

Presidential Address
FREEDOM AND FEARS:
THE MUSINGS OF A COMPARATIVE
THEOLOGIAN ON THE FUTURE OF THE CTSA

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

FACING JESUS, IN FREEDOM

Last evening I was honored to preach at our Eucharist at Old St. Mary’s, for this feast of Corpus Christi. The Gospel selected for the day offered just a small portion of John 6, verses 51-58. As you may remember, my reaction to the passage was first of all to dwell upon the materiality and consequent sacramentality of the flesh and blood that Jesus so vividly, scandalously offers. He is portrayed as doubling down on the eating, which by the two verbs used becomes more and not less visceral and bloody. But then I stepped back and considered those verses in the context of the whole of John 6: the initial gratitude and celebration at the feeding of the thousands; his escape from their kingly designs, to be alone and pray; astonishment at his walking on the water; controversy over revered memories of the manna in the desert, now to be replaced by Jesus himself; Peter’s own steadfast sticking-with-Jesus — even as John reminds us that Judas will choose otherwise. Like so many parts of John, Chapter 6 draws us too into the heart of our faith—into participation in Christ. To abide there we have to make choices. We are free to choose, as Peter and Judas were, yet our choices are grace: “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” (6:65).¹

With that reading in mind, I could not avoid feeling that John 6 shadows and illumines all we’ve said and done in these past several days: what is the freedom to which we are called, and at what price? Can we hold onto Christ without letting go of all else? Is this message a dark one, or one of hope? Perhaps both.

THE INSIDE-OUTSIDER

But first, and not entirely as an aside, I confess that I had other thoughts and insights that I did not mention last evening, images arising from my long study of Hindu traditions. Almost fifty years ago, on July 6, 1973, I first traveled to India, on my

¹ The homily can be found at pages 226-227 of this volume of the *Proceedings*.

way to an unforgettable two years teaching at a boarding school in Kathmandu. In that long past summer I began to learn from Hindu traditions. I began to see that if I was to be a Catholic intellectual and a Catholic theologian, I had to comprehend and take to heart the faith traditions around me up there in the Himalayas.

And so it was that during my preparation of the homily, I was reminded of Hindu texts and practices. For instance, just a few weeks into my stay in Kathmandu I visited the temple of Dakshin Kali, a goddess shrine just south of the Valley. It was a Tuesday, a day for animal sacrifices. I watched the sacrifice of a few goats and many chickens, as devotees brought forward their offerings. The floor of the small sanctum was slick with blood, the priest's hands red, animal parts lying here and there. Somehow it was also rather mundane: like an early morning weekday Mass in ordinary time.

I remember too October 1974, a wonderful month that I spent out in the hills beyond Kathmandu Valley with Cap Miller, S.J. He was a Cambridge-trained anthropologist who by the end of his long life would spend over sixty years in Nepal. At that point, he was writing his dissertation on the "faith healers" (*jhankris*) so important in remote villages. These were people highly sensitive to the spirits, able to diagnose physical and spiritual ailments. Some ailments called for medicine, others for the propitiation of a goddess or a demon. We stumbled one day on a village where an unrelated goddess festival was in process. There we watched two men, naked except for loincloths, become possessed by the temple goddess and fall into a trance state. At the high point of the day's ritual, the two men drank fresh blood squirting from the artery of a dying buffalo. Through them the goddess drinks the blood due to her: though most would keep their distance, the villagers knew very well what drinking blood looked like, and now I did too.²

The Gospel's call to intimacy with Jesus also made me turn to the famed *Bhagavad Gita*, one of Hinduism's best known, beloved, and lived-out sacred texts. I am sure you know the overall story behind it, so I will give only the broad lines of it here. A great civil war is looming between two sides of an extended family, five princely brothers, and their one hundred cousins. Arjuna, the greatest of the warriors on either side, grows despondent as soldiers mass on the battlefield. Rather than signaling the start of fighting as is his due, he balks. He is overcome with grief: we may be killed and our kingdom never gained back; but if we win, it will be only by killing our cousins, elders and teachers; either way, society will be ruined by this terrible destruction. And so, Arjuna declares, I will not fight. Krishna, Lord of the universe and wise teacher, providentially happens to be Arjuna's charioteer. Krishna first scolds and mocks Arjuna—fight like a man!—and then begins to shock him out of his depression by sober words: what is finite always passes away and you should not grieve for it; know rather the deep, interior self with is never born, never dies, and you will overcome grief and fear; be utterly detached, entirely free, and then act with utter detachment.

As the teaching progresses, though, it becomes clear that Krishna, the teacher, matters as least as much as the teaching itself. At a climactic point Krishna invites Arjuna to focus totally on Krishna himself:

² See the photos in Casper J. Miller, *Faith Healers in the Himalaya*, 1997 Edition (Delhi: Book Faith India, 1997). Some of the book's breathtaking photos were taken during the trip on which I accompanied Miller.

Focus your mind on me, share deeply in me, make sacrifice for me, reverence me.

You will come to me alone, thus focusing your self, your destination will be me alone (*Bhagavad Gita* 9.34).³

I thought of these words when I mentioned how Peter was faced with the decisive choice to be made:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:66-68).

There is no other goal, no other way. Like Peter, we have to choose, entirely for Jesus as our only way. Krishna, I could not but think, is telling us the same.

Such back and forth movements of my mind, my reading, my heart arise from my double formation. I grew up Catholic in New York City. As a Jesuit, I have been formed in the Catholic and Jesuit tradition of learning and practice. I have benefited from philosophy studies at Fordham and from theology studies at Weston School of Theology. So all that is part of me, more than half, I suppose. But my mind and heart and memory are often elsewhere, infused with the memories, concepts, and practices of various Hindu traditions. This is, I suppose, not surprising. In addition to those first years in Nepal, I have spent several years in Madras (Chennai; 1982-1983, 1992-1993) reading with learned pandits and made many short visits over the decades. I travel there again in just a few weeks. My doctoral program in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago (1979-1984), deepened my learning on the intellectual level. *Because* I wanted to be Catholic theologian, I opted for that doctoral program, so that I could achieve some linguistic and cultural depth in a religious world far beyond the one in which I had grown up. That I have been teaching at a non-Catholic university for half my four decades of teaching has also perforated the boundaries between the Catholic and everything else.

Of course, the Society's presidential address is not the place for going on and on about blood rituals or for spelling out comparisons between the Gospel and the *Gita* (a process that has gone on for several centuries). My point rather is that the odd resonance of John 6 with blood rituals I remember, and with the deep sentiments of love and surrender enunciated in the *Gita*, is almost inevitable. It was not for nothing that I chose last year's theme, "Thinking Catholic Interreligiously." As I will show, experiencing a kind of liminal status also opens into the freedom essential to our movement forward as individuals and a Society. Being an inside-outsider is a good basis for reimagining who I am, who we are. My guess is that you too are an inside-outsider in some way or another. We belong to this Society as insiders, and as perennial visitors with the thought, "What am I doing here?"

³ Here and below, my translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* are adapted from *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*, trans. Georg Feuerstein with Brenda Feuerstein (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2011).

All I can offer in these reflections is a way to find strength in the uncertainties of who we are, as we step out into a very uncertain future. Thus my title, “Freedoms and fears: The Musings of a Comparative Theologian on the Future of the CTSA.”

THE PLEASURES OF BEING PRESIDENT: HOW MUCH WE LEARN!

Being president can be overwhelming. There is much stuff to do, of course, and about this I will not complain, since it is a great honor to stand where I do today. But committed collegiality takes time, in our intensively volunteer organization, and can be all too much. Had my hair not already been scant and nearly white even by the time I was elected vice president, it would surely have turned gray by now.

A great plus is that presidents learn a lot, because they have to. Though a long-time member (my first convention was in 1987), I have now seen much closer-up the diversification of theology and the intense yet diffuse nature of our annual gatherings. Like every president, and more than many, I have during these past few years been engaged in home schooling, peering into our history, noticing the questions arising over and over in every decade.

From the earliest years, the *Proceedings* have been recommended to us as our archive of wisdom. Rightly so, since they offer a rich summation of where theology has been in the context of any given year. I read most of the presidential addresses, and found them all fascinating, erudite, provocative. I could name them all, but here are just a few that stood out for me:

- 1955, William R. O’Connor, “The Grandeur and Misery of Theology”
- 1967, Paul McKeever, “Development of the CTSA in the Post-Conciliar Church”
- 1968, Walter Burkhardt, “Toward an American Theology”
- 1978, Agnes Cunningham, “Theology for a Future Church: Science, Wisdom, Ministry”
- 1995, Roger Haight, “Fifty Years of Theology”
- 2002, Peter Phan, “Theology on the Other Side of the Borders: Responding to the Signs of the Times”
- 2003, Jon Nielsen, “Confessions of a White Racist Catholic Theologian”
- 2022, Christine Firer Hinze, “Remembering the Rest of Life: Toward a Rest-Inflected Theology of Work and Action”⁴

On and on . . . Charles Curran’s *The Catholic Theological Society of America: A Story of Seventy-Five Years*⁵ is a great example of delving into our history—enriched all the more by Charlie’s own long memory. I have also learned from Eugene Burke, C.S.P.’s

⁴ Each of these presidential addresses can be found in the respective volumes of the *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* at <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsai/issue/archive>.

⁵ Charles Curran, *The Catholic Theological Society of America: A Story of Seventy-Five Years* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021).

“A Personal Memoir on the Origins of the CTSA,” published in two parts, 1980 and 1984.⁶

Looking closely in any given year can also turn out to be a fine way to learn. Consider for example the *Proceedings* of an early year, 1952 (volume 7). I surprised myself by finding these to be a solid set of papers that we would benefit from revisiting: a moment in our history, sometimes dense scholastic thinking that nevertheless in its frame speaks incisively to those who will listen, and as very concerned with the signs of the times. There were two plenaries:

- Emmanuel Doronzo, O.M.I., “The Essence of the Sacrifice of the Mass,” 2.5 hours
- Gerald Kelly, S.J., “The Common Good and the Socio-Economic Order,” 2.5 hours

And there were three concurrent sessions that reach out in various directions (2 hours):

- Charles Sheedy, C.S.C., “The Problem of Theology for the Laity”
- John Goodwine, “The Physician’s Duty to Preserve Life by Extraordinary Means”
- Thomas McCarthy, “The Current Protestant Critique of Catholicism in the US”

Given my interests, I was particularly intrigued by the Presidential Address of Edmond Benard, “What Do the Theologians Do?” He is alluding to a question arising in James Hilton’s novel, *Lost Horizon*. Miss Brinklow asks “the serene Chang,” “What do the lamas *do*?” Chang answers, “They devote themselves, madam, to contemplation and the pursuit of wisdom.” When she protests that then they aren’t really doing anything, Chang responds, “Then, Madam, they do nothing.” Father Benard does not go deeper into Tibetan Buddhism, of course, only commenting, “The Catholic theologian is by profession devoted to contemplation and to the pursuit of wisdom in a true if less, shall we say, exotic manner than the lamas of Shangri-la.”⁷ This first appearance of an Asian religion in the *Proceedings*, quick as it was, at least shows that Benard knew something of a much wider world. It was a start.

If only we could go back and have a dialogue with the Society’s members in 1952, surely they and we would learn much, once we found ways to communicate in some reasonably accommodating English. We would differ, probably disagreeing on the parameters of our community, and regarding who’s in and who’s out. Of course. But I wager that we would still have more in common than divides us. We are of course not

⁶ Eugene Burke, “Appendix B – A Personal Memoir on the Origins of the CTSA,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 35 (1980): 337-345; and Eugene Burke, “Appendix II – A Personal Memoir: Part Two,” *The Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 39 (1984): 235-241.

⁷ Bernard’s presidential address is contained in Aloysius McDonough, “Minutes of the Meeting,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 7 (1952): 34-57, at 34-37, quotation at 35.

entirely different, though we are rightly pressed by the concerns of *our* times, with an underlying concern, “What is it that theologians do? And who cares”?”

The very recent past teaches us too. We can be learning from persons until recently in our midst: Just recollect the all too brief stories we heard on Friday, of our twenty-one deceased sisters and brothers of this year. Their lives and writings remain witnesses, sisters and brothers on the way.

You do not need me to assure you that there is so much to hear and see here and now. Every year’s program has a breath-taking range: our three plenaries; our sixteen topic groups; our ten consultations; our eight current interest groups, our weathervanes, indicative of new ventures, directions. There is so much very fine work going on! One could keep writing articles and books about the direction of theology, just based on what we are actually doing in any given year in our teaching, preaching, writing, conversations with one another.

GOING TOO FAST?

But are we going so quickly that we may be missing out on the riches of what is going on around us? We go fast—think of those forty-four concurrent sessions spread out over Friday and Saturday mornings and afternoons, a steady number unaffected by our smaller attendance at the convention last year and this year. We do the necessary work of speaking within our specialties, but do we have time to learn outside our specialties? Some of you urge me to come to your sessions, so well-planned, so well put together; I in turn urge you to come to a comparative theology session. Yet how rarely do we step outside our areas of immediate concern!

Can we slow down, hosting fewer sessions each year? The plenary sessions in 1952 were two and a half hours, our 105 minutes. Perhaps too idealistically, I imagine the assembled fathers—all male priests—sitting together for a more prolonged discussion, plenty of time for everyone to speak. (It was not said in the minutes how many were in attendance, though over two hundred were on the membership list for the Society that year.) There were only three breakout sessions (since a fourth had been canceled). We cannot go back to that model, but can we at least trim our sessions, so as to have more time for one another?

For instance, instead of eleven concurrent sessions on Friday and Saturday morning and afternoon — suppose we were to have eight concurrent sessions on Friday and Saturday morning, a bit shorter than customary, and then each afternoon, *two* sets of seven concurrent sessions? It all still adds up to forty-four, if I’ve done the math correctly. Slightly less time for any given sustained conversation, I concede, but more opportunities to visit and learn from each other’s work. Give it a try?

The number of sessions aside, I ponder also how our considerable expertises—in the plural, for we are not all educated in a single way—get concealed by our shared English: we do not simply share the same language. Our English, spoken in myriad accents from myriad places, is itself always vexed and stretched, complicated by so many ways of speaking rooted in various life experiences and modes of study. I regret not knowing Spanish, to be sure, and neither can I speak German or French. But I do have the Sanskrit and Tamil I use regularly in my research and writing. As I am sure is true for you, I am used to the limits of English to provide the right words for what I am

thinking. How many terms from the South Asian context are casually understood and misunderstood in English! Think of *dharma* (righteousness), *varna* and *jati* (religious class and birth caste), *devata* (deity), *isvara* (lord), *karma* (action, ritual), *punarjanma* (rebirth), *atman* (self), and so on. Knowing about Hinduism—or Judaism or Islam or Buddhism—only through English is an invitation to misunderstanding, and possibly also to hasty judgments. Generalizations about Asian religions are necessary, but too often they are vague, lacking in concreteness. This phenomenon surely applies all the more to the many local languages that flourish all over the world but are rarely voiced and heard in our midst. But we should be thinking in our multiple languages, mother tongues but also languages learned meticulously in grad school—all heard now in some form of a common English. May our English become a bit more halting and uncertain!

WORRIES IN A CRITICAL TIME

Now let me for a moment get a bit gloomier. I acknowledge the sadly obvious, that we are living in difficult times. We meet in a time of crisis, the world around us tormented in so many ways. It is sadly easy to start a list: environmental degradation, the extinction of species; the incivility of American society; racism, poverty, gun violence; abortion, death penalty; neglect of the young mothers, of elderly and disabled; the assault on the notion and practice of the common good; the secularization of our country as a kind of liberation, but without the assurance that any consensus on values will remain.

Our rapprochement with American culture is perhaps now more fraught with tension than in the early days of the CTSA when tensions with Protestant America were so strongly felt. We are being forced to ponder the decay of the very frame of our knowledge. That there is the loss of a particular kind of Christian culture is not in itself evil, but if the result is increasing incivility, lack of community, and a great diminishment of comprehension of what God and the spiritual are all about, then we cannot but worry about decline. (I say this from my vantage point at Harvard Divinity School, where in a way the spiritual flourishes, but perhaps with the essential sense of community needed for it to endure.) Perhaps a half century's rather optimistic rapprochement of the Society with American society and its cultural and intellectual infrastructure is over with. Christian hope, but no more optimism?

We have to be thinking of the decline in the very substance of our colleges and universities. The data is open to interpretation—and in any case I am not expert on such matters—but very many studies—and articles and op-ed pieces—announce the decline in the humanities, classics, and literatures, theology and philosophy included. Theology's place even on Catholic campuses is shrinking, even in the core curriculum; the paucity of majors and minors has to worry us all the more; the healthy but influential tension between theology and religious studies may be ending in the disappearance of theology in most institutions. Certainly, in a time of shrinkage, we need to keep discussing how the work of a theology department relates to other departments, other ways of imagining and getting at religiosity. But still, there may be a deeper problem: perhaps we've lost hold of a strong sense of what counts as "revelation," in Christian or in other enduring traditions.

Even sheer demographics tell us a lot, and the decline in the birthrate twenty years ago has predicted problems in schools ever since. The financial implications of a simple lack of college-age young people have been predicted for years. We know sadly that whole institutions are imperiled, as some colleges and universities close while others, on the brink, truncate the humanities in order to survive. Consequently—and you do not need me to tell you this—there are fewer jobs, and the shriveling of tenure security, and with that loss, a loss of the necessary frame within which scholars have the security, incentives, and leisure, to do the writing that nourishes the thinking, praying, serving church. It is hard also to avoid worrying about whether we really need a dozen doctoral programs in Catholic theology in North America.

And still closer to home, as we finish our seventy-seventh annual convention: fewer and fewer of us even now have the funding to attend this conference, as overall costs to be here run to \$1000 and more. We do not intend and cannot benefit from a situation in which only a smaller and smaller percentage of our members can afford to come.

Such problems have always existed, but perhaps today the environmental crisis in theology too is nearly irreversible?

JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI'S RADICAL ADVICE

How much do we need to worry, and where might that worry lead us? Or suppose we worried about none of this, in true freedom? For the sake of these reflections I am offering you this morning, I suggest we need to be open to radical as well as modest remedies to what ails us.

Over the past year, as I often contemplated standing here, giving this presidential address, I kept thinking of a probably inappropriate counterpoint, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). He was the child prodigy, discovery of the perennialist Theosophical Society in south India, and eventually a world-renowned teacher. At a climactic meeting in 1929, where he was to be revealed as the teacher for the present moment and for the age to come, he shocked his listeners: Yes, I am that teacher, and I do have authority—so I tell you to go home, disbanding this society. Stop yearning for enduring hierarchies authoritative on earth and in heaven. Krishnamurti spoke of radical freedom, since the Theosophical Society itself was not really necessary:

My purpose is to make you unconditionally free, for I maintain that the only spirituality is the incorruptibility of the self which is eternal, is the harmony between reason and love. This is the absolute, unconditioned Truth which is life itself. I want therefore to set you free, rejoicing as the bird in the clear sky, unburdened, independent, ecstatic in that freedom.

He goes on to proclaim,

You must be free of all these things, free from your complications, your entanglements. For this you need not have an organization based on spiritual belief. . . . Organizations cannot make you free. No one from outside can make you free; nor can organized worship, nor

the immolation of yourselves for a cause, make you free; nor can forming yourselves into an organization, nor throwing yourselves into works, make you free. ... So you will see how absurd is the whole structure that you have built, looking for external help, depending on others for your comfort, for your happiness, for your strength. These can only be found within yourselves.⁸

He was seeking to disband “the Order of the Star in the East,” the very heart of the Theosophical Society. He was trying to get them to not worry about organizations, since they were already Self, and that was all that they needed. He failed in his effort—the Society did not disband—but he did gain many followers over the six remaining decades of his life.

Krishnamurti offers no map of the future of our Society, no remedy for our problems. As Catholics, we cannot go all the way with him in abolishing institutions. The truth of Christ, in Christ, is not an entirely lonely quest. But I could not resist reading his words to you, mainly to push you and me both to ask us how far we want to go in being free, and whether we are worrying about the wrong things. For we need to be free, we need to be detached, freed and free, if we are to thrive in this new era of our existence. Can we find this inner self, in each of us, and in the Society, so that whatever is unnecessary can be discarded?

THE DAWNING THIRD AGE OF THE CTSA

What does it mean to be free as individual theologians, agile inside-outsiders today, and for us to breathe new life in our Society? I would like to propose, for the sake of argument, that we are entering a new era of the Society’s life. Ready or not, we need to be thinking very differently about who we are and what we do. I will give it a try, though I am not a sociologist or even expert on American society, by suggesting that there have been two eras, and now a third is dawning:

- First, the era of the Seminaries, let’s say, to 1965;
- Second, the era of the colleges and universities, let’s say, up to COVID-19;
- Third, the era just beginning goes beyond the seminary era and the college/university era. It is a time of loss, and a time of unimagined new possibilities.

Era One: The early era when most of our members were seminary professors, presumed an inward-looking Catholic world that on its own terms was quite coherent, though distanced from American culture. This era featured a disposition to see the world from inside a church suspicious of that world and, for the survival of the Society, to rely on the support of bishops.

⁸ Quotation from an address given by Jiddu Krishnamurti, “Truth is a Pathless Land,” (Theosophy’s Star Camp, Ommen, Holland, August 3, 1929), <https://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-dissolution-speech>.

Era Two: The great and golden era of colleges and universities provided us with unparalleled opportunities and security, amid a flourishing system of Catholic colleges and universities. Despite the many problems besetting American society, this era was marked with an optimistic view of American society and hence a push to integrate with that society, even if also taking a prophetic stance on injustices in the church and world.

Era Three: I am suggesting that there is a new era, just dawning. Era Three is marked externally by the deep problems tearing apart the fabric of American society, the stresses on the college-university system, and the waning ability of our members to depend on the systems of higher education to support theology, research, travel, etc. But this emerging era is marked also by new societal, political, and cultural dynamics, including unprecedented religious pluralism, a spiritual but not religious attitude toward established churches, and the freedom, imposed on us by economic change, to think outside the margins of both churches and universities and colleges. We stand in an increasingly fluid relationship with the very institutions at which most of us teach, and many of our younger members will have more fluid, uncertain relationships to those institutions.

We need to reinvent ourselves in an era rich in new possibilities, globally and in our own country and in the theological community, even as our situation seems all the more fragile. If I am on the right track, Era Three will be colored by some pessimism about the future of American higher education; by concomitant worries about the well-being, financial and otherwise, of our members and of the CTSA; by an at least mild depression about the American church itself; and yet too by unprecedented virtual and real-time possibilities for a more open and global CTSA. We are more fragile and yet we are offered a deep and wide new freedom. What might this freedom mean? What does it require of us? How do we get there?

FREEDOM IN PRACTICE

We can hardly understand Era Three, because it is hardly under way. We need a more radical freedom over again what we have been until now. Let me try again, coming closer to home now by quoting Thomas Merton's take on institutions. We all know of Merton and have read some of his writings; some of you are great experts on him and have studied him in depth and taught courses on him regularly. In his short life—only fifty-three when he died unexpectedly in Bangkok in 1968—he was voracious in his wide-ranging interests regarding all subjects religious and non-religious, and deep in his commitment to integrate all that he was learning in and for the sake of a rejuvenated Christian monasticism. He did not go as far as Krishnamurti, but he did have a strong sense that old structures were falling away, and that we should let go of them.

In his last lecture, given on December 10, 1968, the day he died, Merton tells a story of a young lama—not Benard's fictional lama, but a real one—in crisis as the institutions of Tibetan Buddhism started crumbling in a time of invasion:

A young lama had to escape from Tibet to save his life, like most other abbots. When he was faced with the decision of leaving his country, he did not quite know what to do. He was absent from his monastery on a visitation to some other monastery, and he was

caught out in the mountains somewhere and was living in a peasant's house, wondering what to do next. He sent a message to a nearby abbot friend of his, saying: "What do we do?" The abbot sent back a strange message, which I think is very significant: "From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet." To my mind, that is an extremely important monastic statement. If you forget everything else that has been said, I would suggest you remember this for the future: "From now on, everybody stands on his own feet."⁹

Merton adds, a few paragraphs later:

Coming now to a sort of conclusion, it is obvious that we have to plan the future. Let us look forward to the worst. Supposing that we are totally destroyed as an institution. Can we continue? ... What is essential in the monastic life is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded even in a rule. It is concerned with this business of total inner transformation. All other things serve that end...¹⁰

The circumstances are quite different from those in which Krishnamurti gave his speech, but Merton too, perhaps influenced by the weeks he spent in India and Sri Lanka just before reaching Bangkok, is offering a similar message. The structures cannot save us, nor even support us anymore—so stand on your own two feet! You are an insider: let go of that, and act, think, pray, as if everything is up for grabs. Rely on who you most deeply are.

Most of us are not monastics, but I think a similar freedom is asked of us. There are changes we must make, and can make, because old securities are declining. My thinking as follows here is partly driven by my experience the last couple of years, related to the expenses of a convention, and the pressures this may impose on some of our members, particularly the younger, particularly those without tenure track positions, and those in institutions that can no longer be generous with funding for conferences and travel. Presidents need also to worry about such practicalities.

We must reimagine the nature and purpose and value of our meetings—at a good time, since our five-year review committee is doing its work, drawing on the questionnaires that most of us, I hope, have filled out. Dissolving boundaries, connecting, in small, ordinary, doable ways, changing of manner of proceeding more deeply over time. Here I will stop for a moment to reflect on just three connected themes: interrelatedness, virtuality, and continuity in leadership. Allow me now to comment briefly on each in turn.

⁹ Thomas Merton, "Appendix VII: Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, and James Loughlin (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), 326-343, at 338.

¹⁰ Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 339.

INTERRELATEDNESS

We have always been aware, I suppose, of our connectedness with other communities within the church, and outside it too. Perhaps there were times in the past, slower and more intimate, when theologians were bonded by greater familiarity than we can even imagine today. Now, if we had not studied in the same doctoral programs and if we do not teach in them, our paths may cross far less than in the past; we may come to the same convention year after year and not really know one another. And yet, interrelatedness seems the way of the future.

On a mundane level, with open borders, we cannot but at this point work more closely with other theological societies. We are well connected with the College Theology Society (CTS), many of us moving back and forth between our back to back conventions. I recently read through this year's CTS program, which was quite rich, diverse, and very interesting; and I was glad to see that some of you were on the program just a week ago at Sacred Heart University. I hear that Brian Flanagan, gave a very fine presidential address, "Theology, Theologians, and Humility." Though I rarely attend the CTS, I am all the more aware now of what I am always, annually, missing.

So too, some of you have long been founders and participants in the Academy of *Catholic Hispanic* Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS) and the Black Catholic Theology Symposium (BCTS). But how can our members who do not attend those conventions—people like me—learn more deeply and consistently from ACHTUS and BCTS, instead of simply applauding those who do belong to those communities and still come to ours?

Similarly, we might also interact more with the Academy of Catholic Theology (ACT), and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. I recently read through ACT's program for their conference from just two weeks ago, where the theme was "Trinity: Fundamental Ground of Reality and Mystery of Salvation." I am sure this too was a rich, diverse, and very interesting conference, in part because it was so different from ours, if one can judge by titles.

In my report at the Business Meeting, I mentioned the "summit" we had in February, among all the societies, was a promising start, with good will expressed among all the societies at the meeting. It was only a start, but intentional, explicit interactions seem essential to all of our futures even if we never merge into a single society. We need to lavish time on all these links, as should our colleagues in these other societies. It seems a very good project for the next generation in each society that we find intentional, considered ways to benefit mutually from our different cultures, all expressive of ways of being Catholic, American, theological.

Nor can we credibly limit our interrelatedness to the societies I have just mentioned. Our links with the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology **and** World Forum on Theology and Liberation seem ripe for great new conversations, yet still unrealized. Zoom is now making new connections seem more possible and real. We belong to these organization, but how many among us take advantage of them? I, alas, have not previously done so.

We needn't cease to be Catholic, but we need more open borders, allowing other Christian identities to impinge on ours. We need to make more of our ecumenical opportunities, e.g., by the field of reciprocal ecumenism which Paul Lakeland among

others has championed. We need to be more engaged in the dialogues with Jews, with Muslims, and with people of all faith traditions. I am grateful how over the past thirty-five years the interreligious reality has become more prominent, and even a regular part of the life of our conference. We are not the American Academy of Religion, but we can only gain from regular conversations with religion scholars.¹¹ And, we need to be thinking Catholic interreligiously—to echo the theme of our 2022 convention—in a way that makes the interreligious a more regular part of who we are. Perhaps we can find ways to give the theologians of other faith traditions a more visible presence at our conventions, ideally with our presence more visible at theirs.

VIRTUALITY

In reality, I suspect, the noble idea of opening in all directions is unlikely to succeed unless we recalibrate how we do things. Conversation needs to be deepened and sustained in ways that cannot possibly be contained within the bounds of an annual meeting that remains by far the focus of most of our collective energies. This year and every year, the convention turns out marvelously, due to the hard work of so many of us. But do we really want to keep putting so much of our CTSA energies into planning an annual meeting to which at most a third of our members come? We would lose so much if the young and the retired could no longer be with us.

The pandemic, a terrible thing, canceled our 2020 convention, a very sad outcome. It forced us to meet online in 2021, a hard thing to pull off. But in the end this was a good emergency test of the new vistas opening before us. We were forced to step into what is nothing less than an entry into the hybrid, virtual age. We are invited to complement the “bricks and mortar” annual convention with online possibilities of a far greater reach. We do accept analogous trade-offs, after all. Amazon and Barnes and Noble ought not bankrupt local bookstores, but neither should bookstores blind us to how much online booksellers make available—more books for more readers than ever before in history. Libraries have radically changed, and the stacks seem emptier, but never have students had as much to read easily available to them. The pandemic forced even churchgoers to experiment with online connectivity for worship; we regret the further decline in church attendance, and we do not think that the sacramental and communal life of the church can be lived on computer screens. But it would mean-spirited only to lament how people have been finding other ways to pray individually and together.

Each year the future is happening around us, is it not? We are having virtual sessions during the year; at the convention itself, suddenly QR codes are everywhere; the *Proceedings* are now rarely printed, but are easily available online to anyone who wishes to access them; I finish my year as president with hardly a page of writing on paper to be saved, but hundreds of pdfs and thousands of emails; we are filming the plenary sessions and, I expect, getting used to putting them online. We will be inventing for ourselves an ever more robust virtual presence as essential to our

¹¹ See also my essay, “What We Do and Who We Are: A Few Reflections on Jose I. Cabezón’s 2020 AAR Presidential Address,” forthcoming in *Buddhist Minds and Bodies: Essays in Honor of José Ignacio Cabezón* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications).

theological conversations, particularly insofar as we think outside the box and enter into more robust relationships with other theological societies, Catholic and other.

Conventions are events of community, and with great value, but obviously they are not as absolutely necessary as they were in the past; or, to put it more gently, they are necessary, but differently. So we can reinvent them, even as we vigorously explore alternatives. Online networks are not the best of all things, but neither are they merely a blip. Meeting in person is expensive and fuel inefficient. It makes no sense to be worried about wasting paper—no handouts! save the trees!—while flying across the country in large commercial jets, and taking Lyft and Uber here and there. And, of course, when we meet in person, we stand in danger of leaving out more and more of our less financially secure members who simply cannot afford the price.

LEADERSHIP

Interrelatedness! Virtuality! But can we be agile enough to reimagine any given CTSA year as more robustly virtual even as we still get together some years or most years? We need to work consistently toward focusing how we are to be, what we are to do, all with a coherent voice maturing over the years. *Who* will make all this happen? Based on my four years thus in the leadership line, I have been wondering whether we are structured properly to do all we need to do—open our borders, be more virtual, ensure our future by raising money, etc.—in terms of our current model. I am skeptical. That we are a volunteer organization is a strength, and we have done well in proceeding by shared leadership that changes a bit each year. In our small ways, we show what a collegial, collaborative Catholic community can look like when it is not constrained by a sclerotic hierarchy. But the deeply collaborative nature of the CTSA is also overtaxed. Too much depends on the good will of individuals. We work together and do our best to ensure continuity, but we are always, I find, under strain. By the time we finish our terms on the Board or in the presidential line, we are tired out, and, I find, a bit regretful about what we did not do. We learn the job, then give it up. I have figured out many things this past year; in just a few minutes from now, I will be letting go of my role here—to my own relief and delight, but also with a sense that it was all too quick.

My concern is not a new concern. Consider the lament of Luke Salm. FSC, in his presidential address, 1975:

Other organizations, including the USCC and some of our Catholic universities, are sponsoring conferences and workshops designed to bring our Catholic tradition and faith experience to bear on the pressing problems of American social and political life. So far the corporate contribution of the CTSA to these projects has been minimal and ineffective with the initiative left for the most part to our individual members. Part of the problem for our Society is practical and structural. *We are limited in our resources, personal more than financial, with a transient presidency, volunteer help, and executive officers who have to steal the time from their many other*

*professional and ministerial obligations just to maintain the routine functioning of the Society.*¹²

I think he was right in 1975, and still right in 2023. We are never quite getting done all we can do, because we do not manage ourselves properly. Concretely, it would be splendid if we have a robust development plan, but we all know that successful work in that regard takes years, with sustained conversations taking place with donors and funding agencies. We have the good will and generosity to work hard at this, but I am not confident we have the structures needed.

Consider how other organizations organize themselves: the CTS has a 2-year terms for president; ACT has a president with just a one-year term, and also a governing board, the members of which have 3-year terms, the chair of the board having a 4-year term. Both structures may work a bit better than ours, in terms of continuity in leadership at service to the members. We certainly can change our leadership model, but need to be careful and patient in doing so. Perhaps the Board and the Centennial Committee, both benefiting from the forthcoming five-year review, can make talking about this a priority?

PASSIONATE DETACHMENT

However we organize ourselves, how do we move forward? What kind of spiritual discipline do we need, to be very detached yet very engaged at the same time? Free enough to let go of all that we are identified by, yet practically engaged in the world around us? I must return once more the *Gita*. In Chapter 3 Krishna teaches that utter detachment, a lack of concern about winning and losing, does not lead to lethargy or inaction. Rather, it is the way to ideal, efficacious action in the world:

For a person who has enjoyment only in the Self, who is satisfied with the Self and content in the Self, there is nothing to be done.

Indeed, for that person no action done or not done here has a purpose. Such a person has no dependence on gain with respect to any thing.

Be unattached, then continually do the work that must be done. The unattached person performing action attains the highest.

By action alone king Janaka and others attained perfection. Consider only the world's welfare, and act accordingly.

Whatever the best do, other people will do as well. Whatever standard they set, that the world follows (*Gita* 3.17-21).

Setting a good example, engaged in the world, yet not wearied by it; striving for something new, without judging what we have done and will do by ordinary measures

¹² Luke Salm, "Past Perspectives and Future Prospects for the CTSA," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 13 (1975), 239-250, at 250.

of success. But learning from the *Gita* is not so terribly different from learning from the Gospels. Reading is not enough—we need to dig deeper into the sources of true self, true detachment, for the sake of true freedom of spirit and action. So, as I draw to the end of this reflection, I suggest that we need to ponder further the state of a mind and soul needed today.

THE FREEDOM OF PILGRIM SOULS

Allow me then to return to last evening's readings at Mass, for wisdom that goes back to the beginning of our story, as Christians indebted to the Jewish tradition. Deuteronomy 8, our first reading, set for us an existential scene, an eternal dependence on God that testifies to a pilgrim people's need for their *daily* bread given *each day* by God:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (8:2-3).

This is a beautiful passage, pointedly useful. It reminds us of the need to depend on the Lord all the time, for our sustenance, day after day, trusting in God as a way of life spiritually and in practice.

Or again, think again of Peter's choice, which I glossed earlier as a best and bravest response to the intimate, radical invitation to Jesus, to participate intimately in him: "Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). No one else, he seems also to be saying, shows us the way, has those words of life. He was ready to let go of what he had thus far, and venture into the unknown future, on the path of his friend and teacher, Jesus.

In her Call for Papers announcing Freedom as this year's theme, Kristen Heyer alludes to the words of Delores Williams:

How do insights from the Hebrew Bible shed light on the gift and task of freedom: whether in terms of liberation for covenantal relationship or release of those captive or in the shadow of exile/exilic mindset even after exile ends? How might freedom from enslavement to sin and death in the Pauline tradition do so, as well? How do other biblical narratives sustain those who must "make a way out of no way" (Delores Williams), given barriers to their freedom?¹³

¹³ See the Call for Papers in this volume, XX-XX.

“Make a way out of no way.”¹⁴ I thought again of Krishnamurti’s claim, radical in another way, as he put it in 1927: “Truth is a pathless land. You cannot approach it by any path whatsoever.”¹⁵ Or Merton’s image of a lama fleeing into the mountains, not sure where he is going.

It would be foolish for people like me to imagine ourselves to be bereft, homeless, without a way forward. However I am spiritually, I do not suffer like so many others after suffered. But still, the challenge is there: to be a person with no way, that God may clear the path; to be a Society willing to be unsure of its way forward, for God to show us how to be Catholic theologians now and in the years before our 100th anniversary in 2045.

In her landmark book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams writes of the narrative of her life and that of other black people, young and old, especially women:

Many times, as a little girl, I sat in the church pew with my mother or grandmother and heard the black believers, mostly women, testify about “how far they had come by faith.” They expressed their belief that God was involved in their history, that God helped them make a way out of no way. As they shared their trials, tribulations and blessings, they asked the other communicants to pray for them. Their testimonies suggested they believed their lives were about more than white people’s oppression of black people.¹⁶

This is wisdom specific to the experience of Black Americans of whom Williams speaks—but then, on that basis, it becomes a gift for all of us. When there is no way, then God can make a way; in humility, we need to allow ourselves to be drawn out into the desert. Then God can care for us.

I was inescapably reminded of a song in south India’s Tamil language that pairs utter helplessness and vulnerability with a choice for God alone. Here is a Tamil verse, where the poet saint worships the iconic presence of the Lord at one temple:

I’ve done no ascetic deeds, I have no subtle knowledge but still
I cannot bear to leave you even for a moment.
My lord reclining on your snake bed, my father,
Enthroned in the Srivaramanganagar temple

¹⁴ This is a term with a long oral history. See Wolfgang Mieder, *“Making a Way Out of No Way”: Martin Luther King’s Sermons’ Proverbial Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). Mieder traces the use of the term in writing, back to 1922, Coe Hayne’s *Race Grit: Adventures on the Border-Land of Liberty* (Boston: The Judson Press, 1922).

¹⁵ From Jiddu Krishnamurti, “The Pool of Wisdom: Who Brings the Truth” (address given in Eerde, Ommen, Holland, August 2, 1927), <https://jiddu-krishnamurti.net/en/1927-the-pool-of-wisdom/jiddu-krishnamurti-the-pool-of-wisdom-12>.

¹⁶ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 10.

Where lotuses bloom in the mud amid ripening paddy,
 Apart from you, I am nothing, even where you are.¹⁷

The Tamil saint reverently known as Nammalvar, “our saint,” devotes this verse—and so many others in his 1102 verse long *Holy Word of Mouth (Tiruvaymoli)*—to expressing his experience of being bereft, helpless when it comes to finding God. He realizes that he has nothing, neither works nor knowledge. He has no way, and so for him, God alone must be the goal and the way. And then—and this is very important—his real mission is under way: he is able to sing, and by his songs inspire his community for a thousand years until now.

This verse—any many others too—rises up in my mind when I think about our next twenty-five years. To make our way, we must not hesitate to be regular borrowers from traditions other than our own. We can take ideas often applied simply to individual persons, and extend them to communities—as Deuteronomy does in showing us Israel in the desert, and as Delores Williams does in her evocation of God’s power to make a way of no way for Black women. We need to do this as we look into an uncertain future where freedom is thrust upon us, so that we can be free with respect of all the CTSA is and has been.

FREEDOM FOR A HOPEFULLY UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In our fragile times, we are both weakened and being offered incredible new opportunities, and so, we need both utter detachment and bravery—to be free of all our baggage as individuals and as a Society, and to be free for the overwhelming resources lying before us. I hope I have made some sense to you, inside-outsider that I am, Hindu wisdom shadowing my Christian faith.

What kind of Society shall we be in 2045? We do not, cannot know, of course. But if the past seventy-seven years have been any indication, we will continue to ponder the mission and duties of the Society in accord with the signs of the times. We will continue, slowly, to make our way forward, sharpening our spiritual skills as outside-insiders (inside-outsiders) in order to imagine the Society in continuity with its past yet facing a truly new future. All of this is an entirely practical matter; and yet it is a very spiritual matter.

“THE AWFUL DARING OF A MOMENT’S SURRENDER”

I end on another note. For whatever reason—sanity in a too-busy year? enjoying poetry for no particular reason (the best reason, surely)?—I have been reading T.S. Eliot since winter, benefiting from that massive volume, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*.¹⁸ I love some of his poems, particularly the *Four Quartets*. Who among us does not? But during this just past, too busy month of May, I struggled to understand “The Waste

¹⁷ *Holy Word of Mouth* V.7.1. As found in volume five of *Pagavat Visayam*, the standard edition of the *Holy Word of Mouth* with five classical commentaries. Edited by S. Krishnaswami Ayyangar. Trichy: Sri Nivasam Accukkutam, 1975–87. My translation from the Tamil.

¹⁸ *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (New York: Farrar, Straus and Geroux, 2015). “The Waste Land” appears on pages 55-71.

Land,” published just over 100 years ago, in 1922. Eliot—quintessentially of the West—nonetheless learned poetically from the East, beginning with his brief study of Sanskrit at Harvard. “The Waste Land,” his scarred and broken text, was composed in the shadow of the aftermath of World War I, the West’s massive self-destruction and all the woes arising from it. It seems to me—no literary critic, to be sure—that the poem is set on remembering, breaking, fixing and pasting back together the lost poetic traditions of the West. If only we could do the same for theology, with the same aesthetic instincts and delicacy of language!

In the fifth and final part of the poem, “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot has already obscurely evoked the scene where Jesus walks with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (lines 359-365), and the crowing of the cock thrice (lines 391-393), as if to remind us of Peter denying Jesus. Eliot then turns to *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, an Indian text nearly 3000 years old. More than two thirds of the way through the Upanisad, at 5.2.3, the thunder rumbles Da, Da, Da — indicating, somewhat mystically, *dāmyata. datta. dayadhvam*:

Thunder, that divine voice, repeats the very same syllable: “Da! Da! Da!”— Demonstrate restraint! (*dāmyata*) Demonstrate bounty! (*datta*) Demonstrate compassion! (*dayadhvam*) One should observe the same triad —restraint, bounty, and compassion (*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 5.2.3).

Eliot draws on this text in evoking a parched land awaiting the monsoon:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
 Waited for rain, while the black clouds
 Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
 Then spoke the thunder
 DA
Datta: what have we given?

The next words speak of a giving that can happen only when your hands are finally empty, all else having been said and written in vain:

My friend, blood shaking my heart
 The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
 Which an age of prudence can never retract
 By this, and this only, we have existed
 Which is not to be found in our obituaries
 Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
 Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
 In our empty rooms...

As the poem ends, a few verses later, Eliot mingles English, Italian, Latin, Sanskrit:

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
 Quando fiam uti chelidon — O swallow swallow
 Le Prince d'Aquintaine à la tour abolie¹⁹
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.²⁰
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
 Shantih shantih shantih

Peace, Peace, Peace. In his notes to the poem, Eliot mentions here solemn words of peace and blessing, “the peace that surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4.7). And so, for us: Be controlled. Be generous. Be compassionate. Give it all away, rather than playing it safe. And be at peace, even in this uncertain moment when the difficulties of a new era make freedom a very risky but all the more necessary venture.

¹⁹ These are three passages that speak to loss and silence, and the desire to find words again. *Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*: “Then he vanished in the fire that refines them” (Dante, *Purgatorio* XXVI.148). *Quando fiam uti chelidon — O swallow swallow*: “She sings, we are mute: when is my spring coming: when shall I be as the swallow, that I may cease to be voiceless?” (*Pervigilium Veneris* XXII, authorship uncertain). *Le Prince d'Aquintaine à la tour abolie*: “I am the shadow, the widower, the unconsolated, the Aquitainian prince with the ruined tower, my only star is dead, and my star-strewn lute bears the black sun of Melancholy” (Gérard de Nerval, *El Desdichado*). I use the translations offered in the notes in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 704-706.

²⁰ A reference to Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, a precursor to Hamlet. The allusion indicates a kind of madness and self-silencing that nonetheless speaks eloquently. See *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 707.