

Introduction

January 2009 marked a watershed moment in the history of the United States in general and a turning point in the midst of international political and economic crisis in particular with the inauguration of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States. On January 26, 2009, President Obama gave his first television interview with the Dubai-based al-Arabiya Network: Not with FOXNews, CNN, or MSNBC, but with an Arab reporter. He spoke freely of his having lived in an Islamic country and having Muslim relatives. He struck a new chord in presidential rhetoric toward the Muslim world: “the language we use has to be a language of respect. . . .”

The theme of this issue requires some careful comment. At least in some theological circles, the language of “the other” has become a buzzword that has lost its original disruptive force and summons to respect. It is very easy to speak about a person or a group of people as being “other than us.” It is also very easy to demand a general theological engagement or ethical response to abstracted “others,” and then we can all call it a day. On the contrary, this naming of the “other” requires constant vigilance. As African American, Asian American, and Latin@ theologians have cautioned, the “other” is never an abstraction. The other is a particular person with a face and in a place. There is a radical particularity to the other that we must respect, not subsume into abstract categories or convenient labels. It is too easy to label the Muslim as Other and walk away because there is nothing more to say. Or to label the Buddhist as Other and then try to make the other more like us. Or to name the Jew as Other and then reconfigure our relationship to excuse the need for taking seriously our common history and complicity in violence against them. Naming an “other” can be a strategy of control or an exercise of power to keep the margins from displacing us from the center of the circle we have drawn. Our naming of the other in this issue is intended to be a summons to those whose very presence demands a response—the student in the classroom, the family down the street, the new person in our office, our new daughter-in-law, a guy asking for a bit of change as we drive downtown. Such encounter demands commitment, not just tolerance; a willingness to risk being changed, rather than stay the same. And we should remember that we are also “other” to someone as well.

Just as “other” is not an abstraction, dialogue is not something out there that only professional theologians are called to do. Amos Yong, a Pentecostal theologian, has called for a reconfiguration of interreligious dialogue (*Hospitality and the*

Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor [Maryknoll, 2008]). Yong argues that interreligious dialogue is “not only the formally organized discussions between academics about comparative religious and theological topics . . . but the dialogue of life focused on matters related to the common good and the flourishing of all of us” (156). He is careful to point out that formal dialogue and the daily dialogue are not separate or different options. They mutually inform one another and need one another. Moreover, the key to the dialogue of life is hospitality (see esp. 131–37). Inviting Muslims or Jews or Hindus to sit down to dinner with Christians can open a “free space” that creates relationships among the guests that “respects their integrity” (132). But hospitality is not only our inviting others to our house, it is also allowing ourselves to be guests as well—to make ourselves as vulnerable as we ask our guests to be (see 132). This dialogue of life leads to a deepening of our own tradition as we are enriched and chastened in the encounter.

James Fredericks leads us off in this issue, taking the concrete experience of Buddhist-Christian encounter seriously in light of the late Pope John Paul II’s expansion of Vatican II’s teaching. He argues that encounter cannot efface difference if it is to be authentic. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith take up Muslim-Christian relations and show the fruit that comes from not only hosting but being hosted, especially with the tremendous effort needed in the face of a legacy of disrespect since September 11, 2001. A further key to the encounter and dialogue between Jews and Christians is demonstrated by Lawrence Frizzell and Jean-Pierre Ruiz in their attention to the narration of history. Our encounter should generate a dialogue that encourages honest confrontation with the past, confession of sin, recognition of past and present possibility, and commitment to struggle to work together in a collaborative way.

A cue forward in the local parish work on these challenging themes and others like sexism, hostility, and fear comes from Barbara Reid, who lays out a rich vision for the task of preaching. Her call will provide rich fare for those willing to taste something new in their usual diet of homily preparation. Reid’s attention to the need to resist and to heal never loses sight of hope. Guerric DeBona challenges the church to think about the way that film culture has been shaped and shapes popular attitude toward priesthood. As a film like *Doubt* has been nominated for an Oscar as this issue goes to press, his article urges us to think about the role of media in the church’s mission. Our columns and reviews round out our issue to provide some further direction for you to plan for your summer reading and reflection.

Coming in August

Ministry in Changing Parish Structures