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## **The Creative Process as Interfaith: How Contemporary Art Supports Interreligious Dialogue in Singapore**

*By Ali Hussain*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Contemporary art is a good example of Tinu Ruparell's notion of "interstitial interreligious dialogue", a means to engage and connect through the shared appreciation of art and the creative process. From Beethoven to one of Singapore's own patron saints, Habib Noh al-Habsyi, countless artists, visionaries and thinkers have emphasised the importance of the artistic channel as a medium to bring harmony to different communities of faith.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Nestled between Singapore's seaport, one of the busiest in the world, and the city-state's financial district, the shrine of Habib Noh al-Habsyi (d. 1866) sits close to the Fook Tet Soo Khek temple, one of Singapore's historical religious sites. This neighbourly post-mortem positioning pays homage to Habib Noh's own interreligious peacebuilding during his life. The Muslim saint is believed to have regularly attended Chinese opera performances in spite of the cultural and linguistic differences, explaining: "[I do not understand the language but receive spiritual insights from the performance](#)".

When I first came across this mesmerising story from Habib Noh's life, I was reminded of an exchange I had with the prominent Muslim intellectual Sayyid Hossein Nasr during his visit to my alma mater, University of Michigan. I asked him about the importance of mysticism for the masses, since many of the conversations surrounding this topic usually occur behind closed doors in the academy. He replied: "When people see a mountain, what attracts them is the summit. Only if the peak is attractive enough

will they struggle to climb the base of the mountain”. Creative art is the pinnacle, and interreligious dialogue the foundation of the same mountain.

In my own work in interfaith and interreligious dialogue, I have found contemporary art and the creative process to be akin to a siren song that one hears at the summit of these mountains. In conversations with Christian priests, Jewish rabbis and practitioners of Zen Buddhism, we have all agreed that there is a strong potency in art and creativity, even the contemporary secular kind, and its ability to translate key concepts in all the world’s religious and spiritual traditions, rendering these ideas in universal human terms.

Stated differently, this summit of interfaith and its accompanying siren song of interreligious dialogue is a good example of Tinu Ruparell’s “[interstitial theology](#)”, “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”. The two key-terms in this definition that hearken to art are “metaphor” and “creative”. In my own work, [A Nostalgic Remembrance: Sufism and the Breath of Creativity](#), I have alternately tethered creativity and the mystical experience as “making connections where none seem possible or exist” and “translating the ineffable into the intangible”.

As mentioned, I have found this role of art in interreligious dialogue to be true in my own interfaith work in the United States. We also find today many initiatives that explore this crucial importance of creativity in spiritual bridge-building. For instance, journalist Krista Tippett’s ground-breaking podcast [On Being](#) is a memoir of how countless artists in different genres are motivated to pursue their craft by faith or spirituality. More importantly, Tippett also excavates from her guests how art can help us coexist in a globalised world and solve generational trauma or social conflicts.

Similarly, we find YouTube channels like [Art21](#) and [Louisiana Channel](#) where artists from different ethnic and religious backgrounds converge in a secular space of contemporary art to describe their creative process in terms that are universally important in all of the world’s major religious and spiritual traditions. “[Witnessing](#)”, “[damage and repair](#)”, “[emotional intensity](#)” and “[genealogy](#)” are creative springs for such artists but also great prompts for interreligious dialogue between different communities of faith.

During workshops with American Muslim artists, I often challenge them to follow these examples and translate their faith or craft into some basic human emotions that are not confined to a particular religious language. The results of these exercises consistently show that art is uniquely conducive to interreligious dialogue precisely because, as Ruparell would concur, it inclines towards the metaphorical, not literal. Just as clashing strokes of red and blue augment the beauty of a painting, so does the canvas of art generally encourage embracing our differences as a sign of our collective imagination.

Returning to Habib Noh and his interreligious dialogue, this little-known bit of our history behoves us to seriously consider the rich creative landscape of this city-state as an entire site for interstitial inter-spiritual dialogue. While such conversations unfold

officially in mosques, temples or churches, they also occur as silent performances in places like the ArtScience Museum, where the question is asked: “[Can a building have a soul?](#)”. For it is this and other sites that constitute what Charles Taylor describes as the “[public sphere](#)” of the secular state where the tapestry of a “[social imaginary](#)” is weaved.

There is but a thin line between the ArtScience Museum, Marine Bay Sands or any of Singapore’s other architectural marvels and the great music of Beethoven or Mozart. For as Goethe once [said](#): “Music is liquid architecture and architecture is frozen music”. And just as Habib Noh received spiritual insight from a performance of Chinese opera, there can also be an unfolding of spiritual conversations and interreligious dialogue at the intersection of secular art.

Singapore is already leading the way internationally in interreligious dialogue initiatives, such as the International Conference on Cohesive Societies ([ICCS](#)), [Harmony Circle](#), the Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies ([SRP](#)) programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and others. But the city-state also hosts some of the most prominent art institutions and schools in the world, such as [LASALLE](#) college for the arts and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts ([NAFA](#)).

Creating spaces for artists from these prestigious institutions to come into conversation with leaders from religious and spiritual communities, as well as those who stand at the interstice, as both artists and devotees, can only further national harmony and emphasise the city-state’s unique place at the intersection of spirituality and creativity.

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