

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING IN THE  
GLOBAL SOUTH – INVITED SESSION

Topic: Interreligious Learning the Global South  
 Convener: Peter Phan, Georgetown University  
 Moderator: Peter Phan, Georgetown University  
 Presenters: Devaka Premawardhana, Emory University  
 Arun Jones, Emory University  
 Respondent: Elaine Padilla, University of LaVerne

This session began with a paper from Devaka Premawardhana of Emory University entitled “Consolata Missions and the Discipline of Voluntary Displacement: A Model for Interreligious Learning.” In his presentation, Premawardhana connected the history and spirituality of the Institute of Consolata Missionaries (founded in 1901), as well as his ethnographic observations of Consolata activities in contemporary Mozambique, to Henri Nouwen’s notion of voluntary displacement as a spiritual discipline. He argued that, because of the stress they put on speaking languages other than their own, patiently studying and even participating in non-Christian religions, and living outside their comfort zones, Consolata missionaries offer a useful case study of interreligious learning in the Global South today. That they consider the slogan “to go beyond” one of their guiding principles makes them especially illustrative of Nouwen’s virtue of displacement, an example for everyone—not just missionaries, he argued, and not just Catholics—of how engaging alterity can foster human flourishing at multiple scales.

The second paper, “Indian and European Catholic Perspectives on Interreligious Learning in South Asia” was delivered by Arun Jones of Emory University. In the paper, Jones described the life of an Indian Catholic ruler, Begum Sumru, who lived from 1750 to 1836 in North India and governed her territory of Sardhana, about fifty miles northeast of Delhi. The Begum—a title of female nobility, even royalty—was discovered at the age of fifteen as a beautiful Muslim dancing girl in Delhi by a European Catholic mercenary soldier named Walter Reinhardt. He paid a sum of money for her, and she became his mistress and companion for life. Within a year of his death in 1778 she had established herself as the leader of his army and then the owner of his *jagir* or fief of Sardhana. Two years later she converted to Catholicism, having been tutored in the faith by a Carmelite priest, Father Gregoria, who for thirty more years was her friend and advisor. Begum Sumru turned out to excel as an Indian ruler, her near brush with failure and death occurring when she tried to marry a French officer in her army. Jones argued that the Begum found in her expression of the Catholic faith—which was controversial among the Europeans who knew her—the religious and cultural resources to fulfill her duties as a typical Indian king. In the process of conversion, the Begum learned to use her new faith to negotiate a world that was filled with rulers who were men, vying for power and dominance, and to live among them as a ruler in her own right.

Elaine Padilla responded by integrating principles on interreligious and multiple belongings as defined by Peter Phan and on interculturality as argued by Raul Fornet-Betancourt. In agreement with Phan, Padilla stated that “to be religious today is to be

interreligious” due to how pluralistic our societies are. Religions have drawn and borrowed from each other because of globalization, migration, and many other political factors. The two key principles of being interreligious that Padilla understood to be of importance for this session's discussion were “dwelling together” and “sharing.” For Phan, one is never just a Christian or a Catholic because one already grows up being multireligious, and as for Fornet-Betancourt, because one already belongs to more than one culture. She then posed some questions based on two scenarios illustrative of Christian missions in the Caribbean and the US southern borderlands. These examples were meant as a preliminary analysis and as starting points of further discussion. In her response, she argued that cultivating a common life and sharing one’s faith can be signs not only of learning interreligiously but also of developing an awareness of one’s being intercultural.

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