

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING

Taking the theme of learning as central to the responsible practice of interreligious dialogue, Michael Barnes S.J. discusses a Christian spirituality that builds on virtues of hospitality and welcome to the other, while maintaining the importance of difference and particularity in the search for meaning. Each chapter explores how faith grows as a person crosses a threshold into another religious world and learns sensitivity to echoes of the known in the unknown. Encounters with the religious other, refracted through texts, conversations, artefacts and places, are used to illustrate the ancient Patristic theme of 'seeds of the Word'. Cumulatively they show that a faith that learns how to engage imaginatively with another religious world constantly returns to the 'home' tradition, reinvigorated in its appreciation of the other.

**Michael Barnes S. J.** is Reader and Senior Lecturer in Interreligious Relations at Heythrop College, University of London. He has written a number of articles and books on interreligious relations, including *Walking the City* (1999), *Traces of the Other* (2000) and *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge, 2002).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING

*Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination*

MICHAEL BARNES S. J.



Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination  
Michael Barnes  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107435360](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107435360)

© Michael Barnes S. J. 2012

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

First paperback edition 2014

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Barnes, Michael, 1947–

Interreligious learning : dialogue, spirituality, and the Christian imagination / by Michael Anthony Barnes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01284-4

1. Christianity and other religions. 2. Dialogue – Religious aspects – Christianity. I. Title.

BR127.B335 2012

261.2–dc23

2011043210

ISBN 978-1-107-01284-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-43536-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*for Richie*

*1966–2009*

‘a life beyond words’

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
I. MEETINGS	I
1 The middle of things	3
2 Schools of faith	27
3 Communities of conversation	48
4 Thresholds of meaning	68
II. CROSSINGS	89
5 The art of translation	91
6 Mending memories	113
7 Channelling desire	134
8 Waiting on God	155
III. IMAGININGS	177
9 The divine imperative	179
10 Passion for justice	202

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination  
Michael Barnes  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
11	Tragedy and loss	221
12	Spirit of wonder	241
	Postface	261
	<i>Bibliography</i>	267
	<i>Index</i>	282



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

## DIALOGUE AND LEARNING

Few words are as susceptible to misunderstanding as ‘dialogue’. In the popular imagination it conjures up pictures of formal meetings in which speakers work towards agreement on some clearly defined topic. In this sense, dialogue may not be the enemy of truth, but the relationship can become problematic; if the object of the exercise is the negotiated settlement of some knotty problem, a degree of compromise and accommodation enters the picture. Thus the term gets associated with the activities of politicians and public officials – and inevitably gives off a whiff of vested interest and undisclosed motives. Small wonder that when the word is applied to the encounter of religions it often attracts a degree of suspicion, as if to enter into dialogue with people of another tradition is to collude with a relativising disregard for religious integrity.

There is, however, another side to the experience of dialogue. When people meet each other as people of faith, the term dialogue comes to connote less the type of reasoning found in Socrates’ insistent questioning of his students than the more mystical encounter of ‘I and Thou’, which is associated with the thought of personalist philosophers like Martin Buber. A Buberian model of dialogue subordinates the issues discussed to the significance of the encounter itself. It is concerned not with the negotiation of outcomes but with a meeting of persons that is almost an end in itself.

In practice, of course, the distinction between the two meanings is never that clear – and no doubt people engage in interreligious dialogue for a variety of reasons. For the intellectually curious, it introduces them to the challenge of different ways of speaking about reality. For the more traditionally religious, it makes for an acceptable form of mission, one that fits the cultural mood of the age. For the politically conscientious, it is one way of answering the demands of justice, getting to know one’s neighbours and developing resources for social cohesion. Sometimes the emphasis is on

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

*Preface*

clarifying ideas and concepts; sometimes it is about building confidence and understanding. Nevertheless, whether we are talking about what is sometimes called the dialogue of theological exchange or the more practical dialogue of common life, the one thing all forms of dialogue share is the experience of learning. When common projects are worked on, when important concerns are shared, when different accounts of ultimate reality are discussed, not only is mutual understanding built up and barriers broken down but a new light is often cast on whole areas of life that have largely been taken for granted. It is not just that one learns more about 'the other'; one also learns more about the self.

This book takes its rise from that experience. For many people in a pluralist multicultural world, faith is deepened, not diluted, by the encounter with another religion or way of life. Learning about another religious tradition goes hand in hand with learning about one's own. But how precisely is faith deepened – and what is learned? How can the beliefs and symbolic structures of one tradition become the source of reflection for another? In addressing these questions, people of faith face something of a dilemma. Either they move towards some sort of universalism, identifying supposedly common elements that are shared by all religions, or they incorporate the most attractive and useful elements of other traditions into one all-inclusive pattern – their own. The former flattens out difference, the latter just absorbs it. That there are ethical as much as theological considerations here is obvious. Some would argue, however, that the risk has to be taken – indeed, that the risk is taken every time people engage with one another and seek to go beyond the politeness and pleasantries of everyday exchange. In today's world of volatile religious and anti-religious commitments, in which fundamentalist and liberal secular sensitivities rub up against each other, dialogue and learning are imperatives not luxuries.

I write as a Christian theologian. Inevitably I 'read' the world of religious difference from within that tradition and seek to give as much attention to the internal philosophical coherence of other traditions as I do to the theological integrity of my own. The tension between virtues of faithfulness and openness runs through this book, and, in what I coyly call a 'Postface', intended to mirror this Preface, I return briefly to the dilemma. There I shall attempt some summary remarks about how interreligious learning is more than a valuable resource for promoting social cohesion in a pluralist society but essential to the proper articulation of Christian faith. My hope is that by that time the key elements of the thesis will have emerged through what is primarily a reflection on the actual experience of interreligious encounter, of living in an ever-developing relationship with other people of faith.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

In style and method, the approach in what follows has similarities to what has come to be called ‘comparative theology’, the close reading of the texts of another religious tradition from a consciously Christian theological perspective. That this is an important development within theology of religions there is no doubt, even if, as a new development, its theoretical foundations are still contested. In our globalised world, translations of sacred texts that even a few years ago would have stayed safely locked away are freely available. Anyone can read them. But mere availability is not everything – indeed, it can be problematic. The question is how to read intelligently, prayerfully, theologically, so that what is being assimilated becomes a source of wisdom and learning beyond the community of faith to which it originally belonged. In what follows I shall be commenting on some important texts, but it is not the expertise of the technical exegete that I bring to this book.

Basing interreligious dialogue on textual tradition has obvious advantages and in practice can be extraordinarily fruitful. Christianity is nothing if not a religion of the Word, and, while different religions value their sacred scriptures in different ways, there are clearly links and analogies between religions as textually based ways of thinking about the world. The risk, however, is that too strong an emphasis on textuality risks projecting onto other religious traditions Christian, and more generally Western, philosophical notions of literacy and literature. There is much more to any religious tradition than its written, or even oral, teachings. My contention, very simply, is that the ‘life of texts’ is the ‘life of a community’. If interreligious learning begins with the meeting of persons, then attention needs to be given not just to the textual tradition itself but to the context of everyday living that it both forms and expresses. I therefore use ‘texts’ in a loose sense to refer not just to canonical scripture and authoritative commentary but to the forms of practice that inhabit the narratives of faith and give them flesh and blood reality. My subject is the interpersonal engagement and the ideas, events, meetings and particularly places that sound echoes and resonances of the known in the unknown and provoke an imaginative re-engagement with the Christian tradition.

This book builds on and complements the approach to dialogue worked out in my earlier *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*. In the final chapter of that book, I described a practice of Christian faith nourished by the Eucharist that built up a Christian habitus, an instinct of hospitality and welcome to the other. I spoke of the Christ celebrated by the Church not as the ‘Christ of conquest’ but as the ‘homeless Christ’ who through the continuing yet hidden action of the Spirit goes on drawing all people to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

*Preface*

himself. I ended by picking up the ancient Patristic theme of the ‘seeds of the Word’. God is to be known through the single mystery of creation and redemption, through everything that enhances that sense of participation in the very life of God to which all people are called. My aim was to commend the resources of Christian faith for generous engagement with the other. This book continues that project, but does so through the prism of lived examples.

Each chapter can be read as a discrete reflection on a particular experience of crossing a threshold into another religious world. From this sense of being in ‘the middle of things’ I seek to discern and follow a trace of the other that stimulates the imagination, opening up half-formed connections, sparking the odd insight, pointing to something that has been missed or not properly understood about the ways of God. What sense can I make of this particular experience, what is seen and heard and touched – indeed, been touched by? What does it take to learn from the unfamiliar and other?

However, what I present in this book is more than a record of one person’s interreligious encounters. Vatican II’s unequivocal statement in *Nostra Aetate*, the ‘Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions’, that the Church ‘rejects nothing of what is true and holy’, and the call to Christians to ‘acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture’, makes theological reflection on the experience of dialogue an essential feature of responsible Christian living in a multi-faith society. If that is correct, then the dilemma noted above is not to be solved in advance of the engagement with the other. Certainly the Church, as, indeed, other communities of faith, must work out the principles on which dialogue and encounter are to be based. But it will be through the actual experience of being in relationship that will lead to those principles being tested and deeply rooted in the tradition. By setting these reflections in particular places – in a Hindu temple or in a Buddhist meditation centre or with a discussion about Shi’a theology in the back of a bus – my aim is not just to paint an evocative picture of the messy reality of life in a thoroughly pluralist world: the chapters are intended to build on one another, developing a cumulative argument for an interreligious learning that grows out of a range of meetings, encounters and conversations.

The first chapter begins with a place that is more metaphorical than real: the ‘marketplace’ of human interaction that comes at the end of the Buddhist ox-herding pictures. Even (perhaps, especially) here, the object is to anchor dialogue in the reality of the everyday. That familiar set of images takes the form of a journey, in which certain key moments open up

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

the possibility of enlightenment. My aim, however, is not to extract a universal paradigm from the Buddha story, nor to impose some Christian template on someone else's religious experience. I work a stage further back, as it were, with the terms of what Charles Taylor calls a 'social imaginary'. The practices of faith, from the prayerful cultivation of interiority to the more exterior works of witness, build up a certain learned ability to move between religious worlds.

In teasing out the logic of interreligious learning, the book describes three moments that speak of shifts in understanding of the relationship with whatever is other. The first section, under the general title of 'Meetings', is an attempt to situate interreligious encounter within a broad theological and historical context and thus to question certain modern assumptions about the nature of 'religion' and its familiar instantiations, 'the religions'. To build an interreligious social imaginary that attends to both the creative and destructive sides of human religiosity means paying attention to the ways in which religion can, on the one hand, be turned into an oppressive ideology and, on the other, be reduced to 'mere culture'. Self-critical attention to the possibility of corruption is always necessary in any human institution – let alone those that seek to speak of divine things. The point I argue here is that by developing a model of a religious tradition as a 'school of faith', where teachers and learners can meet, a forum is created within which theological questions about the meaning of beliefs, actions, prayers and rituals can be addressed with proper integrity.

The second section, entitled 'Crossings', takes 'translation' as the primary metaphor for a process of growing engagement with the other. While it is obviously the case that concepts and ideas have to be translated into other languages if a communication across cultures is to take place, translation is an art rather than an exact science. Thus I seek to argue, largely through examples taken in the first place from the Christian dialogue with Judaism, that persons need to be translated, crossing over a cultural border, if they are to learn the skills and sensitivities that dialogue demands. Two further chapters in this section continue this theme, with a specific focus on the spirituality of dialogue. I argue, through an engagement with Buddhist and Hindu meditative traditions, that the 'dialogue of spiritual experience' provokes an interiority in which desire is channelled by the virtue of a humble and hopeful waiting upon ultimate mystery, however that is conceived.

The third section, 'Imaginings', takes up some of the more ethical and political implications of dialogue that have been touched on throughout the book, particularly the theme of religiously inspired violence. Here the focus

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

*Preface*

is on the return, back across the threshold of engagement, to consider how Christian faith has been enhanced by the meetings, crossings and, crucially, the imaginings that it provokes. Although any number of examples could have been chosen (any significant encounter with the religious other stimulates the imagination to think otherwise), I have restricted myself here to Islam and the Indian religions. The engagement with Islam, I argue, raises questions not just about revelation but also about the nature of the human person as called to witness to the creative power of God. Devotional Hinduism and Sikhism begin from different theological premises but, as I seek to argue, mirror the Christian focus on the God revealed in the very depth of everything that makes us most human – in tragedy and loss, in joy and delight, in passion and suffering. It is important, therefore, in a work of Christian theology, to take back into the ‘marketplace’ some response to Jesus’s own question: ‘who do you say that I am?’

The last thing I want to do, however, is press these examples into some pan-religious Procrustean bed. They are the fruit of textual and contextual reading, one person’s reflection on learning something of the traces of the ever-surprising God. I shall return briefly to the logic that I seek to develop in a final concluding section that offers some further elucidation of a Christian spirituality of dialogue. More important than any such logic is the conviction that guides me throughout that, while Christian faith and the beliefs and practices of Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists may be saying different things, the very attempt to grapple with difference in a spirit of generous respect can be mutually supportive and illuminating. By beginning in the middle of things, with particular people in particular situations, what emerges is a considered and thoughtful response to the Spirit who leads all people into the mystery of God’s providence. Deliberately to avoid the imposition of some sort of magisterial overview is not to collude with the worst excesses of postmodern relativism, it simply acknowledges that any account of the form of God’s presence in the world raises complex issues about how to discern that form and how to live with, as well as learn from, that sometimes irreducible difference.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Acknowledgements*

This book is, first and foremost, a record of experience. I am indebted to my neighbours, the good people of Southall in all their splendid diversity, and particularly the parishioners of St Anselm's Catholic Church, thanks to whom I have been happily immersed in the multicultural mix of West London for some years. I am also grateful to many students at Heythrop College who have, with unfailing sharpness, asked awkward questions and kept my theology of religions honest. In particular I thank the two groups who formed the *Faiths Together* project, an experiment at Heythrop in interreligious learning that tested old ideas and generated new ones. Thanks also to friends and students at the Muslim College, where the task of teaching Christianity has enabled me to appreciate the richness of the living tradition of Islam. Many friends and colleagues have contributed in great ways and small, making the right noises at the right time. A special debt is owed to Ahmad Achtar, Jim Bernauer, Frank Clooney, Swami Dayatmananda, Manfred Deselaers, Gwen Griffith Dickson, Martin Ganeri, Gokal Singh Gill, Anil Goonewardene, Jonathan Gorsky, Chris Hewer, Damian Howard, Gerry Hughes, Robert Kennedy, David Lonsdale, Tony McCaffry, Joachim Russek, Philip Sheldrake, Mohammad Shomali, Frank Sullivan, Bill Tomkiss, Sister Theoktisti, who all in their different ways have given time, advice and support. I am grateful to them all. Thanks also to my Jesuit brethren in Southall for putting up with my distractedness, and to the community at Boston College, Massachusetts, whose hospitality enabled me to get the final drafts finished. Nor should I forget Brother Daniel Faivre, my late and much missed mentor, whose firm but gentle criticisms of my earlier work got this one going.

Finally, a brief word about the dedication. Richard was my first nephew. He was born with a severe mental and physical handicap, and died, a day short of his forty-third birthday, as the first draft of this book was being finished. He never spoke, yet somehow became the centre of a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-43536-0 - Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination

Michael Barnes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

*Acknowledgements*

web of human relations. His was very much a life beyond words, one that in giving and receiving love witnessed eloquently to the Word of God. Like a good theologian, he reminds me that not everything can or should be said about the ways of God. To his memory this book is respectfully dedicated.