

AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND OUR  
MANY RELIGIONS – SPECIAL SESSION

Topic: At the Intersection of Race and our Many Religions  
 Convener: Frank Clooney, Harvard University  
 Moderator: Susan Abraham, Pacific School of Religion  
 Presenters: Balabhadra Bhattacharya Dasa, Vedic Friends Association  
 Victoria Raggs, Atlanta Jews of Color Council  
 Imam Plemon el-Amin, Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam  
 Discussant: SimonMary Ahiokai, University of Portland

A first of its kind session at CTSA was convened by Francis Clooney, president-elect of the CTSA, as a special panel discussion. The panel consisted of three speakers and a discussant, each of whom spoke about their religious, spiritual and theological identities as they intersected with racialized and gendered identities. Audience responses after the session revealed that it was a profoundly moving and spiritual experience for many gathered.

Sri Balabhadra Bhattacharya Das is the president of Vedic Friends Association (VFA). Previously director of VFA Atlanta, Sri Dasa is its first African American president. The VFA is an international community that has embraced the Vedic culture, including its systems of yoga, meditation, pranayama, languages and literature, Ayurveda, astrology, vegetarianism, forms of worship and spiritual knowledge. In his comments he spoke about how he had not known any people from India as a young man, but once he found out about Hinduism, he was drawn deeply to the tradition. He began to think about his former Christian identity and newer Hindu identity as becoming one through his idea of “Namaste Church.” In his reflection on intersections, he asserted, that intersections reveal that we have many points from which to make considered decisions. Yet, many of us ignore the potential of intersections, and focus instead on a single or stable identity such as the physical body. We are, he said, much more than the physical body and intersectional thinking will reveal that to us.

Ms. Victoria Raggs is the co-founder and Executive Director of the Atlanta Jews of Color Council. She is a progressive strategist, DEI consultant, disability rights advocate, and lobbyist. Ms. Raggs spoke about her experience as a Jewish woman of color. Most people think of Jews as either Europeans or of Middle Eastern ethnic identities. “Race” is a constructed reality she argued, but it has the ability to influence social and political realities and was the reason she founded the organization Atlanta Jews of Color. As a woman, intersectionality is intertwined with her gendered reality. Ms. Raggs issued a deeply moving challenge to the audience present: Precisely because of intersectional realities and the many dimensions of oppression such a view reveals, Catholics cannot advocate for Catholics alone. Further, as religious people, we must necessarily talk about politics and political realities and ask hard questions about what exactly we mean by diversity and inclusion.

Plemon T. El-Amin is the Imam Emeritus of the *Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam*, one of the largest and most progressive Mosques in the United States. Working as a close aide and supporter of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, Imam El-Amin has traveled the nation and the world, representing the concerns and interests of Muslim Americans and

Interfaith adherents around the world. Imam Plemon recounted how as a native Atlantan, he grew up in the context of segregation and the triple assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Consequently, he became an activist for progressive and liberal ideals, but he began to see how there were no solutions forthcoming from Christian communities for the problem on the streets. The Nation of Islam presented itself as an option because it was articulating a new vision for America. As he emphasized, there is an instinct in us for newness and his encounters with groups like the Focolare and with teachers like Thomas Merton created in him the urge to answer the question: What is the history to which you must respond?

Dr. Simon Mary Ahiokai then provided a profound reflection in response. He pointed out that the panelists challenged narrow ideas about the image of God we may carry because for so many of us, our theological and spiritual imaginations are colonized. In the bodies and lived lives of the panelists, we see how God wants to be encountered. A God of encounter is not a God of labels, but a God who transcends singular narratives. Consequently, he asserted, each of our panelists are “icons of encounter,” whose inclusion in our gathering at CTSA challenges our understanding of the Eucharistic table as a place of saturated encounter because we make no room for the religious “other.” He then invited us all to stand at the intersections, because intersections are places where we must let go of the power of the familiar.

At the close of the session, each participant provided words of encouragement and reconciliation to the community, with Ms. Raggs empowering the Society to become a beacon of inclusion and justice.

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