

INTERFAITH COMMUNITY AND SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP  
ON CAMPUS: HINDU, BUDDHIST, AND CATHOLIC  
THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES – INVITED SESSION

- Topic: Interfaith Community and Spiritual Companionship on Campus: Hindu, Buddhist, and Catholic Theological Perspectives
- Convener: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard Divinity School
- Moderator: John Borelli, Georgetown University
- Presenters: Brahmacharini Shweta Chaitanya, Emory University  
Venerable Priya Rakkhit Sraman, Emory University
- Respondent: Callie Tabor, Emory University

Chaplains are truly chaplains was the initial point made by Hindu Chaplain Shweta Chaitanya opening presentation. As her colleague, Ven. Priya has been on the Emory University Office of Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL) team less than eighteen months. She has found that those on campus seeking help need a trusting person to share their thoughts and concerns. Once an individual refers to a religious affiliation, she and her colleagues seek to direct individuals to that minister. She began service once Emory's campus opened up during the COVID-19 pandemic, truly in the middle and not at the beginning of an academic year. So, when the 2021-2022 academic year began, she and her colleagues designed a "pre-orientation" session for incoming students, Welcoming Interfaith and Spiritual Exploration (WISE). It provides a tour of religious traditions and sites with participants accompanying one another through various religious traditions and sacred spaces. The ministry team seeks to be companions and not gatekeepers. They hold regular events such as "slokas and snacks," when particular prayers or verses are shared with a snack break. They also created "Akbar's Court" for multifaith sharing and conversation. The reference is to the sixteenth century Mughal ruler in India who hosted interreligious conversations at his court. Herself a monastic in the Chinmaya Mission with training, including a year of study at Harvard Divinity School, Shweta emphasized patience and a willingness to acknowledge doubts. She illustrated these virtues with the story in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, chapter 4, where Prajapati accepts Virochana and Indra as disciples seeking the true self. After thirty-two years of practice, Prajapati instructed that the visible self, the outward self, is the true self. Satisfied, Virochana left, but Indra wasn't satisfied and stayed many more years to move beyond superficial learning to have the true self revealed.

Ven. Priya, the Buddhist chaplain, holds two master's degrees and teaches classes on Buddhism. He brought four years of experience as a chaplain at Tufts University with him to Emory. He cited the Pali *Upaddha Sutta*. The Ven. Ananda, companion of the Buddha, once said: "This is half of the holy life, lord: good friends, good companions, good associates." The Lord Buddha corrected him: "No, do not say that, good friends, good companions, and good associates are the whole of the spiritual life." Campus ministry is an opportunity to provide space and companionship. For example, he hosts one-night silent retreats. Most students are astounded at how much inward reflection they can accomplish in so short a time of silence. He emphasized that campus ministers are to be more than listeners. Ministers need to reply to speakers what they

have heard them say. He cited verse 76 of the *Dhammapada*: “Should one find a person who points out faults and who reproves, let one follow such a wise and sagacious person as one would a guide to hidden treasure. It is always better and never worse to cultivate such an association.”

Callie Tabor offered a response to her colleagues. Tabor is not a chaplain, but associate director of the Aquinas Institute, a Catholic intellectual center serving both Emory and Catholics and others in greater Atlanta. She has taught Modern Catholicism, a core course in Catholic Studies. Founded as a Methodist University, Emory reports that 47.1 percent of current students identify as being religious. Of those, Catholics, approximately six hundred in number, constitute the second largest group, 7.9 percent to Protestants who are 21 percent. Because of the diverse representation on the OSRL staff, Catholics can learn through a pedagogy of encounter. Tabor has discerned that Catholic students divide into two groups, those seeking definitive knowledge and those seeking spiritual companionship and deeper religious understanding. At Emory, classes serve both groups, and with trust and listening, students can be directed towards deeper religious understanding. Classroom work, supplemented by interfaith campus ministry activities, helps students to lighten up any fears of being incorrect and to embrace opportunities. Tabor will join the faculty at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut, in the fall. Through the Aquinas Institute, Catholics in greater Atlanta take advantage of ongoing religious education opportunities, and besides lectures, the Institute sponsored sessions for the synodal process.

With comments and questions from the audience, the point was reiterated that it doesn't make a great deal of difference what faith one professes in seeking advice from the OSRL team. All three panelists spoke of a layered approach and were grateful that programs could be adjusted easily with experience.

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