

Article

Two Strangers in the Eternal City: Border Thinking and Individualized Emerging Rituals as Anti-Patriarchal Epistemology

Lailatul Fitriyah

Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA 91711, USA; lfritriyah@cst.edu

Abstract: This paper is a work of autoethnography in which I (the author) observe critical practices that I and my colleague, Aisha, thought, said, and embodied during our tenure as the only Muslim Nostra Aetate Fellows at the St. Catherine Center for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican City, Italy. The paper focuses on our survival strategies that took on an interreligious and anti-patriarchal character within our interreligious, Muslim–Christian encounters. The framework of border thinking, as theorized by Maria Lugones and Gloria Anzaldúa, and the concept of emerging rituals proposed by Ronald Grimes, will serve as analytical tools to understand our practices. I argue that our embodied thoughts and practices, as seen from the lenses of emerging rituals and border thinking, represent an anti-patriarchal, interreligious epistemology that questions and deconstructs the hegemonic presence of patriarchal Catholic praxis around us within that specific context.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue; anti-patriarchal; feminism; border thinking; emerging rituals; autoethnography



Citation: Fitriyah, Lailatul. 2023. Two Strangers in the Eternal City: Border Thinking and Individualized Emerging Rituals as Anti-Patriarchal Epistemology. *Religions* 14: 29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010029>

Academic Editors: Amina Jamal and Kayla Renée Wheeler

Received: 9 March 2022

Revised: 20 December 2022

Accepted: 21 December 2022

Published: 23 December 2022



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Prelude

It was a rainy October afternoon in Rome when I met Aisha¹ and Father John² for the first time. Father John was a priest who worked for the St. Catherine Center for Interreligious Dialogue (SCCID)³ and was in charge of supervising an interreligious fellowship sponsored by the SCCID, which I and Aisha had both come for. Father John was a tall, big man with a patronizing tone of authority in his voice and body language that demanded respect from the people around him. Aisha herself was a Turkish-German student who focused her research on Islamic theology and its relations with Christianity. Throughout our time in Rome, Aisha would be a ‘sister’ to me, however Father John could never be a ‘father’ to us.

My stay in Rome was the result of a conversation with an archbishop when he visited Notre Dame back in 2014. As an initiator of a successful interreligious dialogue initiative on campus, I was asked to accompany the archbishop during his visit to deliver a lecture on the commemoration of the 49th anniversary of the Nostra Aetate document. He was interested in my interreligious activism and asked me to postpone my Ph.D for a year in order to come to Rome under the fellowship. I had never really wanted to visit Europe before, but I was challenged by the idea and sent out an application. I was accepted and landed in Rome on 1 October 2015.

Meanwhile, Aisha came for the fellowship through a recommendation from her professor. Both of us were clueless as to what we should expect from the program. I came with the expectation that researching and working for a Vatican-based institution would be no more different than studying at an American Catholic university like Notre Dame, while Aisha assumed that she would finally have the chance to genuinely learn about Catholic theology at the heart of the Catholic faith. At that time, we did not know that our experiences would be ones of constant struggle rather than of constant learning.

Taking my cue from Catherine Bell on acknowledging the importance of contexts in the formation and practices of rituals (Bell 2009, p. 171), I must note that the individualized emerging rituals in this paper took place within three different pontifical spheres. The first sphere was the Vatican City; within the confines of the SCCID headquarter, papal masses, and meetings with cardinals. Second, the individualized emerging rituals also took place at two pontifical universities in Rome, referred to anonymously here as St. Catherine University and the St. Augustine University, where I and Aisha participated in some classes and academic activities. The last site was a monastery in the heart of Rome, where both I and Aisha lived throughout the period of our fellowships.

2. A Note on Autoethnography

In general, autoethnography is characterized by two aspects. First, it consists of storytelling features that it shares with other genres of self-narrative writings. Second, it locates narratives of the self within its socio-cultural context (Chang 2008, p. 43). Within the study of religions, many scholars have used autoethnography as a method to find connections between embodied experiences with socio-religious phenomenon within which such experiences are embedded. E. James Baesler writes about the relationship between his academic and religious experiences in the context of his academic career as a professor of Communication (Baesler 2017, pp. 92–112). Randolph Haluza-DeLay writes about the churches' engagement with environmental issues from the perspective of their personal experiences working within such contexts (Haluza-DeLay 2008, pp. 71–81). Meanwhile, in their chapter on autoethnography, Irene Zempi and Imran Awan pose a question about the adequacy of autoethnography as a research method in the context of targeted victimization of Muslims in a post-9/11 setting (Zempi and Awan 2021, pp. 154–63). John Eliastam's study on the relationship between the South African value of Ubuntu with the notion of spatial justice also utilizes autoethnographic methods to argue that Ubuntu challenges dominant spatial configurations within the South African context (Eliastam 2016, pp. 1–8). In a similar tone with this paper on ritual studies, Jennifer Erdely's article uses an autoethnographic method to examine tourism as a form of ritual (Erdely 2018, pp. 32–52). Lastly, Carlos Gerena's work on the conflictual relationship between religious beliefs and sexuality also uses autoethnography to gain insights from their personal experiences on the issue (Gerena 2019, pp. 2297–308).

However, more than just a self-narrative that is located within its socio-cultural context, autoethnography contains critical potentials that: first, poses narratives that subvert dominant paradigms; second, empowers the researcher (especially those who come from marginalized backgrounds); and third, exhibits complex entanglements between embodied experiences and academic discourses. In his work on using autoethnography to write against racism, Yassir Morsi argues that autoethnography is, "... an act of defiance, a paradoxical act. An act of surviving the self-inflicted erasure of my own subjectivity as a proper scholar." (Morsi 2021, p. 511). While in their work on decolonizing autoethnography, Ahmet Atay makes it clear that stories from marginalized individuals and communities are important not by themselves, but rather due to their capacity to decolonize the process of knowledge production (Atay 2021, p. 297). In this article, this subversive qualities of autoethnography are shown through my narratives that deconstruct a hegemonic, Islamophobic paradigm that presumed the backwardness and oppressed status of a hijabi Muslim woman of color.

Furthermore, following Atay's definition of autoethnography, which is, "a method [that] aims to empower scholars by allowing them to narrate their stories and experiences within a culture as they experience it," (Atay 2021, p. 296) the autoethnographic method employed in this article also serves to empower myself to expose anti-Muslim racism as a systemic problem in Rome. Therefore, since the locus of autoethnographic knowledge is the researcher's subjective experience as well as their academic analysis (Spry 2001, p. 711), autoethnographic inquiries deconstruct the hegemonic binary between subjectivity and objectivity in academic discourses. In any autoethnographic research, the researcher

is squarely located within the messiness of social and material lives. In addition, this also means that my autoethnographic research comes through a retrospective reflection of the spontaneous occurrences in my daily life in Rome. In other words, as with many other autoethnographic work, this article was not written as a result of an intentional and systematic fieldwork, but rather is a result of my thoughts and reflections of my personal experiences in Rome. As such, in this article, the analysis on Islamophobia in Rome is presented through my experiences as a racialized and gendered target of Islamophobic violence.

It is in explaining my subject position within the context of racialized and gendered interreligious relations in Rome that Gloria Anzaldúa's notions of the new mestiza, and the new mestiza consciousness, as well as María Lugones's reading of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* come to be important. Explaining the new mestiza, Anzaldúa wrote:

"The new mestiza is a liminal subject who lives in borderlands between cultures, races, languages, and genders. In this state of in-betweenness the mestiza can mediate, translate, negotiate, and navigate these different locations." (Keating 2022, p. 173)

Yet, as Analouise Keating's analysis on the Anzaldúan theories reveals, such negotiations, mediations, and translations are not the new mestiza's attempts at gaining acceptance within the hegemonic context, but rather are reflections of their creative power in forming something new out of the collision between different worlds that they are living in (Keating 2022, p. 172). The new mestiza's nimbleness in living between multiple worlds, i.e., in living at the border, is in turn a function of a specific paradigm that comes both contextually and intentionally to them in the form of the new mestiza consciousness (*ibid.*, p. 180). On this notion, Anzaldúa wrote:

"I have called that space the *Borderlands*, but I have also called it *mestiza consciousness*. If you are a woman of color, a faggot or a dyke, if you are in any way marked by your society as different, you are forced to develop certain inner senses. This happens to all who have to cross borders into different worlds, into different classes. The mestiza or border crosser has to become sensitive to a lot of different things in order to survive and as a result her consciousness expands. It's like being put into a crucible and fired. It tempers you." (*ibid.*, p. 182)

Anzaldúa made it clear that the new mestiza consciousness is both a survival mechanism for border crossers, as well as a rich paradigm that comes out of the context of living, surviving, and thriving at the border. In this case, there is a parallel line between Anzaldúa's notions of the new mestiza, and the new mestiza consciousness with my subject position and living context in Rome.

Within the context of the interreligious, interracial borderlands that I occupied in Rome, the interreligious initiatives that I and others led were at once a survival mechanism as well as reflections of my creative engagement with the multiple worlds that I lived in between. As a border crosser, my location between Islam and Christianity, as a person of color in White Europe, and as a woman in a male-dominated space necessitated me to navigate a hostile borderland in which my religious, racial, and gender markers were seen as legitimate reasons to discriminate against me. However, this same hostile context also gave me insight into problems that resulted from the binary between 'us' and 'them' that served as a foundation for the conventional approach to interreligious dialogue in Rome. That same context then allowed me to create an interreligious space that was based on interreligious hospitality and vulnerability—instead of the basis of religious binary—that are imperatives for those who live at the border (Lugones 1992, p. 35).

3. On Grimes' Emerging Rituals and the Decolonial Body

Ronald Grimes's concept of 'emerging rituals' came as a critique against the hegemonic perspective on rituals in terms of its four main characteristics, namely: the traditional aspect of rituals (that rituals cannot be invented), the collective aspect of rituals (that the conduct

of rituals necessitates more than one person), the pre-critical aspect of rituals (that people participating in a ritual cannot be reflective and self-conscious in their practices), and the meaningful aspect of ritual (that every form of ritual must be referential to certain symbolic meaning) (Grimes 1992, p. 23). Through the concept of ‘emerging rituals’, Grimes argues that, first, the term ‘ritual’ can be understood as something that is invented and created while not necessarily denying its ties with tradition (ibid., p. 24), and second, that the continuity of rituals does not imply the death of criticism, and vice versa (ibid., p. 33).

In arguing that ritual is continuously constructed, Grimes provides a possibility for us to better understand the location of embodiment in the practices of rituals. Instead of seeing the body merely as a means of performing a ritual (Mahmood 2001, p. 828), and/or the body as a site of unsocialized emotions that parallel the pre-critical quality of rituals,⁴ Grimes made the case for seeing the body as a subject in the practices of rituals. Because rather than just being a vessel, the body is cognitive, and the mind is by consequence always embodied (Mahmood 2001, p. 828). Meanwhile, the critical quality of rituals means that the binary between ‘figurative’/‘representational’ (which are what rituals are supposed to be) and ‘real’/‘practical’ (which are what rituals are *not* meant to be) (Asad 1993, p. 67) is no longer relevant. In this perspective, rituals are the embodied practices that combine variance and invariance, which allow for enchanted criticality, and the practicality of everyday life while also representing devotions to the Sacred.

The growth of individualized emerging rituals presented in this paper does not come out of liminal enclaves within the Catholic faith, but rather from external, interreligious critiques, reactions, and adaptations towards ultra-conservative, hegemonic perspectives on Roman Catholic teachings. Furthermore, these intricate encounters between us (me and Aisha) and the Catholics of Rome (religious and lay) can also be seen in terms of parallel enchantments and disenchantments, both on the parts of us, the Muslim others, and them, the Catholic hosts.

Based on its external positioning, our (mine and Aisha’s) individualized emerging rituals do not necessarily aim at revising orthodoxy. Our emerging rituals served at least three main functions: First, they were coping mechanisms in the midst of continuous Islamophobic, racist, and sexist assaults that we experienced in Rome. Second, they provided counter-narratives to the practices and understandings of ‘interreligious dialogue’ as perceived by our Catholic hosts. Third, they formed contexts in which non-patriarchal forms of interreligious dialogue flourished in Rome. In addition to these practical and religious functions, the interreligious rituals that I and Aisha did were also rooted in our personal theologies of religions. Our commitment in sustaining interreligious dialogue in our everyday lives, in spite of the Islamophobic encounters that we suffered, was based on our perspectives on the religious others, and specific Islamic virtues that we aimed to embody in our lives as Muslims.

The formation of these emerging rituals was also brought about on an individual basis rather than a communal one. In some instances, such as our Scriptural Reasoning Forum and our voluntary activities at the refugee center, the rituals were comprised of community-based activities, though the activities themselves came from individual initiatives. Most importantly, these individualized emerging rituals were not only critical in nature, but also were born out of reflective moves in the face of the reality of interreligious encounters in Rome.

The fluidity between variance and invariance, and enchantment and critiques in the embodiment of rituals parallels a decolonial conception of the body that sees it as a porous boundary, rather than a coherent entity.⁵ This is especially true for migrant bodies like mine and Aisha’s, which were not only physically crossing several borders in our lives (national borders, cultural borders, and language borders among others), but also embodying those borders in ourselves as we lived our lives as Muslim *hijabi* women of color in a white Catholic setting.

In the language of ritual studies, as women whose presence cut across several intersections, our embodied practices clearly show a blurry line in the dynamic between

individuals and society that often serves as another binary that differentiates between rituals and non-rituals (Grimes 1992, p. 27). I second the arguments that deconstruct said binary in characterizing rituals, yet in addition to that, I also argue that there are contexts in which the intertwining between the individual and society in embodied practices becomes all the more clear. Due to the gendered, racialized, and Islamophobic setting in which we lived in Rome, I and Aisha did not have the privilege of privatizing our religiosities, and having the illusion of its detachment from our everyday lives.

On the other hand, Catholic bodies⁶ in these contexts were present in their physically collective, orthodox-leaning manners. From everyday encounters to deliveries of anti-religious other rhetoric in classes, most Catholics that I met exhibited a corporate front when in the presence of non-Catholics, with the non-Catholics often finding themselves excluded by the Catholic majority. This corporate form of interaction with the religious others was also strengthened by a patronizing attitude in which the Catholic hosts positioned themselves as the owners of absolute truth, rather than as dialogue partners to their religious others. From casual conversations on religious experiences to weekly liturgies and classes, the Catholic hosts shaped our interreligious encounters into moments of teaching (on their part) and learning (on our part), rather than moments of mutual dialogue. In addition, all of these interpersonal aspects were accompanied by a highly formalized and institutionalized practice of interreligious dialogue that was, by the virtue of conventional religious structures, also elitist and patriarchal.

Last but not least, intersectionality is inseparable from my experiences in Rome. This means that Islamophobia, though it was a major part of my experiences, was not the only dimension that formed Aisha's and my own individualized emerging rituals. In both of our experiences, sexism defined our interactions with male working colleagues and classmates as much as Islamophobia did. Additionally, due to my dark skin tone, racism was also in the picture. In this paper, I scrutinize interreligious relations in light of the sexism and racism that also determined the positionalities of the people involved in these interactions. In terms of power relations, intersectionality also means that the projection of power from the powerful to the powerless in this context came in many ritualized forms that functioned to preserve the centralization of power in the hands of the Catholic majority. In short, the Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, and sexism displayed by our Catholic hosts in Rome must be understood as parts of ritualized practices in the interactions with their Muslim counterparts.

Now, let us go back to Aisha's and my experiences in Rome, from October 2015 up to June 2016.

4. Scriptural Reasoning Forum as a Ritual of Dialogue

It was my first house meeting at the monastery in which I lived. I had been living there for a week and everyone seemed to welcome me just fine. I lived in the huge compound with twenty other international students who were also studying at one of the many pontifical universities across Rome. Most of them were Catholics.

Like many other monasteries in Rome, this monastery was designed to impress rather than to emphasize any concept of 'humility' that I associated with monks and their monastic lives. The compound was located at the top of a hill, on the site of what was once a part of the palace of a Roman Emperor, overlooking many Roman ruins below it. Once through the gate, visitors would be welcomed with a wide garden full of orange and grapefruit trees that seemed to bear fruit all the time. Inside the compound, the air was filled with the scents of lemon and rosemary, the noise from flocks of tourists and street vendors outside of the compound were replaced with the harmonious sounds of trickling fountains and the monks' chants. I could not resist the feeling of awe at the grandeur of Ancient Roman civilization when I stood on the edge of the hill and looked out below. Supremacy and exclusivity were what the compound was made for. Here is a place where only the initiated few could have access to; and those initiated few, due to their special status, deserved the finest things in life.

The house meeting was a monthly gathering between the management of the student center and all student-residents in the building. The meeting was supposed to be reflective in nature and aimed at strengthening the communal bond between residents and management. However, that was not what I found in our first house meeting and other meetings after that. The management, which consisted of a professor at one of the pontifical universities and her student-assistants, sat at one side of the table, while the rest of us, the student-residents, sat opposite. One of the student-assistants opened the meeting and made it clear that, although we as their guests were allowed to deliver our opinion, we were required to deliver it in a way that would not ‘offend’ other people. I took the warning as a wise reminder against micro-aggressions in any interreligious conversation, and would later be surprised to learn their true meaning.

I rapidly discovered that for a place which boasted itself as a center for interreligious dialogue, the student center did not actually have any substantial interreligious initiatives. I thus proposed to integrate a scriptural reasoning forum and interreligious prayers into our monthly activities. Imagine my surprise when my idea was rejected on the grounds of syncretism. The director of the student center, Professor Deborah,⁷ thought that both activities were syncretistic and thus would not be appropriate to organize in a Christian setting like the monastery. The student-assistants affirmed Professor Deborah’s statement, while my other peers looked shocked to hear about my proposal.

Later, I found that this dismissive attitude—or even fear—towards genuine interreligious encounters, as shown by Prof. Deborah and some of my peers, was common in Rome. The invocation of ‘syncretism’ to blatantly reject any serious engagement in interreligious dialogue is the first pattern of ritualized Catholic theology of religions that I noticed, both in the monastery in which I lived in as well as in the pontifical universities where I studied.

There are several dimensions to the invocations of syncretism during my time in Rome: First, that it was used by referencing the thoughts, work, and perspective of Pope Benedict XVI.⁸ Second, that it was mostly invoked in communal settings (e.g., the classrooms and community meetings) where the accusation of syncretism towards practices that were deemed as deviant would be easily affirmed by the agreement of the masses. And third, that the invocation of ‘syncretism’ served as an affirmation to the supremacy of Catholicism, relative to the religious others who advocated for genuine interreligious encounters, or to those who practiced local interpretations of the Catholic teachings. This last point was especially clear in the ways in which some faculty members at both St. Catherine University and St. Augustine University admonished the practices of what they referred to as ‘popular religion’.

That night, my idea to conduct monthly scriptural reasoning forum and interreligious prayer was thus buried under the weight of ‘syncretism’. However, I, Aisha, and another student-resident kept pushing for the idea to be accepted. We knew that the key to the realization of the idea was in the hands of Prof. Deborah and that the other students would just agree with whatever she said. Henceforth, we kept bringing up the idea to Prof. Deborah, held meetings with her, and convinced her that the scriptural reasoning forum was not an attempt to relativize Catholic teachings. Our hard work paid off, for in December 2015, we held our first scriptural reasoning forum.

The monthly attendance rate for our scriptural reasoning forum was quite high (15–20 people in every forum). We quickly expanded our membership from the student-residents to our classmates and professors at the pontifical universities, Muslim activists in Rome, and some national ambassadors to the Holy See. Interestingly, some Catholic participants commented that the forum created a safe space for them to deliver their long-held questions about their own faith; our forum was the only place where they were not being judged in delivering their reflections on their faith or in asking questions about other religious traditions. Before I knew it, the members of our forum were engaged in deep interreligious conversations centered around their daily spiritual experiences.

The scriptural reasoning forum served as a liminal space in which the practice of interstitial theology took place. The notion of ‘stitial theology’ is understood as “a

mode or methodology for the comparative philosophy of religion which exploits the structure of metaphor (. . .) and aims at the construction of liminal, hybrid perspectives or standpoints for continuing the conversation of religions in a creative and open-ended way.” (Ruparell 2013, p. 121). The interreligious encounters in the scriptural reasoning forum were anchored within the fact of everyday lives. Though participants started each conversation with specific verses in scriptures, their reflections and understandings of the verses were rooted in personal experiences that featured the social, economic, political, and spiritual landscapes that they did and did not share with each other.

The forum formed an important critique to the conventional practice of interreligious dialogue within pontifical circles. Large-scale conferences were countered with intimate discussions, the formality of the Vatican’s government-to-government initiatives were replaced by interpersonal conversations, and the imposition of conventional traditions were substituted with humble narratives from lay and religious people whose spiritual journeys were equally significant in the forum. What the scriptural reasoning forum offered was a place to embrace our imperfections, a chance to be uncertain about our faiths, and a genuine dialogue instead of an exchange of defensive moves against one another.

The scriptural reasoning forum provided two ritualistic functions that countered the ritualized hostility towards the religious others in Rome. First, the forum laid bare the complex tension between individuals and society that were often concealed by abstract understandings of rituals. The forum showed that not a single religious interpretation is free from the positionality of its bearer, and thus debunked the claims that interreligious hostility and aversion to interreligious dialogue were divinely sanctioned. Second, the forum created a space for alternative, embodied interreligiousity that showed that nurturing faiths and critically reflecting upon them are not mutually exclusive. Interreligious rituals that took place in the forum displayed a beautiful dynamic between preservation and construction of religious traditions that is at the core of ritualizing, despite the common misconception that ritual is always about preserving traditions.

5. ‘Questioning’ as an Individualized Ritual in a Land of Certainty

The St. Augustine University is located just ten minutes away from Foro di Traiano (the Trajan Forum). Its stone floors, marble walls, and long hallways with arches still carried the 16th century atmosphere, with the building still serves as a convent for Dominican nuns. Professors walked around the campus in their white habits, which contrasted with the appearance of student-priests in their black cassocks.

Classrooms were cold and quiet, with pictures of the Doctors of the Church on the wall. Most of the students were male priests, seminarians, and monks, with a few female students in each class. Some professors would open their classes with the prayer of Ave Maria in Latin and the students would follow. You did not just learn about (established) Catholic theology at St. Augustine, you breathed it; it was in the air and people flaunted it with their body language, their clothing, and the ways they spoke. It was here that I took several classes within the field of interreligious dialogue. Though most of the classes were only directed at the discussion of Muslim–Christian dialogue, I was nevertheless excited and brimming with anticipation, for I finally had the chance to learn from my Catholic classmates and professors.

The course ‘Three Popes and Interreligious Dialogue’ was taught by a Dominican professor whose name is quite well-known in the field. The class focused on interreligious dialogue as envisioned and practiced by Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. In one of the sessions, we analyzed two speeches directed towards Muslims delivered by Popes Benedict XVI and Francis. I found different wordings in the ways in which Popes Benedict XVI and Francis greeted the Muslim communities. Pope Benedict XVI used ‘Islam’ in referring to Muslims, while Pope Francis greeted the Muslim communities directly by using the word ‘Muslim’ in his speech. I argued that the difference reflects a more hands-on approach to interreligious dialogue that was practiced by Pope Francis, and a formal-institutional approach chosen by Pope Benedict XVI to engage his Muslim

dialogue partners. I then asked whether any of my classmates and professor came to similar conclusions.

Professor George⁹ laughed at my question and said, “Do not read too many newspapers. Your opinion is framed with the media’s negative tendency in looking at Pope Benedict [XVI].” Not long after, another classmate, a white priest, raised his hand and said, “I might have my own opinion on this, but since I cannot say that the Pope was mistaken, I cannot opine over what a pope has said and done.” After the class, Professor George called me and Aisha to his office. He sat us down, and said: “You are here to learn from us. So, just sit tight in the class and absorb what we gave you. This is not an American university, nor a German one. This is a pontifical university.”

What happened in Professor George’s class was not the first nor the last of the Islamophobic, patriarchal encounters that I and Aisha would endure in both pontifical universities. Our experiences at St. Catherine University were also full of hostile exchanges with our classmates and professors. Our presence as Muslims, our hijabs, our gender, and skin colors were perceived as threats to the preservation of conventional-patriarchal readings, expressions, and practices of the Catholic teachings.

It was ridiculous yet fascinating to see how my mere presence at the university invoked such fear. People, especially my priest classmates and professors, suddenly felt the need to either explain what ‘Catholicism’ to me is and/or to ask me about my opinion on ISIS whenever they found themselves around me. While the former was somewhat bearable, I found the latter to be irritating. The not-so-subtle invocations of patriarchal Catholicism was even embodied in small gestures that my priest colleagues exhibited around me: collars were fixed, Bibles held close to the chest, with an unmistakable air of undermining reactions towards my presence. In another course at St. Augustine, a professor told the entire classroom that, “Muslims will come to us [Catholics] and ask us [Catholics] a lot of questions about our faith [Catholicism]. They will ask us some offensive questions. When the time comes, we just need to be patient because Muslims are like kids. They know nothing.” Me and Aisha were sitting only a few feet away from the professor when he said this.

Positioning all Muslims as the bearers of guilt for acts of terrorism that were done by other Muslims is a primary exemplar of Islamophobia. Todd Green argues that Muslims around the world have been “presumed guilty” of the sin of terrorism by the white, Western, Christian societies.¹⁰ Yet, I argue that in addition to such a generic presumption of guilt over acts of terrorism, what I experienced in the St. Catherine and St. Augustine Universities were fine examples of gendered Islamophobia that Jasmin Zine defined as:

“... specific forms of ethno-religious and racialized discrimination leveled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform individual and systemic forms of oppression. ... the discursive roots are historically entrenched within Orientalist representations that cast colonial Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies (...).” (Zine 2006, p. 240)

The ritualized Islamophobic and sexist harassments that were directed towards me and Aisha in Rome showed a contradiction that is not uncommon in hegemonic depictions of women of colors in Western societies. On one side, the presumption of guilt that was imposed on me and Aisha came from an explicit acknowledgment of the ‘danger’ that we posed to the Catholic community; hence the demand to repeatedly prove our innocence from acts of terrorism committed by Muslims. On the other hand, we were also perceived as being weak, timid, and submissive, and thus were not capable of effectively enacting our own agencies. The point of reconciliation for this contradiction is located with the men—and other patriarchal authorities—in our lives whose values and perspectives animated our values and perspectives. In other words, we were seen as being active agents of destruction for an agenda that was not even ours. Our subjectivities were deemed as being non-existent in the eyes of our Catholic hosts, and every time they encountered any expression of our agencies, their minds were completely blown.

It is clear that the problems at both the St. Catherine and St. Augustine Universities are not limited to Islamophobia, because sexism and racism were also in the mix. Furthermore, feudalistic behaviors were inseparable from the academic lives in both of these pontifical universities. It was common to see students bringing in the professors' bags, or student-nuns serving the needs of professors or priests. Those feudalistic behaviors were means through which the priests communicated their religious authorities, and their 'divine' masculinity within the context of White European supremacy.

I recall some of my classmates' astonishment at the fact that I spoke English fluently, was able to articulate theories, and that I went to a world-class university. There was an expectation that a brown-skinned Muslim *hijabi* would not be able to speak English well or study in universities. Despite the fact that I and Aisha were there as fellows of the Vatican's SCCID, there was a constant effort to place me and Aisha in stereotypical imagery associated with *hijabi* Muslims in the Western imagination (i.e., backward, oppressed, speaking broken English, uneducated, and timid). Thus, my persistence, and Aisha's, in asking questions and delivering our opinions in classes was considered disruptive, if not threatening, to their specific order of authority and legitimacy, as well as to the 'coherence' of stereotyped imageries of Muslim women that they had.

'Questioning as ritual' for me also came in the form of writing columns for *Sacro Cuore*, the student magazine at the St. Augustine University. I wrote articles on interreligious dialogue, and poetry that came from my feelings of alienation in Rome. Despite the fact that it is impossible to know the depth of the implication of my writings, it is sufficient to say that the opening that they provided for my writings was indicative of an opening for dialogue. Furthermore, a few months after that, Aisha and another female lay student also published their writings in the magazine. Since that time, there has been a burst of interfaith voices in a once Catholic-focused and male-dominated *Sacro Cuore* that hopefully portends better times ahead.

6. Extending the Rituals: Interreligious Dialogue with Refugees

During our third month in Rome, I met a friend who led an initiative in a refugee shelter. The initiative was directed towards relationship building between refugees, who were mostly Muslims, and the management of the shelter, who were mostly Catholics, in a fashion that fostered interreligious dialogue. I immediately expressed my willingness to volunteer and visited the shelter twice a month. I soon also invited Aisha to come with me and we found that our interfaith encounters with people in that shelter were heartwarming and welcoming for ourselves too. At the refugee shelter, power and privileges were never prominently featured in our interactions between individuals. Fragility, humility, and uncertainty were parts of life at the shelter and comprised the beauty of it. For me and Aisha, the shelter was an oasis from the stale and mostly static interreligious life within the pontifical circles.

Within a few months of my volunteering, I decided to share the volunteer opportunity with my peers at the monastery. Recalling the tradition of Catholic social teachings, I expected an enthusiastic response from my peers towards my invitation. To my surprise, it was not the case. There was no enthusiasm, both from my peers and from the management of the student residence regarding my offer to volunteer at the shelter. However, their response significantly changed when, after a few months, there was a study excursion group who visited the monastery and looked for a place to engage in such social activity in Rome. The visit was also recorded by and reported in a radio station in London, United Kingdom.

A few days before the study excursion group arrived, Professor Deborah approached me and said, "you told us a while back that you are volunteering in a refugee shelter?"

"That's right," I said.

"We will have this study excursion group arrived in a few days," she said, "And there will be people from the radio station too. I want to include the refugees in our program. Why don't you bring some of them to the monastery and we will provide them with food?"

I was so angry at that time that I could only give her a short "no" and then left.

The combination between the practical and the symbolic was clearly displayed in the rituals of interreligious dialogue within the pontifical circles. Yet, instead of being directed towards the formation of virtues (Asad 1993, p. 72), the interreligious dialogue rituals in this context were pointed to the accumulation of power within a hierarchical community where everyone is in competition with each other to get as close as possible to the center of power. In this context, most interreligious dialogue practices were strategically organized, not to genuinely understand and respect religious differences, but rather to build a network of more powerful people (as in the case with high level interreligious dialogue forums) and/or to galvanize prestige and respect for the privileged few as shown by Professor Deborah above.

In this context, interreligious dialogue was depoliticized and stripped of its element of social justice. Though the practices were clearly embodied, the understanding of interreligious dialogue in pontifical circles was abstracted. Concepts such as love, compassion, and peace were cited to shut down critical voices and preserve the power structure. Interreligious rituals in this setting were truly dedicated to the upholding of ‘tradition’, which was defined as the body of conventional authority within the Church and its surrounding power structures. This toxic mix of superficial religiosity and pursuit of power made interreligious encounters within the pontifical circles to be suffocating.

While the interreligious encounters that I experienced in the refugee shelter were genuine, warm and welcoming, it also exposed the political facets of pontifical-based interreligious dialogue that were rooted in the pursuit of power and prestige. In addition, it also showed that there is almost no space for non-elite laities who were also religious others in pontifical-based interreligious dialogue, save for a ritualized display of diversity.

7. Conclusions

It would take more than a year to be able to fully understand the multi-faceted realities of interreligious encounters in a city as religiously vibrant as Rome. In my short year living in Rome, I saw three patterns of interreligious dynamics that were present in the Eternal City. First, the dynamics within pontifical settings. These dynamics included large-scale events organized by the SCCID, the interreligious encounters and pedagogy at the St. Catherine and St. Augustine Universities, and interreligious encounters that took place within the Vatican’s circles of political influences, such as the monastery in which I lived. Formality, numbers (quantity instead of quality), and political interests governed interreligious dynamics within these pontifical settings. ‘Dialogue’, in this context, means handshakes, photo-ops, and conferences.

On the other hand, as centers of training for seminarians and priests from around the world, St. Catherine’s and St. Augustine’s approach to education have long-term ramifications into the formation of pastoral approaches that its students will use in the future. Therefore, when both universities presented religious differences in a defensive manner and wrapped them in thick narratives about the absolute supremacy and incommensurability of Catholicism relative to other religions, we should be worried about the ways in which those the students shall resultantly take on their missions.

The second pattern of interreligious dynamics can be seen both within extended pontifical circles and outside of them. It includes interreligious dialogue through monastic initiatives, interfaith initiatives at alternative spaces like the refugee shelter, and interreligious dialogue organized by lay Catholic organizations, such as the Focolare Movement and the Community of Sant Egidio. Though sometimes these were still influenced by strategic political interests, these dynamics were comprised of more casual interactions at the interpersonal level, with an overall goal of providing safe spaces for many vulnerable groups, and a relative absence of formal religious authority.

The third pattern of interreligious relations that I found in Rome can be seen from the relationship between Muslim civil society groups and communities with the pontifical circles. This dynamic is signified by two characteristics: first, the significant lack of serious engagement with Islam, Muslims, and Islamic studies in both pontifical universi-

ties. Second, there are elitist features of many Muslim–Christian dialogue initiatives. The first characteristic was most explicit in the number of Muslim faculty members both in St. Catherine and St. Augustine at that time (2–3 Muslim faculty members at St. Catherine and at St. Augustine). In addition to the low number of Muslim faculty members, discussions on Islam and Muslims in these universities were mostly framed by Orientalist and colonial perspectives. Fear-mongering titles such as “The Return of the Caliphate?” were commonly listed as topics for conferences that did not feature any Muslim experts as speakers. In other words, Islam was depicted as a violent religious tradition that represents everything that Catholicism is not. The scant presence of a few Muslim faculty members at St. Catherine did not necessarily influence the formation of narratives on Islam at the university.

My rituals of interreligious dialogue took place within these three dynamics as I navigated my day-to-day life in the Eternal City. There are two important facets in my practices of interreligious dialogue in Rome that coincided with major characteristics of emerging rituals: First, they were new regularities that were created to counter the established convention in undertaking interreligious dialogue in Rome. The scriptural reasoning forum, and the practice of interreligious prayers that eventually became monthly rituals in the monastery, were created as variants to the static of interreligious dialogue practices within pontifical circles. Second, my rituals also featured a combination of the practical and the symbolic that also represented the tension between individual and society in the practices of rituals. My ‘ritual of questioning’ that I practiced at the St. Catherine and St. Augustine Universities came from my experiences of discrimination and alienation, and from my personal efforts to embody Islamic virtues of speaking truth to power and social justice. My ‘ritual of questioning’ was at once an individualized, spiritual practice, and a practice of public religiosity that responded to the socio-political dynamics around me. Lastly, in one refugee shelter in Rome, I practiced a form of interreligious dialogue that was not aimed at deconstructing any established tradition, but rather at the creation of a safe space for those who were marginalized. In this context, where the demand of responding to various forms of harassment was absent, I found this to be the most genuine of interreligious encounters in Rome.

Several steps need to be taken before genuine interreligious dialogue can be carried out in Rome and the Vatican City: First, there has to be a major re-orientation in the ways that Catholic institutions (educational and non-educational) position themselves in relation with the religious others. A patronizing approach where the Catholic institutions see themselves as ‘teachers’ from whom the religious others must learn implies an unequal power relationship that is destructive to genuine interreligious dialogue. Second, it is imperative for the Catholic institutions to reflect on the widespread presence of racism, sexism, and Islamophobia in their bodies. Such reflection can be done by listening to and learning from the religious others about the alienating and violent implications that racism, sexism, and Islamophobia bring into interfaith relations. In this case, identifying and eliminating racism, sexism, and Islamophobia in the Catholic bodies will lead not only to a genuine interreligious dialogue, but also to a more honest engagement with the core Christian teachings of love and compassion. Last, there has to be an increase in representations of other religious traditions within the leadership and faculties of these Catholic institutions. Sufficient representations of other religious traditions will ensure that the discussions on religions other than Catholicism are conducted in a veritable manner, and that any biases will be critically interrogated. In addition, the presence of more than one or two people who represent other religious traditions within Catholic institutions will help form stronger coalitions that will hopefully correct the power imbalances found between the dominant Catholic discourses and other marginalized religious discourses. All of these steps necessitate an interreligious humility and openness from the Catholic institutions as the host of interreligious initiatives in Rome and the Vatican City.

In conclusion, those individualized emerging rituals were born out of self-reflective capacities in challenging the environment and were practiced on an individualized basis. Those emerging rituals also functioned as a critique to the practice of interreligious dia-

logue within pontifical circles, and hence provided a counter-narrative to the Church's institutionalized ritual of interreligious encounters. To expect the established, hegemonic ritual to change overnight is impossible, but the presence of disruption amidst invariance is crucial for interrogating the power that lies within a hegemonic tradition.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ Pseudonym.

² Pseudonym.

³ Anonymized.

⁴ Turner, Victor (1969: pp. 52–53) quoted by Saba Mahmood: “powerful drives and emotions associated with human physiology, especially the physiology of reproduction, are divested in the ritual process of their antisocial quality and attached to components of the normative order, energizing the latter with a borrowed vitality, and thus making the Durkheimian ‘obligatory’ desirable” (Mahmood 2001, p. 846).

⁵ This is especially clear from an Islamic perspective on motherhood as proposed by Kathryn Kueny: “Maternity exaggerates the porous nature of women, whose boundaries are penetrated by others from within and without, in the form of sperm, child, and even God. As a result of these incursions, a woman’s identity is no longer fixed but severed and fluid. The boundaries of her own body shift continuously to accommodate from one to two or even three sentient beings; . . . Upon giving birth, the contours of a mother’s physique again erode as they are scrutinized, penetrated, and breached by physicians, midwives, family, society, and the child itself.” (Kueny 2013, p. 2).

⁶ I used the term ‘body’ here in the Asadian sense where the role of the body in ritual is not necessarily to convey symbolic meaning, rather to be a ‘container’ of disciplinary effects of the ritual. This means, rather than trying to construct meanings in Islamophobic, racist, or sexist aggressive communal behaviors directed against me and Aisha, we need to understand these aggressive communal behaviors as a reflection of hierarchical and hegemonic religio-political authority in Rome that left almost no places for dissenting perspectives, and thus, for different behavior. See (Asad 1983).

⁷ Pseudonym.

⁸ It mostly refers to Benedict XVI’s “dictatorship of relativism,” namely, a phrase that he used to describe the most significant threat to modern life that is moral-spiritual ‘uncertainty’. In said settings, Benedict’s “dictatorship of relativism” is understood as relativizing the Absolute Truth of Catholicism and placing it in par with other religions. For a discussion on “dictatorship of relativism,” see (Vattimo 2007).

⁹ Pseudonym.

¹⁰ “Muslims as a whole are presumed guilty because they have failed to reform an inherently violent religion, to atone for the sins of their co-religionists, and to come to terms with their religion’s unique history of horrific violence.” (Green 2018).

References

- Asad, Talal. 1983. Notes on Body Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual. *Economy and Society* 12: 287–327. [CrossRef]
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Atay, Ahmet. 2021. Translation and Tango: Decolonizing Autoethnography. In *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Edited by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis. New York: Routledge, pp. 295–302.
- Baesler, E. James. 2017. Searching for the Divine: An Autoethnographic Account of Religious/Spiritual and Academic Influences on the Journey to Professor. *Communication and Theatre Arts Faculty Publications* 17: 92–112.
- Bell, Catherine. 2009. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method*. New York: Routledge.
- Eliastam, John. 2016. Interrupting Separateness, Disrupting Comfort: An Autoethnographic Account of Lived Religion, Ubuntu, and Spatial Justice. *Theological Studies* 72: 1–8. [CrossRef]
- Erdely, Jennifer L. 2018. Touring Religion, Touring Ritual: An Autoethnographic Search. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 7: 32–52. [CrossRef]
- Gerena, Carlos E. 2019. Conflict Between Religious Beliefs and Sexuality: An Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report* 24: 2297–308. [CrossRef]
- Green, Todd H. 2018. *Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn’t Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Grimes, Ronald L. 1992. Reinventing Ritual. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 75: 21–41.
- Haluza-DeLay, Randolph. 2008. Churches Engaging the Environment: An Autoethnography of Obstacles and Opportunities. *Human Ecology Review* 15: 71–81.

- Keating, Analouise. 2022. *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kueny, Kathryn M. 2013. *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lugones, María. 1992. On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay. *Hypatia* 7: 31–37. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mahmood, Saba. 2001. Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of “Ṣalāt”. *American Ethnologist* 28: 827–53. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Morsi, Yassir. 2021. Using “Auto-Ethnography” to Write about Racism. In *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Edited by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis. New York: Routledge, pp. 505–12.
- Ruparell, Tinu. 2013. Inter-Religious Dialogue and Interstitial Theology. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Edited by Catherine Cornille. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 117–32.
- Spry, Tami. 2001. Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry* 7: 706–32. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Vattimo, Gianni. 2007. A “Dictatorship of Relativism”? Symposium in Response to Cardinal Ratzinger’s Last Homily: Introduction: “Surtout Pas de Zèle”. *Common Knowledge* 13: 214–18. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zempi, Irene, and Imran Awan. 2021. Autoethnography. In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*. Edited by Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg. London: Routledge, pp. 154–63.
- Zine, Jasmin. 2006. Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School. *Equity and Excellence in Education* 39: 239–52. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.