INTRODUCTION: CORY WILLSON

There are many pressing issues facing Evangelicals in the West regarding interfaith dialogue, some of which were briefly introduced in the inaugural issue of this journal. In that issue we stated the following:

For many American Evangelicals the topic of interfaith dialogue is confusing and suspect at best and downright dangerous or wrong at worst. On all accounts they face numerous challenges when considering if and how to enter into the realm of interfaith work. Those seeking to enter the broader interfaith conversations find themselves up against a firmly engrained relativism. This places Evangelicals in an awkward position and leads many to believe that the entire field of work needs to be completely avoided, or perhaps reconfigured to look more like the already accepted mode of public discourse with other religious and ideological groups—that of the philosophic debate. Neither of these options is sufficient for Evangelical interactions with other religious groups. Within the American Evangelical traditions, there is a need for a robust biblical, theological, and missiological foundation to be established that will enable faithful and sustainable forms of creative and self-critical interfaith dialogue to be worked out within the community of faith.

In this third issue of Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue, the vision and values of this journal will be discussed. Most importantly, though, the kinds of conversations we seek to enter into and those we hope to initiate through our efforts will become evident. That being said, Richard J. Mouw's development of Martin Marty's notion of "convicted civility," in writing and in practice, has significantly influenced the editorial board members and informed the vision of this journal. Here we print an updated and expanded version of one of his articulations of convicted civility that has been influential among a generation of Evangelicals. In this article, Mouw argues that neither religious conviction nor civil living need to be sacrificed in genuine encounters with religious "others." Drawing on a robust biblical epistemology and theology of hospitality, he offers an insightful framework and helpful examples for how Christians can embody convicted civility as they cooperate with, learn from, and witness to persons of other religions.
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Convicted Civility & Interfaith Dialogue

BY RICHARD J. MOUW

Richard J. Mouw originally published his thoughts on convicted civility in his book *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, released in 1992. Here, courtesy of Richard J. Mouw and InterVarsity Press, we offer Dr. Mouw's recent development of these ideas as they relate to interfaith dialogue. Throughout the article, quotations from respected missiologists and theologians have been inserted, in order to bring Mouw's ideas into dialogue with contemporary and historic views on interfaith discourse.

“Knowing” a Religion

How should we respond to diverse religious perspectives? Do they bring opportunities that we should take advantage of?

Ari Goldman went to Harvard Divinity School to find answers to these questions. Goldman is a religion reporter for the *New York Times*. He is also an Orthodox Jew. In his engaging book *The Search for God at Harvard*, Goldman tells about the sabbatical leave he took in 1985 to study various religious perspectives at Harvard.

Goldman was thrown off guard when Professor Diana Eck started her first World Religions lecture with this declaration: “If you know one religion . . . you don’t know any.” Goldman had gone to Harvard thinking that he already knew one religion very well; he had been steeped in the teachings and traditions of Judaism. But Eck’s statement made a deep impression on him; he quotes it several times in his book. Clearly, he believes the time he spent studying other religions deepened his understanding of Orthodox Judaism.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Goldman’s book, but I am not quite as taken with Professor Eck’s declaration as he is. Indeed, my initial reaction was to reject her comment as a piece of intellectual arrogance. What can it possibly mean to say that one can “know” one religion only after one has studied many of them?

I know dozens of devout Christians who have never given any thought to the content of another religion—does this mean that they do not really “know” Christianity? My maternal grandmother was a deeply devout Christian. Her faith sustained her through many difficult trials in life, including the loss of a teenage son. She certainly could not talk very long about, say, the doctrine of the Trinity or the theories of the atonement, and she certainly knew absolutely nothing about any other religion—nor even about the teachings of other Christian denominations. But I was always impressed with her quiet faith in Christ and her devotion to the church. I have a hard time thinking that some 19-year-old undergrad who has earned an “A” grade in two college courses in comparative religions “knows” his own religious perspective better than my grandmother knew hers.

That was my instinctive response to Eck’s declaration—and, after reflection, I still think it’s a plausible reaction to her statement as it stands. Christian faith, properly understood, is a relationship to God. To know Christianity from the inside is to pray to God, and to read God’s Word, and to worship with other people who have come to know God through Jesus Christ. I don’t see how taking a course in Buddhism or animism could add anything to this foundational “knowing” of God. Saying “If you know only one religion then you don’t really know any” seems to me as confused as saying, “If you know only one set of parents then you don’t know any.”

But let me try to be a little more charitable toward Professor Eck, by following through on my parenting analogy. While it surely would be arrogant to say that you don’t really know your parents at all until you have compared them carefully to other parents, there is something to be said for exposure to what we might call “comparative parenting.”

Actually, it’s a very good thing that some experts study parents to understand the differences and similarities in the way parents and offspring relate to each other. These parenting studies often help ordinary people gain a healthier understanding of their own parent-child relationships. New parents find it very helpful to read parenting guides, which are based on studies of many different family settings. Adults who were abused by their parents need desperately to be reassured,
by people who know about families in general, that what they experienced was not “normal”—that they don’t have to feel guilty about the childhood hurts and fears that still keep cropping up in their lives. And for other people, it is encouraging simply to see that their experiences with parenthood are better than the run-of-the-mill. “Comparative parenting” exercises, then, can sometimes help us gain a better grasp of our own very personal parenting relationships. And the same holds for religion. It is surely too simplistic to say, “If you know only one religion then you don’t know any.” But it does make sense to say that exposure to other religions can deepen my understanding of my own faith commitment.

David Bosch

“Such language boils down to an admission that we do not have all the answers and are prepared to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge, that we regard our involvement in dialogue and mission as an adventure, are prepared to take risks, and are anticipating surprises as the Spirit guides us into fuller understanding. This is not opting for agnosticism, but for humility. It is, however, a bold humility—or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.”


Hospitable and the Religious Other

Meaningful exposure to other religious perspectives requires a form of spiritual hospitality. One of the best books on hospitality that I know of was written by Christine Pohl, who chose an apt title for her book on the subject: Making Room. That is just the right image. To show hospitality is to create space for the needs of others. We are being hospitable when we give weary ones a place to sleep, and when we make room at our tables for people to share our food.

As Christine Pohl also points out, though, the word “hospitality” has been robbed of its original core meaning in recent times. We talk much about the “hospitality industry,” referring thereby to “hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards.”1 True hospitality goes much deeper than an economic transaction. It is going beyond what is expected of us. True hospitality carries with it an element of vulnerability. When Jesus showed hospitality to people whose lifestyles and ideas he strongly opposed, it got him into trouble with the religious leaders of his own day: “The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners?’” (Luke 5:30). To be sure, those religious leaders were guilty of quite a bit of self-righteousness. But we can at least understand something of their concerns. When we show hospitality we are often taking some risks.

In extending hospitality to people, the notion of making room, of creating space, is often quite a literal thing. But it is also helpful to think about the benefits of making room in a metaphorical sense. Here, for example, is a passage from a
journal kept by Father Henri Nouwen, where he describes the ways in which his prayer life is a welcoming of thoughts and concerns into his consciousness:

(P)rayor is the only real way to clean my heart and to create new space. I am discovering how important that inner space is. When it is there it seems that I can receive many concerns of others. I can pray for many others and feel a very intimate relationship with them. There even seems to be room for the thousands of suffering people in prisons and in the deserts of North Africa. Sometimes I feel as if my heart expands from my parents traveling in Indonesia to my friends in Los Angeles and from the Chilean prisons to the parishes in Brooklyn. Now I know that it is not I who pray but the Spirit of God who prays in me... He himself prays in me and touches the whole world with his love right here and now. At those moments all questions about “the social relevance of prayer, etc.” seem dull and very unintelligent.²

It is this same kind of consciousness expanding, this metaphorical making room, that I want to apply to interreligious dialogue. This image does capture something of the vulnerability, the risk-taking character of intellectual activity. When we invite “the other” into our mental space, we are never quite sure how the encounter will go. But there are strong Christian reasons for inviting the ideas that come from others—even new and strange others—into our hearts and minds.

God’s Critique

Spiritual hospitality means also welcoming God’s gaze into our inner places. To be sure, “welcoming” may be too positive a term. I know that I don’t exactly welcome God’s gaze into my private places. Sincerely saying the psalmist’s “Search me, O God, and know my heart” (Psalm 139:23) is no easy thing.

It helps to know that the searching happens whether or not we give God permission. My favorite theologian, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Calvin, makes an important point when he tells us, at the very beginning of his great work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion, that “the knowledge of God and [knowledge of] ourselves” are “joined by so many bonds” that “which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.” This means, Calvin says, that we never truly know ourselves unless we have “first looked upon God’s face.” If we move through our days without contemplating the will of God, he says, we will be “quite content with our own righteousness.” But “once we begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power,” then what we thought was perfectly acceptable in ourselves “will prove itself the most miserable weakness.”¹

That fits the psalmist’s experience in Psalm 139. When he invites God to examine his innermost being, he is not thinking of himself as opening the window to his soul to the divine gaze. He knows that for God that window is always open. His invitation is in fact a submission, an acknowledgement of something that is already a fact. The most important thing in what the psalmist says is his request that God will “lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:24). We need to allow the divine gaze to teach us and lead us in new ways.

No spirituality of civility is adequate without self-critique—taking an honest look at our own motives and purposes. And this can only happen when we acknowledge that we desperately need God to reveal to us what is really going on in our inner being. And having begun to be instructed by looking to the will of God, we can also plead to be guided “in the way everlasting.”

Having noted the need for God’s critique and self-critique, how do we proceed in engaging in interreligious dialogue as a form of spiritual hospitality given the polarizing tendencies within Christianity?

Polarized Approaches

We Christians seem to be fond of polarizations. This propensity shows up in discussions about our approach to other religions. Some Christians emphasize evangelizing strategies that are heavily weighted toward explicit convictedness: present the message of the gospel and invite people to become Christians. Other Christians rely heavily on civility: engage in polite dialogue with people from other religious communities in the hope of promoting mutual understanding and cooperation.

The defenders of each of these approaches often don’t get along very well.

JOHAN HERMAN BAVINCK

“Every Christian knows that he is always apt to hide the truth by his own unrighteousness, and that only God’s grace has taught him to acknowledge and confess this as sin. With such humility the Church can give its testimony in the world of other religions. As I have said elsewhere, “As long as I laugh at what I regard as being foolish superstition in other religions, I look down upon the adherents of them.” Then “I have not yet found the key to his [the religious other’s] soul. As soon as I understand that what he does in a noticeably naive and childish manner, I also do and continue to do again and again in a different form; as soon as I actually stand next to him, I can in the name of Christ stand in opposition to him and convince him of sin, as Christ did with me and still does each day.”


The evangelizers accuse the dialoguers of sacrificing the gospel for religious relativism; they fear that the unique claims of Christianity will be bartered away in interreligious dialogue. The dialoguers respond by accusing the evangelizers of a religious imperialism that runs roughshod over the genuine insights that can be found in other religious traditions; they want to avoid a dogmatic spirit.

Do these two approaches need to be
treated as an either/or choice? Is it possible to see evangelism and dialogue as complementary activities? I’m inclined to look for some way of integrating the two emphases. Why can’t Christians engage in evangelization while at the same time hoping to gain new understanding through dialogue with other religions?

When “evangelism” and “dialogue” become the watchwords of two opposing camps, it leaves some of us very uncomfortable. For example, I find that the dialoguers often explain their approach in ways that leave me no choice but to stay out of their camp. Theologians representing the dialogue cause often do sound relativistic; some of them even insist that interreligious dialogue is an important phase in our “evolution” toward a new “global theology” to which various religions will contribute their particular “hypotheses” about ultimate reality.

I cannot accept a call to interreligious dialogue that rejects Christianity’s claims to uniqueness. And, frankly, I know Jews and Muslims who would also reject that approach. They do not want their claims to theological uniqueness reduced to mere “hypotheses” about spiritual things. There are genuine disagreements between the different religions. In the final analysis, the choice between religious perspectives has to do with mutually exclusive truth-claims about reality and goodness. No amount of dialogue will make these differences go away.

But this does not mean that I’m a consistently comfortable resident of the evangelizing camp. My fellow evangelizers do sometimes (and I stress the sometimes) tend toward dogmatism and imperialism—especially in reaction to the relativistic statements of many dialoguers. But that does not mean they’re right in rejecting dialogue altogether.

I want an evangelizing Christianity that is open to civil dialogue with non-Christians. So I look for ways of transcending these polarized positions. There is much to be gained from holding firmly to Christian truth-claims while genuinely engaging other people in serious discussion.

Transcending the Polarization

I work closely with Jewish organizations on projects having to do with religious liberty and other issues of public concern. A newspaper reporter once asked how I, an evangelical, could have such a close association with Judaism: “Don’t you evangelicals try to evangelize Jews?” I said that I do believe it’s important to share my faith in Jesus Christ with non-Christians, including Jewish people. But I also think it’s wrong, I told him, to treat Jews as nothing more than evangelistic prospects.

He quoted my comment in his news story, and when it was published, both Jews and Christians asked me to explain these remarks further. Understandably, each group focused on a different aspect of what I had said. I was glad for the chance to elaborate on the subject, since it is an important one.

I believe in evangelism. I want to talk about my faith in Jesus Christ with my Jewish friends, and I support ongoing efforts to communicate the gospel. I would be unfaithful to my evangelical convictions if I ignored the clear biblical call to present the evang—the good news that Jesus is the heaven-sent Son of God—to all people, including Jewish people.

But I also feel a strong need to listen to Jews. Even if I thought they were unwilling to listen to my views (which has not been my usual experience), I would still find conversation with them worthwhile. Jewish people have much to teach me about Judaism and about their perspec-
tives on the teachings and actions of the Christian community. They are also helpful allies in many aspects of the struggle for public righteousness. And parallel benefits can be gained from promoting better understanding of and cooperation with Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, and other religious communities.

The Value of Complementarity
It is important, I think, to value both evangelism and dialogue without reducing the one to the other. The two activities have a complementary relationship.

Indeed, dialogue can be an important strategy for evangelism—a fact that’s been recognized by evangelicals who call for “relational evangelism.” In many situations, the best way to evangelize essentially dialogic in nature.

That is good and noble. But it’s important that all dialogue with persons of other religious groups not be merely a strategy for evangelism. We mustn’t set these relationships up in such a way that our efforts will be a failure if the relationships don’t develop into evangelistic opportunities.

Francis Schaeffer, a Christian leader who did much to foster the idea of a more intellectually reflective evangelicalism, talked often about the importance of “co-belligerency.” By that he meant that we should find ways of cooperating with people of other faith-perspectives in working for the common good. This would mean, he insisted, we would form ad hoc alliances—working with one group on this cause and with another on a different cause. Interreligious understanding is a helpful means to gain the appropriate information and sensitivities to seek out that kind of cooperation.

The Islamic Challenge
“9/11 changed everything.” That is said so much that to repeat it comes across as a cliché. The problem, though, is that it isn’t true. The horrible events of September 11, 2001, did shock us, and for a while it looked like it might have a permanent effect on the American mood. But we seem to have slipped back as a culture into many of our old attitudes and habits.

What did change permanently as a result of 9/11, though, is our perspective on Islam. Suddenly what had been experienced as a fairly abstract set of issues about religious differences—or when concrete, they were issues for other parts of the world—have become very personal and local for many of us.

In the past — prior to the events of 9/11 — I had approached my discussions with Muslim leaders in a fairly relaxed fashion. I even felt a kind of kinship with them. As a Calvinist I have a lofty view of God’s sovereign power, and I could affirm certain theological parallels between my theological understanding of the deity and that of my Muslim counterparts. And as a person who worries much about what is happening in our secularized culture, I have even been able to express some admiration for the ways Muslims in the United States have resisted many of the things in that culture that I also want to resist.

There was always, of course, the all-important question of who Jesus Christ is. But here too I often felt a kinship of sorts. My Muslim friends have always insisted on expressing their great appreciation for Jesus of Nazareth, pointing to the fact that their holy book itself sees him

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The Stories We Tell Ourselves and Each Other

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the president of Indonesia, wrote an interesting article in a special issue of The Economist on how Muslim countries and the West can live in harmony in the twenty-first century. What is most significant about President Yudhoyono’s article is his attempt to re-narrate how people in Muslim countries view Westerners and how Western societies view Islam. Similar to how the former leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1980s and 1990s had to tell a new story in which the national “others” were no longer enemies but rather strategic economic partners, Yudhoyono argues that Muslim nations and Western nations must find a way to help people re-see those formerly viewed as “threats” now as partners against the real enemies of climate change and terrorism. The key elements in this retelling of present reality for Yudhoyono are to be found in religious and cultural education and appreciation at the grassroots level, increased cooperation and understanding at the national levels, and ensuring that economic benefits reach all civilizations.1

It could be argued that a similar type of re-narration concerning religious “others” is needed within Western Evangelicalism today. In some sectors of Christianity, society is portrayed as a battleground in which the Christian faithful must wage war against God’s enemies. While “battle” language is used in some biblical texts, it certainly is not the proper metaphor that should be used in shaping Christian witness in society, especially for how Christians should understand people of other religions. As Paul reminds us, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood...” (Ephesians 6:12). Certainly Jesus’s discussion in Luke 10 of the good religious “other,” the Samaritan, should cause us to re-think our use of enemy language.

Yet even those Evangelicals who do not subscribe to the enemy mentality still struggle to find ways of living in religiously pluralistic societies.

Richard Mouw’s articulation of convicted civility is a timely word in helping Western Evangelicals re-narrate the story of what Christian witness amidst diversity should look like, and how we can develop better ways of seeing and relating to our religiously diverse neighbors. While much more needs to be said in the discussion of faithful Christian witness amidst religious pluralism, a robust embodiment of convicted civility is essential in avoiding the many polarized approaches that fail to embrace one aspect or the other in biblical tensions. Such tensions include dialogue and evangelism, humility and boldness, proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, and finding common ground for interreligious collaboration in seeking the welfare of society while maintaining religious distinctives.

These new global realities present numerous challenges and opportunities, threats and possibilities about which Evangelical Christians need to be thinking critically if we are to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus and sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work around the world today. As an editorial board, we feel it is important at this point in our first year of publication that we explain the core values of Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue and the space for dialogue that we hope to create with this journal.

Creating space for new Evangelical approaches to interfaith dialogue to be pioneered, drawing on a robust biblical, theological, missiological, and psychological foundation.

Each domain of Christian scholarship has a role to play in these discussions, and none will be excluded. The missiologist’s insights into culture and contextualization of the gospel, the psychologist’s study of moral exemplars and attention to the holistic formation of persons, and the theologian’s and philosopher’s focus on worldview, epistemology, and metaphysics all are important voices that need to be interacted with. Breaking down silos that separate various academic disciplines is as important as bridging the praxis-theory divide discussed above.

This journal seeks out Christian voices that can help us actively seek integration and collaboration across disciplines.

Wrestling together publicly and as a community on the challenges, opportunities, and dangers of engaging in interfaith dialogue.

While an important editorial assumption is that interfaith dialogue is not optional for faithful Evangelical witness, we seek to include Evangelical voices that come from inclusivist and exclusivist perspectives. While the space we seek to create is for an in-house Evangelical dialogue, we will not be closed off to listening to any member of society or the Christian community. Knowing that the prophet Jonah received a rebuke from pagan sailors and Balaam a rebuke from a donkey, we Evangelicals would do well to listen to critiques not only from within our community, but those outside as well.

This journal seeks to listen closely to the voices and trends in our societies that are having a significant role in shaping the ways in which society thinks about religion and life.

Grounding interfaith dialogue in the missio Dei.

If interfaith dialogue is to move beyond a peripheral activity within mainstream Evangelicalism, and if all Evangelicals are to be trained in faithful, effective, and informed interreligious interactions, we must emphasize the ways dialogue is firmly grounded in the larger mission of God. The mission of God, missio Dei, is the basis of Christian life and mission. Jesus is a key hermeneutical lens through which we understand God’s mission and his call to proclaim the good news of the gospel. This emphasis on Christ in understanding the missio Dei is essential for holding together evangelism and dialogue. In the ministry of Jesus, faithfulness to God’s mission was embodied in such a way that each person was treated with love and dignity, not simply as objects in need of conversion. Thus, to insist on dialogue to the neglect of evangelism, or to opt for evangelism over against dialogue, is to miss an essential part of faithfulness to Jesus and God’s mission.

This journal will seek Christian voices that express arguments for the ways in which Evangelicals should conceive of this essential relationship between dialogue, evangelism, and mission.

Beginning to heal the divisions within Evangelicalism between mission and dialogue by articulating the missiological guidelines for dialogue.

Grounding dialogue in the mission of God is an important place to begin. However, we must also be pastoral in our approach to how this growth and change takes place within the larger Evangelical community. We must not proceed too quickly and alienate those within the community who have sincere and honest questions and objections to our work. This requires us to listen and speak to the underlying fears and questions posed to us by sincere and honest inquirers. It also requires us to provide models and examples of how various approaches to dialogue are taking place and can take place today.

This journal seeks Christian voices that speak honestly about the real challenges and dangers of engaging in interfaith work, and will bring together stories of faithful and creative interreligious experiences from around the globe and throughout Church history.

That instinctive response on my part was based on a realization that the 9/11 destruction we were witnessing was an important teaching moment. To be sure, the lessons were much bigger than simply an exercise in interreligious understanding. But there were also significant interreligious issues at stake. Dialogue with Muslims was no longer something we did “below the radar screen.” We now needed to talk openly to our fellow Christians, and other citizens, about our understanding of Islam as a social-political presence in the world at large and in American life in particular.

And we needed to give a show of support for our Muslim friends. What had previously been a conversation that focused on the nature of God and the way to salvation now had to take on a focus on violence, peacemaking and citizenship. And it also meant that many of us in the Christian world had to make the case to our fellow Christians that global Islam is a complex phenomenon, with many different “denominations”—that not all Muslims line up with Osama bin Laden.

Muslim leaders in the United States were criticized by many in the wake of 9/11 for not offering a bold condemnation of the horrible deeds of 9/11. Those of us who stayed in conversation with them understood the caution on their part. While our Muslim friends were deeply distraught by the events of 9/11, they were not sure how best to speak to the issues. What might come across as a formal statement of condemnation to the American public might well be seen as the sort of betrayal that would elicit reprisals against their own people from Muslim extremists. How should the case for Muslim peacemaking be made? How best can the complex views about Islam and societal pluralism be set forth?

I have wished that Muslim leaders in the United States had quickly spoken out with a condemnation of the acts of terrorism. But I also came to understand their sense of caution. They wanted to say something substantive on the subject, but at the same time they were fearful for their own people. They were genuinely worried that speaking out could bring acts of reprisal against innocent Muslims from the advocates of violence in the Islamic community.

What did happen as a result of 9/11 was a new sort of dialogue that focuses on issues of violence and love, peace, and interreligious understanding. The seminary that I lead successfully applied for a major grant from the United States Justice Department to engage in discussions with Muslim leaders, both nationally and internationally. The kind of results that we achieved, along with other dialogues of a similar nature, were highlighted in a very public way by a strong statement issued by 38 Muslim scholars from around the world—in a document addressed, on October 13, 2006, to Christians: “A Common Word Between Us and You.” This statement, which details what the Muslim leaders see as teachings that they share with Christians, has led to continuing conversations. The basic concerns of that lengthy document are captured nicely in these comments:

Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no
minimising some of their formal differences—it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament.

...So let our differences not cause hatred and strive between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.¹

Not a bad basis for interreligious dialogue and cooperation in general!

Talking About Religion Proper

Now we should consider some important questions. Except for evangelistic purposes, is it really worth our while to attempt dialogue about God and human nature and salvation? How can a true Christian have genuine “dialogue” with a Muslim on spiritual topics? Doesn’t a commitment to dialogue mean that I’m willing to follow the conversation wherever it leads, even if it means changing my basic convictions? How could I ever agree to that kind of process?

These are not cranky questions. They express important concerns. I have to admit it: if entering into dialogue with Muslims means that I must be willing to set aside my belief in the uniquely redemptive work of Christ, then I cannot do it. For me that is one of several non-negotiable convictions.

What, then, can dialogue teach us about spiritual matters? “All truth is God’s truth” is a venerable affirmation of the Christian tradition. And the mainstream of that tradition has never meant by this that spiritual truth is limited to what is explicitly taught in the Bible. As God’s Word, the Bible is a direct source of truth. But it also helps us test claims to truth that come to us from other sources. Consider how the French mystic Simone Weil described the Christian’s search for truth: “Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.”²

I find this comment intriguing. I also have to admit that Weil’s way of putting the point makes me a little nervous. I balk at her suggestion that Christ wants us to value truth more than we value him. But I also know that Simone Weil never meant to suggest that we should not be totally committed to Christ. Her writings are rich expressions of deep devotion to her Lord.

What Weil is pointing to, I think, is the need to have such a total trust in Christ that we are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it leads us. He is “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9). Jesus is the Truth. We do not have to be afraid, then, to enter into dialogue with people from other religious traditions. If we find truth in what they say, we must step out in faith to reach for it—Jesus’s arms will be there to catch us!

Interreligious dialogue, then, can be an activity that we Christians undertake in Christ. The apostle Paul proclaims an important truth when he tells the Colossians that in Christ “all things hold together” (Col 1:17). The Son of God also holds the “all things” of other religions together. His Spirit is everywhere at work. No religious conversation can address matters that take place outside of his sovereign rule.

I cannot put my faith in Christ as Savior on the negotiating table in my discussions with other religionists. But I can come to the conversation with a genuine openness to learning new things about the scope of Christ’s “hidden” authority and power. And these lessons can in turn reveal to us new things about others and about ourselves. Mark Heim makes this point well:

[T]he better we know [other] faiths from the inside, the better we will sense where in a deep sense we can affirm them and where in our dialogue we must speak critically, as we are willing to listen. We must be very sensitive to their understandings of us, for they will teach us where we, within the supposed security of the way and truth and life, are in fact moving away from the very God we confess and proclaim.³

Asking Questions

I once heard an African Christian leader tell what it had been like for him to turn away from animistic religion to embrace Christ. “There were many things in my tribe’s religious stories that prepared me for the gospel. When I first heard the story of Jesus, it did not strike me as a completely new and strange thing. What I said to myself was, ‘Aha! So that is the answer!’”

This man first experienced Christ as the answer to questions that he had long been asking from within the framework of another religion. This should not surprise us. St. Augustine’s oft-quoted prayer expresses a profound fact about the human condition: our hearts are restless until they rest in God. The spiritual restlessness that characterizes the human quest can find fulfillment only in Christ. Interreligious dialogue can be an important way for us to understand
better the ways in which our human restlessness is expressed in different religious settings.

Bishop Stephen Neill was a great missionary-theologian who spent many decades in India. He passionately pursued interreligious dialogue, but always out of a deep conviction that Jesus is the only true Savior of humankind. His comments about Hindu-Christian relationships highlight the importance of interreligious conversations in which we probe together the questions, and the answers, that shape our lives:

[T]he Christian task is to live out the life of Jesus Christ before the eyes of [others]. They cannot see him. They will not see him, unless they can see him in the lives of his followers. If Christians are as different from others as they ought to be, questions may arise in the minds of those who watch them. This may give the Christian the opportunity to sharpen up these questions in the enquiring mind, to suggest that perhaps the answers to such questions as are given in the Hindu system are not entirely satisfactory, and lovingly point those who are willing to listen to the one in whom all human questions can receive their all-sufficient answer, the Lord Jesus Christ.7

Praxis: Dr. C. Douglas McConnell
Mutual Understanding and Collaboration: A Case Study in Muslim-Evangelical Dialogue
This paper was prepared by Dr. C. Douglas McConnell for the Fourth Forum for Al-Azhar Graduates, held in Cairo, Egypt, June 28-30, 2009.

Introduction: An Antidote to Stereotypes

We live in very turbulent times. Technology has given voice to everyone, the wise as well as the ignorant. No longer can we assume that the influence of the academy has a premier role in shaping public opinion. It is, therefore, time for reasoned voices to speak out using the available media to engage those whose rhetoric incites hatred and perpetuates stereotypes. As Scripture says, “Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor” (Deuteronomy 5:20).

In the past several years, there have been a number of encouraging moves toward greater mutual understanding, as exemplified by the October 2007 letter “A Common Word Between Us and You.” Building on this important step, those in attendance at the “Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims” conference at Yale University in July 2008 affirmed that:

Muslims and Christians affirm the unity and absoluteness of God. We recognize that God’s merciful love is infinite, eternal and embraces all things. This love is central to both our religions and is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic heritage.1

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Dr. Richard J. Mouw is president of Fuller Theological Seminary and Professor of Christian Philosophy. As an Evangelical leader, Dr. Mouw has been active in pioneering interfaith dialogues with Jews, Latter-Day Saints, and Muslims.

Peter Riddell takes a multilayered approach in his exploration of Christian attitudes and actions toward other faiths, specifically highlighting Islam. His overarching question of the why behind the acute need for Christians and Muslims to work on their relationship is not merely an isolated theological discussion; rather, Riddell takes into account implications of globalization and the different views held therein by Muslims and Christians, current trends in immigration, and the resulting macropolitical, micropolitical, and social realities. Although the book is set in a British context, Riddell's honest appraisal of the issues in a pluralistic society are applicable to the questions currently being asked in the United States and other Western nations.

Although the scope of this book highlights political and social issues, providing a wide survey of both Christian and Muslim points of view, Riddell uses a four-part biblical framework with which to root his discussion on interfaith relations: God's universal blessing to Abraham, the people's rejection of this blessing, the centrality of faith found in Christ, and a dispersal of the message. Riddell addresses the various currents that are influencing Christian attitudes toward other faiths, diverse Muslim attitudes toward the West and globalization, and the various Christian responses to those of other faiths, ranging from Catholic expressions to Evangelical. Finally, Riddell explores different types of reasons for dialogue and raises pertinent questions addressing the issues emerging from his previous discussion.

Through his discussion, Riddell does not shy away from raising charged issues, even arguing that the West's postcolonial guilt often prevents an honest and critical engagement with the issues at hand. The penetrating questions raised in the final section of the book confront a multitude of issues, ranging from sociopolitical to understanding the Qur'anic view of violence. This multidimensional approach is partly the strength of this book: its extensive, sweeping framework allows one to grasp the numerous factors that play into both the problems and potentials of Muslim and Christian relationships in Britain. In addition, Riddell's inclusion of multiple streams of Christian responses to other faiths provides a wealth of resources and tools. It is with this foundation that he bridges the theoretical and conceptual to the practical, raising questions that anyone might ask while living day-to-day in a pluralistic society. As such, it is a valuable book for scholars, students, and laypeople to begin understanding and assessing the range and complexity of the issues. However, although its questions are penetrating, the responses, because of space limitations, are somewhat limited in depth. Therefore, this book should serve as an introduction as well as a roadmap for questions that need to be further researched and evaluated.

Riddell's book highlights an important concept in interfaith dialogue. In a post-9/11 world, we must be careful not to divorce theological conversation from the sociocultural contexts where it is being expressed. If religion is always expressed uniquely in the culture in which it finds itself, if cultures are dynamic and fluid, and if forces of globalization and immigration are changing specific sociopolitical contexts, then interfaith dialogue must engage these realities. As Riddell notes, “Western society seems to have advanced in its perception of the complexity of the world, but has also developed a growing reluctance to evaluate that complexity” (202). Riddell's critical observations and experiences, although set in a British context, raise a host of pertinent questions and issues for Evangelicals in America. Just as Riddell is not afraid of the hard questions facing Christians in Britain, neither should we be.
mitted Christian people who live in the West, their faith is more often in contradiction to the mores and norms of western society. This is particularly true of Evangelical Christians, despite the fact that our social conservatism is so often the majority opinion.

By way of further clarification, while it is true that the majority in the West claim to be Christians, this is in no way a majority of Christians worldwide. For example, in an annual statistical overview of global Christianity, it was reported that there are 447 million Christians in the continent of Africa and 366 million throughout Asia, as compared to 221 million Christians in North America. The projection is that 42% of global Christians will live in Africa and Asia by the year 2025. Therefore, any serious conversation regarding Christianity must include the voices of Christians from the majority world.

In defining Evangelicalism, Pierard and Elwell describe it as “The movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency.” Evangelicalism is characterized by obedience to the basic tenets or fundamentals of the faith. While the term “fundamentalism” is primarily used in a pejorative sense today, it represents an important aspect of what it means to be an Evangelical. The Evangelical fundamentals are the unifying beliefs that tie together such a disparate group from among the Christian traditions. As Evangelicals, we hold tenaciously to “the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ” and its commands. At Fuller Seminary, our view of global Christianity, it was reported that there are 447 million Christians in the continent of Africa and 366 million throughout Asia, as compared to 221 million Christians in North America. The projection is that 42% of global Christians will live in Africa and Asia by the year 2025. Therefore, any serious conversation regarding Christianity must include the voices of Christians from the majority world.

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“Mission Beyond the Mission” expresses it this way:

Simply stated, the commands to which we respond are these:
1. Go and make disciples;
2. Call the church of Christ to renewal;
3. Work for the moral health of society;
4. Seek peace and justice in the world; and
5. Uphold the truth of God’s revelation.

As is apparent in these five statements, we continue to live with the contrasts of scholarship and activism.

Fuller Theological Seminary: A Case Study in Convicted Civility

An important area of scholarly focus at Fuller Seminary is in response to commands one and four, which call us to go and make disciples of Christ and to seek peace and justice in the world. In obedience, we hold together our evangelical beliefs and our social activism. Our faith is a missionary faith, proclaiming as stated in Article 5 in Fuller’s Statement of Faith, “The only mediator between God and humankind is Christ Jesus our Lord, God’s eternal son.” Equally, we are committed to obeying the whole gospel of Jesus Christ—clearly stated in Article 9—“by striving for social justice, and by relieving human distress and need.”

A helpful perspective for managing the tension is found in President Mouw’s book entitled Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World. Mouw identifies the core problem facing people of strong convictions.

It is not enough merely to reclaim civility. We need to cultivate a civility that does not play fast and loose with the truth ... to find a way of combining a civil outlook with a “passionate intensity” about our convictions. The real challenge is to come up with a convicted civility.

In applying the concept of convicted civility, our seminary community has formally engaged in dialogues that focus on the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism and Islam—and on groups from which we as Evangelicals have either come—Catholics—or those who have come from us—Mormons. Although we affirm the engagement in dialogue with these and other faith communities, we do so with a strong sense of conviction to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith and to the evangelistic mandate.

Growing out of these commitments to evangelism and dialogue, members of the Fuller Seminary community are involved in a range of activities with Muslim scholars and clerics to create and sustain a civil society, thereby exemplifying “convicted civility.” An important example of this engagement was the Conflict Transformation Program of Dialogue with Muslims and Evangelical Christians sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice. The convening groups were Fuller Theological Seminary, Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, and the Islamic Society of North America. The dialogue began with consultations in April 2005 and April 2006, leading to a collaboration over “three years in a two-level project—scholarly and practitioner levels—to seek common practices, patterns, and pathways for conflict reduction, resolution, and transformation between faiths as well as to learn how to better resolve differences within our individual faiths.” The recent publication of Peace-Building by, between, and beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians, edited by Professors Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburger, is a wonderful example of the kind of collaboration that is possible.

A second example of commitment is Fuller Theological Seminary’s willingness to be a prominent signatory of the Yale declaration published on November 18, 2007, in the New York Times as “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You.’” Building on this commitment to a serious Muslim-Christian dialogue was the attendance of five Fuller Seminary professors at a conference on dialogue at Yale University, on July 28 to 31, 2008, which included a plenary presentation by Dr. Martin Accad of Fuller.
This conference, which grew out of the historic document “A Common Word,” is another significant step, as together we embrace the goal of seeking peace and justice in the troubled world in which our two faith traditions constitute one-half of the population. Along with the Yale Conference delegates, Fuller Seminary affirms:

We Christian and Muslim participants meeting together at Yale for this historic A Common Word conference denounce and deplore threats made against those who engage in interfaith dialogue. Dialogue is not a departure from faith; it is a legitimate means of expression and an essential tool in the quest for the common good.11

Further building on our commitment, Fuller Seminary hosted the Third Evangelical Christian-Muslim Consultation: Common Word between Us and You, held April 16 to 19, 2009. The gathering included more than 40 Christian and Muslim scholars and clerics. The hope of the conference organizers, summarized by Dr. Mahmoud Ayoub, scholar in residence at Hartford (Connecticut) Seminary, was that it “would lead to increased peace between the two communities and, eventually, increased peace in the world.”12 Professor Don Wagner, a conference organizer, reflected on the realization of their hope by observing that “one of the Imams affirmed [that,] despite our obvious differences, we reached a deeper level of community.”13

Beyond the commitment to formal interfaith dialogue with Muslims, members of the Fuller Seminary faculty are actively publishing and teaching in areas that build on our obedience to the commands of Jesus as expressed in Fuller’s Mission Beyond the Mission statements 3 and 4. Two books are particularly noteworthy. The first is Professor Glen Stassen’s 2008 book Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War. Building on his earlier work, which outlines ten practices for abolishing war, Stassen brings together a number of scholars to address issues of politics, society, economics, and faith. The second book, Resources for Peacemaking in Muslim-Christian Relations: Contributions from the Conflict Transformation Project, edited by J. Dudley Woodberry and Robin Baselin, was published in 2006. Professor Woodberry brought together the work of six students who participated in the Conflict Transformation Project, providing helpful insights into the changing views of students who engage in dialogue alongside their professors.

A Key Element in Interfaith Dialogue: The “Dialogue of Life”

In preparing this paper, I was reminded of the observation by Archbishop Marcellino Zago that as an essential part of our approach to dialogue, we must embrace the “dialogue of life.”14 By this Zago incorporates the relational engagements that go beyond the exchange of ideas to a commitment to intentionally ... get to know one another as human beings, as neighbors, and as fellow citizens.15 This must also go beyond the relational opportunities of us as delegates to our families and our communities.

A story shared by Fuller Professor Jim Butler illustrates the “dialogue of life” in the actions of people near his home in Claremont, California in the months after September 11, 2001.16 Churches organized a number of events in support of Muslims, including interfaith services, hosting Islamic speakers to educate church members on Islam, and shared meals. A particularly touching response is related by Jerry Irish, a member of Claremont Presbyterian Church: “Adult community members organized to provide a daily presence around the City of Knowledge School, a local Muslim institution, to ensure the safety of its staff and students in the weeks following 9/11.”17

On a personal level, the “dialogue of life” can be illustrated beyond the interaction in the plenary addresses, panel discussions, and responses at a formal interfaith dialogue gathering. One evening, as delegates of the Yale Conference, we were taken by bus to an old Connecticut farm, where blueberries, peaches, and other crops were grown. Before our dinner together, we were invited to go into the orchards to pick fruit. This simple activity of life afforded us the opportunity to meet one another and enjoy a slice of life together. It was followed by a wonderful buffet dinner that continued to foster our interaction.

During the evening, I met the Honorable Professor Dr. Sallama Shaker, Deputy Foreign Minister for the Americas, Arab Republic of Egypt. Professor Shaker introduced the world of foreign diplomacy from the perspective of an Arab state in a way that purged my thinking of media generated stereotypes. In one evening of simple recreation, my life was impacted by her warmth and intellect as she shared stories that deepened my understanding. A further outcome of our relationship was the invitation to participate in this important conference sponsored by Al-Azhar University.

It is precisely this type of positive interaction that lies at the heart of Zago’s concept of the dialogue of life. To limit the dialogue to those who are skilled in communication and highly educated in their faith traditions is to seriously miss an important aspect of dialogue. We as thought leaders within our faith traditions are called together by our shared humanity to break down the barriers of hatred and bigotry that plague the world. If this is to move from theory to practice, we must be willing to risk exclusion for the sake of our embrace. In this, we will truly honor the common word among us.

As it is written in the Bible,

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with
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all your mind. “This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

In obedience to these commands, Fuller Theological Seminary is exploring what it means to love our neighbor, while respecting our differences as well as our commonalities. To truly love means to embrace others with civility while holding to the convictions of our faith. In concluding his inaugural address, Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw provided an important insight into what has become a guiding principle for our interfaith dialogues:

We are a people who believe strongly in naming the Savior’s name and witnessing to his power to transform lives. It cannot be otherwise.

But we would do well also to emphasize the importance of being emissaries of God’s gentle guidance. I am convinced that this emphasis is especially important in our time. It is my deep hope that the evangelical movement can consciously move into a new dispensation of Christian gentleness, and I sincerely pray that Fuller Seminary can have a role in making that happen."

I hope that our future interactions will be characterized by the gentle guidance of the Living God.

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1 Joint statement of the attendees at the “Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims” conference at Yale University, July 28-31, 2008.
7 Ibid.
10 Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburger, Editors, Peace-Building by, between, and beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), xii.
12 Quoted from press release for the Third Evangelical Christian-Muslim Consultation: Common Word Between Us and You.
13 Personal correspondence from Professor Donald E. Wagner, North Park Seminary, sent April 20, 2009.
15 Ibid.
16 Personal correspondence from Professor Jim Butler, Fuller Theological Seminary, sent June 20 and June 26, 2009.
18 Matthew 22:36-40, NRSV.

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