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Abstract: *Walking with the Wise: Interreligious Dialogue as Relational and Transformative*

Those of us engaged in interreligious dialogue do well to remember that even though we use helpful phrases like “Christian-Jewish dialogue,” it is not, in actuality, the traditions or religions in their entirety that are in dialogue. Rather, it is specific strands of the traditions, particular texts, bracketed historical periods, and, most concretely, individual members of the different religions who come together in dialogue. If religions are viewed as communities of believers and the particularities of individual believers are what make up the diversity within the community, then paying attention to the phenomenon of dialogue at the level of individual people—what I call the interpersonal dimension of dialogue—matters.

As a “case study” of sorts, this dissertation utilizes oral history data compiled by the author through first-person interviews with seven leading Christian scholar-practitioners who have dedicated their professional and personal lives to dialogue with Jews and Judaism. The study is divided into three parts. In the first section, the personal biographies of the participants—Alice Eckardt, Franklin Sherman, John Pawlikowski, Eugene Fisher, Mary C. Boys and Celia Deutsch, are recounted and analyzed according to several themes including family context, Christian denomination, hometown, elementary and secondary education (secular and religious), exposure to Jews and Judaism, key relationships, and higher education (seminary, college, graduate school), including influential teachers. Highlighted at this stage are the features that contribute to each person’s unique sense and way of being Christian (*rootedness*) and the personal mentors and guides who factored into the participants’ choice to enter the field of Christian-Jewish relations.

In the second section, these Christian guides and mentors are paralleled by equally influential Jewish teachers and friends who complement the participants’ increasingly nuanced and self-critical Christian identity with an engaged and critical *encounter* with Jewish identity, history, philosophy and spirituality. Personal stories of living, eating and working with Jewish friends, recollections about recent challenges in the relationship between the two religions and how they played out on the individual level, and stories of bonding, friendship and loss create a portrait of the textured and embodied experience of interreligious dialogue through the eyes of the seven participants.

The third section discusses what happens “after dialogue.” In other words, how does the interpersonal and dialogical encounter with the religious other affect the participants’ own Christian identity and theology? Because the participants are theologians and ministerial leaders, through their various academic, pastoral and administrative roles within the Christian community, the lessons of their personal transformation have the potential to affect the self-understanding of the Church more broadly. Furthermore, there is an ethical dimension involved in the *return* to one’s home tradition “after dialogue.” Experiencing first-hand the spiritual and moral integrity of the religious other and to sense God’s presence in that person causes one to consider the implications of any theological statement that does not respect that integrity. Historically, Christians in dialogue with Judaism have been at the forefront of reflection on the Church’s ethical responsibility to the religious other.

Finally, through the lenses of *rootedness*, *encounter* and *return* in the context of specific experiences within Christian-Jewish dialogue, critical questions about the motivations and goals of interreligious dialogue, in general, are explored and addressed.