

Mystērion: The Theology Journal of Boston College

Volume I | Issue II

Reflections on the Inaugural Volume of *Mystērion*: Demonstrated Interest, Future Possibilities

Dennis J. Wieboldt III

Boston College, wieboldt@bc.edu

REFLECTIONS ON THE INAUGURAL VOLUME OF *MYSTĒRION*: DEMONSTRATED INTEREST, FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

DENNIS J. WIEBOLDT III *

In his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasized the important role that theologians play in assisting the Church in “grow[ing] in her interpretation of the revealed word and in understanding of truth.”² Promulgated over two decades after *Ex corde Ecclesiae*—Pope John Paul II’s apostolic constitution on Catholic universities—*Evangelii gaudium* similarly emphasized the centrality of the Church’s teachers, lay and religious, to the fulfillment of the Church’s responsibility to proclaim the Gospel.³ Understood in conversation with Francis’s recent *motu proprio* instituting the Ministry of Catechist, the Holy Father is especially calling today’s Catholic educators and students to focus intently on the intellectual and spiritual renewal made possible by engagement with Catholic theology.⁴

In the university, as in our homes and places of worship, Francis encourages believers to take seriously the responsibility to receive, transmit, and live the Tradition of the Church by reflecting sincerely on that which God has revealed to humanity and responding in light of the Gospel’s commands. In one way, this three-fold task of reception, transmission, and lived discipleship begins with the intellectual inquiry made especially fruitful in the university setting, but it also can (and should) involve other forms of reflection—especially

* Dennis Wieboldt is the Editor In-Chief of *Mystērion*, a B.A./M.A. candidate in history, and a B.A. candidate in theology at Boston College. He is interested in the history of political thought and the influence of politico-religious theories on the American legal tradition and its historical development. He would like to express thanks to Michael P. Walsh, S.J., Professor of Bioethics Andrea Vicini, S.J., and *Mystērion* Managing Editor Megan Stevens for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay. On behalf of the *Mystērion* Editorial Board, thanks are also due to Director of Undergraduate Studies and Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible Jeffrey L. Cooley and Graduate Advisors Tiffany L. Lee and Sarah Livick-Moses for their assistance in bringing this issue to fruition.

² Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World *Evangelii gaudium*, §40 (24 November 2013), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii_gaudium.html#_ftn42.

³ See John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, (15 August 1990), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-cord_e-ecclesiae.html.

⁴ See Francis, Apostolic Letter Issued “Motu Proprio” Instituting the Ministry of Catechist *Antiquum ministerium*, (10 May 2021), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html.

on our distinctly personal experiences and those of our neighbors. Indeed, if the Catholic Church is to be truly catholic (in the universal sense of the term), it must necessarily engage with those inside and outside of the Tradition. True to the archetype of Christ’s ministry, the spirit of the Gospels, the example of the Apostle Paul, the theology of Saint Augustine, the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and the exhortations of John Paul II and Francis, Catholic engagement in a multi-religious global context has perhaps never been more vital.⁵

In light of the ever-changing international religious landscape, it should come as no surprise that the theme of the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA)—the largest professional society of Catholic theologians in the world—is “Thinking Catholic Interreligiously.” In his announcement of the 2022 theme, CTSA President-Elect, Harvard Divinity School Parkman Professor of Divinity, and Professor of Comparative Theology Francis X. Clooney, S.J., well-describes the task given to Catholics in considering the relationship between academic theology and the demands placed upon membership in the Universal Church: “We must find ways to ponder the mysteries of our faith *and* think interreligiously, but with a humility [that] purifies us of erring ways of theologizing that have done justice neither to our faith or the faiths of our sisters and brothers around the world.”⁶

I raise the importance of robust, multi-faith dialogue in this second editor’s note because *Mystērion* occupies a unique position at an American Catholic university amidst what must be acknowledged as one of the most challenging times in the Church’s recent history.⁷ In addition to the restrictions placed on physical participation in the liturgy due to COVID-19, long-standing national trends leading away from organized religion in the U.S. have certainly not facilitated great improvement in American Catholic religiosity, even if

⁵ See, e.g., Mt 8:5-13, Mt 10:5-23, Jn 4:1-42; Mt 28:19-20, Mk 16:15; Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019), I.9, I.24, V.19; Vatican Council II, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, §2 (21 November 1964), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html; Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, §92 (7 December 1965), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁶ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “Thinking Catholic Interreligiously: CTSA Convention Theme, Atlanta, June 9-12, 2022,” <https://ctsa-online.org/resources/Convention%202022/CTSA%202022%20Theme.pdf> (emphasis original).

⁷ For the first of these editor’s notes, see Dennis J. Wieboldt III, “Inaugural Editor’s Note,” *Mystērion: The Theology Journal of Boston College* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2021): 2-4.

the share of Catholics in the United States remains the same today as it was in 2014 (21%).⁸ Compounded by the lingering effects of the sexual abuse crisis, which was first revealed twenty years ago this year, and concerns about the role of Christian (and, even more specifically, Catholic) leaders in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, for example, little seems to suggest that the American Church is enjoying a time of particularly great blessing.⁹

Despite all the challenges facing the Church in the U.S. and abroad, Catholic colleges and universities have demonstrated the promise that intra- and inter-Tradition dialogue has for assisting the Church in the fulfillment of its pastoral mission. In fact, the Boston College Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life's 19th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture featured Jonathan Lee Walton—Dean of the Wake Forest School of Divinity, Presidential Chair of Religion and Society, and Dean of Wait Chapel—who spoke to the campus community about the relationship between Protestant religiosity and the “American Gospel of Success.” Similarly, the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning's 9th Annual John Paul II Lecture in Christian-Jewish Relations featured Boston University Aurelio Professor of Scripture *emerita* and Distinguished Visiting Professor of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem Paula Fredriksen, who lectured on “The Crowded Cosmos of Ancient Jews and Christians.” While neither of these endowed lectures were marketed as ways for the University to fulfill its obligation to help the Church “grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in understanding of truth,” they, in conversation with other courses and programs on this campus alone, certainly reflect a holistic understanding of the Catholic university as a place for robust intellectual inquiry. Indeed, neither Walton nor Fredriksen made presentations on Catholic theology, and yet anyone in attendance could certainly attest to the way in which their diverse theological perspectives and interests benefited attendees from this Jesuit, Catholic university.

⁸ See Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/> (accessed January 14, 2022).

⁹ See, respectively, Kathleen McChesney, “20 Years After Spotlight Investigation of the Catholic Sex Abuse Crisis, is the Church a Safer Place?,” *America*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/01/05/spotlight-clergy-sexual-abuse-20-year-anniversary-242153> (accessed January 14, 2022); Emma Green, “A Christian Insurrection: Many of Those who Mobbed the Capitol on Wednesday Claimed to be Enacting God's Will,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/> (accessed January 14, 2022); James Martin, S.J., “How Catholic Leaders Helped Give Rise to Violence at the U.S. Capitol,” *America*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/01/12/capitol-riot-congress-trump-catholic-bishops-james-martin-239697> (accessed January 14, 2022).

As I wrote in my inaugural editor's note, I hope that the establishment and continued success of *Mystērion* meaningfully contributes to Boston College's institutional mission as a twenty-first-century Catholic university guided by *Ex corde Ecclesiae*'s call to pursue "without reserve . . . the cause of truth."¹⁰ With the support of countless faculty, staff, students, and administrators, this inaugural volume demonstrates that *Mystērion* has proudly accepted the challenge to serve as a thoughtful venue for undergraduates of all religious dispositions and intellectual commitments to engage with theological questions old and new.

If John Paul II was right in purporting that the defense of human dignity and the proclamation of the Gospel message should be at the forefront of the Church's earthly ministry, than it must also be true that "[t]here is today no more urgent preparation for the performance of these tasks than . . . to lead people to discover both their capacity to know the truth and their yearning for the ultimate and definitive meaning of life."¹¹ Like other courses and programs on campus, this inaugural volume certainly speaks to the many ways in which *Mystērion* can contribute to Boston College's fulfillment of this preparatory mission in Chestnut Hill and beyond.

Featuring six articles from undergraduate students at Boston College, Fordham University, and Princeton University, the first issue in this inaugural volume engaged with the relationship of feminist theology to American religion, the historiography of the now-infamous Salem Witch Trials, the role of prayer and language in the human experience, the Catholic Church's evolving position on questions of church and state, and how comparative theology can help us better understand human suffering and liberation.¹² According to computer-generated statistics generously compiled by the Boston College Libraries' digital publishing team, this inaugural issue was read online by users from 35 countries.¹³ With

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, §4.

¹¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Relationship Between Faith and Reason *Fides et ratio*, §102 (14 September 1998), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091_998_fides-et-ratio.html#%243G [citing Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae*, §1-3 (7 December 1965), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html].

¹² See Wieboldt, "Inaugural Editor's Note," 3.

¹³ The gratitude of the journal's editorial team is particularly owed to Boston College Digital Publishing and Outreach Specialist Gabriel Feldstein, who has been incredibly supportive of *Mystērion*'s work since its inception.

nearly 500 article downloads in less than six months, the inaugural issue engaged a large, international audience on a diverse array of theological issues. Considering the positive reception to the inaugural issue's highlighting of young contributors' theological perspectives, I am confident that our inaugural issue's success set a strong precedent for the future potential of this journal.

Building on the inaugural issue, the second and final issue of this volume is comprised of eight original essays from undergraduates at Boston College, Marquette University, Santa Clara University, and Yale University. The articles focus on Saint Augustine's mysticism; ecological suffering; the liturgical status of Holy Saturday; the Parable of the Lost Sheep; the relationship between intersectionality, genocide, and Catholic social teaching; a Catholic response to college hookup culture; Latin American femicide; and Islamic-Christian reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In light of this journal's goal to highlight the diverse theological perspectives of undergraduate authors, I would like to briefly engage with each of this issue's contributors to pose further questions that might help enrich our readers' encounters with these authors.

Based on her careful reading of Augustine's *Confessions* and attentive treatment of Neoplatonic authors, Katie Painter—a junior at Yale University studying classics and religious studies—offers an insightful account of Augustine's mystical paradigm as articulated in the vision that he shares with his mother at Ostia. Demonstrating that Augustine's pattern of assent marks both a continuation of and break from the Neoplatonist tradition, she concludes that Augustine's paradigm is predicated on a belief that we can only make sense of divinity in terms of the material order. In doing so, she also suggests that Augustine offers a Christian optimism about one's potential union with the Divine, even despite our fallen nature. In a certain sense, she thus challenges traditional notions of 'Augustinian pessimism' and offers her readers an invitation to place her analysis of the *Confessions* in conversation with Augustine's other writings on accessing knowledge about God. In particular, I would suggest that additional support for her assertion about the centrality of the material order to human understanding of God can potentially be found in *The City of God*—perhaps Augustine's second most famous treatise. For example, Augustine often insists in *The City of God* that members of God's human creation learn

“through created things,” a claim that undoubtedly points to the importance of the material order to Augustine’s thinking about the omnipotent Creator.¹⁴

Ramon Duran—an undergraduate student in the Department of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University—engages the work of Elizabeth A. Johnson to integrate issues of environmental ethics with broader themes in Catholic moral theology. Explaining that experiences of pain can be a gift from God when understood as a defense against that which may threaten our physical (and, I would add, spiritual) lives, Duran argues that the pedagogical function of human experience (including suffering) should challenge us to focus on the ways in which knowledge about the human relationship to the environment is produced and transmitted. In doing so, Duran simultaneously emphasizes the importance of environmental education and raises the moral stakes of knowledge transmission. Moreover, in acknowledging that humans have the power to make choices of fundamental moral goodness and badness, he similarly raises the stakes of human engagement with the natural world. Considered alongside his analysis of Christ’s suffering on the cross and its centrality to moral reasoning about environmental suffering, Duran offers an important reminder that Christians must carefully consider the multifaceted pedagogical function of suffering caused by human-initiated environmental degradation. Beyond the necessarily complex reasoning required to make sense of any form of suffering, Duran ought to prompt his readers to integrate questions about individual agency into their thinking about the human person’s place in the divinely ordained course of the universe, especially as these questions involve issues of (non)-human environmental suffering.

Drawing on the richness of her Methodist upbringing and her ecumenical concern for Christians’ lack of proportionate liturgical attention to Holy Saturday, Nikita Deep—a 2021 psychology and theology graduate of Marquette University—builds upon existing scholarship in liturgical theology by using the trauma and memory of the Crucifixion as a starting-point for renewed attention to the ‘tragic gap’ of Holy Saturday. Instead of focusing merely on Christ’s death and triumphant Resurrection, Deep contends that Christians of all denominations should pay keen attention to the memory of trauma commemorated by the

¹⁴ See, e.g., Augustine, *The City of God*, VII.10, XI.21. See also VII.6 (citing Rom 1:19): “Thus, God Himself revealed to them what may be known of Him, when His invisible things, and also His eternal power and Godhead, by which all visible and temporal things were made, were seen and understood by them through created things.”

time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. By embracing this liturgical opportunity to engage with our own trauma in a constructive way, Deep suggests that Christians can enjoy an even greater hope of the eternal life made possible by the Paschal Mystery. Proposing an ecumenical Holy Saturday liturgy, Deep shows practically that a ‘theology of pause’ has, in fact, a clear pastoral relationship to Holy Saturday—one that we should attempt to apply to other facets of our lives.

Conor McCormick—a fourth-year student at Boston College studying philosophy and theology—provides a compelling survey of scholarship on the Parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15:4-7, as well as his own analysis of the Parable makes its learnings concrete for a modern reader. Like any other piece of rigorous biblical scholarship, McCormick’s analysis remains faithful to the text and history of the Gospel of Luke, but nevertheless extends his insights immediately beyond the text by asking important questions about how Christ’s ministry can help us understand the human person’s movement towards an ever-closer relationship with God. For example, McCormick’s positing of a queer interpretation of the Parable, while certainly defended with care, invites the reader to question how the queer and non-queer person should respond to the evident distance between many Christian communities and queer individuals if, indeed, the goal is to assist the human person—regardless of the person’s sexuality or gender identity—in their development of an ever-closer relationship to God. While McCormick’s article does not primarily focus on the potential theological challenges and implications of the invitation to this ever-deepening relationship, he provides an insightful, *caritas*-informed proposal for analyzing the conformity of existing models of engagement with queer and non-queer persons to the Gospel’s commands. All things considered, by building his contemporary insights atop nuanced theological debates about the metaphorical symbolism in the Lukan narrative, McCormick’s essay is apt to foster the engagement of both scholars and generally interested Christians.

Leveraging his understanding of Catholic social teaching and his interest in political violence, Andrew Wilson—a 2021 political science graduate of Boston College—confronts the serious challenge of academic and political discourse about genocide. Wilson begins by tracing definitional controversies in rhetoric about genocides, but with, he argues, substantive implications because the “true perpetrators” of genocides are the “beneficiaries

of an outdated and limited definition of genocide.” He then applies theological insights from Catholic social teaching to propose practical action tailored to a new generation of moral American leadership—one predicated on the shared value of human dignity. True to the core insights of Catholic social teaching, his proposal emphasizes international solidarity that is united by our fundamental humanity, but too diverse in culture and custom. While Wilson’s reader might legitimately wonder about the efficacy of an eleven-part naming approach to genocidal action, his proposal should challenge us to consider Americans’ moral and political obligation to confront the mass extermination of those made in God’s image and likeness. In this way, Wilson too invites us to consider how forms of international economic, political, and military coercion with respect to human rights agreements meet or violate a truly Catholic understanding of achieving justice in a fallen world.

Providing an incisive indictment of college hookup culture, Emma Saart—a 2021 biochemistry graduate of Boston College with a minor in faith, peace, and justice—provides today’s readers with a unique glimpse into the otherwise mysterious social practices of college students, paying particular attention to the harmful social expectations placed on young women and men to conform to expected visions of “femininity” and “masculinity” as portrayed in popular media. Drawing on Catholic social teaching, Saart proposes that college students and university administrators should not acquiesce in the status quo, instead responding to “college hookup culture” by undertaking individual and institutional actions that promote the *imago Dei* of every college student. In criticizing college hookup culture, Saart is careful not only to point out the serious flaws of defining personal freedom in terms of sexual promiscuity (as, she rightly points out, many leaders in the twentieth-century sexual freedom movement did), but also acknowledges that the opposite view (what she terms “purity culture”) comes with its own set of potentially problematic (mis-)interpretations. Emphasizing in conclusion the importance of education to college students’ ethical development, Saart offers the example of open dialogue about issues of social expectation and identity modeled by Professor Bridget Burke Ravizza at Saint Norbert College, thus challenging educators—particularly at Catholic institutions—to expand and refine the offerings available to students on their journeys. Wary of the extremes of forcing young students into strictly defined social binaries or mandating complete non-conformity

therewith, Saart offers a timely and thought-provoking contribution that reflects the need for sober consideration of the status of formative education in the twenty-first century U.S.

Beginning with a personal anecdote about her participation in a 2018 march against femicide in Argentina, Alejandra Wright—a 2021 international studies and philosophy graduate of Boston College—discusses how misinterpretations of Catholic symbols have facilitated (if not encouraged and excused) the epidemic of femicide in Latin America. Enriched by the emerging subfield of *mujerista* theology and recent developments in academic theology that have emphasized attention to the lived experience of the faithful, especially in the Global South, Wright offers a constructive proposal for how traditional Catholic symbols can be authentically reclaimed in line with the spirit of the Gospels. Delicately distinguishing between the misinterpretation of classic symbols of sacrificial Catholic women (e.g., the Virgin Mary) and the women themselves, Wright expertly demonstrates that Catholics can indeed value the example of these women without excusing violence against women. In this way, she challenges professional theologians and laypersons alike to work diligently to create a new feminist theological framework centered around the symbol of the Virgin Mary as portrayed at the Crucifixion in John’s Gospel.

In the final article of this issue, Jack Engelmann—a fourth-year undergraduate in Boston College’s Theology Department—offers the example of post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina to elucidate the contours of effective and ineffective methods of Islamic-Christian dialogue. Contrasting the horrors of the twentieth-century Bosnian genocide, in which Serbian nationalist fighters systematically killed over 80,000 Bosnian Muslims, with Christian and Muslim doctrines that have facilitated productive dialogue in a religiously plural environment, his article is particularly well-suited to this moment of religious pluralism in the U.S. and abroad. Indeed, Engelmann’s employment of theological concepts from multiple traditions to analyze the multi-faceted process and implications of post-conflict peacebuilding should prompt his readers to think more intently about how individuals of all religious dispositions should respond to issues of ongoing religious intolerance across the globe.

If Paul Ramsey was right in saying that “[t]he highest tribute one can pay any thinker, or any body of writing, is to wrestle with it,” then I hope my wrestling with this issue’s authors indicates praise on behalf of *Mystērion*’s entire editorial team and readership for the thoughtful pieces published herein.¹⁵ By virtue of the volume of submissions to *Mystērion*’s first two issues, as well as the impressive scope of the journal’s readership, it is clear that there is demonstrated interest in the perspectives authored by the next generation of theologians, just fourteen of whom have had their ideas made public here.

As this journal embarks on its second volume, I have little doubt that future opportunities for engagement with this next generation of scholars await this journal’s readers, just as the opportunities for *Mystērion* to contribute to the Catholic and Jesuit mission of the University are similarly unbounded. Under the leadership of a soon-to-be announced successor to this editor in-chief, I am optimistic that more young people inside and outside of the Christian Tradition will have an opportunity to assist in the Universal Church’s ever-growing interpretation of the revealed word and understanding of truth, even when that assistance challenges conventional wisdom or comes from those outside of the Tradition. Faithful to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, then, this journal—as the university of which it is a part—must embark on its future by confronting the “unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts [of people]” by providing a forum for all to dialogue, “carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life,” so that we might “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral” that contribute to our ever-more-full cooperation with God’s plan for human creation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 1.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate*, §1-2 (28 October 1965), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.