

UNICORNS AT THE EDGE Third Space as Transformative Encounter

Open Table Conference Workshop (60–75 Minutes)

Slide 1 – The Unicorn

Thirdspace – theologies of the pub, chaplaincy when David asked me

The more I explored these questions, the more the unicorn seemed an appropriate guide. Because every time I thought I had understood it, it disappeared again. Perhaps that is the nature of mystery. Perhaps that is the nature of God. Perhaps that is the nature of human beings.

Today I am not offering answers. I am inviting us into a search.

Slide 2 – Queer, Indecent, and the Edge

Before we explore the unicorn further, I want to acknowledge some of the thinkers whose ideas have shaped this journey.

This workshop sits at the intersection of queer theology, liberation theology, practical theology, chaplaincy, spirituality, and relational understandings of God. Definition and Purpose

Practical theology focuses on the application of theological insights to real-life situations, particularly within the context of church practices and societal issues. It seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing for a deeper understanding of how faith is lived out in everyday contexts.

According to John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, practical theology involves critical reflection on the practices of the Church as they engage with the world, ensuring that these practices align with God's intentions for redemption and renewal stephenbarkley.com+1.

Methodologies

Practical theology employs various methodologies, including qualitative research, to explore and understand the complexities of contemporary life. This discipline has evolved from a focus on clerical and parish work to a more interdisciplinary approach that incorporates insights from social sciences. It emphasizes the importance of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Practical theology also includes advocacy theology, such as the various [theologies of liberation](#) (of the oppressed in general, of the disenfranchised, of women, of immigrants, of children, queer theology, black theology and tribal theology). A theology of [relational care](#) has also been proposed as an approach to practical theology.^[9] T

Contextual Relevance: Practical theology is grounded in the contemporary material and embodied world, addressing the complexities of social realities and how they inform theological understanding

Interdisciplinary Engagement: It encourages collaboration between theology and other disciplines, fostering a mutual critical correlation that enriches both fields

Focus on Practice: The discipline emphasizes the importance of actual practices within the church and society, aiming to articulate faith in ways that are meaningful and relevant to people's lives

Among the voices that have particularly influenced this work are

Queer theology provides an important lens through which many of these conversations come together. Queer theology is not simply theology about LGBTQIA+ people.

At its best, queer theology asks what happens when fixed categories begin to break down.

It questions rigid boundaries. It resists easy binaries. It remains open to surprise, ambiguity, and transformation. It asks where God might be found when we move beyond the assumptions of the centre.

The indecent holy appears where these established categories begin to fail. When I speak about Third Space in this workshop, I am drawing primarily on the work of geographer **Edward Soja**.

This is different from what sociologists often call **third places** or **third spaces**—the everyday places that exist outside home and work, such as cafés, libraries, parks, pubs, community centres, or online communities.

These places can certainly become sites of connection and encounter, but that is not quite what Soja means.

For Soja, **Thirdspace** is not primarily a location. It is a way of understanding lived reality.

Soja describes three dimensions of space:

- **Firstspace** is the material world—the physical spaces we can see, map, and measure.
- **Secondspace** is the imagined world—the stories, beliefs, assumptions, ideologies, and meanings we attach to those spaces.
- **Thirdspace** emerges where these dimensions meet.

It is the lived, relational space where experience, imagination, identity, memory, power, and possibility interact.

Thirdspace is therefore not simply a place we go. It is something that happens. It is the space where fixed categories become unstable.

Where competing stories meet. Where new meanings emerge. Where transformation becomes possible.

A church hall can be a Firstspace. Our ideas about what church should be are Secondspace.

But when people from different backgrounds encounter one another, negotiate meaning, challenge assumptions, and create something new together, Thirdspace emerges.

In that sense, Thirdspace is not defined by geography. It is defined by encounter.

For this workshop, the unicorn becomes a symbol for those moments when we find ourselves in Thirdspace:

- between identities,
- between communities,
- between certainty and possibility,
- between what is and what might yet become.

Thirdspace is not merely a social or cultural concept. It can also become a spiritual concept—a way of recognising those liminal moments where encounter, Spirit, and transformation emerge at the edges of our ordinary categories.

Hunting for the unicorn is towards experiences those spaces where encounter, difference, Spirit, and transformation meet.

Slide 3 – What Is a Unicorn?

Invite participants to call out:

- words
- images
- stories
- memories
- associations

Capture responses.

Key insight:

Symbols remain powerful because they resist a single meaning.

Transition:

What if the unicorn is not a creature, but an archetype?

Slide 4 – Unicorns at the Edge

This session explores unicorns as an archetype for people and practices that live at the edges of institutions, identities, and communities.

Unicorns symbolise those who do not quite fit existing categories.

People who live:

- Between work and vocation
- Between sacred and secular life
- Between illness and recovery
- Between cultures and identities
- Between belonging and exclusion

These edge spaces are not simply in-between places.

They are sites of encounter.

- Sites of creativity.
- Sites of tension.
- Sites of transformation.
- Identity is never formed in isolation.

We discover who we are through our encounters with difference.

The unicorn becomes a symbol for those spaces where difference is not erased but engaged.

Slide 5 – The Third

Much of human life is organised through binaries:

Us and them, Sacred and secular, Church and world, Believer and unbeliever, Right and wrong, Insider and outsider

But we know life exists beyond the binary.

What possibilities emerge when we move beyond either/or thinking?

The unicorn becomes our third. A refusal to remain trapped in fixed categories. A movement toward imagination. Complexity. Possibility.

Perhaps we find our unicorn whenever our desires and longing refuse to let us remain where we are.

Slide 6 – Guides for the Journey

Three thinkers help illuminate life at the edges.

bell hooks – The Margin as Possibility

For bell hooks, the margin is not simply a place of exclusion. It can also become a place of insight. Creativity. Resistance. Transformation.

Those at the margins often see realities that those at the centre cannot.

Marcella Althaus-Reid – The Indecent Holy

Althaus-Reid asks difficult questions about belonging, power, and respectability.

- Who is excluded?
- Who must adapt to belong?
- Where might God already be present beyond our accepted boundaries?

The holy often appears where religion least expects it.

Fr Greg Boyle – Radical Kinship

Boyle imagines the Kingdom of God as a circle where nobody stands outside.

His challenge is simple: We do not go to the margins to save people.

We go so that people at the margins can transform us.

Reflection

Which of these ideas feels most familiar?

Which feels most challenging?

Slide 7 – Unicorn Others

Martin Buber helps us think about encounter.

I-It: We encounter others as categories. Functions. Roles. Objects.

I-Thou: We encounter others as subjects. As persons. As sacred encounters.

There is openness. Mutuality. Presence.

The Famous "Horse Story"

To illustrate the I-Thou connection, Buber often used a personal anecdote from his childhood, documented in his book *Between Man and Man*.

Buber describes stroking the mane of his favorite horse. Instead of just observing the animal as a massive, functional object (I-It), he experienced a profound, mutual awareness of life. He felt the "element of vitality itself" bordering his skin—the horse was palpably "Other," yet it confided in him and permitted the encounter. Buber described this as an elemental exchange of vitality that requires complete presence and openness. [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#), [\[3\]](#)

Key Takeaways from the Philosophy

- The "Eternal Thou": Buber posits that all genuine, fleeting I-Thou moments ultimately point toward the divine, or the "Eternal Thou," which he views as God. [\[1\]](#)
- The Transience: Buber acknowledged that we cannot live in a permanent state of I-Thou. Life inevitably requires practical I-It interactions to survive and function. The

tragedy and beauty of human life is that every I-Thou encounter eventually fades back into an I-It. [\[1, 2, 3\]](#)

Emmanuel Levinas pushes this further. The Other always exceeds our understanding. No matter how much we know about another person, they remain more than our interpretation of them. The Other cannot be possessed. Cannot be reduced. Cannot be fully understood.

Perhaps unicorn people are those who resist our categories and invite us into deeper encounter.

Reflection

- Who are the unicorn people in your life?
- Who has disrupted your assumptions?

Slide 9 – Where Are Your Edges?

Table Discussion

- Where do you experience life at the edge?
- Between work and vocation?
- Between faith and everyday life?
- Between illness and recovery?
- Between cultures or communities?
- Between belonging and exclusion?
- What have these spaces taught you?
- What possibilities have emerged there?

Slide 10 – Everyone Is Welcome?

Many communities say: "Everyone is welcome."

But what does that actually mean? Welcome into what?

And on whose terms?

Sometimes welcome hides an expectation.

You are welcome if:

- You become like us.
- You speak our language.
- You adopt our assumptions.
- You fit our norms.

What boundaries remain invisible?

What exclusions remain unspoken?

Slide 11 – The Margin Reveals

bell hooks argues that life at the margin offers a unique perspective. The margin allows people to see both the centre and the edge.

This perspective can reveal assumptions invisible to those with greater power.

This is not about romanticising marginality. It is about recognising that every perspective has limits.

The unicorn often appears at the edge of certainty.

Slide 12 – Is the Unicorn Holy?

Catherine LaCugna invites us to imagine God not as solitary power but as relationship.

The early church used:

- Perichoresis
- Mutual indwelling.
- The divine dance.

Relationship is not simply something God does. Relationship is who God is.

If relationship lies at the heart of reality itself, then encounter matters.

Slide 13 – Spirit Between Us

How do you imagine the Spirit?

What if Spirit is best understood as:

- Presence
- Possibility
- Emergence
- The living between

Spirit is not something we possess. Not something we control.

Yet sometimes in conversation, hospitality, creativity, reconciliation, truth-telling, and courage—something shifts. Something becomes possible.

The Christian tradition often names such moments Spirit.

Slide 14 – Holy Disorder

Transformation is not always gentle. Throughout Scripture the holy appears:

- In wildernesses
- Among strangers
- Through outsiders
- In uncertainty
- In disruption

Again and again, God appears where established boundaries begin to break down.

What if holiness is not always tidy?

What if the holy arrives through disruption?

Slide 15 – The Indecent Holy

Share a brief story from chaplaincy, ministry, recovery, or community life where grace appeared in an unexpected place.

Marcella Althaus-Reid asks:

What if we have confused holiness with decency?

Too often holiness has been imagined from the perspective of the centre.

- The respectable.
- The powerful.
- The acceptable.

Yet the Gospels tell a different story.

Again and again Jesus appears among those regarded as improper, the indecent.

- Unclean.
- Marginal.
- Suspicious.

The indecent holy is holiness appearing where respectable religion does not expect to find it.

Slide 16 – The Kindom Breaks In

Fr Greg Boyle describes the Kindom of God as radical kinship.

A circle where nobody stands outside.

Key themes:

- Radical kinship
- No daylight between us and them

- Compassion rather than fixing
- Mutual transformation

We do not go to the margins to rescue others.

We go to discover our shared humanity.

Slide 17 – The Kindom as Unicorn Space

What if the Kindom itself is Third Space?

Where:

- Outsiders become insiders
- Boundaries become porous
- Belonging expands
- Power is unsettled
- New possibilities emerge

The Kindom is not merely a destination.

It is a living possibility breaking into ordinary life.

A unicorn space.

Slide 18 – Eschatology as Edge: Hope, Becoming, and Queer Futures

The themes we have explored resonate deeply with queer theology. Queer theology challenges fixed endings. Fixed identities. Fixed boundaries.

It remains open to becoming. To emergence. To surprise.

Many Christians hear the word eschatology and think of endings. The end of time. The end of history. The final chapter.

But Jürgen Moltmann invites us to think differently. Christian hope is not about escaping the world.

Hope is participation in God's future already breaking into the present.

Catherine Keller develops this vision further. She challenges images of history moving toward a predetermined conclusion.

Instead, she speaks of an open future characterised by creativity, relationality, and emergence.

The future is not fixed. It remains open. Unfinished Becoming. The unknown is not threat. It is also the space where new possibilities emerge.

What if eschatology can therefore be understood as edge?

- The horizon where the known meets the unknown.

- The place where certainty gives way to possibility.
- The place where God's future interrupts the present.
- The edge is not where life finishes.
- The edge is where life happens.

The unicorn lives at the edge.

Always inviting us beyond what we already know. Always calling us toward what is still emerging.

Slide 19 – Searching for the Unicorn

Perhaps the unicorn is not an answer. Perhaps it is not a destination.

Perhaps it is simply a way of paying attention.

A way of noticing:

- Encounter
- Disruption
- Possibility
- Spirit
- Emergence
- Kinship
- The Holy

The invitation is not to have and to hold, to seduce or to capture the unicorn. The invitation is to keep looking.

- To remain curious.
- To remain open.
- To remain willing to be surprised.

Because the unicorn always seems to appear just beyond the edge of certainty.

And perhaps that is where transformation begins.

Slide 20 – Final Reflection and Sending

Reflection

- Who are your unicorn people?
- Where are your unicorn spaces?
- What assumptions are being disrupted?
- What possibilities are emerging?
- Where might Spirit already be at work?
- What edge are you being invited toward?

Sending

May we remain open to encounter.

May we welcome the unfamiliar.

May we recognise the holy at the edges.

May we have courage to search for unicorns.

Thank you.