

Identities of Encounter: How Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue assist College Students to counter Echo Chambers

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Introduction

The Pew Research Center, in its attempt to understand increased political division within the US, has observed that animosity between members of the Republican and Democratic parties has doubled since 1994. Approximately one-third of each party considers the other party a genuine “Threat to the Nation's Well-Being.” The Center points to “ideological silos” as a catalyst for this extremism and animosity.¹ One factor that is often invoked to explain this division is the presence of echo chambers on social media platforms, which, in turn, can quickly lead to fear of social media.² Amid the widening divides amplified by echo chambers, there is particular concern for young people, who remain the primary users of social media, and for how their formation is being shaped by these platforms.³

¹ Pew Research Center, *Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life*, Report (Pew Research Center, 2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

² Brent Kitchens et al., “Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption,” *MIS Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2020): 1619, <https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2020/16371>.

³ The International Dialogue Center (KAICIID), *Words That Heal: The Role of Young People in Addressing Hate Speech*, Policy Brief (European Policy Dialogue Forum, 2024), 2, https://www.kaiciid.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/epdf-policy_brief_2-the_role_of_young_people_in_preventing_hate_speech_final_0.pdf; Tarja Laaninen with Joris Bol, *Youth and Social Media*, Briefing PE 779.235 (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025), 1.

The following seeks to contribute to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on the issue of polarization among undergraduate students at US universities by echo chambers using the existing CST structure of See-Judge-Act, following Erin Bringham's *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*.⁴ It opens by "seeing" what social science studies show about polarization fostering confirmation bias – particularly through echo chambers on social media. Consequently, young adults do not benefit from the diversity of information that social media can offer and instead form closed-minded identities. "Judging" these observations in light of the Catholic faith, I will specifically look at the reflections offered by past popes on the dangers of echo chambers and social media and how they may impact young people. Finally, to "act" on these challenges and live out our faith, Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue (CT&IRD) are highlighted as practical resources. I analyze the learning and virtue Comparative Theology promotes and provide insight into the application of Interreligious Dialogue in student and peer ministry programming. Foundational to this work is the argument that young adults require special care regarding echo chambers and that CT&IRD offer valuable resources for this care by fostering identities of encounter in students.

Given the concern for CT&IRD here, which is rooted in epistemic humility, I feel it is important to acknowledge my own background, which has undoubtedly shaped my writing.⁵ At the time of my writing, I am a young adult who was recently an undergraduate student. Thus, I speak from experience when discussing the detriment that echo chambers can foster among students and other young adults. Moreover, I am shaped by my interfaith work with undergraduate students in the UK. During my undergraduate studies, I worked with several civil society organizations, such as the Edinburgh Interfaith Association and the Council of

⁴ Erin Bringham, *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning* (Anselm Academic, 2013), 9-12.

⁵ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad Pub. Co., 2008), 9.

Christians and Jews UK, to foster interreligious dialogue among university students.

Accordingly, my argument is grounded in my experience and conviction that CT&IRD can help heal society from division and help young people become part of this healing. This paper is, therefore, my attempt to learn about the US context and is motivated by an interest in how my experiences might apply to it.

See: Echo Chambers and Identities

Social media, and the internet more generally, should not be exclusively vilified. That would be an oversimplified account. Social media has the potential to be a highly inclusive space for its users due to its low barriers of entry and its opportunities for participation in conversation.⁶ This can lead to greater interconnection and even greater diversity in the information consumed.⁷ In fact, social media may even help overcome some of the challenges that will be observed in this section.⁸ Additionally, it should be noted that social media is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of platforms with varying algorithms and user purposes.⁹ These nuances need to be considered when discussing polarization through echo chambers on social media platforms. Nonetheless, while social scientists, such as Kitchens et al., are increasingly nuanced in their attempts to understand the divisive effects of social media on society, studies show that there remains a risk posed by social media platforms to foster echo chambers.¹⁰ Here, I will synthesize how this may be observed among young people and how it may affect them.

⁶ Tanja Storsul, "Deliberation or Self-Presentation? Young People, Politics and Social Media," *Nordicom Review* 35, no. 2 (2014): 20, <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2014-0012>.

⁷ Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 109.

⁸ Ika Diyah Candra Arifah et al., "Social Media Platforms in Managing Polarization, Echo Chambers, and Misinformation Risk in Interreligious Dialogue among Young Generation," *Journal of Social Innovation and Knowledge*, no. 2 (2025): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1163/29502683-bja00011>.

⁹ Kitchens et al., "Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles," 1641.

¹⁰ Kitchens et al., "Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles," 1619-21.

Echo chambers will be defined in the following as “an epistemic environment in which participants encounter beliefs and opinions that coincide with their own,” causing more extreme views.¹¹ They are understood to be detrimental because they play into confirmation bias – our tendency to accept information that affirms our own views more readily. Given how easily accessible information is on social media platforms, it becomes easy for its users to “surround themselves (virtually) with the opinions of like-minded others and insulate themselves from competing views.”¹² Consequently, because we are already confirming our own views through a variety of echo chambers, we become less empathetic toward other views and those who hold them, amplifying this by our natural tendency to give more weight to the views that confirm our own.¹³ This amplification of one’s own opinions and dispositions has the consequence that people have more extreme views – views that are on one side of the spectrum and are closed to discussion and dialogue, which in some cases may even put social cohesion at risk.¹⁴ In terms of the role of religions in echo chambers, “rumors, myths, or misrepresentations of religious beliefs and practices”¹⁵ are often spread as part of the “harmful stereotypes and prejudices”¹⁶ circulated by confirmation bias and echo chambers.

Further, identity, “one’s sense of the person one genuinely is”¹⁷ – including one’s religious beliefs, practice and affiliation¹⁸ – plays a major role in the formation of echo chambers and polarization, since most echo chambers are founded upon identity.¹⁹ Overall,

¹¹ Carlos Diaz Ruiz and Tomas Nilsson, “Disinformation and Echo Chambers: How Disinformation Circulates on Social Media Through Identity-Driven Controversies,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 42, no. 1 (2023): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07439156221103852>.

¹² Sunstein, *#Republic*, 100.

¹³ Sunstein, *#Republic*, 101.

¹⁴ Sunstein, *#Republic*, 119-120.

¹⁵ Arifah et al., “Social Media Platforms,” 196.

¹⁶ KAICIID, “Words That Heal,” 2.

¹⁷ Susan Branje et al., “Dynamics of Identity Development in Adolescence: A Decade in Review,” *Journal on Research on Adolescence* 31, no. 4 (2021): 908, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12678>.

¹⁸ Triță Adrian, “The Role of Religion in the Formation of Personal and Social Identity,” *New Trends in Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2024): 51-2, <https://dj.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/NTP/article/view/3099>.

¹⁹ Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson, “Disinformation and Echo Chambers,” 13.

while the online sphere can be a useful place for information, most of the posts on social media are for self-presentation.²⁰ This personal attachment to and effect on our online activity has the potential to lead to content being centered on “identity-driven controversies” which can quickly “circulate disinformation.”²¹ Hence, it is no longer enough to simply engage with a diversity of information to confront echo chambers, since the disinformation and confirmation bias fostered by them are not based on purely rational knowledge but also on emotional experience and self-identification. This makes it very difficult to overcome echo chambers without holding an identity that is already rooted in dialogue rather than confirmation bias.

Young adults are especially at risk of encountering echo chambers and confirmation bias since they are still developing their identity and are becoming more stable in their views during their undergraduate studies. Undergraduate students are in a particularly significant phase of their identity formation. Identities are shaped by social context, religion and culture, and young people are learning to navigate these different influences while also learning to listen to their own voices. At the usual age of undergraduate students (18-22), students become increasingly established in their identities since they are looking more seriously to the future and recognizing the responsibility of adulthood.²² The stabilization of identities means that young adults need to be shaped to have an attitude of active seeking of diverse information and encounters. By fostering an identity shaped by dialogue and diversity, there

²⁰ Storsul, “Deliberation or Self-Presentation?,” 21, 23.

²¹ Delong Meng and Siyu Wang, “Echo Chambers: Choosing Interlocutors and Messages,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 236 (August 2025): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2025.107121>.

²² James P. Keen, “Young Adult Development, Religious Identity, and Interreligious Solidarity in an Interfaith Learning Community,” in *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action*, ed. Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 30-31; Adrian, “The Role of Religion in the Formation of Personal and Social Identity,” 52-3; Branje et al., “Dynamics of Identity Development in Adolescence,” 912. Branje et al. refer to a Dutch study that shows that while adolescents might form an identity, as they transition into adulthood, this identity often becomes challenged.

is great potential for young people to integrate these qualities into their lives and their media engagement.

Thus, the problem that is “seen” is the risk of echo chambers among young people, which may lead to polarization and identities rooted in confirmation bias rather than encounter and open-mindedness.

Judge: Gentleness and Encounter

Polarization and echo chambers have not gone unrecognized by the Vatican. In his Message for the 59th World Day of Social Communications, Pope Francis denounces “self-promotion and self-absorption” as “diseases” that social media spreads.²³ He also stresses avoiding “shouting over others in order to make our voices heard.”²⁴ Instead, he urges for a communication that is rooted in “gentleness” and that makes “us fellow travelers.”²⁵ This is meant to counter the harshness of polarization rooted in extreme views nurtured by echo chambers.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis more explicitly addresses the danger of social media and echo chambers: “The way many platforms work often ends up favoring encounters between persons who think alike, shielding them from debate. These closed circuits facilitate the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting prejudice and hate.”²⁶ This leads to people not gaining “true wisdom,” which can only be derived from encounters in reality, as it is the only way for us to listen and be hospitable to others.²⁷ It is not the floods of information

²³ Francis, *59th World Day of Social Communications* [Papal Message], The Holy See, January 24, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20250124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html>.

²⁴ Francis, *59th World Day of Social Communications*.

²⁵ Francis, *59th World Day of Social Communications*. Francis references Peter’s first letter: “but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15-6, RSVCE).

²⁶ Francis, *Fratelli tutti* [Encyclical Letter on Friendship and Social Fraternity], The Holy See, October 3, 2020, sec. 45, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

²⁷ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, sec. 47-8.

that the internet offers that make us wiser, but rather the reciprocal gift of encounter with those who are different from us.²⁸ Thus, for a Catholic, echo chambers pose a threat to the love for their neighbor and seeking “true wisdom.” Through the information gathered in their echo chambers, they often develop a lack of gentleness and the potential to spread misinformation in their communication.

Moreover, the rigid and extreme views that characterize polarization are fostered by echo chambers, which is contrary to the Church’s understanding of human dignity, common good and as part of this, the person’s freedom of speech. Pope John XXIII states in *Pacem in Terris* that “man has a natural right to be respected... He has a right to freedom in investigating the truth, and – within the limits of the moral order and the common good – to freedom of speech.”²⁹ Holding extreme views closes the mind off to new insight, often leading one to fail to hear another perspective. Especially online, conversations on a given issue can easily become polarized, creating fear to share one’s questions and views on the topic. This is contrary to the insights of *Pacem in Terris*, as it undermines the human right to learn the truth for themselves and to share one’s views freely within the bounds of Catholic moral teaching.

In *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis exhorts young people to “dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better.”³⁰ This reinforces John XXIII’s statement in the context of young people, as it encourages them to be open-minded and to seek new

²⁸ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, sec. 50, 133.

²⁹ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* [Encyclical Letter on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty], The Holy See, April 11, 1963, sec. 12, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

³⁰ Francis, *Christus vivit* [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and the Entire People of God], The Holy See, March 25, 2019, sec. 15, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

insights. Young people are preparing to take up their “personal vocation.”³¹ They should not become “taken in by ideologies, used and exploited as cannon fodder or a strike force to destroy, terrify or ridicule others.”³² Polarization and echo chambers clearly foster this harm through spreading social mistrust and promoting extreme views. Addressing the challenge of social media for young people directly, the document recognizes that it has the potential to shape us to be focused on self-presentation rather than dialogue, and to foster a loss of touch with reality through echo chambers.³³ This is contrary to the Catholic understanding of human dignity, which enables all to be regarded as equals and to avoid prejudice when entering into dialogue.

The Church advocates for gentleness and encounter, “judging” therefore echo chambers and polarization to be obstacles to this, as they diminish human dignity and foster prejudice.

Act: Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

Finally, I focus on CT&IRD as individual resources to combat echo chambers, acknowledging that there are other effective resources as well. Rooted in experience and encounter, CT&IRD inherently foster the identities young people need to address the challenges outlined above.

Comparative Theology promotes the kind of learning that practically exposes college students to difference. In her book *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, Catholic theologian Catherine Cornille highlights six types of learning that CT&IRD may include: Intensification, Appropriation, Rectification, Recovery, Reinterpretation and Reaffirmation.³⁴ While all of these recognize that there is value in the other and that one learns about oneself

³¹ Francis, *Christus vivit*, sec. 30.

³² “Francis, *Christus vivit*, sec. 75.

³³ “Francis, *Christus vivit*, sec. 88-9.

³⁴ Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).

as part of this, special attention here is given to Rectification, the correction of prejudices held previously,³⁵ and Reaffirmation, “new appreciation or a reaffirmation of the truths of one’s own tradition.”³⁶

Cornille directly points out that Rectification changes one’s self-perception and relation to different religions since understanding is no longer based on polarization.³⁷ Instead, the “internal complexity and diversity [gained through Rectification] correct self-interested forms of essentialization or reification of the religious other.”³⁸ Given that polarization oversimplifies conversations, leads to extreme views, and is rooted in self-presentation over dialogue, learning through Rectification exemplifies the potential of Comparative Theology to foster encounter and counter the harmful prejudices promoted by echo chambers.

Reaffirmation might initially seem counter-productive to the enterprise of equipping students to break out of echo chambers, given that this type of learning reinforces beliefs already held. However, Reaffirmation is not only an intensification of one’s beliefs, but it may also lead to a “reassessment in which one’s self-understanding is somewhat changed through exposure to other religious systems and possibilities.”³⁹ Thus, it enables a learning that helps one to reevaluate oneself in light of differences. This may lead to affirming beliefs, but it may also lead to a change of belief or conversion within one’s beliefs, encouraging a more balanced and reflective learning than echo chambers offer and helping young adults to navigate challenges to their identity. Comparative Theology’s learning, therefore, has the

³⁵ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 121.

³⁶ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 137.

³⁷ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 121.

³⁸ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 121-2.

³⁹ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 138.

potential to enrich students with the type of learning that helps to overcome the effects of echo chambers.

Through the virtues that Comparative Theology promotes, it offers a holistic ethical approach to formation. Daniel J. Soars, in his article “The Virtues of Comparative Theology,” argues that the discipline fosters empathy, humility and interconnection as virtues among its practitioners.⁴⁰ Referring to Cornille’s and Clooney’s understanding of Comparative Theology and the dispositions required to practice it, he argues that it fosters empathy, as we must put ourselves in the other’s shoes and participate in their thought and ritual. Further, he shows that the virtues of humility and interconnection shape the Comparative Theologian to hold on to their own truth while remaining open to new insights and recognizing the interconnections of truth across religions.⁴¹ These virtues stand in contrast to self-presentation and closing off in echo chambers by nurturing a disposition of openness and epistemic humility. They naturally involve critical and constructive engagement with sources different from one’s own, without a sense of superiority or competition. Thus, Comparative Theology, through the virtues that it fosters, is able to shape those who partake in it in favor of greater openness and thereby has the potential to work against the confirmation bias intensified by echo chambers.

Turning now to student Interreligious Dialogue, I will analyze Keen’s work on *E Pluribus Unum* and Wolf’s investigation of peer ministry as practical paradigms for how students gain the skills and mindset to resist echo chambers and become more critical and empathetic thinkers.

⁴⁰ Daniel J. Soars, “The Virtues of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2019): 71-2, <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1734>.

⁴¹ Soars, “The Virtues of Comparative Theology,” 74-5.

E Pluribus Unum (“from many, one”) was launched in 1997 by Rabbi Sidney Schwarz and designed for students in the summer before they began college. It was driven by the founder’s personal commitment to providing a good place to search for God, to social change, and to the use of religious resources for social justice.⁴² The program was designed to foster an understanding among students of the social resources that their religious traditions are, how religious traditions have a shared understanding of the common good, and to educate them in social advocacy. It achieves this by combining academic work, spiritual encounters/worship, volunteering and community experiences in a three-week intensive summer program.⁴³ James Keen’s evaluation of the long-term effect of the program on students was done in its third round in 1999. While the program no longer seems to be active, it is a useful example of how CT&IRD can equip undergraduate students with the skills to overcome echo chambers. Keen draws from his investigation of the effect the program had on its participants, that many of them developed a stronger sense of self. Specifically, he observes that this involved a growth in identity and faith through more reflective practices. It also involved a willingness to learn from sources beyond their faith and engage actively with other religions’ traditions.⁴⁴ This, in turn, fostered a young adult identity which was rooted in social justice and dialogue informed by their own tradition and actively listening to others.⁴⁵ This is further demonstrated in the survey by Keen, whereby participants confirmed that through the program, they had a more expansive view of “we,” connecting the common good and community service.⁴⁶ Recalling that echo chambers fostering polarization are often based on identity, this Interreligious Dialogue program offers a practical solution, since it fosters

⁴² Sidney Schwarz. “E Pluribus Unum: A Model High School Seniors Two-Week Interreligious Program,” in *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action*, ed. Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 219-20.

⁴³ Schwarz. “E Pluribus Unum,” 220.

⁴⁴ Keen, “Young Adult Development,” 29.

⁴⁵ Keen, “Young Adult Development,” 36.

⁴⁶ Keen, “Young Adult Development,” 38.

identities rooted in active and reflective listening and in taking others seriously in their differences from oneself, seeing them as potential sources of personal enrichment.

Another effective model for promoting CT&IRD is utilizing existing campus ministries by fostering a peer-ministry model. Peer ministry is “an outreach concerned not just with the spiritual and faith development of the other, but also with the development of the self within the context of community, an experience whereby peer ministers develop relationships with other students in an effort to understand and respond to God’s presence among them.”⁴⁷ In her paper “Peer Ministry: Students Leading Conversations on Interreligious Issues at Catholic Colleges and Universities,” Helen Wolf shows how undergraduate peer ministers led and initiated Interreligious Dialogue on their campuses and how this experience has shaped them. Focusing on the peer ministers themselves, she notes that, through their experience, they often become more reflective about their own faith and their responsibility to one another, which in turn becomes a guiding skill throughout their college experience.⁴⁸ Therefore, peer ministries can be a practical attempt to foster Interreligious Dialogue on university campuses, using already existing programs and resources. Through their transformational experience of becoming more aware of their own beliefs and responsibility for those around them, this role shapes young adults to be more reflective on what they encounter. This practically assists a solution to the isolation that echo chambers foster, creating a culture of encounter.

CT&IRD offer extensive resources to intellectually and practically foster the skills and dispositions necessary among young adults to “act” against both the root causes and symptoms of echo chambers. Through diverse types of learning, virtues nurtured, and

⁴⁷ Helen M. Wolf, "Peer Ministry: Students leading Conversations on Interreligious Issues at Catholic Colleges and Universities," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 36, no. 1 (2017): 27, <https://jche.journals.villanova.edu/index.php/jche/article/view/2295>.

⁴⁸ Wolf, "Peer Ministry," 28.

possible programs of CT&IRD, there are many opportunities for undergraduate students to be challenged in their identities shaped by echo chambers. Students may thereby develop identities grounded in encounter and self-reflection rather than in self-promotion and isolation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I have sought to show that CT&IRD have the potential to foster skills, dispositions and even identities among undergraduate students that are effective in combating echo chambers and polarization. The “See-Judge-Act” structure has given an academic as well as practical analysis of the symptoms, causes and possible solutions based on CT&IRD. However, it is important to note that CT&IRD are not the sole resources needed to remove echo chambers, polarization and social division. On the contrary, CT&IRD ought to be supplemented and promoted alongside other initiatives, such as media education or diversity initiatives. Even so, this paper has shown that they are valuable resources for young adult formation by fostering identities of encounter and dialogue among them, and as such, should not be disregarded. Hence, CT&IRD should be strongly encouraged on university campuses and established as integral parts of campus ministries and university life more broadly.

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