

An Interview with William Skudlarek:

# Interreligious Dialogue Emphasizes an Experiential Knowledge of Other Spiritual Paths

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**In the interview, which occurred in October 2018 at Saint John's Abbey, MN, USA, William Skudlarek addresses a series of issues concerning the dialogue and spirituality, such as the issue of personal identity in the dialogue along with the issue of multiple spiritual or/and religious identity, the nature of interreligious dialogue, the dialogue of spiritual experience and its perspectives.**



During my residency at the Collegetown Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's University, MN, USA, I had the privilege to interview William Skudlarek, Benedictine monk of Saint John's Abbey and Secretary General of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM·MID), the world's leading institutional interfaith dialogue promoter. Here is the record of our dialogue on dialogue and spirituality.

## 1 Interconnection Framework

As a Benedictine monk, you are a part of a spiritual tradition that goes back to the sixth century AD and Saint Benedict. Moreover, Saint Benedict based his monastic lifestyle on the previous tradition of monasticism reaching back to its very beginnings in the second and third centuries AD. The only text attributed to him, the legendary *Regula Benedicti*, was partly composed of several previous monastic sources, such as *Regula Magistri* and others.

You are thus well aware of the fact that throughout the history spiritual traditions had been entering into mutual interactions and influenced one another either explicitly or implicitly. There are also other factors of cultural, social, economic, and political nature that could cause – to some extent – moments of transformation within a particular tradition. Benedictines are not an exception and a long history of the Benedictine Order provides a historian with a bunch of examples of such transformational moments.

The ideas of mutual interconnection and mutual interference between various spiritual traditions have significant consequences for theologies of religions and interreligious dialogue. This is also the framework I would like to place into our conversation today.



**Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Ph.D.**, is monk of Saint John's Abbey, MN, USA, and Secretary General of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM·MID). He also serves as Associate Editor of *Dilatato Corde*, an international journal devoted to the dialogue of religious experience and practice. He is available at [wskudlarek@csbsju.edu](mailto:wskudlarek@csbsju.edu).

## About the author



**Doc. PaedDr. Martin Dojčár, PhD.**, is professor of religious studies at Trnava University, Slovakia, specializing in spirituality and interreligious dialogue. He is the author of an inspiring book *Self-Transcendence and Prosociality* and Editor-in-Chief of the *Spirituality Studies Journal*. His email is [dojcar@gmail.com](mailto:dojcar@gmail.com).

**Q** Let me open our dialogue with a question – a bit broader and personal at the same time: How this historical awareness of transformational moments in your monastic tradition influenced your understanding of your own personal identity – an identity of a Christian, a Benedictine, a priest, a monk engaged in interfaith dialogue of spiritual experience?

**A** This is not an easy question to respond to because so much of my identity as an ordained Benedictine Christian has been shaped by social and cultural dynamics that affected me in ways that I – at least in my earliest and most formative years – was not conscious of. I grew up on a farm in a region of central Minnesota that was almost 100 % Catholic, but in a township where one's identity was also determined by one's German or Polish descent. At the age of 12 (it was a different era!), I entered the minor seminary (high school) at Saint John's. Even though Saint John's was only 10 miles from where I grew up, its religious and intellectual culture made it a world quite different from the one I knew. When I was a child, many people still spoke German and Polish – my great grandfather, who lived with us, spoke only Polish. High school not only forced me to overcome my "Stearns County accent", it also gave me my first opportunity to study a language (Latin) and whetted my appetite for learning other languages. I suspect that my fascination with the different ways people put into words their experience of the world around them laid the foundation for my interest exploring religious worlds different from the one that initially shaped and continues to shape my religious identity as a Roman Catholic Benedictine monk.

## 2 Identity & Interspirituality

The topic of identity – its development and transformations – has its relevance not only for experimental and clinical psychology (E. Erikson, J. Marcia etc.), but for spirituality as well. In the spiritual context, it opens up a wide variety of questions, the question of multiple spiritual or/and religious identity among others.

**Q** First and foremost, is multiple spiritual or/and religious identity possible at all? What is your view of the issue?

**A** Togo, a tiny West African country with less than eight million inhabitants, has 39 tribal languages. All formal education, however, is in French.

On a visit to a monastery in Togo in 2009, I met a relative of the superior of the monastery who had been a school teacher for many years. When I asked her if she had forgotten the language she was born into, she replied, "*One never forgets the language of one's mother!*"

A well-known dictum – at least among Catholic sacramental theologians and liturgists – is that Christians are made, not begotten. Theologically, I believe that is correct. At the same time, I would not hesitate to say that I was born a Catholic. Even if I wanted to forget my Catholicism, I doubt that I would be able to.

To continue with the linguistic analogy, although my parents were able to speak some Polish, I was born into a primarily English-speaking world. That is my linguistic identity, and I can't imagine that I will ever forget how to speak English, even though I speak other languages, a couple more or less fluently.

I have learned about and from other religious traditions, but my Catholic religious identity, like my mother tongue, was given to me *ab initio*, and it is from that identity that I appreciate and draw on the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions.

The double or even multiple spiritual or/and religious belonging enquiry brings us to another contemporary concept, the notion of interspirituality. The term itself was introduced by Wayne Teasdale and described as a movement that is bringing together people who simultaneously follow two or more spiritual traditions of various religious backgrounds while staying rooted in a particular religious tradition (W. Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart*, 1999).

**Q To what extent is the practice of double or multiple spiritualities of different religious backgrounds in accordance with fidelity to one's own religious tradition from your perspective?**

**A** I think what I have said in response to the previous question could also serve as a response to this one.

You have published extensively on Swami Abhishikatananda, a French Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux (1910–1973) who went to India in 1948 and devoted his life to building bridges between Hindus and Christians. Le Saux personally met with some of the extraordinary saints of the Indian sub-continent of the time and was deeply impressed particularly by Sri Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi. Afterwards, he made a life-long effort to integrate his “advaitic experience”, he experienced in the presence of Ramana Maharshi shortly after his arrival to India, with his Christian worldview.

In one of your articles, you describe his understanding of dialogue as follows: “*true interreligious dialogue is not discussion about the differences of religious practices or doctrines, but heart-to-heart communication about the experience of God*” (“Abhishiktanadna’s understanding of the monk”, *Dilatato Corde* 1 (1) 2011).

**Q How would you characterize the legacy of the life and work of this remarkable man, a great pioneer of interreligious dialogue of spiritual experience? What is the continuing importance of his work for today?**

**A** I have said – though not in writing – that although I greatly admire Swami Abhishikatananda, I am not personally attracted to “advaitic spirituality”. I suppose I could say I am too much of a dualist, someone for whom an “I-Thou” relationship to God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit is a more appealing and intelligible expression of my relationship with the divine.

What I admire about Abhishikatananda is his total commitment to a spiritual path, which, although radically different from the one in which he was formed, offered him a compelling and authentic way to strive for union with God.

I believe it is significant, however, that after his intense spiritual experience of oneness with the divine shortly before his death, he described that experience as his discovery of the Grail. In other words, he too could not forget “the language of his mother”.

Between the years 1994–2001 you had been staying in Japan as a member of the priory of Saint John’s Abbey and at that time you began practicing Zazen within the Sanbō Kyōdan school of Zen. Over the centuries, all traditions of Japanese Zen Buddhism restricted the transmission of Zen to Buddhist monks exclusively. However, since Sanbō Kyōdan school of Zen was established in 1954 by Hakuun Yasutani, this exclusivist rule was broken, and Zen was made available at first to Buddhist laity, later on to non-Buddhist as well. Since 1970, Yasutani’s successor, Kōun Yamada, has allowed to receive Zen training and to obtain the right to teach Zen, the so called “Dharma transmission”, to Christians without requiring them to convert to Buddhism. This means that the Dharma transmission was officially granted to non-Buddhists. Such a dramatic turnaround can only be described as revolutionary.

The first Christian, who successfully completed his Zen training under the direct guidance of Rōshi Yamada, was a German Jesuit Fr. Hugo Makibi Enomiya-Lassalle (1978). Others followed soon – clergy, nuns and monks, laymen. Altogether, over twenty Christians until 1989, out of which twelve were granted the Dharma transmission mandate.

Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle is another exceptional example of interspirituality – as an officially recognized Rōshi, master of Zen, he had never forsaken his Christian and Jesuit identity.

**Q How could you explain to us this kind of multi-religious and multi-spiritual identity represented by Fr. Enomiya-Lassalle, SJ, at present by Fr. Robert Kennedy, SJ, and others?**

**A** I think both have made it clear that they were drawn to Zen Buddhist not as an alternative to Christianity but as a way of developing dimensions of their Christian identity that had gone unrecognized or were underdeveloped.

The reason I became affiliated with the Sanbō Kyōdan was that shortly after my arrival in Ja-

pan, I visited Fr. William Johnston, SJ, and asked him how I could go about becoming familiar with Buddhism as a spiritual path. He recommended the Sanbō Kyōdan to me precisely because it was an expression of Zen Buddhism that was open to foreigners and people of other religious traditions – but one that also attracted Japanese followers. It was there that on several occasions I heard the comment of Yamada Kōun Rōshi, the the Dharma heir of Hakuun Yasutani and father of one my masters, Yamada Ryouun Rōshi, that the practice of Zazen was like drinking tea: you didn't have to be a Buddhist to do it and to profit from it.

### 3 Interreligious Dialogue of Spiritual Experience

We have already been talking about interfaith dialogue today. Let's have a closer look now at the dialogical stance of a religious tradition you are rooted in – the Roman Catholic Church.

The turning point for the Roman Catholic Church was the Second Vatican Council in many regards. Following the apostolic mission of the pioneering Pope John XXIII. (1959), Vatican II announced “aggiornamento” – “bringing up to date” the Church in herself as well as in her relation to the World. In regard to non-Christians, the Council issued a revolutionary *Declaration on the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to other religions Nostra aetate*. Here, all Catholics are “exhorted”, as you often remind us, to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values” in other religions (*Nostra aetate* 2, 1965).

You serve as Secretary General of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM-MID), one of the leading promoters of the interfaith dialogue nowadays. An integral part of DIM-MID's mission is “to open up new pathways of dialogue of spiritual experience”.

Q

**Could you be more specific in this regard and describe DIM-MID's original approach to the dialogue of spiritual experience in the above-mentioned context?**

A

The predominant model of interreligious dialogue has been that of an academic conference in which papers are presented, discussed, published – and then, of course, added to one's *curriculum vitae*. One of the reasons for this practice can be found the very word “dialogue”, which immediately implies talking to one another. Another reason is the ease with which religious people – especially Christians, I would say – emphasize the doctrinal expressions of religious belief.

DIM-MID's approach to interreligious dialogue emphasizes an experiential knowledge of other spiritual paths and promotes “plunging” into another religious tradition to gain this experiential knowledge.

In the words of Fr. Pierre de Béthune, the first Secretary General of DIM-MID, “*If you are deeply rooted in your tradition, as can be expected of a monk who has been formed over many years, you don't have to be afraid of immersing yourself in another religion. It's not a question of compromise, saying I'll accept this, but not that. No. I accept everything! But I accept it with all that is mine. It's a meeting from faith to faith. Or more exactly, from fidelity to fidelity.*” [*Si on est profondément ancré dans sa tradition comme on peut l'espérer d'un moine qui a été formé pendant de nombreuses années, à ce moment, il ne faut pas avoir peur de s'immerger, de se plonger dans une autre religion, ce n'est pas une question de compromis, non plus, en disant je prends ça mais je ne prends pas ça, non, je prends tout! Mais je le prends depuis mon tout! C'est une rencontre de la foi à la foi. Peut-être même plus précisément de la fidélité à la fidélité.*] (From the documentary film “Strangers No More”.)

Twenty-five years after the promulgation of *Nostra aetate*, another important Church's document on interreligious dialogue was issued, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991). Here, the "double commitment" of the Roman Catholic Church to proclamation and dialogue was discussed in more depth.

**Q** **What is your stance on this issue of bringing together proclamation and dialogue when they seem to be in direct contradiction?**

**A** As is the case with understanding "dialogue" as a conversation/discussion about doctrine, the problem here is understanding proclamation as the assertion of doctrine(s) that must be believed to assure one's eternal salvation.

Proclamation of the Gospel means proclaiming Jesus Christ and Him crucified – proclaiming by our lives more than by our words the love that God revealed to the world in the person of Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, a love that is also revealed in the fruits of the Spirit, which are also found outside the parameters of Christian faith and practice.

Words come into play when we are asked to give an account of the hope that is in us (see 1 Peter 3:15). If our lives do not raise curiosity and questions, then our verbal proclamation can easily be regarded as proselytizing.

## 4 The Dialogue of Spiritual Experience Perspectives vs. Critique and Skepticism

Despite its solid doctrinal foundations, interfaith dialogue is not always welcomed among Christians, clergy, and even theologians, and is confronted with the old exclusivist mentality.

**Q** **How would you address suspicions and doubts concerning the dialogue on the side of Christians?**

**A** I would address such suspicions and doubts by referring to and developing what Pierre de B ethune has to say about being firmly rooted in one's own religious tradition.

We have mentioned today just a few pioneers of interfaith dialogue who made their impact in history and, at least for some of us, become examples of the possibility of building bridges instead of walls, attempting at understanding instead of ignorance, spreading compassion and love instead of animosity and hatred. My concern is: Who will follow to continue their mission of building bridges in the divided world?

**Q** **Finally, I would like to hear from you at the end of our dialogue on dialogue and spirituality: What is your account of the future of interreligious dialogue, what are the perspectives of dialogue of spiritual experience in particular?**

**A** The center of activity of interreligious dialogue, more specifically, monastic interreligious dialogue, is shifting from Europe and North America, where age is taking its toll and there is not much sign of interest among the younger monks and nuns and beginning to develop in Asia and Africa. A monk from Korea has recently completed his doctorate at Regis College, University of Toronto, with a dissertation on Thomas Merton's dialogue with Buddhism. A monk from Kenya, now living at a newly founded monastery in Egypt, is completing his doctorate at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam. I have encouraged both and offered them editorial assistance in writing their dissertations. They are enthused about returning to their home countries and continents and promoting monastic interreligious dialogue there.

Thank you very much for sharing your insights with the Spirituality Studies readers!