

Praying Together in the Dark: Theological Reflections on Shared Prayer within Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it explores the nature, forms and rationale for shared prayer within interreligious dialogue. Second, on the basis of this survey, the paper asks whether praying together, which is defined specifically as interreligious prayer, can be theologically justified. The paper argues that interreligious prayer is indeed possible, not because all theological differences between the gathered religious traditions can or should be smoothed over but, rather, because they paradoxically cannot. The paper suggests that authentic interreligious prayer can be anchored within an apophatic modality in which the praying members of each religious tradition are united in their collective failure to adequately name Ultimate Mystery – to “praying together in the dark” as I term it. It should be noted that the paper is theoretical in nature; it does not propose norms for the practice of interreligious prayer.*

Key Words: Interreligious Dialogue; *Nostra Aetate*; Shared Prayer; Interreligious Prayer; Multireligious Prayer; Apophaticism

In October 27, 1986, Pope John Paul II led a World Day of Prayer for Peace in the town of Assisi, the home of St. Francis whose very life represented a symbol of peace and reconciliation. Yet this was no ordinary religious gathering; it was, rather, a momentous occasion of interreligious dialogue through prayer. Representatives from twenty-seven Christian denominations – including one hundred and fifty bishops from the Catholic Church – along with thirty-seven delegations from thirteen non-Christian religions came together to pray.¹ The order of proceedings for the day had been carefully planned. All gathered initially at the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels where the pope welcomed the guests and delivered a short message: “We are here because we are sure that, above and beyond all such measures, we need prayer – intense, humble and trusting prayer – if the world is finally to become a place of true and permanent peace.”² From here, members of the different religious traditions made their way to different locations in Assisi to pray in their own way. Interestingly, some non-Christian groups prayed in Christian churches. Indeed, some Christians were later scandalised when they learned that the Buddhists had placed a statue of the Buddha on the altar in the abbey of

¹ *John Paul II: The Man, the Disciple, the Leader: The Complete Illustrated Biography* (Pleasantville, New York: The Readers Digest Association, 2005), 249.

² Pope John Paul II, “Opening Address in the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels,” in *Assisi: World Day of Prayer for Peace, 27 October 1986* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1987), 88.

St. Peter.³ The day finally concluded with a joint gathering in the open space outside the Basilica of San Francesco. In this space, however, no common prayers were made. Rather, each religious tradition prayed in turn. A final symbolic act closed proceedings: olive branches were distributed to the gathered delegations and pigeons released as heralds of Assisi's message of peace to the world.

As a symbolic act in promoting the cause of world peace the day was arguably a success – and it has since led to repeated gatherings sponsored by the Catholic Church. However, the theological nature of such prayerful exchange was carefully and precisely defined by ecclesiastical leadership and commentators. For example, just a month before the event, Jorge Mejia, the Vice-President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, made a nuanced observation. After extolling the importance of jointly gathering for prayer with those of other religious traditions, he warned “From all this, however, it does not follow that we have to pray together. On the contrary ... it is the opposite that seems to follow. It is difficult to see how we, as Christians, can insert ourselves into the prayers of others. Just as it is difficult to see how they can insert themselves into a prayer that is specifically Christian.” Instead, for Mejia, the event witnessed members of different religious traditions “being present when another prays.”⁴ Assisi 1986 represented not *praying together* but, rather, *being together in prayer*.

But is praying together possible and desirable? In short, my answer is a carefully nuanced “yes.” However, the question remains a challenging one. In addressing this topic, the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it is not really possible to tackle this issue without initially appreciating the broader dimensions of the question. We must first establish, for example, what is actually meant by interreligious dialogue and why prayer should have a place within it. By extension, what forms can “shared” prayer actually take within interreligious dialogue and how have theologians attempted to understand such activity? Secondly, and on the basis of this survey, I will attempt to develop a theological position which provides for the possibility of praying together. My response will certainly not be definitive; rather, my position will best represent a heuristic tool for on-going theological reflection and analysis. We begin, then, by interrogating the meaning of interreligious dialogue.

WHAT IS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

The real mandate for authentic interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church originated with the Second Vatican Council's document *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christians), dated 28 October, 1965. While conciliar deliberations on this text were not easy, and its path to the final vote arguably torturous, its eventual ratification represented an extraordinary achievement.⁵ *Nostra Aetate* was able to establish a theological framework which has since facilitated fruitful ecclesial engagement

³ Arnulf Camps OFM reports this reaction in his article “The Prayers for Peace at Assisi, October 27, 1986: What was Shared?” in *On Sharing Religious Experience: Possibilities of Interfaith Mutuality* ed. Jerald D. Gort et al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 257.

⁴ Jorge Mejia, “A Theological Reflection on the World Day of Prayer for Peace,” in *Assisi: World Day of Prayer for Peace*, 35.

⁵ See John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2008), 6-7, 195-96, 218-24, 150-51 and 275-76.

with members of other religious traditions. It does so by outlining an overarching premise for *theologically credible* dialogue: humanity is itself “one community” because “all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth” and because “all share a common destiny, namely God.”⁶ On the basis of this common origin and common destiny, engagement between religions – in whatever different forms this might take – represents an exercise in mutual enrichment, since all religious traditions share in discerning and expressing “a ray of that truth”⁷ which can be named “ultimate mystery”.⁸ Accordingly, *Nostra Aetate* affirms that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.”⁹ Crucially, however, *Nostra Aetate* is not advocating a pluralist basis for interreligious dialogue; rather, the call to such dialogue is anchored in, what I would term, a dialectical dynamic: that irreligious dialogue can lead to greater openness towards other religions while, *as a result of the very same process*, actually deepen a sense of attachment and belonging within the home tradition. “The Church ... urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians.”¹⁰

According to Cardinal Edward Cassidy, *Nostra Aetate* marked a “completely new approach” to interreligious dialogue: “Rather than stress and condemn what is to be found there that is not compatible with Christian teaching and understanding, dialogue and cooperation are proposed. In this way a promising field for fruitful collaboration with other religions is proposed.”¹¹ Of course, this more inclusive style of ecclesial discourse was in fact characteristic of the Second Vatican Council itself, as the work of John O’Malley on the “discursive style” of Vatican II documents suggests. Rather than an oppositional style of discourse, with its traditional “anathematizing” of the alleged wayward – O’Malley termed this style “legislative-judicial” – Vatican II documents operated through a “poetic-rhetorical” style. O’Malley’s characterisation of this discursive shift is worth quoting at length:

Perhaps that style can be summarized by a simple litany that indicates some of the elements in the change in style of the Church indicated by the Council’s vocabulary: from commands to ideals, from passivity to activity, from ruling to serving, from vertical to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion, from hostility to friendship, from static to changing, from prescribed to principled, from retrospective to forward-looking, from definitive to open-ended, from threat to invitation, from definitive to open-ended, from behaviour modification to conversion of heart, from the dictates of law to the dictates of conscience, from external conformity to the joyful pursuit of holiness.¹²

⁶ *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, art. 1, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 738 (hereafter *NA*).

⁷ *NA*, n.2.

⁸ *NA*, n.1.

⁹ *NA*, n.2.

¹⁰ *NA*, n.2.

¹¹ Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 130.

¹² John O’Malley, “Trent and Vatican II: Two Styles of Church,” in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 318.

Undoubtedly the language of *Nostra Aetate* beautifully reflects such a shift – might we even propose that *Nostra Aetate* encapsulates the *dialogical spirit* which remains the ongoing legacy of the Council?

But how do we precisely define interreligious dialogue? In its efforts to clarify the nature of interreligious dialogue, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, established in 1964 and from 1988 known as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), issued a document entitled *The Attitude of the Church towards Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, now referred to simply as *Dialogue and Mission*. With reference to the encyclical *Ecclesiasm Suam* by Paul VI, the Secretariat suggests that dialogue means “not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and commitment.”¹³ In this text, the Secretariat envisages interreligious dialogue as not only wide-ranging in scope but, very importantly, an act which moves beyond the sole province of episcopal leadership or the work of “specialists” such as theologians. Rather, interreligious dialogue is properly the task of *all* Christians.

As the responsibility of all Christians, interreligious dialogue falls within the *missionary* life of the Church. On the point, however, some clarification is required. Misunderstandings arise when mission is interpreted as a univocal ecclesial task – the proclamation of the gospel in order to extend the community of faith. Within this narrow view, interreligious dialogue becomes an exercise in surreptitious proselytizing. Yet, as *Dialogue and Mission* declares, mission is a “single but complex and articulated reality” involving “witness” to the Christian faith, “commitment to the service of mankind, “liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation,” and, yes, “announcement and catechesis.” But “there is, as well the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religions in order to walk together toward truth and to work together in projects of common cause.”¹⁴

From the Christian perspective, such “projects of common cause” can be theologically contextualized within “conversion” to the in-breaking Kingdom or Reign of God. While, arguably, proclamation of Jesus Christ as “the Word incarnate” is a vital and necessary aspect of this “Kingdom mission,” it nevertheless does not exhaust it, since “the Word” has also spoken and is present in other religious traditions. The missiologist Jacob Kavunkal puts this well when he writes that “the Church is conscious how other religions, in so far as the Word is active in them, also share in elements of the Kingdom.” For Kavunkal, “Through its faith Christianity perceives its relation to other religions and is duty bound to enter into rapport with them. Therefore the Church must collaborate with them in its mission of realizing the Kingdom.”¹⁵ What is significant here is Kavunkal’s claim that Christians are “duty bound” to enter the sphere of interreligious dialogue. We should not think of such activity as an indulgence for the liberal-minded or merely an exercise in promoting social harmony for its own sake. Rather, it turns on the critical

¹³ Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, May 10, 1984, www.cimer.org.au/documents/DialogueandMission1984.pdf, n. 3 (accessed May 19, 2012). Hereafter cited as *DM*.

¹⁴ *DM*, n.13.

¹⁵ Jacob Kavunkal, *Anthropophany: Mission as Making a New Humanity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 52.

recognition that God's revelatory activity exceeds the confines of the Christian faith; indeed, in a pneumatological sense, we further recognise that the Spirit is itself active in other religions as it draws them towards the fullness of the Kingdom.¹⁶ If, then, Christians seek to discern the multifarious activity of the Spirit – an activity which John Paul II aptly suggested “blows where he wills”¹⁷ – then Christians must engage in serious interreligious dialogue. But how is this to be done and, particularly for our purposes in this paper, where might shared prayer fit into this enterprise?

THE PLACE OF SHARED PRAYER WITHIN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In *Dialogue and Mission*, the Secretariat for Non-Christians outlines four forms that interreligious dialogue might take. This typology is reiterated in a subsequent document jointly issued in 1991 by the PCID and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples entitled *Dialogue and Proclamation*. Quoting from *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the four forms are identified as follows:

- (a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- (b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- (c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- (d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.¹⁸

In the mind of the PCID, sharing in prayer clearly occupies a central place in the work of interreligious dialogue. Now according to *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the earlier document *Dialogue and Mission* refrained from establishing among them any “order of priority”. While this is a broadly valid observation, it should be noted that, in English translation at least, *Dialogue and Mission* speaks of the fourth form as operating at a “deeper level”.¹⁹ And *Dialogue and Proclamation* concludes by declaring that dialogue and proclamation are difficult tasks which, ultimately, are “graces to be sought in prayer.”²⁰ Both documents, however, provide little commentary on the theological value of sharing

¹⁶ Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 52.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, 7 December 1990, www.vatican.ca/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptorismissio_en.html, n. 56 (accessed May 19, 2012).

¹⁸ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 19 May 1991, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, n.42 (accessed May 20, 2012). Hereafter cited as *DP*.

¹⁹ *DM*, n.35.

²⁰ *DP*, n.89.

“religious experience” through prayer and contemplation. So why is shared prayer so important to fruitful interreligious dialogue?

In the first place, placing primary importance upon prayer within the task of interreligious dialogue marks a critical awareness that such activity is principally the work of the Spirit, not merely the human efforts of various enlightened individuals and groups. Interreligious dialogue can only succeed and bear fruit insofar as those so engaged enter into it with a sense of humility and openness – qualities or orientations which are themselves gifts received and nourished through prayer. I am reminded of the beautiful insight offered by Thomas Merton in his book *Contemplative Prayer*: as humans we want to direct our own affairs, to be masters of our own destiny, but prayer offers us only “a long course in humility and compunction.” For Merton, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!”²¹ The place of prayer in interreligious dialogue must surely remind us that we come to this enterprise as humble beginners who must rely on God’s grace to accompany our every tentative step. Pope John Paul II made a similar observation precisely in relation to the Day of Prayer at Assisi in 1986. Speaking at an address to the cardinals and the Roman curia on December 22, 1986, he reflected that “Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit ‘who intercedes insistently for us ... because we do not even know how to pray as we ought’ ... This too was seen at Assisi: the unity that comes from the fact that every man and woman is capable of praying, that is, of submitting oneself totally to God and of recognising oneself to be poor in front of him.”²²

In the second place, shared prayer reveals decisively that interreligious dialogue is much more than an intellectual exercise. “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas,” Pope John Paul II reminds us, “In some way it is always an ‘exchange of gifts’ ... There is a close relationship between prayer and dialogue. Deeper and more conscious prayer makes dialogue more fruitful. If on the other hand, dialogue depends on prayer, prayer also becomes the ever more mature fruit of dialogue.”²³ On this point William Johnson claims: “How easily the dialogical process can deteriorate into an intellectually stimulating but spiritually stultifying ‘exchange of ideas. We need to be reminded that authentic dialogue comes from prayer and leads to prayer.”²⁴ Johnston’s point is an important one and, indeed, a necessary caveat in relation to the four forms of interreligious dialogue. For while *Dialogue and Proclamation* asserts that the four forms are “interdependent,” I would argue further that the spirit and practice of shared religious experience suffuses the entire dialogical enterprise. So, if interreligious dialogue is to be truly fruitful, the spirit of prayer must *precede, permeate* and *proceed from* all forms of such dialogue.

Finally, it would be remiss not to draw attention to the *efficacy* of shared prayer within the on-going task of interreligious dialogue. Let me borrow a seminal notion from sacramental theology: it could be affirmed that shared prayer within interreligious dialogue is a sign which effects what it signifies. So what is it a sign of? Such occasions are

²¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1996), 37.

²² Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Cardinals and the Roman Curia, 22 December 1986,” in *Assisi: World Day of Prayer for Peace*, 146.

²³ Quoted from William Johnston, *Arise, My Love: Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 225.

²⁴ Johnston, *Arise, My Love*, 225.

surely a wonderful sign of *solidarity and hospitality* among the individuals and groups from diverse religious traditions. Whether it is a small, rather private gathering or a large public event, shared prayer powerfully demonstrates the “crossing of religious borders” in order to reveal a substantive degree of unity and mutuality among the world’s religions.²⁵ Of course, such occasions do not, by virtue of shared praying, simply erase important spiritual and doctrinal differences nor should they. But the very act of shared prayer reveals that members of different religious traditions can come together not despite such differences but, indeed, *because of them*. And in so doing, shared prayer can effectively deepen the unity and solidarity of religions. From a Christian perspective, we need only repair to our own notions of liturgical theology to appreciate the tremendous potential found here. So, for example, rather than thinking of liturgy as merely enacting our beliefs, liturgical theologians have recently emphasised how engagement in liturgy actually transmits and focuses “a way of being and acting in the world.”²⁶ Arguably, shared prayer functions similarly within interreligious dialogue: it is a way of being and acting “interreligiously” – and we are only just beginning to understand what this means.

THE FORMS OF PRAYER WITHIN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

To this point in the paper, I have been using the term “shared prayer” without actually defining what I mean by it. In fact, my utilisation of this term rests precisely with its useful ambiguity – it could encompass many different ways of praying as an expression of interreligious dialogue. In this sense, shared prayer could refer both to “being together in prayer” and “praying together.” It is essentially a “catch-all” term for any activity which involves members of different religious traditions encountering each other in the context of prayer. Yet behind such a broad designation there is to be found an evident morphological complexity which cannot be left untreated if we wish to address the key question of this paper.

We must begin by carefully differentiating between prayer and worship. In his book *Not Without My Neighbour*, S. Wesley Ariarajah offers a clear distinction between these terms. For Ariarajah, prayer is “the attempt by human beings to be in communion or communicate with the sacred, the holy, the Other, in common parlance, with God ... The urge to pray is so universal that it transcends national, cultural and religious barriers.” Worship, on the other hand, “normally does not refer to a general quest, but to an ordered response to a realized experience of the Sacred within a specific religious community.”²⁷ Ariarajah affirms that worship draws its particularity from a community’s “story” and so it is “the private space of that religion where others would be out of place.”²⁸

While I find Ariarajah’s distinction broadly useful, it seems to tend towards a certain dualism. Can one always draw a clear line between prayer and worship? There can be no

²⁵ I have taken this phrase from the title to an excellent collection of essays on interreligious understanding: *Crossing the Borders: Essays in Honour of Francis X. D’Sa on the occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Anand Amaladass and Rosario Rocha (Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2001).

²⁶ See E. Byron Anderson, *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 81.

²⁷ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 38.

²⁸ Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour*, 39.

doubt that, from a Catholic perspective, those gathered in shared prayer do not form a liturgical assembly, since liturgy is composed of “the whole community, the Body of Christ united with its Head.”²⁹ Muslims or Buddhists, for example, do not gather with us as the Body of Christ in shared prayer. But do we cease to be the Body of Christ as we share in prayer with them? My answer is no: while shared prayer does not form a *unified* cultic site – and so it cannot be said that all gather to worship “as one” – it is not a neutral cultic site either, since each participating group draws from its own rich cultic traditions to pray and, hopefully, such traditions are subsequently deepened and nourished through the experience of shared prayer.

So what forms do shared prayer within interreligious dialogue take? Of course, there are different ways of classifying shared prayer. Broadly speaking, however, we can identify three basic forms, though I have included a non-participatory classification for the purposes of clarification. I have outlined these forms using a frame diagram as follows:

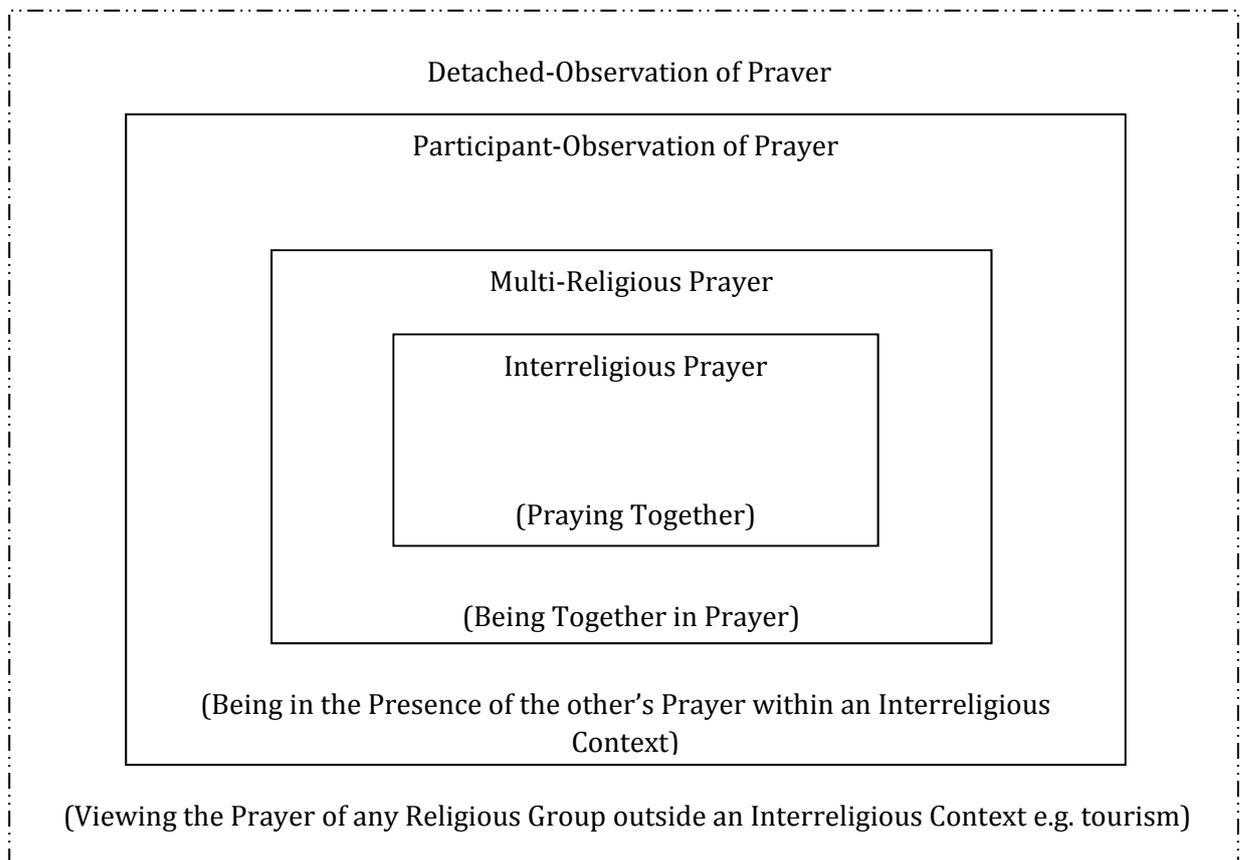


Figure 1

My purpose in Figure 1 is to set the different forms of shared prayer into relationship with each other. The outermost frame does not actually refer to a form of shared prayer – anyone may view the prayer of a religious group without expressing sentiments consistent with interreligious dialogue. However, it is also possible to be “participating” in another religious group’s prayer merely by “observing.” This is not a

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul’s, 1994), #1140.

tendentious distinction: it is possible and very desirable to attend the prayer of another religion as one wholly sympathetic to the purposes of interreligious dialogue. According to Thomas Ryan, "Attendance at the formal prayer rituals of another faith community makes a positive statement all of its own."³⁰ It demonstrates openness to the "other" and expresses an important sense of solidarity with them as co-religionists. Indeed, it can be an extraordinary opportunity to learn about another's faith – surely there is no greater opportunity to encounter the other more deeply rooted in their own tradition. Such activity is considerably varied in nature, occurring at all levels: from small visitations between neighbouring religious congregations, excursions undertaken by those engaged in interreligious learning, exchanges within monastic interreligious dialogue,³¹ to extraordinary gatherings like the World Parliament of Religions held most recently in Melbourne in 2009.³²

Our next frame brings us to multireligious prayer, drawing those gathered into an occasion in which all directly participate. Yet this must still be differentiated from interreligious prayer since those present will not ordinarily pray *together*. Rather, prayers by each religious tradition present will be offered in "serial" progression. Ryan puts this well when he writes that "it describes a situation in which people come together in full fidelity to their own faith and offer an expression of it while at the same time opening their hearts with sincere respect and interest to the faith expression of others."³³ This particular form of shared prayer seems to be favoured by the leadership of most Christian churches. For example, the Australian Consultation on Liturgy (ACOL) issued "Guidelines for Multi-Faith Worship" in 1995. While advisory in nature, this document represents a standing consensus among a number of Australian churches regarding shared prayer. It recommends that "a multi-faith service in serial form be used where services of worship involve members of different faith communities."³⁴ Interestingly, a 2008 document issued by the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) includes the Australian text among its listed "resources." And like the Australian text, the American Bishops note that "even if it is not advisable for Christians and persons of other religions to pray together using the same words and gestures, we should welcome opportunities to pray in the presence of those who belong to other world religions."³⁵

³⁰ Thomas Ryan, *Interreligious Prayer: A Christian Guide* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³² During the seven days of the World Parliament of Religions in Melbourne in 2009, every morning began with numerous opportunities to be present at a range of "religious observances." See the program guide: *Making a World of Difference: Hearing each other, Healing the earth: Parliament of the World's Religions*, 3-9 December 2009, Melbourne, Australia, www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/files/program/schedule/2009%20PWR%20Program%20Book.pdf, (accessed May 21, 2012).

³³ Ryan, *Interreligious Prayer*, 23.

³⁴ Australian Consultation on the Liturgy (ACOL): *Guidelines for Multi-Faith Worship* (1995), <http://litcom.net.au/documents/nationaldocuments/multifaithworship.php> (accessed May 21, 2012). The document states that the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church and the Churches of Christ have commended these guidelines; the Lutheran Church have developed their own text; the Presbyterians have indicated their clear rejection; and no position has been stated by the Greek and Coptic Orthodox Churches.

³⁵ *Interreligious Prayer (Walking Together Series)*, Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), www.usccbpublishing.org/client/client_pdfs/7-051BI.pdf (accessed May 21, 2012).

As a public event, multireligious prayer can take place within a variety of contexts. After 1986, Pope John Paul II convened another World Day of Prayer for Peace in 2002. Multireligious prayer has found a place in the aftermath of national crises or tragedies, such as September 11, 2001 in the United States or following the devastating “Black Saturday” bushfires in Victoria in 2010, for example. It may feature as an annual event, such as the Commonwealth Observance Day in Westminster Abbey – the largest annual multi-faith gathering in the United Kingdom.³⁶ And it continues to be convened by a variety of religious groups across many countries as they deepen their engagement in the task of interreligious dialogue at the local level. While allowing different religious congregations to pray in their own specific ways, multireligious prayer does not *ipso facto* resolve all questions neatly. For example, contextual matters such as how occasions are planned and coordinated, where they take place, who presides, how symbols are used and so forth are far from unimportant.

Finally, we arrive at the innermost frame of Figure 1: interreligious prayer. Where multireligious prayer usually draws back from any common prayers, interreligious prayer seeks, on the contrary, to unify those gathered via the act of praying together. Morphologically, Interreligious prayer can be enormously varied and complex. It can be a delicate balancing act as those participating from different traditions seek to discern and then express common formularies for their prayer. Without addressing the key theological concerns here (this will be taken up in the next two sections of the paper), it should be noted that, while many Christians remain tentative and even highly critical in their appraisal of this form, it is becoming more common, particularly among those religions with a higher level of doctrinal congruence, such as the monotheistic traditions represented by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Before moving on, it should be stressed that the line between multireligious and interreligious prayer is not always so clear. For example, a service which is ostensibly multireligious in form may include elements of interreligious prayer – represented by Figure 1 insofar as “interreligious prayer” may be framed by “multireligious prayer.” But the question remains: why is interreligious prayer often perceived as a dangerous undertaking? To appreciate this, we must “map” the theological interpretations pertaining to this form of shared prayer.

MAPPING THE TERRAIN: THREE THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS ON INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

There are, of course, a range of different theological positions on the possibility of interreligious prayer. However, for the purposes of this paper, I wish to highlight three positions, each taken from the writing of a representative theologian. Before discussing each in turn, I want to set up a particular interpretive framework, as established in Figure 2.

Figure 2 outlines two principal theological concerns commonly attached to the possibility of interreligious prayer. The “vertical axis” expresses concerns and possibilities around the relationship between the transcendental ground of prayerful encounter – which I have tentatively named as “Divine/Mystery” – and the particular groups addressing themselves to that ground within the occasion of interreligious prayer. The key

³⁶ See “Order of Service: An Observance for Commonwealth Day 2012”, http://static.westminster-abbey.org/assets/pdf_file/0010/56377/Programme-050312.pdf (accessed May 21, 2012).

questions on this axis are concerned with the addressee of common prayer: to whom do we all pray? Can we come to sufficient common understanding of divine mystery to justify praying together? Here, questions of *intentionality* and *communion* are primary; by corollary, those who doubt the possibility of interreligious prayer will often speak of potential *infidelity* and even *idolatry*.

The “horizontal axis” opens up the question of the relationships between the different religions in praying together. Here, the concern/possibilities centre more upon the inter-subjective nature and ramifications of praying together: what does praying together say about the relationship among participating religions? Advocates of interreligious prayer will typically speak of the symbolic power of praying together, opening up new possibilities for re-imagining our interreligious, institutional and spiritual/mystical lives. Typically, concerns on the horizontal axis will highlight the dangers of scandalizing other members of one’s own tradition, or giving the appearance (real or otherwise) of *pluralism*, *indifferentism* or even *syncretism*. In surveying different theological positions on interreligious prayer I will refer directly to the vertical and horizontal axes throughout. Let us begin, then, with the first position on the possibility of interreligious prayer: “no.”

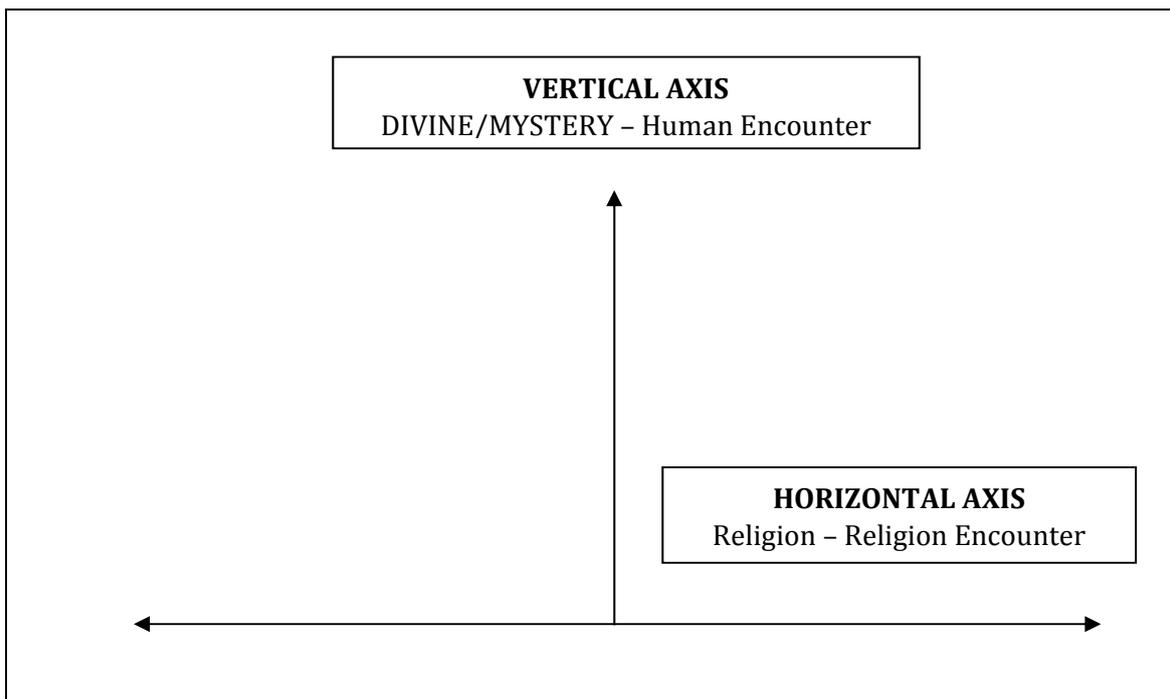


Figure 2

When he published *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* in 2003, Joseph Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. His subsequent elevation to the throne of St. Peter has inevitably made his position on interreligious dialogue and interreligious prayer all the more central. His position on interreligious prayer enunciated in this text was clearly borne out when, like his predecessor, he called members of different religious traditions together at Assisi in 2011. Unlike his predecessor, however, Pope Benedict XVI did not arrange for shared prayer at

all: prayer at this “interfaith summit” was optional and private for all those involved.³⁷ When turning to interreligious prayer in this book, Ratzinger refers explicitly to perceptions in the aftermath of Assisi 1986 and 2002. “The question was repeatedly and most seriously raised, can one do this?”³⁸ For an occasion of multireligious prayer, Ratzinger expresses a cautious “yes.” However, such occasions are to be based on two considerations: that they be arranged only for “unusual situations” (i.e. grave crisis) and with the full recognition that “such a procedure almost inevitably leads to false interpretations, to indifference as to the content of what is believed or not believed, and thus to the dissolution of real faith.”³⁹ Even for multireligious prayer, then, Ratzinger expresses grave concerns on the horizontal axis.

Unsurprisingly, Ratzinger is most pessimistic about the possibility of interreligious prayer: “Is that [interreligious prayer], in all truth and in all honesty, possible at all? I doubt it.”⁴⁰ And here his doubt rests essentially on the vertical axis, for Ratzinger detects a dangerous tendency towards relativising the divine within the push for interreligious prayer:

the boundaries between God and gods, between a personal and an impersonal understanding of God should not be ultimately decisive – that behind all this, everybody in the end means to say the same thing ... This concept has in itself something fascinating for present-day man; it seems to express a greater reverence toward the mystery of God and a greater humility before the absolute on the part of man, and in its all-inclusive tolerance, it seems to be, in terms both of religion and of thought, greater than the insistence on the personal nature of God as being indispensable, an inalienable gift through revelation.⁴¹

For Ratzinger, this will not do. Should interreligious prayer even be countenanced, it must be anchored within a *personalist* sense of the divine. “We can pray with each other only if we are agreed who or what God is and if there is therefore basic agreement as to what praying is: a process of dialogue in which I talk to a God who is able to hear and take notice.”⁴² Since, for Ratzinger, agreement must be reached on the precise nature of this “gift through revelation,” – he will argue elsewhere that “the uniqueness of Christ is directly related to the uniqueness of God and to the concrete form of this”⁴³ – it is difficult to see how interreligious prayer is indeed possible.

In his book *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Gavin D’Costa, a theologian who has written extensively on the theology of religions, answers with a “yes” in relation to interreligious prayer, but in a way which renders such practice necessarily “fragmentary” and “imperfect”. Questions on the vertical axis are indeed paramount for D’Costa, as the very title of the relevant chapter suggests: “Praying Together to the Triune God: Is

³⁷ Francis X. Rocca, “At Assisi Interfaith Summit 2011, Prayer is Optional,” www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/28/assisi-interfaith-summit-2011_n_1062649.html (accessed May 21, 2012).

³⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 106.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 104.

Interreligious prayer Like Marital Infidelity?"⁴⁴ It should be noted at the outset that D'Costa's piece is complex and nuanced, and it is difficult to do him full justice here. Nevertheless, his argument seems to affirm that, while interreligious prayer "with one accord," that is, with a perfect sense of co-intentionality, is only partially possible, the practice of doing so entails a worthwhile "loving risk." "I want to suggest that interreligious prayer, within certain parameters, might not after all be like marital infidelity, but rather an act of loving risk, somewhat like Jacob's wrestling with the mysterious figure, whose identity is unknown and who refuses to be named, but names or rather renames 'Jacob' as 'Israel'".⁴⁵ One such "parameter," however, seems to bring D'Costa's position dangerously close to a subtle form of inclusivism, albeit "Trinitarian". At one point, for example, he suggests that "there is a case to be made that the prayers of others might be reconfigured in the act of shared prayer, such that Christians might discover the mystery of the triune God more fully, and also share with the other the 'gift' that prayer always is: an invitation to communion with the triune God." While being very sympathetic to this position, I see dangers with trying to bring the vertical axis *entirely* in line with an *explicitly* Trinitarian conception of the divine in order to justify interreligious prayer (I will return to this point in the final part of the paper).

In his book *Walking Together: The Practice of Interreligious Dialogue*, the Indian Jesuit theologian Michael Amaladoss sets out a position which confidently affirms the possibility of interreligious prayer. Interestingly, Amaladoss seems less concerned about questions on the vertical axis, since those who pray together "are experiencing the same God. But they are not having the same experience."⁴⁶ This carefully nuanced position shows evident concern for questions posed on the horizontal axis – requiring the affirmation that "common prayer should lead not to an equalisation of experience in mathematical terms, but to a mutual enrichment that confirms their identity in difference"⁴⁷ – which could thereby redound on the vertical axis. For example, Amaladoss argues strongly that the diversity of ritual and symbolic experience found in religions should not be relativised in any occasion of interreligious prayer lest the impression be created that we need the sum total of all religions to experience of the fullness of God's self-manifestation to humanity. Hence, in the relevant chapter which discusses interreligious prayer, Amaladoss spends significant time defending interreligious prayer against the charge of syncretism. While I agree wholeheartedly with Amaladoss's piece, I do not feel that questions on the vertical axis can be easily swept aside, and my own position will address the question from precisely this point.

Now the above survey has been only limited in nature – there are other very interesting theological positions on interreligious prayer.⁴⁸ However, it has given us a good sense of the pivotal theological questions pertaining to interreligious prayer. On this basis, then, I wish to outline my own position.

⁴⁴ Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 143.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁶ Michael Amaladoss, *Walking Together: The Practice of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1992), 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁸ See, for example, John Daniels, "With One Accord...? Some Reflections on Multi-Faith Worship," *Theology*, Vol. C, no. 796 (1997): 252-259. Also, Marcus Braybrooke, "Interfaith Prayer" in *Many Mansions: Interfaith and Religious Intolerance*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (London: Bellew Publishing, 1992), 149-157.

PRAYING TOGETHER IN THE DARK

In his previously quoted text, D'Costa at one point remarks that "interreligious prayer, to some extent, is not unlike 'wrestling' in the dark, an abandonment of control in an ambiguous act of love and trust, even when we are not sure who God is, crying out to God: 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me' (Gen. 32:36)."⁴⁹ In this statement, D'Costa has actually touched upon a line theological inquiry which might open up the possibility of interreligious prayer. I would suggest, however, that such "wrestling in the dark" need not equate to the exceedingly difficult task of trying to find common images or symbols inhering within interreligious prayer. Rather, I wish to propose that interreligious prayer is possible not because we can all arrive at a satisfactory resolution of questions on the vertical axis, naming the Mystery to which we address ourselves in prayer, but because, *ultimately, we cannot.*

To speak of "darkness" is to call upon a metaphor for an object which is not an object, which no metaphor, indeed no language or any form of human cognitive tool, is able to describe.⁵⁰ This discursive strategy of negation regarding "Ultimate Mystery" has a long history in Christianity and many other religious traditions.⁵¹ In Christianity, it is termed the apophatic tradition or negative theology. In this anti-discursive discourse, all affirmations of Ultimate Mystery fail; rather, we can only affirm what Ultimate Mystery is not. However, apophaticism never stands alone – and this is a critical recognition. It requires its "other," the *Kataphatic*, our very human need to name Mystery, to express something of the absolute in whatever first or second order theological languages we find conducive. The apophatic and the kataphatic are not in opposition, nor should the apophatic be thought the higher or more perfect articulation of Ultimate Mystery. Rather, they exist in a creative dialectical tension.⁵²

Correspondingly, one can speak of kataphatic and apophatic modalities of prayer. For example, any prayer which utilises language, music or imagery of any sort is clearly anchored within a kataphatic modality. Furthermore, the kataphatic mode of prayer "names" the particular understanding of Ultimate Mystery within the owning tradition: the triune God in Christianity, Allah in Islam, Brahman in Hinduism and so forth. Kataphatic modalities of prayer and worship are arguably the best exemplars of the human religious imagination. An apophatic modality of prayer, on the other hand, brings us to the critical recognition that the reach of our religious imagination, as rich and deeply symbolic as it is, cannot lay grasp ultimately of that which we confidently name. This is not a process of subtraction, leaving us simply bereft; rather, it is only by fully embracing whatever kataphatic modalities of prayer in our tradition that we sense another horizon which always escapes the kataphatic. Typically, then, apophatic modalities of prayer utilise meditative practices, mantras, stillness and silence.

⁴⁹ D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, 150.

⁵⁰ See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵¹ One can find many examples of such studies in different religious traditions; however, for an excellent collection of comparative perspectives on apophaticism across religious traditions see *God, the self, and nothingness: reflections eastern and western*, ed. Robert E. Carter (New York: Paragon House, 1990).

⁵² See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 252.

In one very significant sense, the ongoing discernment of Ultimate Mystery within interreligious dialogue – which, as *Nostra Aetate* mandates, we are called to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage” – surely brings us to greater awareness of the smallness of our sure kataphatic formulations. What we see as we engage in all forms of dialogue with other religions is the shadow side of our kataphatic drives. “Smallness” and “shadow side” are terms I use carefully and specifically, for my position may be easily misunderstood. I did not use, for example, “incompleteness” or “missing puzzles” of our kataphatic formulations. In other words, we do not engage in interreligious dialogue because we have an incomplete picture of our *own* tradition. Rather, we discover that the plenitude of Ultimate Mystery has also found expression in myriad ways outside our tradition.

In the “dark” of this recognition, then, what does it mean to suggest that interreligious prayer is possible? It means, firstly, that we acknowledge a real poverty in our efforts to pray together. If we can truly affirm that all our ideas of “God” cannot capture God adequately, then we can truly affirm that “we do not know how to pray as we ought.” (Romans 8:26). This Pauline declaration no longer stands as a slightly disingenuous claim. Indeed, occasions of Interreligious prayer bring us face to face with this truth. Such an occasion represents a beautiful moment of theological reflexivity as we become an audience to our own incomprehension before the kataphatic imagination of another tradition, which thereby becomes another vehicle of the apophatic within our own.

Secondly, the apophatic modality allows us to pray co-intentionally insofar as we are addressing that within our traditions which confronts us with the indefinable and ineffable nature of Ultimate Mystery. This co-intentionality does not require us to find some bland kataphatic formulation to which we can all agree, nor does it call us to suspend or extinguish the uniqueness of our traditions or the addressee of our prayers; rather, our praying together as expressive of a continuing openness to the horizon of Ultimate Mystery *itself becomes the intention*. A caveat is necessary here, for it could be thought that such shared co-intentional apophatic prayer represents a form of default pluralism: we can all pray together because, ultimately, we are all addressing the same thing. But such a claim merely reifies the apophatic as a kataphatic “addressee.” Rather, our co-intentionality within an apophatic modality represents a shared prayer towards the horizon of Mystery *as Mystery*.

Thirdly, prayer together anchored in an apophatic modality reminds us of the “given-ness” of all prayerful activity: it is not ours to control; rather, all prayer is a participation in the horizon of Ultimate Mystery where our pretensions to certitude, knowledge and even truth must give way in an act of surrender and trust. Praying together “in the dark” remains an apt metaphor for this very reason.

Finally, it would also seem an apt extension of the metaphor to suggest “silence” as its sensory complement. I am not suggesting here that all prayer in the apophatic modality must be void of words or music – to do so would represent another reification of the apophatic. Yet silence, which we as yet so little understand and appreciate within contemporary practices of Christian worship, allows those gathered to enter deeply into an apophatic modality of prayer precisely because it refuses all efforts to name and control. Furthermore, silence should not be thought of as a device of compromise: since we cannot agree how to pray together using particular words or images, it is best to use

nothing. However, apophatic prayer does not mean embracing nihilistic nothingness. Paradoxically, the roots of apophatic prayer extend deep within a kataphatic soil that first nourishes the spiritual life before any further growth beyond the kataphatic can take place. To speak of praying together in the dark, therefore, is to advocate a dialectical vision of interreligious prayer: in such a vision, people of all religious traditions might find their own place, representing *simultaneously* an act of faith in their rich spiritual traditions and a radical openness to the ever-beckoning horizon of Ultimate Mystery.

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