

# *Creative Dialogue* in Rome, Italy: Thinking Beyond Discourse-Based Interfaith Engagement

Jenn Lindsay

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**Abstract:** *Creative dialogue* is a distinct emergent form of interfaith engagement that should be accounted for in any typology of interfaith dialogue methodologies. Creative dialogue features artistic collaboration and the engagement of interpersonal, artistic and literary methods toward increasing civic interaction, civic discourse, and awareness of diversity. In this article, the analysis of creative dialogue is grounded in data derived from ethnographic study of an interfaith magazine and programme office located in Rome, Italy, and then parsed with scholarly literature about the benefits of engaging in non-discursive modalities. Creative dialogue is shown to allow for the analytical inclusion of dialogue that is neither discursive, nor overtly religious; one that is chiefly experiential, yet often yields a concrete product. This study of creative dialogue – which extends the boundaries of the standard construct of ‘interfaith dialogue’ far beyond institutional contexts with high-ranking clergy and religious elites – is grounded in a post-secular analysis of religious diversity and pluralism that shows that interfaith dialogue, like religious practice, is fluid, relational, embodied, creative, and socially embedded.

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**Keywords:** Interfaith dialogue, Post-secularism, Contemporary Italy, Religious pluralism, Creative dialogue, Ethnography

## Introduction

The term ‘interfaith dialogue’ should not be taken too literally. It is neither always religious, nor always between different religions, nor is it always dialogic (conversational). Indeed, it is possible to embark on interreligious engagement that never overtly involves religious conversations or symbols. ‘Dialogue’ can involve humanitarian collaborations, for example: Baha’i and Christians operating a soup kitchen together; Sikhs and Hindus planning an Indian cultural festival; Jews and Muslims working together to ensure safe healthcare provisions for circumcisions.

Dr Jenn Lindsay is an award-winning social scientist and documentary filmmaker specializing in social and religious diversity and a professor of Sociology and Communications at John Cabot University in Rome. She completed her PhD in the Social Science of Religion at Boston University, holds degrees from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Stanford University, and La Sapienza University in Rome, and studied Arts Management at Yale University. Her book *Pluralismo Vivo: Lived Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue in Rome* is forthcoming from LIT Verlag press. Prior to her academic work she worked in the film and music industries as composer, film editor, performer and documentary filmmaker, serving as documentarian for the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston and as video journalist for Religion News Service. Through her production company So Fare Films she has produced and screened eight documentaries internationally. For more information visit <http://www.JennLindsay.com>.

These humanitarian projects often emphasise a cooperative project over religiously themed discourse. Participants attend on the basis of their religious social ties and identities, and along the way they may – or may not – discuss the religious values, experiences or sacred texts that motivate their presence. Creative dialogue emerges in the same collaborative, non-discursive spirit, which does not require the explicit presence of religion-themed discourse in order to be considered interreligious dialogue.

*Creative dialogue* is a distinct emergent form of interfaith engagement that should be accounted for in any typology of interfaith dialogue methodologies. Creative dialogue is a non-discursive form of interfaith interaction, usually centred around a shared, exploratory artistic process and the engagement of interpersonal, artistic, and literary methods toward increasing civic interaction, civic discourse, and awareness of diversity. In this article, the analysis of creative dialogue is grounded in data derived from ethnographic study of an interfaith magazine and programme office located in Rome, Italy, and then parsed with scholarly literature about the benefits of engaging in non-discursive modalities.

## Background

Each modality of dialogue speaks to discrete problems and solutions to the challenges of religious diversity. This article proposes the following typology of dialogue forms:

- Discursive (Theological and Academic)
- Social-Relational
- Spiritual
- Humanitarian
- Creative

Previously, interreligious dialogue methodologies have been categorised into the ‘dialogue canopy,’ a typology presented by Eric Sharpe (2005). The typology can be applied to a range of activities promoting religious pluralism in Rome and elsewhere, both institutional and grassroots level. Sharpe designates the following ‘branches’ on the canopy of dialogue forms: *Theological-discursive dialogue*, *Human/Buberian dialogue*, *Spiritual dialogue*, and *Secular dialogue*.

Sharpe’s categories are defined as follows. 1) *Theological-discursive dialogue* is a largely scholarly enterprise of theological expertise in a public forum; discursive dialogue can also be purely academic. In this research, I call this form of dialogue ‘discursive’, specifying between Theological and Academic discourse about religion.

2) *Human/Buberian Dialogue* is Sharpe's term for encounters between unique individuals and recognises dialogue as an interpersonal, existential need. In this analysis, I call this form 'Social-Relational' dialogue. 3) *Spiritual dialogue* consists of communal spiritual or contemplative practice through worship, prayer and meditation, or shared devotions. 4) *Secular dialogue* features diverse entities joining forces to incite change and address practical issues of common concern.

After ethnographic research I have determined Sharpe's typology to be incomplete for a full understanding of dialogue methodologies. Going beyond Sharpe's 'dialogue canopy,' I subdivide secular dialogue into two subcategories. 1) Humanitarian dialogue occurs when diverse groups collaboratively serve their common community or the larger civil society, helping each other with practical challenges, legal processes, and collaborating on service projects. 2) Creative dialogue is centred around creative output such as publication, filmmaking, and various artistic collaborations. The central argument of this article is that creative dialogue is a distinct modality that should be considered part of the canopy of dialogue forms. To my knowledge it is a distinct addition to Sharpe's canopy of forms.

A typology of interfaith engagement methodologies is useful as a heuristic tool, in order to establish a framework for analysis. Sharpe's notion of the 'dialogue canopy' of interfaith methodologies reflects scholarly understandings of dialogue. But the lived experience of interfaith engagement in communities and between individuals is always more fluid, messy, and elastic than typologies can possibly convey. *Creative dialogue* allows for the analytical inclusion of dialogue that is neither discursive nor overtly religious; one that is chiefly experiential, yet often yields a concrete product. It allows for the shifting role of religion in interreligious affairs, the reality of multiple religious belongings, the presence of non-religious participants in interreligious spheres, and a shifting of emphasis away from religious leaders and texts, toward grassroots interpersonal engagement.

## Methodology

This analysis of creative dialogue is based on eighteen months of ethnographic participant-observation at interfaith organisations in Rome, chiefly the interfaith magazine and programme office Confronti.

Confronti caught my eye because, while they practiced some of the same methods of dialogue I saw in other organisations – social events, academic panels, informative publications about minority cultures, public discussions, socialisation, travel seminars – they also incorporate a robust *creative and artistic* palette into their practices. Up until this point, interfaith dialogue research has leaned on Sharpe's (2005) dialogue 'canopy' to categorise the methods engaged by dialoguers. Ethnographic immersion

at Confronti, and my participant-observation at other artistic, musical, cinematic dialogue events throughout Rome, revealed that 'creative dialogue' is a distinct modality that should be considered part of the canopy of dialogue forms. In this way Confronti has allowed for a distinct research contribution.

In addition to 18 months of participant-observation in the magazine and program offices of Confronti, I also attended meetings and events of about twelve other interfaith dialogue groups in Rome. In both English and Italian language, I conducted 69 two-hour semi-structured interviews, meaning that questions were often asked out of order, delved into more deeply if needed, or discarded if they seemed irrelevant. I engaged ethnographic methodologies of participant-observation, interviews, and photo elicitation. Interview questions, developed both in the pre-research preparation process and during fieldwork in a reflective and interrogative stance (Agee 2009), were asked during approximately two-hour interviews at the beginning of the eighteen-month research period and then again at the end for a sense of change. Interview questions centred around the Confronti organisation and its sociology, history, principles, and methodology; about the broader field of interfaith dialogue in Rome; and about experiences of religious diversity and daily life in Rome, personal identity expression, interreligious relationships in plural contexts, and constructs of transformation. In addition to these questions, I also gave interlocutors the opportunity to raise other issues they believed to be important to the study of interfaith dialogue.

The study of creative dialogue is best grounded in sociological study of 'lived religion,' a qualitative and ethnographic approach to religion scholarship which is less focused on institutional elites and dominant paradigms, and more focused on communities and relationships (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Spickard et al. 2002; Hall 1997). This method is able to capture and consider 'street level' data about religious lives and identities and to consider how the creative actions of religious pluralists 'are fundamentally shaped by the world they are making as they make these worlds' (Orsi 2003, 172). An emphasis on daily practices, experiences, and relationships exposes aspects of religious diversity, interreligious encounter, complicated and multifaceted identities, and intentionally wrought religious pluralism that quantitative and survey methods have not allowed scholars to see.

## Theoretical Framework

Jürgen Habermas's notion of the *post-secular* (2008) is useful for this analysis, since it allows for a discussion of interreligious dialogue that neither explicitly invokes religion, nor is strictly dialogical. In general, the notion of post-secularism refers to the presence of religion in the secular public. Post-secularism provides a 'third way' in response to the all-or-nothing opposition of 'religious' and 'secular' described by

early sociologists. It is no longer correct to argue that the world is ‘secularising,’ just that secularisation has occurred in certain sectors, namely Western state governance. Post-secularism acknowledges that religion is not disappearing, but its function is changing. In post-secular society, for example, Pope Francis can address atheists, stating that it is better to be an atheist than a hypocritical Catholic with a ‘double life’ (Pope Francis 2017), or, in his *Urbi et Orbi* message on Christmas Day in 2013, ‘I also invite non-believers to desire peace with that yearning that makes the heart grow: all united, either by prayer or by desire. But all of us, for peace’ (Pope Francis 2013).

A post-secular framework accounts for a dynamic between ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ that is interdependent, inseparable, and mutually referential. The post-secular stance expresses the reflexivity, fluidity, and ambiguity of high modern collective life and personal meaning-making in particular local contexts. A post-secular analytical framework can support inquiries into how religious fields are affected by high modernity (Giddens 1991), religious diversity and pluralism, communications technology, and the fluid boundaries and identity expressions of contemporary urban spaces. A post-secular method is able to accommodate non-traditional dialogue that isn’t just religious people talking about religion in a religious setting. It recognises that ‘interfaith dialogue’ can be civic action, artistic collaboration, and inclusive of ‘multiple belongsers’ and non-religious people. ‘Interreligious dialogue’ can be conducted through seemingly ‘non-religious’ methods such as journalism, media projects, and daily life in diverse communities. That is because religious pluralism is a natural part of modern life and civic engagement, where the secular and religious are blended and mutually influential. As the enactment of religion itself is revealed by post-secular methods to be far more encompassing than solely belief systems or ritual commitments, it makes sense that approaches to religious diversity and pluralism could be similarly revealed as embodied, creative, and socially embedded. The confluence of changing methods in both the practice and study of religious diversity and pluralism reveal the very sort of interconnectedness that post-secular scholarship attempts to understand (Giddens 1991; Bender 2012). This study of creative dialogue – which extends the boundaries of the standard construct of ‘interfaith dialogue’ far beyond institutional contexts with high-ranking clergy and religious elites – is both a symptom and analysis of such changes.

## **Context of the Study: Confronti, A Magazine and Programme Office**

Confronti is an interfaith magazine and programme office in Rome, Italy. Its practice of creative dialogue makes a distinct contribution to the range of activities encompassed in the interfaith space. It offers a case study of intentional interfaith encounter that not only draws religious ‘others’ together in creative cooperation, but also describes and reflects on those encounters publicly. In this section, I will chart the

history and mission of Confronti, and describe its creative dialogue activities.

In addition to running a programmes office, Confronti publishes an ecumenical magazine launched in 1989 that is now a multi-platform intercultural enterprise promoting interreligious cooperation through media, artistic and academic collaborations, and cultural encounters. This Protestant Christian non-profit organisation coordinates a diverse community of journalists, activists and intellectuals who promote pluralism through education and meaningful social encounter. Confronti's staff, volunteers, and participant network include Christians of multiple traditions, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Muslims, agnostics and atheists. Its monthly magazine issues present diverse religious perspectives on central social issues such as the large Italian immigrant population and religion in public schools.

At the heart of Confronti's mission is an affirmation of the values of 'memory, peace, hospitality and solidarity – and to building a more collaborative democratic society.' Layout Editor Marco specified that Confronti was founded to provide a platform for 'the dialogue between the religions, of course, of all faiths, and ecumenism among Christians but also dialogue with all other religions.' In interviews, staff members said that 'pluralism' is the primary value promoted by Confronti, and their way of advancing dialogue is to give voices to religious and cultural minorities in Italy – that is, non-Catholics. Programme Officer Emma asserted, 'Given that most Italian newspapers, and the majority of television stations, still give most of their relevant space to the Catholic religion, I think that, despite being a small publishing sector, Confronti has a very large worth within the context of Italian journalism.'

Confronti pursues pluralism along two primary trajectories: 1) the monthly magazine publication and publishing cooperative, and 2) the programme office, founded in 1998, which offers public seminars, conferences, study tours and travel seminars, creative projects like musical collaborations and film festivals, and community engagement with local initiatives for women and refugees.

### ***Dialogue in Print: The Monthly Magazine***

Confronti's monthly magazine of 'politics, faith and daily life' publishes news reports, editorials and reflections on topics covered infrequently by the mainstream media. It reports on religious practices and contexts that are not often mentioned in the mainstream Italian press, and it presents a platform for minority voices and perspectives on mainstream topics. It is also a printed laboratory for discussions of secularism and pluralism, in which collaborators experiment with various approaches to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The forms range from narratives from marginalised faiths, to 'call and response' interviews juxtaposing divergent beliefs and practices, from reporting on interfaith initiatives such as theatrical workshops

or fashion shows, to dialogues tailored for teenagers. Its monthly issues have been anchored by ‘cover story’ themes since May 1995, spanning topics such as Migration, Church-state relations, or the Holy Land. The magazine not only approaches pluralism across many sectors of society, it also attempts to include articles and columns relating to different cultures and religions.

### **Creative Dialogue in Vivo: The Programme Office**

For years now, Confronti has not been just a text. In fact, Confronti also promotes cultural initiatives, conferences and travel seminars, all of which constitute a more and more important sector of our activity. The programme office is also available for the consulting and organisation of historical and teaching trips, advancement courses, and local seminars on the themes of our magazine: ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, intercultural education, peace, development and still more. Do not just skim through Confronti!

*Creative dialogue* is embodied by the programme office of Confronti. Founded in 1998 by Confronti director and political scientist Paolo Naso – who recognised that the magazine alone did not sustain the mission of the organisation – the initial aim of the programme office was to enhance subscriptions and develop a network of contacts for the magazine, but also to educate participants about other parts of the world. It began with a series of projects supported by the Waldensian Protestant Church which were called *Semi di Pace*, *Sentieri Di Pace*, and *Il Rete Tra Campanile*. Travel seminars were added soon thereafter and were judged to be successful. The programme office’s collaborations bring vitality to magazine content and allow for more active, grassroots-level cultivation of religious and cultural pluralism. Confronti director Alessandro stated, ‘It’s fascinating to always have a concrete monthly project and not just unending tasks in abstraction.’

Interfaith experience is perhaps most vivid when participants leave the comfort of familiar Roman territory. Over the years Confronti has led travel seminars in Bosnia, Russia, the United States, Ireland, India, Ethiopia and Oman. Especially important have been trips throughout the near and Middle East: Israel and the Palestinian territories, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Georgia, Armenia and Jordan. In each of these countries, Confronti travel groups meet with journalists and politicians, as well as with representatives of religious communities and civil society. These direct encounters are seen by Confronti as the primary tools for approaching and beginning to understand the complex social, political and religious aspects of the various contexts. These projects make their way into the pages of *Confronti Magazine* with photo essays, descriptive narratives and participant interviews, bringing Confronti’s global work back home to the Roman interfaith society.

Unlike other organisations in the Roman interfaith constellation, Confronti also introduces a distinctively creative element. It draws on art forms that span photography, fashion shows, film festivals, distribution of choral albums, jazz and choral concerts, and videos. There are also active collaborations with other NGOs that produce music, clowning, creating art from recycled objects, and more. In Fall 2014 Confronti promoted a contest for illustrations expressing the immigration crisis and published two covers with the winning entries (Illustrations 1 and 2 below).

There is a long list of artistic and creative activities sponsored by Confronti. They sponsor local film festivals and photography exhibits; introduce new flavours and images of interfaith collaboration by participating in the Bosnian-Serbian women's raspberry canning collective; and promote the Israeli-Palestinian cookbook *Jam Session – Recipes for Friendship, Jams and Remembrance*.<sup>1</sup> In 2013 Confronti released the *Note di Pace* choral album as a form of musical dialogue. A fashion show in 2015 celebrated designs by local immigrant women, embodying pluralism visually



Illustration 1: 'Twilight for Humanity,' December 2014 cover



Illustration 2: 'Our Blood,' March 2015 cover

and strengthening Confronti's partnership with the International Women's House. Confronti Magazine's 2016 conversion into a full-colour magazine opens more opportunities to share photography, visual artistry, and illustrations.

1 Published by Israeli-Palestinian Parent's Circle/Families Forum. (Hovav et. al. 2014)

### **Creative Dialogue: A Non-Discursive Form of Interfaith Engagement**

Confronti affiliates practice some discursive and social-relational methods of dialogue – social events, academic panels, informative publications about minority cultures, public discussions, socialisation, travel seminars – but they *also* extend traditional dialogue practices into the multi-sensory, playful, artistic realm. Confronti, particularly the activity of the programme office, embodies *creative dialogue* as a distinct modality that should be considered part of the canopy of dialogue forms.

In *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue* (2012), Ruth Illman defines creative interreligious dialogue as ‘the practice of using art as a platform where persons of different religious backgrounds can meet and discuss in open, respectful and inventive ways.’ Illman notes that most academic studies on dialogue have emphasised the discursive dimension at the expense of the spiritual, practical and interpersonal aspects of interreligious dialogue. She further argues that through art, ‘the whole person’ can be engaged in building interpersonal communication. By using creative and artistic practices, dialogue can ‘transform our ways of thinking, provoke and inspire new possibilities; cause us to pause and reflect’ (Cheetham 2010, 83).

Confronti’s rich artistic agenda reaches beyond the typical conversation-driven scenario of interfaith dialogue whereby participants simply teach or narrate their diverse religious experiences. These *creative* Confronti practices invoke sights, sounds, tastes, collaborative energies, events, objects and performances – culminating in a multi-dimensional, imaginative approach to religious diversity that is multi-sensory, holistic, visceral, non-rational, and relational in nature. It engages the body, the imagination and the emotions, inviting people into fresh modes of interaction that can be humorous, surprising and novel. Intellectual discourse can be competitive, alienating, or just plain boring; but artistic collaborations – such as playing in a band or singing in a choir together, or responding to call for immigration-themed artwork with a colourful, provocative illustration – can lead people into the realms of faith, relationship, emotion, physical senses, comedy, intuition, and memory.

These are all non-rational ‘ways of knowing’ about the world and each other. Artistic practices generate forms of knowledge and understanding – and interpersonal affections – that are qualitatively different than rational appraisals, and that transcend a mindset that insists on the ‘results’ of dialogue and refocuses instead on the ‘process’ of dialogue. Creative dialogue makes sense of something an interviewee said when I asked, ‘What is the product of interfaith dialogue?’ She replied, ‘The product of dialogue *is* the dialogue.’ Creative dialogue is shown to be inherently experience-based and process-driven – and explicitly *not* results-oriented.

### ***Creative Dialogue: Dissolving Boundaries Through Shared Personal Experience***

Confronti affiliates often remarked that dialogue ideally fosters common ground across social divides and 'humanises' dialogue partners through experiencing shared sentiments, cultivating empathy, or reflecting on common structures of human relationality such as parenthood or friendship. It follows, then, that certain methodologies of interreligious dialogue are more likely to foster shared experiences and spontaneous interpersonal connection than others. Interviewees agreed that methodologies such as theological and academic discourse are less effective, in comparison to relational and social dialogues, for changing minds and forging lasting bonds. Discursive methods are less likely to provide a paradigmatic shift of self- and other-awareness that can be the ground for a changed orientation and behaviour. Confronti contributor Maria noted, 'Rational discourse is useless when it comes to changing your mind. It takes humour or friendship, something to take you out of yourself.' Institutional interfaithing, especially at such a high level as the Vatican where event participants do not interact much and listen to formal panels, showcase the difference between 'discourse on connecting' and 'connecting.' 'Corrective relational experience' (Sandage 2008) is unlikely to take place during these events.

Indeed, according to most of my interviewees, changed attitudes and increased openness to 'the other' emerges chiefly from practical, personal encounters, not in theoretical discussions. It is a subjective experience, a process to share more than a concept to grasp. One interviewee recalled his travel seminars with Confronti and said the trip 'was important because it wasn't theoretical. It was practical.' He saw how people actually live, what they eat. 'Now I can understand them in a new way.'

While an exchange of words – particularly the exchange of personal narratives – can foster an experience of the humanity of the other, sometimes elite discourse can obscure meaning-making and relationship building. The creative dialogue form of interfaith engagement, such as artistic collaborations or even shared humour, can potentially draw forth a spontaneous encounter of authentic humanity. One dialoguer reflected, 'We can't limit dialogue to 'words' because the whole concept concerns the attitude to other, the attitude of relating to other with respect...to develop genuine friendships that don't lean on concepts, but good sincere feelings and hopes for each other.'

In the same spirit, Confronti promotes musical collaborations such as the annual *Note di Pace* choral album recordings. A musician at a Roman 'Concert for Peace' with Christian, Jewish and Muslim themes, spoke of music as a 'universal language of unity and peace [that] offers experience that needs no mediation and can be shared. Through music, human limits leave. Music can push humans further.' She also made a powerful comparison between music and dialogue.

Music is an important metaphor for dialogue. Musicians have to develop discipline, respect, and freedom to improvise--they must develop equilibrium of these qualities and between each other in order to achieve harmony. They have to listen to each other. They provide interpretations with constraints and only express themselves personally in moments when there is structured space and consensual agreement and expectation. Some have talent, others develop themselves through will. Some belong to different types of music styles, play different instruments, have different goals, are involved in different ways. Music is a dialogue.

In this way, creative dialogue is shown to dissolve boundaries, thus encapsulating the highest vision of pluralism.

### **Welcome to All: A Lower Threshold of Entry**

Creative dialogue is inclusive: it has a lower barrier to entry than elite discursive dialogues which presume a high level of education about theology, sociology, philosophy or law. It attracts a new audience to interfaithing – not just intellectuals, but also people interested in art, culture, music and aesthetics. Artistic practices often draw on skill but can welcome a broad palette of backgrounds and experiences. By evoking sacred values and multiple modes of awareness and interactions, creative dialogue embodies pluralism. It expands the plurality of dialogue forms, offers greater accessibility to the interfaith society, and gives centrality and importance to the process of dialogue itself. Dialogue ‘is not merely a cognitive capacity, but also an emotional engagement striving towards empathetic recognition of the other as having fully and distinctively another – different but equally legitimate – perspective on the world. The arts as arenas for dialogue are increasingly recognised, also within the academic sphere, as complements to rational discussions and rhetorical debates’ (Illman 2012, 7).

### **The Liminality and Playfulness of Creative Dialogue**

This explanation of the features of creative dialogue will be enriched by putting it in conversation with other writing on creativity and play. As we have seen, interfaith dialogue draws on the potency of the liminal ‘in between’ space described by Victor Turner (1969). In their practices, interfaithers aim to actively challenge social structures, hierarchies and divisions. In their place, interfaithers hope to make room for creative interplay between members of their society, for relations unbounded by the divisions of the outside world. As Turner distinguishes between structure and anti-structure (or *communitas* or liminality, as he variously calls it), he builds on Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*, arguing that a dialectic between structure and anti-structure is present in all of our lives and all societies, and that alternating fluctuation through both elements are integral parts of human life. Turner describes this universal psychosocial dynamic

– the tensive interplay between a rational, hierarchical, analytical structure, and a holistic, communal, sacred totality – and contends that the balanced personality and society give space to both principles.

The intentionally liminal space of dialogue – particularly, the practice of *creative dialogue* – allow for the emergence of the playful, generative qualities of unguarded, unmediated relationality. In these moments, ‘profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down’ (Turner 1974, 59–60). In this setting, the ‘seedbeds of cultural creativity’ arise (ibid., 60), allowing for the people present to engage in spontaneous play – a state of ‘leisure’ which Turner sets apart from the realm of work. He wrote, ‘Leisure is ... freedom to transcend social structural limitations, freedom to play with ideas, with fantasies, with words... and with social relationships – in friendship, sensitivity training, psychodramas, and in other ways. ... Leisure is potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticise or buttress the dominant social structural values’ (ibid., 68).

Leisure and play, like liminality, symbolise the ‘betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that domain’ (ibid., 71) when persons, groups, sets of ideas, et cetera, ‘move from one level or style of organisation or regulation of the interdependence of their parts or elements to another level.... There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance’ (ibid., 75). In unpacking the difference between the objectifying, obligatory structures of work and structured human encounter, Turner also draws on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2009), a contented state of creative absorption, to distinguish the freedom found in moments of play. Creative dialogue, in its potential to access such states of internal, relational freedom, embody Turner’s liminality more readily than other forms of dialogue.

André Droogers (2015) draws heavily from Victor Turner when he advocates for a more playful approach to religion and society, invoking the universal, diverse enterprise of human meaning-making. To Droogers, the human capacity to deal with multiple ways of knowing and seeing the world is most obvious in our playful modes, when we recognise ‘the resemblance between poetry and worldview’ (ibid., 159) and ‘learn to wink’ at our meaning-making process. Droogers (ibid., 8) understands play as *the human capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality* – and later specifies that ‘the term ‘subjunctively’ is taken from Victor W. Turner (1982), who in discussing play, ‘distinguishes between the indicative and the subjective moods, respectively the domain of ‘as is’ and ‘as if,’ the latter expressing supposition, desire, possibility, and hypothesis’ (Droogers 2015, 95). Droogers (ibid., 5) contrasts play against power, *the human capacity to influence other people’s behaviour, even against their will*, as when power mechanisms ‘tend to restrict the believers’ tendency to play with meanings as they seek answers to existential

questions' (ibid., 9). Exertions of power are displayed when authorities insist on monolithic worldviews, only one way of seeing the world.

Droogers (ibid., 3) shows how such power mechanisms can limit cooperation in the interfaith ambit: 'Interreligious dialogue proves to be a fraught enterprise, with even conciliatory believers experiencing great difficulty in establishing common ground'. However, he argues, when play is engaged and people learn to deal simultaneously with multiple ways of classifying reality, alternatives arise and 'previously ignored questions regarding diversity, the God debate, religious power, and global problem areas, can be raised afresh.' This is when a playful dialogue, a genuine dialogue, can allow both parties to perform meaning-making and de-emphasise unilateral interpretations of life, 'showing a way out of the digital yes-or-no stalemate...of stereotypical contrasts' (ibid., 11).

Droogers's ideas about engaging 'wild and playful meaning-making' apply more to creative dialogue than to dialogue's other forms, which, being structured, institutionally sanctioned and often quite formal, are less likely to access the same imaginative flexibility that is available to the practitioners of experimental explorations of religion and diversity. Creative dialogue takes itself less seriously than the high-profile discursive interfaith summits seen in the Vatican, driven more by flexibility and collaboration than the similarity-seeking 'common ground' talk seen in formal dialogues. For Droogers, the versatility of creative dialogue is key for paving the way to the world dialoguers dream of building.

In *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, authors Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon address the 'subjunctive space' of ritual (Seligman et al. 2008), which permits enactment of new relationships and new modalities of interaction. The subjunctive play of ritual allows for new possibility, for emergent ritual forms to be developed by people with different affiliations and intentions. Ritual can define and create boundaries, but the authors emphasise that 'crossing boundaries is just as inherent to the ritual process.'

It is reasonable to consider the discursive rituals of the interfaith society in these terms – and *creative dialogue* is especially well-described as a subjunctive field that allows for a temporary yet transformative alleviation of dominant social hierarchies and norms, which can be restructured temporarily to reflect the principles and ideals of the collective. The temporary 'play space' of creative dialogue clears associative habits and introduces new relations and new visions for future relations. It is in this subjunctive mode where dialoguers ritualistically inhabit the change they wish to see in the world, imaginatively infusing the ritual moment with the structures and relations of their hoped-for civil contract.

In *The Grace of Playing* (2016), Courtney T. Goto also advocates for creative play, which – like Turner, Droogers, and Seligman et al. – she sees as a modality that can disrupt, de-centre, and then re-centre relationships and thinking. For Goto, play is a medium for ‘revelatory experiencing,’ which ‘causes in learners a destabilising and re-orienting shift in awareness or feeling that allows them to encounter divine mystery, themselves, and others in new, life-giving ways’ (ibid., 3). Such moments transcend words just as creative dialogue aspires to do, provoking participants to begin ‘living into deeper and more authentic ways of being and being with one another’ (ibid., 4).

Although in her book Goto describes the practices of medieval holy fools and Rheinland nuns playing with devotional dolls, her psychoanalytic and theological reflections also pertain to the playful nature of creative dialogue practices, which, through their musical, photographic, cinematic, choral, and theatrical modalities invite a dialoguer into ‘finding and losing oneself, acting and believing as if, and a world of possibilities’ (ibid., 16). The play of creative dialogue, in contrast to more structured dialogue forms like formal lectures and panels, evokes a ‘counter environment’ not unlike Turner’s anti-structural *communitas*, which leads to deeper interrelation and spontaneity or creativity. Goto draws on the psychologist D.W. Winnicott, who describes the playful being as the *true self*, ‘which he believes is central and instinctual to being human’ (ibid., 34). Outside the liminal space of dialogue – and sometimes within the more routinised sectors of dialogue – the risk is that ‘freedom and authenticity are impinged upon...[and] true self will not play because it is not safe’ (ibid., 131).

Using Goto’s logic, among all the methods of interfaithing, *creative dialogue* has the most potential to disrupt social hierarchies and cultural biases, because it alleviates the player’s dependency on socially inculcated rationales of division and competition. Goto says, ‘The truth of one’s life cannot be sought directly by reason and logical deduction alone, but indirectly by ‘losing it’ in playing with it. By becoming lost in the upside-down, surprising world of play for the sake of faith, it is possible to entertain what seems impossible’ (ibid., 81). Goto argues that the ‘revelatory experiencing’ accessed through play can form the basis for a more just and peaceful world. In this light, creative dialogue offers a way for interfaithers to usher their cosmopolitan vision into reality.

## **Creative Dialogue: A Multi-Dimensional, Experiential Embodiment of Pluralism**

As an agent of *creative dialogue*, Confronti promotes civic collaboration and diversity awareness through embodied, unstructured, imaginative practices. Creative dialogue resists strict definition as a type and in its enactment, because the playfulness and spontaneity at its heart defy the limits inherent in categorisation. Nevertheless, the

dimensions of creative dialogue explored in this article suggest that this category is a distinct contribution to previous dialogue typologies which account exclusively for discursive, humanitarian, and spiritual interfaith exchanges. The multi-sensory and multi-dimensional nature of creative dialogue, its ability to 'welcome all comers' through a low threshold of entry, its liminal nature and the generative playfulness that drives it, and its emphasis on process and experience over results, all set it apart as an aesthetically distinct and experimental form of engagement across social divides.

By revising common typologies of interfaith dialogue that focus only on discursive, traditional, or institutionalised forms of interreligious expression, and expanding categories of dialogue to account for the fluidity and complexity of multireligious identities and experiences in a post-secular world, our analysis of this practice will be more grounded in the lived realities of diverse dialoguers.

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