

Defining the Field

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This issue of *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* (ISIT) presents five articles that each in their own way contribute to defining the field of Interreligious Studies (IRS). Hans Gustafson's opening article sets out to explain how the field of Interreligious Studies differs from Religious Studies, Theological Studies, and Interfaith Dialogue. For our journal, this is an especially pertinent discussion since we aim to present innovative studies in the interconnected fields of Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology. As the field of IRS is growing, scholars are trying to define what sets it apart from other closely related fields. This is an especially salient exercise since the field is multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary with few of us who write about it having been trained in this specific area of studies.

Gustafson's article is a welcome contribution to these conversations, especially as his forthcoming edited volume called *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from the Field* provides essays covering the entire spectrum on Interreligious Studies. The volume features no less than thirty-six articles by as many scholars, many of them past contributors to ISIT, who define and question aspects of the field from the point of view of their respective disciplines and experiences.

The debates about how to shape the field of Interreligious Studies also guide the way journals addressing this particular field, as well as those adjacent to it, manage their contents. For the June 2020 international conference of the European Academy of Religion (EuARe), Aaron Hollander brought together five journal editors who cover Ecumenical and Interreligious Studies.¹ The goal was to take stock of how academic ecclesiological journals, each in their different way, approach the entanglement between intrareligious divisions, interreligious relations, and trans-religious dynamics – all of which

1. Participants included: Aaron Hollander (Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute/*Ecumenical Trends*), Stephen Brown (World Council of Churches/*The Ecumenical Review*), Nelly van Doorn-Harder (Wake Forest University/*Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*), Terry Rey (Temple University/*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*), and Axel Takács (Seton Hall University/*Journal of Interreligious Studies*). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmmOAYCNV40&feature=youtu.be>.

contribute to the conversation of Interreligious Studies. Due to the pandemic, the conference was held virtually with as result that the panel “Ecclesiological Investigations: Writing Difference, Reading the World” is now available via YouTube.

According to Gustafson, Interreligious Studies is often descriptive. Amos Yong’s article, “Studying-Teaching-Evaluating Religions: A Comparative Theological Perspective,” analyzes how the evaluation and ideas of teachers serve to transmit the descriptive elements of religion. Using findings from the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, he explores “the reality that theological ideas are embedded in religious practices and hence effect consideration of how the comparative task might unfold in multiple, not just ideational, levels.”

Gustafson’s article further notes that definitions that are more recent “explicitly leave room for people who do not identify with a religious tradition.” Peter Adminrand’s “Atheist Critiques of the New Atheists: Advancing Atheist-Theist Dialogue,” is a timely reminder of the reality that there is a paucity in literature about the diversity within atheist views. Some do and some do not wish to engage with theists. With the goal of advancing atheist-theist dialogues and partnerships, Admirand’s article presents the writings of atheists who do seek conversation with theists.

In “Convergence and Asymmetry: Some Brief Observations on the Current State of Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” Alana Vincent reviews the persistent strands of Christian bias in this dialogue. Arguing that in many instances when Christian groups take the lead, they often end up creating imagined versions of the Jewish faith, and misrepresent Jewish self-understanding. Her article links to Gustafson’s point that interreligious studies can also have strong prescriptive dimensions.

Finally, in “Religions: a Janus-Faced Phenomenon in Local Politics,” Tomas Axelson and Jonas Stier present a local case study about an interreligious council in a Swedish town. Their contribution connects with Gustafson’s observations about the self-implicating nature of Interreligious Studies where academic study and personal relationships often go hand in hand.

The volume ends with three book reviews by Johnson Elijah Amamnsunu, Kate Mroz, and Jon Paul Sydnor. In the back of this volume, you will find an announcement about the ESITIS conference that was planned for 2021 but due to the pandemic will be postponed until 2022.