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The Last Denton Conference

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The 2015 Denton Conference took place May 8-10, forging ahead on the heels of and despite the sad news of the death of Canon Professor Dr. Edward Bailey on April 22, 2015. Christine King convened the first session on Friday evening and introduced Ted Harrison, who read his eloquent eulogy, observing at the end that Edward Bailey's international legacy "is now in the hands of people influenced by his work." Within this circle is Reverend Professor Dr. David Martin, who was influential in Edward pursuing his study of what became implicit religion. Indeed, it was due to David's encouragement that Edward organised the first "Denton" conference (not actually held at Denton) and it was David that suggested May as a good time for it to be held, as it has been ever since. After the eulogy, each conference participant shared a brief introduction and reflection, noting the special influence of Edward in his or her implicit religion research. William Keenan kindly sacrificed his place on the program to provide time on Sunday for an extended discussion among those present regarding how best to move forward with this highly esteemed legacy. For this and other reasons, Keenan's paper, in memoriam to Edward I. Bailey, is here summarized first.

William Keenan, in his inimitably eloquent, powerful, yet gentle style, takes to task the so-called spiritual revolution, which "turns away from the projected external authority of 'religion' in favour of a self-chosen 'spirituality' as the locus of faith commitment." Keenan's paper summarized nine fallacies in the implicit ideology of the 'spiritual revolution,' observing in the end that the contrived conundrum represents "an unnecessary outbreak of hostilities" within a family, leading only to the "culturally deforested tundra of 'the narcissistic society' – a wasteland littered with broken social contracts, shattered communities, self-absorbed spiritual isolates." He then turned to Edward Bailey and David Martin, the sources for implicit religion research, to conclude, as did they, that beyond the artificial borders, guarded by defensive-aggressive facades, the religious-in-the-spiritual and the spiritual-in the-religious co-exist side by side. Both David and Edward (not unlike the late Andrew Greeley, also a priest-scholar) noted the necessity of seeking the sacred where it erupts rather than at its official location, but also within religious traditions where "social ligatures bind us to one another."

Paul-Francois Tremlett opened the formal sessions with a brief overview of his paper on Occupy Hong Kong, describing this event as "an eruption of the sacred that placed conventional norms of Hong Kong city life under erasure," an eruption "that released powerful emotions into streets and spaces once thought to be immune to the effervescences of the transgressive." Themes linking Occupy Hong Kong to radical leftist groups, Left21 and FM101, and their fluency with new social media amplified the endurance (six months) and impact of the anti-neo-liberal capitalist message of the Occupy movement.

On Saturday morning, Steven Doehrman provided an extensive analysis to explain how the history and practice of clinical psychology maps onto the implicit religion framework initially developed by Bailey, modified by Schnell, and then by Keenan. He improvised the model in the paper to encompass professionalizing, practicing, and producing with historical and contemporary examples. In the first of two papers on high tech, Ton Meijknecht presented three steps toward a theology of engineers, starting with a model from Erik Borgman (successor to Edward Schillebeeckx) that reinstates the reality and sacrality of the natural world by analogy to the theological revelation by God through Jesus and not the church. The reality-sacrality of the natural world, and especially nature as transformed by technology, suggests a parallel between the profession of the contemporary engineer and that of the mystical theologian. Meijknecht used the inability of students to explain insights from a *diner pensant* at a later time and different place to describe how modern technology lacks both a philosophical and literary language through which to create myths that explain its stories -- stories that are of paramount significance to our destiny in the contemporary world. Guy Ménard offered a rich analysis of the implicit and explicit dimensions of technological phenomena, framing these within symbolic matrices, that is, as within wide sets of values, symbols, beliefs and myths. The matrices have encoded technology within given historical periods and enabled deep relationships between technology and religion, both implicit and explicit, thereby defining the human relationships to nature and ultimately to technology itself.

Israel Selvanayagam presented an image of "Krishna Frolics with the Milkmaids" to explore how pleasure and sexuality are used to understand the divine. The representation of Krishna with the milkmaids, who abandon their husbands and chores, is both similar and dissimilar to Christian images. It contrasts sharply with the Christian instrument of torture, the wooden cross, but is similar insofar as Christians, too, may abandon families and responsibilities to follow Christ. A key difference rests in the Hindu valuation of sexuality and pleasure as expressions of love. In a second paper on Hinduism, Pavel Veselsky examined the Bhagavad Gita and its tradition of commentaries, which address numerous everyday human attitudes and activities. Veselsky noted that in the text and worldview of the texts, the sacred and profane are blurred and thus often indistinguishable from the Western point of view. The fuzziness elicits a need for the implicit religion lens.

George Gonzales applied Catherine Bell's ritual theory to an observational analysis of branding at Starbucks and the affective-cognitive entanglement with processes inherent in neo-liberal capitalism. His paper suggested that religious studies and marketing may share a similar epistemic context, one in which subjectivity is shaped from the outside by branding cultures. This observation, he claimed, implies that our own intellectual labors as scholars of religion may also be enmeshed in the logic and mechanics of neo-liberal capitalism. In a second paper on ritual, Wilhelm Dupré queried the tension between meaninglessness and meaningfulness in ritual processes. Depending upon the intensity of approximation to the center of cultural reality and attunement to the vanishing point of the ritual process, ritual phenomena may be religious rather than magical,

or magical rather than religious. Insofar as the vanishing point of the ritual process intimates the end of ritual meanings, it is in the emptiness of this point that we encounter the tacit God of ritual relations.

Kees de Groot used the example of Bingo games to illustrate the significance attributed to the mystical experience by Karl Rahner. The full engagement of the players in transitory but repetitive settings points to meaning making that by far transcends rational descriptions of the game, endowing it with liturgical qualities.
Ivo Jirasek explored the boundaries between secularity, implicit religion, and explicit religion through examination of the Czech comic strip, "Fast Arrows." The comic was completely secular with no signs of religion. However, there are educational and health messages and inspirations for activities, which tended to inspire confidence in the law and in state authorities. In terms of whether it is possible to see Fast Arrows as implicit religion, Ivo noted that there are neither superstitions nor religious architecture; however, there are embedded values and a focus on personal development around these. Ted Harrison provided vivid visual representations of the use of religious symbols in tattoos. Tattoos, he noted, have implicitly religious aspects as rites of passage, marks of relationships, and permanence. As such they create powerful symbols of resonance without necessarily connecting in a one-to-one way with the more traditional interpretations as icons when embedded in their religious contextual field.

Mary Hale's presentation examined mindfulness as as it is conceived, practiced, and marketed in two educational settings: the Shambhala School, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Smiling Mind, a mindfulness program out of Australia. To these applications she added a sampling of the conversations among critics and proponents of mindfulness as an integral component of school curricula. Her examples and analysis illustrated ways in which educational and other practices explicitly designated as secular may implicitly carry signifiers of religion, by opening vistas of the transcendent from within immanent frames to achieve human fullness. Observational and other research over time may shed additional light on how the secular and sacred may be integrated as well as on the impact of mindfulness practice. The Saturday sessions closed with Colin Greene's brief description of proposed collaboration between Sarum College and Implicit Religion,

Peter Brierley opened the Sunday morning session with an extensive statistical description and analysis of the growth and decline of various modes of religiosity in London and the UK. His analysis provided seven reasons for the growth of attendance at various churches and is available in published form. Roger Grainger, reading from a partly autobiographical and eloquent text, discussed the interplay of identity creation and maintenance through theatre, noting that our reality exists in the recognition of ourselves in one another. As an actor and lover of theatre, a taste born in the wake of bombs and nonspecific killing during WW II, he confided that when acting on the stage: "I knew who I was." The two papers were followed by an open discussion on the future of Implicit Religion, the conference, and the journal.

Francis Stewart deftly deployed Prezi for a highly creative multi-media presentation on anarcho-punk using interview extracts, lyrical analysis, videos, visual art, and music clips. She suggested implicit religion as a useful tool for understanding anarcho-punk more generally, and specifically its animal rights advocacy. Especially the presentation media facilitated communication of the coherent intersectionalities between veganism, anarchist politics, punk music, and animal rights. Finally, Barbara R. Walters examined human rights through the implicit religion lens. Following a brief description of the significance of constitutional and international law as the implicit religion replacement for mores and norms within explicit religions, she presented an empirical data analysis showing statistically significant relationships between measures of country-level gender inequality and the signing by that country of the enforcement protocol for the Covenant for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The conference closed with a lovely photo of the group in front of Denton Hall followed by lunch.