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## INTERRELIGIOUS FRIENDSHIP: A NEW THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE\*

James L. Fredericks

### PRECIS

Today, in an effort to respond to their religiously pluralistic situation, Christians should recognize friendships with non-Christians as a theological virtue. The first section of this essay reviews some of the recent discussion of virtue theory, noting that virtues are enduring aspects of character that incorporate values and skills, have histories, and often act as correctives to vices. The second section reflects on friendship as a virtue, using Aristotle, Sartre, and Levinas, among others. The third section discusses interreligious friendship in particular as an example of a human excellence, a new virtue that incorporates values and skills and helps Christians in resisting the vice of despising, ignoring, or caricaturing their non-Christian religious neighbors. A final section has to do with the limitations of interreligious friendship as a new theological virtue.

Given the intrusive fact of religious diversity today, Christian believers not only need to account for diversity theologically, but they also need to address this diversity creatively and responsibly in their own lives. In doing so, Christians will need to cultivate within themselves personal qualities that in the past have not been recognized as valuable and, in fact, may even have been seen as vices. Recent work in the area of virtue theory may prove helpful in addressing this challenge. Virtue theory provides a language for talking about what is of vital importance in our lives. It is especially useful for discerning the role that character plays in equipping us to deal with life's challenges and promoting human flourishing.

The focus of this essay is not virtue theory as such. It will, instead, seek to reflect on a topic that has received scant, if any, attention: the role of virtues

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in helping us to live creatively and responsibly with people whose religious view of the world is significantly different from our own. Neither will this essay address the important problem of comparative approaches to the virtues.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it will draw attention to our need to identify and cultivate virtues that equip us for living well in a world where people of differing religious outlooks increasingly find themselves neighbors.

More specifically, the essay inquires into virtues that can be especially beneficial to Christian believers in an environment of religious pluralism. Instead of offering a new interpretation of an existing virtue (such as tolerance, whose value in regard to religious diversity has already been recognized), I want to identify what I believe to be a new virtue: interreligious friendship. Friendships that reach across the boundaries of doctrine, experience, and value that separate religions should rightly be recognized as virtuous for Christian believers today. Those who follow religious paths other than my own may, in fact, agree with me that interreligious friendships should be extolled as virtuous. However, these religious believers may have very different ways of thinking about virtues and about friendship. Conversely, non-Christians may decide that friendships with believers other than their co-religionists are not virtuous at all.

### I. Virtues

Over approximately the past fifteen years, ethics and moral theology have undergone a renaissance driven by the rediscovery of the centrality of an ethics of virtue as distinct from the quandary ethics that has been the legacy of the European Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Quandary ethics is concerned with justifying acts either by rules or by consequences, while generally remaining unconcerned with the character of the moral agent and the nature of human happiness. The Roman Catholic manualists shared in this modern eclipse of the virtues by departing from the legacy of Aristotle and Aquinas and treating virtues as sources of obligations rather than resources for living well. The return to virtue ethics has shifted attention from rules, consequences, duties, and obligations to a concern for the cultivation of human character as it contributes to the flourishing of human life.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For significant contributions to the problem of comparative virtues, see John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, eds., *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>For some of the more important contributions to the rediscovery of the virtues in relation to ethics, see the extensive bibliographies in Lee H. Yearley, "Recent Work on Virtue," *Religious Studies Review* 16 (January, 1990): 1-9; and William C. Spohn, "The Return of Virtue Ethics," *Theological Studies* 53 (March, 1992): 60-75.

<sup>3</sup>Of course not all ethicists have welcomed the return to virtue ethics. For a prominent defender of a deontological ethics in the Kantian tradition, see Ronald Michael Green, *Religion*

Most figures who are prominent in the discussion of virtue theory would agree with Lee Yearley's definition of a virtue as "a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence, an instance of human flourishing."<sup>4</sup> In keeping with this definition, a virtue should be thought of as a "recognizable human excellence." Any inquiry into the nature and import of the virtues necessarily leads us into the arena of human character and its contribution to the realization of what is of value in life. Therefore, virtues should not be confused with emotional states that pass away quickly. The virtues are enduring elements of what constitutes us as specific individuals. Beyond these brief statements, I would like to underscore three other important aspects of the virtues.

First, virtues incorporate values and skills. Virtues involve values to the extent that they make possible prudent judgments about what constitutes a lasting good. In this respect, virtues generally imply qualities that are publicly extolled and recognized as important for the common good. In acting virtuously, we embody values and contribute to human flourishing. This suggests a connection between virtues as the embodiment of values and the skills required to realize these values. Virtues also involve skills that require training and discipline. To the extent that they involve skills, virtues must be cultivated; they are not simply innate. A person skillful in realizing a value in life can also be said to embody a virtue. Since capabilities are not evenly distributed among human beings, some will excel in a particular virtue, while others will be deficient. A virtue arises in the confluence of values and skills. For example, a wine-maker may be skilled but is not thereby made virtuous. Similarly, one may recognize justice as a value but still lack the skills required to realize that value concretely. Persons such as these are not virtuous either, but a person with good organizational skills who sees a value in helping others with these skills may be said to be virtuous.

Second, virtues have histories. Some virtues are old. Other virtues are relatively new to any given community. Perhaps the notion of a "new" virtue needs some defense. Most of the virtues that come readily to mind would seem to be not only universal but also perennial: courage, honesty, patience, generosity. Moreover, to the extent that virtues tend to be publicly admired qualities, a "new" virtue will probably not be widely admired and may even be considered a vice. Therefore, my claim about interreligious friendship as a new virtue must be taken prescriptively. Some virtues merit wider recognition because our circumstances have changed to the point that these qualities are more salutary today than they were in the past.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, some virtues

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*and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); idem, *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and idem, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Yearley, "Recent Work," p. 2. For a discussion of various definitions of virtue, see Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), pp. 73-100.

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of virtues and their histories, see Lee H. Yearley, "New Religious Virtues

may be understood as era-specific. This is true in two distinct but related ways. First, what is considered a human excellence in one age may be deemed a vice (or perhaps at the least a curiosity or eccentricity) in another. For example, early Christians prized the virtue of faith, manifested in the form of world-renunciation, a virtue quite unintelligible to Cicero who lived a generation before. Second, the character of a specific virtue can change significantly over time. For example, for Homer, courage had to do with bravery in battle; for Gandhi, courage was manifested in the practice of nonviolence. Virtues have histories because they are recognized and cultivated in response to ever-changing historical situations. Thus, the confluence of skills and values recognized by an individual or community as a virtue must of necessity change in response to the bumpy road of history.

Third, virtues can function as correctives.<sup>6</sup> In responding to human weaknesses or need, virtues often address some propensity within us that needs to be resisted. In this fashion, virtues may be coupled with vices. For example, patience acts as a corrective to the human tendency to be impulsive. In some cases, virtues can be coupled with two vices. Aristotle argued that virtues often form the mean between extremes. If *in media stat virtus*, then vices are to be found on both extremes. For example, the virtue of courage forms the mean between the vices of cowardice and brashness.<sup>7</sup>

To return to my basic claim, Christian believers would do well to cultivate what I take to be a new virtue: friendship with people who follow religious paths other than their own. My proposal is not modest. By no means do I expect that all will agree that interreligious friendship is a desirable quality in a Christian or that it will lead to the flourishing of the Christian tradition. In fact, some will see it as a vice rightly to be avoided. In defense of my claim, I would like to offer some ideas about the virtue of friendship in general before turning to interreligious friendship in particular.

## II. Befriending the Stranger

Any inquiry into friendship must, perforce, be an inquiry into the relational character of our lives. Friendship, as a theme within feminist thought, for example, has been an effective way of calling into question the European

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and the Study of Religion," the 15th Annual University Lecture in Religion given at Arizona State University on February 10, 1994, pp. 6-10, 14. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; 2nd ed., 1984); and Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Marie Pohier, eds., *Changing Values and Virtues*, Concilium 191 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>See Yearley, "New Religious Virtues," p. 1; and idem, *Mencius and Aquinas*, pp. 16-17, 114-116.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the virtues in relation to the vices, see Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 8-14; and Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984).

Enlightenment's preoccupation with the autonomous individual.<sup>8</sup> Friendships humanize. By means of friendships we are exposed to the formative elements of life that complete us, orient us to life-goals, and shape our sense of value and worth. Friendship has been an important theme in the recent discussion of virtue theory. The concern for friendship is especially visible in the various retrievals of Aristotle and Aquinas, both of whom placed heavy emphasis on friendship as a virtue that is also a school for other virtues.<sup>9</sup>

In the West,<sup>10</sup> discussions of friendship have been dominated by the need to come to terms with the relationship between two different understandings of love: *philia* and *agapé*. *Philia* refers to friendship, in the sense of preferential love, extolled by Aristotle. *Agapé* is the unconditional love preached by Jesus (see, for example, Mt. 5:45). *Philia* requires a bond of reciprocal affection. *Agapé* is steadfast in the face of rejection. *Philia* reflects the requirements placed on friendship by the public life of the Greek *polis* and its call to civic involvement. *Agapé* implies a hope in the redemption from suffering by the ultimate triumph of love.<sup>11</sup>

In the Western tradition, *agapé* has eclipsed *philia* in prestige, for the most part. Over the centuries, for example, Aristotle has been much criticized by Christian moralists. *Philia* was not rejected outright as bad, but it was relegated to a subsidiary place below *agapé*, which has been seen as the perfection of love. *Philia* holds up as its end the primacy of self-fulfillment, unlike *agapé* with its ethos of self-sacrifice.<sup>12</sup> "Aristotle," wrote Simone Weil in her diaries, "is the corrupt tree which bears only rotten fruit. How is it that people cannot see this?"<sup>13</sup> A century earlier, Søren Kierkegaard argued for the radical opposition between *agapé* and *philia*.<sup>14</sup> Some contemporary commentators, however, caution against separating *agapé* too starkly from *philia*. Paul Wadell, for example, draws our attention away from Kierkegaard and back to Augustine

<sup>8</sup>For a fine example, see Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>In addition to MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, see Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study of Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN, and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); Stanley Hauerwas, "Companions along the Way: The Necessity of Friendship," in *Asbury Theological Journal* 45 (Spring, 1990): 35-48; Jean Porter, *Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), pp. 168-171; and Rose Mary Volbrecht, "Friendship: Mutual Apprenticeship in Moral Development," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 24 (October, 1990): 307.

<sup>10</sup>Of course, friendship is not a theme monopolized by Western thought. For reflections on friendship from non-Western perspectives, see Leroy Rouser, ed., *The Changing Face of Friendship* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Especially helpful for reflection on the issue of interreligious friendship are the articles therein by David Burrell ("Friendship with God in al-Ghazali and Aquinas"), Bhikhu Parekh ("An Indian View of Friendship"), and David L. Hall and Roger Ames ("Confucian Friendship: The Road to Religiousness").

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of the problem of the relationship between *philia* and *agapé*, see Meilaender, *Friendship*, pp. 2-5.

<sup>12</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 58-70.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Spohn, "Return of Virtue Ethics," p. 62, from Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebook* (London: Oxford University, 1970), p. 355.

<sup>14</sup>Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, pp. 58-70.

in contending that *agapé* is, in fact, an extension of *philia* to all, making the two not only compatible but also intrinsically connected.<sup>15</sup>

The focus of this essay lies more on *philia* than on *agapé*. My goal is not to discern the proper relationship between *philia* and *agapé*, however important this question might be for ethicists. Nor is it interested in the unconditional love (*agapé*) owed by all Christians to all non-Christians as a basis for religious tolerance. My interest lies in how the encounter between religious believers today might be both creative and responsible — how religious truths manifested in the life of a stranger might come to be welcomed as a transforming truth for a believer from another religious tradition. In fact, what Christian moralists have found most lacking in *philia* is what recommends it most for the purposes of this essay: friendship as preferential love arising out of our need for self-fulfillment through relatedness.<sup>16</sup> *Agapé* may provide one basis for religious tolerance. *Philia*, I will argue below, provides the basis for another type of tolerance and also moves us beyond tolerance to a standpoint wherein a transformation of our lives by the Other is possible.

Even the oldest and very best of friends was once a stranger to us. Friendships that are vital do not lose sight of this truth. In fact, friendships that would be lasting and rewarding should not seek completely to eradicate the stranger within the friend. There is value in showing hospitality to the stranger, even the “stranger” who has been a friend for many years. This value has at least two aspects: the decentering of the ego, and the expansion of our horizons. The stranger helps us to move off our own home ground and, in so doing, provides opportunities to understand ourselves in new ways. Often, the encounter with those who are strangers to our own ways entails a dethronement of the ego. Acknowledging worlds other than our own exposes our presuppositions and confronts us with our misperceptions. In challenging the sovereignty of the ego, the Other helps us to look differently at the world and at ourselves.

Jean-Paul Sartre imagined the encounter with the Other in decidedly unfriendly terms. To be in the presence of another person is fundamentally a threat, since that Other has the power to call into question the validity of one’s world.<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, like Sartre, also had a good ear for the power of the Other to attenuate our self-centeredness. However, in contrast to Sartre’s emphasis on the shock and threat of the Other, Levinas emphasized the power of the Other to bestow beatitude as well. If the Other is a decentering force in our lives, so the Other can be a source of self-knowledge and redemption, as well. If the Other is a threat to the integrity of our presuppositions and predispositions (what Levinas called a “traumatism of astonishment”), the

<sup>15</sup>Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*, p. 72. See also Meilaender, *Friendship*, pp. 6-35. Both Meilaender and Wadell underscore the fact that Augustine saw *philia* as a gift from God that naturally finds fulfillment beyond itself in *agapé*.

<sup>16</sup>For Aristotle’s discussion of our need for friendship, see Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, tr. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs Merrill, 1980), Books VII-X.

<sup>17</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 259-273.

Other is also a summons to a more honest and integral life. In the encounter with the Other, there is a loss of security but also a loss of hopelessness, the ruination of our autonomy but also a liberation from our self-absorption. In encountering the Other, we are required to take seriously another center of meaning, value, and action; another orientation toward the world; another way of being human. In the process, the Other rescues us from the tyranny of the autonomous ego. In the Other we have the opportunity to realize that the deliverance from our own selfishness does not lie in our own hands. For this reason, the terror and the comfort we know before the Other are never completely separable. Indifference to the Other or the attempt to render the Other harmless by remaking the Other into our own image and likeness is to misunderstand the experience fundamentally.<sup>18</sup>

A second aspect to the value of showing hospitality to the stranger has to do with the expansion of our limited horizons. Lying within every encounter with the stranger is a potential for discovery. The Other is present to us, Levinas has written, as a “face” that purveys the familiar and the unfamiliar. The stranger has stories to tell that we have never heard before and that may not be easily reconciled with our own stories. These new stories are a *tremendum* and also a *fascinans*, subversive but also enriching. New stories have the power to redirect our doing and stimulate our imagining. In this way, the strangeness of the stranger itself can become for us a resource for the cultivation of our souls and the appropriation of truth.

What can be said of those times when the stranger is not only encountered but also befriended? Friendship is a virtue that recognizes the value of the stranger and equips us with skills for welcoming her or him. Enduring friendships recognize a value in the Other as such. In befriending the stranger, we have not only found a way of taking another human being seriously and rejoicing in what we have in common but also a way of holding in regard what is different from us, what we have not chosen for ourselves for cherishing and living.

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguished three forms of friendship, each defined by what attracts and binds: friendship based on pleasure, on usefulness, and on goodness.<sup>19</sup> Neither of the first two types of friendship is based on the innate attractiveness of the Other as such. Friendships of pleasure and usefulness are based on the enjoyment or benefit that the Other can provide. Friendships such as these usually end when the pleasure or the usefulness ends.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, friendships based on the recognition of good-

<sup>18</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969). In the area of philosophical hermeneutics, there is a great deal of literature on this notion in addition to that of Levinas. See, e.g., Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, tr. and intro. Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 126.

<sup>19</sup>For a useful discussion of Aristotle's ideas on friendship, see John M. Cooper, “Aristotle on Friendship,” in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Major Thinkers Series (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA; London: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 301-340.

<sup>20</sup>See *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1156a5ff. (pp. 218-221).



ness in the Other imply that the Other is loved for her or his own sake. Friendships such as these are the most lasting.<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, however, argues that friendships of this type presume that the friends are fundamentally similar in character, interests, and outlook.

In claiming that enduring friendships recognize a value in the Other as such, I want to emphasize that the vitality of some forms of friendship arises from the attraction we hold for what is different from our customary ways of thinking and acting. In this respect, friendships can be ways of embodying concretely in our lives the importance of changing our lives well. By drawing us out of ourselves and into a world significantly different from our presuppositions, friends help us to reform our lives and understand ourselves in new ways. A friend's actions suggest emulation; a friend's judgments invite reflection. Our commitment to friendships measures in no small way our commitment to changing our lives well.

To be threatened by a stranger may be natural to us all. To befriend the stranger requires skills. Those who are skillful at befriending have learned how to set aside their anxiety and confusion and welcome the new and unfamiliar. If friendship provides a context for maintaining an openness to the unforeseen and uncontrollable, practicing the virtue of friendship itself helps us to cultivate this openness as a skill. Perhaps this is the case because friendship (*philia*) entails a reciprocal act of hospitality; my willingness to welcome the stranger into my world is complemented (and empowered in no small degree) by the stranger's willingness to welcome me into hers or his.

In addition, friendships require us to be playful as conversation partners.<sup>22</sup> Playfulness is a practical way to surrender, even if only momentarily, the presuppositions that have become established in our lives in order to experiment with new possibilities of identity and action. In play we "let ourselves go," for a time at least, in order to enter into new modes of experience, whether it be the "make-believe" of children or of Ibsen. Good conversations have much in common with play. In good conversation, quotidian modes are set aside in order that the conversation partners might enter into the play of new ideas, new stories. By losing ourselves within the play of the conversation, we establish the possibility of finding ourselves anew. Good conversation is rare. Friendships of quality are likely places to look for such conversations, a point amply demonstrated by Plato in his *Symposium* and by Louis Malle in his film *My Dinner with Andre*. Playfulness is a skill particularly helpful in assisting us to take the Other seriously on her or his own terms by suspending our own presuppositions about ourselves and the world.

<sup>21</sup>See *ibid.*, 1156b6-32 (pp. 219-221).

<sup>22</sup>On the notion of playfulness in human creativity, see J[ohan] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955). For the implications of play for the interpretation of texts, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. edited by Garrett Bardon and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Basil, Blackwell and Mott, 1958), pp. 4-20.

### III. The Virtue of Interreligious Friendship

To be friendless must be counted a major impoverishment of our humanity. In addition; we may ask how the befriending of one who follows a religious path not our own should be counted a virtue. Interreligious friendships are human excellencies that contribute to the flourishing of human life. Print and electronic media are replete today with news items documenting the violence religions can generate. Much less prominently covered are the friendships these same religions are capable of generating.

In the midst of the Cold War, during a conversation with the Buddhist scholar Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., at Sophia University in Tokyo, historian Arnold Toynbee predicted that historians in the future would look back on the twentieth century and give the conflict between the liberal democracies and the Soviet bloc merely a footnote. The initial dialogues between Buddhists and Christians would eventually be seen as the events of lasting import. Toynbee's statement to Dumoulin is all the more interesting given this priest's long-standing personal friendship with Nakamura Hajime, one of the greatest interpreters of Buddhism in Japan. On the night of his death, Gustav Weigel, S.J., spent a pleasant evening in the parlor of his beloved friend Abraham Heschel. The Hasidic rabbi remembered that evening with his friend, reporting, "We opened our hearts to one another in prayer and contrition and spoke of our own deficiencies, failures, hopes."<sup>23</sup> In 1959, Thomas Merton wrote D. T. Suzuki, the exponent of Zen Buddhism, what was to become the first of many letters. The two actually met five years later at Columbia University. Suzuki's friendship would eventually have an impact on Merton, an impact that is bearing fruit today in the intermonastic exchanges between Christian and Buddhist monks.<sup>24</sup> Friendships such as these richly deserve to be held up as examples of human excellence to be emulated. They are excellent in that they show us a valuable truth for today: We cannot love and remain unchanged.

Like the virtue of friendship more generically, interreligious friendship implies a conjunction of values and skills. One obvious value enshrined in friendships that cross religious boundaries is the increase in understanding of traditions foreign to our own. Of course, other religious traditions can be understood without actually befriending those who have embraced these paths. However, in interreligious friendships, religious traditions become present to us in the spontaneity of human speech and action and are no longer constrained by the limits of the text. The truths of religions cannot be exhausted by inscription.<sup>25</sup> Friendships between followers of different traditions

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," in Paul J. Griffiths, ed., *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1990), p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Merton met the present Dalai Lama weeks before his death in 1968. Twenty-eight years later, in a major meeting of Buddhist and Christian monks at Merton's monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, the Dalai Lama draped the cross marking Merton's grave with a Tibetan prayer-shawl, saying, "Now our spirits are one; I am at peace."

<sup>25</sup> In addition, some religions must be said to be more textually oriented than others. The

help us to resist the tendency to reduce religious forms of life to textuality.<sup>26</sup> In the friend, the religious Other is present not as an abstraction on paper but as an embodied truth in all its historical ambiguity. For all their ambiguity, texts are but static and limited snapshots of realities even more ambiguous — the religions themselves as they are realized in the lives of real believers. Interreligious friendships promote understanding between believers in helping them to locate the text not merely within its historical context but also within its living, existential context.

Additionally, friendships that cross over the boundaries between religions offer practical ways to embody the value of tolerance. The human need to render our enemies faceless in order to hate them has been much studied. The virtue of interreligious friendship is a concrete way of resisting this vice. Here we may return to my above-stated interest in *philia* over *agapé*. These two forms of love lead to different forms of tolerance. *Agapé* is the unconditional love demanded of Christian believers even for their enemies. *Philia* denotes the preferential love of friends, a love that must be reciprocated, for friendship is impossible if it is not mutual. We may love an enemy, but we cannot be friends with that enemy.

Religious tolerance based on *agapé* is rooted in a strength borne of a faith in an ultimate vindication of love by divine grace. Tolerance such as this endures whether or not love is returned and is not dependent on the actual character of the Other. *Philia* provides a basis for religious tolerance of a different sort. To the extent that *philia* denotes a preferential love, tolerance rooted in the mutuality of friendship is based on the actual character of the Other. If the strength of *agapé* is that tolerance is unconditional, the advantage of tolerance rooted in *philia* is that it is sustained by the concrete appeal the Other holds for us. Tolerance based on *philia* is especially a value in situations where one group forms a minority religion within a larger, more established religious community. *Agapé* may lead the established believer to look tolerantly on the Other despite her or his errors, as is the case with inclusivist theologies of religion.<sup>27</sup> *Philia* leads to toleration based on a recognition of the real differences that separate the Other from us.

Vulnerability to the truth is a third value concretized in interreligious friendships. We human beings realize ourselves through fidelity to truths that

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incongruence of a religious form of life with its textual approximations is most obvious in the nonliterate religious traditions, but the issue is not dispelled when dealing with religions that have created sophisticated texts. Buddhism is not a “religion of the book” in the same way that Judaism is. Not all Muslims are oriented to the Qur’an to the same degree.

<sup>26</sup>In the act of inscription, there is a withdrawal of the author’s speech from the text. On the subject of textual “distanciation,” see Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). The text is distanciated not only from the author’s speech but also from what remains unsaid in the author’s speech.

<sup>27</sup>The classic example of a Christian inclusivist theology of religion is the theory of the “anonymous Christian” advanced by Karl Rahner, S.J. In this view, non-Christians are to be tolerated because the same saving grace witnessed to by Christian believers is to be found at work in the lives of non-Christians, despite their ignorance of this fact.

are not of our own creation and not fully under our control.<sup>28</sup> In befriending the Other, perhaps most especially the religious Other, truths foreign to my own tradition become real possibilities for shaping and giving direction to my life. In the process, the truths of a religion not my own can become for me theological resources for revising my own religious self-understanding. Showing weakness or admitting confusion is rare in interreligious dialogues, especially at the official level. Within the embrace of friendship, however, the mutual pursuit of truth becomes a more concrete possibility. In short, interreligious friendships help us to realize a great value in life: Remaining vulnerable to the truth is a responsible act that cannot honestly be pursued without the assistance of the Other.

The value being discerned here is not to be confused with an uncritical capitulation to the Other. As noted above, even the oldest and very best of friends were once strangers to us. Friendships that are lasting never lose sight of the stranger within the friend. Thus, much of the vitality in a friendship lies in the honoring of differences, not simply in the enjoyment of similarities.<sup>29</sup> In vital interreligious friendships, there remains a role for apologetics, the principled defense of one's religious beliefs. Locating apologetics within the context of friendship, however, requires us to account for our faith in the presence of a real – not imaginary – Other. For all its inconvenience, having to present one's belief to an Other who is also a friend will only sharpen one's self-understanding.

As a virtue, interreligious friendship requires skills as well. If being threatened by a stranger is a natural response to the unknown and uncontrolled, befriending the stranger requires skills for resisting this tendency. Befriending a stranger from a religion other than my own requires special skills. Some of these skills are theological. In entering into interreligious friendships, Christian believers will be required to interpret their own tradition in new and resourceful ways. Of course, Christian doctrine has been used to dismiss the Other as insignificant or to inoculate Christian believers from the threat of the Other. The recent debate over the Christian theology of religions bears witness to this.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Christian theology, skillfully employed, can contribute to the deepening and sustaining of friendships that cross religious boundaries. Indeed, interreligious friendships may require Christians to revise their theological self-understanding in significant ways.

<sup>28</sup>Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup>Aristotle, whose reflections on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* have been vastly influential in the development of Western thinking about the subject, places great stress on similarity as the basis for lasting friendships. The historical context of these reflections, however, was the political demands of public life imposed by the Greek *polis*.

<sup>30</sup>None of the three basic candidates for a theology of religions (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism) is adequate to the task of assisting Christians in addressing the fact of religious diversity today. Exclusivism and inclusivism succeed in dismissing or marginalizing the Otherness of non-Christians with appeals to the uniqueness of Christ or the universality of grace, apart from any concrete familiarity with non-Christians and their religious beliefs. Pluralist theologies, such as John Hick's, begin with the "hypothesis" (which in fact is nothing more than a working presupposition that can never be abandoned) that all religions share in a common essence. This

Recent attempts at a "comparative theology," a theology in which a non-Christian tradition is looked on as a theological resource for interpreting Christian belief, best exemplify the role theological skills can play in interreligious friendships.<sup>31</sup>

Akin to theological skills is the matter of imagination,<sup>32</sup> a skill crucial for any friendship. The capacity to imagine skillfully assists one to enter sympathetically into the worldview of the Other.<sup>33</sup> In friendships that cross religious boundaries, the capacity to imagine may be quite as important as the capacity to distinguish concepts and infer from premises. The capacity to use the imagination skillfully can be related to yet another skill entailed in the virtue of interreligious friendship. Friendships that dare to cross the boundaries separating religious traditions require the ability to live well with considerable amounts of ambiguity. The capacity to listen patiently and to revise one's misconceptions, even after many years of friendship, are skills integral to this virtue.

I have also claimed that interreligious friendship is a new virtue for Christians and not sufficiently recognized as yet. Despite the long and shameful history of violence perpetrated in the name of Christian faith, creative encounters between Christians and those who follow other religious paths are by no means unprecedented. For example, the contribution of Islamic thought to Christian theology is well documented. Less well known is the extent to which Buddhist and Christian cultures became mutually fecundating in Central Asia in the first centuries of the Common Era.<sup>34</sup> The notion that friendships of Christians with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews should be held up as virtuous, however, has not generally been the case.

Today, friendships between Christian believers and believers from other religious traditions should be recognized as virtuous because of the historical situation in which Christianity presently finds itself. The sheer fact of religious diversity, at least in places such as the United States and Western Europe, undercuts the plausibility of Christian belief. With the loss of what Peter Berger has called our "sacred canopies," we are more self-consciously aware

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assertion renders theologically insignificant the real differences that distinguish other religions from Christianity. For a fine synopsis of these three models, see Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1985). Currently the most comprehensive criticism of the pluralist model of religions is S. Mark Heim's *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup>For examples of comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); and his more recent *Seeing through Texts* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996). Also see Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991); John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1989); and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

<sup>32</sup>Yearley, "Recent Work," p. 16; idem, *Mencius and Aquinas*, pp. 196-203.

<sup>33</sup>For the role of imagination in entering sympathetically into the religious world of another, see John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

<sup>34</sup>Take, e.g., the argument for a Buddhist origin of the Barlaam and Josaphat legends and their influence on the Christian spirituality of the Eastern churches. See David Marshall Lang, *The Balavariani* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966).

today than in the past that the foundations for our deepest religious commitments are not shared by all.<sup>35</sup> This state of affairs helps to account for the dilemma of fanaticism and relativism that plagues much of intellectual life today. The dilemma of fanaticism and relativism compels us to recognize interreligious friendship as a virtue for today.

Interreligious friendship is not only a new virtue, but it also serves as a useful corrective to vices that should be resisted. Friendships between followers of different religious paths help to correct a natural, but not inevitable, human propensity, fear of the Other. Such social scientists as Clifford Geertz and such theologians as George Lindbeck are right to emphasize the way in which religions offer comprehensive interpretations of the world and human life.<sup>36</sup> As a result of centuries of doctrinal development, religions can be said to be full and complete in themselves—when left to themselves. Today, religions no longer live in splendid isolation from each other. For this reason, the otherness of another's religion is often experienced as a threat not only to the comprehensiveness and coherence of one's own religion but also to its plausibility.

Not surprisingly, religious believers have developed multiple strategies for ignoring or controlling or annulling this threat. The religious Other is demonized as a terrorist or ridiculed as superstitious or dismissed as a heathen. Intellectuals have their own, more academically sophisticated methods. The terror and relativizing power of the Other are effectively domesticated and defanged with foundationalisms of all sorts, which reduce the Other to what David Tracy has called “merely more of the same,” whether they are based on phenomenological assertions about a universal religious experience or ontological assertions about Being Itself or logical assertions about a universal rationality. Religious exclusivisms, whether based on theologies of revelation (as with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) or on philosophical anthropologies (as with Hinduism and Buddhism), succeed in keeping the Other at bay with cultivated neglect.<sup>37</sup>

As a corrective to these vices, the virtue of interreligious friendship assists Christians in taking their actual experience of other religious believers as the prime locus for thinking about the diversity of religions, not the caricatures of popular prejudices or the abstract universals of pluralist philosophies, which

<sup>35</sup>Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990 [orig. — Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967]).

<sup>36</sup>See Clifford Geertz's essay, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in his collection, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125. For George A. Lindbeck, see *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>37</sup>The critique of foundationalism is reflected in the theology of religions debate. Among the most articulate critics of the claim that all religions share in a common essence is Joseph Dinaia, whose approach is shaped in large measure by the theology of George Lindbeck and its emphasis on religions as discrete, even incommensurate, cultural-linguistic systems. For the basic pluralist position on the “common essence,” acting as a foundation uniting all religions, see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). For Paul F. Knitter's response to the anti-foundationalist critique of the pluralist model, see *One World, Many Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996).

no actual religious believer would recognize as her or his own. The vice to be resisted is not simply our tendency to exclude the religious Other from our own account of the world. We must also resist the tendency to begin and end our attempts to understand the Other solely in terms of the autonomous self. The value of interreligious friendships lies in their ability to help us to move the self off its home ground and to expand its limited horizons.

Moreover, interreligious friendships have the salutary effect of helping us to correct the deficiencies and inconsistencies of our own faith. All religious worldviews, no matter how highly rationalized, are limited by historical circumstances and their specific cultural embodiments. The changing social and historical circumstances, to which all religious movements are subject, require that all religions constantly reinterpret even their most basic symbols and doctrines. The incoherence and irrationality of a religion may be detected easily by one from outside the tradition, but it is often hard to see from within it. Seeing the limits of the stranger's worldview can give us insight into the limits of the coherence and rationality of our own.

In fine, interreligious friendship is a human excellence, a virtue, because such friendships embody what Tracy has called "a form of resistance."<sup>38</sup> Such friendships help us to resist the multiple strategies we have for domesticating demanding truths or inoculating ourselves from their transformative power. Tracy holds that, in every act of resistance, some unnameable hope begins to show itself. In interreligious friendships, this unnameable hope becomes discernible in the face of the Other, the friend.

#### *IV. The Limitations of Friendship*

Interreligious friendship is not the only virtue useful to Christians in addressing the fact of religious diversity, nor is this virtue free of dangers. Choosing friendship as a model for dealing with religious diversity carries with it the possibility of obscuring the real and sometimes painful differences that separate religions by overemphasizing the similarities that relate them. Ideally, friendships foster a sense of community between persons, in that similarity can be recognized without loss of separate identity and in that enduring differences can be faced as real and yet honored. As stated above, healthy friendships do not lose track of the enduring otherness of the friend.

Not all friendships succeed, however. Interreligious friendships are no longer healthy when they are no longer relationships wherein religious differences are honored and recognized as possible resources for deepening our own religious self-understanding. For this reason, perhaps interreligious friendship itself is in need of a corrective. Take, for example, Yearley's notion of

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<sup>38</sup>See David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 82-114.

“spiritual regret.”<sup>39</sup> He takes spiritual regret as one appropriate response to the fact of religious diversity today. This form of regret arises when we recognize (1) that there are in fact a plurality of legitimate religious goals, (2) that these legitimate goals are in conflict to the degree that no one person can embody them all, and (3) that the goals one can in fact pursue are generally determined by accidents of birth that are beyond our control. A great value of Yearley’s focus on our limited ability to embody the wealth of religious truths and pursue them as legitimate goals in life is that this limitation acts as a corrective to the tendency within interreligious friendships to pass over differences in the attempt to recognize similarities.

In my own case, reflecting on my treasured friendships with Buddhists, I am required to acknowledge that I am not, in fact, a Buddhist, even though Buddhist truths have had a powerful, salutary, transformative influence on my self-understanding as a Christian. I cannot be a Buddhist, not only because my roots in the Christian tradition are so deep and so nourishing but also because the truths I cherish as a Christian believer are not fully reconcilable with the great truths of the Buddhist Dharma. Although I cannot be a Buddhist, I can be a friend to those who follow the Eight-fold Path. In these friendships I am blessed by truths that are both compelling and different from the truths I embrace as a Christian. Thus, in promoting interreligious friendship as a new virtue, we must be attentive to the danger of obscuring differences with romanticized notions of friendship.

Is interreligious friendship a universal virtue? Are friendships that cross religious boundaries always to be thought of as human excellencies? In the recent literature on the virtues, there is widespread agreement that at least some virtues are universal.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, however, there is also widespread agreement that all virtues are intimately connected with particular cultural contexts. Here, I have refrained from claiming that interreligious friendship should be recognized as a virtue within non-Christian religious traditions, even as I have noted that all friendships, including friendships that run across religious traditions, entail reciprocated love. Although I enjoy the friendship of several Buddhists, Buddhism as such may not think of interreligious friendships as virtuous.

Nevertheless, I believe Heschel was correct when he noted that, today, “no religion is an island.”<sup>41</sup> Religious diversity is nothing new, but the impact of this diversity on believers today makes it incumbent on us to respond to this intrusive fact creatively and responsibly. Feminist thinkers have rightly emphasized an important truth for today: Relatedness is not an external quality affecting the self but is constitutive of our personhood.<sup>42</sup> Recognizing that the same is true for religions will lead to the flourishing of human life in this

<sup>39</sup>Yearley, “New Religious Virtues,” pp. 12-16.

<sup>40</sup>See, e.g., Yearley, “Recent Work,” p. 2; and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 180-196.

<sup>41</sup>Heschel, “No Religion Is an Island,” pp. 26-40.

<sup>42</sup>In addition to Hunt’s *Fierce Tenderness*, see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Jean



religiously pluralistic world. The relatedness of religions, in their similarity and in their profound differences, is not accidental to their basic character. Today, the relatedness of religions to one another needs to be seen as a constitutive quality of all religions. On the one hand, religions are comprehensive interpretations of the world and the meaning of human life. On the other hand, modern circumstances make it no longer possible for religions to dwell in isolation from one another. Friendships that involve those who follow different religious paths are virtuous because they can be creative and responsible realizations of this fact of religious diversity.



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