racial identities in colonial America:

Over time, race loomed larger—primarily in British America—as the fundamental prism for rearranging the identities and the relative power of the many peoples in the colonial encounters. A racialized sorting of peoples by skin color into white, red, and black was primarily a product, rather than a precondition of colonization.⁴

British Protestants coming to North America developed a distinctive form of racialized slavery. The colonial rhetoric of liberty and equality served to unite lower-class whites with the landowning elite class against African Americans and American Indians. Early colonial racial and religious prejudices shaped the context for European American encounters with Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. As noted earlier, the majority of early Muslims who came to North America arrived enslaved, and most were not granted freedom to practice Islam. When Buddhists from China and Japan came in significant numbers, racial prejudice demonized them, leading to government actions against them. Religious and racial biases often reinforced each other in American and European life.⁵ Theodore Vial has explored the academic context of how the modern concepts of race and religion were born together as “conjoined twins” in late eighteenth-century Europe. According to Vial, the modern notions of race and religion emerged together in the European Enlightenment as hierarchical rankings that privileged European Christians over other populations; perceptions of racial and religious identities intertwined to the extent that Vial finds that “the category of religion is always already a racialized category, even when race is not explicitly under discussion.”⁶ Vial stresses how strongly racial prejudices shaped the creation of the modern study of religion; and he finds that many contemporary American commentators continue to discuss religion as a racialized, hierarchical category, assuming that other societies and cultures, such as those in Africa, should make “progress” in order to become more like the United States.⁷

³ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁴ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies*, The Penguin History of the United States, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xii.

⁵ Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁶ Theodore Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 221ff.

Religious, racial, and ethnic prejudices have long overlapped and reinforced each other in American life.⁸ Racist views, combined with negative theological judgments about African, Asian, and American Indian religious practices, shaped prejudices against African Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians. Modern racist biases against Jews reinforced traditional Christian accusations that all Jews of every generation were guilty for killing Jesus Christ.⁹ From the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century, racist Jim Crow laws legislated discrimination against African Americans; and the criminal justice system generally turned a blind eye to crimes committed by white Americans against African Americans. The immigration laws of the 1920s sought to protect the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant character of American society by allowing Northern and Western Europeans to enter the United States in large numbers, and by establishing very limited quotas for persons from all other regions of the world. Tensions from religious and racial prejudice continue to challenge American society and Christian life and practice today. While many European American Christians have harbored religious prejudices, experiences in the United States prod them to learn to live together with followers of different religious traditions; over time the American experience of diversity has repeatedly transformed the religious traditions that come here.

Catholic Presence

Catholics were present from the beginning of European settlements in the Spanish- and French-ruled areas of North America. Catholics arrived in British North America at the founding of Maryland in 1634. While Maryland established religious liberty early in its history, this achievement was fragile and was revoked after the Glorious Revolution renewed distrust of Catholics in the British Empire. Catholics were often viewed as “Papist Devils” by Protestant colonialists, but nonetheless they would have a distinctive role to play in shaping American society, including interreligious relations.¹⁰

As the British American colonial society developed and eventually became the nation of the United States of America, the generous ideals of religious liberty and human equality collided with the brutal realities of enslavement and prejudice against religious minorities, including Catholics and Jews. Amid the tensions there emerged a new and distinctively American context of religious pluralism that privileged Protestants but that nonetheless allowed Catholics and Jews to develop and even to thrive. Catholics were a very small minority in the newly founded United

⁸ Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister, eds., *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 136–42.

¹⁰ Robert Emmett Curran, *Papist Devils: Catholics in British America, 1574–1783* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

States of America. Charles Carroll was the sole Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence. In 1776, the Continental Congress sent him and his cousin, John Carroll, together with Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Chase, on a mission to Canada to seek the support of French Catholics for the American Revolution.¹¹ Even though the mission did not succeed, the involvement of the two Carrolls demonstrated their support for the Revolutionary cause. John Carroll later became the first Catholic bishop in the United States and founded Georgetown Academy, which would become the first Catholic university, with an explicit openness to welcoming students of all religious traditions. Carroll had experienced prejudice and discrimination as a Catholic in a Protestant society, and he wanted his new school to offer an alternative path.¹²

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, large numbers of Catholics came to the United States, becoming in time the largest single Christian church. Even though they encountered much hostility and prejudice, a number of Catholic leaders participated with leaders of other traditions in the pioneering World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, which has been viewed as the dawn of the modern interreligious movement. The twentieth century, however, witnessed a terrible renewal of racial and religious prejudices from which Catholics were not immune. For example, the influential Catholic priest Charles Coughlin promoted viciously anti-Semitic accusations in his popular radio broadcasts of the 1930s and early 1940s until he was finally forced off the airwaves. Donald Warren has called Coughlin “the Father of Hate Radio,” and Bradley W. Hart includes him among “Hitler’s American Friends” because of his defense of Nazi policies against Jews.¹³

American Catholics had long shared with Jews the situation of being a suspected minority in a Protestant-dominated society. In the years following the Second World War, Catholics together with Jews were just entering into the mainstream of American society. Many Americans were coming to accept the interreligious triad of Protestant-Catholic-Jew as acceptable religious options, while other religious communities were usually either neglected or viewed with suspicion. Nonetheless, at midcentury many American Protestants continued to view Catholics with great suspicion, while Catholics debated whether persons outside the Catholic Church could be saved at all. In Boston, the Jesuit chaplain and editor, Leonard Feeney, vigorously insisted on a literal application of the traditional teaching that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation until he was censured and silenced by Catholic authorities in 1953.¹⁴ At the middle of the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 248–51.

¹² Robert Emmett Curran, *A History of Georgetown, Volume 1: From the Academy to University, 1789–1889* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 25–29.

¹³ Donald I. Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends: The Third Reich’s Supporters in the United States* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018), 68–95.

¹⁴ Mark Massa, “On the Uses of Heresy: Leonard Feeney, Mary Douglas, and the Notre Dame Football Team,” *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (1991): 315–41.

century, a number of American Indian Catholics, including Nicholas Black Elk, continued to practice their Native religious traditions; but this dual religious observance received little attention from theologians and church leaders.¹⁵

During the years immediately following the Shoah, many American Catholics were still influenced by traditional prejudices against Jews; but a number of Catholic leaders felt the need for a radical change in Catholic-Jewish relations. To counter the age-old heritage of anti-Jewish animosity, a few Catholics in the United States, mostly immigrants from Germany with Jewish ancestry, launched efforts toward revising the traditional negative attitudes toward Jews and Judaism.¹⁶ The transformation of Catholic relations with Jews would provide an important impetus for improving all other interreligious relationships and transforming the self-understanding of Catholics and many other Christians.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church generally remained aloof from Christian ecumenical ventures. Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Archbishop of Chicago, forbade Catholics from attending the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, in 1954, though some Catholic journalists covered the event. During the 1950s, however, the attitudes and practices of Catholics and many other Christians in relation to other religious traditions began to move toward greater ecumenical and interreligious openness.

The Second Vatican Council profoundly and positively transformed Catholic attitudes and actions toward both other Christians and people from other religious traditions. Many Protestant communities in the United States went through similar transformations in these years. Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics in the United States have actively participated in dialogues with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, as well as efforts to understand American Indian religious traditions and their relation to Catholic practice. Many Catholic colleges and universities in the United States have centers for interreligious understanding. Catholics and many other Christians know followers of other religious traditions as neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family members. The transformation of Catholic responses to religious diversity in the United States is also closely linked to changes in racial relations, ethnic attitudes, and immigration law. Changes in racial relations and in immigration legislation in the 1960s contributed to improving Catholic responses to religious diversity.

Contemporary Context

Today, alongside the traditionally dominant traditions of American Protestant Christianity, virtually all the religious communities of the world find a

¹⁵ Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Clyde Holler, ed., *The Black Elk Reader* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

home in the United States. Since the middle of the twentieth century, thanks to globalization and migration, the ethnic, cultural, and religious composition of the United States has grown increasingly diverse; and Americans have become more and more aware of the social and theological dimensions of living with different religious communities.¹⁷ Since 1965, the United States of America has become, as Diana Eck and Robert Wuthnow have shown, one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world.¹⁸

While many celebrate interreligious diversity with openness and acceptance, not all Americans welcome religious differences. Suspicions and negative stereotypes about religious traditions continue to plague American life, and there have been expressions of prejudice and violent attacks on Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Hispanics, African Americans, and American Indians. Religious pluralism in the United States today is both praised and lamented; while some people praise religious diversity as one of the greatest strengths of the United States, others seek to restore a White Christian America on the basis of renewed religious, ethnic, and racial biases.¹⁹ Catholics and other Christians in the United States today face renewed challenges and choices regarding religious diversity.

Today many American Catholics acknowledge the painful sins and crimes committed by earlier generations of Catholics who claimed to be serving the faith but who often mistreated indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and African Americans, and harbored prejudices against immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and their descendants. The terrors of the Shoah provided a decisive impetus to Catholics and other Christians to improve relations with Jews, and numerous theologians have reflected on how to do Christian theology with integrity after the Holocaust.²⁰ American Christian theologians have devoted much less attention to the well-documented genocide carried out in California against American Indians between 1846 and 1873,²¹ or to the repeated acts of ethnic cleansing of American

¹⁷ Daniel G. Groody, "Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 638–67; Gioacchino Campese, "The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in the 21st Century," *Theological Studies* 73, no. 1 (2012): 3–32.

¹⁸ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Became the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002); Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Christian Picciolini, *White American Youth: My Descent into America's Most Violent Hate Movement—And How I Got Out* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017); Daryl Johnson, *Hateland: A Long, Hard Look at America's Extremist Heart* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2019).

²⁰ John T. Pawlikowski, *The Challenge of the Holocaust for Christian Theology* (New York: Center for Studies on the Holocaust, 1978).

²¹ Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

Indians across the United States,²² or to the forced removal of young American Indians and their indoctrination in Christian schools where they were forbidden to speak their native languages.²³

It has often been easier for European Americans to reflect on atrocities committed elsewhere than in their own land. In 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened its doors in Washington, DC, as a living memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. It was not until 2016 that the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened its doors in Washington, DC, telling the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the United States. Since 2004, the National Museum of American Indians on the National Mall in Washington, DC, honors the religious and cultural heritage of American Indians; but it does not communicate much information about the details of mistreatment of American Indians by European Americans. American Catholics today are increasingly coming to terms with the continuing effects of the history of oppression of American Indians, slavery, religious and racial discrimination, and hostility toward immigrants. For example, in the past few years, the community of Georgetown University, where I teach, is learning about and wrestling with its historical involvement in the enslavement and sale of African Americans, including the notorious sale of 272 enslaved persons in 1838.²⁴

Since the middle of the twentieth century, many Catholics and other Christians in the United States have devoted much attention to improving interreligious relationships, ushering in an unprecedented situation of openness to religious pluralism. As Christians relate in new ways to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of other traditions, they not only come to a new awareness of the many dimensions of interreligious relationships; they also learn to recognize truth and holiness in other religious traditions, and to gain new insights into their own scriptures, traditions, practices, and beliefs. Each interreligious relationship presents a distinctive set of questions, challenges, gifts, and opportunities; and each relationship has implications for other interreligious relationships and for Christian identity.

Religious Diversity, Religious Pluralism

After centuries of largely negative attitudes toward other religious communities, many Americans today place a high value on religious pluralism, understood as the open acceptance of religious diversity, though this development is not without controversy. William R. Hutchison, a scholar of American religious history,

²² Gary Clayton Anderson, *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: The Crime that Should Haunt America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

²³ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

²⁴ *Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2016).

comments that in the United States of America today pluralism, “understood as the acceptance and encouragement of diversity, is a fighting word for participants in contemporary culture wars, and a key concept for those who write about them”; he explains that scholars often make a distinction between religious diversity and religious pluralism, that is, “the distinction between a fact or condition called diversity and an ideal or impulse for which the best term is *pluralism*.”²⁵ Hutchison argues that religious pluralism in this sense developed in the United States only in the second half of the twentieth century as a belated acceptance of a situation already present: “I believe that Americans and their public policy are only now coming to terms, however grudgingly or opportunistically, with a radical diversification that came crashing in upon the young nation almost at the moment of its birth.”²⁶

Mary Boys, a Catholic theologian who has long taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and been active in Jewish-Christian relations, comments on the challenge of pluralism:

Unlike tolerance, in which one resolves simply to live with difference, pluralism requires the pursuit of understanding. In distinction from relativism and syncretism, pluralism is built upon an encounter of commitments and a respect for difference that comes from extensive knowledge of one’s tradition. . . . [P]luralism requires work and virtue.²⁷

Religious pluralism is a far-reaching but not uncontested experience in American life today.²⁸

Sociologist Peter Berger reflects on American religious pluralism in light of a shift in social scientific perceptions of religion in modern societies. Sociologists used to focus primarily on the secularization of the modern world, assuming that modernization would lead to the decline of religion. Now, Berger believes that

pluralism, the co-existence of different worldviews and value systems in the same society, is *the* major change brought about by modernity for the place of religion both in the minds of individuals and in the institutional order. This may or may not be associated with secularization, but it is independent of it.²⁹

²⁵ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

²⁷ Mary C. Boys, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: One Woman’s Experience* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 54–55.

²⁸ In this sense religious pluralism does not refer to the specific theological position of John Hick and others regarding parity of religions in offering salvation.

²⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), ix.

Berger distinguishes three levels of pluralism: (1) involving religious perspectives in the minds of individuals and society; (2) between secular and religious perspectives; and (3) of different versions of modernity, including different relations between the secular and the religious.³⁰ Berger stresses the importance of “religious freedom in the context of a religiously neutral state,” and grounds this not primarily in instrumental political considerations but in the fundamental human right to pursue one’s sense of wonder and mystery wherever it may lead.³¹

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow stresses the major impact of relatively small religious minorities on the awareness of Americans:

Although the share of the population that is Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist is quite small, the impact of these groups on American culture is much larger. Millions of Americans who are Christians or Jews come in contact with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists through their work, their business dealings, and in their neighborhoods.³²

But he notes a paradox in American discourse:

In our public discourse about religion we seem to be a society of schizophrenics. On the one hand, we say casually that we are tolerant and have respect for people whose religious traditions happen to be different from our own. On the other hand, we continue to speak as if our nation is (or should be) a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles.³³

In this context the acceptance or rejection of religious pluralism has become a contested issue in American society at large. Some welcome the growing religious and ethnic diversity, but others worry about the loss of traditional American Christian identity. The changing religious demographics of the United States increasingly challenge its claim to be a Christian nation, and not all are pleased. In 2016, Robert P. Jones, a scholar and commentator on American religion, published a dramatic obituary statement: “After a long life spanning nearly two hundred and forty years, White Christian America—a prominent cultural force in the nation’s history—has died.”³⁴ Jones observed contrasting responses: some Americans welcome the demise of White Christian America, and others are going through the painful stages of grief. However, not all Americans have accepted this announcement of death, and white supremacy has recently reemerged in public discourse.³⁵ Writing about religious pluralism in relation to current American

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92–93.

³² Wuthnow, *America*, 228.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

³⁴ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 1.

³⁵ Picciolini, *White American Youth*.

political debates, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks defines and endorses pluralism in the American context as the conviction that “Human difference makes life richer and more interesting. We treasure members of all races and faiths for what they bring to the mosaic.”³⁶ However, Brooks stresses the value of religious pluralism precisely because he sees it in danger in the current political climate.

The increase in tensions over American identity has fueled a polarization of opinion. Robert Putnam and David Campbell note, “Perhaps the most noticeable shift is how Americans have become polarized along religious lines. Americans are increasingly concentrated at opposite ends of the religious spectrum—the highly religious at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other. The moderate religious middle is shrinking.”³⁷ They also observe that if one ignores the heated rhetoric concerning religion in America and focuses on behavior, one sees a different picture, where

the United States hardly seems like a house divided against itself. America peacefully combines a high degree of religious devotion with tremendous religious diversity—including growing ranks of the nonreligious. Americans have a high degree of tolerance for those of (most) other religions, including those without any religion in their lives.³⁸

They pose a question and offer the beginning of a response: “*How can religious pluralism coexist with religious polarization?*” The answer lies in the fact that, in America, religion is highly fluid. The conditions producing that fluidity are a signal feature of the nation’s constitutional infrastructure.”³⁹ Putnam and Campbell relate the acceptance of religious pluralism to the U.S. Constitution’s refusal to establish a national religion: “More broadly, the absence of a state-run religious monopoly combined with a wide sphere of religious liberty has produced an ideal environment for a thriving religious ecosystem.”⁴⁰ These tensions shape the context of American Catholic theology today, with all the promises and challenges facing the United States with regard to religious pluralism.

Pluralism in the United States at the present time involves not only external relationships among followers of different religious traditions; it also shapes a context where interreligious learning and borrowing is increasingly possible. Boundaries in relationships are important but fluid and often porous.⁴¹ Religious

³⁶ David Brooks, “Marianne Williamson Knows How to Beat Trump,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2019.

³⁷ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell with the assistance of Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Michele Saracino, *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

traditions are not always homogeneous and external to each other but sometimes enter deeply into the lives and awareness of followers of other religious paths. The history of interreligious relationships includes repeated examples of borrowing and influence. Many Native American Catholics continue their indigenous religious practices while also participating in Catholic sacramental life; some Catholics engage in meditation practices derived from Buddhism or in yoga practice coming from Hinduism. Catholic theology in the United States today is shaped by the multifaceted social reality of numerous religious communities in close proximity to each other. American popular culture includes a wide array of religious images and symbols from different traditions that are often combined in new ways, and some persons experiment with multiple religious belonging.⁴²

Structure of the Discussion

In light of recent Catholic activities in interreligious dialogue and with awareness of the work and teachings on interreligious dialogue of other Christian communities and the World Council of Churches, this book will explore Catholic involvement with other religious traditions in the history of the development of the United States and the significance of this experience of religious pluralism for Catholic theology.

Part I of this book will offer an overview of major developments in Catholic interreligious relationships, both in the context of changes in Catholic teachings and attitudes toward other religions and also in the multireligious context of the United States. Chapter 1 will survey the historic transformation of Catholic views and practices toward other religious traditions. We will note the long heritage of intolerance and animosity, and also the shift in the stance of Catholics and many other Christians regarding interreligious relations since the Second Vatican Council.

Chapter 2 will survey the development of Catholic responses to religious pluralism in North America in the context of the demographic, social, cultural, and religious landscape in the United States throughout its history and especially during the last half-century. Since the changes in immigration laws in the 1960s, American society has become more ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse; and all major urban areas today are home to many religious traditions.

Part II of this book, which includes Chapters 3 through 7, will examine the historical development of particular interreligious relationships. Chapter 3 will examine Catholic engagement with American Indian religious traditions, with brief attention also to traditions of Africa. The first Christians to come to the areas that are now the United States of America were Spanish Catholics who encountered a variety of Native religions. Latin American and U.S. Hispanic Christian practice continue to bear the influence of these primal traditions, and in recent years

⁴² Catherine Cornille, *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

Hispanic Christians have reflected on the theological implications of this *mestizo* heritage. Enslaved Africans who were forcibly brought to North America carried with them the religious traditions of Africa, which flowed into the lives of African Americans and form an important part of their heritage. African American Christians have stressed the importance of this heritage.

Chapter 4 will explore the dynamics of Jewish-Catholic relationships in the United States, which have had a powerful impact on other interreligious relations. In the wake of the Second World War and the Shoah, many Christians went through a reassessment of their tradition's historically negative views of Jews and Judaism. Through numerous encounters, dialogues, and academic explorations, Christians and Jews in the United States came to know each other in new ways. For Christians, this process included major revisions in their interpretation not only of contemporary Jews and Judaism but also of Jesus, the early Christian community, and the development of Christianity in relation to Jews and Judaism. Because Christianity emerged from a Jewish matrix and because Jesus and his first followers were Jews, changes in this relationship have implications for every other Christian interreligious relationship.

There has been intense focus on Jewish-Christian relations in recent decades, but often these discussions have been somewhat isolated from the broader interreligious network of relationships. There is definitely an important place for specialized studies of each interreligious relationship. There is also a need for an overview of the ways in which the distinct dialogues have implications for each other and impact Christian thought and practice as a whole. The extensive discussions in Jewish-Christian relations have profoundly transformed how many Christians understand the Bible and the origin of Christianity; it is important to integrate the results of Jewish-Christian dialogue into the broader world of interreligious relations and into Christian theology as a whole.

Chapter 5 will turn to Muslim-Catholic relations in the United States, which face difficult challenges from Islamophobia but also present promising opportunities for the future. Relationships between Christians and Muslims were already developing in some organized Muslim-Christian dialogues in the final decades of the twentieth century. In many settings in the United States, Christians and Muslims enjoy cordial, respectful relationships. Nonetheless, for many Christians the current international context of conflict and violence reinforces traditionally negative views of Muslims and Islam.

Chapter 6 will explore Catholic relations with Hindus in the United States. The visit of noted theologian Howard Thurman and other African American leaders to Mahatma Gandhi in India in 1936 proved to be one of the most influential interreligious conversations in all of American history, since it prepared the way for the decisive influence of Gandhi's path of nonviolent resistance on Martin Luther King Jr. and other movements seeking social reform through nonviolent means. Hindu perspectives have influenced many Americans from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to the present, and many American Christians

have explored the practice and theory of yoga and have incorporated this into their Christian practice.

Chapter 7 will conclude the second part with a reflection on Buddhist-Catholic relationships in the United States. Many Christians have explored the practice of Buddhist meditation and found beneficial results. Buddhist perspectives and practices have been very influential on some leaders in the field of Christian spirituality. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, an organization of Catholic monks and nuns that promotes interreligious exchange with monastics of other religious traditions, has held a number of encounters that have been milestones in the depth and quality of Buddhist-Christian exchange.

Part III will explore implications of changed interreligious relationships for Catholic theological reflection as a search for wisdom. Chapter 8 will examine some new ways that American Catholic thinkers have pursued theology as a quest for wisdom in light of religious pluralism.

One of the most important methodological questions for any religious tradition is the interpretation of its scripture; Chapter 9 will discuss the interreligious hermeneutical issues involved in Catholic biblical reflection. This chapter will propose that the biblical wisdom tradition offers important resources for reading the Bible in relation to other religious traditions.

Central to Christian faith are the activities of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ; early Christian leaders associated both the Spirit and Christ with the figure of personified Wisdom or Sophia. Chapter 10 will discuss the Holy Spirit in interreligious perspective as the universal presence of God affecting all human life.

Chapter 11 will focus on the significance of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word and Wisdom of God in relation to other traditions.

Chapter 12 will explore how transformed interreligious relations impact Catholic ecclesial identity and what an interreligious wisdom community could look like.

Chapter 13 will conclude with reflections on Catholic spirituality in relation to interreligious relations. Traditional spiritual writers sought wisdom through the threefold path: the *via purgativa*, which turns away from sin and seeks to heal relationships; the *via illuminativa*, which seeks to see our neighbors and ourselves in a new and more accurate manner through dialogue with interreligious partners; and the *via unitiva*, which seeks to shape a healthy community of the world's religions based on respect for diversity.

The Epilogue will note the increasing convergence of interreligious conversations and concern for ecology and care for the earth.

A number of issues run through many of these interreligious relations. When crossing religious boundaries, we find at every stage both similarities and differences. Comparing religious traditions is frequently like looking at a Gestalt that can be viewed in different ways. Viewed from one perspective, traditions can appear so radically different that it seems impossible to have a genuine conversation; when seen from another perspective, however, the values of the same traditions can

appear to be so similar that one wonders what difference the differences make. It is important to keep both perspectives in mind.

In multireligious contexts like the United States, the classic theological themes of sin, grace, freedom, transcendence, immanence, divine justice, and divine mercy find new resonances and applications in relation to either conflicting or analogous perspectives in other traditions. According to medieval Catholic theology, our condition in this world is that of *viatores*, wayfarers. The condition of a wayfarer is in-between, on the road toward a destination that is anticipated but not yet reached. Christians since the early centuries have made pilgrimages to sacred places, often as penitents seeking God's forgiveness for the sins of the past and praying for absolution and a new start toward a better future. Christian wayfarers today can welcome Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Daoists, practitioners of indigenous religions, and others as companions for the journey. While respecting the important differences between our traditions, we can hope that our journeys bring us close enough to each other that we are within the range of conversation. Interreligious partners and companions can give us hope and sustenance for the journey.