

# WOMEN ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE EQUITY:

*The Parliament of the World's Religions*

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*Editor* COLLEEN D. HARTUNG

# *Women Advancing Knowledge Equity: The Parliament of the World's Religions*

**EDITED BY COLLEEN D. HARTUNG**

Women in Religion — Volume Three

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Cover Image: The background image\* on the cover is a prayer rug likely woven by a woman from Turkey in the 18th century. Prayer rugs for both domestic and commercial use were crafted by women on looms in their homes because women were unable to work outside the home.

\*Prayer Rug with Triple Arch Design, Joseph V. McMullan, New York (by 1965–d. 1973; bequeathed to MMA), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452570>)

*This volume is dedicated to Mary (Polly) Hamlen, a founding member of the Women in Religion Wikipedia Project. Polly's extraordinary contributions as an editor on Wikipedia, as an author of secondary sources about under-covered women in religion, and as patient mentor, have made a significant, global impact on the problem of gender bias on Wikipedia and beyond. We are grateful.*

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# Foreword

## ***Introduction by the Chair of the Women’s Task Force of the Parliament of the World’s Religions:***

As the Chair of the Women’s Task Force of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, it is my honor to introduce the third volume of the Women in Religion series, “Women Advancing Knowledge Equity: The Parliament of the World’s Religions.” This volume is a significant step forward in our ongoing commitment to amplify the voices and contributions of women across various religious, spiritual, and wisdom traditions.

The Women in Religion series, an outgrowth of the “1000 Women in Religion” project initiated by the Women’s Caucus of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, reflects our dedication to rectifying the historical imbalance in the representation of religious and spiritual women’s lives and accomplishments, particularly in the realm of digital content. The series also explores and challenges the biased guidelines governing digital content creation about women, striving to redefine the norms that have perpetuated inequality in the realm of knowledge production.

Volume Three, the focus of our present endeavor, delves into the stories of remarkable women associated with the Parliament of the World’s Religions. Since its inception in 1893, the Parliament has been a meeting ground for diverse voices, yet many women who played pivotal roles in shaping its history remain obscured by geographical, economic, and occupational factors.

I know because I have been devoted to advancing the participation of women since becoming a Parliament Trustee in 2009, helping to create the Women’s Task Force, the historic Inaugural Women’s Assembly in 2015, and the *Declaration for the Dignity and Human Rights of Women* and continuing to advance women’s visibility, their issues of concern and world-changing contributions at each subsequent convening.

This volume importantly seeks to rectify these oversights, with the stories of women who were essential to the historical development of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, who served as leaders and organizers of the various Parliaments – often working behind the scenes, on tasks forces, as board members and ambassadors, who were participants in the Parliament as keynote speakers and lecturers, and women who have been associated with the Parliament in other ways.

It also seeks to contribute to the broader mission of addressing knowledge gaps and gender biases on platforms like Wikipedia. Wikipedia, a widely accessed source of information, has been marred by systemic bias and under-representation, fueled by historical definitions of knowledge that favored certain perspectives and marginalized others. Even in the present day, a lack of diversity in contributors continues to shape the platform's content.

This inspiring volume is the reply by scholars, researchers, and enthusiasts who engaged in original research that sheds light on the lives of women associated with the Parliament. They uncovered the stories of women who have been leaders, organizers, speakers, founders, practitioners, teachers, resisters, and researchers in the world's religious and wisdom traditions, focusing on those who do not currently have a biographical entry on Wikipedia.

The authors employed original research methods, including interviews, oral histories, and transcriptions of existing recordings, to bring forth the richness of these women's experiences. And contributors critically engaged with the issues of knowledge equity and gender parity throughout their biographical chapters.

This volume not only contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the historical development of the Parliament of the World's Religions but also challenges existing norms and practices, an important goal of the Parliament's Women's Task Force. By expanding our knowledge of significant women and recognizing diverse knowledge-making practices, we pave the way for a more inclusive representation of human history and we contribute to a future in which women are seen and valued.

This invaluable volume serves as a testament to the importance of biographical writing as a means of critiquing and reshaping traditional definitions of knowledge and traditional notions of women's roles, especially in religions. Through this constructive project, the Parliament, its editors and contributors hope to promote knowledge equity, challenge systemic biases, and work towards achieving gender parity not only on digital platforms, but in the world.

Thank you for joining us on this journey of uncovering and celebrating the diverse and impactful contributions of women in the world's religions.

In solidarity,

**Rev. HPs. Phyllis Currott**, Chair, Women's Task Force  
Parliament of the World's Religions

# *Towards a Fuller Embrace— The Evolution of Women’s Stories at the Parliament of the World’s Religions*

JONATHON EDER & MARY C. HAMLEN

## *Prologue*

How do we know what we know? That is the question that fuels epistemological inquiry and, more broadly, questions about current “facts” and historical accuracy. Whom we know and how we know them – which is ultimately a matter of perspective – is an essential part of that equation. In this chapter, we foreground the importance of the women discussed in this volume by placing their work in the context of the significant contributions of the women who came before them as speakers at the plenary sessions of the original World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893. Who were these original women leaders at this gathering which has come to be “regarded as the birth of the interfaith movement” (Braybrooke 2022)? One could argue that they were the foremothers of today’s contemporary Parliaments who, like the so-called forefathers of the United States, represented a more exclusive body. And yet, in spite of, or one could say because of their social locations, their participation and contributions were groundbreaking. Their work brought attention to women’s voices and women’s issues at this original interfaith assembly. It also laid the foundation for a regeneration a century later, enabling a movement towards a fuller expression of women’s religious and spiritual experience in ongoing parliamentary proceedings. As this volume demonstrates, this evolving embrace of a greater diversity of faith traditions, spiritual practices, and cosmological understanding through the women at the contemporary parliaments reshapes, rebalances, and expands knowledge equity. Through getting to know these women, we get to know a deeper and greater level of what exists as lived religious experience.

A retrospective analysis of women’s voices and vision from the original parliament can surface historical tension. That tension is present in the co-authors’



perspectives in this piece. Jonathon Eder attends to the way the women speakers at the original parliament emerged from and reflected the educational and cultural orientations of the conference organizers, who were overwhelmingly male, white, and champions of a Western liberal ethic. These women's combined voices, while profound and visionary, nonetheless omitted much of women's religious and spiritual experience due to class, cultural, national as well as religious differences.

Mary Hamlen bases her review of women and the modern parliaments on a perspective that raises up the women who spoke at the original parliament as pioneers and activists who overcame significant obstacles as leaders in women's rights, women in religious leadership, and women in the academy, as well as in other areas, such as civil rights. Hamlen foregrounds how these women were, in practice, the foremothers of the more democratized contemporary parliaments of recent decades, which she discusses in the chapter. Both perspectives are true and relevant to understanding the importance of women's voices in the evolution of this world interfaith assembly from the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions to their renewal in 1993 as the Parliament of the World's Religions.

## ***Women at the Original 1893 World's Parliament of Religions—How the West Attempted to be One***

JONATHON EDER

More than four thousand people attended each of the seventeen daily programs in September 1893 at the groundbreaking, landmark World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Illinois (Parliament of the World's Religions, n.d., 1893 Chicago). Of the nineteen women whose addresses were part of the main plenary program, only one hailed from outside the bounds of the United States and Great Britain. The geographic outlier was Miss Jeanne (aka Jane) Sorabji of Bombay, India. However, as the parliamentary records pointed out, Sorabji was, in fact, not so distant from the other women. The report read, "A young lady from Bombay, Miss Jean [*sic*] Sorabji, being introduced as a representative of the Parsees, hastened to explain that it was only in point of race that she could claim to belong to that stock. Her father, at the age of eighteen, had been brought to the knowledge and faith of Jesus Christ to which she most earnestly adhered. She brought a message of love and salutation from her Christian fellow-countrymen to the women of America" (Barrows 1893, 1:106). Jeanne's mother, Francina Ford Sorabji, founded the Victoria Hall School for Girls in Poona. Her sister was Cornelia Sorabji, the first Indian woman to attend university in the United Kingdom, reading law at the University of Oxford. Subsequently, Cornelia became India's first woman lawyer. Jeanne Sorabji was as much a product of British colonial society in India as she was a representative of the complex matrix of culture and religion in her native land.

While Sorabji was a voice for Indian women at the 1893 Parliament, it was a very specific and targeted India: not the India of the Hindu majority or

its large Muslim population. It was men at the Parliament who spoke to those traditions. Universally, the women at the 1893 Parliament—including their one Asian representative—were intellectually inclined, well-educated in the Western canon, and committed to Progressive Era reforms. A wide swath of spiritual experience and religious practice was missing from their ranks. Nonetheless, they represented an impressive group of female trailblazers, many of whom shine brightly today in the pantheon of women’s history. Among those who presented addresses or had their speeches read were Frances Willard, the famed temperance advocate; suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose paper was read by the equally famous suffragist Susan B. Anthony; Mary Baker Eddy, founder and leader of the fast-growing new religious movement of Christian Science<sup>1</sup>; and Julia Ward Howe, author of the celebrated patriotic American anthem, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Their presence represented the conference organizers’ overall vision for the Parliament to exemplify the relevance of religion to educational, political, and social advances in the late nineteenth century. Mainstream Christianity was the dominant but not the only influence in the women’s presentations during the plenary sessions. Overall, the Parliament showcased women who were change agents in religion and various other fields, including the social sciences, the study of comparative religion, and political and social activism. As Ursula King stated in her 1993 article “Rediscovering Women’s Voices at the World’s Parliament of Religions,” “More important is that a hundred years ago already so many highly qualified women were official delegates at the parliament and gave plenary addresses” (328-29).

The Reverend Augusta Chapin, D.D., was Chair of the Women’s Committee at the Parliament and the only woman to chair a session during its proceedings. Chapin’s appearance and role at the Parliament were notable for a variety of reasons. Chapin was one of the first ordained women clergy members in the United States, entering the Universalist Church’s ministry in late 1863. As part of the parliamentary proceedings, she became the first woman in the United States to be a Doctor of Divinity. She received an honorary degree from Lombard University, a Universalist school of higher learning in Illinois. With that increased credentialing, she addressed the wider assembly at the opening and closing ceremonies. Chapin’s presence on the crowded dais, which was overwhelmingly male, indicated a special status as part of the inner circle of the Parliament’s leaders and luminaries. While her remarks were consistent with her life story and her views, the “universalism” about which she spoke was, in fact, more aspirational than actual. In describing recent progress for members of her sex, she noted that “now the doors are thrown open in our own and many other lands. Women are becoming masters of the languages in which the great sacred literatures of the world are written. They are earning the highest honors that the great universities have to bestow, and already in the field of Religion hundreds have been ordained

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<sup>1</sup>Eddy appointed Judge Septimus Hanna to read her address at the parliament: “Called to Boston by Mrs. Eddy in 1892 to serve as Editor of *The Christian Science Journal*, he and his, wife, Camilla, were periodically given private instruction by her. A year later, Mrs. Eddy chose Judge Hanna to read her address to the Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair” (Longyear, n.d.).

and thousands are freely speaking and teaching this new gospel of freedom and gentleness that has come to bless mankind” (Barrows 1893, 1:82). But the 1893 Parliament did not include women from “many other lands,” including from the ancestral homelands of Native Americans. That would have to wait another hundred years until the regeneration of the interfaith Parliaments in 1993.

As will be discussed in more detail in part two of this chapter, the biographies in this volume speak to the much more diversified expression of women’s spiritual insight and religious leadership as represented in the renewed parliaments of recent decades. These life stories reflect a commitment to women-centered spirituality, whereas the women of 1893 were proving themselves within established patriarchal structures. In Chapin’s view, had the Parliament taken place fifty years earlier, women could not have meaningfully contributed to it. In her opening day remarks, she stated, “Women could not have had a part in it in her own right for two reasons: one that her presence would not have been thought of or tolerated, and the other was that she herself was too weak, too timid and too unschooled to avail herself of such an opportunity” (Barrows 1893, 1:82).

### ***Jeanne Sorabji and Cultural Conformity at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions***

Jeanne Sorabji provides a valuable touchstone in exploring how what is now called The Parliament of the World’s Religions evolved from a gathering in 1893 aimed at achieving religious unity to one that now embraces religious diversity. Sorabji’s presence at the 1893 Parliament was significant in presenting to an American public and an international assembly a voice and face of non-Western womanhood. However, given the location of the Parliament in the United States and the cultural formation of its leadership, her address was necessarily tailored to appeal to and impress a Western outlook, one with a decided Anglo-American orientation.

The points that Sorabji made (as selected by John Henry Barrows in his two-volume history of the event) served as an apologetic for Indian women, describing how a certain stratum of Indian female society was progressing in accord with the habits, forms, and values of Western civilization. Sorabji painted a picture of an elite Indian female class that aspired to the standards of Western high culture, noting that “the Parsee and Brahman women in Bombay twenty years ago scarcely moved out of their houses, while to-day they have their libraries and reading rooms. They can converse on politics, enjoy a conversation and show in every movement culture and refinement above the common. Music, painting, horsemanship come as easily to them as spelling the English language correctly” (Sorabji as cited in Barrows 1893, 2:1037). Sorabji also emphasized Western religious influence in the educational experience of these women. “The Victoria high school has turned out grand and noble women, so also has the new high school for women in the native city of Poona,” observed Sorabji. “These schools have Christian women as principals. The college of Ahmedabad has a Parsee (Christian) lady as its head.” She concluded, “What women have done women can do” (Sorabji as cited in Barrows 1893, 2:1037).

Sorabji's remarks implied that Christianity, and by extension, Western culture, was a critical factor in advancing social and educational progress for Indian women. Her approach at the original Parliament reflected pressures to conform to the standards and norms of a dominant cultural order, even in the context of a purported international setting. Charles Bonney, as a leading visionary for the 1893 Parliament, enunciated the assembly's purpose as "a royal feast to which the representatives of every faith were asked to bring the richest fruits and the fairest flowers of their religion" (Bonney 1895, 324). Still, the globalism it represented was the world according to an established, largely Anglo-American Protestant perspective, especially as it concerned addresses by women at the Parliament. While there were some papers from Jewish American women at the proceedings, otherwise, the dominant female voice was that of mainstream Protestantism with liberal and rationalistic leanings. As Seager notes, "Protestant women spoke on ethics, the criminal justice system, women in the pulpit, and comparative religion. They naturally tended to hail from the liberal religion end of the spectrum" (Seager 1989, 315). None of the parliamentary sessions included a paper from a woman of Roman Catholic formation, let alone from any non-Western religious background. For Sorabji, it was necessary to present her address, titled "The Women of India," in a context that aligned with the perspectives of her American audience and the presumed vision of the Parliament's organizers: to show how Indian women were progressing in a way that was appreciable to those with an Anglo-American formation.

Sorabji's presence at the Parliament also reflected the complexities of the interrelations between the colonial world and the colonized. Twelve blocks away from the site of the Parliament, the Exposition featured "the Midway Plaisance, which was lined by concessionary stands, the so-called Bazaar of Nations, and exotic model villages representing the lifestyles and cultures of foreign lands—including the Native American" (Ziolkowski 1993, 7). It was against a tendency to exoticize non-Western cultures that Sorabji bristled. "Speaking to a local reporter, Sorabji remarked, '[T]he manner in which the people here gaze at a person is very embarrassing. I don't like it.' To convey that she was 'no savage,' Sorabji devised a strategy that returned the colonial gaze; it became a pivotal component of anti-colonial nationalism. She would meet these stares and then, turning to her observers, would address them in fluent English" (Ashutosh 2021).

The word "parliament" derives from the French word "parler," meaning to speak. Sorabji was clearly educated to speak in an Anglophilic voice, not one that spoke to the lived religious experience of most of her country women. In fact, her greeting was from her "Christian fellow-countrymen." Contemporary Parliaments of the World's Religions have worked to reverse the process of conformity: creating events and programs that generously allow for new voices to emerge, including those that represent previously unrecognized or marginalized spiritual and religious experience. The organizers of the original Parliament had a monistic objective for its outcome, assuming that diverse religious expressions could align and conform. Instead, what the Parliament ultimately showcased was complexity as opposed to unity. As Seager notes about the 1893

Parliament's outcome, "Having failed as a liberal quest for religious unity, the Parliament unintentionally turned out to be a revelation of the plurality of forces on the American and world scenes" (2009, xxxix). In contrast, the "modern" Parliaments, which have taken place since their renewal in 1993, have sought to expand acceptance of and respect for diversity and pluralism in world religion.

### ***Origins of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions***

The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions was the outgrowth of progressive thought leaders in Chicago, who felt that attention to world religion deserved a dedicated place at an exposition that sought to celebrate America's emergence as a leading light of world civilization. As a result, the organizers wished to present both a variety of religious thought and what they saw as the best reflection of American culture and religion. The 1893 Chicago's World's fair took the name of the Columbian Exposition as a tribute to the Spanish/Genoan expeditionary, celebrated for opening the New World to European civilization in 1492. As such, it was America's answer to the great world's fairs that predated it in Europe, notably the Crystal Palace Exposition in England in 1851, spearheaded by Prince Albert; and the Paris Exposition of 1889, famous for debuting the Eiffel Tower as a technological marvel and an enduring tourist attraction. It was America's "great Gilded Age Fair" (Seager 2009, xiii). "[It] occupied over one square mile and filled more than two hundred buildings. A single exhibit hall had enough interior volume to have housed the U.S. Capitol, the Great Pyramid, Winchester Cathedral, Madison Square Garden, and St. Paul's Cathedral, all at the same time" (Larson 2004, 43). This was the backdrop and context in which the first World's Parliament of Religions took place.

Although the fair's organizers missed the 400th anniversary by a year "due to construction delays and competing celebrations in New York City," (Seager 2009, xxv), the 1893 exposition was an extraordinary triumph of architectural and technological design. It offered a dazzling spectacle of new inventions, installations on different cultures, and the creation of a city within a city—dubbed the White City as its buildings generally presented a façade of that color. The event ran from May 1 to October 31 and "was wildly popular. In the six months that it operated, 27 million people visited the fair" (PBS.org, n.d.). The World's Parliament of Religions opened on September 11, 1893, and continued over the next two weeks and a half, earning the appellation of a "seventeen-day wonder." Charles Carroll Bonney, a Chicago educator and jurist, was one of the key drivers behind instituting world congresses of religion as part of the "Columbiad." Bonney wanted to counteract the prospect that the world's fair in Chicago would "descend to merely extolling man's mechanical and material victories" (Feldman, 1967, 180). The congresses for different religious groups would "culminate in a parliament of world faiths" (Feldman, 180). Thus, the world's first parliament of religions was born.

Other leading progressives credited for spearheading the World's Parliament of Religions include the radical religionist Jenkins Lloyd Jones of All Souls Church in Chicago. A Unitarian, Jones "dropped the word 'Unitarian'" from

the church's name as too confining. "Jones' idea of universal religion inspired the World's Parliament of Religion" (Jones Papers 2010). Among female progenitors of the religious congresses and the Parliament was the Chicago socialite Ellen Martin Henrotin, "a women's club leader and labor and social reformer," who became vice president of the Board of Lady Managers of the World Congress of Religions (James 1971, 181.) John Henry Barrows assumed the mantle of organizing much of the Parliament. Barrows was minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Chicago and would later be president of Oberlin College in Ohio. In his massive two-volume retrospective on the Parliament, *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*, Barrows identified the Parliament's purpose in quasi millennialist terms. He wrote, "Religion, like the white light of heaven, has been broken into many-colored fragments by the prisms of men. One of the objects of the Parliament of Religions has been to change this many-colored radiance back into the white light of heavenly truth" (1:3). In her memoir of her father, Mary Eleanor Barrows remembered comments he made on the occasion of the World's Parliament of Religions: "I am considered very liberal and tolerant in theology, but I have no respect for the blatant materialism that is all the while making mouths at the Gospel of Christ" (Barrows 1904, 269). The visionaries behind the original World's Parliament of Religions saw in it the potential to provide a moral and spiritual compass for the modern world.

In pursuit of forwarding world religious unity, Barrows sent thousands of letters to interest world leaders in religion to come to Chicago to make up the Parliament. The most noteworthy result was a critical mass of spiritual and religious thinkers and leaders from Asia who came to Chicago for the proceedings to engage with what otherwise was largely a mainstream Christian affair, with a decent representation of American Jewry. Few African American religionists were included; Mormons were absent; and Muslim inclusion was minimal. And, as Amy Kittlestrom has pointed out, "the Parliament's so-called world's religions excluded the Indigenous religious traditions of the Americas, Africa, and Australia while privileging both in numbers and ideological influence the Protestant Christianity of the Parliament's organizers" (2009, 244).

### ***East Meets West at the World Parliament of Religions***

Scholars have commented on the startling impression made by the Asian presence at the Parliament. Kittlestrom has referred to "the dramatic popular success of the Asian delegates to Chicago—particularly the eloquent Vivekananda and the handsome Ceylonese Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala" (2009, 244). Richard Seager has noted that "the Parliament served as a launching pad for the pioneering efforts of figures like Anagarika Dharmapala, Shaku Soen, and Vivekananda to carry to the West the religions of the East" (2009, 169). Along with Dharmapala, the Japanese Zen Buddhist Shaku Soen was at the forefront of communicating about and establishing various Buddhist practices in the United States. Swami Vivekananda's addresses at the Parliament were among its most celebrated,

earning him the reputation of introducing Hinduism to the American public. Still, as Kittlestrom has also observed, “Often trained in Christian schools, largely learned in Western traditions, delegates like Vivekananda, Dharmapala, Virchand Gandhi, and Soyen Shaku were ably prepared to appropriate the Parliament credo of unity and brotherhood to their own culturally specific agendas” (2009, 245). Virchand Gandhi addressed the Parliament on “Ethics and History of the Jains” (Houghton 1893, 732-736). While the agendas of their addresses embraced universal themes appropriate to the intent of the Parliament in its efforts to create common ground among world religions, it was men who were speaking on behalf of their cultures and spiritual traditions. Multiculturalism in 1893 in Chicago meant deliberations among men.

### ***Women at the World’s Parliament of Religions***

Addresses by women at the Parliament reflected a relatively homogenous group: almost all were White, American, well-educated, and some of significant financial means.<sup>2</sup> A disproportionate number were Unitarians, either as clergy or simply as adherents. And many were already famous and would become even more so over time. Almost all enjoy a strong digital presence today. Of the nineteen women presenters, currently, sixteen have Wikipedia biographies, and most are extensive, drawing from ample secondary sources. In addition to the women noted above—Stanton, Anthony, Willard, Eddy, and Howe—the other presenters included an impressive array of women distinguished as academicians, rights activists, religious leaders, and writers. Among their number were Eliza Sunderland, Ph.D., a leader in the Unitarian church, a scholar of world religion, and “one of the first women in the United States to head a public secondary school” (Lavan 2003); Laura Ormiston Chant, the British social reformer, feminist, and author; Josephine Lazarus, sister of the famous poet, Emma Lazarus, daughter of one of the oldest and foremost Jewish families in New York, and “a vocal advocate of Reform efforts to assimilate eastern European Jews” (Seager 1989, 314); and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, recognized at the time as the first woman in the United States to be ordained by a recognized Protestant denomination.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Alice Cunningham Fletcher and Fannie Barrier Williams***

Alice Cunningham Fletcher and Frances “Fannie” Barrier Williams were two of the women who spoke at the plenary sessions of the 1893 Parliament whose stories are particularly relevant to the purposes of this volume. Both were highly

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<sup>2</sup>As examples, Julia Ward Howe came from a well-to-do New York City family, was educated by private tutors, and traveled in elite social circles through her family connections (Goodwin, 2002); Elizabeth Cady Stanton “grew up amidst wealth and privilege, the daughter of Daniel Cady, a prominent judge” (Harper n.d.); Josephine Lazarus’s father was a wealthy sugar merchant, scion of one of the oldest Jewish families in New York (Elwell, 2022); Fannie Barrier Williams, the only African American woman to speak at the Parliament, was a member of the midwestern Black aristocracy, and was wife of S. Laing Williams, a successful Chicago attorney (Edwards 2005).

<sup>3</sup>In 1851, [Blackwell] was granted a license to preach by the Congregational Church and the following year she became minister of a Congregationalist Church in South Butler, New York. Luther Lee, a socially radical Methodist minister ordained her, making her the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the United States. In 1854, due to poor health and doctrinal doubts, she resigned her position with the church, focusing instead on her work for women’s rights” (Schlesinger, “Biography”).

accomplished women of great learning, passion, and integrity, but each enjoyed a privileged status as it related to the topics of their speeches. Issues related to class and race informed their outlooks in ways that reverberate today, more than one hundred years later. Fletcher was affiliated with the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, distinguishing herself as an anthropologist and expert on American Indian life. “By the last decade of the nineteenth century [she] had become a leading figure in scientific circles” (Library of Congress, n.d.). As an ethnologist, however, she was a White person studying and interpreting the character and culture of another race.

Barrier Williams was the lone African American woman to give an address at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions. She enjoyed a privileged place within America’s Black elite and was a prominent figure in educational and civil rights circles in Washington, DC, and then in Chicago. As noted by Barrier Williams’s biographer Wanda A. Hendricks, “The local community of black women in Chicago recognized [Barrier Williams’s] acumen. She joined a powerful cast that was dedicated to meeting the social welfare needs of the city’s black community that included anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett and reformer Elizabeth Lindsay Davis”<sup>4</sup> (2014, 5). An examination of Fletcher’s and Barrier Williams’s addresses and their careers reveals both the promise and limitations of the dominant cultural views and attitudes that informed the program at the 1893 Parliament.

Fletcher’s address occurred on the twelfth day of the Parliament and was titled “The Religion of the North American Indians.” In it, she observed the unique ethnographic opportunity to study peoples of what she presumed to be a largely unbroken heritage of thousands of years. She maintained that “the point to be emphasized is, that here in North America exists a people of great antiquity that has conserved social and religious forms which, speaking broadly, antedate those of the historic periods of the East” (Houghton 1893, 584-85). For Fletcher this meant that “we can study not only the slow growth of society, but the equally slow and unequal development of man’s mental and spiritual nature” (Houghton 1893, 585). The “otherness” of the Native American recurred throughout her comments. For example, she noted that “this race, like our own, is composed of many peoples speaking different languages, languages belonging to widely different stocks” (Houghton 1893, 584).

Fletcher described North American Indian religion as essentially animist, stating, “The aboriginal American’s feeling concerning God seems to indicate a power, mysterious, unknowable, unnamable, that animates all nature. From this power, in some unexplained way, proceeded in the past ages certain generic types, prototypes of everything in the world, and these still exist, but they are invisible to man in this natural state, being spirit types, although he can behold and hear them speak in his supernatural vision” (Houghton 1893, 585).

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<sup>4</sup> “Elizabeth Lindsay Davis was a writer, teacher, leader in the African American women’s club and settlement house movements.” She and her husband moved to Chicago in 1893, where “[she] served as the first secretary of the Ida B. Wells Club. Anti-lynching activist and journalist Ida B. Wells founded the club in 1893 to aid local African American residents” (Ryerson).



She provided a picture of Native American ceremonies and animal totems—“a tuft of hair,” or a feather—which she explained helped to connect the Indian mind to the supernatural. Building upon her assessment of the deep influence of nature on the Native American, she opined on its effect as distinguished from Western notions of self-determination. She explained, “The belief that everything was alive and active, to help or hinder man prevented development of individual responsibility. Success or failure was not caused solely by a man’s own actions or shortcomings, but because he was helped or hindered by some one of these occult powers” (Houghton 1893, 586).

Prior to participation in the Parliament, Fletcher’s career involved contributing to a United States Governmental program to deed property through “allotments” to Native Americans, which proved unsuccessful as it conflicted with Indigenous Americans’ understanding of human relationship to the land. The concept of privately held real estate was largely alien to Native American culture. Fletcher helped write the “Dawes Act” of 1887, which “authorized the President to break up reservation land, which was held in common by members of a tribe, into small allotments to be parceled out to individuals” (National Archives, “Dawes Act”). Contemporary perspectives on Fletcher’s legacy see her actions as representative of Western paternalism towards the Native American.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Fletcher’s remarks at the Parliament also conveyed respect and sympathy for Native American culture:

*Hospitality was a marked virtue in the race. The lodge was never closed, or the last morsel of food ever refused to the needy. The richest man was not he who possessed the most, but he who has given away the most. The deeply rooted principle of giving is a great obstacle in the way of civilizing the Indians, as civilization depends so largely upon the accumulation of property.*

*In every home the importance of peace was taught, and it was the sole object of a peculiar ceremony which was once widely obtained over the Valley of the Mississippi—the Calumet or Sacred Pipe ceremony. (Houghton 1893, 587)*

Fletcher concluded her address at the Parliament by making note of the absence of the Indigenous American at the proceedings, while extending the hope that one of the totems that she, the ethnologist, had described might serve as an offering of peace to the gathered international assembly:

*We are recognizing to-day that God’s family is a large one and that human sympathy is strong. Upon this platform have been gathered men from every race of the Eastern world, but the race that for centuries was the sole possessor of the Western continent has not been represented. No American Indian has told us how his people have*

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<sup>5</sup> “Fletcher’s efforts to improve the condition and experiences of Native Americans reflected the paternalistic attitude towards non-European cultures that was characteristic of the nineteenth century and emphasized assimilation to Western-European culture and ideas. Her work regarding Indian allotments and the Dawes Act, reflects these attitudes. In spite of this, her field notes, correspondence, and allotment records shed light on the history of U.S. Indian policy, 19th century ethnology, and Native culture” (Smithsonian, “Alice Cunningham Fletcher Papers-Winnebago allotment record book Box: 4B, 1887-89”).

*sought after God through the dim ages of the past. He is not here, but cannot his sacred symbol serve its ancient office once more and bring him and us together in the bonds of peace and brotherhood? (Houghton 1893, 587)*

As the founder of Harvard's Pluralism Project, Diana Eck, pointed out, "no late-twentieth century Parliament would conceive of having an anthropologist speak for the native peoples of America" (King, 339). In keeping with Eck's observation, this volume reflects contemporary parliaments' respect for and recognition of Indigenous peoples as important religious actors and leaders. The chapter on Iyekiyaipiwiñ Darlene St. Clair explores the development of a feminist Native American perspective that speaks directly to critical contemporary social and environmental justice issues.

Fannie Barrier Williams was integral in giving African Americans a measure of leadership at the Chicago World's Fair. Prior to her address at the Parliament, "she achieved considerable recognition when she waged a battle for the representation of African-Americans at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. Her efforts resulted in "having two staff appointments designated for African-Americans and having African-American interests included in the program" (Western New York Suffragists 2023). In addition, on May 18, a couple of weeks into the Columbian Exposition, Barrier Williams gave an address as part of the World's Congress of Representative Women, which placed her in the company of "internationally known women leaders from around the world.<sup>6</sup> When [she] was invited to speak at this event, she transitioned from a local figure to a national celebrity (Hendricks, 82).

Barrier Williams's subsequent address a few months later at the World's Parliament of Religions was titled "What Can Religion Further Do To Advance the Condition of the America Negro?" It was a forceful denunciation of American hypocrisy around ideals of freedom and equality as it pertained to members of her race. She maintained, "In nothing do the American people so contradict the spirit of their institutions, the high sentiments of their civilization, and the maxims of their religion, as they do in practically denying to our colored men and women the full rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Barrows 1893, 2:1114-15). However, Barrier Williams represented a class of African Americans that was often of mixed race and endowed with the financial, educational, and political means to have greater entrée into various upper echelons of liberally minded White society. While Barrier Williams's critique of exploitation of African Americans both during the time of slavery and since "emancipation" was stirring and uncompromising, she necessarily approached her subject as partially that of an outsider.

Barrier Williams grew up in the village of Brockport, New York, about twenty miles outside of Rochester. Hendricks observes, "The village was a secure and supportive place for Barrier. Although white citizens overwhelmingly outnumbered blacks, she never felt out of place, threatened, or intimidated...

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<sup>6</sup> The title of Barrier Williams's address at the World's Congress of Representative Women" was "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation" (Hendricks, 82).

Barrier enjoyed an unsegregated childhood and early adulthood that was free of residential, educational, religious, and social separation along race lines” (2014, 10). As a person of color who knew firsthand how things could be different, the tenor of Barrier Williams’s remarks conveyed outrage at the ravages of prejudice and repression meted upon Black America. As someone on the frontlines of creating better opportunities for Black women in her adopted city of Chicago, Barrier Williams was conscious of the traumatic consequences of slavery and subsequent forms of discrimination for the African American family. In her speech, Barrier Williams noted that “in nothing was slavery so savage and relentless as in its attempted destruction of the family instincts of the negro race in America. Individuals, not families; shelters, not homes; herding, not marriages; were the cardinal sins in that system of horrors” (Houghton 1893, 635). “Barrier Williams spent nearly forty years in the second-largest city in the country defending women and African Americans and helping to shape the municipal policies that affected their lives” (Hendricks 2014, 7).

Barrier Williams’s familial and educational experience accustomed her to a level of economic security and educational advantages that were out of reach for most African Americans in her time. Her father, Anthony Barrier, was a successful businessman in Brockport, owning a barbershop and other real estate. He “was born to a Frenchman and a free black woman on November 29, 1824, in Philadelphia” (Hendricks 2014, 11). Barrier married “a young mixed race woman named Harriet Prince. Their marriage was officiated by a white minister in a predominantly white Baptist church.” As Hendricks notes, “The [marriage] announcement did not mention the race of the couple” (2014, 18). Barriers’ educational opportunities more or less mirrored those of Whites in Brockport, and “in 1870, she became the first African-American graduate of the teacher training college Brockport State Normal School, which is now SUNY Brockport” (Black Women’s Suffrage, n.d.).

Barrier Williams’s ensuing career as an educator and civil and women’s rights activist took her to Washington, DC, and then to Chicago. In Washington, she met and married “the mixed-race Samuel Laing Williams in 1887,” and “the couple relocated to what was then the western outpost of Chicago” (Hendricks 2014, 3). Laing Williams would go on to become a successful attorney in the city. As a spokesperson for racial civil rights, Barrier Williams experienced the unique position of being “racialized” by White society while also having experienced her early life as unsegregated from Whites and free from racial bigotry and prejudice. Moreover, as a member of the Black elite in Washington and Chicago, she interacted and developed close relationships with White progressives, such as the Reverend Jenkins Jones, whose All Souls Unitarian Church she joined. “With the aid of white peers such as fellow Unitarian Celia Parker Woolley,<sup>7</sup> and Chicago Woman’s Club member and second president of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs Ellen Henrotin, [Barrier Williams] became one of the few black female presenters at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, the only black woman to

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<sup>7</sup> Woolley was also one of the nineteen women who presented at the plenary sessions of 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions.

present on the main program at the Parliament of Religions in September 1893, and the first black member of the Chicago Woman's Club (CWC)" (Hendricks 2014, 4-5). The prestigious Chicago Woman's Club "was dominated by well-to-do white women" eventually becoming involved in social reform: "most notably the improvement of state facilities for dependent children, orphans, and female prisoners, as well as legislation for compulsory education and against child labor" (Knupfer 2005).

Barrier Williams's educational and social pedigree lent itself to embracing and advocating for religious thought seeded in rationality and exercise of the intellect. While a powerful advocate for Black Americans, she also distanced herself from many dimensions of the Black church. As Hendricks notes, "Barrier's connection to the elite black culture in the city led her to insist in later years that black aristocrats worshipped differently from the masses because their style of worship symbolized enlightenment's triumph over the demonstrative displays of emotion that were so prevalent among the uneducated" (35). One can intuit the influence of this religious preference in Barrier Williams's address in the concern she expressed that "the churches have sent among us too many ministers who have had no sort of preparation and fitness for the work assigned to them." She allowed for "a due regard for the highly capable colored ministers of the country," but averred that she felt "no hesitancy in saying that the advancement of our condition is more hindered by a large part of the ministry entrusted with leadership than by any other single cause" (Houghton 1893, 634). Nonetheless, in her speech, Barrier Williams also recognized a singular capacity for religious insight in the African American experience—despite its isolation from educational opportunity. "Though the Bible was not an open book to the negro before emancipation, thousands of enslaved men and women of the negro race learned more than was taught them," she asserted. "Thousands of them realized the deeper meanings, the sweeter consolations, and the spiritual awakenings that are a part of the religious experiences of all Christians" (Houghton 1893, 633).

Barrier Williams was a powerful advocate for civil rights for African Americans. Within the context of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, her presence represented what Hendricks refers to as "the complexities of the life of Fannie Barrier Williams" (3) in terms of the different worlds she navigated in American society. Future Parliaments of the World's Religions would provide for a greater range of African American religious experience and for African American women, as represented by this volume's chapter on Reverend Dr. Barbara Lewis King.

### ***Pluralism at the World's Parliament of Religion***

As Richard Hughes Seager argued in his analysis of the original Parliament, while it failed in its quest for 'world religious unity,' it was "a harbinger of the rise of the idea of religious pluralism" (2009, xxxix). The orchestrators of the original Parliament were committed to a vision of world religious unity based in Christian idealism. For Bonney, the enlightening influence around which world religious practices coalesced could be found in the Christian Bible's New Testament:

*In a certain high and representative sense, the Parliament of Religions was an exemplification of monism in religion. For it showed that with all the differences in the forms of religion, there is, nevertheless, something underlying them all, which constitutes an incorruptible and indestructible bond of brotherhood, which, like a golden cord, binds all the races of men in one grand fraternity of love and service. What that enduring something is, may be found quite explicitly set forth in the Christian Scriptures. The Gospel of St. John declares, among many similar things, that there is a True Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world; namely, the light of the Word which was in the beginning with God, and which was made flesh and dwelt among men in the form of the same Jesus whose prayer voiced the daily supplications of the Parliament of Religions. (St. John, i, 9) (1895, 323)*

Contemporary Parliaments have recognized the complex pluralism at work in the world today, providing for much greater diversity of spiritual and religious voices in its programming. As a result, feminine-inspired and women-led spirituality in a variety of global expressions has enjoyed a place and prominence in the Parliament, even if many of their voices have not yet received the same degree of respect and recognition in the academy and in conventional sources of knowledge, both online and in print. Knowledge equity is thus a work in progress.

Seager has noted that the original World's Parliament of Religions "can usefully be conceived as an event that was meant to be quintessentially modern, but turned out in the end to point to the fracturing process and the collapse of meta-narratives that many see as the hallmark of post-modernity" (2009, 172). As such, a more appropriate designation for the contemporary Parliaments may be as "postmodern" as opposed to "modern." They have resisted the original Parliament's vision to marry varied forms of world religious experience into a type of monolithic universalism: "to change this many-colored radiance back into the white light of heavenly truth." Instead, they have honored differences and their "many-colored fragments" as more representative of the actual lived experience and spiritual adventure of humankind. This shift has had a particular resonance for women in religion in their emergence out of the shadow of paternalism into their own light, taking leading roles in the contemporary Parliaments.

### ***The Legacy and the Future***

Jeanne Sorabji concluded her speech at the Parliament with a bold prediction for the "Women of India," stating that "my countrywomen will soon be spoken of as the greatest scientists, artists, mathematicians and preachers of the world" (Barrows 1893, 2:1038). While Sorabji's national pride may not have been as ecumenical as would have been perhaps ideal in a global assembly like the World's Parliament of Religions, her words signaled that the future was not just for women who enjoyed the advantages of the economically and politically dominant West, but also for women of the then colonized world or today's Global South. Today's Parliaments of the World's Religions have recognized the greatness of women's contributions as religious and cultural leaders and activists in a wide variety of global and diverse spiritual settings. As such, de-colonialism in the context of a

global interfaith assembly like the Parliament of the World's Religions is as much about freeing consciousness from oppressive structures in any society as it is about liberating a people or a part of the world from external cultural domination.

This volume resonates with the liberating experience of women spiritual pathbreakers whose stories change our understanding of how religion and spirituality exist and can transform the world for the marginalized, the unrepresented, the outsider, and the dispossessed. These stories represent an expanded view of the power and value of womanhood beyond what was present at the original Parliament. This volume presents the voices of women who overcame economic and cultural disadvantages to become spiritual luminaries and leaders. Still, their presence owes a debt to those largely first-wave feminists who made up the bulk of the presenters in 1893 in Chicago. In her address "What is Religion?," given on the penultimate sixteenth day of the Parliament, Julia Ward Howe asserted that "any religion which will sacrifice a certain set of human beings for the enjoyment or aggrandizement or advantage of another is no religion," adding that "any religion which sacrifices women to the brutality of men is no religion." She then implored that "from this Parliament let some valorous, new, strong, and courageous influence go forth" (Barrows 1893, 2:1251). This volume uncovers various expressions of the profound, sometimes radical, influence of women's voices and stories in today's Parliaments of the World's Religions.

## ***Women and the Parliaments of the World's Religions Redux, 1993 and Beyond —In Diversity, Wholeness***

MARY C. HAMLEN

### ***1993 and into the Future***

Without a doubt, the world looked very different in 1993, when interfaith organizers in Chicago envisioned a centenary celebration of the 1893 Parliament. Key changes included the growing religious pluralism within the US (Eck 2002), the emergence of global ecumenism and the World Council of Churches, changes in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*, the post-colonial movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and social movements such as Indigenous rights, women's rights, and gay liberation movements (Marshall 2015). There were also many significant political events that shaped the world, including two world wars, independence battles, and the Cold War, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the nuclear arms race, the beginning development of the internet, neoliberalism and globalization, and the environmental movement (Marshall 2015). The easy confidence of Protestant leaders from the 1893 Parliament would be inconceivable today. Nevertheless, there remains a stubborn presence of western privilege and patriarchal norms that must continue to be challenged and interrogated today (see, for example, LaDuke

2002; Kazam et al. 2021).

Since 1993, six other parliaments have been held to date: Cape Town in 1999, Barcelona in 2004, Melbourne in 2009, Salt Lake City in 2015, Toronto in 2018, a virtual gathering in 2021, and Chicago in 2023 (Parliament of the World's Religions, n.d."About"). Women have been involved in the modern Parliaments in many ways: as religious leaders, workshop speakers, artists, exhibitors, and participants. As Marshall (2015) has noted, interfaith work has fluctuated between "models that implicitly favored predominantly top-down approaches (a rather traditional religious model)" and those that "favored more self-consciously 'bottom-up' or grassroots models." This tension between models remains a part of interfaith discourse, but the modern Parliaments demonstrate a shift over time toward a greater emphasis on the grassroots model. The greater inclusion of women and non-binary persons from many backgrounds and faiths reveals how a grassroots model can be transformational, largely because it allows for a greater diversity of representation. That diversity, including gender diversity, has and continues to shape the Parliament, moving it far beyond the chauvinism of the 1893 event.

In addition to having a greater diversity of representation at the modern parliaments, there has also been a shift in the way culture is represented. Artists and performers from diverse traditions share their artistic talents on equal footing. Activities outside the main plenary allow space for exploring music, prayer, sacred ritual, art, and other multi-sensory experiences of the divine (see, for example, Barratt 2015). The modern Parliaments create a space for encounter that is not based solely on rational thought or a study of comparative religion in which one's core tenets of faith are expounded. While information sharing and speeches form a portion of the gathering, one could argue that this is not the truly transforming nature of the event. As Kay Lindhal expresses it:

*The Parliament provides a lived experience of inclusion on a grand scale. Everyone is welcome to attend, from renowned religious leaders, theologians and academicians to those who follow no particular faith, from those representing their traditions or spiritual paths to those who are passionate activists for good in the world. It is a kaleidoscope of diversity, a potpourri of sights, sounds, and smells. It is an opportunity to become aware that we are all connected with each other; we are all members of a global family. It is a taste of being the beloved community." (TIO Staff 2015)*

### ***Knowledge Equity and the Modern/Postmodern Parliaments***

Knowledge equity is a movement to expand access to education for all people and remove barriers that prevent marginalized groups from accessing educational opportunities. It is closely linked to a larger conversation about what constitutes knowledge, whose history is foregrounded in educational systems, and whose is suppressed. Discussions around themes including epistemology, colonialism and racism, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and multiple ways of knowing all inform the search for knowledge equity.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*,

Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights the ways in which Western academic theory and research methods have been closely connected to colonization. Smith notes, “It is easy to think of the tools that the master created being generic and unbiased tools such as education, government, democracy and so forth. Not only are those terms not innocent but it is important to recognize that imperialism and colonialism enabled the design of specific tools to deal with Indigenous Peoples” (Smith 2021, 22). Smith argues that we need to generate different analytical tools and alternative methodologies that honor Indigenous Peoples’ wisdom. Within the interfaith movement, these discussions raise important questions. What are the theoretical underpinnings of the interfaith movement? How do we define what is religion, spirituality, or an ethical system? Who is welcome to the discussions, and what are the boundaries? Do we include dissenters, critics, and alternative views? Do we center the “leaders” of “major” religious groups? Do we highlight the words of the ordained, those with clerical authority or well-defined hierarchical roles? How do we include individuals who practice religions but may have no ecclesial role?

Beyond these questions of inclusion, using a lens of knowledge equity to examine interfaith activity requires us also to look at the language of interfaith gatherings with a critical eye. How do we speak about the divine? What pronouns, metaphors, and modes of speech do we use? Can reason and language even capture the divine, and do we learn by speaking and listening? What is the role of spiritual practice, meditation, or divine inspiration, in imparting knowledge? How do music, art, ritual, and non-verbal communication inform our understanding of ultimate reality? Can we learn about the divine from studying the beauty of the earth? In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests that an appreciation of beauty is key to understanding the world around us and that we lose something when we reduce the world to an external object to be studied rather than something of which we are a part. She describes the western scientific view of botany and Indigenous knowledge as “cross-pollinators.” “Science and art, matter and spirit, Indigenous knowledge and Western science - can they be goldenrod and asters for each other? When I am in their presence, their beauty asks me for reciprocity, to be the complementary color, to make something beautiful in response” (Kimmerer 2013 , 47).

Within the context of the modern gatherings of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, women have engaged in these questions, pushed for a broader understanding of knowledge, and insisted on including diverse voices in interfaith activities. They have brought their lived experience to the table and challenged the norms and assumptions of the dominant patriarchal White male paradigm and the enlightenment models of interfaith dialogue. They have advocated for women, yes, but also more broadly on behalf of communities of which they are a part. Intersectionality is present in their work in deep ways. The biographies of the women in this collection reflect this awareness of the need to listen to alternative or marginalized voices, uncover the Feminine Divine, model diverse leadership styles, advocate for shared action to solve global issues, and to question systems



of oppression that harm. These biographies also show that these women's sites of activism, and their engagement in the questions of knowledge equity, cannot be limited to their participation in the Parliament gatherings and projects. They have dedicated themselves to advocacy and truth-speaking in the academy, the civic sector, religious communities, and within their own circles of connection. By highlighting the entire scope of women's lives, these biographies underscore that the interfaith movement cannot be understood in isolation from the wider world in which it is situated. Indeed, the richness of the Parliament of the World's Religions is that it creates a space for encounter between people who have been shaped by very different realities in terms of geography, social location, religious or spiritual tradition, gender, sexuality, ability, and other factors. The more diverse the gatherings are, the broader the range of questions raised and perspectives shared. In this way, one can argue that the Parliament provides an important case study of how norms have changed over time. By comparing the work of women in the modern Parliaments to the model provided in the original 1893 Parliament, we can see the ways in which questions of knowledge equity have come to the foreground in recent years. While there is more to be done, the groundwork has been laid for productive engagement in the future.

### ***Global Ethic and a Call to Guiding Institutions***

The 1993 Parliament is probably best known for having produced the statement "Towards a Global Ethic." Drafted by the Catholic priest and Swiss theologian Hans Küng and discussed by the Parliament assembly, the Global Ethic affirmed four basic directives that participants felt could be affirmed by all religious traditions. These were identified as commitments to cultures of "non-violence and respect for life," "solidarity and a just economic order," "tolerance and a life of truthfulness," and "equal rights and partnership between men and women" (Parliament of the World's Religions, n.d. Global Ethic). The document was circulated widely after the event and discussed in faith communities and academic circles.

At the 1999 Parliament in Cape Town, South Africa, a further discussion on the Global Ethic resulted in "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions" to implement changes based on these ethics. The document was further revised in 2015 (Parliament of the World's Religions 2015a). This document makes clear that the leaders of the Parliament believe that stating shared ethical norms alone is not enough to make real change in the world. "A Call to Our Guiding Institutions" reveals the intention of interfaith leaders to spur change in global systems that create injustice and oppression. These two documents have not been left to sit on shelves gathering dust. Rather, the Parliament has continued to revise them and engage in critical reflection over time. Bringing more voices to the interfaith table has helped create ongoing dialogue about these aspirational documents. For example, the Global Ethic has been closely re-examined with regard to the need for a shared ethic around care of creation. As a result, in 2018, a fifth directive on care for the earth was added to reflect contemporary religious perspectives on the urgency and centrality of care for the earth as a religious obligation.

These efforts to articulate a shared Global Ethic include diverse perspectives representing a somewhat different approach from the original Parliament. However, there is still an intellectualizing of religious thought aimed at finding common ground that echoes the goal of unity articulated at the 1893 Parliament. The original Parliament expressed a belief that there was a common thread of harmony that could be found in the various world religions. There was an affirmation that humanity was innately drawn to questions of ultimate reality and drawn to spiritual seeking. However, the organizers and many speakers, the majority of whom were Protestant, articulated this impulse as the natural seeking of the soul for God. They saw other religions as partial attempts that fell short of the truth, which they understood to be fully expressed in Christianity. The assertion by Vivekananda and Darampala, and others from Asia, affirming the worth and depth of their own religious traditions challenged and undermined this nativist assumption of the rightness and superiority of White western religious thoughts. The implied consensus that Protestants sought was rejected in favor of the insistence by the “other” that they stood as equals. By contrast, the Global Ethic expressly seeks to affirm five key basic ethical precepts that can be affirmed in all religious traditions, which puts the world’s religions on a more equal footing. However, some might object that distilling core ethical ideas into a universalizing ethic of four or five points is itself reductive.

### ***Diversification***

*A Parliament of Souls: In Search of Global Spirituality*, written by Michael Tobias and others, highlights the widening range of religious voices and the increased diversity of women presenters at the 1993 Parliament. The book was published in 1995 as a companion to the twenty-six part PBS documentary series by the same name, hosted and co-produced by Bettina Gray. The series included interviews with 28 religious leaders, six identified as women. Three of these were women who held positions of authority within their traditions. Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt (Tobias, Morrison, Gray 1995, 19) served on the Continental Board of Counselors for the Protection and Propagation of the Bahá’i Faith in the Americas. She also spoke about her heritage as an Indigenous woman in her remarks as a member of the Lakota nation. Two women represented Eastern traditions: Sister Jananti (39) from the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, London branch, who also served as their representative to the UN in Geneva; and Dr. Chatsumarn Kabil Singh (68), an ordained nun from Thailand and a renowned author of texts on women in Buddhism. Three well respected academics also were included: Drs. Diana Eck, Susannah Heschel and Azizah T. Al-Hibri. Eck (86) is a religious scholar best known for her work on religious pluralism in the United States and who led the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Susannah Heschel (210) is a well-respected scholar of Judaism. She taught in the Department of Religion at Case Western Reserve in Ohio, where she held the Abba Hillel Silver Chair in Jewish Studies. Dr. Azizah T. Al-Hibri (219) taught Islamic jurisprudence at the University of Richmond and founded the Muslim Women Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. In addition to these six women, the book includes 22 male

religious leaders from fourteen traditions, including Native American, Bahá'í, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While the diversity in both religious tradition and location marks a much broader range of voices from 1893, there are still gaps, especially in the absence of Latinx leaders.

### ***Indigenous Women***

Indigenous women have increasingly become a visible part of the Parliaments since 1993. They have been part of the broader conversation about Indigenous communities and their struggle for rights, including the right to practice Indigenous religions, the right to self-determination, control and protection of their traditional homelands, and the care and protection of the earth. Interfaith leaders at the Parliaments have addressed the need to redress colonial acts of terror and the intentional destruction of Indigenous cultures, including the removal of children from families in an attempt to strip them of their culture, language, community, and history. Winona LaDuke recalls joining a large delegation of Native Americans, including Iyekiyaipiwiñ Darlene St. Clair, at the 1999 Parliament in Cape Town, South Africa. While celebrating Nelson Mandela and “the long walk” to end apartheid in South Africa, LaDuke noted that “Native American delegates reminded the world’s dominant religious institutions that these same issues must be taken up in home countries” (LaDuke 2002, 171).

As Deborah Fulthorp outlines in her chapter, Iyekiyaipiwiñ Darlene St. Clair has been a significant voice for these concerns through her participation in the 1993, 1999, and 2015 Parliaments. Much of St. Clair’s work challenges educational systems and historical narratives that erase native traditions and history. She pushes not only for the inclusion of the facts of Native American history but also for a shift in the very approach to education by lifting up and centering Dakota perspectives, grounded in spiritual truths, that offers an alternative understanding of our relationship as humans to each other and the earth.

This educational shift is important and requires a more significant change than simply including more voices or participants at a conference or parliament. Indigenous women have helped challenge the underlying principles of the original parliament’s gathering. What models do we adhere to when we bring people together from around the world at Parliament gatherings? How might these gatherings lead us to rethink our ways of being, doing, and acting? As Fulthorp notes, during the 2015 Parliament at Salt Lake City, situated on the traditional lands of the Goshute and Shoshone nations, the Parliament of the World’s Religions endorsed *An Indigenous Peoples’ Declaration for Action*. This declaration urged action on “Recognition and Respect of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights to Exist,” “An End to the Desecration of Sacred Sites,” “Love our Earth Mother,” “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” “End of Violence against Indigenous Women,” and “The End of Violence against Indigenous Peoples” (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2015b). These calls to action urge a genuine conversion of all people of faith away from colonial models that oppress Indigenous communities.

A powerful symbol of the ways in which modern Parliaments have

re-envisioned the centrality of Indigenous perspectives to the proceedings has been the central place of honor given a sacred fire lit at the last three in-person Parliaments, in Salt Lake City, Toronto, and Chicago. I observed that in each setting, the fire was set and attended by the first nations community. It served as a space for ceremony, and a welcome place for others to gather. Likewise, a lodge was present at the 2018 Toronto Parliament.

As is often the case for the women in this volume, St Clair's relationship with the Parliament is dynamic - she has influenced and been influenced by the gatherings. In the exchange of information, in the time spent with community, and in listening to others, she has transformed, taught, learned, and been connected with a wider web of people.

### ***Decolonization and Anti-racism***

Like St Clair, Teresia Hinga has been active in post-colonial discourses through her work as a scholar and a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She has highlighted the need for African women to speak on their own behalf, to step out from the shadows of colonial discourses that treat Africans as other and as subjects only to be viewed through colonial eyes and colonial value systems. In addition, she centers African women's perspectives in engagement with liberation theology and feminist thought. Most importantly for our purposes, she has contributed to the centering of African perspectives in the Parliament's work and the need to take African women's voices seriously in all matters. She was the initiator of the idea to hold the second modern parliament in Cape Town, which profoundly shaped the tone and focus of that event and the work of the Parliament. In her chapter on Hinga, Rosalind Hinton explores the trajectory of Hinga's scholarship and its influence in reshaping perspectives on African Christianity. Hinton writes in her chapter in this book that Hinga "surfaces the stories, ethical principles, and traditions endemic to African women's religious contributions globally. . . and revives hidden veins of knowledge that are suppressed by imperial and Western colonial systems of knowledge."

Jennifer Howe Peace was a beneficiary of Hinga's initiative in bringing the Parliament to Cape Town, South Africa in 1999. Along with other young interfaith activists associated with the American-based United Religions Initiative, she came to Cape Town, where she saw the potential of interreligious education to change the dynamics of the world. As Jonathon Eder traces in his biography of Peace, this led her to develop a new pedagogy for religious training, which she named *coformation*. This bold new approach involves shared learning by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students in their pastoral preparation, wherein their own beliefs are clarified through a deeper understanding of and respect for the religious convictions of those committed to other belief systems.

Another academic who has brought different perspectives to the Parliament is Pamela Ayo Yetunde. As a Black Buddhist chaplain, Yetunde brings to her interfaith work an eye to which narratives have been overlooked. In her chapter, Karma Lekshe Tsomo notes, "In her scholarly work, she wrote about African-American Buddhist same-gender-loving women because no one else

had.” Tsomo notes that in 2009, Yetunde presented as part of the panel on “Voices of Challenge and Wisdom: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on Faith, Spirituality, and Embodied Grace.” It is worth noting that workshops like this have become important spaces for discussing issues related to inclusion and justice. In these spaces, challenges to the dominant paradigm in religious traditions can be offered more directly than may be possible on the plenary stage. In the workshop space, women are able to bring diverse perspectives and different approaches in conversation with other panelists and participants. These spaces can have long reaching, generational impact. Note, for example, that Yetunde’s own experience of the Parliament led her to encourage her students to participate in a discussion on “How do you make interrelations chaplaincy education more inclusive?” This encouragement is an example of one of the ways that women often lead—empowering and mentoring the next generation (United Theological Seminary 2018).

### ***Women’s Task Force***

Another creative space for dialogue and action at the Parliament of the World’s Religions has been the Women’s Task Force established ahead of the 2015 Parliament in Salt Lake City and further developed under the leadership of Elizabeth Ursic ahead of the 2018 Parliament in Toronto. Ursic’s own educational work is situated in the community college setting, where she ensures access to quality education for students who may not have the means or opportunity to attend a four-year college. In her chapter on Ursic, Christine Meyer engages with Ursic’s complex and wide-ranging background, revealing how it is an asset to her spiritual and interfaith endeavors. Her work is not limited to encouraging the intellect but also engaging the heart through her music. This ability to “speak” in more than one language or mode of being is another example of the ways that women bring different orientations to leadership. Ursic has a collaborative approach to leadership that encourages others and sees the value in inclusion and bringing different ways of knowing to the work of the Parliament. Task teams provide the energy to get work done between the major parliament gatherings held every five years. Ursic’s leadership on the Women’s Task Force, along with the leadership of Phyllis Currott (author of the forward to this volume), who helped establish the Women’s Task Force in 2015, and Dolly Dastoor, (a subject of a chapter in this volume) who served as vice chair along with Ursic ahead of the 2018 Parliament, ensure that women’s issues remain at the forefront of the work of the Parliament at all times. For example, the Women’s Task Force recently condemned the brutal repression of women’s protests in Iran and called for Iran to be removed from the UN Commission for Women (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2022). This timely response to an ongoing crisis is only possible because of the existence of the task team and the tireless advocacy of leaders like Elizabeth Ursic.

### ***Women’s Leadership and Healing***

Audren Kitagawa is another religious leader who has emphasized feminine divine

wisdom. She is Divine Mother for the Light of Awareness Spiritual Family and has been closely connected to this community since she was in law school. After being a practicing lawyer, she shifted her local, professional focus to working at the global level to bring spirituality to the UN. As an advocate for women and children, she has worked to include women's voices and concerns in the work of international development and transnational actors in civil society. As the first woman to chair the Board of Trustees for the Parliament, she manifested a feminist and collaborative leadership style. As Mary Hamlen brings out in her chapter, Kitagawa's lifework has served as a testament to the power of women's spirituality in the way she has paid honor to her mothers, both spiritual and biological, and affirmed the ways women's leadership is essential for the health and future of the world.

Win Whelan reveals in her portrait of Dr. Barbara Lewis King a woman who changed the trajectory of her own life through a commitment to spirituality and healing. From modest beginnings as a child in Houston, Texas, raised by her grandmother, King became a major thought leader, hailed on two continents, North America and Africa. For King, engaging with personal issues around the African American experience was critical to her religious journey. King's ancestors were enslaved Africans, and during her life, she experienced both systemic racism and sexism. King chose to identify herself with her African heritage by claiming Ghanaian nationality, the area of Africa to which she has traced her familial heritage.

A career in social work and community activism eventually led her to the ministry. As founder of the Hillside International Chapel and Truth Center in Atlanta, Georgia, King created a place of psychological and spiritual transformation through a marriage of New Thought positivism and Christian awakening. Whelan notes that the global media icon, Oprah Winfrey, has called King the "Queen of New Thought." King's contributions to the Parliament of the World's Religions reflect the assembly's valuing of new religious movements. King gave major addresses at the 2015 Parliament in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the 2018 Parliament in Toronto.

Dr. Dolly Dastoor has combined her career as a clinical psychologist in researching and treating dementia with her spiritual convictions as a Zoroastrian. Dastoor's dedication to medical research, inter-religious dialogue, and global economic and educational opportunity for disadvantaged young women, along with her own religious path, has given her a unique view on addressing critical needs in contemporary society. In her chapter, Sheryl Johnson observes in her profile that "[Dastoor] has never sought attention or acclaim, yet her continuous service to her academic, medical, and religious communities and her mentoring of younger women have certainly 'sweetened' the lives of many." Dastoor has served as a Trustee of the Parliament of the World's Religions, as the Co-chair of the Parliament's Women's Task Force, and in 2020 was elected Vice-Chair of the Parliament. She has also "advocated for the inclusion and equitable treatment of practitioners and scholars representing non-dominant religious and spiritual traditions such as Zoroastrianism." Dastoor's work represents the contemporary

Parliaments' commitment to openness and equal respect for minority religious and spiritual practices.

Some women affirm that there are particular qualities that women bring to leadership that are different from men's. Certainly, many women favor a more collaborative style than the hierarchical and patriarchal model of the past. However, other women and non-binary folk are challenging binaries and any essentialism that negates the wide diversity of women's experience. Valarie Kaur, a keynote speaker at the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions, spoke to this when she noted, "In my world, though, God did not make "pink and blue souls." God made us in black, white, red, and every hue in between. Not just as men and women but as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people... Can we begin to use the word woman in ways that do not set us up over and against men and do not treat us all the same?" (Kaur 2012, 137).

## *Epilogue*

At the conclusion of her chapter on "Rediscovering Women's Voices" at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, Ursula King comes away with this observation on the relevance of these women in the contemporary world. She writes,

*Personally, I take away one strong message from the women speakers at the World's Parliament of Religions: women must be given an equal share in contributing, according to their full capacity in all areas of religion and spirituality. The current patriarchal structures of religious institutions do not permit this yet, but women of all faiths are striving to bring about a transformation which could be of great significance for the future of humankind. It is particularly in the area of personal and global spirituality that contemporary women are making many new connections or rediscovering ancient ones which provide great sources of inspiration and empowerment. But women also need public visibility and official recognition. (1993, 343)*

The biographies in this volume affirm King's vision that "women of all faiths are "striving to bring about a transformation which could be of great significance for the future of humankind." These stories indicate that the work and innovations of these women have had a profound impact on advancing humanity's welfare. King attests that, to some extent, their significance depends upon the recognition they receive. This volume aspires to bring to global consciousness the significance of these women in their service to humanity as religious, spiritual, educational, and societal leaders. They advance knowledge equity, which in turn benefits humankind overall.

Women in this volume are making new connections and rediscovering ancient ones, whether it is through the activism of Iyekiyaapiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair in applying the sacredness of Indigenous spiritual practice as salvific for the preservation of "mother earth" or in the work of Elizabeth Ursic with Parliament of the World's Religions Women's Task Force in defending women's freedoms on a global scale, or in the resonance between Dolly Dastoor's passionate advocacy

as a clinical psychologist for empathic treatment of those suffering from dementia and in her work as a practitioner of Zoroastrianism to uplift respect for and understanding of minority religions.

In developing the pedagogy of *coformation* in interreligious education, Jennifer Howe Peace's work testifies to the courage and innovative thinking required to empower contemporary religious leaders to bridge and heal divisions between religious groups while solidifying their commitment to their own faith traditions. Barbara Lewis King's ministry at the Hillside International Chapel and Truth Center in Atlanta, Georgia, reflected the transformative power of spirituality to uplift humanity out of legacies of discrimination and oppression. King's story serves as a witness to bringing the personal to the global as she has retraversed the Atlantic slave crossing of her ancestors to reclaim Ghanaian citizenship in Africa while maintaining a powerful presence as a thought leader in the United States. Similarly, Teresia Hinga was courageous and inspirational in revealing the power and vitality of African Christian spirituality as a powerful agent of positive change in Global Christianity.

As a Black Buddhist Chaplain, Pamela Ayo Yetunde has applied her experience as a same-gender-loving woman to open up new landscapes of thought and inclusion within an academic and religious context. Furthermore, Audrey Kitagawa has brought both the ancient and contemporary influence of the divine feminine into her work on women's and children's issues at the United Nations.

Taken as a whole, the stories in this volume provide a powerful testimony of the transformational impact of women as contemporary spiritual and religious leaders and activists. Their work penetrates at all levels of society and throughout the world. The women profiled in this volume reveal a spirit of holy inclusion: offering a Shekinah, a hospitable, nurturing place for the broken pieces of our world in their interactions at the Parliament of the World's Religions and in their overall actions in the world. They carry the idealism of the original 1893 Parliament in ways that effectively minister to the complex realities of contemporary global society.

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# *Uncovering Women’s Stories: She Said, but Not According to Wikipedia*

CHRISTINE MEYER

## *Introduction*

### *She Said and Knowledge Creation*

The 2022 film *She Said*, released during the Covid-19 pandemic, captured my attention because it resonated with my growing interest in systemic gender bias on Wikipedia and beyond. The film centers on the downfall of the entertainment mogul Harvey Weinstein alongside the start of the #MeToo movement. In the film, Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor, two reporters for *The New York Times*, engage in investigative reporting about sexual harassment and abuse in the American entertainment industry. The film emphasizes women’s voices and portrays Twohey and Kantor as information and knowledge creators despite the struggles with gender bias that they and the women whose stories they report experienced. Sam Adams of *Slate* notes that we never see Harvey Weinstein, the piece’s villain. Instead he appears as a “disembodied presentation” of a voice because Rebecca Lenkiewicz, the film’s screenwriter, did not want to overwhelm the women’s voices.

Furthermore, Twohey and Kantor’s families are a significant part of the story. *Time Magazine* calls Twohey and Kantor “tireless reporters who are also tired moms” (Zacharek 2022), something many women can relate to. The day-to-day lives of these women reporters not only affect their work but also inform the shape of the story they write and the centrality of what “she said” to that story. *She Said* is “a decidedly feminist project” (Walsh 2022) representing female-centered and embodied ways of discovering and producing knowledge which profoundly affects the emergence of the #MeToo movement.

In this chapter, it is my goal to do the same by raising up what “she said” in the context of biographies about women on Wikipedia and other media platforms: to describe the lack of representation of the voices of women and other groups in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, what has happened as a result, and

what advocates and activists can do to change it. This is not the place to provide a comprehensive analysis of the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia; it has been well-documented and well-studied elsewhere, including in Colleen Hartung’s introductory chapter in this book series’ first volume, “Leveraging Notability: Defining, Critiquing and Strategically Engaging a Wikipedia Guideline,” especially as it relates to Wikipedia guidelines of notability, as well as in my MA thesis. (See Hartung 2020, pp. ix-viii; and Meyer 2022, pp. 10-19). Hartung states, “Studies show that gender bias on Wikipedia reflects cultural bias that is transmitted and then amplified by Wikipedia guidelines” (Hartung, 2020, p. x), which includes its guidelines about notability, original research, and reliability. Hartung expands upon this in her introductory chapter of this series’ second volume, “Creating Inclusive Biographical Narratives: A Disruptive Use of Sources and Writing Conventions,” by describing this serious and entrenched problem, which she attributes to the site’s dependence on “institutional prestige and print-centric systems that enable fact-checking” (Hartung 2021, xviii). Hartung considers this unfortunate problem, which exists despite Wikipedia’s status as one of the few sources of objective truth on the internet, one of the site’s “unintended, negative consequences” (Hartung 2021, xviii).

These well-documented unintended and negative consequences surface in Wikipedia’s content as the gender gap and systemic bias across all articles. However, nowhere is this more apparent than in articles and biographies about women in religion. Matthew A. Vetter, Wikipedia activist and scholar, suggests that to solve these and other associated issues, the Wikipedia movement must adopt 21st-century methods of knowledge-building if it wants to survive and build upon its tremendous success. Vetter states, “Wikipedia’s adherence to the practice and tradition of print places it firmly in the encyclopedic tradition, yet it is also this placement that prevents it from accomplishing its encyclopedic goal of becoming a global human knowledge source” (Vetter 2020). In other words, the policies and procedures that have made Wikipedia successful and, in this age of disinformation and conspiracy theories, the most trustworthy source on the internet have also marginalized many users who approach knowledge-building in non-traditional ways. Through its adherence to print culture, Wikipedia has excluded contributors whose work is framed by other knowledge production practices or whose formative sources of knowledge are not considered authoritative within a Western framework. It has also excluded those who do not have easy access to Western sources of knowledge and other types of knowledge-making practices. All this highlights the paradox of Wikipedia: an open-access platform does not necessarily foster equal participation, easy access, or acceptance of diversity concerning knowledge production. Much has been said in the popular press, among academics, and within the Wikipedia editing community, about ways to mitigate the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia. Significant strides have been made, especially by WikiProjects like Women in Red, Art+Feminism, and Women in Religion, but more needs to be done. In this chapter, I describe strategic ways of writing biographies on Wikipedia and other contexts that can be applied to combat this problem. The tools or approaches I have come to call “embodied

editing” are: the influence of the editor’s identity and experiences on their contributions; developing advanced research skills; creating and gaining support from a community of editors; and identifying a personal editing philosophy.

### ***Biographies about Women: Interrupting Enlightenment Modes of Knowledge Production***

In 2019, Hartung and two other founding members of the Women in Religion WikiProject, Polly Hamlen and Clifford Anderson, analyzed the project’s list of women in religion that needed biographies created on Wikipedia about them. They found that over half were associated with academia (Anderson, Hamlen, and Hartung, 2019, slide 28). Most of the biographies in this volume are about important women in the Parliament of the World’s Religions who are also academics,, most likely because the higher education setting is one of the main places those who study religion are employed and have professional careers. As we will see, it is up to the Wikipedia community to take responsibility for expanding Wikipedia’s diversity and inclusivity in its content. As Hartung stated to me during the production of this chapter:

*Wikipedia cannot adequately cover the notable lives and works of women like the women who have contributed to the Parliament of the World’s Religions without adopting counter enlightenment modes of knowledge production and sharing. Additionally, it is these enlightenment era modes of knowledge production and sharing that creates the bias that preferences or privileges academics across categories of women in religion including activists and practitioners covered in this volume. It is their academic credentials not the contributive importance of their work that gets them covered. (Colleen Hartung, pers. comm., with author, January 25, 2023)*

Regrettably, many of the women featured in this volume do not meet Wikipedia’s standards for notability, so one of the purposes of each volume in this series is to establish their notability by creating secondary sources about them. However, even if their Wikipedia biographies already exist, they likely need assistance with many of the same problems and issues as other articles and biographies about women and other obscure and neglected topics in Wikipedia. They are often not well-written and lack professional-level prose. Their leads, the first few paragraphs summarizing the article, tend to be short and incomplete. Vetter suggests this underrepresentation emerges “directly from an Enlightenment positioning of the genre” (Vetter 2020) of the encyclopedia. In other words, Wikipedia is a contradiction rooted in the ideals of the Enlightenment despite being a post-modern, 21st-century creation. As Vetter continues to remind us, the Wikipedia community’s adherence to the “dominance of print culture” (Vetter 2020) marginalizes Indigenous knowledge, which is stored and transmitted orally and not represented in print sources.

For Wikipedia to continue its success into the postmodern era, it must adapt to new, postmodern ways of knowledge-building and reflect the significant contributions of women and other underrepresented groups. As Vetter suggests, the

Wikipedia community must do this by adhering to and including the postmodern view of knowledge creation, which values Indigenous knowledge creation and oral traditions. It must also move away from print culture to a more inclusive approach to knowledge-building reflecting the diversity of human experience. As my colleagues Jonathon Eder and Polly Hamlen state in their chapter in this volume, the biographies featured here express the increasing diversity in the Parliament of the World's Religions and “reflect a commitment to women-centered spirituality,” something that would have been unheard of at the first meeting of the Parliament in 1893. Editors working with the Women in Religion Wikipedia Project believe that writing biographies on Wikipedia and in general scholarship go hand-in-hand and is an important reason for publishing this and the other volumes in this series. Writing biographies here and on Wikipedia is a creative, intellectual, and activist endeavor. Writing and encouraging others to write about neglected populations of people on various platforms creates more knowledge about and for marginalized communities of people. In other words, it is a work that increases knowledge equity.

### ***Embodied Editing***

In the previous volumes of this series, Hartung has already discussed the effects of Wikipedia policies and guidelines on the work of editing articles about women in religion on Wikipedia. Vetter and Hartung agree that three Wikipedia policies, rooted in encyclopedic history and tradition, exacerbate the bias involved with editing articles about women on Wikipedia: reliability, notability, and “no original research”; I would add the Neutral Point of View (NPOV) and Conflict of Interest (COI) policies to the list. However, though these policies are biased, they do not wholly deny and erase Wikipedia editors’ and contributors’ voices and embodied choices from their writing. Their voices are instead expressed in their editorial and content choices, which include the topics they choose, the content they include (and omit), and how they choose to structure articles. Following one’s interests in choosing which articles to work on does not violate any of these policies; instead, it is one of the few ways Wikipedia editors and contributors can embody themselves in their work as editors. Another way editors embody their work is to be more strategic and purposeful in their choices to mitigate the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia. For example, Rosie Stephenson-Goodnight, the co-founder of the highly successful Women in Red WikiProject, states that, like many editors, she began editing various topics that interested her. However, as she learned more about the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia and became more active as an advocate, she began focusing on topics and biographies that specifically addressed the problem (R. Stephenson-Goodnight, pers. comm., with author, March 8, 2023). My own experience as a Wikipedia editor and contributor is similar.

### ***Claiming the Influence of Identity and Experience***

When I began editing and contributing to Wikipedia in 2007, I knew nothing



about the gender gap and systemic bias present on the platform since the site's early days, even though the editing community and media were already talking about it. However, despite my lack of awareness, I found myself naturally drawn to articles and topics that addressed these problems, not because I wanted to be what Hartung calls “engaged in an activist endeavor” (2020, p. xxvi) but because they matched my interests. My editing interests include Maya Angelou because I have always been interested in literature; children’s media and music because of the profound effect *The Wiggles*, *Sesame Street*, and *Blue’s Clues* have had on my disabled children; figure skating because of my lifelong love of the sport; and finally, female saints because of my Catholic spirituality. It was not until relatively late in my editing career that I began to choose articles more strategically and purposefully to assist in increasing content about women and other neglected topics. I still only work on the articles that interest me because I believe that all Wikipedia editors should pursue their interests. Editing articles that reflect individual interests allows editors to embody the articles they contribute to, despite the limitations placed on them by the genre.

Feminist theologian Judith Plaskow identifies that writers, researchers, and even artists who position themselves within Enlightenment ideals claim that “rational thinking is not affected by the location in a particular body, culture, or history” (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 139). Western modes of thought assume that the “disembodied minds of rational thinkers can commune with transcendent ideas” (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 139). However, feminist theologians like Plaskow’s good friend and colleague Carol P. Christ assert that thinking arises from the body’s feelings: “We are able to know and reflect on the world only because of our capacities to feel, touch, see, hear, taste, and smell. Our embodied thinking is always situated in relationships, communities, cultures, societies, and in the web of life” (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 139). The same can be said even about those who edit and contribute to Wikipedia, who can and do, like me, find their voices there. The tone of an article I have contributed to, for example, will be very different from the tone of an article someone else works on, not only in their topic and editorial choices but in their prose. Those of us who understand the insidiousness of the gender gap, for example, tend to be careful in the words we use to describe a woman’s accomplishments. Two studies, conducted by Francesca Tripodi in 2021 (2) and Claudia Wagner and her colleagues in 2015 (6) found that women’s biographies on Wikipedia are more likely to indicate gender or connection to a male (for example, “first female astronaut” or “wife of”). As someone knowledgeable about the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia, I purposefully attempt to avoid that kind of thing, which provides a very different tone than other editors might have.

For feminist theologians, including the ones featured in this volume, embodiment is a central concept of their studies. In their book *Goddess and God: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (2016), Christ and Plaskow trace the history of feminist theology alongside their own studies and decades-long friendship. In this juxtaposition, they masterfully demonstrate the use of embodiment in academic and theological writing by identifying and claiming how their spiritual

journeys influenced them. Plaskow and Christ insist that embodiment has always been a part of feminist theology. For them, embodiment is “a foundational idea in feminist theology” (138); since experience is always situated in bodies, we think about and through our bodies. As someone who does not study theology but studies literature and pedagogy instead, reading Christ and Plaskow’s book offered me an insightful introduction to feminist theology and embodiment, which has implications for my own field of study. Christ has spent her entire career struggling with what she calls “the problem of voice” (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 97) in her theological writings. Since she became committed to the idea that “theologies must be connected to experience and thus to stories,” the search for her embodied voice became a necessity (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 97). She has even considered the possibility of fiction or poetry as a better genre choice for her. For example, Christ’s colleague, feminist theologian Susan Thistlethwaite, has written a series of murder novels where she addresses themes important to feminist theological thought, which she embeds in the stories about her main protagonist, Kristin Ginelli. Across her career, Christ has overcome her struggle to be more embodied in her “theology” (Christ and Plaskow 2016, 154), as she calls it, by embracing Goddess traditions rather than male-centric depictions and conceptions of the divine. This shift has made a significant impact on feminist theology. For example, in an interview conducted by Elizabeth Ursic, shortly after the publication of her book with Plaskow, Christ describes her experience of this shift in thinking in her efforts to encourage her students to embody their academic writing:

*I always had a goal in my classes to combine rigorous thinking with experience, and I found that this idea was very difficult for most students to grasp. When students are given the green light to write about their experiences, rigorous thinking falls away. On the other side, the scholars who are doing the rigorous thinking are not necessarily relating it to their experiences, which, I would say, means that their thinking isn't as rigorous as they think it is. (147)*

I had a similar experience at the University of Idaho when I taught first-year composition students; one of their assignments was to research a place, which included visiting it and describing their experiences there. However, it was a challenge for many students who were taught in high school to never use the words “I,” “me,” or “my” in their writing. It was reassuring to hear from Christ that even experienced scholars struggle with being both embodied and rigorous in their writing. The high school rule still applies to contributing to Wikipedia. Yet despite its policies, Wikipedia editors and contributors embody themselves in the biographies and articles they write, research, and create.

The subjects of the biographies in this volume have eschewed the high school rule and the Western way of conducting scholarship in various ways and have found ways to claim their identity and experience in their writing. For example, Iyekiyaipiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair unambiguously claims her heritage as an Indigenous Dakota in North America and her life experience. St. Clair shares with her biographer Deborah Fulthorp that the tragic loss of her younger sister

to cancer during her childhood made her a deep thinker. As Fulthrop states in this volume, “St. Clair’s work is an outflow of her identity as a Dakota woman.” Feminist theologian Elizabeth Ursic’s life experience is embodied in everything she does: her pedagogy as a college professor, her writings about the emplacement of the feminine image of the divine into prayer and worship practices, and most especially, her music. My deep dive into her life and scholarship influenced me to investigate Carol Christ and embedded theology for this chapter.

Other subjects in this volume are also clear about how their life’s work arises from their experiences of family, community, and ethnic connections. Win Whelan shares that Barbara Lewis King’s family history of enslavement, involvement in the Civil Rights movement, and her grandmother’s example influenced her life choices and the decision to go into Christian ministry. King’s act of claiming her Ghanaian heritage resulted in her enstoolment, or installment, as the first female chief in Ghana, in 2001. The worldview of interfaith educator Jennifer Howe Peace “emerged out of a renewed commitment to the liberal evangelical Christianity of her upbringing.” Teresia Mbari Hinga, one of the founders of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, overcame many obstacles to provide her insider perspective on how colonialism has affected African Christianity. As her biographer Rosalind Hinton says about Hinga, “Dr. Hinga’s stories personalize the history of the British occupation of Kenya and form the building blocks of her scholarship, teaching, and activism.”

All the subjects in this volume are, in one way or another, practitioners of the faith traditions they serve and study. They claim a faith tradition and conduct their preaching, writing, and research from that perspective. For example, Dolly Dastoor, a committed Zoroastrian, has successfully negotiated the intersection between her work as a leader in her faith tradition and her professional work as a clinical psychologist and cutting-edge dementia researcher. Like St. Clair, Pamela Ayo Yetunde was also influenced by family tragedy, the death of her father at age 35, when Yetunde was eight, which she later recognized as the catalyst of her life’s work. Yetunde’s biographer Karma Lekshe Tsomo states this about Yetunde: “As a gay person, she knows what it is like to be shunned by Christian relatives – in some ways, the ultimate betrayal. She learned what it is like to be part of a non-Abrahamic tradition considered by many to be non-theistic or atheistic and therefore lesser. Being Black, she knows what it is to embody the characteristics of a group considered by many to be inferior.” For interfaith activist Audrey E. Kitagawa, religion was always an important part of her life, “in a way that exposed her to multiple faith traditions without any seeming contradiction among them,” which opened her up to the interfaith work she did as an adult.

All the women featured in this volume have embodied themselves in their work and writings. They serve as models for the different ways scholars, writers, and even Wikipedia editors and contributors can use their identities and experiences in the work they do. One of my most enjoyable experiences as an editor was creating a Wikipedia biography about early 20th-century Pentecostal minister, leader, and writer Mae Eleanor Frey, featured in volume one of the Women in Religion series. Frey’s Wikipedia biography was eventually classified

as a featured article, among the best articles on Wikipedia. I learned many things in the process, including that, for me, there can be fewer limitations in encyclopedic writing than in academic writing. I also learned that my commitment to increasing the content about women in religion on Wikipedia, one of the ways I use my own experiences and identity as an editor, can be expressed in new and more creative ways.

### ***“Way Too Many Books, Way Too Little Time”: Research and Wikipedia***

As a Women in Religion WikiProject member, I have encountered challenges in conducting research to improve and create new articles. A deep understanding of Wikipedia’s policies on reliable sources and notability, and strong research skills is helpful for those of us committed to increasing content about women in religion on Wikipedia. However, I found it helpful to think outside of the box regarding my research processes. Stephen Ramsey’s 2014 essay “The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books” has strongly informed my theoretical and practical philosophies about Wikipedia studies and how to conduct research for Wikipedia. Ramsey discusses conducting research even when there are too many books and sources for a single person to read and consult about a particular topic. In other words, how does one efficiently and creatively approach a glut of information?

Ramsey recognizes that there are “*Way* too many books, *way* too little time” (111, emphasis in original), although he might or might not have been quoting musician Frank Zappa, stating, “There has never been a time when philosophers—lovers of wisdom broadly understood—have not exhibited profound regret over the impedance of mismatch between time and truth. For surely, there are more books, more ideas, more experiences, and more relationships worth having than there are hours in a day (or days in a lifetime)” (111). While it is true that women have been systematically written out of history, and therefore there are often few and at times no traditionally and historically reliable and trustworthy sources to support their contributions, perhaps it is also true that multiple sources exist (at least in some cases) but are difficult to locate and require advanced research skills to find. The “glut” of sources may exist, and we have to find a way to access it. Wikipedia’s adherence to traditional forms exacerbates the problem by discouraging an editor from straying too far off the beaten path regarding sourcing. However, Ramsey’s hermeneutics of screwing around might help us develop research strategies that leverage the general glut of information to benefit research and writing on undercovered areas like women in religion.

Taking advantage of the glut of available information and expanding the types of sources that contributors use can be thought of as a type of “screwing around,” an off-the-beaten-path form of research that can solve the research challenges faced by Wikipedia editors, particularly when it comes to topics such as women’s history. For example, scholars researching women’s lives in the Middle Ages have, in recent decades, used non-traditional sources such as hagiographies, volumes similar to encyclopedias used by the Christian Church throughout its history to document the lives of saints. Medieval scholar Jane

Tibbetts Schulenburg, in her essay “Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500—1100” (1988), states that until the late 1960s, historians have discredited the historical value of hagiographies because they were full of “fantasy and contradiction” due to their “edifying intention” (103). Hagiographies have been used by Wikipedia editors (including myself) to support the content in biographies of female saints, although it has not been without controversy. I experienced this controversy in mid-2022, centered on my use of two hagiographies as sources in the biography of Edith of Wilton, a 10th-century British nun and saint. Sabine Baring-Gould’s 16-volume *The Lives of the Saints* (1875) and Agnes Baillie Cunningham Dunbar’s two-volume *A Dictionary of Saintly Women* (1904) were disputed as reliable sources because of their age.

Schulenburg suggests that hagiographies are good sources for writing women back into history, especially female saints. She recognizes the drawbacks but emphasizes the benefits; hagiographies “provide a solid core of social and personal detail not found in any other documentation”; they hold remarkable potential for social historians (and I would add Wikipedia editors and contributors); and are “invaluable for historians of medieval women” (103). Compared to other sources written in the Middle Ages, which can be frustratingly silent about women, hagiographies pay a great deal of attention to women religious, especially their roles in the Christian Church and society at large. Hagiographies also demonstrate the complex attitudes towards women at the time and allow historians to compare the roles of men and women in the Early Modern Era. Schulenburg also states, “A collective study of saints’ lives thus provides enough information to form a rather crude but accurate evaluation of the status of women in medieval society and specifically within the religious community” (103), which can be of great use to those who want to increase content about female saints on Wikipedia. Hagiographies also indicate the notability of these obscure women, with notability being one of the policies I noted above, that impede more representation of women and other marginalized groups on Wikipedia. Third-party sources must be used to verify information on Wikipedia and fulfill the requirement that “the topic must be worthy of notice” (WP:Notability). I use hagiographies to fulfill the notability requirement that subjects have received enough coverage in enough sources, even if the coverage occurs in older sources. Eventually, the editors who disputed the use of hagiographies in Wikipedia articles about saints let the sources remain. In this case, a bit of screwing around with different types of sources and my persistence improved the overall quality of Edith of Wilton’s biography.

Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, in her book *The Care of Nuns: The Ministries of Benedictine Women in England During the Central Middle Ages* (2019), examined hagiographies and other documents in order to better understand the duties and responsibilities of female monastic leaders in the early Middle Ages. She found that women were able to co-opt leadership responsibilities and that noble women used their wealth, power, and position to ensure the survival of the convents and monasteries, as she put it, “as primary agents of their spiritual and material care” (10). She also noted that “By reviewing the chronicles, saints’ lives, letters, charters, and prescriptive sources that praised, memorialized, and directed

their lives, scholars have gleaned evidence of nuns founding monasteries, serving as counselors to secular and ecclesiastical officials, participating in regional synods, teaching, preaching, hearing confessions, liturgically reading the gospel, and administering the Eucharist” (11). Burgvis’ work illustrates that screwing around with all types of available historical documents, including letters and notes of praise, allows us to rethink our assumptions about the scarcity of information on women in religion.

In late 2022, Jessica Hodgkinson, a Ph.D. student from the University of Leicester, stumbled upon the works of a medieval nun who likely co-opted some of these traditionally male-dominated roles. While studying an 8th-century Latin translation of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, Hodgkinson discovered the drawings and writings of Saint Eadburg (also known as Edburga), a princess in Great Britain and abbess at a convent in Kent. These drawings indicated that Eadburg owned and interacted with the text, so scholars at the University of Oxford used a high-tech 3D scanner to study them further (Martin 2022). While researching one topic, Hodgkinson stumbled across an opportunity to screw around a bit, which took her down a productive rabbit hole that expanded the availability of information about Saint Eadburg. This story was reported widely in several mainstream media outlets like the BBC and has potentially provided Wikipedia editors and contributors with valuable and useful secondary sources.

In his “hermeneutics of screwing around,” Stephen Ramsay distinguishes between two research methods: searching and browsing. Searching is research that often happens in a library where you have a specific topic and various research strategies for locating sources. These sources are identified using a catalog, a bibliography, and assistance from librarians. In this age of the internet, we have additional tools such as search engines like Google and, if one is fortunate to be connected to a university library, JSTOR (Journal Storage). Wikipedia would most likely not have been as successful without these research tools provided by the internet in this age when “googling” has become a verb. Browsing, on the other hand, as Ramsay puts it, is “a completely different activity” (2014, 115) and occurs when “I walk into the library and wander around in a state of insouciant boredom” (2014, 114). Ramsay calls browsing “screwing around,” in which one does not know what one is looking for but has “a bundle of interests and proclivities” that inform a randomized perusal of information (2014, 115).

I connect strongly with Ramsay’s description of the process of searching and browsing because I regularly do both activities when researching the articles I write for Wikipedia. However, based on my experience researching female saints and other obscure and neglected topics for Wikipedia, I identify another method called “stumbling across.” This method includes finding sources for one topic while researching another, which Hodgkinson was doing when she discovered Saint Eadburg in the margins of the document she was “pouring over” (Martin 2022). In pursuit of information on another topic, she found the etchings by chance, creating the possibility for a future focus for her studies as a historian and medieval scholar.

While researching other saints, I have stumbled across most of the sources I have found for articles about female saints. For example, I discovered Schulenburg’s hagiography essay while researching another saint’s biography. It also matches my experiences with one of my first niches on Wikipedia, articles about the African American writer and poet Maya Angelou. Before coming across her biography and the article about her first and most critically acclaimed autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), I knew little about her. I had read *Caged Bird* in high school, which made an impact on me, saw her recite her poem “On the Pulse of Morning” during Bill Clinton’s first inauguration in 1993, and viewed her appearances on Oprah Winfrey’s show (Angelou was Winfrey’s mentor), but that was the extent of my knowledge about her. I cannot tell you how I stumbled upon Angelou’s articles, but it was very much like Ramsay describes: I was bored, as I was when I discovered female saints in 2020 and was “screwing around,” looking for something to do on Wikipedia. Seven years later, I became the preeminent expert about Angelou on Wikipedia, became a published author, and became inspired to continue studying literature in graduate school. My experience demonstrates that all three techniques—searching, browsing, and stumbling across—are valid ways to conduct research in ways that increase our access to sources about obscure and underrepresented topics on Wikipedia.

### ***Community: Developing a Tribe***

In addition to being an active participant in the Women in Religion WikiProject, I am also an active member of WikiProject Figure Skating. Even though my username on Wikipedia is “Figureskatingfan,” I did not work on articles about the sport until 2018, when a fellow editor, who was also a member of WikiProject Figure Skating and a friend of up-and-coming skater Alysa Liu, asked me to create Liu’s biography. Liu was beginning to be noticed by the mainstream press and figure skating community for her triple Axels and went on to win two U.S. National titles and compete at the 2022 Olympics. The fellow editor trained with her at their rink in San Jose, California, and felt that it was a conflict of interest (WP:Conflict of Interest) for him to create her biography. After creating her bio, I was hooked; I began to edit more articles and biographies about figure skating and became an active member of its WikiProject. This localized, particular relationship-building moment exemplifies the power of developing a community and support system to help us mitigate the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia. If not for a community of editors who support and encourage each other as they contribute to these articles, the Conflict of Interest policy would have gotten in the way of Liu’s Wikipedia biography being in place well before she garnered attention in the figure skating world.

At this point in my editing career, I was not surprised to discover that articles about figure skating suffer from the same issues as many of the articles I have previously discussed. I imagine that the reason for this is that figure skating, at least in the U.S., is female-dominated, so most of the articles about the sport and its athletes, both male and female, are notably brief or inadequate, especially when compared to articles about male-dominated sports. Figure skating articles also

suffer from similar issues surrounding research, which often makes contributing to them just as challenging as researching articles about female saints. Like many female-centric topics and biographies about women, they are also subject to a higher level of scrutiny, especially when submitted for Wikipedia's rigorous peer review system. I experienced a higher level of scrutiny for my contributions to a biography about Olympic gold medalist and commentator Tara Lipinski in the spring of 2023. This biased scrutiny was a challenging experience that reinforced previous experiences of bias and echoed the experiences of many other women editors. I coped by turning to my fellow Women in Religion WikiProject members, who had become my support system, because I knew they would understand and sympathize. Eventually, Lipinski's biography passed a more rigorous than typical peer review because I could hang in there with their support and encouragement.

Online harassment on Wikipedia has been well-documented. Not only are articles about most women subject to more rigorous peer reviews, but the editors that contribute to them are also more highly scrutinized (Vrana, Sengupta, and Bouterse 2020). As recently as 2015, women did not consider Wikipedia a safe place, like many places on the internet. They also reported in a survey that it requires a "taxing level of emotional labor" (Menking and Erickson 2009) for women editors to navigate, especially on article talk pages. Amanda Menking and Ingrid Erickson conducted and analyzed interviews with twenty Wikipedia contributors who self-identified as women. Despite their stories of conflict, trolling, harassment, and stress, they reported experiencing tremendous personal satisfaction from contributing to Wikipedia. However, they tended to manage their personal safety by avoiding topics or areas that could open them up for harassment. One woman reported that she did not experience the trolling or harassment other female editors went through because she purposely focused on "safe" topics and because, like many women, she was already dealing with enough emotional labor "in real life."

To their credit, however, the Wikipedia community has tried to address the issue of harassment experienced by marginalized editors, particularly women. For example, hundreds of words have been written on policy pages by members of the editing community about harassment and how to deal with it (WP:Harassment). Editors are expected to follow etiquette rules when interacting with other editors on talk pages, but unfortunately, this does not always happen. The Wikimedia Foundation, which oversees Wikipedia and other projects, has made some efforts to make Wikipedia safer for female and LGBTQ editors. They have created anti-harassment tools to address these situations in the Wikipedia community. Administrators, or volunteers who manage and enforce the technical and community aspects of Wikipedia, then investigate allegations and make decisions about banning perpetrators from editing. However, this is not a completely effective way to deal with the problem since it puts the onus on the abused parties to prove their allegations. Consequently, Wikimedia is developing other tools and more effective methods to prevent and punish trolling and harassment, but even these new methods do not go far enough. Instead, I propose that they do a better job defining abuse and harassment and then install



a zero-tolerance policy against it. It is also clear that depending on the editing community to enforce anti-harassment policies is not enough, so Wikimedia needs to step in and enforce its policies so that Wikipedia can fulfill its stated goals for both the diversity of volunteer editors and contributors and the diversity of content in Wikipedia.

Art+Feminism, a WikiProject that describes itself as “a do-it-yourself and do-it-with-others campaign to improve Wikipedia’s content on gender, feminism, and the arts,” trains editors of “all gender identities and expressions” (Evans et al. 2020) how to edit to fill the gender and content gaps on Wikipedia through conducting and hosting edit-a-thons. The project has also created safe spaces and policies in its in-person and virtual events, such as national and international conferences and edit-a-thons. WikiProject Women in Religion has adopted Art+Feminism’s strategy but has also become a support group, providing a place for support and encouragement. Groups like Women in Red, Art+Feminism, and Women in Religion are key to our mission to train new editors and to improve and create articles about women. As Vrana and her colleagues state in *Wikipedia @ 20*:

*We love Wikipedia. As readers, and as contributors. But we also hate what it can do to many of us from marginalized communities around the world. Most Wikipedians find it hard to accept that a truly inspiring model of peer production can sit alongside misogyny, racism, and colonialism, but this has indeed been our experience of Wikipedia’s first twenty years.*

*Don’t get us wrong; we do love Wikipedia. But for us, our passion for the projects translates into tough love. We believe in speaking up about some of the critical issues of marginalization that have been lurking, invisible, or silenced over the past twenty years. And we believe that acting to change this status quo will make Wikipedia and the Wikimedia movement more powerful and relevant over the next twenty. (Vrana et al. 2020)*

During one of the monthly Women in Religion WikiProject edit-a-thons, members were training a group of women academics from Africa by having one of them practice live edits to an article about an African religious studies scholar. Not five minutes later, another editor reverted her changes instead of waiting for her to finish the session. We were knowledgeable about the harassment that editors like her often experience, so we simply reverted the reversion and added a request in the edit summary for patience and time. I also suspect that if we were not there to support the new editor, she might have felt discouraged and possibly quit. The Wikipedia community would have lost a valuable addition, someone with a different perspective than the typical Wikipedia editor and contributor. At any rate, this is an example of when a community surrounding and supporting this editor stepped in, protected her, and prevented a possible negative editing experience from driving away a talented and accomplished writer and researcher. As Hartung states, community may be a creative way to develop more knowledge equity within Wikipedia, that “the burden of the emotional labor is transformed

somehow in the crux of community relationships.” She goes on to say that “there is something transformative about being supported and assisted” (C. Hartung, pers. comm., with author, January 25, 2023) since it helps editors doing this kind of work cope better with the emotional and gendered labor that may be necessary to accomplish our goals. That is certainly what both a new editor and even I, a more experienced editor, needed to get through difficult editing experiences.

Community building, even though it has been neglected in the conversation surrounding the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia, may be the most important tool in the mission of increasing content about women and other neglected topics. It was not until concerned editors organized into groups that the situation began to improve. Building relationships with other editors committed to this task may also be the key to solving the online harassment that unfortunately occurs on the site. For me, it was the key to dealing with the heightened scrutiny that the articles I contribute to can receive. The support and encouragement I received from my fellow WikiProject Women in Religion members also provided me with the motivation I needed to persist in improving the quality of these articles. Other editors have had similar experiences.

### ***Developing an Editing Philosophy***

In 1962, Charles Van Doren stated that any encyclopedist (and I would add anyone who contributes to Wikipedia) must ask themselves what kind of encyclopedia they want to build (23). I started editing Wikipedia in 2007 when the site was relatively new because I was naïve enough to believe its tagline, which still exists today, “The free encyclopedia anyone can edit” (WP:Main Page). It took me over a year and a half to get serious about it. My experiences demonstrate the importance, especially for those of us dedicated to increasing content about women on Wikipedia, of developing what I have come to call a “Wikipedia editing philosophy.” I certainly did not come into editing and contributing to Wikipedia with a fully formed editing philosophy, which I doubt very few editors have at the beginning of their editing careers (if at all). I did not have one until perhaps the last few years when I began to ask myself, “Why do I edit Wikipedia?” and “Why do I continue to do so?”

One day, while wandering in what Ramsey would call insouciant boredom, I stumbled upon a humorous piece of vandalism in the Wikipedia article about piracy. Vandalism on Wikipedia, a problem that endangers the integrity of the site but is commonplace due to its crowd-sourced nature, has been defined by the Wikipedia editing community as “editing the project in an intentionally disruptive or malicious manner” and “includes any addition, removal, or modification that is humorous, nonsensical, a hoax, or degrading in any way” (WP:Vandalism). A vandal, most likely a bored teenager, added the lyrics to a song about pirates, and an editor reverted it, rightly so, shortly afterward. I immediately recognized that the lyrics were from an episode of the Icelandic children’s television show *LazyTown*, pointed it out to the editor, and mused, “How sad is it that I know that useless piece of information?” Looking back, I realize that this experience was one of the ways I was initiated into the Wikipedia editing community as a new

editor. It was one of my first interactions with the kind of reading and research I have tended to do as a Wikipedia editor and contributor – editing as an engaged conversation with the larger Wikipedia community. It foreshadowed one of my eventual niches of writing, researching, and improving articles about children’s media and television programming. It also sparked my interests in the more social and organizational aspects of Wikipedia studies.

Matthew Vetter, by contrast, found inspiration through his contributions to the article about “*aporia*” (or “puzzle”), which he considered a philosophical analogy for his involvement in Wikipedia studies and his eventual academic interests in Wikipedia (2020). For me, what started as a way to combat boredom became a creative outlet; and later, a way to become involved in scholarly activities and activism. I believe that developing an editing philosophy could be a key strategy in overcoming the barriers to increasing the content on Wikipedia about women, female-centric topics, and marginalized groups and topics, which I have already described in this chapter. Other editors have similar stories. For example, even my colleague Win Whelan, who has written a biography in this volume and is a relatively new Wikipedia editor, has developed an editing philosophy. Editing Wikipedia seems to help her stay engaged in the project of increasing the representation of women in religion, which in turn increases knowledge equity. She also seems to rely on her research; as Hartung put it, her “reliance on basic facts is engaging and embodied and straightforward” (C. Hartung, pers. comm., with author, January 27, 2023).

How does one develop an editing philosophy? It was never something I consciously set out to develop; instead, it was formed over time and across rich experiences and will continue to develop as time goes on. My philosophy includes: writing and researching about things that pique my interest; deriving pleasure and satisfaction from the editing process (i.e., having fun); using editing as a creative output and as a way to improve my writing and research skills; working collaboratively with other editors; supporting Wikipedia’s peer review system, both as a participant and as a reviewer; advocacy in the form of helping to mitigate the gender gap and systemic bias on Wikipedia by choosing obscure topics and biographies; and developing community by encouraging and mentoring other editors. I also try to follow what has become a Wikipedia adage: “Quality over quantity,” meaning that I prioritize producing high-quality content rather than amassing a large edit count, which also means that I may produce less content in words and characters than many other experienced and long-time editors. Identifying and describing my editing philosophy and consciously developing it as part of my effort to embody my editing has allowed me to participate in the growth of knowledge equity on Wikipedia by helping me to claim my voice and to participate more consciously in addressing bias through my work on the platform.

## ***Conclusion***

Embodied editing on Wikipedia occurs as women claim their identities and experiences, gain advanced research skills, cultivate a tribe or community to

rely upon, and develop an editing philosophy. Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor’s reporting for the *Washington Post* focused on the embodied reality of what “she said” related to the Harvey Weinstein entertainment industry scandal, and their work helped to inspire an entire movement. Their reporting galvanized countless women to come forward with stories about their experiences of sexual abuse and workplace discrimination and bias. In this chapter, I tried to do something similar by raising up what “she said” in the context of biographies about women on Wikipedia: to describe the lack of representation in Wikipedia of the voices of women and other groups, to identify the negative consequences, and to outline what advocates and activists can do to change it, particularly in the pursuit of knowledge equity and embodied writing.

When the Women in Red WikiProject was founded in July 2015, only 15.53% of English Wikipedia articles were about women. As of early 2023, the percentage had increased to 19.55%, which means that out of almost 2 million articles, approximately 379,000 are about women (WP:Women in Red). That may not seem impressive and shows that we still have a ways to go, but it demonstrates both the hard work that has been done so far and the work ahead of us. Recently, I was chatting with my friend Win Whelan, a fellow WikiProject Women in Religion member and a contributor to this volume, about her fascinating life. She told me, “I’m not notable enough for Wikipedia,” and I responded that she probably was but that she, unfortunately, did not have enough written about her. She told me that we needed to create a volume about those of us in the Women in Religion project so that Wikipedia articles could be created about us. We laughed, but she had a point: notability in Wikipedia, at least in our cases, often depends upon each other. Other groups, such as WikiProject Art+Feminism and WikiProject Women in Religion, have used similar models and tools described in this chapter. All the women featured in this volume deserve more recognition for their accomplishments, including high-quality and informative biographies written about them, both on Wikipedia and in general scholarship. That is the intent of knowledge equity and the purpose of advocating for the legitimacy of embodied editing.

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**Teresia Mbari Hinga**  
*An African Woman's  
Contributions to Religious  
Dialogue and Knowledge  
Equity*

ROSALIND HINTON



Source: Santa Clara University

***Introduction***

Dr. Teresia Mbari Hinga b. January 25, 1955 - d. March 31, 2023, (Santa Clara, n.d., In Memoriam) was an African ecofeminist, Christian, and theo-ethicist who, since 2005, was an associate professor of religion at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit University in California's Silicon Valley. She championed the inclusion of African women and their ways of meaning-making throughout her life, including through the Parliament of the World's Religions (PoWR). She was a founding member of numerous Pan-African and global organizations that advance the PoWR's mission to 1) cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual traditions and 2) address the critical issues of our time (Parliament, n.d., Mission). Hinga was a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) in 1989 and was a member of the Pan-African steering committee of the Circle from 1999 to 2002. She was a founding member and on the executive committee of the African Association of the Study of Religion (AASR). From 2006 to 2016, she was on the steering committee and remained a Catholic Ethics in the World Church Network member until her death. She was also a member of the Catholic Theological Society of America, on the board of the Journal of Global Catholicism, and a frequent blogger for Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC). She was a member of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Since 2014, she had been a member of the Black Catholic Symposium of the AAR and had served on the steering committee for the Global Christianity group (Hinga pers. comm., December 3, 2021).

Hinga's accomplishments in her short life are too many to enumerate and do not express the pleasure of a visit. Hinga was a gracious hostess and

almost always wore a smile. You knew she felt good when her great wit was activated, which was almost always. She had a razor-sharp memory, and it was jaw-dropping to watch her mind go into a multilevel outline on any particular topic. Her critiques were clear-eyed but not without compassion, as she sought dialogue over disruption. Hinga used the analogy of “the rearview mirror” which magnifies only what is essential to moving forward. She was determined and forward-looking.

A transition to the United States began in 1991 when she became a research associate at the Harvard University Divinity School in the Women’s Studies Program for one year. She returned in 1994 to take the Louis Iliff Visiting Lectureship at the Iliff School of Theology before joining the faculty at DePaul University in 1994 where she taught for eleven years. (Hinga, pers. comm., December 3, 2021).

Along with numerous speaking engagements and awards, Hinga was the editor of three collected volumes, including the first collection of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges* (Hinga et al. 2015). She edited *Valuing Lives Healing Earth: Religion, Gender and Life on Earth*, a collection honoring Rosemary Radford Ruether’s ecofeminist legacy. As an essayist, Hinga wrote on a wide range of topics in journals, on blog posts, and in significant collected volumes by leading scholars, such as her essay in the 2019 collection, *Ecological Solidarity: Mobilizing Faith and Justice in an Entangled World* (Hughes et al. 2019). Her own essays are collected in *African, Christian Feminist, In Search of What Matters*. (Hinga 2017).

Her life story, essays, and personal commitments offer insight into African women’s engagement in the modern PoWR and the expansion of its platform for peace, justice, interreligious dialogue, and environmental sustainability. They are rooted in traditions endemic to African women’s religious contributions globally. She challenged Western religious epistemologies and revived hidden veins of knowledge that were suppressed by Western colonialism.

## ***On Being Catholic and Gikuyu***

Hinga, the youngest of seven children, was born in 1955 to Agnes Wairimu and Ernest Hinga in the village of Ndumberi, Kiambu in British occupied Kenya (Santa Clara, n.d., In Memoriam). Hinga states, “I am Mogikuyu of the Angari Clan.” Mugikuyu means I am a descendant of Gikuyu and Mumbi. The more well-known Kikuyu is an Anglicized for Gikuyu (Hinga, pers. comm., March 6, 2021).

Hinga’s stories personalize the history of the British occupation of Kenya and form the building blocks of her scholarship, teaching, and activism. Her birth occurred at the height of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Party’s uprising, also known as the Mau Mau Rebellion to throw the British out of Kenya. It was a Gikuyu-led uprising. As Hinga explained,

*I was born just when the colonial government was forcing people into villages. That's like they forced people into reservations. They forced people into tribal enclaves...They [her family] built a house made out of adobe, you know mud, and then the order came to move to the village the following day, so they had to deconstruct a wet house. (Hinga, interview with author, March 6, 2021)*

Hinga described this land displacement in her essay, “The Gikuyu Theology of the Land,” saying, “The Indigenous people were herded into disproportionately small areas of land summarily described as “native reserves,”” while most undeveloped but potentially usable land was declared “Crown” property by the British government (Hinga 2017, 189). Her father lost his farmland and was moved to a smaller plot of land closer to town. Hinga continues, “Parents did mandatory labor for the government, so they were not being idle.” Her mother refused to do mandatory labor for no reason. Hinga explained, “My mother was defiant, and the British knew how to absorb her, they co-opted her by making her prefect and so she rounded up the children every day for the nursery school. And I remember this white woman who would come in a Land Rover whom we called the milk grandmother” (Hinga, interview with author, January 9, 2022).

Hinga called her Catholicism “totally an accident of history.” The colonial government was tired of missionaries stealing each other’s members and divided the country into missionary quadrants (Hinga 2017, 71). Holy Ghosts Missionary priests (HGM) called Spiritans were in charge of Kiambu. The Riara Mission Church still stands in her village. Hinga knew her birth date by counting back eight days from her Baptism. Every child was baptized Catholic eight days after birth and given a Christian name. Hinga said that her parents were pioneer Catholics. In fact, the Spiritans introduced her mother and father with an eye toward their marriage. They raised their children Catholic but within the Indigenous Gikuyu culture of many generations. Hinga was both Gikuyu and Catholic by her upbringing (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021). Hinga recalled her mother,

*My mother was a pioneer in her church. The missionaries were very harsh, and if you misbehaved, like if the kid misbehaved, the parents got punished, and it would be like almost physical punishment, “Come and kneel in front of this church.” My mother wouldn't kneel. (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021)*

## ***Dr. Hinga's Early Schooling***

Hinga went to nursery school, kindergarten, and then to Kamirangi primary school for seven years. Kamirangi means “Bamboo School,” named after the materials with which the school was constructed. She then went two years in Kiambu and two years in Matunda in the Rift Valley. Loreto Sisters, based in Ireland, ran both schools.<sup>1</sup> (Hinga, interview with author, January 09, 2022). Her school years took place after Kenya gained flag independence in 1963 under its first President, Jomo Kenyatta, who introduced the concept of *harambee*,<sup>2</sup> which means pulling the nation together in the same direction. Hinga recalled,

*The independent (Kenyan) government wanted to do three things, eliminate ignorance, eliminate poverty, and eliminate disease, so in the spirit of eliminating ignorance, they were pretty aggressive in the education sector. They said if you start a school, we will give you a teacher. So, that's what my villagers did, you know, Kiambu, in terms of schooling, literacy and schools, all over the place they built schools on the basis of harambee spirit. So I went to that [first] school, I was a pioneer, the very first ever class for that school. I was in it at age five, you know, alongside the teenagers... There were eight of us in the first class for sections three and four.<sup>3</sup> (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021)*

Hinga qualified for the elite Catholic boarding school for girls in Limuru, Kenya, run by the Loreto Sisters. Hinga's sister and Nobel Prize winner Wangari Mathai also attended the school. Limuru is in the area known as the White Highlands. Hinga described the area, "It was very cold, the White Highlands, very English weather, it didn't get above sixty degrees in the Kenya Highlands where the settlers lived. It was only twenty miles from home but 7,000 feet high" (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021).

The White Highlands is an area around Mt. Kenya and other mountains, including the Aberdares, that the colonial government enclosed and reserved for European settlers from 1902 to 1961 (Morgan, 141).<sup>4</sup> Hinga recalled that she picked coffee beans as a child in settler-run coffee plantations until one day her older brother calculated the amount of money they made as a family and found it very unfair. The family never picked coffee again. This history informed her future work.

## ***Dr. Hinga's College Education***

After Limuru, Hinga went to Kenyatta University where, in 1977, she earned a Bachelor of Education (BED) in English Literature and Religious Studies. Hinga explained, "Again we were pioneers...At the time all of the universities and colleges were taught only by expatriate Europeans. The university decided to recruit and grow its own faculty, so I was chosen to be one of those placed in the faculty development program. I went to do a master's with a view to joining Kenyatta University as a faculty member." She continued, "The master's program

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<sup>1</sup> "In 1609, Mary Ward founded one of the first groups of active religious women in the Catholic Church, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary," who were known in Ireland as the Loreto Sisters. <https://loreto.ie/history/mary-ward/>

<sup>2</sup> *Harambee* means "pull together" and appears on the Kenyan coat of arms. The first Kenyan president, Jomo Kenyatta stated, "Our motto 'harambee' was conceived in the realization of the challenge of national building that now lies ahead of us. It was conceived in the knowledge that to meet this challenge, the government and the people of Kenya must pull together. We know only out of our efforts and toil can we build a new and better Kenya," (Equal Rights, 2012, forward.)

<sup>3</sup> Between 1964 and 1985, the 7-4-2-3-system was operational: seven years of primary, four years of lower secondary (Form 1-4), two years of upper secondary (Form 5-6), and a minimum of three years of university education (Inyega et al, 2).

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Dubois discusses the colonization of the White Highlands, in Alaine Locke's, *The New Negro*, "Here was a land largely untainted by the fevers of the tropics and here England proposed to send her sick and impoverished soldiers of the war. Following the lead of South Africa, she (the British Protectorate) took over five million acres of the best lands from the 3,000,000 natives, herded them gradually toward the swamps and gave them, even there, no sure title; then by taxation she forced sixty percent of the black adults into working for the ten thousand white owners for the lowest wage." (Dubois 1925, 404)

was very much like a Ph.D. program. You did the class work, but you also did field work and a dissertation; mine was 300 pages.” Hinga returned to Kenyatta University and taught while finishing her master’s degree, gained in 1980 (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021).

The essay, “An African Understanding of Salvation: Comparing the New Testament Concept of Salvation with that of the Ahonoki,” describes this dissertation.<sup>5</sup>

*My insistence on interviews and structured conversations with the Ahonoki on the subject of salvation was my recognition that Africans are not just consumers of knowledge (including theological knowledge). Rather, they are moral agents, capable of generating their own ideas and engaging creatively with ideas from the outside. In the Ahonoki, I encountered not merely “objects of my study,” but human beings with agency and subjectivity. Insofar as I too was an African and a Christian, I was learning from them and with them about ways of customizing Christianity so that it resonated with us as Africans. (Hinga 2017, 226)*

The Association of Commonwealth Universities offered scholarships to citizens in the British Colonies, which Hinga received. Her research proposal described her interest in creating a case study of one of the African Independent Churches, Legio Maria Church, one of the 6,000 or more African Independent Churches popping up all across Africa. The initial response came back from Lancaster University, England, “This proposal looks good, but nobody does those kinds of things in England. We don’t do African anything.” The philosopher John Hicks, then working at Lancaster University, rescued the proposal from the trash, saying, “Let’s not pass her up. I’ll work with her.” Hinga described her first interaction with Hicks,

*Hicks said, “Well, I just signed on the dotted line so that you will get the scholarship. You are on your own.” ...So, I went knocking on all the doors, “Please can you be my supervisor?” I went to anthropology. I went to sociology. The only person who said a conditional yes was Sarah Coakley, a systematic theologian at the Lancaster University Department of Religious Studies. But she told me “Well, I have no knowledge about your topic. But at least I can support you, you know, to help write the thesis and be a reader.” So, I just sat down and wrote my Ph.D. the best way I knew how. (Hinga, interview with author; March 06, 2021 and January 09, 2022)*

Hinga found it difficult to find research on her topic in an archive anywhere in England. She, therefore, asked for permission to do extensive fieldwork, interviews, and insider participation. Like her mother, she was a pioneer Catholic working without a map or co-travelers as one of the first women doing African theology. Her fieldwork became her dissertation, *Women, Power and Liberation in an African Church: A Theological Case Study of the Legio Maria Church in Kenya*. Both her master’s and doctoral dissertations focused on women’s power

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<sup>5</sup> Ahonoki means “saved”

and liberation through self-naming in African Independent Churches. She said that her theories were articulated much later when her approach found “a theoretical home in the emergence of postcolonial theories” of the 1990s, continuing she said, “These theories were possibly best articulated by Musa Dube” in her 2001 text “Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible” (Hinga, 2017, 226).

Hinga left Lancaster initially without passing her doctoral examination. She needed someone to examine and approve the dissertation so Lancaster found Dr. Adrian Hastings at the University of Leeds. Hastings was an ordained Roman Catholic priest who had spent several years as a priest in the Massake diocese under an African bishop. He was later the editor of *The Journal of African Religions*. (Lawrie 1999, 232; Spear 2003, 337). Hinga recalled,

*My thesis was important because missionaries refused to listen to insider interpretations. They have distorted the understanding of who these churches were...So my examiner felt offended by that [assertion]. He said, “You know I’m an Africanist. I have written about African Christianity a lot. I was even there when this particular church rose up. I was a missionary in Western Kenya.” My argument back was that he was still an outsider. As I told my supervisor Sarah Coakley, “You know, no matter how many years he stayed in that neighborhood, he would be an outsider and he will always give an outsider’s perspective.” I’m arguing that we need the insider’s view on this. Because he was saying, “Oh, you are also just a Catholic. You are not a member of this church.” And I said, “You know, I have more insiderness precisely because I share the history and the culture and critique from which this church arose.” So initially I was told “You must delete that part, or the thesis will not pass.” It took me almost three years to think, to think of how to respond. As I told my supervisor “What he wants me to eliminate, that’s my contribution. That’s my thesis. If I take that away, I have no thesis. I will be just repeating an echo.” (Hinga, interview with the author, March 06, 2021 and January 09, 2022)*

It took her three years to find a way to satisfy Hastings without compromising her position on women’s agency in the Legio Maria, recalling, “And so finally, he said yes, and he passed the thesis in 1990 and even thought it was publishable” (Hinga, pers. comm., January 09, 2022).

The power dynamics of knowledge production surfaced in this exchange. Hinga’s embodied knowers of the Legio Maria Church challenged Hastings’ quest for objective knowing and universal (now thought of as a colonizing) Christianity. Hinga asserted that truth was socially constructed, in this case, within the community of the Legio Maria Church. Hastings clung to a logocentric idea of objective truth that rendered insider knowledge as false consciousness. Hastings was blind to the social construction of his own quest for objective truth, which was also made in community, but one that was white, patriarchal and colonial, one that sought religious transformation within a Christian missionary context, but was actually subjugating those not like himself. Hinga read not only on behalf of, but with the members of the Legio Maria Church, stating, “I was concerned to foreground the women in this church who had been doubly left out of the picture by the dominant cultures and the colonial missionary churches” (Hinga 2017, 55). Christian missionaries ignored the religious history and cultures of Africans,

and many Africans responded with African Independent Churches. Hinga sought justice for women. Hastings sought empirical certainty in one universal Godhead.

## ***The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians***

A significant event that contributed to Hinga's journey to the U.S. and later involvement in the Parliament of the World's Religions was the Convening of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 in Accra, Ghana, by Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Hinga was a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, "a pan-African association of women who study the role and impact of religion and culture on African women's lives" (Hinga pers. comm., December 3, 2021). As a member of the Circle, Hinga celebrated African forms of knowledge production and women's moral agency. She advanced the ideas of interreligious dialogue far beyond "Religious Studies" methodologies that studied the "other" through detached inquiry. The methodologies of the Circle insisted on solidarity through face-to-face encounters.

### ***Circle History***

In 1989, Mercy Oduyoye initiated a gathering of seventy African women theologians and religious leaders in Trinity College, now Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana. Hinga said that the impetus for the meeting was the injustice implicit in the enforced silence of African women. Oduyoye noted her growing gender awareness that led to the creation of the Circle, "My sensitivity to the issues of gender began with moving from Ghana to Nigeria; trying to teach theology in a department where all my colleagues were men, and trying to understand the status of women in a patrilineal Africa where some of us are matrilineal" (Oduyoye 2004, xiii). Hinga quotes a line from Oduyoye's keynote at the founding of the Circle, "As long as men and Western strangers continue to write exclusively about Africa, African women will continue to be represented as if they were dead" (Oduyoye, and Kanyoro. 1992, 5. Also in Hinga 2017, 10.).

Hinga helped name the Circle, and recalled, "This community named themselves afresh and therefore freed themselves from the imperial naming about them" (Hinga, interview with author, January 09, 2022). Hinga articulated the Circle's mission, saying, "Determined to transcend the state of apathy born out of years of imposed silence, the African women covenanted to undertake sustained research, analysis, writing and publishing on the impact of religions and culture in their lives" (Hinga 2017, 12).

Hinga noted the continuity with other African liberation struggles such as that of Kimpa Vita, who, from 1702 through 1706, fashioned herself as a prophet and criticized the colonial missionary presence in the Kongo. Hinga points out that Kimpa Vita would symbolically die every Friday and be transfigured to the presence of God, where "she would spend three days pleading the case of the oppressed African in the Kongo (Hinga 2017, xx). The Circle gathering in 1989

marked continuity with the spirit-driven activism of Kimpa Vita, the Ahonoki, and the women of the Maria Legio African Independent Church, the community of Hinga’s doctoral focus.

## **Circle Thinking**

It is helpful to name a few of the underlying principles of the African Circle’s ongoing thinking, called here Circle Thinking that were influential in Hinga’s interactions with PoWR.

**Dialogical Imperative:** Hinga’s essay “The Dialogical Imperative: Listening to Concerned and Engaged African Women,” situates this concept as the basis of the Circle’s formation and covenant to be intentionally inclusive of women who are in Islamic, Christian, Indigenous traditions and in African Independent Religions. (Hinga 2017, 17-34). Hinga said, “This concept means, simply to talk and listen because you can’t make a move into the direction of understanding each other without it. It is important to talk and see each other’s issues. Two waterfalls can never have a conversation. One of us has to listen sometime if our position is to continue. It’s imperative. There is no option” (Hinga, interview with author, January 4, 2022).

**Mothering:** Mothering is a central ethical principle that goes beyond biology and is exemplified by how mothers ideally nurture their children. Hinga recalled that her mother would show up at Limuru at odd times with food and deliver *mokimo* – mashed potatoes with vegetables and beans –in the middle of the week to Limuru High School. She continued, “Whenever that mother bug grabbed her, she had to move. It didn’t matter what time of the week or what the protocol was she would come. The nuns would sit her [mother] in the field and call me from study and we would have a feast that night in the dormitory” (Hinga, pers. comm., with author, January 04 and January 09, 2022).

In mothering, Hinga states, “there would have been no contradiction between Kimpa Vita being a woman and a mother and her being a medium of the divine spirit, a healer and a prophet. This principle is formative in African Independent Churches like the Legio Maria Church, where female members are recognized as mothers and sisters” (Hinga 2017, xix). Western dualisms that bifurcate body and spirit, mothering and moral agency are not part of Circle epistemologies.

**Better Samaritan:** The story of the Good Samaritan in the Christian Bible is the springboard of the essay, *Becoming Better Samaritans: The Quest for New Models of Doing Social Justice in Africa* (Hinga 2017, 93-106). The Good Samaritan focuses on immediate relief, not the complex root causes of injustice. The Good Samaritan drags the bodies out of the streams without curiosity about how the bodies entered the streams of injustice. The Better Samaritan examines the root causes of injustice. Hinga states, “I argue for what I call the ‘Better Samaritan model,’ namely, a model that involves the use of clinical economic tools and the focus on proper diagnosis (a process that theologians call discernment) and then develop an appropriate theo-ethical and practical response to the scandal



of poverty today” (Hinga 2017, 101).

**Of Potted Plants:** Hinga deconstructed global Christian proselytizing and missionary work that has long been central to the colonial project. She noted that missionary Christianity is like a potted plant that can be moved around but whose roots never interact with native soil. The potted plant is imposed upon the native soil and dominates it without enriching it. It is a decoration that sucks up nutrients, not benefitting native soil. Hinga explained that the goal of the Parliament of the World’s Religions to seek a nurturing pluralism is contradicted by studies of Christianity and its texts which attempt to show the superiority of Christianity compared to other religions (Hinga 2017, 211). If Africans embrace prophets like Kimpa Vita or speak in tongues, they are called heretics or are considered examples of false consciousness. These ethnocentric categorizations are examples of Christian chauvinism. One essay nuances the strategies of Christian chauvinism,

*Chauvinism is manifest more subtly in a conditional tolerance and inclusion of the “different other” that carries the provision that the other should change in the direction dictated by those with power. This kind of chauvinism is exemplified in Africa in the coercive proselytization of dominant religions and proselytizers sometimes using “charity as ‘bait’ for such conversion.” (Hinga 2017, 30)*

**Community:** Community is a radically inclusive ethical principle that recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings with the Earth. It also recognizes human formation within and in relation to community, including the natural world. Our relationship to the Earth is reimagined within paradigms of liberation. African Circle community is built upon face-to-face dialogue across religious and cultural divides, especially between the many ethnicities and religious traditions that co-exist in Africa. This commitment to building a pluralistic universe is one reason Hinga joined the many matriarchs of the Circle who are active in global leadership positions such as the Parliament of the World’s Religions, the World Council of Churches, the World Service Mission, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Hinga worked tirelessly to tell the story of the Circle and to celebrate the presence of African women as leaders and influencers on the global stage.

Hinga noted that Circle thinking “reorients history in the direction that would enhance rather than subvert human and other forms of flourishing” (Hinga, 2017, xvi). The basis of this reorientation is a blended community that creates respect and recognizes multiple centers of ethical knowledge production. This interconnectedness challenges Western universalism, a limiting and narcissistic concept forged within the context of European conquest and Western imperialism. This Western obsession with universality absorbs and extracts rather than dialogues or respects a pluralistic world where many worlds are possible.

**Sabona:** Hinga explained in a blog post that Sabona is “seeing clearly.” She introduced a routine greeting ritual with her Santa Clara students who were apprehensive about taking religion. The students would say “sabona,” which means “I see you,” to which the response is “I am here.” Sabona is a relational

seeing with the heart. Students shared in papers that the ritual was transformational as they reflected upon times when they were not seen or did not see others. Professor Hinga said of sabona, “We shall recognize the moral significance, even moral imperative of sabona and commit to truly seeing with the eyes of the heart the intrinsic worth of all, including the different other, however, that difference manifests itself” (Hinga 2020a).

**Africa’s Triple Heritage: African Indigenous Religions, Christianity, Islam:**<sup>6</sup> Hinga insisted that there is an underlying African Indigenous worldview that is complex and multi-dimensional and nurtured across African religious landscapes, calling this Africa’s Triple Heritage of African Indigenous Religions (AIR), Christianity, and Islam. Hinga’s life story is a testament to a hyphenated identity that is both Catholic and Gikuyu. In a recent article addressing Africa’s triple heritage and contributions to global ethics, Hinga clarifies this triple heritage,

*To focus exclusively on AIR separately from Africa’s other two heritages overlooks the fact that many in Africa live their faith in hyphenated and even hybrid ways. Christians in Africa are not Christians but African Christians whose expression of Christianity is shaped and informed for good or ill by the African worldview as well as by the social cultural and historical contexts in which Christianity is lived and negotiated, often among other competing ways of living and believing. (Hinga 2020b, 187)*

Hinga brought these Circle principles to the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1994 when she became an active member. Before I discuss her contributions, I will briefly review the PoWR’s history.

## ***Dr. Hinga and the Parliament of the World’s Religions***

The Parliament of the World’s Religions first met in 1893 in Chicago. Religious scholar Diana Eck tells us that the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions was the first time there was a gathering of Eastern and Western Religions. However, Christian Protestants dominated the meeting. Despite its limitations, Eck goes on to say, “It could as easily be seen as one of the opening events of the modern ecumenical movement,” rather than an inter-faith convening. There were few Asians and only one Muslim convert in attendance (Eck 1994, 43-44). Gender inclusivity was also limited. For instance, Jewish women joined the Women’s Pavilion rather than the PoWR because male Jewish leaders refused their demand for parity in planning Jewish presentations. Jewish men would only allow women to plan social events and teas (Taylor 2021,1). There was no thought of including African Indigenous religions. Africa was considered the dark continent that needed saving by what David Livingston called the three Cs, Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce. For most people at the PoWR, Christianity was

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<sup>6</sup> Hinga attributes the idea of a triple heritage to Mazrui (Hinga 2020b, 186).

thought to be the only true religion (Hinga 2017, 60). One hundred years later, in 1993, the PoWR reconvened in Chicago. This second convening had greater diversity, with 8000 in attendance from around the world, but Africa's presence was still limited. The mission of this second convening was to "seek common ground." A groundbreaking document emerged from this convening: "Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration" (Parliament, n.d. Global.). Theologian Hans Küng drafted this declaration in consultation with scholars and leaders from many of the world's religions. Dr. Küng felt that there would be no peace in the world without peace between religions. He used the word ethic rather than ethics because it denoted "a way of life guided by certain moral commitments" (Renaud and Schweiker 2020, 2).<sup>7</sup>

Hinga attended PoWR planning sessions after this convening and after joining the faculty at DePaul University in 1994. She stated, "I was immediately co-opted into the International Committee of the Parliament of the World's Religions (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021). DePaul University became the academic link to the PoWR since both are based in Chicago, Illinois.

As a member of the PoWR's planning committee in 1994, Hinga proposed Cape Town, South Africa for the 1999 PoWR to symbolically honor Nelson Mandela's release from prison.<sup>8</sup> At the Cape Town convening, Hinga participated on three panels, including a panel she both convened and served as a respondent, entitled "Becoming Global Citizens, Indigenous Religions and the Search for a Global Ethic" (Hinga, pers.comm. December 03, 2021). This panel marked the first time African Indigenous Religions were included in PoWR convenings. Hinga's fellow panelists were from Kenya, South Africa, and Chicago. She was a panelist on a session entitled "African Religions and Ecology" and a third session entitled "Religion and Human Rights at the United Nations: Women's Rights as Human Rights." Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama were the convening's keynote speakers. One of her greatest memories was setting foot on South African soil after being barred from entry because of its apartheid policies and human rights violations. Hinga recalled, "I could travel everywhere in the world except South Africa, because the world was protesting racism..." (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021 and January 09, 2022). Hinga's insistence on including the knowledge production of African Indigenous Religions and African women marked a moment of greater inclusivity in the PoWR. This convening moved the PoWR from its primarily patriarchal and Western approach to religion to a more global and relevant space for collectively tackling the world's problems.

Hinga remained on the PoWR's international advisory board and participated in planning the academic component for the PoWR's next convening in Barcelona, Spain, in 2004. She could not attend the meeting because of difficulty getting a visa. Ironically, even though apartheid had ended, growing nationalism and stricter immigration policies prevented Hinga from traveling freely.

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<sup>7</sup> This document had two principles: humanity, and the golden rule. They had five directives: Nonviolence, Justice, Truthfulness, Equal Rights and Partnership, and Ecological Responsibility. (Global Ethic Foundation, n.d.)

<sup>8</sup> Another decision at the 1993 PoWR convening was to meet every five years, rather than once every 100 years (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021).

In 2018, the PoWR hired Dr. Myriam Renaud to assess the Global Ethic and decide whether revisions were necessary. Renaud determined that the fifth directive of the Global Ethic, Ecological Responsibility, needed more elaboration. In April 2018, Renaud initiated a conference on the Global Ethic at the University of Chicago, “*Grappling with the Global Ethic: Multi-Religious Perspectives on Global Issues.*” Renaud invited Hinga to attend the conference to comment on and contribute to the initial draft of this document. After this consultation, the new expression of the fifth directive on ecology was presented to the General Assembly in Toronto and was passed. An impressive document, it begins,

*The world is in agony. The agony is so pervasive and urgent that we are compelled to name its manifestations so that the depth of this pain may be made clear: Peace eludes us...the planet is being destroyed...neighbors live in fear...women and men are estranged from each other...children die! (Parliament, n.d., Fifth)*

In addition to helping craft this ecological directive, Hinga was a respondent to Dr. Vandana Shiva’s keynote address on Earth Democracy in Toronto. Shiva believes the green revolution is a global disaster and a corporate takeover of Indigenous and marginalized peoples’ land, culture, and knowledge production. She calls Earth Democracy both a movement and an ancient worldview based on the Indian idea of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the earth family), the community of all beings supported by the earth (Shiva 2015, 1). This movement calls for peoples’ sovereignty over seeds, food, land, and water. Continuing the dialogue at a later session, “Vandana Shiva and Friends Presenting Earth Democracy,” Hinga suggested using the African principle of *ubuntu*, translated as human flourishing as a complement to the Indian idea of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. A person with *ubuntu* is governed by the relationship imperative to treat all people and the earth with dignity and respect. Paraphrasing African scholar Sambuli Moshe, Hinga names virtues that define *ubuntu*, “self-control, silence, courage, diligence, and communality” (Hinga 2020b, 190). In an essay, Hinga states, “Reclaiming these virtues that flow organically from the African worldview would help Africa and by extension, the world gain better traction on the rather slippery path to enhanced flourishing” (Hinga 2020b,190). Drs. Shiva and Hinga suggest a return to indigenous virtues and beliefs that revere the interconnectedness of all life in their search for a global ethic. Hinga believed these values encourage personal integrity and personal wholeness and nurture reverence for people and the natural world. She states, “Such an attitude of reverence, if adopted within and beyond African shores, would surely help the global community follow the path to a future where all flourish” (Hinga 2020b, 188).

In 2021, Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker edited a collection of essays from the initial April conference entitled *Multi-Religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*. In one of ten essays, *Tapping The Moral Wisdom of Africa’s Triple Heritage of Religion and Culture*, Hinga argues for the inclusion of African ethical principles into the PoWR’s search for a global ethic. However, she warns against stereotypes, and calls for an understanding

of the complexity of the African landscape. Hinga defines and defends the idea of an African triple heritage, including African Indigenous Religions (AIRs), Christianity, and Islam. Speaking about AIRs, she said, “Despite the aggressive proselytizing strategies of Islam and Christianity, AIR or African Traditional Belief (ATR) systems and their ethical dimensions continue in subdued, though very real ways to inform Africans’ navigation of the many challenges that complicate their efforts to meet their needs, basic or otherwise” (Hinga 2020b, 188). Hinga notes that Christianity and Islam are not merely foreign colonial additions inimical to Africa’s flourishing claiming,

*Both Christianity and Islam have been major parts of the African religious landscape for centuries with Islam in Nigeria, for example, going back to the 7th century CE. Furthermore, the history of Christianity in Africa is not coterminous with its 19th-century missionary expression. Christianity has been present in Africa since biblical times—the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church predate 19th-century missionary Christianity by many years. (Hinga 2020b, 187)*

She critiqued essentialist outsider classifications that bifurcate this Triple Heritage. “Focusing exclusively on AIRS separate from the other “heritages” overlooks the fact that many in Africa live their faith in *hyphen-nated and even hybrid*” ways... because Africans read, interpret and embody Christianity (and Islam) through African eyes” (Hinga 2020b, 187).

Hinga needed this early argument to justify the inclusion of an underlying African Indigenous ethical principle, *ubuntu*, which is the quality of living in harmony with certain African Indigenous values. The distinctive beliefs underlying *ubuntu* are,

1. The centrality of belief in God.
  2. An acknowledgment of the intrinsic unity between individuals and communities.
  3. The view that the universe is an interconnected, interdependent and sacred whole.
  4. An embrace of life as a process of spiritual formation and transformation.
- (Hinga 2020b, 201)

Hinga believed that the PoWR and the world should move beyond stereotypes of Africa and learn the lessons of African communities that have sought human flourishing in the midst of colonization, apartheid, genocide, and the destruction of the earth. These lessons include Desmond Tutu’s *third way*, an embrace of *ubuntu* ethics that called for reconciliation rather than Nuremberg-like trials after South African apartheid; Julius Nyerere’s *ujamaa* (familiness in Swahili) in post-colonial Tanzania; Jomo Kenyatta’s *harambee* through which schools and hospitals were built in Hinga’s youth in Kenya; Wangari Mathai’s Green Belt Movement originating in Kenya, which is an “application of Indigenous moral wisdom to heal ourselves and the Earth;” *Gechacha* (justice on the grass) in post-genocide Rwanda, and; Mercy Oduyuye’s Circle of Concerned

African Women Theologians that “has mobilized and nurtured women’s moral agency to advance the struggle against sexism and allied injustices that sabotage women’s human flourishing in Africa and beyond.” Hinga concludes the essay by saying, “Applying Africa’s moral traditions of abundant life would enhance the possibilities of achieving a major goal of the Global Ethic, enhanced flourishing in a global and rapidly globalizing world” (Hinga 2020b, 197).

### ***Additional Publications***

In addition to her work with the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Hinga published widely on a variety of topics of importance to the African World and the Circle. She was a prolific essayist. Her essays offer more insights in the footnotes than many scholars provide in their main text. Hinga was refreshingly transparent in recounting her scholarly roots. She created the context for her writing, compiled the writers that influenced her on the particular topic, asserted her own convictions, and offered concrete examples of how ethical principles became actionable.

#### *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges*

As noted in the introduction, Hinga was one of four editors of the first collection published under the auspices of the Circle in 2008. This collection was conceived in the darkest moments of the HIV/AIDS pandemic when medicines were available in the United States but too expensive in other parts of the world. Musa Dube describes the context of the 1990s, “I said to myself, ‘Almost 40 percent of these students may not be alive ten years from now.’ I asked myself whether there was any need to teach what I was teaching if it could not save my students from HIV and AIDS or assist them to manage to live within the epidemic” (Dube 2019, 321). One of the reasons for the collection was to break the theological silence around HIV/AIDS and the experiences of women. Reviewer Elias Bongmba of Rice University said of this collection, “This book is a welcome addition to the literature on theology and AIDS, especially as it opens a window into the urban world where domestic service these days has become a deadly zone for women” (2008, 76-104).

Hinga’s essay critiqued patriarchal ecclesiology that disregarded women’s lived experiences such as the traditions of multiple wives in a household or the numerous contexts by which divorce occurs. Hinga condemned theodicies, the defense of God’s power in the face of evil, that assert that disease and suffering are the consequence of sin. She called for hope grounded in compassionate care and “accompaniment with” the most vulnerable (Hinga 2017, 131).

#### *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters*

This collection of essays is a response to colleagues who have trouble accessing many of Hinga’s writings. It is a compilation of a lifetime of work on a wide range of topics. It shows the breadth of her scholarship and knowledge of

world events. In her review of this collection, Zimbabwean scholar Rudo Mudiwa states,

*Hinga, a feminist theologian, argues that Christianity can be, and has been, a resource for African feminist worldmaking... While Hinga insists that Christianity and feminism are not merely compatible but complementary, she does not shy away from addressing Christianity's past and present entanglements with colonialism, sexism, and racism. Instead, she demonstrates how African feminists have read Christian texts against the grain, employing them as resources for feminist justice.... Accordingly, Hinga takes a particular interest in how African Christians have subverted the mission enterprise and developed practices best suited to their lives. (2019, 146)*

Dr. Kwok Pui-lan comments in her cover note that this “collection offers the most comprehensive account of the issues and debates on Afro-feminism, power, and religion... This book will be influential and referred to for years to come” (Hinga 2017). Dr. Anna Floerke Scheid notes that the first section of this collection offers essential documentation of the “origins, practice methods, and impact” of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Scheid 2021, 121) saying, “One could argue that the entire first section of the text is a semi-autobiographical account of Hinga’s own growing conscientization and agency through her work as a founding member of the Circle. The Circle had a major impact on Hinga’s development as an African, Christian, feminist scholar” (Scheid 2021, 121).

## ***Teaching to Transform***

Since several of Hinga’s essays are evaluated above, I will explore her teaching journey from a focus on “Bible Knowledge” to a pedagogy of “Teaching to Transform.” Hinga noted that engaged pedagogy was different from her earlier training. She recalled that her youthful study of religion consisted of rote memorization of Bible passages called Bible Knowledge. She referenced Paulo Friere calling this approach the “banking” style of education in which a student is “receiving, filing and storing the deposited knowledge, without critical thinking or mutual flourishing and transformation” (Hinga 2017, 220). When she began teaching at Kenyatta University, she became aware of the inadequacy of Bible Knowledge. She understood this approach as a colonial construct that ignored Christianity experienced in Africa, and the personal experiences that her African students brought to the Biblical texts (Hinga 2017, 201). She moved to a pedagogy that engaged the world, particularly the worlds of her students as her career advanced. For instance, in Chicago, she invited Reverend Dirk Ficca, the longtime Executive Director of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, to speak to her class after 9/11 (Parliament 2021). Hinga recalled his dressing more like the students than the expert was important to creating a class of equals who together made sense of 9/11 (Hinga, interview with author, January 04, 2022). Her colleague Philip “Boo” Riley referred to this aspect of Hinga’s teaching and research as “Glocalization.” Riley went on to say, “Teresia loved that word...

She herself was a walking embodiment of glocalization. Whether it was bringing concerns and themes from Africa to bear on our curriculum and programs or her networking with and supporting immigrant groups in the community, she always had Kenya with her in Silicon Valley” (Santa Clara, n.d., In Memoriam).

Hinga recognized the local issues involved in the “urgent need for conscientization about the global ethical challenges of our time” (Hinga 2017, 200). In her essay “Teaching to Transform,” Hinga called for the transformation of consciousness and the nurturing of global citizenship to mitigate the harms of technology and global capitalism, especially the extreme poverty of women and the pervasive xenophobia and fear of the other. She observed, “Global capitalism and technology heighten our sense of living in one world, which also heightens fears of the other in the intimate global village” (Hinga 2017, 201). Hinga believed in “working in collaboration with others in the global village, including her students who are not only affected by globalization” but like her students at Kenyatta University, “bring multiple and diverse gifts, competencies and even ethical sensibilities to the table as the world seeks lasting solutions to complex questions” (Hinga 2017, 201). Hinga refined her teaching to include service and experiential learning rather than lectures and exams that tested banked knowledge. She called for teachers and students of religion to scrutinize “religion itself for the role it might play in subverting or abetting the ethical challenges posed by globalization” (Hinga 2017, 229). Throughout her career, Hinga posed the question, “Does religion, for example, subvert greed which many see as being at the root of globalized, feminized extreme poverty or does it participate in this greed, thus impoverishing many” (Hinga 2017, 229)? This question is an integral part of her legacy.

### ***Dr. Hinga and Knowledge Equity***

Hinga spent a lifetime expanding the visibility of African women’s knowledge production. The members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians are central to her scholarly discourses and activism in global organizations like the Parliament of the World’s Religions and the World Council of Churches. In Africa, the issue of knowledge equity is not narrowly centered around the gender gap in knowledge representation and production, the most notorious example being the dramatic 80% gap between gendered biographical entries on Wikipedia (Wikipedia, n.d., Women). An even more significant root cause of knowledge inequity in Africa is the lack of access to scholarly research locked behind “High-Income Country” (HIC) pay-walls. A second cause is the insular nature of Western academia and the lack of engagement worldwide with African scholars and their concerns. Kenya is developing robust open access requirements for publicly funded research and is creating public-private university consortiums promising open access platforms, but these are geared more toward the sciences than the humanities. However, consortiums do not solve the problem of young students simply accessing the internet on a daily basis without going to internet cafes that charge by the hour (Matheka et al. 2014).



In the context of the Parliament of the World's Religions, economic issues prevent knowledge equity. For instance, Hinga missed PoWR conferences in the United States because of the cost of these conferences. Shared knowledge at conferences is, first and foremost, about who can afford to walk through the door at the conference. The PoWR conferences are places of geographic and economic privilege. The funds needed to cover the costs for hotels, registration, travel and food are prohibitive for many. Most faculty and NGO budgets barely cover the costs of annual meetings for professional organizations let alone the additional cost of PoWR conferences. Hinga struggled with the financial implications of attending these and the additional professional organizations she has contributed to. Where many in the North attend from their want, many others attend from their need and at great sacrifice. It is difficult to break free from the economic inequalities in which these conferences are embedded.

Another difficulty in achieving knowledge equity is the inability to create a shared understanding of cross-disciplinary exchange and its purpose. For instance, the authors of the PoWR's *Global Ethic* volume promise that the respondents to essays are "expert(s) in the same tradition" (Renaud and Schweiker 2020, 2, 202). However, these criteria did not apply in the case of Hinga's essay, *Tapping The Moral Wisdom of Africa's Triple Heritage of Religion and Culture* (discussed in detail earlier in this essay). Dr. Ralph Austin, emeritus from the University of Chicago, admits he is not a student of religion or philosophy but has a Western academic background in African history, post-colonial theory, anthropology, and literature. Rather than using his context as a jumping off point for cross-cultural dialogue, he remains deeply embedded in a universalizing Western epistemology. Like many white academics, he uses his own social location as a reason not to engage with scholars who use differing epistemological assumptions. Austin dismisses Hinga's assumptions about African Indigenous or Traditional Religions (AIR and sometimes ATR) as "analytical kinship with racism" (Renaud and Schweiker 2020, 202). Where do you go after you call an African's academic insights racist? He does not grapple with, but dismisses the entire field of African Religion that Hinga builds upon. He dismisses her use of African derived words, such as *ubuntu*, because it is also the name of a Linux operating system. I am not sure why he engages literary criticism for an origin quest of African words except to gain his own alternative mastery over the concepts Hinga puts forth. He dismisses Hinga's contextualization of *ubuntu* ethical principles as aspirations that failed. The failures he dismisses include Desmond Tutu's third way used as a remedy for South Africa's apartheid regime, Julius Nyrere's use of *ujamaa* (meaning family) in postcolonial Tanzania, Jomo Kenyaata's *harambee* (Swahili for "all pull together," Hinga 2020, 192) at Kenya's independence from British rule and Rwanda's Gecacha or restorative justice.

These examples are not failures, but recognizable applications of traditional knowledge that reinvigorated broken moments in the history of Africa, moments that were entangled with the extensive history of colonialism on the continent. Ethical concepts are subject to history and the corruption by political and economic systems. Ethical systems that call upon local concepts like

a third way, *ujamaa*, *harambee* and *gechacha* must be renewed and embodied to survive in a broken world. Hinga's essay calls for a global ethic that moves beyond dialogue and becomes embodied through cross-cultural exchange. She is critiquing the many interfaith encounters that are wearisome fact-finding missions or Western intellectual pursuits that change nothing.

In her essay Hinga argues that *ubuntu* virtues are embodied particularly in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and are needed building blocks for equitable communities (Hinga 2020b, 190). Hinga uses an example of the weaver of kente cloth, "she does not produce narrow strips to be sewn together, but a whole universe of cloth—several motifs and several colors, blending and clashing, but forming one piece" (Hinga 2020b; Oduyoye, 2004, 102-3). She claims that the women of the Circle, though not perfect, are moral agents who have gone beyond the declaration of the PoWR's Global Ethic because they "embody what they push for and hope for in society: pluralism, justice, and peace based on transformative dialogue among themselves and with the wider society and with the Church or mosque" (Hinga 2020b, 195).

To paraphrase Hinga, right now we are on the wrong bus when it comes to understanding and creating knowledge equity. We need to change buses (Hinga 2019, 140). She has said that it seems hard logistically to change buses, but it is just a matter of a few steps.

Western epistemologies seek mastery, rather than transformation and are deeply suspicious of narrative because it is thought to be limited. Scholars often see orality and storytelling as a hindrance to objective truth. Yet, Hinga's life story and the life stories of her academic and activist colleagues are a road map to human flourishing. The storyteller voices a composite truth. The intimacy of one person's journey provides a compelling, transformational map from limits to liberation. The brief part of Hinga's oral history shared in this essay informs us of the impact of colonialism on an individual, a community, and a nation. Her scholarship is grounded by her struggle to transform outsider categories of naming that are inherently unjust and reductive. Her transparency regarding her embodied understandings reinforces the idea that all knowledge is contextual and situated, not universal and objective. Hinga's focus on cross-cultural conversations that transform both the storyteller and the listener or reader. If embraced, could go a long way in building more meaningful and exciting platforms of knowledge sharing and production in digital spaces like Wikipedia, in university settings, and within the Parliament of the World's Religions.

## **Conclusion**

Hinga spent her career in ecumenical dialogue beginning with her Gikuyu and Christian colonial beginnings. She used her intellect and education to remove stereotypes and essentialist categories that diminish African people, particularly African women. She began her academic career with the *Case of the Legio Maria Church in Kenya*. Through this dissertation she held strong to her convictions and recognized and celebrated the moral agency and knowledge production of African

women. As a founding member of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, she carved out a body of ethical principles, proverbs, and insights that created ecumenical and communal spaces of mutual understanding and empathy. She defined and embodied ethical principles that will help Africa flourish and, if forged and renewed in dialogical conversation, help to overcome colonialism, patriarchy and a global economic system of power that is responsible for the poverty of the majority of the world. She believed these principles, if taken seriously, would help the world flourish in this moment of crisis. Many of her colleagues called her “Mama Africa” at least in part because she embodied these principles so thoroughly.

As a member of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Hinga used quiet diplomacy to advance the interfaith mission by articulating Africa’s Triple Heritage of Religions and by helping plan the first Parliament of the World’s Religions Conference held on African soil. She used a hermeneutics of suspicion to both embrace and critique the PoWR’s history and practices, always as a partner in solidarity with the PoWR. She continued to enrich the PoWR’s quest for peace among religious traditions by articulating African ethical principles that have proven, in key moments in history, to bring people together and aid human flourishing.

As an educator, Hinga brought the PoWR’s programs and Circle practices into the classroom. The PoWR initiated a PoWR Cities Initiative by which San Jose, CA, near where Hinga taught, was designated one of the PoWR cities in the U.S. Hinga integrated interfaith activities and faith community visits into her curricula and produced interfaith justice events in the larger community (Hinga, interview with author, March 06, 2021).

In closing, I will bring the reader closer to the dialogical experience that I had in interviews with Hinga. Talking with Hinga was like entering a sacred space; it was also like crossing the Atlantic in a rowboat. With her Queen’s English and my slow Alabama Southern drawl, I asked her to spell words two and three times. But Hinga was patient and carried on the conversation with respect and dignity, holding space for us both. When I entered the space she held for me, I became a little quieter and allowed the conversation to unfold. Hinga held a three-dimensional space of transformation, not simply as an exchange of ideas, but as a way of creating community across cultures; two worlds changed in dialogue and made room for more.

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**Pamela Ayo Yetunde**  
*Wisdom from the Center  
of the Heart: The Life  
and Work of Pamela Ayo  
Yetunde So Far*

KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO



Source: Pamela Ayo Yetunde

### ***Introduction***

In recent years, Dr. Pamela Ayo Yetunde has emerged as a prominent figure in the Black, Buddhist, and queer communities. As I caught a glimpse of her amidst the excited crowds at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Toronto in 2018, a gathering of 10,000 delegates from 80 countries and nearly 200 religious, spiritual, and Indigenous traditions, her humble free spirit immediately captured my attention. Unpretentious, unaffected by the grandeur of the immense gathering, and unfazed by the power and prestige of the luminary figures assembled there, she flowed through the hallowed halls with confidence and grace. In an era of shameless self-promotion, to be simple, humble, and authentic is a distinction. In the Buddhist context, self-effacement is construed as a sign of respect for others and dedication to their well-being.

Yetunde was born in relatively ordinary circumstances but has become a leading voice for personal, spiritual, and social liberation. Trained in law, meditation, finance, and hospice care, she transcends the limitations of stereotypical categories in her roles as chaplain, pastoral counselor, professor, writer, and community activist (<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/pamela-ayo-yetunde>). She is a co-founder of the Center of the Heart, which uses Buddhist principles to help people heal from racism, misogyny, homophobia, and relationship abuse, what she calls “the trauma of being alive” (Yetunde and Giles, 2020, 18). She has made presentations on the spirituality of the Black lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde, both at the Parliament of the World’s Religions and the American Psychosocial Oncology Society (Yetunde 2019a),<sup>1</sup> and has shared her ideas and experiences at numerous events, both academic and community-based. In all these roles, she uses Buddhist principles to educate, elucidate, and



free beings from the effects of trauma and oppression.

Yetunde expands learning using language and media that illuminate the lives and diverse experiences of people who tend to be marginalized. Her publications focus on issues of racism, trauma, and religion; the experiences of Black lesbians who practice Buddhism (Yetunde 2017a; Yetunde 2017b); and how Buddhist practice can support the spiritual care of transgender people (Yetunde 2020a). When she entered academic life, she was twenty years older than most in her cohort and was not interested in pleasing others just to be liked (Yetunde, pers. comm., January 25, 2022). She was not looking for a new long-term career and was not invested in gaining tenure, so she did not conform as others might and engaged in activities that some academics would frown on, for example, becoming an assistant professor of pastoral care and counseling and launching the Theology of Prince project in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Her concept of knowledge equity revolves around what moves and transforms the heart. Not many people will attend a seminary, but they may be moved to read a book about Black or trans-Buddhists. Her work is scholarly, interdisciplinary, and expands access to learning beyond academic formats that privilege White colonial modes of knowledge production. Her efforts to democratize knowledge extend to neglected populations that have not been sufficiently considered, in ways that straddle the academy and the public forum.

In 2018, Yetunde published an article on the experiences of 31 African American same-sex-loving women who are Buddhist practitioners in the Insight Meditation Community to explore whether their understanding of the concept of non-self could be correlated with relational interdependence, possibly influenced by the African relational norm NTU (Phillips 1990; Yetunde 2018a). One of her greatest accomplishments thus far was the groundbreaking Black and Buddhist Summit, convened and hosted by her in February 2021 (<https://www.blackandbuddhistsummit.com>). This free week-long online event gathered 20 Black Buddhist leaders to discuss issues of racial equity and gender justice from a wide variety of Buddhist perspectives. As an attendee, I observed speakers who expressed their deepest feelings with stunning honesty, brilliance, insight, and clarity. About 10,000 people registered and videos from the event have been used in classrooms throughout the world (Yetunde, pers. communication, January 25, 2022).

Yetunde has authored three groundbreaking monographs: *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, *U.S. Law, and Womanist Theology for Transgender Spiritual Care* (Yetunde 2020a), a guidebook for chaplains and care providers in hospital settings; *Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical*

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith F. Coleman-Tobias mentions Yetunde as among the Audre Lorde scholars “who have articulated the spiritual and religious imperatives of Lorde’s oratorical and literary activism.” “Audre and Africa: Reconsidering Lorde’s Rites/Rights,” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 23 (May 2018): 69.

<sup>2</sup> The Theology of Prince project, designed to explore the impact of religion on Prince’s music, commenced in Fall 2017 and is documented on the website of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities: <https://content.untedseminary.edu/theology-of-prince-gallery>. Yetunde’s keynote at the Build Peace Borderlands conference on the intersection of peacebuilding, technology, arts, and storytelling, held at University of San Diego and the Escuela Libre de Arquitectura in Tijuana, Mexico, in November 2019, can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENwJxOfwJ3g>.

*Theology* (Yetunde 2018b), a work that intersects Buddhism, Womanist theology, and practical theology; and *Casting Indra's Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community* (Yetunde 2023), in which she gathers wisdom from diverse religious traditions and from her experience as a Buddhist teacher, pastoral counselor, practical theologian, chaplain, and activist. The scope of her writings is evidence of her radically inclusive approach to learning equity, personal transformation, and social justice. By writing and creating events independent of academic structures, she implicitly critiques traditional racist, sexist, and colonialist norms and institutions that attempt to delimit and constrain what constitutes valid knowledge. Yet, to this day, there is no Wikipedia entry about Pamela Ayo Yetunde. This chapter highlights why she is notable and deserves our immediate attention.

## ***Life Review***

An oral history recorded in 2019 and published in the *LGBTQ Religious Archives Network* recounts some of the formative events in Yetunde's life (Yetunde 2021c). Born into a lower-middle-class family in Indianapolis in 1961, she grew up in an almost entirely Black neighborhood with her brother, three years younger, and two cousins. She had no context for the discrimination she experienced when she was bussed to an all-White school for the sixth grade in 1972. She remembers wondering why White students were not being bussed to her neighborhood. Her mother never discussed race with her, and she knew nothing about the tensions that had sizzled in Indianapolis in the 1960s. She lacked the tools necessary for social or political analysis, so she had no choice but to try to make sense of the disparities on her own. She recalls one experience while on the school bus of being confronted by a group of angry parents protesting integration. Their message was not welcoming. Unprepared for the encounter, she felt a strong sense that she did not belong there. The court-ordered bussing of Black students to majority-White schools without any corresponding bussing of White students to majority-Black schools resulted in the devaluation of homes in her neighborhood and the closing of the school just five blocks from her home. Both these unintended consequences of court-mandated bussing had an unfortunate impact on the community from which it never recovered (Yetunde 2020b, 98–99).

The racial discrimination Ayo Yetunde experienced in her youth was both subtle and overt. She recalls one incident when a student told the class she was the only person who did not belong there. She remembers being shocked and paralyzed by the boy's words. Her teacher, who was White, intervened immediately to correct him. From the ninth grade, she was bussed again for high school. Integration in Indianapolis was not going well. There was fighting in the high schools, and students were told to prepare for race riots, so the Black students segregated themselves. Overall, however, Yetunde found that she was able to navigate issues of race and racism successfully. A popular student, she participated in school government, played tennis avidly, and was on the homecoming queen court (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).

When Yetunde was eight, her father died of cardiac arrest while golfing, at age 35 (Yetunde 2023, 8). “My uncle was babysitting us at the time. He told my cousin, who told me. My mother and her sister were out, and so I knew about my father’s death before she knew. When she came to pick us up, and I heard her scream, I believed I knew what she felt. She was in pain. I didn’t want her to suffer any more pain, so I became the obedient, dutiful daughter so as not to cause her any more pain.” In a video titled “Befriending Aging, Illness, and Death,” Yetunde describes how the sudden loss of her father made her very fearful of death, to the extent that she swallowed an entire bottle of aspirin, thinking it would protect her against illness and death (Yetunde, n.d.). Later in life, she realized that this early exposure to the reality of death was the catalyst that inspired her life’s work. After years of exploration, she became a chaplain. She co-founded two organizations, each aimed at compassionately confronting the inevitable experience of dying: Center of the Heart, which promotes wellness (<https://www.centeroftheheart.org/our-teachers-and-partners>), and Audre, an online, chaplain-facilitated community that provides spiritual care for women with cancer (<https://chaplaincyinnovation.org/projects/pamela-ayo-yetunde>).

Every week growing up, Yetunde attended the United Methodist Church, where she learned Christian prayers, moral values, and gendered social expectations. Attending church regularly with her family was an unquestioned part of her life until, as a teenager, she began to notice some inconsistencies (Yetunde 2023, 8). She remembers one particular Sunday morning when she was 16 years old. Suddenly, she became aware of a woman outside the church screaming at the top of her lungs. Everyone could hear the woman but ignored her. Moved by the woman’s suffering, Yetunde stood up, and her aunt told her to sit down. Undeterred, the teenager went outside to help, but when she looked around, the woman was gone. When she walked back into the church, it was like walking into a still-life. All eyes were riveted on her, but no one asked anything other than, “What did you see?” No one asked her how she felt or why she responded the way she did. She was stunned that people could be in church, engaged in spiritual practice, and yet be unwilling to attend to a person in distress. The woman’s pain did not seem to matter to the congregation. Believing in Jesus did not necessarily equate to taking the risk of intervening. Through this experience, Yetunde came to realize that many people, despite their lofty convictions, would prefer to remain comfortable rather than take risks to aid another. This realization made her question her Christian faith and opened a door to spiritual exploration (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).

Yetunde’s wide-ranging academic career mirrors her spiritual evolution. She received a B.A. in Journalism/Advertising from Ball State University in 1984, a J.D. from Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington in 1992, an M.A. in Culture and Spirituality from Holy Names University in 2007, and a J.D. in Pastoral Counseling from Columbia Theological Seminary in 2016. When Yetunde went away to attend college at Ball State University in Indiana, she intended to use her Journalism/Advertising degree to join an advertising firm and make lots of money writing copy under a pseudonym for products people had

already developed. Her decision to move off campus led to a major rift with her mother, who cut off all communications and financial support. During that lonely time, she reevaluated her career plans and turned to the Bible for wisdom, but discovered it was full of violence. She went to church twice during college. The first time, staff advised her not to take communion at the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church she was visiting because she was not a member. The second time, during the closing prayer, the minister said we should pray in gratitude for our European heritage. These experiences conflicted with what she had learned attending church all her life: that serving others was more important than making money and that being truthful was more important than manipulating other people's desires (Yetunde, pers. comm., January 26, 2022).

Yetunde began to stand on her own feet and live by her own values, regardless of the approval of others or the financial implications. She decided not to take an internship at an advertising firm and had no clue what to do next. As she recalls, "That may have been the first time I started trusting in not knowing, not having a path, being in the wilderness" (Yetunde, pers. comm., November 29, 2022). Instead of going on to graduate school, she took the advice of her Black history professor and went to Zimbabwe with Operation Crossroads Africa. She considers that one of the best decisions she ever made. She realized that she knew little to nothing about herself, the world, politics, war, the causes of war, refugees, or environmental degradation. In six weeks in Zimbabwe, she realized that her theology was simplistic and that what was in her heart mattered more than what others thought of her. After returning from Zimbabwe, she served for two years with the Church of the Brethren (Anabaptist) in the Netherlands, where she became an activist for nuclear disarmament and human rights. In that environment, she had the space to discover herself and who she was attracted to and the anonymity to experiment with different ways of expressing herself. This was a time of awakening: learning a new language, learning about politics, re-examining her theology, and living very simply in community. These lessons carried her through the rest of her life (Yetunde, pers. communication, January 25, 2022).

After returning to the States, Yetunde worked as an intern with the ACLU in Washington, D.C., then decided to go to law school at Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington. She graduated and worked as a law clerk but discovered she was not cut out to be a lawyer.

The illness and death of her cousin Roderick in 1992 from HIV/AIDS inspired Yetunde's interest in counseling and hospice work (Yetunde 2023, 9). Soon after his death, she discovered Buddhism when a friend gave her a copy of Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Touching Peace*. She began volunteering at the Zen Hospice Project (now Zen Caregiving Project) in San Francisco. Being introduced to Buddhism through hospice work was one of her most powerful and transformative experiences, challenging her to deal with the trauma she experienced when her father suddenly died when she was eight. She learned Buddhist meditation and began doing short retreats at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California. Her volunteer coordinator and guide, Eric

Poche, and fellow volunteers were experienced, dedicated practitioners in the Vipassana (Insight) and Zen traditions. At the Zen Hospice Project, she practiced washing the body of a recently deceased person, wrapping the body, and taking it to the morgue. This practice was starkly different from the culture of embalming the body to appear lifelike at the funeral, as with her father, which had left a terrible impression (Yetunde 2021c; Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).

In 2005, she completed a year of Buddhist chaplaincy training at Sati Center for Buddhist Studies in Redwood City, California, and in 2006 began Clinical Pastoral Education at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland. She became a hospice chaplain and completed an M.A. in Culture and Spirituality at Holy Names University in Oakland, and a doctorate in Theology for Pastoral Care and Counseling at Columbia Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian institution in Decatur, Georgia, with a dissertation on “A New Spelling of Our Names: An Exploration of the Psycho-Spiritual Experiences of African-American Buddhist Lesbians.” That same year, a former president of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in New Brighton, Minnesota, read an article she had written on “Buddhism in the Age of Black Lives Matter” in *Lion’s Roar* magazine (Yetunde 2016a) and encouraged her to apply for a teaching position. She was hired as an assistant professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling and the director of interreligious chaplaincy. She used Buddhist principles to manage countless obstacles, including rejection by her family and friends when she came out. In the process of applying these principles, she became ever more resilient and confident. Currently, she is a pastoral counselor in private practice and a Buddhist lay leader in the Insight Meditation tradition. Although no longer affiliated with an educational institution, she teaches Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy through Center of the Heart, the wellness practice she co-founded in 2020 to offer spiritual and emotional healing through various services, programs, and events (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021). Currently, she is developing a course called The Net, based on Indra’s Net of interdependence taught in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, which is also the theme of her most recent book (Yetunde, 2023).

## ***Distress and Affirmation***

Religion has played a defining role in many aspects of Yetunde’s life. She was brought up to believe that any expression of sexuality that was not heterosexual would damn oneself and one’s partner to hell. The assumption was that same-sex attractions were completely psychological. She had always known that she was different in that way and, given her upbringing, had begun to pray to God to cure her and take it away. She remembers that these prayers became most intense when she was about 22 years old, just before she graduated from college. Nothing in her environment changed, so she tried to let go of her sense of being differently oriented and began to accept that she was wonderfully made in the image of God. This was very comforting, for she sensed that her mother, who had invested so much in making her like herself, would be heartbroken if she transgressed gender norms in their conservative community.

It was not until Yetunde was 30 that she finally told her mother that she was attracted to women (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021). She had decided not to tell her mother unless she found a woman whom she loved since, until then, there was no point in disappointing her. When she found someone and finally broke the news, her mother was indeed heartbroken. They became estranged and did not talk for two years. Yetunde had very carefully planned the circumstances of coming out to her mother. Ironically, the setting was the Cracker Barrel Old Country Store. A restaurant in this franchise caused a public outcry in the early 1990s when it fired several workers whose “sexual preferences fail[ed] to demonstrate normal heterosexual values” and only backtracked after a massive public outcry (*Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1991). After Yetunde graduated from Law School in 1992 at 30, she got a job in San Francisco and was ready to drive there. Before setting out across the country, she met her mother at the Cracker Barrel and said, “I have something I want to tell you,” to which her mother replied, “Don’t tell me if you’re gay.” Yetunde paused, looked her dead in the eye, and said, “Okay, I won’t tell you.” As they proceeded with their meal, she thought to herself, ‘Why is she making this so hard?’ (Yetunde, pers. communication, October 31, 2021).

After arriving in San Francisco, Yetunde received a scorching letter from her mother. This led to a period of deep, honest, and painful reflection:

*As a Black lesbian who grew up in the United Methodist church, having inherited the homophobic theology of that church body before my sexual identity was formed, I experienced, to borrow a term of art from First Amendment jurisprudence, the “chilling effect” of homophobia in church and society, as well as the ostracization and hatred by loved ones, based on the same theology I was raised on. In fact my mother (to whom I am eternally grateful for her nurturing as I grew into adulthood), a Black Christian woman who raised me in the church, threatened me with violence and attempted to degrade me in various ways when I told her I was a lesbian. My maternal aunt, a Black Christian woman, wrote that I should go back into the closet and that God would drown me, along with everyone else living in the San Francisco Bay area where I was living at the time, into the Pacific Ocean. Though my mother and aunt expressed their sadistic fantasies with me, my adoptive maternal grandmother, raised on the same theology, told me that she had always known women who were in romantic relationships—they just weren’t called anything like “lesbian” or “gay.” (Yetunde, 2017a)*

Her grandmother became her primary healer.

Yetunde had heard about Glide Memorial Church, a United Methodist congregation in San Francisco, while still in Indianapolis but was “finished with church” at that time. When she arrived in the city, she went to Glide Memorial sometimes but was going through a period of deep sadness. Her mother had completely cut ties with her and, for months, she sat crying in the back of the church, not wanting people to even know she was there. Eventually, when she told people at Glide Memorial about the letter she had received from her mother, the LGBTQ group asked her to represent them on Pride Sunday by reading her

mother's letter aloud to the congregation.

Reading her mother's letter had been a moment of intense shame. The essence of the letter was very painful. Her mother accused her of child molestation, changed her phone number, changed the locks on her doors, claimed she was damned to hell, and worse. For her to admit that her mother had said these hateful things and bring them forward in front of the church congregation was an incredibly painful experience. She began shaking on the dais and was unable to carry through with reading the letter:

*I was so nervous. I wasn't accustomed to public speaking. The church was full of people. I started to read the letter but was so nervous that the paper was rustling in my shaking hands. As I stood there, frozen with terror, Reverend Cecil Williams took the letter from my hand and told me just to speak from my heart. I don't remember a word that I said. I think I totally dissociated. I felt like a deer in the headlights. But when I finished speaking, the people in the congregation were on their feet. This was the first time I had been affirmed in my fullness. (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021)*

Yetunde received lots of positive feedback from the people in the congregation. Although the experience was traumatic, it became a pivotal moment – not about the letter or her mother, but about not being alone in being rejected by a parent. That moment taught her that not all United Methodist congregations are the same. She learned that what is in your heart is much more important than what someone writes about you, and that life is not about perfectionism and abiding by the script. That pivotal moment was utterly transformative in myriad ways, sparking many insights. She owed so much to her mother and realized on a very deep level that being honest with her must have been heartbreaking to the person who meant so much to her. At that moment, by speaking her truth, she began to heal (Yetunde, pers. communication, October 31, 2021).

## ***Writing Her Vision of a Just World***

Yetunde is a published author with wide-ranging interests, adroit in diverse forms of writing that speak to a variety of audiences. Since graduating from Law School, she has written several books: *Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical Theology* is about African American women and finance; *The Inheritance* is a financial literacy book for youth that incorporates stock lessons; and *Vigil* takes up the spirituality of personal finance. In her provocatively titled, “Black Lesbians to the Rescue! A Brief Correction with Implications for Womanist Christian Theology and Womanist Buddhology,” she argues for a horizontal encounter between Black Christian Womanist theologians and Black lesbians using a Black queer Buddhist feminist hermeneutic based on Alice Walker's 1979 short story, “Coming Apart.” In 2021, she received the Nautilus Book Award from the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies for her co-edited book, *Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us about Race, Resilience, Transformation, and Freedom*. She received the Frederick J. Streng Book Award

from the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies for her book *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, U.S. Law, and Womanist Theology for Transgender Spiritual Care*. As mentioned above, her book *Casting Indra's Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community* (Yetunde 2023) is inspired by the image of Indra's Net in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. She has many more writing projects in the works. These books are evidence of her radically inclusive approach to educational equity and dedication to personal transformation and social justice. She continues to write, as a Black Buddhist lesbian, to advocate the education of the heart as essential for addressing social injustices.

Much of Yetunde's work is grounded in basic Buddhist principles, gathered in the course of her spiritual formation in a range of Buddhist traditions, including the Insight Meditation Community at Spirit Rock Meditation Center (where she became a Community Dharma Leader), the Zen Hospice Project, the Community of Mindful Living, and a Zen center and Shambhala in Atlanta. Following several painful and demeaning experiences at primarily White Dharma centers, she practiced independently for some time. After a while, she was invited to give two series of talks titled "Conversations with People of Color: Cultivating Your Bodhisattva Self" and "To Be Beautiful, Colorful, and Buddha-ful: Building an Inclusive Practice Community for Confident Living." In these talks, she took up themes that helped nurture resilience, such as safety amidst insecurity, joy amidst sorrow, and loving kindness in response to being othered. Without renouncing her Christian upbringing, she drew on diverse strands of Buddhist philosophy and practice (Yetunde, pers. comm., January 26, 2022). "The Five Remembrances," an article she published in *Lion's Roar* in 2021, includes a straightforward iteration of Buddhist views on human frailty,

*I am of the nature to age.  
I am of the nature to become ill.  
I am of the nature to die.  
I will be separated and parted from all that is dear to me.  
I am the heir to my actions. (Yetunde 2021a)*

This verse, from the *Upajjhatthana Sutta* preserved in the Pāli canon, acknowledges the existential suffering universal to all sentient beings, regardless of identity markers (Bodhi 2012). This acknowledgment of the facts of life "in their blunt simplicity and undeniability" is fundamental to a true understanding of the human condition.

## ***Educational Achievements and Their Limitations***

Yetunde's academic achievements are impressive. Alongside her scholarly credentials, she participated in numerous experiential learning programs—conforming to academic standards of how merit is apportioned while simultaneously carving her own path. Yetunde's academic career path took her in many directions: scripture, pastoral theology, chaplaincy, spiritual formation, Womanist theology, Buddhist feminism, and administration. After a



guest co-lectureship for a course on Womanist Approaches to Pastoral Care at The Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, GA (Spring 2016), she took a position as a visiting scholar-in-residence at the University of the West in Rosemead, CA, where she taught courses on Women in Buddhism, Spiritual Formation (for Buddhist chaplains), and Buddhist Issues and Frameworks (for Doctor of Buddhist Ministry students) (Fall 2016). Her academic career culminated in various positions at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in St. Paul, Minnesota. As an assistant professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling, she taught Introduction to Pastoral Care and Counseling, Couple Counseling, Buddhist Pastoral Care, and graduate courses on Spiritual Formation, Intercultural Resources for Chaplaincy, and Interreligious Resources for Chaplaincy in the M.Div and D.Min programs (Fall 2017–Summer 2020). She served as the director of Interreligious Chaplaincy (Fall 2017–Fall 2019) and the assistant vice president for faculty community relations (Fall 2019–Summer 2020); founded and directed the Buddhist Chaplaincy Certificate Program; co-constructed the curriculum for the Interreligious Chaplaincy Programs (M.Div and D.Min) programs; and led the Theology of Prince project. Simultaneously, she taught a variety of modules at Upaya Zen Center Buddhist Chaplaincy Program in Santa Fe, New Mexico (March 2019 – March 2021). (Yetunde, pers. comm., February 14, 2023). As hard as she tried, however, she felt that her academic work was not honored and her creative side was not supported within that structure (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).

Part of the intensity and stress of academic learning and teaching is the time crunch involved in producing written work that matches specific definitions of intellectual rigor typically set in place by White, Christian, economically comfortable males. Aspiring academics must squeeze themselves into a prescribed mold to qualify to take their place at the table of the elite, often forfeiting their creativity, health, family, and sometimes their ethics and sanity in the process. Those who do not match the normative demographic may be consigned to marginal, insecure, contract positions at less-favored institutions where they are expected to be content and exhaust themselves to simply make a living. While chasing tenure, junior faculty are dissuaded from spending their time publishing “trade books” or in popular venues such as magazines and websites. Following her instincts, Yetunde ignored all this and published whatever she saw as the greatest need and in whatever venue she felt would make the most significant impact (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).

## ***Religious Engagement and Spiritual Activism***

In her work as a pastoral counselor, Yetunde listens carefully to understand feelings of alienation and addresses these feelings with insights about the interrelatedness of all phenomena from Buddhist texts such as the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. In all of her work, she supports the cultivation of insight and listens carefully to discern the strengths and skills people already possess that will help them reconnect. The womanist practical theologian and psychoanalyst Phillis Isabella Sheppard cites

her among the “psychodynamically trained clinicians [who] have combined the psychological and ethnographic in their work to link interiority and sociality”:

*Pamela Ayo Yetunde, a lesbian Womanist pastoral theologian, counselor, and Buddhist scholar, encourages Buddhist practices to counteract the stress inflicted by COVID-19 concerns. Yet she also emphasizes the necessity of a compassionate and ethical dimension to how we respond to COVID-19. Responding to suffering with compassion is a spiritual path and helps to diminish the effect of suffering in everyday living. (Sheppard 2022)*

Yetunde argues that it is the role of an effective caregiver and spiritual leader to work to care for all who suffer and to build toward interdependence among creation. In her Womanist pastoral theology, compassion is integral to the path to liberation from suffering. She understands and integrates Dharma and social justice as two mutually entailing sides of a coin. Drawing on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* as expressed in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, she says, “In the Avatamsaka world, no one is discriminated against because the mind’s tendency to discriminate has been eliminated through the varieties of spiritual practices and devotion to the buddhas and *bodhisattvas*” (Yetunde 2020a, 66).

When Yetunde thinks about the relationship between Buddhism and activism, she recalls stories about the Buddha’s early life of privilege and how he fled to the forest to learn how to avoid human frailty. Down the road, he comes to some realizations but thinks no one will listen. Before long, however, he gets inspired and teaches anyway. Yetunde believes that teaching people how to live with compassion, loving kindness, wisdom, and equanimity is a form of activism, especially since those who learn these skills will pass them on to others. Yet if a spiritual community is only a place of quietude and tranquility, the deeper teachings on how to be spiritual friends may become distorted. The concept of spiritual community as a refuge is powerful, and its members must be prepared to receive each other’s pain.

Yetunde tells a story about Nichiren, who was angry that the monks were hoarding the Dharma and using their privilege to keep it from others. The chant *Namyō horen gekkyō* is the distillation of this vast teaching – a simple chant through which ordinary people can access the Dharma. Yetunde confronts her own privilege and reflects on how well she has created solidarity with those at the margins of her life. Specifically, she faces the question of economic equity in accessing the Dharma in her article “What About the Cost of Retreats?” (Yetunde 2018c).

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to educate White pastors who were telling him and other members of the civil rights movement that their activism was untimely, disturbing, or unrighteous. He justified direct action, famously stating that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (King 1964, 13). These sentiments resonate closely with the teachings on interdependence found in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, a favorite of the Buddhist monk

and activist Thich Nhat Hanh, a good friend of King's whose work Yetunde read extensively (Yetunde 2021, 63).

*Perhaps not being an activist is not about practicing Buddhism, or being Christian, but really the lack of courage, or belief that our activities matter or could have an impact. In a country that is increasingly authoritarian, I believe Buddhist practitioners of all varieties should examine our Buddhologies and ask ourselves if these teachings and practices are truly valuable in the midst of a culture growing more and more numb to the loss of freedom, the rise in violence, the embrace of lying, scapegoating immigrants, and failing to hold our political leaders accountable for the harms they create” (Yetunde, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).*

Yetunde believes that Black American Buddhist activists deserve more attention, including Jan Willis, angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, Jasmine Syedullah, Rima Vesley-Flad, and many others.

*I think the overarching theme for Black American Buddhist activists is liberation. What is liberation and how is it achieved? How does Buddhist liberation intersect with and support anti-racism, anti-oppression, and #blacklivesmatter work today? What does it mean to center the voices of people of color? What methods do we use to analyze situations and disrupt oppressive systems? How do contemplation, nonviolent direct action, and resistance transform the heart and mind as well as the structures and systems that perpetuate mindless behavior? I think this is our work. (Yetunde, pers. comm., January 25, 2022)*

Knowledge equity means far more than simply more and better education for the marginalized. It also means sharing the knowledge gained by the marginalized with the privileged and ordinary folk, who may be ignorant and uneducated about issues such as racism, poverty, and privilege.

Recently, Yetunde took an editorial position with *Lion's Roar* to focus on content that is accessible to ordinary people. Her concern is not merely to see knowledge in print but to share people's stories because there is so much to learn from listening and seeing how people express themselves. When she was teaching at Union Theological Seminary and took the position of director of interreligious chaplaincy, she told the administrators that students would learn more if they learned from people who are practitioners of religious traditions, not just scholars who trade in concepts. To go deeper, she feels, we need to change the curriculum to ensure it is relevant to faculty and students from various backgrounds. While working toward her doctorate, she presented material about gestalt therapy, highlighting the importance of attending to what is seen or not seen, present or not present. To hammer the point, she asked, “Why do you think there are no Black men in our class?” She encourages her listeners to be sensitive to who is present and absent in our conversations and lives. Because many universities do not represent a truly diverse community, what they offer is not interesting to many people. Of course, there are exceptions, such as the universities and general population in the

San Francisco Bay Area, but other places are not always welcoming of difference. She asks students to question, “Where are folks? Why are they here or not here?” For genuine equity, for a community to be radically inclusive, it needs to include all beings. To that end, most of the events she organizes are educational and most are offered to the public free of charge. She tackled the dilemma of equity in learning opportunities within Buddhism head-on when she asked, “What about the cost of retreats?” (Yetunde 2016c). For years, Anglo Buddhists have scratched their heads and wondered why they could not attract diverse audiences. It seems to only have occurred to them recently that the high price of getting enlightened might be a factor.

## ***Interreligious Engagement in the Parliament of the World’s Religions***

Consonant with her early decision to explore diverse spiritual directions, Yetunde has been participating in the Parliament of the World’s Religions since 2009. Before she became aware of the Parliament, while still a budding chaplain, she vowed to immerse herself in religious difference to better connect with others. When she first heard about the Parliament, she wanted to be there. When she learned that the Parliament would be held in Melbourne, Australia, in 2009, she submitted a proposal and was invited to speak on a panel titled “Voices of Challenge and Wisdom: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on Faith, Spirituality, and Embodied Grace.” Speakers on the panel had just five minutes to present their ideas. Yet, even in this short amount of time, she was able to reflect and share deeply on the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Her presentation, titled “The Healing of Sodom and Gomorrah: A Path to Compassion and Liberation for All,” got to the heart of a spiritual, theological, and ethical dilemma that was deeply personal. She published a book on the topic in an effort to clarify long-standing misconceptions and conflicting interpretations of this ambiguous and controversial biblical narrative (Yetunde 2010; pers. comm., September 27, 2021).

Yetunde also attended the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Salt Lake City in 2015 and gave two presentations, including one titled “Uncovering a Bodhisattva: Audre Lorde’s Spiritual Journey” and another on “Transforming Greed through Spiritual Practice.” Based on her very positive experiences at the Parliament, she encouraged her students to participate in the 2018 Parliament in Toronto, where they presented a panel on “Making Interreligious Chaplaincy Education Meaningfully Inclusive” (United Theological Seminary 2018). She deeply appreciates both academic and non-academic settings for learning, and challenges her students to embrace both.

Yetunde’s experience as an exchange student with Operation Crossroads Africa in Zimbabwe in 1984 and her two years of volunteer work with the Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS), including the Interchurch Peace Bureau and Disarmament Campaigns in The Hague, The Netherlands, made her aware that she was a global citizen who should be aware of global concerns. Her next BVS projects were with the Office on Africa in Washington, D.C., a lobbying

organization advocating divestment from apartheid South Africa, and the American Civil Liberties Union. As she grew older, she continued to gravitate towards opportunities to be involved in international matters. When she learned about the Parliament of the World's Religions and its history, she felt drawn to it immediately. She understood the importance of interreligious understanding and cooperation, and the dangers of religious supremacist thought, given what she was taught about Christianity in her own religious upbringing. For her, the Parliament is an intentional microcosm of the world. Each time she attends these gatherings, they help shape her view of herself as interconnected to people and worldviews beyond familiar spiritual communities and geographies. When she started chaplaincy studies at Sati Center for Buddhist Studies, she made a vow that she would always try to find a way to connect with those she serves. Attending the Parliaments has helped her see, hear, and understand ways to connect across differences. Her experience at the Parliaments has had a significant impact in her work as a chaplain and pastoral counselor serving and counseling people with different religious beliefs. Importantly, the Parliaments have informed her scholarship among Buddhists who grew up in Christian churches and her work promoting Buddhist-Christian dialogue in U.S. healthcare settings (Yetunde, pers. comm., February 16, 2023).

When Yetunde spoke at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Salt Lake City in 2015, her presentation on the poet Audre Lorde, usually known as a political activist, cast Lorde in the role of a spiritual guide in the archetype of a bodhisattva. Her hope was that those in attendance would see Audre Lorde in a completely different light, encouraging people to apply spiritual frameworks to famous figures who have been reduced to secular figures with no spiritual power or resonance. Her aim was to “rehabilitate” Lorde’s image by exposing how the I Ching was a central organizing principle in her poetry and essays (Yetunde, pers. comm., February 16, 2023).

Yetunde’s experiences at the Parliament have been overwhelmingly positive. As the founding director of the Interreligious Chaplaincy program at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota, Yetunde seized the opportunity to appeal for funds to support students attending the 2018 Parliament in Toronto. With her guidance, the students crafted a panel proposal and created a booth to recruit potential students. The students’ participation in the Parliament exposed them to the microcosm that she had benefited from. All their years of university studies could not compare to a few days at the Parliament. The students expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to speak on a panel, participate in events, and attend numerous presentations. As chaplaincy students, their experience at the Parliament prepared them to be the “non-anxious” pastoral/spiritual presence they were being cultivated to be (Yetunde, pers. comm., February 16, 2023).

Yetunde sees the Parliament as a platform for potential collaboration across differences. As a gay person, she knows what it is like to be shunned by Christian relatives – in some ways, the ultimate betrayal. She learned what it is like to be part of a non-Abrahamic tradition considered by many to be non-theistic

or atheistic and therefore lesser. Being Black, she knows what it is to embody the characteristics of a group considered by many to be inferior. Thousands of people contribute to the Parliament and everyone contributes what they can, in myriad fascinating ways (Yetunde, pers. comm., February 16, 2023).

## ***Black Buddhists Breathing***

Equity in knowledge is not a stand-alone issue; it is closely bound up with issues of racism, sexism, poverty, public policy, incarceration, homophobia, property ownership, and more. These interconnections require an understanding of multiple dimensions of social in/justice and their intersectionality, observed from diverse perspectives. This is where *Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us about Race, Resilience, Transformation, and Freedom*, the anthology Yetunde edited with Cheryl A. Giles, makes such significant contributions. A strength of this collection of essays is its inclusion of diverse Buddhist traditions and perspectives, including Theravāda, Tibetan, and Zen, to address the experience of racialization. Writing in 2020, just as protests against racial injustice and racialized violence were breaking out across the United States, they begin with a tribute to George Floyd that puts the protests in historical context:

*People took to the street to express their outrage at the police killings of Floyd, Taylor, Arbery, and told and untold other Black Americans. The videotaped police beating of Rodney King occurred in 1991; setting aside the issue of racist cop in fictional movies and television shows, the nation had been watching broadcasts of real Black people beaten and killed by real police officers for twenty-nine years! A generation had grown up knowing that they could be murdered by a police officer, have the murder videotaped, have the videotape shown throughout the world, and justice would not be served. (Yetunde and Giles 2020, xiii)*

To address this state of affairs from a Buddhist perspective, Yetunde and Giles offer an original analysis of the Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path as a means to overcoming oppressive social constructs (2020, 3). This entails confronting the false narratives propagated to justify kidnapping, torture, and enslavement:

*Africans are not human beings; Africans are on Earth to serve Europeans; African slaves are three-fifths of a person; Africans can endure the pain and suffering of slavery; African women and men do not suffer dehumanization from being raped and abused by European men; Africans pollute Europeans; Europeans are more intelligent than Africans; and so on. (2020, 3)*

The analysis of the Noble Eightfold Path, which Yetunde and Giles call “the Buddhist nobility project,” analyzes and interprets each step of the path through the experience of African-Americans to reverse “the reality of racist oppression in a capitalist society” and imagine their survival as “whole, spiritually integrated, non-exploitative, generous, and constructive human beings” (2020, 7).

Notably, Yetunde speaks not only to Black Buddhists but expresses an inclusive vision that embraces all communities. Certainly her work may be most

meaningful to the Black community and other marginalized communities because, whether one is Buddhist or not, Buddhist texts and teachings offer wisdom for understanding exclusion and oppression from a fresh perspective. The Four Noble Truths acknowledge suffering, the causes of suffering, the goal of liberation from suffering, and a well-defined path to achieve liberation from suffering. This is just one of many salient teachings for understanding oneself and the world, distilled into the wisdom to overcome the ignorance that is the root of all suffering and injustices, and the compassion to heal.

In *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, U.S. Law, and Womanist Theology for Transgender Spiritual Care*, Yetunde reflects on the legacy of Thich Nhat Hanh (1927–2022), the Vietnamese Thien (Zen) monk teacher who taught internationally for almost eight decades and had an enormous impact on global understandings of Buddhist principles and practices. In the third chapter, she focuses on “his mystical teachings on Lady Mahamaya” and how they “can contribute to deepening empathy with trans patients by touching on our own trans fluidity capacities” (Yetunde 2020b, 62). Her reflections begin autobiographically on October 7, 2001, the day the United States bombed Afghanistan in retaliation for the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11 that year. A Jewish friend gave her Thich Nhat Hanh’s book, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*, which teaches mindfulness of breathing as a remedy to the world’s ills – to see oneself “as a fresh flower, as a solid mountain, as still water reflecting reality, and as free space” (Hanh 1992, 11–12). It proved to be a remedy for the existential anxiety brought on by the two attacks. In the book, Nhat Hanh explains the practice he learned as a young novice, the practice of seeing every action as the dharmakaya, formless awakened awareness – ultimate, limitless, beyond description. The world of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is populated by Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, beings dedicated to helping others find liberation. The method allows practitioners to realize that everything, whether pure or deluded, is constructed by the mind through insight into the nature of “interbeing,” the interdependency of all things. Nhat Hanh’s theory of “interbeing” thus encompasses all beings equitably and aims to liberate them equally.

Yetunde’s analysis focuses on a story in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* about Mahamaya, the mother of the incipient Buddha, rendered as a motif of universal awakening. Based on the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching on the womb of awakening (*tathagatagarbha*), which signifies the potential of all sentient beings to achieve the same awakened state as Buddha Śākyamuni (the historical Buddha), Thich Nhat Hanh proposes that all beings have within them a baby Buddha birthed by Mahamaya, who thus represents hope. This image of all sentient beings as having within themselves the potential to become a fully awakened being is liberating, especially for oppressed and underrepresented beings. The concept is complex because, unlike systems that deny that animals possess soul or consciousness, the potential for awakening in the Buddhist worldview pertains to all sentient forms of life, including nonhuman animals, insects, and birds, as well as human beings. That very universality is what renders the Buddhist concept radically inclusive. The potential for awakening, Mahamaya’s gift to this world, pertains to people

of diverse identities, and stretches beyond our ordinary capacity for kindness to extend boundless compassion to infinite suffering beings. The implications of this boundlessness for social justice are obvious. With a heart of boundless compassion, Buddhists cannot ignore the personal and social sufferings that result from racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia, and other social ills. Knowledge equity means more than simply book knowledge; it means incisive awareness of inequities and injustices as well as skillful methods for transforming inequities and injustices with wisdom and compassion to alleviate the sufferings of the world.

## ***Dedicating the Benefits***

It is appropriate to conclude this encapsulation of Yetunde’s work with a dedication of merit, just as she ended the preface to *Black and Buddhist* with “an aspiration to use the gifts of Buddhist practice – generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolve, lovingkindness, and equanimity – not for ourselves, but for others” (Yetunde and Giles 2020, xv). Yetunde explains,

*Dedication of the merit is setting the intention that any practice benefits (merit) be offered to others. This is a radical practice in letting go of a precious experience so that others can be released from suffering. In a relational sense, this means carrying the precious experience as a gift so that when others encounter us, they are not harmed but rather nourished and possibly liberated. In spiritual and secular senses, this dedication promotes radical generosity as we work to transform the delusion of separation. (106–107)*

This interpretation of the dedication of merit practice as radical generosity to transform the delusion of separation is uniquely insightful, borne of a Black woman’s personal experience of being alternately embraced and othered, included and ostracized, by individuals in White Buddhist practice communities in the United States. “Paradoxically,” she says, “transforming the delusion of separateness may need to happen in a POC [people of color] sangha when divisions arise over ethnicity, culture, gender identification, sexuality, religion, political views, roles, and responsibilities” (Yetunde and Giles 2020, 107). As a solution, she proposes applying loving kindness meditation “thoroughly and regularly” as “an antidote to anger, hatred, rage, and separateness” (108). The Buddhist teachings offer remedies for moving forward by using wisdom to eradicate the ignorance that is the root of injustice, and loving kindness and compassion to heal the pain of oppression and prevent further pain. In the modernist project in contemporary Buddhism, Yetunde is paving her own path, highlighting elements of traditional Buddhist teachings that are relevant and useful for transforming social injustices and liberating marginalized groups and individuals from the social sufferings of oppression and neglect rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance through the personal and immediate implementation of loving kindness, wisdom, and compassion.



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## Chapter 3

### Jennifer Howe Peace *Interfaith Outreach as “Basic Christianity”*

JONATHON EDER



Source: Jennifer Howe Peace

*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*

— Chapter Seven, Benedict’s Rule

### ***Introduction***

“There is a quality of curiosity and playfulness that animates the best interfaith work,” writes Dr. Jennifer Howe Peace. “It requires a flexibility and suppleness that allows for new insights and new understanding. In a Christian context I am reminded of the Benedictine vow to ‘conversion of life,’ a willingness to be remade, reborn, transformed daily as God continues to work in us” (Peace 2014). For the pioneering interfaith educator Jennifer Howe Peace, Benedictine spiritual precepts and practices provide critical guideposts to achieving effective and meaningful interreligious engagement. In particular, Peace notes the significance of the chapter on humility in St. Benedict’s Rule as essential to creating empathy and respect for spiritual experience and practices in other religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> Peace’s innovations reveal that the intensive self-examination she espouses in interfaith education deepens and strengthens how one lives one’s faith. Conversion, for Peace, has resulted in expanding and deepening one’s religious commitment and ideals, as opposed to bringing about separation from them. In Peace’s life and work, interreligious exploration, education, and engagement have illuminated the Christian walk to be more real, more meaningful, and more relevant to the challenges and opportunities of living in a complex, pluralistic world.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter Seven of Benedict’s Rule outlines the twelve steps in the ladder of humility in monastic practice. This eventuates in the following state of consciousness for those who have completed the spiritual journey as stated in verses 67 through 69 of the rule: “Thus after having climbed all these steps of humility the monk will soon arrive at that love of God that is perfect and drives out fear. Through this love he will begin to practice everything that he previously practiced not without fear, now practice without effort, as if by nature, and out of habit, no longer out of fear of hell but out of love for Christ and good habit and delight in virtue” (Böckmann 2017, 94).

Trailblazing has been a constant in Peace's religious, educational, and professional experience. The most recent development in Peace's professional and personal journey has led her to dedicate her time to artmaking in connection with community and spirituality. "I'll be turning my full attention to building an art studio with my husband," she notes about this emerging direction in her life. "I'll be thinking about community-facing dimensions as well as the spiritual roots of art making. It feels like a real integration" (pers. comm., February 16, 2023). For Peace, the physical act of artmaking provides the potential of a new dimension for consciousness-raising, a key element in her approach to interfaith engagement.<sup>2</sup> "My ceramic work is creating that space for myself to have the insight and to find what it is I'm trying to say and express somewhat like writing, but with a whole different physicality that is really very satisfying to me," she explains. "It's going to influence what I'm making: this ongoing set of questions that animate my interfaith work" (Peace, oral history interview, November 5, 2021). Peace's distinctive contributions to interfaith pedagogy continue to inform and transform interreligious studies through the core questions she has explored in her career. They resonate in former students' academic and pastoral work, her writings, and the organizations she has created in their influence on interfaith activities on a national and global scale (see Tufts 2023).

As a young woman, Peace's participation in the United Religions Initiative (URI) Global Summit in California in 1998 and in the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, South Africa in 1999 sparked her involvement in interfaith activism. Peace's participation in these events grew out of her desire to expand beyond the intellectual life of her graduate studies in religion to find a deeper spiritual purpose through action in the world. Those initial activist experiences influenced her approach to working within academia in ways that have contributed to greater knowledge equity. Her writings have had an enduring impact on interfaith study, as has her leadership in the formation of new interreligious initiatives at the highest levels of the religious studies academy (Peace 2013a).

For Peace, spiritual consciousness-raising is integral to the pursuit of knowledge equity. Through the psychological and moral demands it requires, consciousness-raising as an interfaith practice encourages more genuine and deeply felt respect for and understanding of other religious and cultural perspectives. A willingness to be humbly present to the religious Other has been an enduring theme in Peace's life experience. Lessons in spiritual and psychological humility have tested Peace at her core, with transformational results. Still, the willingness to partner with those of other faith perspectives has informed what is perhaps Peace's most significant contribution to interfaith study: the development of the pedagogy of "coformation." Developed during her years (2007-2017) on the faculty of the two-hundred-year-old Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, America's oldest graduate seminary, coformation emphasizes

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<sup>2</sup> An important influence on Peace's approach to ceramics is Mary Caroline Richards book *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1964). Peace stated in a recorded interview that she "loved her [Richards'] model of this integrated way of being" (oral history interview, November 5, 2021).

engaging in spiritual practice, study, and reflection with the religious Other as opposed to only learning about other religious faiths (Peace 2020a).

The principles of coformation grew out of cooperative learning initiatives between the Protestant-based Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College, a neighboring school of rabbinical studies. These initial forays into shared pastoral training between different faith traditions resulted in the development of The Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE). For Peace, those undertakings revealed that the consistent practice of coformation cultivates new ways of knowing, which build naturally and organically. The outcome is a kind of knowledge equity that is not simply intellectual but intuitive and innate, drawing from foundational spiritual learning. Peace's work envisions spiritual testing and transformation as fundamental to interreligious practice and study. In linking the emotional and spiritual underpinnings of coformation pedagogy to her own experience, she writes, "This work requires care, reverence, humility, trust, and faith. . . It requires the kind of faith that allows me to risk my identity on the proposition that God may have something greater in store for me. This is a risk we invite others to take too" (Peace 2011, 25).

Peace's worldview has emerged out of a renewed commitment to the liberal evangelical Christianity of her upbringing, which she applies dynamically and in harmony with interfaith outreach. This process has not come about easily for Peace, given the heritage of Western paternalism in much evangelical Christian missionary ideology and practice. For Peace, developing a sensitivity to societal differences began very early: first, she felt it intuitively and then understood it intellectually (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021). While the nexus of the academic and the spiritual has been an area of challenge for Peace, her story has demonstrated a willingness to be open to Benedict's scripturally based maxim in Chapter Seven of his Rule: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Böckmann 2017, 63).

## *A Child of Christian Missionaries*

*I appreciate having been born into a family where the values you hold animate the choices you make. That is itself a pretty strong paradigm that I inherited. At the same time, thinking through the complexity of the legacy of missionary models and activities, I went through a long period where I just would never even use the word "missionaries" to describe what my parents were doing in South Africa. (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021)*

In 1967, Peace came into the world in apartheid South Africa as the middle child of Richard and Judy Peace, American Christian missionaries. The Peaces co-founded "African Enterprise, Inc., an interdenominational evangelistic ministry that resulted in eight years of ministry in South Africa, where [Richard] Peace served as the organization's director of special projects" (Fuller, "Richard V. Peace"). In a sense her childhood experiences were shaped by "issues of equity." She remembers the depth of concern that her parents had about the injustices

of the apartheid system in South Africa, which their family encountered in the country in the 1960s and 70s. Her mother and father devoted much of their missionary activity to fighting against apartheid's racially oppressive rule. At the same time, Peace's upbringing necessitated a very real and visceral questioning and negotiating of what equity meant in a missiological context:

*My very first memory was of Mrs. Ntombela, a Black South African woman, who helped my mother in the house and helped taking care of us. I remember being wrapped to her back South African style in a blanket—and just the sort of total comfort of that position. So, the complexity of that image is not lost on me: That my first image of being mothered is really of this Black South African woman who was at the same time leaving her children to be parented by others and cared for by others, while she took care of us. (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021)*

For Peace, the memory of Mrs. Ntombela is significant on a variety of levels. Although her missionary parents were of limited economic means, they were still able to benefit Mrs. Ntombela and her family financially through this form of employment. Wrapped within the literal comfort of Mrs. Ntombela's South African style of care, young Jennifer, was also wrapped in issues of social and political inequality and injustice. Reconciliation of Christian mission and salvation with respect for the religious, cultural, and racial Other has undergirded Peace's approach to interfaith issues. For Peace, this has meant restoring fundamental precepts of a "Basic Christianity" where self-reflection and spiritual openness are key factors in confronting and rectifying a long history of religious paternalism in American missiological outreach. As the child of liberal evangelical parents, Peace's wrestlings around her cultural and religious inheritance became the building blocks she has used to forge a pluralistic evangelism for the twenty-first century. Peace has cultivated a humbler version of Christian evangelism through communing with practitioners of other faith traditions. Peace's writings have drawn implicitly and expansively from Jesus's commandment "to love thy neighbor as thyself." Peace's work and personal experience have involved placing one's own spiritual exaltation in humble service to that which brings exaltation in other faiths—even those that fall outside the Christian rubric. Peace elucidates this point in quoting from Buddhist scholar John Makransky<sup>3</sup> in her co-edited book *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth and Transformation*: "We Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Humanists, etc., need each other to liberate us from our own stories" (Peace 2016).

## ***Spiritual Crisis, a Father's Influence, and Loving My Neighbor as Myself***

Peace's family background has both inspired and challenged her approach to faith. Her father's story provided a critical backdrop to her own spiritual and professional

<sup>3</sup> Makransky is professor of theology at Boston College. The title of his chapter in *My Neighbor's Faith* is "What Mast Ram Baba Dropped into My Bowl."

development. Ordained in the United Church of Christ (Congregational), Richard Peace has had a distinguished career as a professor, author, and creator of media in the field of religion. In 1994, he was appointed Robert Boyd Munger Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. The narrative behind his vision and achievements speaks to the transformative potential of the symbiosis of higher education and spiritual journey. As an academic and minister, Peace's father served as a model and as a provocateur in Peace's story. Her father's pathbreaking accomplishments challenged and inspired her own pioneering work. Peace offers this portrait of her father's experience and influence:

*[My father] comes from very poor Southern dirt farming kind of roots. He was the first in his family to go to college and went to Yale on a full scholarship. So, the idea that you can get out of your circumstances through education was definitely another key message from my family. I think it compelled me to both find my own way through that path and then to think of myself in my career as creating the conditions for others to find their way to a wider understanding. Education at its best can interrupt narratives of dehumanization and help students think more broadly about themselves in relation to the wider world. This is especially important in a Christian seminary context. (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021)*

Peace received a master's in theological studies from the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Massachusetts in 1995. While there, she studied under her father, who was a professor. Her presence at the evangelical Christian seminary marked a significant turning point. Her previous intellectual pursuits at Connecticut College, an elite private undergraduate college in New England, spurred doubts, questions, and even cynicism, around issues of faith and spiritual purpose. However, in the late 1980s, during a junior year abroad program in London, England, Peace experienced a conversion experience that broke through her intellectual armor, reconstituting how she would integrate the life of the mind and the impetus of the spirit in her ensuing academic and professional career. Drawing in part from this watershed event in England, Peace contributed her own story of spiritual transformation to her father's book *Spiritual Storytelling: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Autobiography* (1996). For Jennifer Peace, effective interfaith work depends on an intimate understanding of and ability to confess one's own spiritual story.

Peace's spiritual crisis took place in the context of studying South Asian religion and culture at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Here, Peace's critical view of her religious upbringing intensified, and she began to reject identifying with her family's church. When a woman in an aerobics class asked if she were a Christian, Peace replied "Well, my parents are. My father is ordained but, no, I'm not a Christian" (Peace 1996, 74).

Still, Peace maintained communication with her father. In the journal she kept during her study abroad, she wrote about a book her father sent her called *Basic Christianity* by the evangelical Anglican pastor John Stott.<sup>4</sup> Remembered



in an obituary as a “plain, ordinary Christian,” Stott’s notable influence as an ambassador for Christianity was linked to his humility (Stafford 2011). In his book, Stott included a prayer for the “honest seeker of truth,” asking, “teach me the truth and show me if Jesus is your son and the savior of the world. And if you bring conviction to my mind, I promise to accept him as my savior and follow him as my Lord.” Peace noted, “I like that prayer and I am going to take the challenge” (Peace 1996, 74).

Subsequently, Peace agreed to attend a charismatic Christian retreat, which she thought of “as God’s last chance to convince me that there was something to this whole religion business” (Peace 2012, 26). Initially, at the gathering, critical thoughts dominated. She noted in her journal that she “was trying to stay as detached as possible from the people and events around me,” rebuffing their public demonstrations of emotional and spiritual openness. “‘Wow,’ I thought, ‘these people are all emotional wrecks. What are they all crying about?’” Eventually, though, she found herself openly crying as well. Later she would revisit her journal to reflect on what had happened to her to reposition her experience of faith. She remembered it as involving three waves: the first brought an intense sense of personal pain and of the universal human experience of pain, dislocation, and fear; the second wave subsumed the former with a profound sense of warmth and joy: “a deep down sense that at the core of all my pain, I am loved, deeply and fully”; and finally:

*The third wave washed me up on shore and left me sobbing slightly from exhaustion. The ocean receded and was lost from direct sight. But once you know something exists, no fortress can deceive you. I stayed silent, slightly shocked. What had happened? My mind leapt back in control and demanded to know what had been going on and who was responsible. Be still mind, I cautioned, this is beyond the both of us. This will take time. I felt new and young. I felt ancient and worn. I felt exuberant and exhausted. (Peace 1996, 75-76)*

At first, Peace treasured her conversion experience as deeply personal and rooted in her Christian identity. When she recounted what had transpired to a Muslim friend at SOAS, she felt put off when he compared it to his friend’s intense conversion experience in Islam. But the interaction stayed with her, encouraging her “to make room for the undeniably real in someone else’s faith.” She realized that “at a moment when my religious identity could have been narrowly defined in Christian terms, it was broken open by Mohammed’s story” (Peace 2012, 29). Ultimately, Peace would translate this profound experience of spiritual transformation into a commitment to interfaith activism imbued by the “Basic Christianity” articulated in the book her father gave her. She concluded her spiritual autobiography by stating, “I feel God constantly at work trying to move me towards wholeness and harmony. My hope is that I can balance and serve the

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott served as minister at London’s All Soul Anglican Church for 66 years (1945-2011). Dr. Alister Chapman, professor of history at Westmont College, a Christian liberal arts college in California, has described Stott as having been, in the late twentieth century, “the most prominent leader of the evangelical movement in England and remarkably influential in evangelical circles in the United States and in many parts of the developing world” (2009).

demands of my heart, soul, mind, and body so that I might continue to learn what it means to love God and to love my neighbor as myself” (Peace 1996, 77). The Christian commands “to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” and “to love thy neighbor as thyself” would find expression for Peace in interfaith activism, particularly as it involved the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## ***Bridging the Academic Public Divide***

*I met Charles Gibbs, who was the first director of United Religions Initiative and Bishop Swing, who was the founder. Through my involvement in the URI, I met people from all different places in the world, all different religious traditions. We were working to co-create something that would be a meeting place for religious leaders and practitioners to talk through issues and build community and greater understanding. That became a really important counterweight to my academic work. I would say that my doctoral work in tandem with my work at the URI deeply informed how I construct interreligious or interfaith studies. The combination of being both practitioner/scholar in the field, and in the library, is key to interfaith studies. (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021)*

After obtaining her master’s degree in 1995 in theological studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Peace continued her academic journey as a doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, California. The school began in 1962 as a consortium of different theological schools “founded to support graduate theological education and promote ecumenical and interreligious dialogue” (Stiver 2017). While there, Peace was able to build on her academic interest in comparative religion and gain hands-on experience in interfaith work.

At GTU, she continued to explore South Asian Indian culture and religion, but now in relation to Christian practice in the Benedictine tradition. Her dissertation was titled *Sound Rituals: A Comparative Study of Chanting and Communal Identity in a Hindu Temple and a Christian Abbey*. Peace’s involvement with the Benedictine order has been ongoing, providing personal and professional inspiration from this period forward. While the Hindu concept of Nada Brahma or “God as sound” has remained important to Peace—as has the devotional chant tradition among Benedictine nuns—Peace does not look back at her dissertation with satisfaction. During her doctoral defense, she admitted to the examiners that she felt that the “research experiment was a failure on a certain level.” However, it was wrestling to find a clearer and more productive sense of purpose while in graduate school that spurred her to reach beyond the academy to explore interreligious engagement in the world. “I just didn’t love the whole model in the end. My comparison felt forced,” Peace explains, “and I think my real interest was in the kinds of questions that interreligious or interfaith studies creates space for: what is happening in those times and places where people or communities, or ideas, are already in relationship? That should be the site of your study” (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021).

For Peace, the United Religions Initiatives (URI) became a site for immersive interfaith engagement. Here she worked with Reverend Charles Gibbs, URI's first director. Peace became the youngest board member of URI and "was charged with convening a group of young people at a conference URI hosted in 1999, held at Stanford University" (Peace 2013, GTU). Here, she met people like Eboo Patel, who would go on to become a national and global leader in interfaith education. Out of ideas and a vision generated through URI came the impetus for Peace, Patel, and others to go to the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, South Africa. While there, they engaged with a global community in addressing key issues around interfaith activism for a new generation of religious leaders and educators.

## ***The 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions***

The 1999 Parliament was the second modern assembly of the Parliament of the World's Religions and the first held outside the United States, or the Global North. The original, historic Parliament held in Chicago in 1893 took place in conjunction with the massive undertaking of the World's Columbian Exposition, "America's great, Gilded Age fair, which was built to celebrate the quadricentennial of Columbus's 'discovery' of the Western Hemisphere" (Seager 2009, xiii). Today, Columbus is a more contested figure due to his association with western colonialism and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Still the 1893 Parliament was notable for including representatives of non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly from Asia. The original Parliament was an effort at religious monism, influenced by a progressive Protestant view that the world's major religions could unite around shared spiritual and ethical views. Nonetheless, that aspiration seemingly crashed around issues of colonial exportation of Christianity and the implicit bias, though relatively gentle, of Protestant Christianity as the natural leader of religion in the modern world. As Richard Seager notes, the Parliament failed in its quest for "world religious unity." Instead, its ultimate importance was as "a harbinger of the rise of the idea of religious pluralism" (2009, xxxix).

A genuine liberality towards religious pluralism would become a significant feature of contemporary Parliaments of the World's Religions. At the 1999 Parliament in South Africa, religious pluralism combined dynamically and dramatically with liberation politics in the Global South, arriving at a time of galvanic social change in a new South Africa under Black African leadership. Nelson Mandela was a keynote speaker at the Parliament, having served as the first Black African president of South Africa since its liberation from White supremacist apartheid rule. In his speech, Mandela credited the work of institutions across the religious spectrum during the apartheid regime as providing the educational tools for him and other Black South Africans to change their lives and the life of their country:

*We grew up at a time when the government of this country owed its duty only to whites: a minority of less than 15 percent. They took no interest whatsoever in our education. It was religious institutions whether Christian, Moslem, Hindu or*

*Jewish in the context of our country, they are the people who bought land, who built schools, who equipped them, who employed teachers, and paid them. Without the church, without religious institutions, I would never have been here today.*  
(Parliament of the World's Religions 2013)

The location of the Parliament was, of course, significant for Peace as it brought her back to the country of her birth, where her parents had done their best to support resistance to the oppressions of apartheid. In 1999, the energy of the Parliament and the country focused on youth. Peace participated in the Parliament as part of a cadre of young activists in interfaith work, including Eboo Patel. Patel would go on to lead Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), now Interfaith America, and is an acknowledged leader in interfaith education today. Patel, who remains close friends with Peace, remembers her significance in the launch of IFYC:

*Peace was an integral part of IFYC in its earliest days. She was at “the creation” in June of 1998 at the United Religions Initiative Global Summit.<sup>5</sup> In fact, as a board member of URI at the time, she was a powerful advocate for our vision with the executive team of that organization. She also served on the leadership team of IFYC for the first several years of its work, including during the period where we ran the youth program at the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town.*  
(Patel, pers. comm., January 3, 2022)

At the 1999 Parliament, Peace interacted with young interfaith activists from the West and from the de-colonized world. She recalls the experience as “just very, very formative,” noting the passion and power “of seeing these young people from all over the world, South Africa, Brazil, Ghana. I mean, there were just really powerful people in their teens and 20s and early 30s” (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021).

Peace's panel presentation at the Cape Town Parliament was “A Neighborhood of World Religions: Collaborative Approaches to the Teaching of the World's Religions.” The concepts of collaboration and neighborhood forecasted later initiatives by Peace, including the CIRCLE program at Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College, in which Christian seminarians and Jewish rabbinical students, and later students of Islam, prepared together for their roles as religious leaders and educators.

## ***Bringing Interfaith Activism to the Academy***

In 2005 Peace completed her doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union with a Ph.D. in the historical and cultural study of religions. She used her education and experience with interfaith activism in her work as a professor at Andover

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<sup>5</sup>The United Religions Initiative (URI) stemmed from efforts to establish a global interfaith organization modeled on the United Nations. URI, which now has a presence in 47 countries, grew out of meetings and summits in the San Francisco area (site of the signing of the UN Charter in 1945) in which youth activists played a defining role in its establishment and growth. See Sarah Talcott, “Youth Leadership: A Catalyst for Global Good” in *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action*, Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur, eds, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 75-76.

Newton Theological School (ANTS). Peace began her time at ANTS in 2007. In 2010 she became the first professor of interfaith studies in the school's more than two-hundred-year history. The appointment came with a certain measure of historical irony as two hundred years earlier, in 1810, Andover Newton was the site of the establishment of the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). ABCFM became the organizational engine driving Protestant missionary activity to foreign lands. David Kling observes, "From the beginning, Andover was the training center of the ABCFM's missionaries. During the first decade of the Board, all but one of its missionaries was educated at Andover" (2003, 811). In 2015, Peace became a tenured associate professor of interfaith studies.

In 2017, Peace chose not to go to New Haven, Connecticut as part of Andover Newton's merger with Yale Divinity School. The pedagogy that Peace developed at the seminary has continued through the Miller Center for Interreligious Learning and Leadership, where CIRCLE was relocated after the merger. The Miller Center is located at Hebrew College, Andover Newton's old neighbor in Newton, Massachusetts.

Peace's pioneering work in cooperative pastoral interfaith education had its roots in the personal and professional. Edie Crary Howe, Peace's mother-in-law, was instrumental in creating a vision for her daughter-in-law's ongoing work in interfaith. Peace dedicated her co-edited book, *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*, to her mother-in-law. Quoting the Bible, it reads, "A woman of valor—with the fruit of her hands, she plants a vineyard" (Proverbs 31:16). In response to the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, Edie Crary Howe committed the last years of her life to interfaith work and education. She founded the "Daughters of Abraham," an interfaith book club for Christian, Jewish, and Islamic women, which has grown exponentially since its founding. As a student in her fifties at Andover Newton Theological School, she supported the efforts of Betty Ann Miller of Hebrew College, who created an interfaith community of students from both their schools. Subsequently, faculty members from Hebrew College and Andover Newton, including Howe and her daughter-in-law, advanced the student interfaith initiative by establishing CIRCLE. With this institutional grounding, CIRCLE has become an enduring, groundbreaking educational undertaking between the neighboring schools. While at CIRCLE, Peace developed new grassroots approaches for training religious educators and leaders for pastoral service in a religiously diverse pluralistic society. Out of the laboratory of interfaith experimentation and discovery at CIRCLE, Peace emerged as a leading voice in interfaith action and interreligious education.

## ***Centering Interreligious Studies in the Academy***

In 2013, Peace and Dr. Homayra Ziad, a scholar of Islamic Studies, founded the Interfaith and Interreligious Studies Unit at the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Now, ten years later in 2023, the unit is a well-established contributor to

the overall field of religious studies. In its statement of purpose, the unit identifies itself as “advanc[ing] cutting-edge institutional and pedagogical innovation at the intersection of the academy and civic engagement” (American Academy of Religion 2020). That undertaking reflects Peace’s values and her work as a progenitor of the unit.

Scholarly work highlighted by the unit has led to important publications such as *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, edited by Peace, along with Eboo Patel and Noah J. Silverman. The editors note that their inaugural meeting in 2014 was the inspiration for the book where a group of “eighty or so people gathered for a session called ‘Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies: Emerging Questions and Considerations.’” The session broached the question of what constituted interfaith studies. Those gathered acknowledged that the emerging field of study required its own methodologies. The group suggested “favoring an active learning approach over the default academic lectures” (Patel, Peace and Silverman 2018, xi). The unit has gone on to foster a dramatic rise in scholarship. Peace explains, “There was nowhere at the American Academy of Religion before 2013, where you could propose a paper on interreligious or interfaith or even multi-faith. Those words were almost absent. I did a before-and-after word search in the catalogs of the AAR, and the increase of papers within and then outside of our program unit that started to use this language was just dramatic from like two or three references to like 50 or 60” (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021). Recent statistics now show the “group receives between sixty and eighty proposals per year and regularly draws seventy-five to ninety participants to each of its sessions” (Patel, Peace, and Silverman 2018, xiv). Scholar of comparative religion Judith Berling has noted the significance of this and related efforts in advancing interreligious education in the religious studies academy: “With new professional organizations, a presence on the program of the American Academy of Religions [*sic*], and journals through which to share developing knowledge, this initiative is bound to thrive” (Berling 2020, 12).

Building on the success of the new unit at AAR, Peace looked to encourage a new generation of emerging scholars as interfaith thinkers and activists. She writes that “due to the overwhelming positive response and interest in this group at the AAR, I founded the Association of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies (AIIS) in 2017 as a scholarly society dedicated to developing and exploring the potential of this emerging paradigm in the study of religions and its implications for both educational institutions and civic life” (Peace 2019, 217). As such it represents Peace’s argument for interfaith studies as “a field that values scholarship accountable to community, the dynamic link between theory and practice, and the centrality of relationships at every level (from subject matter to methodology and motivations)” (Patel, Peace, and Silverman 2018, xii).

In 2013, Peace returned to the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, California, to give the annual Surjit Singh Lecture in Comparative Religious Culture and Thought. The purpose of the endowed series is to bring “a distinguished scholar to address religion and culture from a cross-cultural perspective” (Graduate Theological Union, n.d.). Other notable scholars in the

series include the bestselling author and scholar Huston Smith; the renowned expert on Hinduism and mythology, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty; founder and leader of Harvard’s Pluralism Project, Diana Eck; and Peace’s colleague in interfaith activism, Eboo Patel of Interfaith America. Peace titled her lecture “Spiritual Other/Spiritual Self: Models of Transformative Interfaith Work.” In it, she made three assertions based upon her experience in the interfaith field: one, that “interfaith work is consciousness-raising work”; two, that “interfaith work strengthens rather than threatens particular religious identity”; and three, that “interfaith work is a practical imperative” (Peace 2013, GTU).

### ***Interfaith Work as the Pursuit of Knowledge Equity***

All three of Peace’s assertions around interfaith work speak to the issue of knowledge equity. Her assertions align with feminist theologian Mary Hunt’s recognition of the necessity of “looking more broadly at the many religious players in their unique roles and looking more deeply around the edges to see who has been left out or who has been misunderstood” (2020, iii). This search is a process that “will result in a far richer and more useful-hopefully more well-respected font of global knowledge” (Hunt 2020, iii). Peace’s first assertion of interfaith work as consciousness-raising means examining and being open to reconfiguring what we privilege as knowledge in a religious context. It connects strongly to Peace’s study and experience of Benedictine principles in her academic and spiritual journey, in which the practice of humility provides a ladder to enlightenment. Peace explained in the Singh Lecture that “understanding and critiquing the human tendency we have to imagine the Other in ways that constructs “Them” as less than “Us” and therefore not worthy of the same rights or respect, is perhaps, the primary ethical imperative of interfaith work” (2013, GTU). This ethical imperative applies to knowledge formation on Wikipedia and other encyclopedic digital platforms that privilege established ways of knowing based on the Western canon. Whether intentional or not, this tendency devalues other traditions, which have their own heritages of enlightenment: some with roots that draw from oral traditions. When Peace made room for Mohammed’s friend’s story of spiritual transformation as deserving of equal respect to her own experience, epistemological boundaries shifted, expanded, and inherently became more inclusive.

Peace’s second assertion around interfaith work as “strengthening rather than threatening religious identity” stemmed from her collaborative interreligious teaching at CIRCLE. That experience revealed to her the importance of deeply understanding and reverencing one’s own religious underpinnings as essential in developing an appreciation of the depth of purpose and beauty of other religious orientations. In the Singh lecture, Peace cited the experience of a Baptist student studying for the ministry who had been married to a Jewish woman. The work spurred him to dig deeper to understand how love and respect could operate within the context of religious difference. In his final paper, he wrote, “What I had yet to realize was that there is even more need to understand and appreciate each other’s differences...Not everything is a commonality, and that is perfectly

okay. In fact, it is necessary. In our difference lies our dimensionality, our depth, our richness” (2013, GTU). As Peace remarked in her Surjit Singh Lecture at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, in 2013, “Interfaith work does not inherently lead to watered down religious identity but rather evidence points to the opposite,” noting how at CIRCLE “this work helps rabbis be better rabbis and ministers be better ministers” (2013, GTU).

Finally, it brought Peace to the third assertion of interfaith work as a practical imperative. “We need each other,” Peace exclaimed in her remarks. “Global challenges—such as persistent poverty, cultures of violence, ecological degradation—call on each of us to reach towards the deepest resources of our respective traditions and collectively bring them to bear on issues that none of us can address alone” (2013, GTU).

Peace’s contributions to interfaith have been both practical and epistemological. They have inspired new priorities in seminary education and have encouraged core shifts in thinking about what it means to be of spiritual service in a complex, pluralistic society. One sees strong parallels in contemplating Peace’s innovations in interfaith with efforts to rethink and reform what is privileged in knowledge generation on Wikipedia and other digital platforms. As Colleen Hartung has observed, “Even though Wikipedia aspires to be a compendium of the sum of all knowledge, its content and contributor gaps indicate a replication of bias that exists across the spectrum of communities marginalized in society at large by sexism, racism, colonialism, and more” (Hartung 2021, vii).

The dominance of men in the Global North as arbitrators of the so-called World Wide Web (www) is pronounced, thereby heavily skewing what is privileged as authoritative and worthy knowledge on its digital platforms. Through the website “Whose Knowledge?,” its co-directors, Adele Vrana and Anasuya Singupta, monitor issues around global knowledge equity. The site profiles surveys that provide insight into current cultural, gender, and geographical imbalances in sources of online public knowledge. For example, they identify that “20% of the world (primarily White male editors from North America and Europe) edits 80% of Wikipedia currently,” and note that “those in the global North” still write most of the articles written about the global South (Whose Knowledge?, n.d. “Public Online Knowledge.”) Peace’s background, educational experience, and interfaith activism have sensitized her to issues around attitudes of religious and cultural superiority in connection with neo-colonialism and globalization. In regard to her own faith tradition, the values expressed in Benedictine practice have been formative. Peace notes their impact on her experience in interreligious education. “When I did fieldwork for part of my doctoral research at a Benedictine abbey, I saw this reflected in the community’s vow of *conversatio morum*, which they interpret as openness to change,” she explains. “This posture of openness coupled with a sense of epistemological humility is essential for learning and essential for the model of coformation we are committed to at Circle” (Peace 2020a). The openness to change that Peace sees as essential has broad implications for interreligious learning and understanding and more broadly for changes in what is valued as knowledge and the various ways in which it is produced and



communicated: from oral traditions to advanced technological media. In an article for *Colloquy*, the magazine of the Association of Theological Schools, Peace discusses contemporary cultural complexity and its effects on the communities that current seminarians are preparing to serve. She writes,

*To add the prefix “co” to “formation” and apply it to seminary education is to assert that students are not formed in isolation but in connection to a dynamic web of relationships. Making formation an intentionally interfaith process reflects the reality that our particular beliefs exist in a larger and complex multireligious (and nonreligious) human community, a community we want to prepare our students to both encounter and engage on multiple levels—theological, ethical, and pastoral—as community organizers, educators, preachers, and citizens. (Peace 2011)*

## ***Coformation and the Future***

The term “coformation” represents a unique contribution by Peace to the lexicon and conceptual framework of interfaith studies. “The key to instilling interreligious competency,” Peace writes, “is moving from a model of formation to a model of *coformation*. Coformation in this context is a term I coined to describe the model developed at CIRCLE that privileges learning with diverse religious communities over learning about the religious other.” She recalls that “what was new about the model we were developing was the fundamental assertion that we cannot form our religious leaders and educators in monoreligious isolation” (Peace 2020, 210).

Peace has discussed coformation in various publications, including in her chapter “Religious Self, Religious Other: Coformation as a Model for Interreligious Education,” included in the monograph *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*. Here, she argues for coformation as the necessity of learning with those of other faiths in order to serve the needs of a pluralistic society. What emerges through coformation is an appreciation for the spiritual building blocks that have led to religious commitments and practice in other traditions. In the essay, Peace draws from a deep well of experience with CIRCLE, her interreligious education at the Graduate Theological Union, and other initiatives in interfaith. Contemplating the meaning of coformation, Peace explains that “a key theological insight that underpins my commitment to interfaith education as part of seminary formation is the assertion that interreligious engagement is a *way* of being Christian. Rather than being tangential to faithful Christian life, how we understand and treat our religious neighbors is central to it” (Peace 2020, 204).

As Peace has continued in interfaith work, she has come to recognize that its future development no longer depends on justifying its place in the academy but rather on exploring how best to fulfill its potential in an academic sphere. She notes that “over many years of experimentation, reflection, and strategic development our questions have shifted and multiplied. We are no longer asking whether or not the competencies of interreligious leadership are necessary for adequate preparation. Instead our questions focus more on the details of ‘how’ and ‘what.’” She asks, “How can we design a curriculum to move from a model

of religious formation to a model of interreligious coformation? How can we integrate interfaith concerns in a curriculum so that they do not remain peripheral or optional? What curriculum designs, educational programs, and pedagogical strategies best serve this work?" Moreover, for Peace, interreligious education and training require responding to and reforming the distorted and even corrupted interreligious coformations that happen unacknowledged, unmediated, and often unconsciously in a societal framework. Her interrogation of her field begins with the question: "What does adequate preparation for the next generation of religious leaders and educators look like, given the complex multireligious contexts in which our graduates will serve?" (Peace 2020, 218)

In his review of Peace's book, *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*, Peter Admirand notes that it provides "a collection of more than fifty personal testimonies from recognized pioneers and experts in the field of interfaith studies depicting a particular moment or contact of interfaith immersion when outlooks, beliefs, presuppositions, and apparently closed arguments all are exposed, challenged, re-fashioned and purified" (Admirand 2015, 161). For Admirand, this speaks to the book's capacity to stimulate readers to reflect on their own interfaith experiences. At the outset of the review, Admirand confesses that the book offered "such a moving, personal, inspiring, and honest collection of interfaith encounters" that he felt compelled to relate an interfaith story of his own from his Catholic youth in New York when he met a Jewish boy, named Yuri. "Yuri mentioned that though Jesus was not God's son, he was a holy man who did a lot of good," Admirand recalls. "My ten-year old eyes suddenly saw a wider world. I felt relieved and happy knowing that Jewish people saw something good in Jesus. The topic never arose between us again and Yuri later moved back to Israel with his parents. But that moment of interfaith connection has always stayed with me and likely influenced my adult interest in interfaith studies and dialogue" (Admirand 2015, 161).

For Peace, the interreligious reality of contemporary society on a local and global level—whether direct or more nuanced, whether harmonious or discordant—necessitates pastoral formation that reflects and addresses interfaith and intercultural interactions that are already happening, inclusive of their complications, tensions, and contradictions, in addition to their positive outcomes. As she observes:

*One disconcerting conclusion I've drawn from decades of work as an interfaith organizer and educator is that consciousness in one area is not necessarily a predictor of awareness in another. I've met racist feminists, sexist interfaith activists, and homophobic champions of racial equality. We can be bigoted when it comes to one group of people and enlightened advocates for others.*

*This is both disheartening and fascinating to me. Because the more I explore these intersecting forms of exclusion, the more I recognize the same patterns of thought underlying them. (Peace 2016)*

As such, an important requirement of conformation depends on individual

consciousness raising and reformation.

## ***Consciousness Raising in Advancing Knowledge Equity in the Classroom***

Peace's teaching on interfaith has required students to examine the influence of narratives they have generated or inherited about other faiths. "This imprisonment in our stories in 'ways not fully conscious to us,'" she explains, "makes it urgent to address the internal dimensions of grassroots interfaith work. . . . In all of my classes, I begin with attention to the unconscious biases that undergird our relations to others, and then I introduce students to practices that help them explore this inner landscape" (Peace 2016). For Peace, this involves interrogating attitudes, perspectives, and assumptions to raise consciousness into more generous, informed, and sensitive engagement with the world. "Much seems to hinge on our relationship to our own stories, the narrative chronicles of our personal experiences," Peace observes. She asks, "Will we cling to them rigidly in a kind of unconscious idolatry? Or can we offer and receive them as gifts, allowing my story to expand your understanding even as I allow your story to expand mine?" (Peace 2016).

As a professor within the religious academy, Peace has intentionally worked to create greater knowledge equity through the curricula she has developed both in interfaith and feminist studies in a Christian context. Peace remembers that her course on the "History of Christian Spirituality through the Lives of Women" was the only one offered at Andover Newton during her nearly ten years of teaching there that "had the word 'women' in its title." (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021). She recognizes that addressing feminist concerns in the study of religion has interrelated with and contributed to her commitment to interreligious work. "I would say recognizing the gaps that part of my work was trying to fill very much came out of my experience as a woman in the academy. I had a really strong sense from the start that it was a house built by and for other people" reflects Peace in her oral history. "So, in some ways, the interreligious/interfaith studies program unit at the AAR came out of a long process that started during my time as a graduate student. I spent years thinking about: How could we build the house a little differently?" (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021)

The original thinking and innovation that Peace has brought to interfaith studies has established her as a valued leader and advisor to those involved with interfaith work: one who has changed the very design and structure of religious education and pastoral formation. Peace's leadership led to her involvement with organizations like the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, which supports research and programs to cultivate increased interreligious dialogue and understanding within the broad and growing expanse of religious diversity in the United States. Peace is currently Senior Advisor to the Pluralism Project (Pluralism Project).

## *Enduring Influence on Students*

When Andover Newton Theological School merged with Yale Divinity School in 2017, Dr. Peace retired. The decision has opened new opportunities for Peace to pursue her interest and talents in art as a ceramicist, while continuing to contribute to the interfaith field. Since leaving the seminary, she has served as a university chaplain in the Boston area and, as noted above, as a senior advisor to the Pluralism Project. She continues to be active in institutions she has founded or helped to found, such as the Association of Interreligious & Interfaith Studies. She is on the advisory board for the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*. She continues to write on interfaith and religious topics with two manuscripts in process: *The World in a Ray of Light: 24 Hours in a Benedictine Monastery* and *Understanding Interfaith: 48 Short Stories*. For Peace, this has represented a natural step for interfaith and interreligious work as an ongoing and multigenerational process. “Part of my hope,” she acknowledges, “is to say, like in a relay race image, here’s the piece of the run I can do and now I’m handing this off to the next runner” (Peace, oral history interview, October 15, 2021).

True to her missionary parents, Peace remained committed to her students and the salvific potential of the intersection of higher education and spiritual journey right up until the closure of Andover Newton’s Massachusetts campus. Testimonials from past students at Andover Newton offer a record of enduring love and respect for Peace’s teaching and its applicability in their professional lives. In different ways, the voices of Peace’s students reflect the intimacy and connectedness that Peace fostered in the classroom as well as the transformative impact the students experienced through the programs she developed and led at the school. For bereavement counselor Shannan Hudgins, Peace provided an example of grace and dedication. “Over the four years of my M.Div. study, I took every class of Jenny’s I could fit into my schedule and participated in the interfaith community she worked so diligently to establish,” Hudgins reports. “In joint seminars between ANTS and Hebrew College, I witnessed her gentle regard for her colleagues in religious education.” Hudgins was there to witness the final days of Andover Newton Theological School at its long-held Newton, Massachusetts campus. She remembers that “in the final year of ANTS in Newton Centre, when we last remaining faculty and students were confined to a single building to finish our degrees and for some, teaching careers, Jenny was a joyful, encouraging presence who was always willing to tap the bruise of our collective sadness and help tease out meaning for us, for herself” (Hudgins, pers. comm., November 6, 2021).

Co-pastor of the United Church in Waban, Massachusetts, Reverend Amy Feldman recognizes the value of Peace’s dedication and innovation in preparing her students for interfaith action and service, which represents a consistent theme in remembrances and tributes from other former students. Included among them are ministers in various denominations, educators, a Christian Science practitioner, and psychological and spiritual counselors. Feldman writes, “My current work includes engaging youth in interfaith relationship-building and action; and leading an interfaith group of clergy and religious educators in our

town. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Peace for her presence and role in my life, and in my formation as a religious leader seeking to build a more peaceful and just world with my colleagues of different faiths” (Feldman, pers. comm., October 31, 2021).

For Reverend George Oliver, Senior Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, San José, California, Peace’s emphasis on spiritual self-interrogation was pivotal in his educational transformation at Andover Newton. Oliver sets his experience there in the context of the moral reckonings around racial issues that were taking place during his time at the seminary. His full testimony captures the building blocks of Peace’s approach to coformation as they applied to his spiritual and intellectual maturation at ANTS:

*Looking in and reaching out are the two major themes overarching the lessons drawn from sitting at the feet of Dr. Jenny Peace at Andover Newton. I grew immensely from the courses in Interfaith Leadership and St. Benedict’s Rule that I took with her; at what was now the beginning of national unveiling. Trayvon Martin had recently fallen. Tamir Rice and other Black bodies would become national symbols. I was freshly being introduced to Derrick Bell and CRT.<sup>6</sup> Rev. Dr. William Barber, II, was not yet a Bishop, but a rock star when we brought him in to comment to and convict us in this period on our New England campus.<sup>7</sup> And I, the unusual institutionally inclined rebel, landed in her generous learning space.*

*Dr. Peace taught me to seek out the grandeur in introverted sanctuaries, the inherent power in deeply committed spiritual practice, and that we have just as much to teach as we have to learn in relationships.*

*For a long time, my looking in was a selfish, shallow pursuit. My peering was without peers. For many years my reaching out was rooted in the needs of those in distress, without thought to my own needs and vulnerability. But Benedict’s notions on self-control in founding strong impartial relationships, helped me better comprehend the give and take required to help order the lives of God’s servants. But looking in becomes even more prerequisite when we seek to engage in dialectic with other faiths, for rootedness precedes revelation, and then can be established into cooperation. Marcus Garvey suggested, “Man, know thyself,” and Jenny made it apparent that there are responsibilities on every side of duality, which requires us to be intimately aware of ourselves to draw from our depths to enable meaningful exchanges. Self-knowledge, or self-wisdom, are the products of looking in. Self-love’s development in our being after introspection, means we have the capacity for love of neighbor; and this informed my interfaith work moving forward, for it did not shun my use of polemics and prophecy, even outside the usual contours of familiarity.*

*Jenny taught us to appropriate a reflective faith toward the achievement of lasting harmony...Looking in to reach out. (Oliver, pers. comm., November 12, 2021)*

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<sup>6</sup> Bell, an American lawyer, has written extensively on critical race theory (CRT).

<sup>7</sup> Barber, a pastor, author, and social activist, is the founder of Repairers of the Breach, a not-for-profit organization “building a movement rooted in a framework that uplifts our deepest moral and constitutional values to redeem the heart and soul of our country.” See <https://www.breachrepairers.org/about-us>.

These commentaries from former students indicate that they not only appreciated Peace's qualities as a mentor but also absorbed, understood, and effectively applied Peace's distinctive interfaith pedagogy as one involving coformation with those of other faiths. Equally, they speak of the kind of self-reflection that Peace's approach to meaningful interfaith work requires, noting the influence of Benedictine thought in what they have learned from their professor.

## *Conclusion*

Peace's contribution to a pedagogy of coformation has been critical to new developments in interreligious education. In Peace's work, coformation reframes the education and ongoing development of religious educators and leaders for a pluralistic society. It is particularly useful during a time of cultural and political polarization when religion has the potential to serve as either a civic harmonizer and healer or as an instigator of increased division and conflict. Peace's groundbreaking work in this field invites questions about the potential for coformation's application in the digital spaces that increasingly envelop the world at large. Can coformation serve as a model for generating knowledge on digital platforms like Wikipedia, reconstituting knowledge production to embrace viewpoints from groups heretofore unrepresented or underrepresented in established knowledge sources and structures? Should the standards for editors on these digital platforms make greater room for biographical entries that draw from heretofore marginalized ways of knowing? For example, those based on oral traditions? Peace's model of coformative learning offers a template for more inclusive knowledge generation in the digital sphere.

Peace's experience with students and programs like CIRCLE has led to a greater understanding of knowledge equity but also knowledge holism. The process of coformation in interreligious studies demands that students interrogate their own memory formation and ideation to make room for new epistemologies that allow them to interpret and engage with the world differently. As Peace has discovered, coformation does not imperil the faith commitments of those who participate in it, but rather it "can strengthen one's own religious identity and sharpen one's ability to articulate deeply held beliefs" (2013, GTU). The words of Peace's beloved mother-in-law, Edie Howe, with whom Peace shared a significant part of her interfaith journey, portray the impact of coformative work. "One very strange thing that has happened to me is that I now think in a sort of 3-D paradigm," Howe explains. "I cannot think about Christianity without thinking about Judaism and Islam. It is—they are inextricably linked in my mind forever" (Religion Newsweekly 2006). Wikipedia and other digital platforms can literally provide coformative links in their entries, thereby encouraging new dimensions of interconnecting perspectives and understandings. Content producers, annotators, and editors in the world of digital knowledge creation can look to Peace's pedagogy of coformation as instructive in generating greater knowledge equity on their platforms.

In many ways, Peace's experiences with the United Religions Initiative

and her time at the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions situated her for the career that followed as a major innovator in interfaith activism and interreligious education. The foundation of her public outreach stemmed from deeply personal spiritual transformations that rooted her in a generous Christianity. In a practical sense, her work served as a countermeasure to Christian missiological history that has presumed Christian superiority over those of other faiths. For Peace, the key to achieving knowledge equity begins with transformation on a personal level, which can foster spiritual clarity in service to greater humanity. Engaging in interfaith study and activism settled and deepened her own faith convictions.

In a recent article for *Interfaith America*, Peace reflected on the Benedictine nuns she has studied and with whom she continues to find solace and inspiration. She noted how the nuns end each evening with a chant of Psalm 133. At the closure of her article, Peace adopted her own poetic voice in a prayer for humanity, writing:

*The closing words of Psalm 133 are the last words the nuns sing to one another before they retreat into the Great Silence, broken only by Matins in the early hours of the morning: "For there the Lord ordained the blessing—life forevermore." It is right there, in that sacred space and time, when we are able to glimpse a life in unity as equals, that we experience eternal blessing. May it be so. (2020, June 15)*

For Peace, faith and interfaith are basic to one another, living and prospering independently and together.

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## Chapter 4

**Iyekiyapiwiŋ Darlene**

**St. Clair**

*The Sacred Story of  
a Dakota Woman  
Challenging Knowledge  
Inequity*



Source: Parliament of the World's Religions

**DEBORAH FULTHORP**

### ***Introduction***

Winston Churchill's words, "history is written by the victors," attest to the reality that knowledge passed on through public, private, and religious educational systems is developed by and is a reproduction of the perspectives of those in positions of civic and religious power – the "victors." In other words, knowledge within dominant cultures is constructed within biased systems and institutions that dismiss ways of knowing used by the conquered, defeated, and marginalized. In the United States, Native and Indigenous communities experience this exclusion in the most profound ways. Their stories and cultures have been largely dismissed, forgotten, and even erased from public, private, and state educational institutions. Dakota activist Iyekiyapiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair,<sup>1</sup> an educator, and a scholar, stands as a recognizable force against the ubiquity of knowledge inequity characteristic of educational systems in Minnesota. Her work is transforming inequitable structures in secondary and higher education, where she critiques and reforms a White majority cultural view on behalf of the Dakota people. Based on her Dakota worldview, her work with knowledge equity is more than an academic exercise; it is a work representative of all her relatives, human and nonhuman.

Iyekiyapiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair is an associate professor and director of the Multicultural Resource Center at St. Cloud State University (SCSU). St.

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<sup>1</sup> Iyekiyapiwiŋ is Darlene St. Clair's Dakota name and will be explained further in her biography. Throughout the course of her story, I use her Dakota name in places where the context is more specific to using it, and also where St. Clair specifically has used it.

Clair, a Mdewakantonwan Dakota activist, works tirelessly to address issues of knowledge equity for Dakota, Ojibwe, and Indigenous peoples. St. Clair, a citizen of the Lower Sioux community, is an advisor of Dakota Wicoh'an, a non-profit organization revitalizing the Minnesota Dakota language and ways of living. Her activism focuses on protecting sacred sites of Indigenous people, particularly that of the Mdewakantonwan Dakota people in *Mni Sóta Maḵoḱe*<sup>2</sup> (Minnesota) (Peterson 2019). Her research, work, and involvement promoting knowledge equity on behalf of Indigenous peoples remains multi-faceted and spans various fields of study and curriculums. Across categories of difference, she seamlessly interweaves the theme of knowledge decolonization in the projects she engages.

In 2015, she was a keynote speaker for the first Women's Assembly at the Parliament of the World's Religions, which "focused on peace, climate change and women in leadership" (PBS 2015). In Minnesota, her work includes the development of a curriculum for children and youth about the Dakota people as well as teaching about the language, culture, and cultural artifacts of Native people. Her exceptional life and work extend beyond her community, inspiring Indigenous women and communities worldwide to challenge knowledge inequities (Drakulic 2020). Her work on behalf of knowledge equity and reparative justice is historic and significant on a global level. Her voice, words, and life's work echoed in her speech at the Parliament of the World's Religions embody the hopes and dreams of those who have gone before. She stands as witness to and advocate for reparation of past injustices against Indigenous peoples and "all [her] relations" (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021).

Within Indigenous communities, stories and art embody sacred spaces. Given this context, the writing of this biography is informed by St. Clair's intimate sharing of the story of her life and work as an activist, eco-feminist, and ally in a way that opens out onto the sacred nature of who she is; in her words, "A good Dakota" (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021). As her work and story unfold, models for shifting paradigms toward knowledge equity can be apprehended and contextualized. In this biography, I will focus on how St. Clair challenges Western and "settler-oriented" assumptions to create sacred spaces for knowledge equity on behalf of Indigenous people across educational institutions (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies 2020). The hope is that understanding her story will provoke more inclusive ways of learning among educators and scholars through an intersection of ethnic, gender, and religious fields of study.

## *Wicooyake*

The Dakota word, *Wicooyake* (historical or personal stories), carries significant meaning. Dakota people have a deep connection to their past. As a Native educator, Darlene St. Clair leans into the difficult stories surrounding American Indian studies to combat the erasure of knowledge about Dakota people and

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<sup>2</sup>The spelling of Dakota language words used throughout this chapter is taken from "Dakota Language: Lessons" on the Dakota Wicoh'an website: <https://dakotawicohan.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Dakota-Language-in-MSM.pdf>

Dakota experiences. She uses the term “dysconsciousness” in conjunction with the idea of disassociating from the desire to do anything about injustices, past and present (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies 2020). In order to shift paradigms, she believes it is important to acknowledge that, “the foundation of the educational achievement inequities of Native students is the dysconsciousness of settlers and settler-oriented institutions” (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies 2020).

The Parliament of the World’s Religions left an indelible mark on St. Clair’s life as a young woman and underwent a similar process of overcoming Native dysconsciousness. While attending the 1993 Parliament, St. Clair was invited into a multicultural and interfaith conversation about religious and wisdom traditions among other Native American scholars and activists. This provided her a place at the table in a conversation about inclusion that would redirect her life’s work. While the Parliament of the World’s Religions (Parliament) currently boasts that it convenes “the world’s largest and most inclusive interfaith gathering, with an average attendance of 8,000 participants,” it also contends with its own struggle of dysconsciousness (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2022b). From its beginning in 1893, the Parliament has been on a journey toward translating knowledge equity from discourse into praxis in relation to the religious and spiritual traditions of non-Christian and non-Euro-American participants.

The Parliament was first assembled in 1893 and is “the landmark beginning of the modern interfaith movement” (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2022b). Criticisms of the first Parliament challenged how it privileged dominant forms of knowledge in ways that reproduced bias and inequity. During the “Gilded Age” era, in post-Civil-War America, the Parliament, a product of its times, cloaked itself with a thin veneer of interfaith and interracial pluralism. The Parliament’s prominent use of Christian terminology, lack of women’s involvement, ostracism of African Americans and lack of Native Americans or Indigenous peoples betrayed its goal of interfaith and interracial inclusion. Frederick Douglass referred to the White architecture surrounding the event as a “whitened sepulchre” for Blacks, as only two major speakers were African Americans (The Pluralism Project 2020). Though the Parliament made history, crossing traditional boundaries by hosting the convention in the urban area chosen by the Chicago World’s Fair, problems remained. Native Americans were denied an invitation predominantly because of their religious traditions (2020). Indigenous peoples endured dehumanizing tactics and were viewed as part of the curiosities exhibit historians label as “human zoos” (Shahriari 2018).

Despite petitions from various Native American leaders challenging spectacles such as these at the World’s Fair, human exhibits were allowed to continue. According to the Pluralism Project, “The Parliament itself was planned as part of the Chicago World’s Fair, or World’s Columbian Exposition, which celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America. Organizers called this major interreligious conclave ‘the morning star of the 20th century’” (The Pluralism Project 2020). Petitioner, Potawatomi leader Chief Simon Pokagon sold and distributed a booklet entitled “The Red Man’s Rebuke.” In this booklet, he

articulated his contempt for the atrocities done to the Native American people. “On behalf of my people, the American Indians, I hereby declare to you; the pale-faced race that has usurped our lands and homes, that we have no spirit to celebrate with you the great Columbian Fair now being held in this Chicago city, the wonder of the World” (Pokagon 1893).

The Parliament’s first convention at Chicago’s World’s Fair reflected the views of its time. The World’s Fair was built upon the myth that Chicago would become “The Rome that is to be of the new world.” However, this generation also witnessed Native American relocation, lynching, and labor wars. Native Americans, religious and spiritual practices were oppressed and outlawed. According to the work of historian Richard Seager, the World’s Columbian Exposition and Parliament of 1893 exemplified the myth that the United States epitomized the center of a pluralistic modern civilization. However, Seager points out that the “myth, drawing upon classical, Christian and patriotic traditions, reflected a triumphalist, universalistic perspective in which ethnocentric Anglo-Protestant ideas and values were filtered through lenses that rendered their ethnocentricity and racism invisible” (Seager 1995, ix). Further, attempts made to self-correct within these imbalanced structures of power and privilege often, unintentionally, continued to exclude those they sought to include. Without including all ethnicities, religions, and genders in the discourse about inclusion and knowledge equity, interfaith and interreligious goals remained unmet. It took almost 90 years for legal protection to be enacted for Indigenous peoples to follow their native spiritual practices in the United States through the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978 (Seager 1995). When the Parliament reconvened to celebrate its Centennial in 1993, the religious and ethnic landscape in America looked quite different than in 1893. Indigenous peoples were openly welcomed to the 1993, 1999, and 2004 Parliaments.

In 1996, the Indigenous Peoples Task Force at the Parliament of the World’s Religions formed. The Parliament continued decolonizing its structures as it worked to honor the significant contributions of Indigenous Peoples during the 2009 convention (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2022b). In 2015, the Parliament of the World’s Religions gathered and declared in “one voice” an An Indigenous Peoples’ Declaration for Action. The preamble to the declaration illustrates the importance of creating spaces for knowledge equity – especially spaces to reconstruct ways of knowing that include Indigenous voices. Due to colonization, and “settler-oriented institutions,” Indigenous voices and narratives were erased from historical moments and warranted active restitution. “While many well-intended words have been written and spoken in many languages in support of our Indigenous survival, it is through action that those words will have meaning and become reality. Words without action have the effect of a ceremony without purpose” (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2022a). Standing in contradistinction against the first Parliament of the World’s Religions, this declaration called for ending all forms of violence committed against all Indigenous peoples. It proclaimed the collective plea to cherish their relations. St. Clair’s understanding of and participation in the creation of this declaration

encapsulates the foundation and motivation for her life's work toward the achievement of a decolonized embrace of Indigenous knowledge. Although this specific work embodies a vast and considerable undertaking in her life, for St. Clair it simply means living as a good Dakota.

## ***Dakota Wicoḥ'aṅ***

To understand St. Clair, it is important to know a brief history of the land where the current Lower Sioux Indian Community (LSIC) is located. St. Clair was born in Minneapolis and is a citizen of the Lower Sioux community located at *Caṅšayapi*, along the *Mni Sóta Wakpá* (Minnesota River). *Mni Sóta Maḵoce* (Minnesota) is a Dakota word that loosely translates as “where the waters reflect the sky” (St. Clair and Beane 2018). *Caṅšayapi* is translated as “They paint the trees red.” The “original homelands of the eastern bands of Dakota people” is 2 miles south of Morton in Redwood County, Minnesota (St. Clair and Beane 2018). In 1851, a U.S. Treaty officially named their band, current community, and land “Lower Sioux.” Dakota people originated in the area where the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers meet (Bdote Mni Sóta). Dakota belief originated in this place over 11,500 years ago (Gloria Dei St Paul 2021).

## ***Early History***

In this sacred land, Loretta Ann St. Clair (née Ekern) gave birth to Darlene on May 5, 1965 (St. Clair, pers. comm., April 8, 2023). Her father, Henry Benjamin (Hank) St. Clair was primarily raised by his grandparents, Rev. Henry (who was the first ordained Episcopalian Dakota minister) and Amelia St. Clair. (*Star Tribune Obituaries* 2021). Although Darlene is the middle daughter of three (Karen and Carolyn), her sister Carolyn succumbed to cancer when she was a young child. This traumatic loss shaped Darlene's childhood as she found herself alone in the waiting rooms of doctors' offices and hospitals, as age limits for visitors were standard. These times as a young girl forced her to be “a young person who could spend time alone thinking” (St. Clair, pers. comm., April 8, 2023). Out of this trauma she learned the discipline of solitude which continues to guide her, and center her Dakota identity today.

Although missionaries strongly influenced St. Clair's grandparents and extended family, she is one of many Native Americans who have returned to their roots to embrace traditional Dakota spiritual practices (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021). The first generation of her family not to be sent away to boarding school, she is also the first to have received a college education (American Indian Center - SCSU 2019). Majoring in Art History and American Indian studies she completed her Bachelor of Arts (BA) from the University of Wisconsin (UW), Madison Campus. She graduated from UW Madison Campus in 1990 with a Masters of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) as well as in 1997 with an Educational Specialist degree (Ed.S) in American Indian Studies and Library and Information Studies. Her dissertation was entitled, “Know Your Roots: An oral history project with American Indian adolescents” (St. Clair, pers. comm., April

8, 2023). She actively considers herself a scholar who lives and works in and for the benefit of her native homeland. Her scholarship and work are local in scope, however some of the “practices [such as her antiracist pedagogies] are models that can be used elsewhere” (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies 2020).

Her devotion to sacred spiritual Dakota practices undergirds everything she does from advocating for the protection of sacred sites to educating natives and non-natives in various contexts such as anti-racist studies, about a sacred relationality embedded in the Dakota *wicoh’añ*, the Dakota way of life. For example, St. Clair serves on the board of the non-profit organization, called Dakota *Wicoh’añ*. Its mission is “to preserve Dakota as a living language, and through it, transmit Dakota life ways to future generations” (Dakota *Wicoh’añ* 2020b). Although the Dakota people lived and flourished on the land for thousands of years, by 2013, there were as few as five elders alive who were fluent speakers of the Dakota language. In contrast, today the Dakota community is engaging in a revival of their native language and culture among young people and adults (Weiss 2013). It seems daunting, but the revival continues because of the ongoing advocacy and work of educators like St. Clair and others in her collective community.

## *Wiçahunkake*

Much of the work Darlene St. Clair initiates and advocates within educational spaces commences from her own understanding of knowledge according to the Dakota worldview. Her beliefs are grounded in an understanding of her *Wiçahunkake* (Ancestors). This is foundational to the Dakota worldview and the Dakota *wicoh’añ*. For the Dakota, *Wiçahunkake* are tied to place or land. The Dakota homelands are also called “the place of our *Wiçahunkake*” (St. Clair and Beane 2018). The Dakota people refer to the region and the land of their ancestors as *Mni Sóta Maçoce*. This image of “where the waters reflect the sky” means that there is so much water the landscape takes on the appearance of the sky. This region, before the time of colonists and settlers, included “lands in eastern North and South Dakota, southern Canada, western Wisconsin, and northern Iowa. The name is important because it illustrates a deep knowledge of the landscape the Dakota people developed over thousands of years” (St. Clair and Beane 2018).

The Dakota worldview starts with the understanding that land, water, earth, and other forms are paramount. Everything the Dakota do and who they are has a sacred connection to their homelands. They are more than stewards of the earth. They have a sacred relationship with the land. The land holds a sacred space because it is in this land of *Mni Sóta Maçoce* that their origin and creation story transpired (Westerman and White 2012). The practice of their relational spirituality nurtures St. Clair and the Dakota community along their pathways and informs their understanding of their history and identity.

According to St. Clair, the Dakota origin story begins with the *Wiçapi Oyate*, or the Star Nation, a swath of stars also known as the Milky Way. Their

belief is that the Dakota people, physically made of stars, traveled to the earth down a road called the “Road of the spirits.” St. Clair explains, “It is believed that in birth we travel that road, and that in death we travel that back. Part of our origins story is the place of our creation. So we traveled down to the earth along this road of the spirits, but we emerged from the earth at a particular place, and that is the Bdote Mni Sóta” (Gloria Dei St Paul 2021).

Environmentally friendly practices have maintained a rich diversity of resources in Minnesota. The state has more ecological and biological diversity than many other states, where the whole state is one biome (Gloria Dei St Paul 2021). St. Clair suggests that the maintenance of Minnesota’s rich diversity of resources is supported by Indigenous knowledge. Traditionally, Dakota people lived off of the land by knowing the location and seasonal availability of certain resources. In this way, caring for the land and its resources developed into an interdependent symbiotic relationship. According to the Dakota origin story, Minnesota is the birthplace of humanity and the place where the relationship between humans and nature has thrived.

Yet many Minnesotans are not aware of the presence of the Dakota people and their connection to the land. St. Clair attributes this to the erasure of Indigenous knowledge in settler-oriented history. Unfortunately, most Minnesotans define the Dakota people through the lens of their understanding of the U. S. Dakota War of 1862. Scholars regard this war as the “defining moment in the creation of Minnesota, and one with dire consequences for the Dakota people who remained in Minnesota or were exiled from their homeland” (Minnesota Visual and Media Arts 2013). The ongoing emotional connection to these traumatic historical events is dismissed, ignored, and replicated by the state’s educational system, which privileges Western hegemonic ways of knowing. St. Clair critiques, “The fact that Dakota people are still not recognized and still not seen as the real Indigenous tribe in this place . . . is a difficult thing, and it is not accidental. Certainly our educational systems have not done what is necessary to sort of really let Minnesotans know the true history of Minnesota” (Minnesotabroadcaster 2012, beginning at 9:10).

St. Clair counteracts hegemonic ways of knowing and advocates for her homeland by implementing and leading Land Acknowledgements connecting faith communities. According to Northwestern University, “A Land Acknowledgements is a formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of this land and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories” (Northwestern University 2023). This is an avowal of the ties Indigenous peoples have to the land as stewards of the place of their Wiçahunkake. Land Acknowledgements also create knowledge and awareness of Indigenous histories or experiences that have been erased (Michigan State University 2019). As a Dakota woman, the relationality characteristic of Land Acknowledgement is central and critical to how she sees herself within the world (Gloria Dei St Paul 2021).



## *Mitakuye Owas'iq*

According to St. Clair, *Mitakuye owas'iq* is the shortest Dakota prayer. However, though it is short, she considers it a primary and foundational Dakota concept.

*Mitakuye owas'iq. It means, "All my relations." ... this means all are my relations. In this phrase, All are my relatives. It isn't just Dakota people, it's not just Indigenous people, it is really, all humans, animals, plants, the land, the rocks, the water, the stars and the spirits that live in these places. These are the relatives that we were referring to. The way it was explained to me as a child is that this refers to everything that is seen and unseen. So embedded in this ethic of relationality, is recognition of a shared responsibility of reciprocity and interconnectedness. What I was taught is to be a Good Dakota is to be a Good Relative. (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021)*

St. Clair's work is an outflow of her identity as a Dakota woman. She deconstructs inequitable structures of power and privilege by shifting her perspective and seeing things from a Dakota worldview. This framework of being a good Dakota in kinship with others motivates her to create spaces of inclusion for "all her relatives." "Central to a Dakota worldview is the concept *Mitakuye owas'iq* (all my relatives). This teaching is at the core of *wicoh'an* (ways of life) and it is used to guide our decision-making and actions... To not follow this central kinship rule is to abandon our identities as a people" (St. Clair and Beane 2018).

Even though the Dakota were the first Indigenous people to make what is now Minnesota their homeland, their story has yet to be appropriately represented and understood in the historical narratives about the land. At SCSU (St. Cloud State University), St. Clair teaches a class on Native Nations of Minnesota along with American Indian studies. Consistently, every semester a large majority of her non-native students ask her, "Why is this the first time I'm hearing this? Why have I never heard of this before?" (MinnesotaBroadcaster 2012). Driven by this misunderstanding, St. Clair works to challenge and shift educational paradigms and ecosystems of knowledge in Minnesota schools, making room for the histories that account for Dakota understandings of the world.

St. Clair developed a 6th-grade social studies curriculum to address historical erasures called "Mni Sóta Maḵoḵe: The Dakota Homelands." She collaborated with a native nonprofit organization called Dakota *Wicoh'an*, to integrate this curriculum into Minnesota's schools and state history. The curriculum has 10 lessons and centers on the Dakota concept of relationality, *Mitakuye owas'iq*. The first part focuses on teaching a "greater understanding of a traditional Dakota worldview," explaining core beliefs, and introducing the Dakota language. It integrates both oral and written history passed on from elders, spiritual leaders, or other folks within the Lower Sioux Indian Community (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021). St. Clair suggests that making sure children across the state have access to knowledge about Indigenous peoples increases access for all Minnesotans. She believes that when knowledge about the marginalized from a non-Western perspective is accessible by all, everyone benefits.

*We drastically reduce our capacity for surviving on this planet when we have access to fewer worldviews ... How might we understand our shared history more deeply if viewed through teachings that center our relationship with the land as a relative? Our project, Mni Sota Maḳoḳe: The Dakota Homelands Curriculum, invites Minnesota's sixth graders to develop their own relationship to this land by learning from Dakota people about our relationship to the land. (St. Clair 2019)*

St. Clair's influence in the Minnesota K-12 education system includes the development of another curriculum project that equips teachers to promote Native arts in the classroom. In this curriculum, teaching Native arts is suggested as part of the standards for Minnesota art education. The general lack of knowledge about Native arts is caused, in part, by its absence within official educational standards. Students were not required to learn about authentic Native art and Native experience related to this art. St. Clair partnered with teacher and lecturer Betsy Maloney Leaf in the Arts in Education teacher licensure program at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, to create solutions to this gap in knowledge. According to the Weisman Art Museum, where these educational intervention programs take place, “St. Clair and Maloney Leaf aid pre-service teachers in recognizing, uncovering, investigating, and understanding how to not only name injustice, but take action against the institutions and individuals who perpetuate it” (Drakulic 2020). St. Clair believes that by shifting the paradigm of non-Natives (those from dominant cultural perspectives and others), knowledge inequities among systems and “settler oriented” institutions will be corrected and/or repaired. Implementing curricular interventions and Indigenous pedagogical models creates new categories of meaning for students with different belief systems and from different cultures (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies 2020).

## ***Tehiḳda***

Understanding Mitakuye owas' iḳ, includes understanding another concept: *tehiḳda* or cherishing. For St. Clair, the word *tehiḳda* connotes an equal part of love and protection (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021). St. Clair cherishes the sacred sites of the Dakota people and considers shared awareness and understanding of these sites across the larger culture to be an issue of knowledge equity. She recognizes that protecting sacred sites begins with educating everyone about the significance of the land, not only to its people but to its surrounding environment. This restoration of ideas and shared knowledge about how to cherish the land is also a type of deconstruction of colonialism.

In 2005, St. Clair co-wrote an article related to her dissertation entitled “Know Your Roots: Development and Evaluation of an Oral History Curriculum for Native American Middle School Students” (LaCourt, St. Clair, Kokotailo, et. al. 2005). It advocates for the full participation of Native American students and community members in developing their city's standard of education, curriculum, and ways of learning. Her work suggests a need to refocus in order to address

the “ongoing erasure of Dakota experience and Dakota peoples in the public consciousness” (Memory Studies Association 2019, beginning at 1:02:39). She identifies that her work assumes “that the shift needs to be made by everyone else. Everyone who is not Dakota in Dakota homelands needs to sort of make a shift to bring Dakota experience and Dakota history into their understanding” (1:00:25). This change in perspective creates spaces of opportunity for increased knowledge equity that challenges traditional models of education and makes room for Indigenous ways of knowing. Fostering relationships with tribal community elders, teachers, grandparents and parents and a proper cherishing of the environment moves the dialogue toward tangible action points. In their 2005 article, Darlene St. Clair, Jeanne La Court, Patricia Kokotailo, Dale Wilson, Betty Chewning highlight the conflict.

*Although Indian communities have a rich cultural and political history, long-term impacts of processes relating to colonialism including loss of land, and forced assimilation have impacted the access that Native adolescents have to systems of traditional knowledge. The loss of cultural knowledge and traditional values concern many Indian communities and for this reason, programs have been developed to support students’ access to their Indigenous cultures and histories. (LaCourt, St. Clair, Kokotailo, et. al. 2005, 29)*

St. Clair’s work touches on sacred sites across Minnesota. She encourages an ethic of cherishing the land by interpreting Dakota sacred sites for area residents in many locations, including what is now known as the “Twin Cities.” Her teaching aims for an awareness of the transcendent and spiritual nature of these places. She actively lobbies for policies that sanction sacred sites for use among Dakota peoples (Memory Studies Association 2019). For the Seven tribes of Dakota, the *Bdote* (where the waters meet together) represents their spiritual and physical birthplace where it all began. This sacred site is located at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. As the site of the Dakota’s creation story this sacred ground is rich with spiritual practices and traditions. However, this site also has a complicated history including colonizers’ appropriation of land, battles, hangings, deception, and war. These appropriations and complications continue to this day. Northwest of the *Bdote* are the Coldwater Springs, Mni Owe Sni, often called the birthplace of Minnesota state history. This place, known to Dakota as the home of the God of Waters, *Unktehi*, is under the management of the National Park Service. Currently considered a tourist attraction, Dakota people must obtain a permit to conduct ceremonial services there (Sacred Land Film Project 2022).

## ***Mni Wiconi***

For Dakota and Lakota people, *Mni Wiconi* translates as “water is life.” In these traditions being a good relative includes protecting and cherishing the environment.

*If I’m a good relative, and if I’m following those teachings, I am protective and*

*cherishing of the environment...Take for example the People at Standing Rock protesting the resource extraction and the pipeline there. Dakota and Lakota people are saying, Mni Wiconi, that means Water is Life. This is a deep teaching that we have. We cannot live without water, it is life. It is our first medicine. (St. Clair pers. comm., November 4, 2021)*

For St. Clair, the environment, humanity, and spirituality intersect. She addresses environmental racism by using education and knowledge as a weapon to face not only racism on an individual level but institutionally and politically. She encourages others to step outside their worldview to see things from a different perspective.

The importance of water for St. Clair and the Dakota people remains meaningful and critical to their way of life, history, and worldview. The *Bdote*, the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, remains the sacred place of creation for all Dakota people. “Water that comes from within the earth is pure and as such is considered wakaŋ or sacred ... In this place, the Dakota people flourished. We respected our homeland and our Creator. Our numbers increased. Our winter camps became villages, and we became the people of the Oçeti Sakowin, the Seven Council Fires” (Westerman and White 2012, 19). St. Clair educates everyone that water preservation should be a shared responsibility among non-natives and Natives alike. This focus is another stream in St. Clair’s recognition of and work toward responsibility for and relationship with her Wiçahunkake, or ancestral homelands.

## ***Wasicuŋ***

Within her work and profession, St. Clair faces unique challenges as a Native woman in a predominantly White (*Wasicuŋ*) academic institution. Underlying presuppositions exist among students often questioning her position as an Indigenous educator made evident in reactions to the course content and on end of course surveys. “‘Real’ Indians aren’t supposed to be highly educated” (St Clair and Kishimoto 2010, 20).

St. Clair constantly addresses racial and gender challenges arising from students, the institution, and systemic issues of bias within academia. Situated in a predominantly White community, St. Cloud State University, with a 2020-21 enrollment of 11,841 students, still boasts of being one of the largest state university campuses second only to the University of Minnesota campuses (College Tuition Compare 2021). Although there is a shift in population with an influx of immigrants and refugees, out of the 68,000 St. Cloud residents, only 427 registered as American Indians or Alaskan Natives (Minnesota Compass 2022). Approximately 75% of the St. Cloud population considers themselves “White.” This presents a unique challenge and opportunity for St. Clair and others actively working to turn the tide using anti-racist pedagogies to address systemic knowledge inequities.

The Twin Cities of Minnesota, home of the Lower Sioux Mni Sóta Maŋcoce, represents a sprawling urban region where racial tension is common

and often violent. Known as the “Minnesota Paradox,” Minneapolis, Minnesota, is often championed as one of the best places to live in the nation (Myers 2022). Nevertheless, in the past ten years, police violence against Black people, such as Jamar Clark (2015), Philando Castile (2016), George Floyd (2020), and Daunte Wright (2021), continues against the backdrop of White privilege. This plagues Minneapolis in particular but also St. Cloud, Minnesota as a whole and is prevalent across the United States (Myers 2022). Traditional measures of creating spaces for multicultural understandings within education fail to resolve these systemic problems. Systemic racism must be acknowledged, addressed, and rejected whether in metropolitan Minneapolis or more rural areas like St. Cloud (Myers 2022).

As an educator, St. Clair presents tangible ways the concept of knowledge equity can generate new solutions to systemic problems in many different geographic areas. More than a theoretical construct, St. Clair’s contribution toward knowledge equity yields a powerful way to address systemic racism and shift educational paradigms toward equality for all. St. Clair’s passion for reparative justice through shifting educational models which embrace knowledge equity calls out white privilege as settler-oriented ideals. Her contributions create and build collaborative paradigms to be used in the K-12 setting as well as in higher education within Minnesota universities. Students hear Indigenous voices, immerse in Dakota culture, and engage with the heavy stories of transgressions against Native Americans and others because of colonialistic ideologies.

*Having dialogues about the challenges we face as women of color and teaching these Racial Issues classes are our way of decolonizing our classrooms and the institution. Teaching these Racial Issues classes gives the students the tools to be critical thinkers, and to understand the big picture of how race, racism, oppression, and privilege works. It is a small but important step in making institutional changes. (St. Clair and Kishimoto 2010)*

In 2002-03, St. Cloud University instituted a racial issues study requirement as a response to a growth in racial violence and incidents of racism within its community. This institutional adoption of a required racial issues course engaged all entry-level students across disciplines. As an associate professor and as a Native woman, St. Clair takes a different approach and philosophy to teaching this mission-critical class,

*As an Indigenous woman, my intellectual traditions (traditional teachings) frequently challenge the teachings I have received through my Western/dominant culture education. These challenges include basic questions including “What is knowledge? What is worth knowing?” I take seriously my spiritual role as a teacher, a role that views sharing knowledge as a sacred gift that is honored and recognized through prayer. (St. Clair and Kishimoto, 21)*

She believes more needs to be done to address racial issues than one compulsory class on racial diversity. With cross-collaboration and co-curricular

programs, she promotes and advocates for an approach that addresses racial issues across all programs, curricula, and fields of study as well as within communities.

*There exists a danger of a ghettoization or compartmentalization of race in college curricula. In addition, the existence of Ethnic Studies may be perceived as permission for other disciplines to avoid the discussions of race. Furthermore, colleges and universities are co-opting this course content and transforming it into “diversity” and “multiculturalism” that dodges the challenging issues including White privilege, institutional racism, social position and oppression. This model of multiculturalism also puts forward the common stance of colorblindness as a response to racism that we continue to struggle against. (St. Clair and Kishimoto, 18)*

As a director for the Multicultural Center of St. Cloud State University, she works nationwide to address systemic racism and knowledge inequity. The Multicultural Resource Center provides resources for students and faculty but also impacts the broader academic community. St. Clair hosts the workshop “Native Studies Summer Workshop for Educators.” This summer workshop provides a place for educators to come and “increase the knowledge, sensitivity, and awareness of Minnesota educators, administrators, and student service providers on the histories, cultures, and languages of the federally recognized tribes and bands in Minnesota” (Minnesota Visual and Media Arts Education 2013).

As the Multicultural Resource Center Director, she also hosts an annual Antiracist Pedagogy Across the Curriculum (ARPAC) Institute. It stems from a project that aims to promote a movement across higher education to bring institutional change for racial equity (Antiracist Pedagogy Across the Curriculum [ARPAC] 2022). The movement activates other educators to leverage knowledge in a way that presents and engages antiracist ideologies. Working toward decolonizing knowledge in institutions, they advance antiracist methodologies within various academic disciplines (ARPAC 2022). These antiracist educational methodologies are designed for use in all forms of pedagogies. The cohort begins with identifying systemic racism within institutional practices and its “relationship to white dominant culture in the United States” (ARPAC 2023). Students go on to investigate ways the dominant White culture either intentionally or unconsciously harms people of color. They critically analyze how overarching colonialistic approaches influence knowledge production practices within higher education and academia. Ultimately they integrate and “connect their classroom work with larger antiracist organizing efforts to transform higher education” (ARPAC 2023).

In her advocacy work, St. Clair works collaboratively and naturally to connect people. These connections promote personal and institutional transformation. In this way, she accomplishes her “modest ambition” (through instructional advocacy, mentoring, and scholarship), where she helps to instruct others on practical ways to disentangle systemic problems of racism in academic institutions (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies 2021). In doing so, St. Clair promotes more inclusive knowledge, strategically expanding knowledge equity practices to key educators across academic and educational institutions. For

example, in an attempt to advocate for the use of the curriculum in places where there is resistance, St. Clair explains the incongruence between settler knowledge versus Dakota understanding using the concept of “treaties.” She explains how knowledge between Dakota people and non-Natives can conflict significantly without contextualization and learning Dakota ways of understanding (U of MN Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies, 2021). Making the case for the curriculum, she says,

*I think the reason that we onboard the [Dakota] Traditional teachings first, is that we think that the understanding of the violence that the Dakota people have experienced is going to be interpreted and felt differently by kids or all sixth graders if they have some context of Traditional teachings. It is one thing to learn about treaty making, but if you learn treaty making without an intentional Dakota context, it has an intentional Western context of equal parties sitting at the table for a mutual, beneficial agreement. And it's fair and it's legal. And if you start with the Dakota relationship with the land; you really understand the violence of treaty making and the ways that it has traumatized, ongoing, still today Dakota people. There's a reason that we put so much energy into those things. Because the violence, especially in Minnesota, is something that is over discussed, I would say, with very little context among non-native society of understanding Dakota people and Dakota worldview. (St. Clair, pers.comm., November 4, 2021)*

St Clair’s holistic educational models provide innovative ways to work collaboratively and across curriculums to address systemic inconsistencies such as these. Using the lens of a Dakota worldview, she levels unequal foundations to rebuild antiracist and inclusive understandings of curricular subjects. Her findings indicate that elevating Dakota pedagogies with intentionality decolonizes her teaching and classrooms. This in turn makes them more inclusive and communal (Memory Studies Association 2020). One student engaged in the project shared how it reoriented her perspective. “I feel as if I’m also more united with the people around me and I also feel like I should respect others beliefs and culture differences” (2021). St. Clair suggests that the impact of this curriculum reaches beyond students to families and thus entire communities and ecosystems. With confidence in her identity as a Dakota woman and her ability to see others as her relatives, St. Clair’s work as associate professor, and director for the Multicultural Center, substantially and consistently shifts paradigms in her predominantly Wasicuq “settler-oriented” institution.

## **Dakota**

For St. Clair, to be a good Dakota also means being an ally. The word Dakota translates into English as ally, or friend. St. Clair’s primary work as Associate Professor and Director of the Multicultural Resource Center at St. Cloud State University is a testament to her identity as an ally for all her relatives. Her identity as an ally was formed as a college student at the University of Wisconsin. It was a time when she was thinking about who she was, defining what she stood for and her values. There, she found a community dedicated to knowledge equity and

social justice issues for Indigenous peoples in the US. She joined others on the American Indian Planning Committee for the Parliament of the World's Religions to work on a shared project. "To me, seeing myself as not just an individual with beliefs, but somebody as a person of faith that was called to do things and sharing this with other Native people at that 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions really did have a big impact" (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021).

St. Clair was invited by Omie Baldwin, one of her mentors at the University of Wisconsin and former member of the Parliament of the World's Religions board of directors, to be a panelist at the 1993 Parliament in a session titled "Native Women: The Faithkeepers, Telling our Stories" (Parliament of the World's Religions 1993). These panels, sessions, and conversations reopened the dialogue about restoring knowledge equity among Indigenous peoples at the Parliament.

During St. Clair's attendance at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993, she made strong allies and friends. In the evenings, St. Clair spent her time listening to various spiritual leaders speak. This experience significantly impacted her life, resulting in personal growth (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021).

## ***Ikce Wicašta***

Twenty-two years later, at the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions in Salt Lake City, Utah, on October 19th, a more seasoned St. Clair was a keynote speaker in the same event which had earlier impacted her journey of faith and shifted the trajectory of her life's work. Her opening statement, "*Haŋ Mitakuyepi aâpetu (kiâ) de cante wasteya, nape ciyuzapi ye Darlene!*" "Hello, my relatives! Today I greet you with a good heart and a handshake." Iyekeiyipiwiŋ Darlene St. Clair typical greets everyone this way. She is *Bdewâkaŋtuwaŋ Daŋota*, the Dwellers of the Sacred Lake people (Parliament of the World's Religions 2019).

Coming full circle, her speech on protecting sacred sites inspired others to learn the Dakota concept of *Ikce Wicašta*, which means common man or common person. Dakota people work their whole lives to become a common person. Instead of standing out as an individual, they prioritize the collective community's well-being. Leaning into this concept, one learns what it means to be a true human being. Darlene St. Clair clearly describes what it means in her address to the Parliament,

*We strive into and live into and honor our humanity and all of our relatives, including the trees, the plants, the spirits, the rocks. They are all trying to live into their own state of being and their own ways of life. This also means recognizing and addressing the way we have dehumanized, and the way we have been dehumanized. These Dakota philosophical orientations can inform our work creating healthy and balanced communities. It is really our shared work. (Parliament of the World's Religions 2019)*

## ***Recognized Woman***



Bestowed the Dakota name Iyekiyapiwiŋ, during a sacred ceremony, St. Clair's Dakota name means "Recognized woman." The Dakota definition is better understood as "seeing things for what they are." St. Clair's Dakota name may not carry the weight of the Western term for "Recognition," but her life and life's work as an ally and advocate for all her relatives, is truly notable. Her work spans across generations, culture, race, gender, ethnicity, and more.

Recognized as a keynote speaker for the Parliament in 2015, St. Clair engenders what it means to be a good Dakota. From creating Dakota based curriculum for the state educational K-12 system to advocating for the protection of sacred sites as well as leading the way for anti-racist and American Indian studies, her contributions pave the way for decolonizing knowledge. They provide strong examples for others to embrace and advocate for knowledge equity globally.

Passing on cultural knowledge with every opportunity she has, she leans into her full identity as a Native woman and educator. St. Clair lives out the Dakota worldview challenging knowledge inequity at every opportunity. Although she does not see herself as a "recognized spiritual leader," it is her ability to see things for what they are that makes her life and work notable, as a good Dakota (St. Clair, pers. comm., August 3, 2021).

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## Barbara Lewis King

*“When you believe in who you are, nobody can stop you.”<sup>1</sup>*

WINIFRED WHELAN



Source: Parliament of the World’s Religions

### *Introduction*

Across the 20th century and beyond, women pursued ministry in the church as pastors and priests. However, many women could not fulfill their callings to serve as pastoral and liturgical leaders because of gender bias against women in ministry. Many felt called, but the prospect of pastoring to a church and its people was unthinkable. Dr. Barbara Lewis King was one of those women. Even as a child in the 1930s and 40s, she knew this was her calling, and at age 16, she gave her first sermon.

Nevertheless, in spite of her early response to the call, her journey to ordained ministry was a struggle. But she persevered, and at the time of her death in 2020, Dr. King had established and become president of Hillside International Chapel and Truth Center in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1977 she began a school for new ministers, now known as the Barbara King School of Ministry. “She was a committed donor and member of the Parliament of the World’s Religions” (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2020), and in 2015 she gave a keynote speech at the Women’s Assembly of the Parliament of the World’s Religions. She was a major speaker at the 2018 Parliament in Toronto.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Lewis King uttered these words during her address to the Women’s Assembly at the Parliament of the World’s Religions on October 15, 2015, as cited later in this chapter. See Parliament of the World’s Religions 2015b. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EzH3emmBqm6u2kimsxYKj7Q-yO5Yp9Aw/view?usp=drive\\_web](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EzH3emmBqm6u2kimsxYKj7Q-yO5Yp9Aw/view?usp=drive_web)

<sup>2</sup> The 2015 Parliament took place at the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City, Utah. 9,806 attendees, performers, and volunteers from 73 countries, 30 major religions and 548 sub-traditions participated in the Parliament. King gave a keynote address to the Women’s Initiative for Global Advancement at the 2015 Parliament. “Bishop Barbara King delivers Parliament Keynote Address” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vifu8SQpoeE&t=13s> At the same meeting she gave a closing prayer. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH9GDeTgFOQ>

Dr. Barbara King was an invited speaker on many occasions, including the United States delegation to the International Conference of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers in Helsinki, Finland, in 1968 (Hooks 1968). The main point of many of her talks was that each person has a gift to give the world, including personal knowledge and experience, and when each brings that gift, the world changes. Dr. King participated in and was a member of the Atlanta Community Relations Commission, the Atlanta Women's Network, the Women's Chamber of Commerce of Atlanta, and the American Management Association (Weitzman, n.d.). Dr. King was a full-time minister at the Hillside International Truth Center. The Sunday Bulletin reveals that Dr. King might be characterized as a "full-time" minister; aside from a weekly Sunday 10:00 service, there are prayer services, bible study, meditation times, and thoughts for the day. The school for ministers at the site is called the Barbara King School of Ministry, of which "Dr. Barbara," as they affectionately called her, was president. Her scholarship foundation dates from 1997, and by 2013 had helped more than 2,000 students with over \$265,000 of financial support toward realizing their educational dreams (*Atlanta Daily World* 2013).

### ***Early Life***<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Barbara Lewis King was born in Houston, Texas, on August 26, 1930, and died on October 11, 2020. Her parents were Mildred Jackson Shackelford and Lee Lewis. Shortly after she was born, her parents divorced. Her father remained at home, but her mother did not. So Barbara was raised by her father and his mother, her paternal grandmother, Ida Lewis. Her grandmother worked for a White family, often taking home plates of food to feed King's father, and also earned money by sewing. Barbara was well taken care of.

Barbara was thirteen when she met her mother for the first time. In an interview with Jodi Merriday (September 21, 2004) for History Makers, the nation's largest African American video oral history collection, King shares that her mother walked into her junior high classroom one day, demanding to talk to her. Though she had not seen her mother for thirteen years, King somehow knew that this was her mother. Mildred stated, in the hallway outside the classroom, "I am your mother." Her grandmother and her father were concerned and did not want King to see her mother. However, her mother had moved back to town, so they settled on an arrangement to have King visit her mother on weekends. This arrangement did not last. Mrs. Lewis (King's mother) moved to California with her mother and two sisters. King stayed in Texas with her grandmother and visited her mother during the summers. Despite these visits and her reconnection with her mother, she told Merriday that she and her mother remained estranged until she became an adult. Many years later, King described her mother's funeral, which took place at the Baptist church in Houston; she noted her disappointment that she

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the story of King's life is taken from History Makers, The Nation's Largest African American Video Oral History Collection, in the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. Available for patrons of any local public library. See King, Barbara Lewis 2004.

was not allowed to do the eulogy or be recognized as a minister because of her gender.

Looking back, Barbara was fortunate to have such a loving grandmother to care for her. Her grandmother told her stories about Barbara's great-grandmother before the Civil Rights Act of 1866, connecting her to her family's history of struggle under slavery. The Civil Rights Act declared all persons born in the United States to be citizens "without distinction of race or color or previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude." This legislation almost didn't pass because President Andrew Johnson vetoed it, but the 39th Congress overturned the veto. Without the passage of this law, Barbara might have had a very different type of rearing, perhaps being sold into slavery.<sup>4</sup> Later in life, Barbara connected more deeply with her history, traveling yearly to Ghana in West Africa. She claimed Ghana as her home country because that is where her ancestors came from (King 2013). Slavery was legally over, but racial tensions continued across her life. For example, in 1943, when Barbara was 13 and meeting her mother for the first time, there were race riots in Manhattan and Detroit over a Black housing project set up by the city (Detroit Historical Society, n.d.).

## ***Education, Growing Up in Atlanta***

Barbara's grandmother was a significant influence, and through their relationship Barbara was unconsciously being taught about the ministry. Grandmother Lewis was involved with everything at the local Antioch Baptist church. She taught in Sunday school and the Baptist Young People's Union. She sang in the choir. Something was going on almost every day during the week. Barbara accompanied her grandmother to mission meetings and Sunday school teacher's meetings. One night when she was fifteen years old, on Women's Day, Barbara was called upon to speak. She was allowed to preach because it was an evening service, and attendance was light because only a few people came back after attending services in the morning. From then on, Barbara was known as "the little missionary."

King finished her primary education at Edgar M. Gregory School and her high school education at Booker T. Washington High School in Houston. At that time, she began to think seriously about being a minister, but the minister at her church assured her that this was impossible. "God didn't call women to preach," he said. "You can be a missionary but you can't be a minister and you will never be a minister in the Baptist church." This prediction actually came true.

In 1948, King enrolled at Texas Southern University, a public historically Black university in Houston, Texas (Aaseng 2014). The university is one of the largest and most comprehensive historically Black colleges or universities in the USA. In 2022, it enrolled 10,000 students and offered 100 academic programs (Texas State University, n.d.) She graduated from Texas Southern with a BA in

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<sup>4</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was the first United States federal law to define citizenship and affirm that all citizens are equally protected by the law. It was mainly intended, in the wake of the American Civil War, to protect the civil rights of persons of African descent born in or brought to the United States. Library of Congress, A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875," accessed April 8, 2023. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=014/llsl014.db&recNum=058>.

sociology. (Barbara Lewis King Scholarship Foundation, Inc., n.d.).

King grew to be a tall woman. Even as a teenager, she was 6'5" and was taunted with names like "long-leg-lizzy" and "jolly green giant." She was fortunate to have a grandmother who made all of her clothes which meant that she was always in style, even though clothes in her size were hard to find (Hill 1998). When the minister at church told her she couldn't be a minister, he told her to choose the next best thing. However, she had no idea what that might be. Because she was tall, people encouraged her to focus on her physical ability and sports. So for two years, she half-heartedly majored in physical education. In retrospect, what came next was a blessing. She fell ill with tuberculosis in both lungs and had to spend four years in the sanitarium. In those days, there was no cure or medication for tuberculosis. The only thing she could do was rest; because she was Black, she lived with Black people in converted army barracks. Eventually, she had surgery to take out a portion of a lung. However, while in the sanitarium, Barbara began to minister to dying people. Patients would call her when they needed someone to pray. She recounts watching people go to the other side while praying the 23rd Psalm.

This experience only strengthened Barbara's desire. Her lungs had healed, but the doctors warned her they were still delicate and could disintegrate at any minute. She was discharged in June, and by September 1951, she was back in college, this time majoring not in physical education but in social work. She enrolled in Clark Atlanta University, a private, Methodist, historically Black research university in Atlanta, Georgia. Clark Atlanta is the first Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in the Southern United States. In 1955 she graduated with a master's degree in social work (MSW) (Hillside International Truth Center 2020b, 2020c).

## *Chicago*

After finishing her social work degree in 1957, King took a job in Chicago at Malcolm X College (formerly Crane Junior College), part of the community college system that serves Chicago. She worked in community relations and also was a college instructor. While living in Chicago, in June 1966, she married Moses King. Their son, Michael, was born on March 15, 1967. Soon after starting her job at Malcolm X College, King decided to pursue a doctoral degree. However, she was unprepared for the theoretical material and needed more prerequisites for a degree in adult education. King was the only Black person in the new environment. In her oral interview with Merriday for History Makers, she explains the difficulties in her personal life and her professional interactions with her instructor: "I was, had married then [to Moses King] and I was going through a very turbulent divorce. So emotionally I couldn't handle that kind of attack. If I spoke in class, I spoke from having worked in the field. I had not had all of the theoretical material that he was throwing us, and so I was the one that wanted to show the balance between the two. And he always insulted me in the class" (King 2004).

From 1966 to 1968, King worked as program director for Henry Booth



House, a center for early childhood learning and family health and social services in Chicago. She also worked as a program consultant for the Church Federation of Greater Chicago and as executive director for South Chicago Community Services Association. From 1967 to 1969, King was director of community services and adult education at Crane (now Malcolm X) College. She set up classes in social agencies, churches, storefronts, and businesses in the area. “We have decided to bring college classes to the people,” she said, “by using storefronts and any other locations in order to help people upgrade themselves” (“Here’s an Idea” 1968). These initiatives supported by Crane were welcomed by the city, as can be seen in news reports. The *Chicago Tribune* spoke of her as a woman who “stands six feet five inches tall. Everything is big in Texas, her home state. It’s no problem for her, and she doesn’t stoop. She walks with the grace of a ballet dancer” (*Chicago Tribune* 1969). Throughout this time, King was working to make learning more accessible to anyone who might be interested. She continued this throughout her preaching and teaching, always encouraging everyone to recognize their gifts and to bring them to the world.

Early in her career, Barbara Lewis King became known as a speaker and a preacher. An article in the 1968 *Chicago Defender* congratulated “... Barbara Lewis King, assistant director at Crane College. She’ll be one of three principal speakers at our nation’s delegation to the International Conference of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers in Helsinki, Finland when they meet August 12-17. Barbara will present a paper on ‘The Role of Professional Workers in Community Work’” (Hooks 1968). The International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (IFS) is a global movement of more than 11,000 member associations that include multi-purpose, community-based organizations worldwide. IFS works to empower and support people who work for social justice. On November 11, 2009, the *Chicago Defender* commented that “The luncheon speaker [at the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority] will be Soror Barbara Lewis King, Director of the South Chicago Community Center. Her topic will be ‘Woman’s Role in a Changing Society’” (*Chicago Defender* 2009).

In 1968, King met the Rev. Johnnie Coleman, the first female African American minister she had ever encountered. Coleman was the full-time minister of Christ Universal Temple, one of the largest churches in Chicago. She was considered the “First Lady” of the New Thought Christian Community (McDermott, n.d.). She founded Christ Universal Temple, New Thought Church in 1956. Coleman, who was a significant influence on King, would go on to establish an international organization of affiliated New Thought churches and study groups in 1974. Rev. Coleman retired in 2006 after having built five structures to spread her “Better Living” teachings, including three churches and two institutions of learning (Johnnie Coleman Institute and Johnnie Coleman Academy). When the congregation outgrew the first church, Rev. Coleman designed the Christ Universal Temple on the 100-acre campus at 119th Street and Ashland Avenue in Chicago. Following her introduction to Reverend Johnnie Coleman, King began to work for her as director of administration at the Temple. Coleman guided King in ministerial training and inspired her to establish her own ministry. Now King

knew and had confidence that she too could be a minister. Following Colemon's encouragement, King worked to make her dream of becoming a minister a reality. Sometime in the late 1960s, she began studies at the Baptist Training School in Chicago and Missouri's Unity Institute of Continuing Education. Having completed her training, and following her success in Chicago, she moved back "home" to Atlanta with her current husband, grandmother, and with her child, Michael Lewis King.

## ***Back to Atlanta***

In 1971, King found employment as an instructor at Atlanta University School of Social Work. While working as director of South Central Community Mental Health Center (1971-73) and as dean of students at Spelman College in Atlanta (1974-1976), she gathered a small group of twelve people whom she knew from her teaching jobs to form a study group. As yet, King was not thinking of this as a ministry, but as time passed and more and more people joined, she began to think of starting a new church. Her husband at the time was a minister who had a church, but she had her own ideas. She woke up one morning and after meditation knew what she would do.

*I couldn't explain it. But all I knew was, I was supposed to be a preacher. That I knew. It was just finally getting to the point where I'd walk through many doors to finally get there after meeting Johnnie Colemon. I started as a study group. . . I would talk to people on my job, . . . and something would come up and I would share my ideas. . . And people said, you know, why don't you teach that? So I started a class on Wednesday nights and that class grew, and grew, and grew. . . And so this church grew out of one woman who believed in the God in her and tried to impart that message to others, and that's what Hillside [International Truth Center Atlanta, Georgia] is today. (King 2004)*

King had successfully completed her training, and now was ready for ordination to the ministry. She was ordained twice, first by Rev. Roy Blake and then by Rev. Johnnie Colemon in 1971 (Weitzman, n.d.). The church was not well-regarded in the city during those early days. However, by the time of her interview with Merriday in 2004, her congregation numbered over 10,000 people. King used her social work background and life story to aid her ministry and to grow the church. Resistance from other local ministers was fierce. They preached against her in their pulpits. One minister told his parishioners they would go to hell if they went to King's church. God didn't call women ministers. Even when she attended the funerals of members' relatives, area pastors refused to let her come up in the pulpit or walk in the procession. King reports that across Atlanta, she was critiqued and ridiculed. Even the mayor of Atlanta named her church "the problem church" (King 2004).

## *Hillside Chapel and Truth Center*

King became known as the Founder of Hillside International Truth Center, Inc., a New Thought, inclusive, healing ministry open to all people, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. The center identifies its beginnings with the prayer group of twelve in her home in 1971 and celebrates that it now has thousands of members and supporters worldwide. King felt that religion, as she knew it as a child, was too negative. Her idea was forgiveness, listening to God, healing, health, and happiness. The titles of her books are indicative: *Wake Up, Live the Life You Love in Spirit*; *Ten Principles for Finding the Divine Within*; *Leave with Love: A Spiritual Guide*; *How to Have a Flood and Not Drown*. She authored ten books and monographs, including *Transform Your Life*. A description on the cover of this book states: “In this 2016 edition of *Transform Your Life*, Dr. King brings to a global audience her positive message of love, faith and prosperity. She shows you how to turn your fear into faith and your water into wine. She reveals three secrets to a happy life.” She wanted her church to be open to all people and inclusive. In her interview on the History Makers website, she explained,

*There was no sign that said no lesbian, no gays, no blacks, no whites, no this, no that. The church had an open ministry because we felt that Jesus taught love. And if you love you don't have time to condemn and, and judge anybody. People are all on their own path. People could dress casually. If they came in blue jeans, they came in shorts, there was no dress code in Hillside so we talked about that. And there are many manifestations of God. We recognize the Buddhists whoever come, we've had the Buddhists dancers in our church. I've met the Dalai Lama, Minister Louis Farrakhan has been to our church, Betty Shabazz was there, Daddy King [Martin Luther King, Sr.]. (King 2004)*

In this excerpt, one can see King's efforts to be accepting of all, believing that everyone has a gift to share. Everyone has knowledge and can make a better world by sharing it. In her keynote speech at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 2015, she showed deep emotion as she spoke directly to women at the Women's Assembly:

*Within you is the power to be whatever you choose to be. Each of us has a gift to bring to the world as women because there's no other person like a woman. And this is the year of the woman and we might as well decide right here and now that nothing will stop us from being what we were chosen, what we came here to be. Each of us has a gift to bring. When we bring that gift to the world, the world changes. (Parliament 2015)*

By 1985 the church had outgrown its building. She sought financing to build a church in the round. This circular orientation had the advantage of not needing a pulpit which King felt was an obstacle to communication (Aaseng 2014). She had many helpers. “The church's 32 auxiliaries handle the major components of our ministry,” she said, “I focus on the development of the youth in our church. . . I have hundreds of volunteers who can handle the requirements

of membership and those persons in the community who seek our services and support. . . I pray that the people trained in our church will positively impact the lives of all of the persons they meet. I pray that this ministry, which concerns itself with the whole person, will change the universe for the better” (Morrow 2002). Later, in 2002, King reflected on how quickly the church grew:

*The underlying spiritual principles and the lessons of positively ministering to the whole person, mind, spirit and body, quickly attracted thousands of persons to the worship services. The attendance continued to increase. I sought financing to build the Church-in-the Round, which has 1,750 theater-type seats. Three services are held presently in the new building. My training and skills as a social worker readied me well for the assignment which God has given me. As a professional counselor and a believer in an ‘affirmative ministry,’ I have been led to write several books and positively impact thousands of truth seekers. I have spoken from the pulpits of many of America’s leading churches. I have been a guest lecturer at the Harvard School of Divinity. I have found acceptance by many ministers and my work is widespread. (Morrow 2002)*

King believed strongly in knowledge equity as the practical application of the idea that everyone has gifts to share with the world and can learn if given the opportunity. This included her belief that all people, regardless of gender, were called to learn and share their particular gifts. In 1977, six years after she arrived at Hillside, this commitment to equity led her to begin a school for new ministers. It is now known as “The Barbara King School of Ministry (BKSM).” On its website, the school is described as “a private institution of higher learning affiliated with Hillside International Truth Center” (BKSM, n.d.). The school provides two study tracks: The Ministerial Education program includes optional ordination as a New Thought minister (36 courses) and the Transformative Living certification program (15 courses). Through the power of virtual learning tools, students from around the world are pursuing studies through BKSM.

## ***Relation to Ancestors***

After King had built up her church and started the school for new ministers, she began investigating her ancestry. She surmised that her great grandparents had come from Ghana, West Africa, and began to make yearly trips to Ghana. One day in 2001, a tribal chief from Ghana appeared at her Sunday service at Hillside Chapel. He had been brought there by the mayor of Atlanta. The name of the visitor was Barema Notchy, II. When King finished her sermon that Sunday, she invited the chief to come up and speak. He talked about how much he enjoyed the service. He was most impressed. He shared his remarks and took his seat. It so happened that King had planned a trip to Africa for a delegation of people from the church. Just before King closed the service, the gentleman got up again to speak. He said that when Dr. Barbara King comes to Ghana in August, we will enstool her. King was confused because she had no idea what an enstoolment was. People in the church began shouting in amazement and joy, but King still didn’t understand and was asking, what is an enstoolment? She learned that enstoolment

is the highest honor that can be bestowed in Ghana. She would become the first woman chief. That August, seventy-eight people took that journey to Ghana. They toured all over Ghana, including the Kumasi area, where they saw W.E.B. Du Bois' tomb. Then they toured Kumasi and Nsuta areas, down where the castles are, the slave castles. Visitor information from Ghana reports that Assin Manso Ancestral Slave River Park was one of the largest slave markets for gathering people to sell into slavery during the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade. A visitor can follow the route taken by the ancestors of many African-Americans. Assin Manso was the final link in the slavery route from northern Ghana and was known to have been the largest slave market for the merchants supplying enslaved people to the forts and castles on the coast (Visit Ghana, n.d.).

Assin Manso is where the enstoolment took place. The women who were to dress King had a very challenging time because they had never dressed a female chief. There is a certain way you have to wrap the robe with your right shoulder exposed. They put gold around her, five gold rings, a gold breastplate, gold medallion, and gold shoes. They had found out ahead of time what size shoe she wore and how tall she was so they would know how long to make her kente cloth. When she was ready, they presented her to the people. Thousands of people wore T-shirts with her picture and name on them. They carried handkerchiefs with her name on them. The men carried her on their heads. They paraded her through the streets, one carrying a huge umbrella over her.

They went into a great open area with people sitting all around, where King sat with the chiefs. She recited a statement that they read to her. A crown was put on her head and she was introduced as Chief Nana Yaa Twunmwaa I. The name comes from a woman who was called [Yaa] Asantewaa. She led the Ghanaian people against the British Army when they were trying to take the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool is thought of as the spirit of the people, the soul of the people. Only certain people know where it is stored. The British wanted it because it was solid gold. The Golden Stool represents the Ghanaians' soul or spirit and their unity. So to be enstooled is the highest honor for the Ghanaian people. When one chief spoke, he spoke about the controversy of King being a female chief and explained to the people how this came about. The enstoolment process begins when the families contending for the position have agreed or decided upon the person to be appointed. The decision becomes final when the Queen Mother approves the selected person capable of leading and representing the community. The seventy-eight people that day all wore white. King described it as a "glorious sight." She "danced and danced with the women and hugged all of the elderly women, I hugged them all. I loved the children. We were there for three days" (Kaplan 1971; Kludze 1993; King 2004).

## ***International New Thought Alliance and Consecration as Bishop***

In 2010, Dr. King had been pastor and president of Hillside for almost 30 years. She had accomplished her dream of being a preacher. With inspiration

from Reverend Johnnie Colemon, King, with her church, became part of the International New Thought Christian Alliance. The alliance had begun in 1915 as a democratic umbrella organization. Members may have different beliefs, but all the ideologies have one thing, at least, in common: they believe strongly in the power of positive thinking and the role that thoughts play in our lives. On September 29, 2010, members of the International College of Bishops, led by Bishop Carlton D. Pearson, Interim Senior Minister at Christ Universal Temple Chicago, participated in the consecration of the now Reverend Barbara Lewis King as the first female Bishop within the International New Thought Christian Alliance of Churches. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* quotes Pearson, who served as senior consecrator, as proclaiming:

*“Dr. King has shown immense dedication, compassion and commitment to the work of the church for many years. As an affirmation of her ministerial call and global impact, we, the members of the international College of Bishops, consecrate her to the office of Bishop in God’s Universal Church.” (Los Angeles Sentinel 2010)*

The consecration took place at the Hillside International Chapel & Truth Center in Atlanta with many spiritual leaders and attending. (*Los Angeles Sentinel* 2010)

The recognition deeply honored King but she did not become arrogant. Her philosophy had already been that everyone, regardless of race or religion, had gifts of knowledge and understanding to bring to the world. She did not ascribe to the idea that now that she was a bishop, that she knew better or was a better person than anyone else. She resisted the idea that the minister or the bishop was on a higher level of sanctity.

*All through the years, my thing is people need to be exposed in the church so they can make their own decisions. No minister should have people thinking that he’s the way that they get to heaven. That is not the truth. The minister’s job is to bring the message. It is the person who received it to take it and make it work for them. If it doesn’t work for you, that’s why some people, when the minister goes awry, or something goes on and the minister is caught with a woman or whatever, they just go to pieces, oh, but the minister’s human and they need to let people know. My people know that I’m a human being and I have my human frailties like they do. But I always tell ‘em how I got through. So they’ll know, if I can get through you can get through. (King 2004)*

Through her years at Hillside International Truth Center, Dr. King had many speaking engagements. In 1994 she was invited as a guest speaker to Buffalo, New York, to celebrate the end of apartheid (*Buffalo News* 1994). In 1996 her friend Johnnie Colemon invited her to speak at Christ Universal Temple on Ashland Avenue in Chicago. Her topic was “One Vision, One Woman, Only God” (*Chicago Tribune* 1996). In 1998 King invited the prospective governor of Georgia, Roy E. Barnes, to Hillside and led her congregation in bestowing their traditional blessing: “We love you, we bless you, we appreciate you and we thank God for you” (*New York Times* 1998). King was among the high-profile pastors on the program at Emory University for the presentation of Emory’s President Medal

to Representative John Lewis (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 1999). Also, in 1999 King led the opening worship service for the National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality. *Ebony* magazine (November 1998) named her as one of its fifteen greatest Black women preachers. The talk she gave at the Unity Church of Hawaii, “The Power of a Dream,” is an example of her teaching style (King 2015).

The International New Thought Alliance recognizes King as a significant founder and preacher. She received INTA’s highest award, the INTA Life Achievement Award, as well as the Ernest Holmes Religious Science Award, and Unity’s The Light of God Expressing Award (International New Thought Alliance, n.d., Honoring the Legacy).

## ***A Life Well Lived***

King married several times but after her second marriage kept the surname King till the end of her life. Shortly after she moved to Chicago in about 1960, an article in the Chicago Defender refers to King as Mrs. Barbara Lewis Blake (Chicago Defender 1964). Rev. Roy Blake was a minister who had his own church and is also mentioned as being one of the ministers who ordained King as a minister in the International New Thought Christian Alliance. Her second marriage took place in 1966 to Moses King, whose name she kept. Their son, Michael was born on March 15, 1967. Then, at the age of 74, in 2004, King married Sylvester Outley, 80. King and Outley had known each other since the 1940s, and reconnected when they were in Philadelphia for a prayer visit. The wedding was quite an affair with Danny Glover, R&B singer Toni Braxton, author Maya Angelou, and Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam attending. Outley was the founder and director of SELF Inc., a Philadelphia-based social service agency. The wedding occurred at Hillside with Della Reese officiating (Blake 2005; Aaseng 2014).

In 2007, King campaigned on behalf of Hillary Clinton for President. In her statement at the time, King said, “I support Hillary Clinton for President because of her leadership, her courage, and her strength. Hillary Clinton brings a powerful healing voice that can rebuild our alliances abroad and unite Americans to solve our challenges here at home” (“Clinton Campaign Launches Hillary Council for the Women of Georgia.” October 19, 2017).

In 2012, when King was 81 years old, she decided to finish something she had left undone in Chicago. She decided to pursue a doctoral degree from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary of Detroit, Michigan. At 81, she knew that this goal was attainable, and more what she had wanted from the beginning. And so, in 2012, she officially became “Reverend Doctor Barbara Lewis King.” King’s dissertation is titled “Succession Planning for Charismatic Founders” (King 2012).

## ***Parliament of the World’s Religions***

It is not known exactly when King became a supporter of the Parliament of the World Religions, but as can be seen from her life story, she attended the gatherings

at least twice. In 2015, she delivered two major addresses, one a brief keynote address, and the other at the Women's Assembly. In her keynote address, she introduced her focus as a member and leader of the New Thought movement. Without this association, she says that she "would still be in the Baptist Church, begging to be a minister." She remembers courageous women of the past: Esther, from the Hebrew Bible, who had the courage to go and save her people, Sojourner Truth supporting women's rights, and Fannie Lou Hamer who worked for the right to vote for all people (Parliament of the World's Religions 2015a). In her address at the Women's Assembly that year, King shows, using herself as a model, that a woman can be what she chooses to be. She speaks of herself as the daughter of an unwed mother, as a woman who was raped at 17, was ill with tuberculosis for four years, and suffered failed marriages. But, she learned she could make choices, and became a successful minister. "When you believe in who you are, nobody can stop you." She encouraged her audience to a) start a support group of people you can talk to and lean on for support, b) find time to be still, c) watch their thoughts, think positive, and d) live life to the full, enjoy, travel (Parliament of the World's Religions 2015b). At the closing of the 2015 Women's Assembly, she was invited to give a closing prayer (Parliament of the World's Religions 2020). King gave a major speech at the 2018 Parliament in Toronto, Canada, a convening that more than 8,000 people attended, and one that included an opening plenary address by the Dalai Lama (Parliament of the World's Religions 2020).

## *Conclusion*

Raised in the Baptist Church by her father and the paternal grandmother who took up sewing to support her, King overcame many obstacles to actualize her dream of being a minister. She has impacted many lives with her teachings about positive thinking. Oprah Winfrey calls King "The Queen of New Thought." In 2019, the chapel at the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport was named in her honor: "The Dr. Barbara Lewis King Interfaith Chapel." She has enlightened people everywhere with her teaching and speaking across the globe (Barbara Lewis King Scholarship Foundation, n.d.).

King died at her home on October 11, 2020. The Atlantic City Council celebrated her life and legacy as someone who "will always be a monumental figure in our city and in the faith community" and one who "had a deep and lasting impact on civil rights and immense outreach as an educator, author, and businesswoman. . . a trailblazer in every sense of the word." Atlanta joined in calling her a trailblazer, and quoted City Council member Michael Julian Bond as saying, "We are all better to have known her and to have had her deeds, words, and her heart shared with us" (WSBTV.com News Staff 2020).

International tributes from Ambassador Dr. Erica Bennett, the head of mission for the Diaspora Africa Forum, and from the founder of the Ministry of Unity Center of Love and Light in Johannesburg, South Africa, cited both her wide impact and her personal touch (Hillside International Truth Center 2020c).

Dr. Kenneth Harris, president and professor of Biblical Studies at her



alma mater, the Ecumenical Theological Seminary, spoke of her with pride as “a great woman of God who we deeply loved, and . . . [who] was deeply loved by tens of thousands around the world” (Hillside International Truth Center 2020c). The many ministers who spoke of her as a friend and mentor, and who pledged to carry on her legacy, perhaps embody her most lasting impact.

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**Elizabeth Ursic**  
*Scholar and Artist*

CHRISTINE MEYER



Source: Elizabeth Ursic

***Introduction***

In the 1992 movie *Sister Act*, Whoopi Goldberg portrays Deloris, a lounge singer performing in Reno, Nevada. She enters the witness protection program, disguised as a nun in a convent in a low-income neighborhood of San Francisco because she has witnessed a murder. Understandably, she buckles under the community’s rigid rules and is ordered by their Mother Superior, played by Maggie Smith, to join the convent’s struggling choir. Deloris introduces some innovative changes to the choir’s music, including updated Gospel and rock and roll versions of “Salve Regina” and “My Guy” (lyrics changed, of course, to “My God”). Shocked and outraged by the changes to their liturgical music, Mother Superior opposes the changes at first, but the convent’s Monsignor overrides her. The choir’s music revitalizes the parish the nuns serve and garners enough attention to earn a visit from the Pope. Eventually, the nuns help Deloris escape the bad guys and the movie concludes with a happy ending.

*Sister Act* is a secular film, lighthearted and humorous but full of tropes and stereotypes about nuns and women in religion. It captures an essential truth about many religious communities, though: the introduction of innovative worship styles often leads to controversy, conflict, and pushback. Elizabeth Ursic, a scholar and musician, and creator of religious and sacred music and art, who also studies feminine images of the divine, explores this tendency in much of her research, speaking, and writing, most notably in her 2014 book, *Women, Ritual, and Power: Placing Female Imagery of God in Christian Worship*. In this book, Ursic discusses how the feminine finds expression in depictions of the divine and examines how four Christian communities incorporate these images in prayer practices and corporate worship services. She calls this “strategic emplacement,” which is “the intentional act of placing ritual in strategically significant locations” (18). She builds upon the geological term “emplacement,” which refers to the physical processes of softer rock melting and moving into the cracks of harder rock, thereby adhering to and further fracturing the harder rock. Ursic identifies

strategic emplacement as a significant theoretical contribution to ritual studies, thus bringing, in her own words, “the category of place back into the conversation” (WATERwomensalliance, event occurs at 1.06.30).

The notion of place is important not just for Ursic but for many feminist theologians. Post-modern, post-colonial, liberation, and feminist theologians, including Ursic, emplace themselves into their scholarship, much like the communities she studies have attempted to emplace feminine imagery of the divine into their worship and prayer. Feminist theologians call this “embodied theology.” As scholar and writer Monica A. Coleman states:

*The notion of embodied theology is that our theologies are not simply or primarily rational constructions but rather rooted in the totality of our lives. In Goddess and God in the World, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow offer up their lives and the theology that has emerged from their experiences. They model, as have so many other womanist and feminist theologians, a theology rooted deeply in faith and experience. (2017, 105)*

The same can be said for Elizabeth Ursic, who has also embodied herself in her music and studies, which parallels her spiritual journey, starting with a broad spirituality, and ending, at this point in her interesting life, in more traditional expressions of Christian faith. Her theology demonstrates, like Christ and Plaskow’s theologies, her journey of faith, as expressed in her theological studies and writings, her long teaching career and pedagogical practices, and in the composing and performance of her music.

## ***Biography***

Elizabeth Ursic was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 29, 1959. She comes from a religiously Catholic background; her parents were both first-generation Slovenian Americans and were the first of their families to attend college. Her mother, Margaret Volk, was an educator. Her father, John Ursic, was an engineer who worked in Yugoslavia and the Middle East after World War II, building hydroelectric power plants and water desalination plants. Her parents met on the Orient Express in Europe. Ursic could very well have been born in Cuba because her father had lined up work there at the time of her birth, but Castro came to power, and her father decided to work in the U.S. instead. Ursic has one sibling, a younger sister named Kathy, who is also a musician and a nurse. When Ursic was three years old, her father got a job in Argentina; she says that Spanish was her first language but that she lost it because her family returned to the U.S. when she was four, and she was “inundated with English for school” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). She grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Ursic began her musical education in first grade when she began piano lessons; it became her instrument. She took up the cello in fourth grade and composed her first piece of music, which she says is when her first burst of creativity took place (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, November 11,

2022). She was an average student until she took an IQ test that same year and was placed in a program for gifted students, and began to excel academically, earning straight As. Ursic says, “I may be one of the few people who actually benefited from IQ tests” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). As a teenager, Ursic’s leadership skills emerged: she served in student government, composed the opening number for her senior class show, and conducted a 100-member chorus and 20-piece band. Her parents insisted that while she could study music in college, she had to earn a degree that allowed her to also make a living. Because of her leadership experiences, she chose to be a music composer and go into business instead of becoming a music teacher. She was accepted in both the business school and music program at the University of Pennsylvania but stopped studying music when the music department would not allow her to pursue a dual degree. She considers her undergraduate studies a balanced education, earning a bachelor’s degree in communications from the Annenberg School of Communication and a Bachelor of Science in marketing research from the Wharton School of Business. After graduation, she began a career in the corporate business world, working at Westinghouse for two years and at AT&T for two years, where she earned top honors at AT&T’s national sales school.

Ursic also reported experiencing sexual harassment during college, telling me, “A drunk instructor tried to drag me into an elevator in a public crowded hotel lobby, but I broke free. My anger and upset made me wonder why men felt they could abuse women. Because of that and other incidents, I participated in a Take Back the Night event” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). Take Back the Night, according to Wikipedia, is “an international event and non-profit organization with the mission of ending sexual, relationship, and domestic violence in all forms” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

In 1984, she continued her studies at the Wharton School of Business, earning an MBA in International Relations, choreographing for the Wharton Follies, and dancing in a group scene of Stevie Wonder’s “Part-Time Lover” music video. In 1986, she and her classmate Deebie Symmes broke a Guinness Book of World Records for Long-distance Tap Dance.

After graduating at the age of 26, Ursic took a nine-month-long sabbatical in Spain. She began to practice meditation and had her first mystical experience, calling it “a feeling of universal love and acceptance.” She says that even though it happened outside of a religious context, it “changed how I viewed life” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). When she returned to the States, she worked as a management consultant for the accounting firm Touche Ross in Miami, Florida. She lived in the South Beach area, practiced meditation, and composed digital recordings in the late 1980s. Ursic discovered Sedona in central Arizona on her 29th birthday during a consulting assignment in Phoenix. Soon she left the corporate world behind, moved to Sedona to pursue her spiritual development, and lived in this desert town for five years, working part-time for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters, doing adjunct teaching at Northern Arizona University, and conducting workshops and retreats. She also pursued

music, meeting world musicians who introduced her to new styles and rhythms and helped her go beyond her classically trained roots. She discovered musical improvisation, began her life-long involvement with the genre of New Age music, and performed in community concerts. She recorded her first album, *Unspoken Touch*, in 1995, which played on 100 radio stations, including National Public Radio. She also broke her Guinness World Record title in long-distance tap dance in 1993 and her full-page picture was featured in *Sports Illustrated* that same year (Lidz 1993, 77). Guinness created a new “Solo Long Distance Tap Dance” category to include her record of tapping a half marathon of 13.1 miles. Ursic told me that most of her friends and colleagues at the time, who were primarily academics, did not take much notice of her tap-dancing accomplishments, but that it gave her “lots of street cred” with her male cousins (Elizabeth Ursic, in discussion with the author, October 1, 2022).

In 1994, Ursic moved to Ridgecrest, California, near Death Valley. In Ridgecrest, she “experienced the wisdom of the desert” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022), marketed her album, played in the community orchestra, and taught part-time at a local community college. She continued her meditation practice, feeling called to images of Catholic women, most notably Mary the mother of Christ and St. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century German Benedictine abbess and Doctor of the Church. St. Hildegard’s music inspired her own music and her deep sense of call back to the Catholic Church, where she participated in Eucharistic Adoration, a devotional practice of contemplation in which parishes, convents, and monasteries offer the opportunity of continual or perpetual adoration of Christ. Ursic was surprised to discover that many Catholics she met practiced centering prayer, a form of Christian meditation much like the meditation she also practiced. During this time, she was invited to Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a Catholic pilgrimage site dedicated to a series of apparitions of Mary (Our Lady of Medjugorje) that occurred there. Ursic states that while in Medjugorje, she felt torn between her ancestral Catholicism and her broader spirituality in which she felt drawn to “a universal Presence that was larger than any religion” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). For example, her retreat group, who opposed the New Age, played her music and loved it anyway. She finally spoke to a priest about her conflict, who shared with her that his brother, who was autistic, was positively affected by New Age music. The only video that held his attention was New Age artist Yanni’s PBS special at the Acropolis, so the priest advised her to “relax and trust the unfolding journey” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). A month after her retreat in Medjugorje, Ursic returned to Europe and visited three other Catholic pilgrimage sites, Lourdes, Fatima, and most importantly, the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Spain, where she felt “internally invited to return to the Church” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022).

Within 18 months of her trip to Europe, her life was “completely reorganized” (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). Ursic moved to Hawaii to teach economics and world politics at Maui Community College. She lived there for one year, then resigned from her teaching position,



sold most of her possessions, and returned to Connecticut to help her mother care for her ailing father. She accepted a position at her local parish, St. Catherine's Catholic Church, which hired her based on her strong problem-solving and management consulting background and her connection to the parish. She found it very rewarding work, focusing on revitalizing the parish by creating groups for new and underserved members, including young adults and new families. Also, during that time, she took an impactful trip to South Africa sponsored by the Rotary Club, which broadened her worldview. She worked at St. Catherine's for four years and earned a Master of Divinity degree at Yale (a 45-minute drive from her home) in 2003, which was funded, due to her musical background and church work, by a full-tuition fellowship from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. At Yale, she studied images of the divine in art and the female imagery of Sophia Wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures. She also studied the Daughters of Wisdom, an order of Catholic nuns who prayed with Sophia imagery. Sadly, her father passed away a month before she started the program at Yale in the fall of 2000.

During this time, the Catholic priest sex scandal broke out in Boston. She told me, "I saw the best of church as we supported our community during 911 and still managed to build a beautiful chapel in its aftermath, as well as the worst of church through the priest sex scandal where I saw priests I knew removed from ministry" (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). She lost her job when the parish lost its funding, so she taught religious studies and philosophy part-time at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, and completed her studies at Yale. She says, "I continued to live with my mother, and it was a gift to support her and be supported by her in those years after my dad's passing" (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022). She found that she had a passion for teaching, and with her MDiv, she pursued full-time community college teaching after graduating from Yale. In 2003, Ursic returned to the warm weather of Arizona and procured the only full-time religious studies position available at a two-year college in the country, Mesa Community College (MCC) in Phoenix, Arizona. She told me:

*I felt very fortunate to be selected, even though by some academic stereotypes, community college is a low-status position. I love that approximately half of our students are the first from their families to go to college (like my parents) and today MCC is a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) with over thirty percent Latino students as well as significant American Indian and Southeast Asian populations. (Elizabeth Ursic, email message to author, October 1, 2022)*

Ursic earned a Ph.D. in Religious Studies at Arizona State University (ASU) in 2010, continuing her studies of the Daughters of Wisdom, as well as three other Protestant communities that prayed with female imagery, research that eventually turned into her book, *Women, Ritual, and Power*, published in 2014 by SUNY Press. Ursic trained to be a spiritual director at Yale and has been a certified spiritual director since 2003, currently serving as a spiritual director at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona (Faculty). She has been an adjunct professor in the Women's Spirituality Ph.D. program at the California

Institute of Integral Studies since 2011. She teaches courses in religion, gender, and art and serves on dissertation committees (Faculty). She went on sabbatical in 2012 at both the University of Edinburgh as a visiting scholar, where she researched one of the communities for her book, and in Auroville, India, also as a visiting scholar, where she studied a community that followed the teachings of guru Mirra Alfassa (also called “the Mother”) and had close connections with her research about female imagery in worship and prayer. In 2013, she began serving as co-chair of the Women’s Caucus at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature.

In 2016, Ursic met her fiancé Frank Nightingale and began attending the Episcopal Church. She continued writing and performing her music, teaching at MCC and researched music and female imagery of the divine. In 2019, Ursic released her second album of instrumental music, *Gratitude*. In 2022, she completed a chapter on metaphor for a forthcoming Oxford Press series on music and Christianity, was accepted as a Fulbright Specialist in American Studies, and was selected for a faculty development seminar in India in early 2023.

Ursic’s involvement with the online encyclopedia Wikipedia began at the author’s reception for her book at the 2014 National Women’s Studies Association annual conference in Puerto Rico. There she met representatives of the Wikipedia Educational Foundation, which assists college professors who use Wikipedia as a teaching tool in the classroom. She also learned about the Women in Red Wikipedia Project (or “WikiProject”), which seeks to increase the number of women’s biographies on Wikipedia. As a trustee and chair of the Women’s Task Force for the 2018 Parliament of the World’s Religions and chair of the Women’s Caucus of the AAR, she launched, along with Colleen Hartung, the Women in Religion WikiProject. Modeled after the goals of Women in Red, the Women in Religion WikiProject seeks to increase biographies about women in religion (leaders, teachers, theologians, and saints) on Wikipedia. Hartung states, “Elizabeth’s work as the chair of the Women’s Task Force for the 2018 Parliament was significant. It intersects with her work as the co-chair of the AAR Women’s Caucus” (Colleen Hartung, pers. comm., with author, December 27, 2022). During her nine-year tenure as chair of the Women’s Caucus, she directed several projects that advocated for women in religion. Hartung shared that Ursic designed and led the Women’s Task Force presentation at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, which was attended by thousands of people. Hartung noted that “[Parliament] events do not happen without the work of leaders like Elizabeth” (C. Hartung, pers. comm., with author, December 27, 2022).

## ***St. Hildegard and the Daughters of Wisdom***

As I interviewed Ursic for this chapter, I discovered, to my delight, that we had several deep connections. I, too, returned to the Catholic Church later in my life, and Eucharistic Adoration is also an important devotional and prayer practice for me. I strongly related to her story about the priest who told her to calm down and trust her journey because I am a parent of two severely developmentally disabled

adults who also use music to communicate and interact with the world. I also am familiar with the desert, growing up near Bakersfield, California, about a 90-minute drive from Ridgecrest, where Ursic lived for a few years. Despite my conservative background, I even have a deep connection with New Age music, because the music of Mannheim Steamroller (especially Chip Davis' *Fresh Aire* series of albums) significantly impacted me during my young adult college years. Like Ursic, I have found that I have embedded myself into my academic studies and the many careers I have pursued, including as a writer of poetry, an academic writer and scholar, and a Wikipedia editor and contributor.

I also share with Ursic, although for different reasons, a strong devotion to Mary the Mother of God and other female saints. Ursic has used the life, writings, and music of St. Hildegard, one of the first named composers of Christian sacred music, in her work as a musician, lecturer, and spiritual director. As one of her employers, the California Institute of Integral Studies, notes on their webpage, Ursic's "development as a scholar emerged from her love of music and commitment to a spiritual path" (California Institute of Integral Studies). One of the most important lessons I learned in my own graduate studies is that one can be both a scholar and an artist. Like the poet Diane Seuss and the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor did in their poems, short stories, and novels, I can and should bring my religious and spiritual journey into my academic studies. Ursic and other female scholars of religion model this lesson through their lives and studies. In her 2021 article "Sonic Metaphors: Music, Sound, and Ecofeminist Theology," Ursic briefly describes Hildegard's embodied theology of prayer, her studies of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, her music, and how she used female imagery to help us understand God. Ursic quotes gender and medieval scholar Barbara Newman, whom Ursic says "brought attention to Hildegard's positive use of female imagery to express and explain a sapiential wisdom theology based on Hildegard's writings and manuscript paintings" (Ursic 2021a, 253). Newman states that Hildegard formulated her thinking in a male-dominated world and "within the traditional framework of Christian symbolics" (Newman, as cited in Ursic 2021a, 253). Medieval literary scholar Bruce Holsinger agrees that Hildegard embodies her musical compositions, which include 77 liturgical pieces and 82 antiphons. Hildegard wrote the words and music for her nuns to sing, as Ursic put it, "expressions of sung prayer" (252). Holsinger agrees, stating that Hildegard's music was "inextricably bound up with her spiritual experience" (Holsinger, as cited in Ursic 2021a, 252). As Ursic states, Holsinger demonstrates how Hildegard "transgressed musical boundaries of Gregorian chant" (252) and that Hildegard's music "opened the female body with soaring melodies of spiritual poems that were meant to be experienced through the embodied act of singing" (252). Finally, Holsinger states that Hildegard viewed female bodies "as available and resonant like musical instruments" (252). As Ursic puts it:

*[Hildegard] provides us with examples for ways music can advance theology through her life as a composer and musician, her experiences as a woman of prayer with mystical visions, and her musical connections with the natural world. She*

*also displayed a complete willingness and even enthusiasm for communicating and exploring her theology metaphorically through the arts (254).*

Liturgical historian and Hildegard scholar Margot Fassler, director of the Institute of Sacred Music while Ursic was at Yale, “placed Hildegard’s embodied approach to music and theology in the context of the medieval worldview of incarnation” (Ursic, 2021a, p. 253). She conducted what Ursic calls “contemporary research” (253) with an order of Benedictine nuns at Regina Laudis Abby in Bethlehem, Connecticut. Fassler took Ursic and her fellow students to meet the nuns who resided there and to experience the same insight that Fassler had experienced studying a community of women who used Hildegard’s chants and music that made up their disciplines of prayer and work. Ursic describes the visit in “Sonic Metaphors,” embodying herself in this study of feminist theology and music. Ursic does the same thing again and again in her own scholarship and music. For example, when studying the Daughters of Wisdom for her Ph.D. dissertation and later her book, Ursic inserts herself into their community, as Fassler had also done for her studies in Connecticut.

Ursic met the Daughters of Wisdom, the only religious order in the Catholic Church that has the word “wisdom” in their title, in Connecticut during her time at Yale, when a few members of the order introduced themselves to her after her performance playing the cello at a local sacred music event. They invited her to their retreat house in Litchfield, Connecticut, and the province’s leadership team later agreed to allow Ursic to conduct a formal research study with them. Ursic describes the history of the Daughters of Wisdom in her book, from their founding in France in 1703 to Vatican II, when religious orders were directed to return to their original call and purpose. The Daughters took this directive seriously, including changing their prayer and meditation practices. Ursic studied these practices, interviewed the sisters, and researched the life and history of the Litchfield community. Some of the nuns Ursic spoke to had profound, ecstatic, and mystical experiences of the divine, often centered in feminine imagery, in their prayer and devotional experiences. Ursic described the Daughters’ spiritual and religious experiences of the divine, stating, “Unexpectedly, I too found myself participating in an extra-worldly exchange” (Ursic 2014a, 86). While searching through the printed archives at the order’s provincial house with the assistance of a sister who lived there, they received a call informing them of the death of a long-time member of the order. Ursic happened upon a box that contained the master’s thesis of the sister who had just passed away, something the nuns needed to know to plan her funeral. Ursic states:

*As I stood there with the sister’s thesis in my hands, I was not just observing and recording accounts of these communications between worlds, but being placed inside them. My actions were seen by the Daughter as being directed by some unseen hand. I cannot say that I was aware of anything other than my own research motivations to look inside that box, but the thought that maybe two Daughters were communicating across the life/death divide and using me as the telephone line was a bit unnerving. If there was ever a moment when I wondered who I was in the mix of*

*this research, it was that moment. (Ursic 2014a, 86)*

Ursic's involvement in researching the Daughters of Wisdom parallels not only the importance of experience and embodiment in feminist theology but her own experiences with meditation, prayer, and devotional practices. For the Daughters of Wisdom and Ursic, this kind of extra-worldly communication was normal, offered a new perspective on life, and motivated them to action.

## **Music**

Creative artists and musicians like Ursic use art and music as a type of knowledge creation and production, one that has been historically devalued among scholars. Art and music are among the ways that feminist scholars like Ursic promote knowledge equity, embodiment, and the importance of using non-traditional, post-colonial modes of knowledge creation. She does this via her music, much like St. Hildegard and the communities she studied in her book strategically emplaced feminine images of the divine into their religious practices. Ursic has successfully and strategically used her academic credentials and success as a musician as both a pedagogical tool and a way to expand and build up alternative ways of producing knowledge. In other words, the embodiment of her scholarship is best expressed in her music. Ursic is an accomplished musician and performer and plays several instruments: the cello, the piano, the synthesizer, the lap harp, and the ukulele. She has published two albums of instrumental music, *Unspoken Touch*, originally released in 1995 and remastered in 2017, and *Gratitude* in 2020, which has a variety of musical styles. Ursic recorded *Unspoken Touch* at a local studio in Sedona, Arizona, "improvising world music after years of composing and performing as a classically trained pianist and cellist" (Album: *Unspoken Touch*) that was inspired by her hikes among the Sedona desert's red rocks. She performed all the synthesizer, piano, cello, and female chanting/voicing on the album, which has been played on radio stations all over the U.S. The album helped her procure her fellowship at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. *Unspoken Touch* places Ursic squarely in the genre of New Age music; it is ethereal, dreamy, calm, and mystical and uses interesting instruments like the digeridoo in her song "Outback," which has a very Australian feeling to it. Her song "Night Flight" emulates sounds in nature; one can easily imagine Ursic listening to the desert birds and other animals during the evening hikes that inspired it. Ursic's album *Gratitude* is "a musical journey" (Album: *Gratitude*); like *Unspoken Touch*, it also features instruments from all over the world, including the digeridoo, the drums, the violin, and the flute. One of its tracks, "World Anthem," was used as the anthem for the World Academy for the Future of Women, "a leadership training program for college women in Nepal, Bangladesh, and China" (World Academy Anthem). She also served as a facilitator for the World Academy.

On Ursic's birthday, October 29, 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when everything was mostly shut down, she performed an online concert at Arizona State University. She performed for an interactive live-streamed

audience, and the concert was recorded and later put on YouTube by ASU. The performance, in which she plays music from both her albums, demonstrates Ursic's skill as a musician and performer and demonstrates her generosity and flexibility during what must have been a difficult situation, making it all look easy. Even though she is performing, she takes advantage of many teachable moments, demonstrating her pedagogical styles and philosophies. For example, before playing her song "Kume," the seventh track of *Gratitude*, she gives a brief lecture about sung and spoken chants in Christianity, explaining that the word *kume* means "rise" in Aramaic, the language the historical Jesus likely used. She describes her creative process in writing and performing music, telling her virtual audience that she had been playing the piano and cello since grade school. It was the piano that opened up her creativity, demonstrating the importance, as a musician, of finding the instrument that taps into one's creativity. She even shared the first piece of music she composed on the piano as a child. During the performance of her song "Gaia," the fifth track on *Gratitude*, she showed a montage of time-lapsed photos of Sedona inspired by her music, created by her friend, photographer Cozy McFee. She takes advantage of this teachable moment by sharing the pleasure she gets from working with artists in other genres and media as they collaborate. Later, towards the end of the concert, she plays her song "Emergence," the eleventh track from her first album *Unspoken Touch*, and showed another montage of Sedona, also created by McFee.

About halfway through the concert, Ursic tells her virtual audience, "Now, it's time for you" (ASU Kerr, event occurs at 30.50). She picks up her lap harp, explaining that it is helpful at that moment because "it's all tuned to the same note, and I can actually speak to you while I am playing." She also tells them, in another opportunity she uses to teach, "In terms of sacred music, sometimes what you find is the words that are being spoken...can sound very different when there's music behind it and so often music is used when you're being asked to kind of let go and maybe dream or recall" (event occurs beginning at 31.12). She then leads her virtual audience through a guided meditation about creativity, encouraging them not to let their insecurities get in the way of their creative processes, teaching them about the spiritual connection with their creativity, and recommending that they attend workshops to encourage the development of their creativity. Then, in the most delightful, whimsical, and fun part of her concert, she picked up her ukulele, which she began playing after buying one for her niece and discovering how fun an instrument it is. She told her audience that her friend and colleague, Jodie Richardson, a music therapist, ukulele player, and psychology professor, "showed me a few things" (ASU Kerr, 2020, event occurs at 34.53). She also shared that they created a duo called "The Uke-ladies," serving the members of their college community by going to their offices and singing "Happy Birthday" to them. Ursic then celebrated her own birthday and all the Fall birthdays of her audience by playing and singing it on her ukulele and then playing it, New Age-style, on the synthesizer. She took advantage of that teachable moment by giving another mini-lecture about the spiritual aspect of birthdays and how she uses the synthesizer as another way to unleash her creativity.

## *Sacred Art and Music*

Ursic's ASU streamed concert demonstrates her generosity as a performer, artist, and teacher. It shows how she integrates her music, pedagogy, and scholarship. Performing music is an embodied act by necessity, but this concert demonstrates how art can also be embedded into spirituality and knowledge. It is fortunate that we have it, perhaps a hidden blessing from the Covid-19 era, for if ASU was not forced to present it online, many of us might not have been able to experience it. In 2017, Ursic composed original music for the Dancing with Gaia Exhibition, curated by Megan Clay and hosted by the Institute for Theological Partnerships at the University of Winchester in Hampshire, England. Gaia, a Greek goddess and a personification of the Earth, is a significant figure in feminist spirituality and ecofeminism and was the exhibition's focus. Ursic's writer's statement for the exhibition, available on her website, is illuminating because, like her streamed concert for ASU, it provides insight into her creative processes and how it connects with her scholarship and pedagogy. She starts by talking about one of her heroes, feminist and ecofeminist scholar and Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther, who died in 2022, shortly before the writing of this chapter, and her seminal and influential work *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (1992). Reuther was an inspiring influence on Ursic's life. Ursic says this about Reuther:

*She turned the wheel of theological insight in an obvious way so that all could see it. She showed us that patriarchal domination is a sin and that patriarchy diminishes life in all it subjugates, women and nature alike. When patriarchy gets justified through a skewed interpretation of our sacred stories, it is a most insidious form of sin. It obscures the liberating and life-giving wisdom of these texts. (Dancing with Gaia)*

For Ursic, composing music for the Gaia exhibition, included on her album *Gratitude*, was an opportunity to expand upon what she calls the exhibition's "theological palette." She says, "I wanted the piece to reflect the hope of ecofeminist theology that sees both women and nature struggling yet ultimately triumphant in the dance" (Dancing with Gaia). Ursic also gave a keynote speech during the exhibition, a lecture about feminist theology and how "imagination and art serve important yet often unacknowledged functions in the development of theology" (Dancing with Gaia). Her Gaia music fits right into her New Age and World music genre, fitting for such an exhibition. She explains, again using her writer's statement as a teaching moment, that her piece is a suite, which she defines as "a collection of musical movements meant to be played in sequence, and the movements are usually dance pieces." She goes on to explain how her choice of writing a suite for the exhibition relates to the work the organizers of the exhibition wanted to publicize: "As ecofeminists, we want to dance with the beauty and forces of nature around us, not destroy them" (Dancing with Gaia). As a musician, Ursic states that she composed music "to inspire people to reflect

upon the meaning of life” (Dancing with Gaia). In this way, her choice of New Age and World music as her primary mode of musical and creative expression is a good one. I am not a musician, so instead of attempting to describe this piece, I will allow Ursic to do so herself:

*“Dancing with Gaia Suite” opens with primordial cosmic waters and a single, low rumbling tone. There is a subtle vacillation from a minor third to a major third as a way to sonically express diminishment and growth. Growth prevails as melody and harmony appear. Rhythm is introduced as the dance with humans, and the percussive instruments include Indigenous drums, rain sticks, and other tribal instruments. Later, a solo piano provides a wistful reinterpretation of the triumphant dancing motif. It is the echo of how we dream and what we faintly remember before merging back into the cosmic primordial waters. (Dancing with Gaia)*

Ursic is, as she states, “a composer and an academic; I paint with soundscapes and ideas. For me, the two expressions complement each other” (Dancing with Gaia). Her scholarship, and in the case of the Dancing with Gaia exhibition, her readings of ecofeminism inspire her compositions. Perhaps it can also be said that the converse is true, that her music and creative expressions inform her reading and understanding of theology, scripture, sacred art and music, and other fields of study. In “Sonic Metaphors,” she traces the history and theologies of sacred music. She begins at the earliest mentions of music in the Hebrew scriptures and King David’s Book of Psalms and ends with demonstrating the use of sacred music by modern marginalized peoples and social justice movements (Ursic 2021a, 250-252). In early 2020, Ursic was selected for a two-week faculty seminar in Jordan called “Sustainability at the Margins,” which was co-sponsored by the American Center of Research (ACOR) and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC). She said that it was one of the best faculty seminars she had attended. She wrote about the experience in an article in ACOR’s journal, entitled “Sustainable Tourism and the Cross at Umm el-Jimal,” which focuses on a unique Byzantine cross design the faculty group saw at an archaeological site. For her ACOR article, she focuses on her case study about sustainable tourism in Jordan and “how faculty seminars stimulate academic research and reflection” (Ursic 2021b, 1).

Her work with “Sustainability at the Margins” is an example of the kind of research Ursic engages in and demonstrates the emplacement of her interests in sacred art and theology. Another example of this emplacement is Ursic’s biography of artist Janet McKenzie, “Janet McKenzie: A Sacred Artist’s Life of Creative Activism,” in the first volume of this series, *Exploring Notability for Women in Religion* (2020). The first time Ursic saw McKenzie’s most famous artwork, “Jesus of the People,” was while she was at Yale. The painting depicts what Christ could look like in the year 2006, when the *Catholic National Review* issued a challenge, in the form of a contest, to artists to depict the person of Christ in art. Ursic says, about “Jesus of the People: “I was captivated by this dark-skinned, clean-shaven Jesus who was wrapped in a mantle and wearing a crown of thorns while gazing at the viewer with a gentle countenance. I was even more intrigued when



I learned that the model for the image was an African American woman” (Ursic 2020, 17). Ursic’s biography explores McKenzie’s artistic development, what she calls “creative activism,” and considers how sacred art resonates with the culture in which it resides, long after the moment has passed. McKenzie’s purpose of her image, even though she only realized it after she completed it, was to represent groups of people who had historically been left out or underrepresented in images of Christ and of the divine.

This is similar to the four communities Ursic studied in *Women, Ritual, and Power* and their attempts of embedding feminine images of the divine into their prayer and worship practices. For example, Ebenezer Lutheran Church, or herchurch, in San Francisco, California, “recognized a need to display predominately female images in at least one worship setting because the overwhelming majority of churches expressed exclusively male images of God” (Ursic 2014a, 159). The influential scholar Mary Daly, who also places imagery and imagination at the center of her work, states: “If God is male, then male is God” (Daly, as cited in Ursic 2021a, 19), a quote Ursic references in much of her writing. McKenzie received pushback, including harassment, hate mail, frightening death threats, and even being targeted by the racist congregation Westboro Baptist Church in response to her painting. She notes the similarity between the treatment of the women she studied in *Women, Ritual, and Power* and McKenzie’s experiences. Ursic reports that eventually, even though they never completely stopped, the attacks waned, and the painting’s supporters were larger in number than its detractors. A similar backlash was experienced by British artist Edwina Sandys in 1974, about her sculpture *Christa*, which depicts a nude Christ on a crucifix and is one of the earliest contemporary art pieces depicting Christ as a woman. As Ursic states in “Christian Feminist Theology and the Arts,” her entry in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Supporters saw the *Christa* sculpture as an expression of God’s incarnation for all people, yet detractors found the sculpture sexual and blasphemous” (Ursic 2021c, 7). At first, even though the cathedral’s dean approved it, the sculpture was denounced as theologically and historically indefensible by the bishop. It was removed from its installation at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City after just eleven days. Nevertheless, the sculpture toured galleries and churches internationally and was eventually permanently returned to St. John the Divine in 2016 (Barron 2016). Ursic delivered a lecture at the cathedral on the history and importance of female imagery of the divine the following year.

Ursic has recorded music, researched, and written about gender and art for almost thirty years. She told me there has been a resurgence of interest in female imagery for the divine and a renewed interest in the genesis of New Age music. Her early compositions from the 1990s have been featured on retro music podcasts and collectors are interested in her original cassette recordings. While she did not realize it then, she is “one of the few female early New Age composers in a popular musical genre that has sought to integrate spirituality and sound for many decades” (Elizabeth Ursic, pers. comm., November 2, 2022).

## Conclusion

During my interview with Elizabeth Ursic for this chapter, in response to her description of her spiritual journey and her recent reception into the Episcopal Church, I asked her, “So are you currently transitioning into the Episcopal Church?” I naturally used the term “transitioning,” the term usually used to describe the process of changing genders, instead of the religious term “converting.” She responded, without hesitation, that yes, she was. In Ursic’s 2014 article “Bi the Way: Rethinking Categories of Religious Identity,” which may be, after her book, one of the most important things she has written, she discusses the switch in how “a single category of religious identification no longer serves a significant and growing segment of the U.S. population” (Ursic 2014b, 29). Categorizing people in this way no longer reflects how Americans view the complexity of their religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices. A third of adults under the age of 30 and one-fifth of all Americans are “religiously unaffiliated,” something that has led religious scholars, who seem to have a tendency to categorize people, to come up with the new term “nones.” This group identifies themselves as “spiritual” rather than “religious” and are often influenced by several religious and spiritual traditions. In Ursic’s “Bi the Way” article, she could very well be speaking of herself; she suggests that spiritual/religious identity can be fluid and calls for a change in the way we think about religious identity. In other words, perhaps scholars who study religious trends could be influenced and informed by gender studies.

Ursic’s change in her thinking of religious affiliations, including her own, was influenced by the four communities she studied in *Women, Ritual, and Power*. These communities reflect various views on gender, especially how gender is expressed in the divine. Ursic states in “Bi the Way:”

*[The members of these communities] offered their understanding of gender when trying to explain the meaning of the female imagery used in the worship service. Some described a fluidity of gender, stating that God was neither male nor female and that God could be represented in a variety of gendered ways. Others continued to make meaning using only two categories of male and female in their explanations. Often participants did not use specialized terms, but as a scholar I could use the theories of gender performativity and gender essentialism as theoretical framings to interpret their responses. (Ursic 2014b, 30)*

I found it interesting that the subjects of Ursic’s studies were clearer about their fluid conceptions of the nature of God than they were about their own religious and spiritual identities. When Ursic asked the members of the communities she studied about their religious affiliations, their responses were more complicated and less clear. Ursic speculates that in the recent past, identifying with more than one religious tradition was taboo, and often still is, “much like the attitudes towards bi-sexual and transgendered people were fifty years ago.” She says, “Scholars have not typically characterized religious identity as bi or trans, but perhaps we should...Theoretical blurring of distinctions in gender and

sexuality may suggest ways that religious identity could be re-conceptualized as well” (Ursic 2014b, 31). In other words, in many ways due to the work of Ursic and other feminist theologians, we are beginning to think of God in different ways, so perhaps we should also begin to think of our own religious/spiritual affiliations differently. As Ursic puts it, “Many of us are more religiously bi and trans than we care to admit” (Ursic 2014b, 31). The exciting thing about viewing both God and ourselves in this way is that like those in the LGBTQ communities, those of us who value our religious and spiritual journeys, even those of us who practice our beliefs and faiths in community settings, also have a choice about our affiliations. We also get to go on not only a journey of discovery about the feminine image of God but a journey of how we identify ourselves and our religious affiliations. In the past, that was not true; one’s religion was often based on the group we happened to be born into. That has certainly been true for me, who was born into a Catholic family, dabbled with different varieties of Protestantism during her young adulthood, returned to Catholicism at forty, and has recently investigated Judaism.

For Ursic, freely investigating her spiritual and religious identities was never taboo. As I told her during our interview, she simply followed the lead of, using a Christian metaphor, the Holy Spirit. She has done so with boldness, creativity, and courage, no matter where it took her as a religious scholar, teacher, and musician. She started with music, specifically New Age and world music as she investigated meditative practices, then looked at Catholicism, and as of this writing, the Episcopal Church. Along the way, it even influenced her academic career, as a college professor and as a feminist theologian specializing in sacred art and feminine images of the divine. She has used her talents to the fullest while promoting knowledge equity, knowledge creation, and embodiment. She had been a leader in the use of music and sacred art in the Parliament of the World’s Religions. Elizabeth Ursic has had an interesting life and career, with lots of twists and turns, like Carol Christ’s description of life’s journey in *A Serpentine Path: Mysteries of the Goddess* (2016), as Christ put it, is “like the path of a snake... never straightforward” (Christ and Plaskow 2016, p. 153). Ursic has also led others on their faith journey, using her academic knowledge and creativity, and has led a truly embedded and emplaced life.

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## Chapter 7

### **Audrey E. Kitagawa** *Interfaith Activist and Spiritual Leader*

MARY C. HAMLEN



Source: Audrey E. Kitagawa

*A willingness to learn about other religions expands our own limited world view, and allows us to step into the world view of the other. Our capacity to do this enhances understanding and acceptance of each other that enables us to live peacefully together as one human family.*

- (Kitagawa 2019c, 11:39)

*Faith communities have to exercise their moral, spiritual, ethical duty as citizens of the world.*

- (Kitagawa 2020b, 19:40)

In her article “Women, Religion and Peacebuilding,” Susan Hayward highlights the need for more scholarship about women religious leaders working in the intersecting fields of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding. As she notes, “women of faith have historically ‘fallen through the cracks’ of the scholarship and practice of religious peace building and women’s peacebuilding, marginalized from both fields” (Hayward 2015, 309). Audrey E. Kitagawa, president and founder of the International Academy of Multicultural Awareness and president of the Light of Awareness International Spiritual Family (International Academy for Multicultural Cooperation n.d.), is an example of a woman of faith who is also a peacemaker. Audrey Kitagawa works to build coalitions and to use education to help foster common understandings and a shared vision for action. She is a leader in discussions around the role of spirituality and ethics in international relations and has led efforts to work collaboratively for the common good. Kitagawa has worked to highlight the ongoing challenges of racism in society and to articulate ways in which people of faith can address this ongoing problem. She has also championed women in numerous ways, speaking out against discrimination and oppression. Kitagawa, like many religious women peacemakers, emphasizes relational efforts that cross boundaries and that counter traditional hierarchical top-down leadership models.

Audrey E. Kitagawa has engaged in the global interfaith movement in

numerous and varied ways, from helping communities at the grassroots level, speaking about spiritual values at the UN, leading workshops on meditation practices, organizing interfaith educational events, and being on boards of organizations. She was the first woman to be elected as chair of the Board of Trustees for the Parliament of the World's Religions (Marshall 2018). Her leadership of the Parliament led to partnerships with other organizations and an active programmatic focus on education and advocacy. She has also been a key leader in other organizations that work collaboratively to solve major global problems. This biography explores her work both as a religious leader and as an interfaith activist, to show how her interfaith work emerges from her religious leadership and spiritual practice. In reviewing Kitagawa's work, this chapter will also examine how religious and spiritual women's achievements are often made invisible and marginalized at the level of academic discourse, press, and other media.

## ***Childhood and Education***

Audrey Emiko Kitagawa was born in Honolulu in 1951, the youngest of five children born to Yoshiko and Yonoichi Kitagawa. Her family history reflects how Japanese immigrants to Hawaii have become an integral part of Hawaiian society. In the late 19th century, Japanese laborers were recruited to supply labor for the pineapple and sugar plantations run by large corporations, which led to the creation of a large and well-established Japanese community in Hawaii and the establishment of Buddhist temples and Japanese language schools (Library of Congress, n.d.).

Audrey's grandparents were part of this migration from Japan to Hawaii in the late 19th and early 20th century. Her paternal grandfather was a fisherman who came to Hawaii around 1902 with his wife; the couple left their first-born son in Japan until they were settled. Their second son, Yoniochi, Audrey's father, was born in 1913 and grew up in Kakaako. He loved sports, especially boxing, and he eventually founded a boxing club in his neighborhood, the Kakaako Boxing Club, now considered the oldest boxing club in the United States (Stinton 2022). He had also been the State of Hawaii Boxing Commissioner. Trained as a sheet metal worker, blacksmith, and machinist, he worked at the Inter-Island drydocks. He ran unsuccessfully for the House of Representatives 14th District in 1970 (Audrey E. Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). Later he worked for the Park and Recreation Department (Y. Kitagawa 1977).

Kitagawa's paternal grandfather was a fisherman. During World War II, "he was interned in a then secret internment camp on Oahu, called Honouliuli.<sup>1</sup> He just disappeared one day with no one in the family knowing what happened to him. He was eventually discovered in the internment camp and released." According to Kitagawa's mother, "he refused to talk about his experience, but he

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<sup>1</sup> After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many Japanese and Japanese-Americans were forcibly removed to internment camps. Approximately 4,000 people were interned in the Honouliuli internment camp. (Molly Solomon, "Once Lost, Internment in Hawai'i now a national monument," Code Switch podcast, March 16, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/16/393284680/in-hawaii-a-wwii-internment-camp-named-national-monument>.)

came back completely changed. He was a “frightened” man, who eventually died of stomach cancer” (Audrey E. Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2022).

Kitagawa’s maternal grandmother was a second-generation (Nisei) Japanese immigrant to Hawaii. She worked as a field laborer and never learned to read. She was married three times, which reflected her dependence on men for financial support. Later, “she became a local celebrity as a peanut vendor at the ‘Termite Palace’ stadium, and at Sears Roebuck Department Store” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2022).

Her eldest daughter, Yoshiko, dropped out of school in the fifth grade to help care for the family. As a child, Audrey’s mother worked as a field laborer, a “hotel housekeeper, a waitress at the Pacific Club in Honolulu, and as a maid in private homes” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2022). In time, she saved enough money to purchase a restaurant, the first of six restaurants she would own and run. A serial entrepreneur, she promised herself that she would educate all of her children. She worked tirelessly in her restaurants and expected her children to help (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 18, 2021). Once Audrey had started high school, Yoshiko returned to night school to get a GED diploma. After two years of evening classes, while working full-time, she completed her degree. Her graduation was “a very proud moment for Yoshiko” and her family (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2022).

Kitagawa learned to value hard work as a young child. Even as a 4-year-old, she helped in her mother’s restaurants, doing small chores such as filling salt and pepper shakers. Later, she waited tables and worked in the kitchen. As a teenager, she worked as a trimmer in the pineapple cannery during the summer. Kitagawa recalls coming home by bus, drenched in the smell of pineapples. Other summer jobs broadened her experience and sparked interests she pursued as an adult, including working “at the State Department of Education, at her then brother-in-law’s insurance company, and at Rice, Lee and Wong, a Honolulu law firm” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023).

In addition to working hard, Kitagawa was encouraged, along with her older siblings, to study and take her education seriously. Time off from working at the restaurant was only allowed for school activities. She wryly observes that she signed up for every debate and speech tournament she could (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 18, 2021)! She excelled in public speaking, a skill that would serve her as an adult, winning many awards in high school, which led to her selection as “one of 35 high school students from across the US accepted to attend a University of Southern California intensive summer speech program in debate, oral interpretation of literature, and extemporaneous speaking” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). Already as a high school student, she devoted her time to advocacy and leadership by representing her peers in local leadership positions, including her service as Honolulu High School Association President, ex-officio student representative on the Honolulu School Advisory Council, student representative on the Board of Education,” and the “student representative on the Mayor’s Advisory Council for Children and Youth” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023).



Kitagawa's mother set an example for her by working hard and dedicating herself to caring for her family. She later paid for Kitagawa's tuition for college and law school. She was a devout Buddhist, humble, and self-sacrificing (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 18, 2021). In reflecting on the women who influenced her, at a speech at the Faith in Women Plenary at the 2015 Parliament, Kitagawa remarked that her mother "understood the importance of family and of meeting her responsibilities as a mother and she in her own way gave us the understanding of what it is to live life with integrity" (Kitagawa 2015).

Religion was an integral part of Kitagawa's life from the beginning, in a way that exposed her to multiple faith traditions without any seeming contradiction among them. As in many Japanese homes, her family practiced both Buddhism and Shintoism (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 18, 2021). Kitagawa also attended Sunday school classes at a nearby Christian church. In this setting, she learned about "the Old and New Testament, and teachings of Jesus" (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). Thus, through education and spiritual practice, Kitagawa was comfortable with various religious traditions from a very early age.

Early in her life, Kitagawa decided she would become a lawyer. First, she attended the University of Southern California, where she was a double major in philosophy and political science, with a "strong minor" in religion. While she found philosophy dry, she found the religion classes very intriguing. In her first year of college, she took a semester off to manage her father's political campaign while he ran for his district's seat in the House of Representatives as a Republican. Kitagawa soon decided that politics was not for her. However, she made important connections during the campaign that would aid her future career as a lawyer (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 18, 2021). Kitagawa returned to college and became "a member of the Blackstonian Pre-Law Honor Society, and in the Political Science Honors program" (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). She graduated cum laude in 1973 (VoiceAmerica, n.d.).

Kitagawa then attended Boston College's Law School, where she completed her Juris Doctorate degree in 1976 (Zeder 1999). She had spent summers working for attorney Tom Rice, whom she met during her father's political campaign. After graduation, she joined his Honolulu law firm, Rice, Lee, and Wong. Eventually, after several years with the well-known firm, she branched out and started her own family law practice (Kitagawa 2021a, 6:22 - 7:46).

## ***Divine Mother's Influence & Light of Awareness Spiritual Family Group***

Kitagawa's life also changed spiritually during those years. Eventually she left the law to become a spiritual leader and teacher. The foundation for that transformation lay in her meeting Fora Tsuruyo Nomi, a Japanese woman in Hawaii whose profound spiritual teachings and deep loving presence had drawn to her a community, who came to know her as the Divine Mother. A friend suggested to Kitagawa that she meet her, so she made arrangements just before leaving Hawaii for law school. In their first meeting, at the Divine Mother's home,

Kitagawa listened to five hours of the Divine Mother's teachings on spiritual matters. This introduction began a transformation in her spiritual life, and she spent as much time with the Divine Mother as she could over the next twenty-plus-years (Chang 1998). Nomi was a housewife who raised five children and rarely left her home. Yet, her deep expression of love and remarkable spiritual transmissions drew people to her. She taught that the only true reality was God and that God is love. This community around her grew organically and eventually spread to other places in the United States, Australia and the UK. According to one newspaper article about Kitagawa, the community adherents will number in the millions (Chang 1998).

A serendipitous meeting with Swami Sarvagatananda, a Vedanta monk who led the Vedanta Society in Boston, initiated another profound religious connection for Kitagawa.<sup>2</sup> Swami Sarvagatananda agreed to speak with Kitagawa at the center, even though he was scheduled to go to MIT, where he served as a chaplain. He conversed with her about Sri Ramakrishna and the Vedanta society, and she eagerly absorbed his teaching. She began attending the weekly sermons and read as much as possible about Sri Ramakrishna, whom she took as her "chosen ideal." Kitagawa was drawn to him because "his teachings emphasize the oneness of the ultimate reality. Through his own sincere study and practice of different religious paths, Sri Ramakrishna reached that same ultimate reality and so declared 'as many faiths, so many paths, which in the end, all lead to the one great god'" (Light of Awareness 2009). Sri Ramakrishna's teachings affirmed what Kitagawa's own spiritual experience had taught her, and inspired her to dedicate her life to expressing her spirituality as he did, "through acts of love and kindness, a generosity of spirit and giving that is inspiring through its selflessness, thoughtfulness, and respect for one another" (Light of Awareness 2009).

Despite having a demanding career as a lawyer, Kitagawa always made time for spiritual practice, meditating daily and being an active member of the community that gathered at Fora Tsuruyo Nomi's modest home in Honolulu. At the end of her life, Nomi, known to her community as the Divine Mother, asked Kitagawa to lead the community after her death. Fora Tsuruyo Nomi died on May 22, 1992. Since then Kitagawa has served as Divine Mother to the Light of Awareness community. The community includes people from all walks of life, "doctors, lawyers, engineers, students, housewives, elderly people" who, as Kitagawa describes it, "have all experienced the power of love." The community gathers for meditation, to seek self awareness and God-consciousness, and encourage each other to embody Love through their thoughts, words, and actions (*The Sunday Times* 2004).

While Kitagawa loved practicing family law, she knew that at some point, the time would come to close her practice. Divine Mother had pointed at

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<sup>2</sup> Swami Sarvagatananda came to Boston in 1962, becoming the head of the Vedanta Society, a post he held until 2002. He also led the Vedanta Society of Providence, and served as the Hindu chaplain at MIT. Francis X. Clooney noted after his death, "His message was simple, and stressed the value of knowledge of the self, the possibility and value of spiritual progress, the presence of God everywhere, and the harmony of religions." See Francis X. Clooney, 2009. "The Death of a Swami, and His Bliss," *America*, May 8, 2009. <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/death-swami-and-his-bliss>

Kitagawa the first moment they met and told her, “**You** cannot serve two masters.” Even as she pursued her legal education and career, Kitagawa always knew that at some point, she would give up the practice of law to commit fully to a spiritual mission. This time came in 1996. As she tells it, Kitagawa was in her law office one evening, “preparing for a trial” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023), when her law diploma, framed and hung on the wall, suddenly dropped to the floor. Kitagawa took that as a sign that the time had come to transition. She transferred her ongoing cases to a colleague, who agreed to take on her staff, and closed her law office within two weeks. Kitagawa embarked with great faith on her new path, not taking any pay for her spiritual leadership, with openness to follow where God led her (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 18, 2021). “At the time of her retirement, Kitagawa was a Martin Dale Hubbell (AV) rated attorney, the highest rating for professional and ethical excellence in the legal profession. She was also listed in Who’s Who of American Law, Who’s Who of American Women, Who’s Who in the World, and Prominent People of Hawaii” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023).

## ***Roles in United Nations and Interfaith Organizations***

Kitagawa left Hawaii in 2000 for New York City, where she “continues to reside while also maintaining her residence in Honolulu, Hawaii” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). One of the messages imparted to Kitagawa by the Divine Mother was that “the light had to go to the United Nations” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). A few years after she arrived in New York, an opportunity emerged. Kitagawa was helping to organize the 2000 State of the World Forum, planned to coincide with the opening of the UN General Assembly that year and the Millennium Summit. The State of the World Forum was a project of the Mikhail Gorbachev Foundation launched in 1995. As described in CNN World News, Gorbachev sought to promote “mutual solidarity, unity in diversity and world peace” as the world emerged from the Cold War (Lefevre 1995). Participants at the first gathering in San Francisco included political leaders such as former US president George Bush and former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Paddock 1995), religious leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh, and activists like Jane Goodall (Halifax 1995). In 2000, the State of the World Forum planned a major conference to coincide with the UN Millennium Summit. One of the event’s key themes was “the emergence of civil society in shaping world priorities and the mechanisms of global governance” (State of the World Forum 2000). This theme continued throughout Kitagawa’s work over the coming two decades.

As part of the programming, Kitagawa invited Olara Otunnu, the Special Representative for the Office of Children and Armed Conflict at the UN, to “give a plenary speech” at the gathering (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). After the conference, Otunnu invited Kitagawa to serve as a special advisor to his office (Kitagawa 2019b, 19:04 - 20:27). She spent the next five years in this role, raising awareness of the need to protect children in war zones. She spoke about the stark

realities, including the recruitment of boys as soldiers at very young ages, children being maimed or killed by landmines, and the particular vulnerability of women and girls in conflict situations, subject to rape or forced to serve as concubines (Kitagawa 2005b). The Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict emphasized “engagement with the general public and media outreach activities” as part of their advocacy strategies to increase awareness of the issues (UN General Assembly 2005, 6).<sup>3</sup> Kitagawa traveled widely and spoke to many constituencies. As she spoke about these issues, she brought spirituality and morality into the conversation, grounding the work in deeper spiritual truths (Kitagawa 2003, 23).

After concluding her work as a special advisor, Kitagawa’s interest in spirituality and its role in shaping the work of the UN led her to participate in various NGO settings. She served as a special advisor to the World Federation of United Nations Associations and joined the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values, and Global Concerns in New York (SVGC-NY). SVGC-NY was founded in 2004, and is recognized as a committee of CONGO, the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN. Their mission statement supports “the recognition and acceptance that spirituality and adherence to universal values are key factors in providing solutions to global concerns” (CSVGC-NY, n.d., “Evolving Mission Statement”). From June 2006 to May 2010, Kitagawa was chair of CSVGC-NY (CSVGC-NY n.d., “History”, 12).

Similarly, Kitagawa has been a long-time member of the United Religions Initiative (URI), another significant global interfaith movement. She has served as a representative to the United Nations for URI, and as the co-facilitator for the URI UN Cooperation Circle (Kitagawa 2021b; *May Peace Prevail on Earth* 2009). Kitagawa is also a member of the “Voices for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons” URI Cooperation Circle, whose goal is to “assist in the effort to abolish nuclear weapons through peace-building and conflict transformation (Voices for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons, n.d.). She was also made an honorary president of Religions for Peace International in 2019 (URI 2019).

Kitagawa’s involvement with the Parliament of the World’s Religions overlapped with her work toward bringing spirituality into conversations on global affairs. She led a workshop on Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings at the Cape Town Parliament in 1999. She then served a term as co-vice-chair of the Board, beginning in 2008, and attended the Barcelona Parliament in 2004 and the Melbourne Parliament in 2009. At the 2015 Parliament in Salt Lake City, she was a keynote speaker at the Faith in Women Plenary (Parliament of the World’s Religions, Program Guide, Salt Lake, October 15-19, 2015). In 2018, she succeeded Robert Sellers as chair of the Board of Trustees, becoming the first woman to hold this role (Marshall 2018; Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). It was a remarkable sign of progress for the Parliament, which traces its founding to the 1893 Parliament held in Chicago. The religious leaders present in

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<sup>3</sup> For more details on the role of this office in the UN, see “The Mandate,” Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/about/the-mandate/>. Accessed November 3, 2021.

1893 were overwhelmingly male; only nineteen women were among the over 200 speakers (Chaffe 2020). In more modern times, women have increasingly become visible as religious leaders and as participants at Parliament gatherings. In the 2009 Parliament, gender equity and reclaiming the feminine divine were major topics of discussion, with pink buttons being passed around that asked, “What happens when women lead?” (Schaaf et al, 2012, 3). Since then, issues of gender equity have been increasingly visible aspects of the Parliament gatherings.

As chair, Kitagawa led the Board as it navigated the COVID-19 pandemic, adjusting its ways of planning and working. She helped expand the work of the Parliament, offering online programming addressing global issues throughout the year. Kitagawa’s leadership with the Parliament of the World’s Religions combines a concern for spiritual development and personal transformation, along with critical analysis of the world’s problems and encouragement of cooperative, cross-cultural efforts to address them. She notes that the world’s problems cannot be solved unless people of faith are at the table and work together across their divisions to effect change. In her remarks at the Plenary on Change at the 2018 Parliament, she observed, “the Parliament of the World’s Religions provides this international platform where people from all over the world can come together and to share, to inspire each other” (Kitagawa, 2019a, 11:55).

While chair of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Kitagawa oversaw the production of a video on the 75th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2020a). She also arranged for the participation of key Japanese government officials. The video was co-sponsored by Religions for Peace, United Religions Initiative, Parliament of the World’s Religions, and Charter for Compassion. The premiere was held on August 6, 2020, at the same time as the bombing of Hiroshima seventy-five years earlier (Kitagawa 2020a, 9:07). She also oversaw the production of a video for the International Day for the Conservation of Tropical Forests: Highlighting the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. The video was co-sponsored by the UNEP Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, Jane Goodall Institute, and the Parliament of the World’s Religions (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2020c).

In writing about Hans Küng and his drafting of the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic, adopted by the Parliament in 1993, Kitagawa notes, “In calling out the pain and suffering in the world, it offers a way forward that seeks the alleviation of social ills through justice, respect for life, and readiness to help others” (Kitagawa 2021c). As chair, she emphasized the importance of the Global Ethic, noting, “The Parliament’s Global Ethic, whose principles are foundational to our work, will have prominence in programs that seek to establish values and the development of a moral compass to guide our actions for the betterment of ourselves and the world in which we live” (Kitagawa 2018). She also affirmed the role the Parliament can and does play in fostering mutual respect and building cooperation among people of faith. “The Parliament of the World’s Religions provides an inclusive, dialogic platform for people from all over the world representing a broad spectrum of religious and spiritual traditions who answer a call to harmoniously and respectfully come together to share their voices, hear the

voices of others, and partake of as well as contribute to the collective wisdom of our stories that affirm our common humanity” (Kitagawa 2018). Kitagawa served two years as chair of the Board of Trustees; at the end of 2020, the Trustees elected Nitin Ajmera to be the next chair, and Kitagawa stepped off the board (Miriam V. Quezada Mendez, interview with author, December 20, 2022).

In 2021, Kitagawa launched a new organization, the International Academy for Multicultural Cooperation (IAMC), to gather faith leaders and experts to work collaboratively on solutions to global problems. Kitagawa uses this platform to foster education, advocacy, joint problem-solving, and implementation of concrete steps to address complex and urgent global needs. IAMC has been very active in its first two years, and its programming frequently addresses issues of peace, sustainable development and anti-racism (International Academy for Multicultural Cooperation, n.d.). In addition to its education and advocacy work, IAMC - produces videos that express the spiritual values of unity and harmony, reaching people emotionally as well as intellectually. Kitagawa embraces video productions and social media as tools to educate and inspire people to action. IAMC regularly posts videos on Facebook and Instagram regarding special UN days, such as their December 3, 2022 post for International Day of Persons with Disabilities and their November 3, 2022 post for the Day of Remembrance for all Victims of Chemical Warfare. IAMC also “co-sponsored the G-7 Hiroshima Summit held in Tokyo, with the G-7 Research Group, Soka Gakai International, and Soka University addressing the nuclear weapons and climate change issues. Policy recommendations from this gathering were brought to the G-7 summit leaders” (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023).

Beyond her work with IAMC, Kitagawa has also been a notable leader in the G20 Interfaith Forum, a non-governmental organization which brings together faith leaders to discuss the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) and make policy recommendations to global leaders at the annual G20 summit. Kitagawa has served as chair of their G20 Interfaith Forum Anti-Racism Initiative and also co-chair of their IF20 Gender Equity Task Force (Wadsworth 2022). As stated on their website, the Anti-Racism Initiative works toward “the eradication of racism as a standing item for both the IF20 and the G20 agendas; and to work towards advancing the goal of racial equality and equity by every means available.” They have organized webinars on “Anti-Semitism,” “Racism in the Media,” “Ecological Racism,” “Responses to Anti-Asian Hate Crimes,” and more (IF20, n.d.). Kitagawa notes that international leaders are increasingly recognizing the importance of hearing from religious communities in making decisions about global issues. (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023).

## ***Spiritual and Interfaith Leadership***

Kitagawa continues to be a source of inspiration to her own religious community, at the same time that she has engaged in her work at the global level. She notes that her community is integral to everything she does in the world (Kitagawa, pers. comm., May 21, 2023). Kitagawa’s spiritual leadership is centered first and

foremost on encouraging spiritual development and personal transformation. Kitagawa grounds all her interfaith activities in the belief that love is at the heart of all religions. However, her spirituality does not require her to withdraw from the world. Instead, her awareness that the only true and absolute reality is God and that all physical manifestations are temporary and ultimately not real leads to the erasure of boundaries between ourselves and others. Furthermore, this awareness leads to humility, compassion, and service to others so that practitioners actively engage with the world. She believes that “we are really love - pure, perfect, unconditional - and that we are all tasked to be able to bring that love in our everyday seemingly ordinary lives and actualizing the reality of the living god in our lives here, now, every moment that we live, through every loving thought, every loving word and every loving action.” She acknowledges that “it sounds simple but it’s not easy” (Kitagawa 2019, Insight podcast). After her talks, Kitagawa often offers a prayer or meditation. Her messages emphasize that the transformation of the world starts with the transformation of individuals:

*Love expressed and shared daily with others, magnifies into greatness. Live everyday from the power of love that your life may be your message radiant as a beacon of light, and filled with hope and inspiration to all those whose lives you touch within your family, your community and the world. (Kitagawa 2019b)*

Kitagawa’s leadership is grounded in the spiritual concept of selfless service. She notes, “An important aspect of not only my tradition, which is interfaith, but of most of the spiritual, religious and faith traditions around the world is that of *seva*. *Seva* is a Sanskrit word that means selfless service. Selfless service means you give of yourself whether it be of your time, your energies, your resources, to help others without any expectation of return, for your own personal edification, acknowledgement or self-aggrandizement. The giving is a form of offering to the Divine and becomes sanctified in its purity when done in this fashion” (Kitagawa 2020b, 0:21–1:32).

In 2016, Kitagawa received the Spirit of UN Award from the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values, and Global Concerns, an annual award that recognizes global leaders who “have made great efforts implementing the UN core principles and spirit” (GFHS Forum 2017). In 2019, she was made an honorary president of the United Religions Initiative (URI 2019). She has also been honored by the Interfaith Seminary in New York City and given the title of Interfaith Minister (Light of Awareness 2009). She was also accepted as a member of the Ghanaian royal family – “enstooled” as a Queen Mother of Development in Agyemanti, Ghana where she was granted a Ghanaian name, Nana Ode Anyankobe. A girl’s school was named in her honor (GNA 2003; Kitagawa 2003b).

As a religious leader and interfaith activist, Audrey Kitagawa has demonstrated the ability to connect the personal with the global. As a spiritual leader, she emphasizes personal transformation through meditation and awareness of the unity of all creation, known as the awakening of God consciousness. She

preaches that God is love and that each day we are alive is an opportunity to practice love in our actions, thoughts, and speech. Nevertheless, Kitagawa brings both reason and spiritual grounding to her work and has been a strong advocate for a critical understanding of the root causes of problems as the base from which global cooperation should begin. This emphasis on causality has led her to advocate for a broader lens through which to see the world's problems. She believes that including women at all levels of participation, from the local to the global, is critical for achieving positive change, both in attaining the UN sustainability goals and peace and justice in general.

## ***Women's Leadership***

Kitagawa's leadership within the interfaith movement reflects characteristics women often bring to the table. Susan Hayward notes that "women generally, and particularly women of faith, reach across religious, political, ethnic, and other divides in conflict zones to build bridges between communities through deepening interpersonal relationships, and to create broad-based movements and constituencies for peace" (Hayward 2015, 314-5). She goes on to note that "women's work for peace is often very relational, that is, focused on building and deepening interpersonal relationships that can be both individually and socially transformative" (Hayward 2015, 315). Kitagawa excels at building coalitions and mobilizing various actors to work collaboratively, emphasizing finding practical solutions to real problems. Education about contemporary issues is a hallmark of her work with the International Academy for Multicultural Cooperation, the Parliament, and the G20 Interfaith Forum. For example, she organized a webinar on "Responses to Anti-Asian Hate Crimes," which featured a panel of five Asian American leaders from the federal, state, and local levels of government (G20 Interfaith Forum 2021). She also works at the grassroots level, as is exemplified by a trip she led with sixty-three members of her spiritual family to Sri Lanka in 2004 to bring medical and educational supplies to an area of the country hard hit by inter-religious conflict and violence (*The Sunday Times* 2004).

Azza Karam, the first woman to serve as Executive Director of Religions for Peace, has observed that "women of faith bring in their own unique perspectives, experiences and insights into leadership spaces. There is a stronger tendency among them to build alliances, interconnect with diverse institutions and have developed numerous goals to negotiate difficult challenges and these are important skills which will add value to the current practices" (Parliament of the World's Religions 2020b, 57:36-58:14). Karam goes on to mention Kitagawa as an example, saying, "Just listen to Audrey Kitigawa and assess how she has elevated the Parliament to a space of ongoing collaboration and service - this is how women of faith make a difference" (Parliament of the World's Religions 2020b, 57:36-58:14).

Kitagawa herself has been outspoken about the need to involve women in addressing the world's problems, saying, "it's very important that women be incorporated into all processes not only environmental, not only in all of the



sustainable development goals but in all peace processes, political processes, because truly if we want to see efficacious transformation in the world we must recognize the power of women” (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2020b, 58:00-60:35). She frequently notes that motherhood is influential in shaping many women’s approach to life and that we should respect women because we are each born from a mother’s womb. She also holds up as a positive value the hard work that women undertake on behalf of their families and communities. In her New Year’s message of 2019 as PoWR Chair, she affirmed, “The rise of women in roles of leadership in religious institutions, peace processes and family homes to the houses of governance will bring the flourishing of respect, dignity and equality for marginalized and vulnerable people everywhere. Women’s powerful voices of advocacy cannot be ignored” (Kitagawa 2018).

### ***Knowledge Inequity & Women Religious Leaders***

As noted in a report produced by the United States Institute of Peace, “[t]he work of women building peace from within religious communities has been largely overlooked in analysis, policy, and practice” (Marshall and Hayward 2011, 5). Yet women religious actors can and do play critical roles in dialogue and peacemaking. Many women activists and peacemakers ground their work in spiritual practices or religious beliefs, regardless of whether or not they hold ecclesiastical authority (Hayward and Marshall 2022; Hayward 2015). Sharing the stories of women religious peacemakers is an important move towards greater knowledge equity. In so doing, we can learn from their successes and failures and better understand the processes by which significant portions of the religious communities wrestle with issues of peace and conflict resolution (Schaaf et al, 2012).

Due to her extensive use of social media, finding primary sources on Kitagawa’s work as an interfaith leader is very easy. Yet there is almost no coverage of her work in secondary sources, such as the press or other media. This reflects the fact that very few media outlets cover interfaith activities or report on activities of organizations such as the Parliament of the World’s Religions and the IF20. Even when these organizations do report on activities, only a select few individuals will be mentioned or quoted. The kind of organizing and collaborative work done by Kitagawa and other faith leaders is not typically covered in the press. This lack of coverage then becomes a barrier to admission to tertiary sites like Wikipedia, which require neutral third party sources to confirm notability (Wikipedia, n.d., “Notability”).

This biography has offered a sketch of the myriad ways that Kitagawa has impacted the spaces in which she has moved as a lawyer, religious figure, and interfaith practitioner. She heads a religious community that values her leadership and wisdom. She is an outspoken advocate for women and girls, the environment, and peace. She has effectively built bridges and led organizations that continue to make an impact through their organizing, education, and collaborations. She represents the many women who are energizing the growing interfaith movement and many transnational, pan-generational, and cross-cultural efforts worldwide.

It is important, of course, not to essentialize women and to recognize that women are incredibly diverse and have different approaches when working as leaders. Nevertheless, a significant number of women lead in this type of collaborative way, and ground their work in their spiritual vision. Kitagawa's religious approach is a central part of her work and provides an example of a non-Western, mystical approach to spiritual authority. To understand the breadth of leadership models and to identify possibilities for solving global problems, we need to understand how these leaders lead.

Unfortunately, when women faith leaders “fall through the cracks” of research and media coverage, they are further silenced on tertiary sites like Wikipedia, which depend on reliable secondary sources. The absence of these sources prevents them from being included on the site, rendering their work invisible. As Jackie Koerner has noted, “knowledge from published, written materials with a preference toward academic and peer reviewed publications epitomizes reliability. The reliable sources policy limits knowledge equity by ignoring knowledge that falls outside of the rules” (Koerner 2020).

## *Conclusion*

The role of religious women leaders in creating just, sustainable societies and building peace is an under-studied area within the field of religion, peace, and conflict. This gap reflects the undervaluing of less hierarchical models of leadership, and the assumption that religious leadership is male. It also reflects a hesitancy within the study of women and peace to address spirituality. Audrey Kitagawa is a woman who crosses many boundaries, as a global citizen, interfaith leader, a deeply mystical person, and a recognized spiritual leader. Her work shows the ways a spiritual and mystical religious approach can be helpful in navigating interfaith activity. She provides an inclusive collaborative leadership model, and her impact on the interfaith movement reveals the strengths of this model for building coalitions. As more women take on senior leadership roles in interfaith organizations, and other faith settings, following Kitagawa's model, we need to reflect on how these women's life and work offer insights into how to create a just peace in the world. Audrey Kitagawa's successes and struggles help us to understand how deeply spiritual motivations fueled her work and created leadership models that provide for greater collaboration and cooperation as we face global challenges like never before.

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**Dolly Dastoor**  
***Celebrated Dementia***  
***Researcher, Committed***  
***Zoroastrian, Inter-***  
***Religious Leader***

SHERYL JOHNSON



Source: FEZANA

***Introduction***

Dr. Dolly Dastoor is a practicing Zoroastrian who serves as an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. In addition to her full and celebrated professional life, Dastoor has served as the president of the Federation of the Zoroastrian Associations of North America, as a trustee of the Parliament of the World's Religions, and as the Co-chair of the Parliament's Women's Task Force. In 2020, Dastoor was elected vice-chair of the Parliament. Through her work with the Parliament of the World's Religions, Dastoor advocates for the inclusion and equitable treatment of practitioners and scholars representing non-dominant religious and spiritual traditions such as Zoroastrianism. Considering Dastoor's struggles and accomplishments as a clinician and researcher in dementia and her active role in her faith community and the inter-religious movement allows for a consideration of systemic bias against women and women of color in particular, illustrating the importance of addressing issues like knowledge equity.

Knowledge equity is a concept that challenges conventional standards for what counts and what is considered valuable with respect to information. It promotes work to include and advocate for the participation of marginalized peoples in all sectors of society, and acknowledges more broadly that knowledge that women and people of color tend to hold has generally been discounted and devalued - or simply ignored. Advocating for the role of women within Zoroastrianism and for women's role in the interfaith dialogue has been a central commitment of Dastoor's life and represents work to address knowledge inequity by bringing forth more marginalized perspectives and experiences in these fora. Scholarship about Dastoor's life and work therefore also advances knowledge



equity on a broader scale, offering information about how this work has been done through her life and work, and contributing insights that could apply in other settings. I am very grateful to Dr. Dastoor, who was willing to meet with me (connecting by e-mail and virtually, over Zoom) primarily in April 2021 and answer extensive questions about her life. It was a pleasure and a delight to meet her through this project, and I am grateful for her participation. I begin this biography by offering a brief introduction to Zoroastrianism for those who may not be familiar with this religious tradition.

## ***Zoroastrianism***

Dastoor has been a lifelong practitioner of Zoroastrianism, and its stories, values, rituals, and commitments have richly shaped and informed her life, family, and communities. Its emphasis on education has been particularly influential on her personally. Zoroastrianism is a religious tradition that originated in what is today Iran and was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (also known as Zaratustra, Zartosht, or Zarathushtra). It involves a dualistic cosmology of good and evil, the worship of a deity of wisdom known as Ahura Mazda, and an emphasis on the ultimate triumph of goodness. This monotheistic tradition teaches a belief in judgment after death, heaven and hell, and humanity's free will. The major practices include the threefold path of Asha: good thoughts, good words, good deeds; practicing charity; and being good for its own sake, without the hope of reward. Zoroastrianism's precise date of origin is unknown, but practitioners claim it originated in the second millennium BCE. From about 600 BCE to 650 CE, it served as the official religion of the Iranian empires but then declined due to the Muslim conquest of the region. Today, there are about 110,000–120,000 adherents, mostly located in Iran, India, and North America ("Zoroastrianism," n.d.).

## ***Early Life, Education, and Career***

Dr. Dolly Dastoor was born in Mumbai, India, on November 16, 1939. She was the second oldest of four children, with an older sister and two younger brothers (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Her father, Manchersha Manekji Bharucha, was a stockbroker, and her mother, Gulcher Darabsha Kolsawalla, was a housewife (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 30, 2021). Her family practiced Zoroastrianism, although she describes her father as more religious than her mother. They were not particularly "orthodox" and were very open in their dispositions, interacting with people of various faiths and beliefs (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

Her aunt, Sheroo Kolsawalla, was an important role model for Dastoor growing up (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 30, 2021). Kolsawalla completed her master's degree in French and wanted to pursue a PhD but had to give up further education due to a financial market crash and limited family resources (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor looked up to this aunt partly because of her educational achievements and work as a teacher, something she envisioned

for herself. Generally speaking, her family supported women's education. Many women in her extended family attended university and had professional careers—"there was no bar for anyone to do anything" (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

For high school, Dastoor attended a convent girls' school. She completed her undergraduate and master's degrees (BA and MA) at Bombay University (now the University of Mumbai) (Dastoor, pers. comm., January 13, 2023). Upon entering university, she wanted to go into medicine. However, because she had not taken physics and chemistry in high school, she could not enroll (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Instead, she chose psychology because it was adjacent to the sciences but did not require these prerequisite courses (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Throughout her education, she did not experience gender-based discrimination personally and found her university years stimulating and empowering (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

In 1964, after her marriage to Dr. Phiroz Dastoor (a chemist), she and her husband moved to Nigeria for her husband's university teaching position (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). There, she served as a World Health Organization research fellow at the University College Hospital in Ibadan, Nigeria (Fine 2020). One project she worked on involved a comparative analysis of the treatment of those with schizophrenia by doctors in hospitals and by traditional healers in village settings (Fine 2020). They found that the outcomes for the patients in both settings were similar (Fine 2020), which connects nicely to Dastoor's long commitment to home-based care for those with dementia.

In Nigeria, Dastoor also became active in several community service organizations, including her service as the president of the University of Ibadan's Women's Club from 1969-73 and as chairperson of the University of Ibadan Women's Society (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 30, 2021). Through her volunteer work with Zonta International, she was exposed to and became involved with the reality of sexism in Nigeria but also more broadly. Zonta International is a civic organization with the mission of advancing the status of women (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Founded in the US in 1919, Zonta is now a global organization in 62 countries where it works to empower women through service and advocacy (Zonta International 2022). Typical of Dastoor, she became active in the leadership of the Zonta Club of Ibadan. As part of her service, she led a workshop on the difficult realities of women worldwide. Here she was exposed to the discrimination and violence experienced by many women, including higher rates of abortion and infanticide of female children (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). At that point, she began identifying as a feminist, which she understood as promoting the role of women and girls in all sectors of society (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Reflecting on the fact that she often ended up in leadership roles in these organizations, she claims she did not seek them out but that others saw her leadership gifts and she was willing to serve (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

The couple's three children were born in Nigeria (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor and her family left Nigeria in 1973 as the country was

moving increasingly toward nationalization with the desire to have essential posts filled by Nigerians whenever possible (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

## ***Life and Career in Montreal***

In 1973, Dastoor and her family moved to Montreal, Canada, where some of her husband's family had settled (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor began work as a research fellow and later as a psychologist at what is now the Douglas Mental Health University Institute, where she became interested in geriatrics. In 1978, she developed a program for "continuous care" for patients experiencing dementia (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Whereas previously, patients were moved as their symptoms progressed, this new approach allowed them to stay in place and have increased care brought to them as needed (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor noted that while other people found the "setting depressing, [she] found it exhilarating" (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021), a feeling that set her on the path that would define much of her life's work.

She also worked on the issue of family involvement in patient care and the possibilities for supportive programs to connect different families caring for loved ones with dementia (Fine 2020). This involvement led her to help found the Alzheimer Society of Montreal, which offers a variety of programs, including support groups for families (Fine 2020). Originally the Alzheimer Society in Quebec, this organization was founded in 1981 and works "to alleviate the social and personal consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related disorders through the development and delivery of leading-edge intervention, care and support services" (Alzheimer Society Montreal 2022). Dastoor's interest in developing new approaches to dementia care led her to complete her PhD in Clinical Psychology at Concordia University in Montreal in 1999, successfully finishing her degree at the same time as her son and daughter completed their advanced degrees (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Throughout her career, Dastoor has specialized in the assessment and treatment of dementia. One of her key professional achievements was publishing a scale to diagnose dementia named the Hierarchic Dementia Scale for Assessment and Prognosis of Dementia, developed jointly with Dr. Martin Cole (Cole and Dastoor 1996). This test measures the loss of cognitive and physical functions over time and remains widely used today.

In 1991, before completing her PhD, Dastoor began teaching as an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University and continued to work at Douglas as well (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 30, 2021). She participated in a complete remodel of the university's hospital in the early 2000s, a redesign that earned the space its description as a "4-star hotel" and contributed to the hospital receiving many awards (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). This new development was named the Moe Levin Centre (opened in 2003) and included a day program, memory clinic, and overnight facilities (Fine 2020; The Douglas Research Center 2023). Dastoor shared that the philosophy of the program was to make it feel more like a home and less like an institution, allowing residents to have their own rooms, wear regular clothes (rather than

hospital clothing), and eat familiar homemade foods (such as cakes and other baked goods), etc. (Fine 2020).

Her professional achievements include her service as divisional chair of the Canadian Association on Gerontology, secretary/treasurer of the Aging Division of the Canadian Psychological Association, and her selection as the 1990 recipient of the Roberts Award of Douglas Hospital for outstanding achievement. Although she officially retired in 2014, Dastoor remains affiliated with McGill and continues to serve as co-director of the Program for Dementia with Psychiatric Co-Morbidity at the Moe Levin Centre at the Douglas Mental Health University Institute (McGill Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences 2021).

## ***Leadership in the Zoroastrian and Inter-religious Communities***

In addition to her professional work, Dastoor has maintained active leadership in the Zoroastrian community throughout her life. Upon her arrival in Montreal, she became active in the Zoroastrian Association of Quebec and served as president several times, from 1978-1985; 1993-1997; 2005-2007; and 2013-2015 (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 30, 2021; English Zoroastrian Library 2021). She brought the North American Congress of the Federation of the Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) to Montreal and also served as the Secretary (1988-93) and then President of FEZANA from 1994-1998 (English Zoroastrian Library 2021). Under Dastoor's leadership, the World Zoroastrian Congress was held in Houston in 2000, the first time it was held outside of Iran and India. At the same time, she was also elected to be the co-chair of the World Zoroastrian Congress (2000) (English Zoroastrian Library 2021). Her many leadership roles in her faith community also include serving as the chair of the FEZANA Academic Scholarship Committee and as the Chief Editor of the *FEZANA Journal*, roles she continues at present (FEZANA 2016 and Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

The *FEZANA Journal* is a quarterly publication that considers various contemporary civic and religious issues (*FEZANA Journal* 2021). Recent editions have considered topics such as the COVID-19 global pandemic and issues related to human rights. Dastoor shared that her goal in her role with the journal is to “promote young women and give exposure to them” (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Whenever possible, she strives to profile young women and give them opportunities to write and share their work and perspectives. Dastoor admitted that sometimes she feels it is daunting because so many young women look up to her because of the broad impact of the editorials that she writes for each issue (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

Dastoor's leadership in the Zoroastrian community led her to an interest in inter-religious dialogue. From her perspective, Zoroastrians have yet to be active in the inter-faith movement due to their relatively small numbers and the concentration of their communities in only a few locations worldwide, limiting their interactions with diverse traditions. In 2016, the *Parsi Times* reported Dastoor's election as a trustee on the Board of the Parliament, the only person

of the Zoroastrian tradition to serve in that role. Her election is also highlighted on the FEZANA website, where Dastoor is celebrated for this accomplishment and recognized as a “leading light in the Zoroastrian Community” (FEZANA 2016). In 2018, Dastoor also was elected as co-chair of the Parliament’s Women’s Task Force, which supports “advocacy for the dignity of women across religious and spiritual traditions” (Parliament of the World’s Religions 2020). In 2018, Dastoor attended the Parliament of the World’s Religions. Dastoor shared that “it was an exhilarating experience to see so many people working together from all different cultures and religions” (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). The 2018 Parliament in Toronto featured Zoroastrianism more prominently than in the past, partly because there is a significant number of Zoroastrians living in Toronto. However, Dastoor’s leadership was also a contributing factor (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

Dastoor is very committed to raising the profile of Zoroastrianism and to deep interfaith engagement and comparative religious dialogue, co-creating new rituals, and engaging in interfaith community service to support the common good. At the 2018 Parliament, Dastoor ensured that one of the visits to sites of religious worship was to a Zoroastrian temple. Additionally, she nominated a Zoroastrian woman (journalist Parisa Khosravi) to be one of the plenary speakers at the Congress. An interesting inter-faith element at the 2018 Parliament was that some religious ceremonies were held jointly by Zoroastrians and Canadian Indigenous spiritual leaders (FEZANA 2018). Dastoor reflected on how some symbols, such as fire and water, are common to both traditions (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

In Dastoor’s view, the Zoroastrian tradition is very open, with a strong focus on civic engagement and collaboration across differences (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). However, Zoroastrianism places some limitations on women. Significantly, they cannot be mobed, meaning they can not become full priests. However, in the last 5-7 years, it has become possible for a woman to serve as a lower-status priest (known as mobedyar) in both Iran and North America, although not yet in India (Religion Watch 2023; Gholamhosseinpour 2020).

Dastoor identifies much work going on in North America to give men and women equal status in the religion. In the case of intermarriage outside of Zoroastrianism, traditionally, any children born to the couple are only considered Zoroastrian if the father is Zoroastrian (Encyclopaedia Iranica 2011). However, in North America, the children can be considered Zoroastrian if either parent is from the tradition. Additionally, the customary initiation ceremony for boys (navjote) is performed for all children in North America (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). A mobed training program is currently being established in North America (arZan 2020). Dastoor is hopeful this development will help to ensure there is a more egalitarian tradition going forward (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

The move toward gender equity is not a recent development within Zoroastrianism, but is rather, Dastoor argues, a return to something that was originally present within the tradition. In a 1994 article in the journal *Ecumenism*,

Dastoor cites evidence found in the Gathas, the hymns attributed to Zarathushtra (the founder and prophet of Zoroastrianism) (Dastoor 1994, 31). This hymn includes instructions given to both women and men that honor the agency of both, the critical role Zarathushtra bestowed upon his youngest daughter, and a verse that notes that men and women can be rulers (Dastoor 1994, 31). Dastoor argues that both women and men were understood as created in God's image and that commemorations of the earliest Zoroastrians include the names of many women (27 of the 261 persons named) (Dastoor 1994, 31-32). However, Dastoor traces the development of gender inequality many centuries after the tradition was founded (around 1500 BCE), during the Parthian period (250 BCE to 224 CE). She finds these restrictions on women to originate in the Vendidad, a text which dates to this period. The text introduces the ideas of women as impure, particularly when menstruating or after delivering a stillborn child. It also restricts their agency in certain situations, such as choosing a husband (Dastoor 1994, 32). Dastoor concludes by arguing that there are, to this day, important issues of equality to address that stem from these restrictions (such as restrictions against women's religious leadership and participation) and that we must recover the original intention of the tradition which was for equality between women and men in all spheres of life (Dastoor 1994, 33).

## ***Current Life and Work***

Dastoor continues to rise in the ranks of the leadership of the Parliament of the World's Religions. In 2020, she was elected as its vice-chair (Parliament of the World's Religions 2023). The *Parsi Times* newspaper celebrated this achievement and described her election as a "great moment of pride for the global Zoroastrian community" (*Parsi Times*, 2020). She also continues to be active in the assemblies held at the Parliament of the World's Religions. At the 2021 virtual gathering of the Parliament, she offered a prayer at the closing plenary (Parliament of the World's Religions, 2023).

Dastoor retains a substantial standing in the academic community. In 2019, on the occasion of her 80th birthday, she decided to establish a scholarship through McGill University for a student specializing in dementia (Fine 2020). She is particularly hopeful this will advance research on the problem of how to keep people with dementia at home rather than in institutions (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Further, she is concerned that too much attention has been paid to pharmacological treatments of dementia and too little to the possibilities of physical and occupational therapy (Fine 2020). The Dolly Dastoor Research Award supports the scholarship of a graduate student in the McGill School of Physical and Occupational Therapy (SPOT) who focuses on dementia care (Fine 2020). She also continues to serve on the Education Committee of the McGill University Research Centre for Studies in Aging (MCSA) (McGill 2022).

Dastoor also continues to lead community programs through the McGill Center for Aging. One such program is the "Brainy Boomer" lecture series supporting healthy aging for seniors in Montreal. Dastoor shared her delight that

participation has more than doubled with the program moving online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). This increased access to programming represents Dastoor's passion for new technology and new techniques, always striving to impact the broadest possible audience. Another example is her participation in creating the Zoroastrian Global Glossary, the first-ever English-language glossary of Zoroastrian terminology (FEZANA 2021). Its purpose is to provide uniform spellings and common understandings of terms related to cosmology, ethics, concepts, rituals, texts, historical figures, and more (FEZANA 2021). Dastoor's glossary, published previously in the *FEZANA Journal*, was a foundational resource for this glossary (FEZANA 2021).

In reflecting upon the intersection between her faith and her professional work, Dastoor notes that religion can play an important role in aging, "As people grow older, they often become more reflective and introspective, and ask big questions about life and death. As dementia progresses people are no longer able to ask those big questions but religious services can bring a sense of calm and offer familiarity" (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor shared that her mother developed dementia toward the end of her life and she "couldn't remember many things but she could remember prayers" (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

Dastoor locates the source of her desire to serve the community in her faith tradition. She believes that Zoroastrianism teaches it is okay to make money and be successful but that "you have to give back to the community, be philanthropic" (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). This approach is promoted for individuals but also modeled by the community at large. Dastoor shared that unlike the ornate temples of some religious traditions, Zoroastrian temples are relatively plain and simple. "Zoroastrians build temples for education," states Dastoor, noting the long history of Zoroastrian financial support for institutions and initiatives that demonstrate a focus on lifelong learning (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

In her personal life, she is the proud grandmother of six children. She enjoys traveling to visit them and her children, now spread across the North American continent (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

## ***Looking to the Future***

In consideration of the future of the inter-religious movement, Dastoor raises the need for the focus to shift away from "preaching to the converted" (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). She worries that those who attend the Parliament of the World's Religions and other inter-religious gatherings tend to be already open to diversity. Those engaged in inter-religious violence and extremism are not included within the scope of these inter-religious efforts (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor suggests the need for grassroots initiatives to reach those who still need to be engaged in inter-faith work, expanding circles of influence by reaching out to people who are involved only in their local faith communities and providing them with opportunities to engage with those of other faith traditions and backgrounds.

Dastoor is also concerned about climate change. She believes that climate change exacerbates inequality and conflict and often has the most significant impact on women. She highlights the importance of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which FEZANA, in part due to her leadership, has supported for several years (Damodaran 2021). Her concern extends to girls in the Global South (especially in drought-prone areas) who must now drop out of school in order to travel the increased distances needed to fetch water and other essentials (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Dastoor recognizes the intersectionality of her various concerns and the necessity to ensure that the needs of girls and women are at the center of importance: "We need to ensure women's empowerment by supporting their financial independence," which is something Dastoor does concretely by donating to a variety of causes that address this need (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021). Through her financial support of Zonta International, various scholarship funds, and other nonprofits that support women, she helps to support women's education, training, and employment opportunities so that women have their own income generating capacities (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

Dastoor is hopeful about the future of Zoroastrianism. She notes that there is a great openness to diversity in terms of types of religious practice and approaches to the religion itself. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused religious practices to evolve including an increased use of technology. Dastoor shared her excitement and amazement about the use of video conferencing platforms for religious ceremonies and death rituals. These changed practices are adapting to the needs of new generations and allowing more people to participate (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

She also finds hope in the next generation and in the many women she has mentored. Many of these women have become leaders in their own right and are doing critical work to advance the status of women and girls and empower marginalized communities more broadly. For example, Freyaz Shroff, an NGO leader and founder of KurNiv Success Solutions in Mumbai, shares that Dr. Dastoor "has been a role model of courage, dedication, and tenacity" (Shroff, pers. comm., January 17, 2023). She recalls that when Dastoor took over the role of editing the *FEZANA Journal* (a publication Shroff had been writing for at the time), she did so in a way that was collaborative with the previous leadership and modeled respect for what had been done before even as she instituted change (Shroff, pers. comm., January 17, 2023). Furthermore, Shroff shares that Dastoor has been very supportive of her NGO. This organization "creates platforms where students...those who live below the internationally accepted poverty [level], can present, practice their skills, and grow" (Shroff, pers. comm., January 17, 2023). Dastoor helped to facilitate a group of students from KurNiv Success Solutions presenting virtually at the 2021 Parliament of the World's Religions in a session entitled "Youth for Humanity," which gave these young people a unique opportunity to present on a global stage.

Katayun Kapadia, the second woman to serve as president of FEZANA (2012-16), also attests to Dastoor's impact and mentorship. "[Dastoor] motivated



me, encouraged me to rise from local involvement in my Zoroastrian organization to take on national leadership roles, and eventually to participate in the Parliament of the World's Religions" (Kapadia, pers. comm., January 20, 2023). Kapadia shared that Dastoor is a motivational mentor who is always looking to uplift women and youth and to build bridges between Zoroastrians with Iranian and Indian heritage (Kapadia, pers. comm., January 20, 2023).

Dastoor deeply values the Zoroastrian tradition and the values embedded within it. Many aspects of her life and commitments—to education, empowerment, and service to others—are deeply ingrained in the tradition. During our interview, she told me the traditional story about when Zoroastrians were persecuted in Iran in 630 and subsequently migrated to India. The local Indian king (rāja) was unsure whether to accept the migrants, but the Zoroastrians said they would be like sugar dissolving into milk. They would adapt to the local culture and customs in most ways but would work to serve the community and sweeten it, much like dissolved sugar is not visible but sweetens milk (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021).

In many ways, this story works well as a way of reflecting on Dastoor's life and career. She has never sought attention or acclaim, yet her continuous service to her academic, medical, and religious communities and her mentoring of younger women have certainly "sweetened" the lives of many. In both Nigeria and Canada, she has immersed herself in the local community and worked to benefit all. Many people have benefited from her advancements in the treatment of dementia. Moreover, most of those may never meet her or know how her influence has improved their lives. The impact of her efforts to support scholarships and mentor the next generations extends her influence through the lives and careers of her students, who serve their local and global communities.

## ***Conclusion***

Dastoor celebrates the progress made for women within Zoroastrianism, and the opportunities technology offers to expand access to religion. However, access to technology and technologically-mediated information remains impacted by gendered biases and the marginalization of women. This biography demonstrates Dr Dastoor's significance as a leader in Zoroastrianism, in global inter-religious dialogue, and in her professional work and research on dementia. Dr. Dastoor has achieved significant success by conventional standards through both her career and volunteer work. She has worked tirelessly to make Zoroastrianism more egalitarian for women and more engaged in numerous inter-religious conversations and organizations. As a researcher, she has increased the quality of life for those living with dementia and their families. Through the Parliament of the World's Religions, she has raised the profile of Zoroastrianism and worked to strengthen this important global forum. In addition to these more conventionally-celebrated achievements, she has mentored and supported numerous girls and women both directly and indirectly and raised and supported her own children and grandchildren.

When considering Dastoor's life and career through the lens of knowledge

equity, we can see the ways that she has contributed to and been celebrated by conventional realms, such as the medical and academic communities. But, looking through the lens of knowledge equity, we can also see that she has also contributed to advancing marginalized perspectives and sources of knowledge by bringing forth the voices of women, people of color, and practitioners of marginalized faith traditions within both Zoroastrianism and in the broader global interfaith conversation. Although Dr. Dastoor does not seek recognition or acclaim for her own sake, she believes in the importance of mentorship and role modeling for young women and girls. She hopes that her story and leadership experiences will help young women see their boundless potential. Dr. Dastoor noted the positive impact she has had on young women who have read her editorials in the *FEZANA Journal* (Dastoor, pers. comm., April 27, 2021)—and one can hope that her biography will extend this impact.

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*Women Advancing Knowledge Equity: The Parliament of the World's Religions* is a collection of biographies about women who are noteworthy leaders and participants in The Parliament of the World's Religions® but whose geographical location, economic status and occupational attentions obscure the significant influence and impact of their lives and work. This lack of coverage, fueled, at least in part, by an 18th century definition of knowledge that privileges the scientific method, technological development and masculine achievement even as it discounts knowledge and histories that are oral, embodied and unpublished, leads to tremendous gaps in our knowledge about these women. These gendered gaps in knowledge create issues of gender parity on print and digital platforms where women, particularly women marginalized by race, economics and geography are poorly represented. This volume challenges the norms and practices that create this lack of parity, with analytical biographies that create knowledge about these women and give us a sense of the women themselves, as knowledge creators.

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The ATLA Women in Religion series was an outgrowth of the “Women in Religion Wiki Project,” an initiative to create, update, and improve Wikimedia content pertaining to the lives of cis-gender and trans-gender women who are notable as scholars, activists and practitioners in the world’s religious, spiritual and wisdom traditions. This volume continues the initiative’s work of creating biographical sources about women in religion that challenge and explore biased conventions and principles that regulate print and digital content creation about women.