The Pandemic as Challenge for Intercultural and Interreligious Relations: Report on the March 2021 ESITIS Webinar

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As readers of Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology and members of European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS) well know by now, the bi-annual conference of ESITIS, planned to be held in Bonn in March of 2021, had to be rescheduled for 2022 due to the ongoing SARS-CoV–2 pandemic situation. That conference will still take place; it is currently planned to be held in Bonn in 2022 on the topic of religion and protest with the working title “Sacred Protest.” Nevertheless, the board felt it was important – indeed, specifically for scholars working in the fields of Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology – to address challenges created by the pandemic for interreligious and intercultural relations. To this end, on 25 March 2021, ESITIS held a webinar in cooperation with the Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Bonn, Germany on “The Pandemic as Challenge for Intercultural and Interreligious Relations.”

ESITIS has a reputation of being a professional society of scholars who not only share common intellectual interests, but who also form community in various ways: collaborating on projects but also forming fast friendships and supporting one another in the spaces of lived struggle that so often characterize work in these fields. ESITIS President Anne Hege Grung drew attention to this point in her opening remarks when she reflected the “relational” nature of ESITIS and noted this as a characteristic of Interreligious Studies in particular. And this is not “merely” a matter of personal affinity but a core principle of research in the field, as Hans Gustafson wonderfully outlines in a recent article in ISIT (Gustafson 2020, 131–154). The lines between theory and practice blur in IS and IT (143), as scholars seek to gain perspective on and be critical about the webs of power and participation in which they are inevitably entwined – as (non)believers, researchers, and teachers. This has led to the recognition that Interreligious Studies (IRS) and Intercultural Theology (IT) are “essentially relational” (132).
In this vein, ESITIS meets a need in providing space for scholars in IRS and IT to come together, to share, and to learn from one another’s experiences in teaching and research – all things that have become quite difficult, however, under pandemic conditions. Thus, it was a great encouragement to have sixty-five people attend the ESITIS webinar, from twenty-three countries, to hear talks from Najeeba Syeed, Joanna Wojtkowiak, and Willie Jennings, as well as responses from Anne Hege Grung, Carola Roloff, and Nicolas Adams.

The pandemic has impacted IRS and IT in an acute way by severely constraining forms of interreligious cooperation and exchange. The webinar sought to highlight three of these challenges brought on or intensified by the pandemic: Challenges for ritual observance, challenges for interreligious cooperations, and challenges of racism and populism. Leading scholars working in each of these areas generously accepted invitations to speak on the identified topics. Joanna Wojtkowiak, Assistant Professor in the area of existential care at the University for Humanities in the Netherlands, began her talk by highlighting the way the pandemic, as crisis and disaster, has intensified the need for ritual forms used to process crisis and disaster, but has also produced a situation in which the very possibility of these forms has been severely compromised. She then outlined several key frameworks of discernment for reflecting on how to process the pandemic experience ritually under drastically different normative, hermeneutical, and ontological conditions: During the pandemic scholars and practitioners alike have been forced to reflect on whether certain forms of observance are “allowed” or even “real” observances when practiced online, when practiced individually rather than in community, or when practiced without the correct ritual objects and persons. Nevertheless, as the length of time living under Covid-19 has increased, communities and individuals have inevitably been forced to make consequential decisions for action – even where that has meant authorizing inaction. And these decisions change rituals – practices to which people turn precisely in order to be lifted above the turbulence of change. A clear benefit is that such practices can maintained, can remain possible, via change. At the same time, this raises new questions about their necessity, their normativity, their meaning and what is truly or most important in their observance.

Najeeba Syeed, Associate Professor of Muslim and Interreligious Studies at Chicago Theological Seminary, joined the webinar from Los Angeles, at 4am Los Angeles time and after having been awake all night at an action seeking to prevent police officers from clearing
a park of homeless persons – thereby embodying the figure of the scholar-practitioner. Professor Syeed drew upon the work of Christian Neuhäuser on representative humiliation of groups to reflect on the humiliation and silencing of migrants (especially children), of women, and of the elderly during the pandemic. Spaces such as court hearings, private prisons, and funeral observances have been removed from the public view – and public awareness – to an alarming extent during the pandemic. Prof. Syeed pointed out that in this situation, the role of clergy and faith leaders, as individuals who are still permitted to enter and negotiate in these spaces, has taken on new civic importance. And this calls for likewise increased co-operations and solidarity among leaders of different faiths, who share a responsibility and commitment to advocate for the weak, helpless, and oppressed.

If Professor Syeed concentrated on drawing attention to issues that have been hidden, Willie Jennings, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale University and Yale Divinity School, focused on the all-too-visible and alarming rise of “the offended white man” and the logics of whiteness propelling contemporary populisms. Issues of race are not separate from, not merely running parallel to, the pandemic crisis. Taking but one particularly arresting example, Prof. Jennings led the webinar to reflect on why white nationalists in particular have been so offended by the pandemic and the economic and social restrictions implemented for public health reasons. “Whiteness,” he argued, is a product of a complex colonial logic that premises possession of oneself on possession of land, persons and commodities – or in other words, unrestricted individual control over commerce (Jennings 2020). He noted that inasmuch as economic and social restrictions are perceived by the offended white man as a restriction on rights to individual self-determination they are interpreted as calling into question individual autonomy as such, that is, social restrictions are experienced as an existential attack. But resistance to such restrictions – for example, in the form of refusing to social distance or wear masks – has had tremendous societal consequences, with a disproportionate impact on the poor and persons of color. As Anne Hege Grung observed in her own response later during the webinar, the pandemic situation has shown it is impossible to divide between interfaith work and anti-racism.

In what ways has the pandemic perhaps also catalyzed creative new approaches to interreligious research and learning? Several webinar attendees shared from their own experiences in a final section of the webinar framed as “five minute stories;” two are highlighted here:
Hans Gustafson related his experience with creating digital research projects for students; although all learning moved online, students were encouraged to go out into their neighborhoods digitally by curating photographs and audio-visual material on online storyboards, as well as visiting online religious gatherings. As so many online religious gatherings have been thematizing the pandemic experience, religion and interreligious digital spaces have become a prime location for processing this experience. In result, an important realization can take place: As Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke shared with the webinar from his experience, students and scholars alike are confronted with the realization that the objects of intercultural theology and interreligious study are not outside of oneself, and “rather, I am caught up in this experience.”

A point which leads, in conclusion, back to where this reflection began, namely: the relational and always-lived nature of work in IRS and IT. These realities are at the same time tasks for continuous negotiation, and ESITIS remains as committed as ever to working with so many fine scholars who engage in these negotiations on an ongoing basis.

References
