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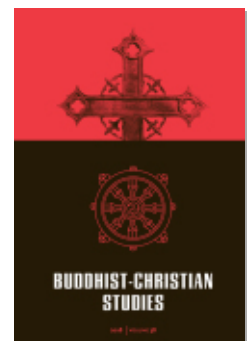
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Seeing a Friend in the Stranger and the Stranger in the Friend: The Practice of Christian Hospitality through Interreligious Dialogue and Solidarity

Karen B. Enriquez

If you find a wise person who points out your faults and corrects you,
You should follow such a sage as you would a revealer of treasures.
It is better, never worse to follow such a sage.
—Dhammapada

ABSTRACT

This article explores James Fredericks's arguments for the importance of interreligious friendship not just for comparative theology but for the continued religious division we find today. Through friendship, one is able to come closer to the other who is different from oneself, which can lead to the development of solidarity with the other. At the same time, the "otherness" of the friend is maintained, allowing one to truly learn not simply from the similarity with the other, but more importantly through the differences. **KEYWORDS:** interreligious friendship, interreligious dialogue, hospitality, solidarity, interreligious friendship as a spiritual practice.

Anyone who meets James Fredericks for the first time will probably not be surprised that friendships are a key part of his theology for he is a man who makes friends easily, and values friendships deeply. His own interreligious friendships—with Masao Abe that he poignantly has written about,¹ with Ruben Habito, the Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue group in Los Angeles, as well as the Zen-Catholic Dialogue group in the Bay Area—all inform his own comparative theology. As he argues, such friendships should be the foundation for comparative theology. Moreover, in the United States with the current rhetoric of "radical Islam," Fredericks's proposal of seeing interreligious friendship as a virtue that serves as a corrective to vices that should be resisted, continues to be even more important today.²

His many publications highlight examples of interreligious friendships. His latest co-edited book (with Tracy Tiemeier), *Interreligious Friendships after Nostra Aetate*, is filled with stories of interreligious friendships and how they blessed and challenged the authors as believers and theologians. Moreover, in Fredericks's introduction to the book, he traces how the document *Nostra Aetate* itself would not have been possible without such friendships.³ He has also noted the many interreligious meetings John Paul II had during his long pontificate, including the interreligious ecumenism in Assisi in 1986. A couple of years ago, he wrote of Pope Francis's own interreligious friendships, especially with Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Buenos Aires, a friendship, he says, that is based on *fútbol* (soccer) and lunch. Here again, he emphasizes the importance of friendship and practice as he highlights the difference between these two popes: "for John Paul II, theory led to practice," while for Pope Francis, "dialogue comes from friendship, not theory" as one starts with a "person and a relationship" and not with ideas.⁴

By starting with friendship, Fredericks contends that we "resist the tendency to reduce religious forms of life to textuality" and "the religious Other is present not as an abstraction on paper but as an embodied truth in all its historical ambiguity."⁵ One's study of another religion comes alive in new ways as one encounters it as a lived reality in the life of the religious other bringing greater understanding, depth, and meaning to the religion one is studying. Fredericks has spoken powerfully about how his own mind has been changed because of such friendships. In a session honoring him and his work at the 2016 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, he talked about how the emphasis of his own study of Buddhism had shifted from Zen to Pure Land Buddhism, not just because of his own intellectual curiosity but also because of his friendships with Pure Land Buddhists. More importantly, through a very touching story, he talked about how the practice of the *nembutsu*, the only practice of Pure Land Buddhists in Japan, gained more meaning for him in the face of the story of one of his Pure Land friends who disclosed that he was a *hibakusha*, a survivor of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. After a pause, his friend recites, "*Namu Amida Butsu.*" Fredericks acknowledges that he can no longer read the texts of Shinran and others on the *nembutsu* apart from that story.⁶ Here, he shows the power of such friendships in changing our own theologies, our own approach and understanding of another tradition in the face of the religious other.

But for that other to truly be able to speak to us, Fredericks argues that the other must be experienced as a *tremendum et fascinans*—in mutual hospitality that leads to a change and transformation of self and other. Within the Christian tradition, the practice of hospitality, as the welcoming of the stranger into one's home, is deeply rooted in Scripture: in the story of Abraham and Sarah and the Israelites for whom hospitality was key to survival as they experienced being strangers in the land of Egypt, and in the stories of the Good Samaritan and the disciples' mission depending on the hospitality of others. In the case of interreligious friendship, Fredericks argues that practicing the virtue of hospitality is helpful in overcoming our natural tendency to fear that which is strange. It creates the space, he says, for the stranger to be experienced with both a *tremendum* that calls into question our own worldviews, and a *fascinans* that

expands our views. In this way, the religious other, the stranger, brings us blessings, the gift of knowledge, of self-critique, and the enrichment of our own views.

However, keeping this attitude of hospitality, this openness and vulnerability to the other, of a sustained experiencing of the other with both a *tremendum* and *fascinans*, is a real spiritual practice. Our usual tendency to understand the other is by making them familiar to us, sometimes to the point of reducing or domesticating the other to our own truth and thereby to lose their transformative potential. Hence, Fredericks describes interreligious friendships as a form of Christian spiritual practice that “resists the attempt to overcome difference and incorporate the Other into ‘simply more of the same.’”⁷ For him, this includes a disciplined practice of listening described as “let[ting] the Other appear as a ‘face’ to resist my need to deface, and above all, to dispose myself to become one who is addressed by that face, not one who addresses.”⁸ It is a spiritual practice of a constant attentiveness and intentionality in de-centering the ego, or an emptying of oneself so that one is continuously predisposed to truly encounter the other, not simply as friend but also always at the same time a stranger who graces us with gifts if we are truly receptive to them.

Understanding interreligious friendship as a spiritual practice leads me to see that such dialogue and friendships can also be seen as part of the cultivation of one’s sacramental imagination, of ways of seeing the world as mediating God and God’s presence in diverse and surprising ways. Seeing the religious other as “sacred” supports even more one’s attitude of *tremendum et fascinans* toward the other; of a coming closer in intimacy yet also maintaining distance in the face of something or someone that mediates the “holy.” Johann Vento also reflects on this proposal asking, “[w]hat does it further the conversation to consider inter-religious friendship as sacramental?” She answers that, “perhaps in some way even more so than spiritual friendships between members of the same faith tradition, because care, concern, and sharing of faith occur precisely across religious boundaries, what we are accustomed to thinking of as alienating differences become sites of bonding, love, and trust.”⁹ In coming closer, treading on ground made less contentious through dialogue, the stranger becomes the friend. And this friend becomes our teacher—that wise sage—who brings us new ways not just of understanding and loving the other, but of understanding ourselves, of making friends with our own selves. It becomes the basis for the expansion to other friendships, building global interreligious communities of friendships that are sorely needed today. For Fredericks, this too is the hope, that the “praxis of interreligious friendship and dialogue lead to communities that express a new form of social and religious solidarity.”¹⁰

In the end, Latin American liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino, writes that working for justice “is the name love acquires when it comes to entire majorities of people unjustly oppressed.”¹¹ In our time, in our context not simply of religious diversity but of fear and persecution of the religious other, interreligious friendship and solidarity must become the name love acquires when it comes to entire majorities of people unjustly oppressed because of their religion. It is the virtue that needs to continue to be cultivated in the face of the vice of suspicion, fear, and demonization of the religious other. This is part of the legacy of James L. Fredericks.

NOTES

1. James L. Fredericks, "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 219–230.
2. James L. Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 171.
3. James L. Fredericks and Tracy Tiemeier, eds., *Interreligious Friendship after Nostra Aetate* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–7.
4. See his arguments in "Francis' Interreligious Friendships: Soccer and Lunch, Followed by Dialogue," *Commonweal* (June 24, 2014), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/franciss-interreligious-friendships>, accessed October 25, 2016.
5. Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship," 168.
6. James L. Fredericks, "Response to a Thematic Examination of the Significance of James L. Fredericks' Work" (speech, San Juan, Puerto Rico, June 10, 2016).
7. Fredericks, "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship," 225.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Johann Vento, "The Sacramentality of Inter-religious Friendship," *The Elijah Interfaith Institute*, <http://elijah-interfaith.org/sharing-wisdom/the-sacramentality-of-inter-religious-friendship>, accessed October 25, 2016.
10. James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 112–113.
11. Jon Sobrino, "Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity," in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 10.