

Union Seminary (NYC) Hosts International Association for Spiritual Care's "Religious Conflicts" Conference

"St. James wrote that, 'Faith without works is dead,'" declared Candler School of Theology's Professor Emmanuel Lartey, "but I say unto you that faith without critique is lethal!" Lartey issued his challenge for self-examination and critique of others' views that cause individuals to suffer spiritual damage as he concluded his lecture on toxic spirituality during the 2018 annual gathering of the International Association for Spiritual Care (IASC). "Be irritants," he exhorted conference participants, suggesting that disrupting practices and countering pronouncements that poison people's spiritual lives is an essential component of providing spiritual care in today's challenging context. Encouraging spiritual care providers to pay greater attention as individuals engage in "making meaning," Lartey asserted that "the spiritual dimension is what makes us human."

More than 100 participants from over a dozen countries came together July 8-10 when New York's historic Union Theological Seminary hosted the IASC, convened under the theme of "Religious Conflicts: External and Internal." Attendees included seminarians from Union and its neighbor institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, chaplains, pastoral counselors, parish and congregational leaders, seminary professors and others committed to the broad field of spiritual care. The conference topic was particularly timely amidst current heightened tensions within faith communities and between conflicting perspectives on how religion shapes public policy and international relations.

In the conference's opening address, which was open to the general public, Union's Professor of Psychology and Religion, Dr. Pamela Cooper-White offered an overview of her recently published book, *Old and Dirty Gods*, which explores perspectives on religion among Sigmund Freud's inner circle of disciples who joined their famous mentor as pioneers in shaping the field of psychotherapy. Cooper-White's extensive research at the Freud Museum in Vienna, as a Fulbright fellow, led to her conviction that the common view that Freud and his early followers were all atheists and anti-religion is overly simplistic. Noting the multiple conflicting views held by the Wednesday Night Psychological Society, she concluded that their experiences over a century ago have continuing relevance for individuals and communities that find themselves in conflict today. Concluding that anti-Semitism played a key role in shaping the early Freudian's worldview, she drew connections to today's socio-political realities in which spiritual care is needed desperately by many individuals and groups that face discrimination and suffer the effects of racism. Cooper-White, a principal planner and local host of the 2018 conference, was elected the Association's president for the coming biennium.

Reflecting the international diversity of the Association's membership, Sunday's other opening plenary session lecturer was Dr. Jessica Lampe who pursues empirical research at Switzerland's University of Bern on "religious coping styles among people dealing with internal religious and spiritual struggles." Lampe was honored as one of Forbes Magazine's "30 under 30" (pioneering leaders under age 30) in the social research category. Lampe pointed to factors that enhance or detract from individuals' abilities to cope with the stresses encountered as they confront an increasingly pluralistic religious landscape and experience internal and external conflicts.

A rich menu of additional plenary lectures and workshop presentations was offered throughout the duration of the three-day conference.

Exploring the question, “Does multiple religious belonging necessarily entail internal conflict?” Professor John Thatamanil, who teaches theology and world religions at Union, asserted that, “we must care for people whose spiritual beliefs and practices are drawn from the repertoires of more than one religious tradition.” He shared his conviction that some of today’s most religiously sensitive persons are those who embrace more than one religion’s claims. A failure to recognize the religious complexity of many people’s lives on the part of counselors, chaplains and other care givers can result in their being guilty of “malpractice,” asserted the systematic theologian, who also acknowledged that some in his field are uncomfortable with theological diversity and non-exclusive faith claims. Echoing Cooper-White’s and Lartey’s calls for critique and social analysis, Dr. Thatamanil posed provocative questions such as, “Why is it that the possibility of being a capitalist Christian is assumed without critique?” He pointed to the widespread tendency to separate religious and secular life: “We think we can be Christian in our religious lives and uncritically embrace capitalism in our economic system.”

On the last day of the conference, Dr. Sarah Sayeed, Senior Advisor in the Community Affairs Unit of the New York City Mayor’s Office, shared personal experiences encountered as a Muslim woman and her ongoing efforts to promote greater understanding of Islam and to advocate for social justice and human rights. Sayeed pointed to the critical need for “reconciliation leadership” that can break the cycles in which perpetrators do violence to victims.

New York University clinical psychiatry professor, Dr. Anthony Bossis, helped participants gain insights from his FDA-approved research using psilocybin (a drug derived from mushrooms) to ease the suffering of end-stage cancer patients by inducing mystical experiences. He quoted one participant in experimental trials who described herself as an atheist, but expressed the feeling of being “bathed in God’s love” as psilocybin relieved her anxiety and brought a sense of peace as death approached.

The conference’s dozen workshops explored a wide range of issues that generate internal conflicts for individuals in their spiritual lives, and cause intense fights within families and between communities and even nations. Topics explored included racism, multiculturalism, fundamentalism, growing secularity, and the conflicts and victimization experienced by members of LGBTQ+ communities. Conference workshop leaders serve as professors, chaplains, counselors and researchers in settings throughout the United States and in Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Denmark.

In a concluding panel discussion, conference speakers reflected together on the challenges of balancing diversity, which can easily result in destructive conflict, with unifying impulses derived from common human attributes and experiences. Thatamanil reminded the conferees that proponents of most religions uphold unifying aspirations and express in one way or another that, “the one begets the many.” And in the face of the internal tensions and conflicting impulses that spiritual care givers inevitably experience, concluded Cooper-White, to best serve others, “we have to use our entire selves.”

IASC board members and conference planners hope to publish many of the plenary lectures and workshop presentations in a forthcoming collection.

- Michael Cooper-White, Director of Lutheran Formation, Union Seminary