

THE JOURNAL OF
World Christianity

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**Special Issue: Interreligious Learning in Chinese Christianity
and Religions**

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THE JOURNAL OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY

The interdisciplinary area, "World Christianity," investigates the histories, practices, and discourses of Christianity on six continents. It examines local forms of Christianity as well as the global interconnections that make Christianity a world religion. As a field of study, World Christianity emerged historically from mission studies, ecumenical theology, and the academic study of world religions. While it is not reducible to any of these three, they each continue to play an important role in informing its work. In the contemporary world these research areas include the relations between various manifestations or expressions of Christian faith and their immediate contexts; the interactions among Christian groups separated by confessional, ecclesiastical, cultural, geographical, or geo-political divides; and the interactions between Christianity and other faiths, ideologies, or religious traditions.

Emanating from Galilee and Jerusalem in the first century CE and carried through diasporic movements of persons and communities, Christianity has for two thousand years been embodied in a multitude of communities and ecclesiastical traditions. It has never been a "Western religion," and in that sense is no more natural to Italy than to China. Diverse linguistic and cultural practices have shaped it, and it has been informed by myriad social and historical experiences worldwide. The study of World Christianity applies the resources of various academic disciplines to further understand both the diversity of local expressions of Christian life and faith and how these interact with broader histories, movements, and discourses.

The field of World Christianity by its very conceptualization recognizes that the various forms of Christianity that have a predominantly Western European genealogy do not exhaust the totality of Christianity as a global religion today. In a similar manner, the academic study of Christianity extends beyond intellectual centers in Western Europe and North America, the geo-political entity that is often referred to simply as "the West." World Christianity must not be reduced to "Third World Christianity," "Christianity in the Global South," or other such depictions of a European Christian "other." Simply put, there is no single center. World Christianity entails the study of a multicentered world religious phenomenon.

To say that there is no single center is not to assert that knowledge, power, and understanding are evenly distributed across the globe. They are not, for Christianity as a religion as much as for humanity as a whole. In order to address this imbalance World Christianity as a field of study is particularly concerned with underrepresented and marginalized Christian communities, which necessarily results in a greater degree of attention being paid to Asian, African, and Latin American contexts, to migrants and minorities, and to the experience of women around the globe.

As an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field, World Christianity engages other disciplines and fields of study across the religious or theological

curriculum. Its work impinges upon biblical studies, liturgical studies, historical and dogmatic theology, the study of spirituality, church history, ethics, ministry studies, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, and more. In the very best tradition of academic study, it recognizes that theory and praxis can never be entirely separated. For this reason the field of World Christianity is both critical and constructive in its theological and academic endeavors.

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

The mission of *The Journal of World Christianity* is to advance knowledge and understanding of Christianity in its various dimensions on six continents in both its local and global expressions. The journal seeks to provide an intellectual meeting place at the cross-roads of diverse disciplines, departments, institutions, and identities from around the world where scholars and practitioners can reflect upon Christianity as a world religion.

If you would like to submit an article to *The Journal of World Christianity*, please visit <http://www.editorialmanager.com/JOWC> and create an author profile. The online system will guide you through the steps to upload your article for submission to the editorial office. Manuscripts for submission should conform to *Chicago Manual of Style* guidelines. A 150-word abstract is required with all submissions.

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Introduction

EASTEN LAW

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT: This short essay introduces the collection of articles featured in this special issue on interreligious learning in Chinese Christianity and religions, setting the contents of the issue in the larger context of world Christianity and Chinese Christianity's dual quest to understand both the church's internal diversity and its outward relationships to other faith traditions.

KEYWORDS: interreligious learning, interreligious studies, world Christianity, Chinese Christianity, Chinese religion

World Christianity is a river with many tributaries and overlapping interests. Among them are two interrelated quests: ecumenical unity and interreligious witness. These two goals are surprisingly intertwined and, whether one takes an evangelical or conciliar posture, remain ever pertinent to world Christianity's goal to make sense of Christianity's diverse and diffuse legacies.¹ As the world church wrestles with its internal diversity and unity, it must also engage and reconsider its relationships to other religious traditions. Paramount to these matters is the ability to manage conviction in one's own beliefs with genuine openness to learning from and dialoguing with others.

This special issue is the second of two collections of essays focused on these dual quests within the context of Chinese Christianity's internal diversity and its relationship to the other religious traditions and worldviews that surround it.

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Both collections emerged from research presented and inspired by the Ecclesiological Investigations 2016 Conference, hosted by the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui at Ming Hua Theological Seminary with the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The conference theme, “Christianity and Religions in China: Past-Present-Future,” built a multidisciplinary platform to explore Chinese Christianity’s diversity vis-à-vis both historical and contemporary dynamics, and we are thankful to both the leadership of the Ecclesiological Investigations Network and the conference organizers for their facilitation.²

The first collection, published in 2021 as an edited volume by Alexander Chow and Easten Law under the title *Ecclesial Diversity in Chinese Christianity*, focuses on the theme of internal diversity within Chinese Christianity’s many communities.³ In that volume, Chinese Christian churches within the boundaries of the People’s Republic of China and in the Chinese diaspora are examined as a pluriform phenomenon. Whether in China, Malaysia, or the United Kingdom, each community expresses its religiosity in particular forms that join elements of Christian faith, Chinese cultural habits, and local sociopolitical concerns in ways that are most appropriate to their settings. In many ways, this volume applied the principles and concerns of world Christianity to Chinese Christianity, diving into the local particularities of Chinese faith and culture around the world. Taking into account the many contingencies that globalization, migration, and multiple modernities have played in the formation of Chinese faith communities and perspectives, the volume implicitly argues that Chinese Christianity has become too big for any one dominant narrative.

The collection of essays that make up this special issue tackles the second quest, exploring Christianity’s relationship to China’s other religious and philosophical traditions. The history of Chinese religions and religiosity is one of diffuse creativity and competition. Over centuries, the various threads that make up China’s diverse religio-philosophical traditions have been woven in and out of one another in order to discern answers at different levels of society. For the erudite, religious and philosophical learning seeks to recognize eternal patterns of the universe. For the elite, these patterns are studied to gain practical wisdom for governance. And for the everyday person, such learning provides opportunities to acquire protection or prosperity in the face of life’s many challenging circumstances. As Christianity becomes an increasingly common and accepted part of Chinese religiosity, it is only natural to ask what role China’s other religio-philosophical traditions might have on Christian belief and action. This means that interreligious studies, broadly conceived to include dynamics of dialogue, cooperation, and learning at all levels of society, ought to become increasingly important in the study of Chinese Christianity.

To contribute to this endeavor, this issue adopts interreligious learning as its primary posture: asking what open, intentional, and humble learning from religious others might provide Christians to illuminate and enrich the beliefs and practices of the church. In specific, we draw from the work of Michael Barnes as our initial basis for defining interreligious learning.⁴ In this sense, interreligious learning is different from interreligious dialogue in that it prioritizes a posture of listening over speaking. Barnes prioritizes virtues of hospitality, meeting, generosity, humility, and conversation as foundations for interreligious learning. These virtues are embodied and worked out in genuine encounters where the ideas exchanged are given an opportunity to change the ways we see the world, creating new vistas into the Christian tradition that would otherwise be hidden.

While all of the essays in this collection can be said to contain Barnes's prescribed posture of openness, the authors pursue interreligious learning with different ends in mind. Some seek to develop philosophical or theological insights while others seek answers for specific questions regarding dynamics of cultural, social, and ecclesial change. Indeed, when we consider interreligious learning in the context of world Christianity, there is much more to account for than scholarly comparison of theologies and traditions. This learning must also be applicable to everyday realities and challenges.⁵ As an inherently multidisciplinary space, world Christianity concerns itself as much with history and the social sciences as it does with doctrines and concepts. As such, interreligious learning should also include multiple standpoints and disciplinary perspectives capable of grounding conceptual learning in its various sociocultural relations, historical contexts, and everyday applications.⁶ Recent developments in interreligious studies recognizes this need, and its foci and methods are growing more diverse.⁷ The essays in this collection are, therefore, representative of both world Christianity's and interreligious studies' shared concerns.

This issue opens with words from one of the great elders of interreligious studies from a Christian standpoint: Dr. Anselm Min, who passed in 2020. Min's article, "Learning from Another Religion: Some Methodological Reflections," provides scaffolding for this special issue, proposing eight theses for interreligious learning. According to Min's first thesis, everyone everywhere exists interreligiously through relational connections. Our pluralistic world has given every locale religious diversity, although certain contexts, such as metropolitan centers, naturally include more. Min's following theses explain that living in a diverse religious space requires intentionality, where each person consciously chooses to learn from others. He concludes by saying that ultimate success depends on the "reception" of different religions. Each thesis contains rich resources, but his fifth is particularly innovative—to recognize other religions' presence within one's own religion. In other words, there is no "pure" religion, detached from interaction and exchange. It is truly an

honor to be able to publish this essay as a tribute to Min's legacy—one that has contributed so much to the work of Christian faith and interreligious learning.

Lauren Pfister's and Bill Atkins's articles then explore two manners of interreligious learning via different texts and orientations. Using primary texts—the *Zhuangzi* and New Testament—Pfister argues that these sources contain an instructive interaction he terms “instruction plura-logues,” when the “master” instructs multiple persons of different worldviews. Zhuangzi and Jesus can be found engaging both disciples and detractors in a single setting. Pfister also considers the “hard sayings” in these texts; the communities who would have originally engaged them operate as turning points for transformative choices leading to spiritual renewal. Atkins, using more contemporary texts, compares various interpretations of *Qi*, the Chinese conception of life force or energy, to expand his understanding of the Holy Spirit. Whereas Pfister works with close readings of classic primary source texts in their own historical and cultural contexts, Atkins examines a wider range of secondary contemporary texts by Asian and Asian American scholars in comparison with relatively recent interpretations of *Qi* framed by categories of modern medicine. The result is a similar end pursued via two different means. On the one hand, Pfister, a senior scholar with decades of careful engagement with sacred texts, offers a close reading of classical documents to discern a common pedagogy between traditions. On the other, Atkins, a younger scholar, provides a creative theoretical exercise that integrates contemporary readings and sensibilities that blur the lines between traditional and modern definitions of the Holy Spirit and *Qi*.

Jesse Cicotti and Henry Kuo expand the discussion in the next two articles by asking questions about how Chinese religious thought and Christianity can influence one another's larger cultural norms from two different directions. Whereas Cicotti asks how Christianity might be integrated into Chinese cultural norms, Kuo asks how Chinese religio-philosophical concepts might be utilized to illuminate Christian ecclesiology. Cicotti begins by looking at Chinese tradition's propensity to integrate multiple teachings into its cultural repertoire and examines Christianity's potential to do the same based on two case studies of indigenization in the works of Chinese Christian intellectuals Wú Léichuān and Shí Héngtán. Focusing primarily on the Catholic Church, Kuo claims that Pope Francis's attempt at synodality remains idealistic in its current form. He suggests that “synodal virtues” need to be established to enable actual change and contends that the Chinese philosophical notion of *tianxia*, or “all under Heaven,” can help by constructing a cosmological perspective where each person fulfills their role in society, taking virtuous living seriously. This pair of essays offer readers examples of the ways interreligious learning can operate bidirectionally, shaping the culture of another while also being reshaped in the process.

The last pair of articles share a common conceptual core as the basis for their interreligious learning but apply them to very different contexts. Both Peter Ward Youngblood's and Leo Lefebure's works focus on the concept of "care," but Youngblood's reflection is set in the context of a hospital chaplaincy's care for patients while Lefebure's exploration of Chinese religio-philosophical resources is directed at caring for all of creation. For Youngblood, "care" is not simply "caring about" another but rather actively working for the holistic well-being of others. He compares "Western" medicine and Christianity with a "Chinese perspective" found in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which he uses as a case study. Lefebure returns to Pope Francis and the Catholic Church, asking how Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (*sanjiao*) might help the pope's call to "care" for our common home in *Laudato Si'*. In both, the concrete social contexts of medical care and environmental care animate the motivations for interreligious learning.

The authors and essays assembled here provide a surprisingly rich balance of senior and emerging scholars working from varied Christian traditions (Catholic, mainline, Evangelical, Pentecostal) reflecting together on how interreligious learning with and from Chinese religions and religiosity can generate new perspectives on themes ranging from wisdom, culture, and ecclesiology to pneumatology, pastoral care, and ecology. In the works of senior scholars such as Min, Pfister, and Lefebure, one will find mature interreligious insights conducted with the kind of precision that comes with masterful practice. In emerging scholars such as Atkins, Ciccotti, Kuo, and Youngblood, one will find fresh questions and creative attempts to answer them.

We would like to close this introduction with a word regarding the importance of community and the relational network that has fostered this publication and, naturally, ought to animate all learning, interreligious or otherwise. The editors of this issue began this project under the guidance of the late Gerard Mannion, who taught us during our doctoral studies at Georgetown University. It was through his mentorship and relational network that we were introduced to senior scholars such as Dale Irvin, Peter Phan, and many others who modeled the importance of interreligious learning as a fundamental part of deepening our own faith. His example also impressed upon us the importance of learning in community. Gerard Mannion's sudden passing in 2019 left a large gap and his presence is missed, but his strong will to bring people together remains present in the publication of this issue as well as in the Ecclesiological Investigations Network, which continues to seed new relationships and research.

It is, therefore, altogether fitting that this special issue closes with a memorial reflection from Peter Phan dedicated to both Anselm Min and Gerard Mannion. Words like these are as important as any piece of academic research because they remind us that our scholarship is not built upon any one brilliant

mind or line of inquiry but rather sustained by communities of mentorship and learning. As junior scholars, we are indebted to those whose wisdom lights the pathways that we now tread. We dedicate this special issue to all senior scholars, including Peter Phan, Dale Irvin, Leo Lefebure, Sallie King, Lauren Pfister, Sathianathan Clarke, Thomas Hastings, and many more who have set aside time to build us up so that we may continue the quest to understand the world's many expressions of faith and wisdom.

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NOTES

1. Dale Irvin defines world Christianity as a field intimately connected with interreligious dialogue. Dale Irvin, "World Christianity: An Introduction," *Journal of World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2008): 1–26. He also traces some of the development of world Christianity as a field of study in relationship with the history of ecumenical movement, including its interreligious dialogue initiatives. Dale Irvin, "World Christianity: A Genealogy," *Journal of World Christianity* 9, no. 1 (2019): 5–22.

2. See Hong Kong 2016: Ecclesiological Investigations 10th Annual Gathering, <https://hongkong2016.ei-research.net>, for a summary of the conference.

3. Alexander Chow and Easten Law, *Ecclesial Diversity in Chinese Christianity* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2021).

4. Michael Barnes, *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. For a compelling study that integrates world Christianity and interreligious studies to identify the gaps and challenges of interreligious relations in everyday South Indian life, see Mutharaj Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue: Plurality, Conflict and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

6. An early text advocating for this expansion of interreligious studies includes Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

7. For two of the most recent compilations of multidisciplinary perspectives on interreligious studies, see Hans Gustafson, *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020); and Lucinda Mosher, *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022).