

# The Paradox of God Between the Lines

Carl Chudy, SX | Transformative Spirituality: Living in and Through the Spirit (WS-610)

Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19)

## Introduction

God between the lines is something I borrowed from a study of our men for our *Asian Study Center*. The essays collected in this little volume are selected literature from four Asian countries where there was an effort to survey, marveling at the lived out universal human experience of God across the pluralism of their cultural milieus.<sup>1</sup> It also speaks well of my own journey with the divine, transcendent Lord “between” faiths/non-faiths, and cultures across three continents and in the extraordinary diversity of the American scene.

We began this course with the suggestion: “Forget about believing. Some things must be wrestled with in the heart, not in the head. Suspend belief or disbelief long enough to consider the questions and allow yourself a momentary glimpse of the other side of the issues, or the other side of the universe, or the other side of the tracks.”<sup>2</sup> I was immediately intrigued.

Quantum spirituality is something that I have been drawn to through the likes of Ilia Dileo, Diana Butler Bass, Judy Cannato, and now Miriam Therese Winter. Quantum gives a language that I am searching for in attempting to name how my consciousness is, in a way, unraveling toward the cosmos through the divides and the walls between us and all of creation.

From the start of my religious missionary life in the Catholic Church, I have never worked within my own cultural milieu. During theological studies, I worked in the African American community and the Chinese community. After ordination, I had the opportunities to work in West Africa, the inner city of Chicago, as well as abundant work introducing youth to the poor in a variety of settings. I spent 15 years in the Philippines and came back to the United States with a deep intuition that my life would take yet another transformative leap. Living as a foreigner and guest with others has taught me much.

## A Story

My initial encounters with Islam began while I was studying theology at *Catholic Theological Union* in Chicago. The ecumenical and interfaith possibilities were abundant there. During my

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<sup>1</sup> Tosolini, Tiziano ed, *God Between the Lines*. Asian Study Center, Xaverian Missionaries. Japan, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Mariam Therese Winter. *Paradoxology: Spirituality in a Quantum Universe*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY. 2009 Medical Mission Sisters, p. 8.

internship as a theology student I worked for two years in Sierra Leone, West Africa. There it is predominately Muslim. Most Sierra Leoneans are adherent to Malikite Sunni Islam. Significant portions of Sierra Leonean Muslims are Ahmadis, Shia, and Non-denominational Muslims. Most mosques in Sierra Leone are non-denominational. It was there I learned much of our common love of God and the prophets, the extraordinary generosity, simplicity, and respect that speaks much for African peoples, and the deep passion for justice and peace that rises out of their Islamic faith. To this day there is strong collaboration between us.

However, while working 15 years in the Philippines, with little exposure to Islam there, I began to understand with surprising depth, the centrality of interfaith dialogue in my work. One of the areas where we were working was assistance to landless farmers who were trying to dialogue with the government about land titles promised them 20 years prior and never delivered. During this work, clandestine, para-military soldiers, probably from someone in the government, began a systematic campaign to assassinate the leaders of these farmers structured through various organizations, and funded by an NGO in Belgium. In the early 2000's, more than 200 were killed. One of the targets of this campaign was a village in an island in the south in Negros where a number of men were killed. Their wives and mothers responded by traveling to Metro-Mania (center for the seat of government) and holding a hunger strike in front of the Department of Agriculture, close to our center. Fifteen days into the hunger strike, weak and lying on cots under a plastic canopy alongside the highway, a local Muslim chaplain and I were called to join them. We were asked to provide some spiritual consolation to this religiously mixed group of women who did not know what the future would hold.

Both he and I agreed that it would be simple. We would both read from our sacred texts, pray to God (Allah) for protection, and then visit each woman by their cots and have a quiet conversation with them. I began with a letter from St. Paul, he from the Qur'an. After our respective prayers, we spent the rest of the afternoon talking individually with each in quiet whispers, hunched over these frail, brave women who shaved their heads in protest. I realized in that interfaith worship, that our common prayer to God to bring justice to the poor and consolation to the grieved hit at the belief and passion of us all, Christian and Muslim. Furthermore, it was a balm of healing we could only carry together to this valiant community. I knew from that time forward, my energies would be about gathering that same kind of collaborative spiritual healing and revitalization in front of the great challenges and cancers that afflict our communities and world in the name of justice and peace, the Kingdom of God. "The

world has grown sufficiently small, the problems that we share across the globe sufficiently large and common.... While plural in so many wonderful ways, morally the human family is one.”<sup>3</sup>

Our mutual desire to come together is encouraging. Yet it is tapping into this deep longing among us all to bridge the divides between us. We naturally seek to dialogue through our common Creator who wills this so. Pope Paul VI, in his first encyclical at the end of Vatican II, *Ecclesiam Suam*, after the Catholic Church began to look anew at its relationship with those of other faiths (*Nostra Aetate*), and with ever-changing culture (*Guadium et Spes*), wrote this: “God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. "He hath first loved us." We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men (others), without waiting to be summoned to it...” (72)

An important discovery for me in the last few years is the particular perspective of our Muslim friends, beginning with my partner at the hunger strike some years ago. “The Prophet did not hesitate to listen to others, be they idolaters, People of the Book, or fellow Muslims.”<sup>4</sup> I saw this too in my interaction with the *Islamic Society of North America*, *Islamic Network Group*, *Interfaith Youth Core*, and Muslim centers in our area. We worked with *Groundwell* to bring letters of support to local Muslim centers during this distressing time of *Islamaphobia*, particularly within this volatile election cycle in the United States. In those we visited the outpouring of gratitude and a resolve to work together with their non-Muslim neighbors to overcome religious hate was a prominent feature. Discovering our mutual desire to connect with each other in meaningful ways is heartening. Between Catholics and Muslims, we share much in our hope in the dialogue of life, action and works, theological exchange, and religious experience.

## The Connect to Humanism/Atheism

Since 2011 our religious congregation created a fledgling project called *Common Ground*. Its purpose is to bridge secular and religious voices, particularly in the northern hemisphere (Europe & the USA). Dialogue with atheists, secular humanists, and the religiously unaffiliated takes on the similar dynamics of interfaith dialogue, and includes a growing population of the non-religious who are expected to be the third largest group globally, under Christianity and Islam.<sup>5</sup> If interfaith dialogue is about creating a diverse global exchange for sharing and

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<sup>3</sup> Hadshell, Heidi, “Interfaith Dialogue in Christian Theological Education in North America: Opportunities and Challenges”, in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, D. Werner, D. Esterlien, N. Kang, and J. Raja, eds., p. 213, 216.

<sup>4</sup> Shawakat M. Toorawa, “Islam.” Chapter one of *Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith*, Roger M.A. Allen and Shawkat M. Toorawa, eds, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2015*. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

collaboration, it must also include secular voices. This is particularly important because of the interplay of religions and secularism that affect all of us greatly. At the same time, non-religious people are interested in connecting with religious believers, especially the millennial generation.<sup>6</sup>

We held two conferences in this regard; one in Coatbridge, Scotland (2013), and the other at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey (2015) entitled: *Common Ground: Conversations Among Atheist, Humanists, and Religious Believers*. Our collaboration with the British Humanist Association, the Scottish Humanist Association, and the American Humanist Association has been crucial to both conferences. We run two meetup groups in New Jersey and Massachusetts where religious and non-religious people gather for dialogue on a monthly basis. Along with this I blog for an atheist blog on patheos.com called Secular Spectrum. We recently produced a short video for YouTube.

At first glance this may seem rather odd for some religious believers. Many have determined in their minds that atheists and humanists, agnostics, skeptics, and the unaffiliated are rather anti-religion. However, this distorted thinking, without the aid of dialogue, is rather far from the truth. Although it is true there is a smaller group called the “new atheists” who are anti-religious, with such published names as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and others. The new generation of secular humanists and atheists, however, are very open to connecting to religious believers through names such as *Christ Stedman* and *Greg Epstein*,<sup>7</sup> or as Greg says, “allies of secularists.” One of the important national associations to strengthen this dialogue is [Interfaith Youth Core](#). Our common ground search involves ethics, community, justice, peace, and hope and wonder. I hope to explore this more in my studies at Hartford Seminary.

## Ever-Widening Circles

The course itself, and indeed my decision to come to Hartford Seminary now, is an opportunity for me to understand this change which has been slowly surfacing in me for some time. The experience in the Philippines was one trigger that I have been paying close attention to, but the crossing across cultural and religious lines, two things that shape my identity in so many ways, is all about giving myself over to ever-widening circles.<sup>8</sup> What happens in the crossing? Across cultures, the boundaries between Christianity and Islam, and the boundaries between belief and

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<sup>6</sup> Stedman, Chris, *The Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*. Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Both Chris and Greg, who worked together as chaplains of the humanist community at Harvard University, represent secular efforts in dialogue. Greg’s book, which was very popular is: *Good Without God: What a Billion Non-Religious Do Believe*.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Therese Winter. *Paradoxology: Spirituality in a Quantum Universe*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2009, pp. 26-30.

non-belief, through the pathway of our common ground, there is a need to change my understanding and a new language about life, faith, and our diversity. I can't use "church-speak."<sup>9</sup>

The language and vocabulary we use in the Catholic Church, particularly embedded among us who preach and teach is traditionally insulating, sort of like preaching to the choir. What we say to a Catholic audience is often incomprehensible to anyone else (and perhaps for many Catholics as well). This can be understood as the "prevailing paradigm."<sup>10</sup> An example came from a friend who is writing a book on bioethics. Her remarks are on the how to talk with Atheists about physician assisted suicide if there is no a sense of natural law, which is held by religious believers. She says: "My sense is, if we are going to address the secular world that does not have a particularly firm grasp of the transcendent, *we have to be able to find another way to talk about moral issues of relation*, and that's what physician-assisted suicide boils down to. But I am prepared to be wrong." She is so right.

Crossing into ever widening circles, I discover people I want to connect with who have very different expectation that I do, and very different ways of thinking about faith and life. Our cosmologies can be "worlds" apart. The fact that we differ in fundamental ways, that my words and ideas need to change if I am going to be understood, almost immediately calls into question my own religious identity. My initial conversations in dialogue with Muslims and Atheists were more about shoring up what I think I believe in because in front of my Muslim and Atheist friends, I questioned my faith. Why do I believe in this way, when they believe in another?

The *paradox* is that it leaves me with questions, many about my faith and the Church in the world today. In dialogue, I become acutely aware of the dialectic within me, that I hold what appears as opposite poles simultaneously. Both my appreciation and esteem for my faith and church is held with critiques about the state of leadership, the role of women, the left/right divide, the growing insularity, basic beliefs that belie a loving and compassionate God, and more.<sup>11</sup> As my world is expanding.

## The Unknown Christ to Me

What has been shaken more than anything is my evolving image of Christ and what it means to be a Christian in a multi-religious and multi-convictional world. If our relationship is not about

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<sup>9</sup> Church Speak: Strange Things Church People Say: <http://blog.adw.org/2016/02/church-speak-strange-things-church-people-say-2/>

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, p. 16. I found the juxtaposition of *paradigm and paradox* a very help way to think about my experience.

conversion,<sup>12</sup> than what is it about, and who am I as a Christian in this relationship? Most fundamentally, who then is Christ and what does salvation then mean?

Quantum spirituality again comes to my aid through *Raimon Pannikar*,<sup>13</sup> who shares Christ as the center and meaning of an evolving universe and an evolving humanity. One of his works, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, unravels the intra-religious: «the most positive way to overcome a tradition does not consist in leaving it behind as if it were just any kind of association, but rather in living out the said tradition more deeply (authentically), that is to “transmit it”, and thus transform it ...». So, this is the transformational dynamic inherent in the open relationship between a *traditum* and a *tradendum*, between paradigm and paradox.

He once said: “I left Europe as a Christian; found myself a Hindu; and I return as a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.”<sup>14</sup> In some fashion I see my own story in this very same way. I am faced with an alternative: either I will bring my studied, theologically astute conception of Christ to others, or, I must recognize the unknown dimension of Christ for me, striving for what Panikkar calls “mutual ‘fecondation’ – which is an act of love.” I am deeply attracted to this revealed, yet hidden image of the Christ. Dialogue has deepened my sense of Christianity and its relevance in the world, understanding more profoundly our interconnectedness mirrored in the whole-ness of the cosmos itself.

It pushes me to understand how my religious tradition is moving in this direction, even though it seems as snail’s pace at times. For example, Vatican II’s *Dignitatus Humanae*’s insistence on religious freedom is based on a fundamental assumption, namely that God speaks to the conscience, which binds one to follow its dictates. The primacy of the conscience overrides any conversion that is not authentic and requires those who sincerely believe in other religions to follow those dictates. God saves in the context of all faiths. Thus, I encounter Christ in my meeting with both Islam and Atheism, but it is one that requires a sustained, conscious relationship. Presently there is theological work going on in the possibilities of multiple religions belonging.<sup>15</sup> However, the old paradigms and the fear of religious *relativism* is still insistent in other documents, such as Benedict’s *Dominus Iesus*.

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<sup>12</sup> A prevailing paradigm still for many ordinary Christians, even though Vatican II and post- councilor thinking has helped define a new relationship with peoples of other faiths.

<sup>13</sup> Raimon Panikkar. *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*.

<sup>14</sup> Ilia Dileo. *Christ in Evolution*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2008, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Feldmeier. *Perils and Possibilities of Multiple Religions Belonging: Test Case in Roman Catholicism*, published by De Gruyter Open.

[http://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_url?url=https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/opth.2017.3.issue-1/opth-2017-0006/opth-2017-0006.xml&hl=en&sa=X&scisig=AAGBfm1k1xBMa1bmnuetAf-dmaohegkloA&nossl=1&oi=scholaralrt](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_url?url=https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/opth.2017.3.issue-1/opth-2017-0006/opth-2017-0006.xml&hl=en&sa=X&scisig=AAGBfm1k1xBMa1bmnuetAf-dmaohegkloA&nossl=1&oi=scholaralrt)

The language of quantum spirituality helps me to understand the *gift of relativity*. Christ is much more than I presently know, and what a wonderful life it is to be keen on curiosity and discovery by being with others different than I. The codification of faith, the absolutism of how I used to understand Christ and my Christian faith as a child and teen is reminiscent of a time in the “empire” of the church in a state run theocracy roughly from the third to the fifth century. Creeds and canons were created, in part, to distinguish the western Roman Church from other competing Christian communities and their competing images of Jesus. It resisted the pluralism of Christianity that could have been embraced.<sup>16</sup>

### Belief, Non-belief, & Quantum Spirit

My work with Atheism brings a unique dimension to my self-understanding, hopeful, but often perplexed on how to move forward. In a *Common Ground* gathering in Scotland in the fall of 2015, on the cusp of the COP21 meeting in Paris, Interfaith Scotland and the Humanist Association of Scotland came together around the perils of global climate change. At the end of that meeting we discussed our next steps together. In the end, we could not come to any conclusions but gave it to a small committee to deal with. The conundrum is how to go beyond initial conversations, the “honeymoon” stage, to a deeper level where the dialogue is not only between one faith and another, but between faith and unbelief.

The principles of interfaith dialogue also apply to dialogue with those with no supernatural outlook in life. Like connecting with those of other faith traditions, I find “secular communities” extremely diverse. Each person has their own story, just as we all do. Our propensity to place secularists in a monolith of unbelief is quite mistaken, and evidence of no genuine meaningful contact with non-believing persons. In one sense, secular communities are as divided as religionists, and as diverse. Atheists, humanists, agnostics, seekers, aweists, those with hyphenated identities that include religion and secularity, the unaffiliated, and more are all labels that fit and yet, do not fit many ways. The mystery of each of us where the remnants of our evolving, religious, or not, remains with us all and brings us together in more ways than we can imagine.

The gulf between belief and non-belief is one worth traversing. Our entire cosmologies are so different. We see the world and ourselves in so many profound and different ways. We do not share the same perspective of natural law, the sense of an absolute truth, we do not share the same enthusiasm and trust for traditional cultural institutions like religion. They ask us, “Where is your God?” amid the rubble of the World Trade Center, the inundated villages of tsunami-

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<sup>16</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, p. 124.

ravaged Thailand and Indonesia, broken levees of New Orleans, the dead because of Ebola, the hidden, abused and lost victims of human trafficking. “Where is your God?”

On the religious life side, we can point to many factors that make up the secularization of belief from the evolution of the “faceless” God, the religion of self, the shifting sands of philosophy, industrialization, the failures of an empire Christianity, scientific advancement, and anthropology since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and others. But in the end I have felt called to give myself to this ever-widening circle of life, the third circle referred to by Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam*. In doing so, my faith in the institutional church has been rattled enormously, our religious insularity in some respects infuriating, but it is helping me to find new language about the chaos and uncertainty we swim in and to see how all of this is emerging *consciousness* within me and all the universe. Why? There is so much that I cannot see, so much just beyond my awareness, and my curiosity is peaked!<sup>17</sup>

This sense of consciousness is extremely helpful to me as I straddle these different worlds. Like energy, it is “mysteriously pervasive.” All consciousness is divine and there is no reality where the Spirit is not present and it holds for us a “wellspring of hope for our present age and unlimited possibilities for that which is to come.”<sup>18</sup> This convergence of a global consciousness is expressed in an interesting way by Judy Cannato. She talks of the characteristics of this consciousness which are expressed in many ways: they include love, care, compassion, freedom, courage, unity, simplicity, solidarity, belonging, diversity, empowerment, harmony, equality, and hope. They are images that keep repeating in a circle, the spiral, the dance. In this sense, I am learning a new sense of the whole, lives with integrity, willing to make sacrifices for something larger than us, taking risks, believers, and non-believers.<sup>19</sup>

Quantum spirituality is the best way to understand an emerging spirituality that undergirds all the attempts at dialogue across ideologies, cultures, faiths, and belief. Dialogue in this sense assumes a mutuality, respect, and concern for the common good, inclusive of everyone, including the earth itself. The new humanity is both prophet (secular) and mystic (religious). The prophet is engaged in the material world, sees with great clarity, and calls the species to a new humanity. The mystic is engaged in the transcendent world, drawn toward

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<sup>17</sup> Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Vintage, 2005), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> Judy Cannato. *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology is Transforming Spiritual Life*. (Sorin Books, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2010), p. 163.

incomprehensible holy mystery.<sup>20</sup> Both the prophet and the mystic need each other's important gifts and contributions.

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<sup>20</sup> Judy Cannato, p. 163.