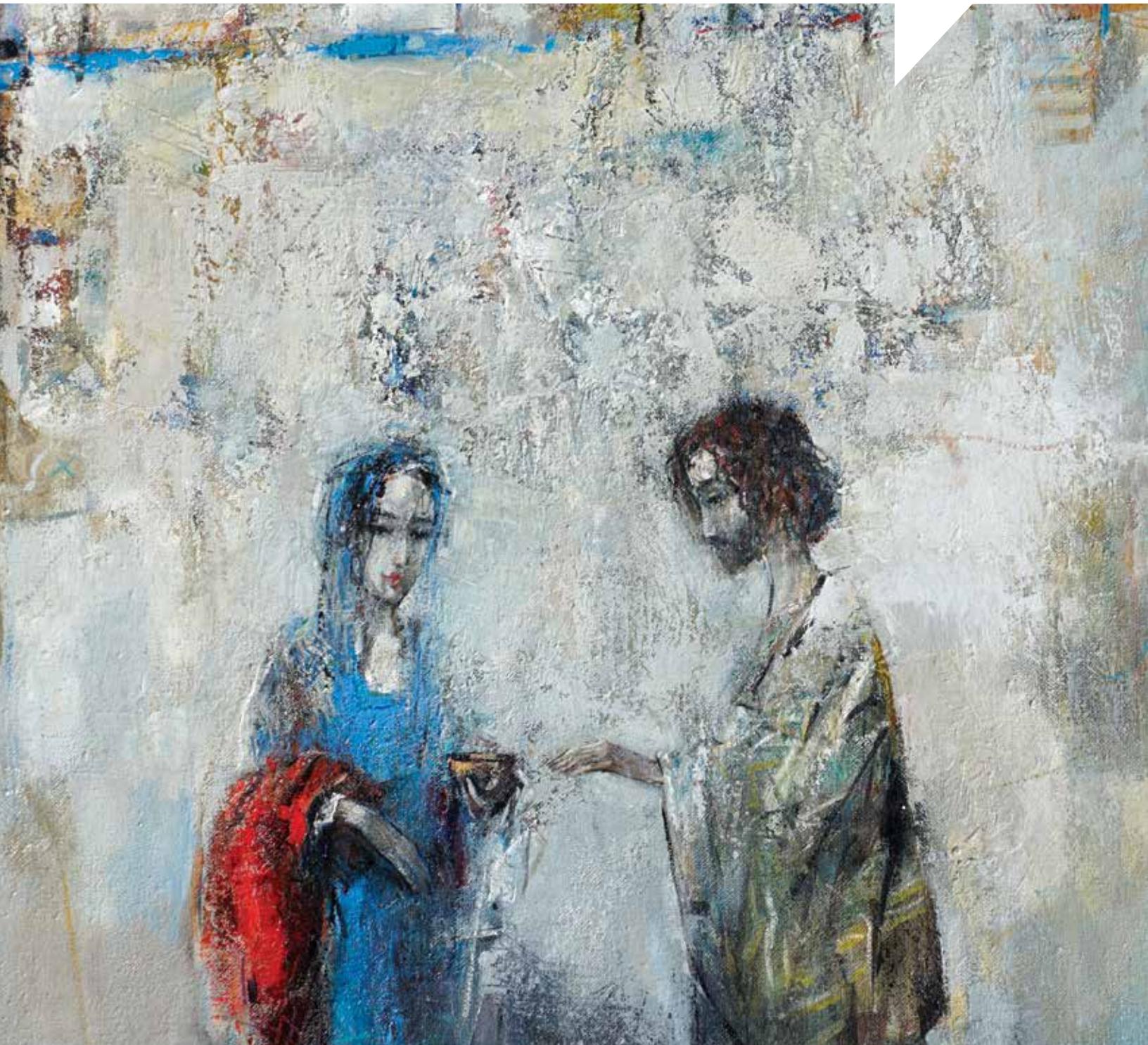


EVANGELICAL INTERFAITH

dialogue

Fuller Theological Seminary



CONVERSATIONS AT THE WELL: Scriptural Views of Other Religions

FALL
2015

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Summary Statement

In this issue of *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*, we provide resources for the various ways in which both the New and Old Testaments speak about other religions. Rather than a static posture toward religious people outside the community of God's people, there is a remarkable array of engagement revealed in the texts of Scripture. Far from leading evangelicals to a position of relativism, respecting and listening to the diversity of Scripture's witness yields tremendous resources for Christians today as we wrestle with how to be faithful disciples in our own particular contexts.

On the Cover:

Grigor Malinov, *The Samaritan Woman at the Well* (2013)
Oil on Canvas (see back cover for more on the artist).

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Vision Statement

This journal seeks to create space for evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his Church.

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Introduction Matthew J. Krabill and Cory B. Willson

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CONVERSATIONS AT THE WELL:

Scriptural Views of Other Religions

"Is there salvation in other religions?" This is a question that has preoccupied the conversations among American evangelicals in recent years amidst an increasingly religiously pluralistic society. A resounding "no" from the evangelical community has sounded out against the mainstream perspective on other religions in Western liberal democracies.



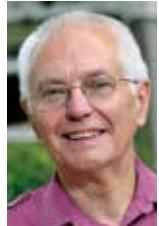
How might engagement of our religious neighbors take a different shape if we were to ask instead whether if there are elements of truth, beauty, and goodness in non-Christian religions? More importantly, what would it look like for evangelicals to insist that "salvation is found in no other name under heaven" than Jesus, while also seeking to be faithful disciples of Jesus who search the Scriptures for guidance in how we live alongside our religious neighbors? Is it possible that those very elements of truth, beauty, or goodness in the lives of their religious neighbors could play an important part in how evangelicals engage with them? If so, it is important that Christian discipleship remain under the authority of Scripture, so that being faithful to God remains at the core of who we are called to be and how we love our neighbors.

In this issue of *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*, Dr. John Goldingay and Dr. Nijay Gupta provide illuminating resources from the various ways in which both the Old and New Testaments speak about other religions. Rather than a static posture toward religious people outside the community of God's people, there is a remarkable array of engagement revealed in the texts of Scripture. Social and contextual factors play a role in these different approaches, as does the health and witness of the community in those particular times and places.

Far from leading evangelicals to a position of relativism, respecting and listening to the diversity of Scripture's witness yields tremendous resources for Christians today as we wrestle with how to be faithful disciples in our own particular contexts.

Featured Article

John Goldingay is the David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament in the School of Theology.



HOW DOES THE FIRST TESTAMENT LOOK AT OTHER RELIGIONS?¹

What attitude does the First Testament suggest with regard to religious plurality?

Different parts of the First Testament suggest a variety of perspectives on this question.

Two insights emerge from the First Testament as a whole. One is that it is possible to recognize foreign religions as reflecting truth about God from which Israel itself may even be able to learn; the other is that nevertheless the First Testament sees these religions as always in need of the illumination that can come only from knowing what Yahweh has done with Israel.

So the First Testament does not suggest one should take a radically exclusivist attitude to other religions, as if they were simply misguided, simply the fruits of human sin or inspired by demonic spirits. Yet one cannot simply affirm them as if they are just as valid as First Testament faith itself. The closing sections of this article suggest why this is so, pointing to the narrative nature of First Testament faith as key to understanding its attitude to this question. The First Testament is not simply a collection of religious traditions parallel to those of other peoples (though that is one aspect of its significance). In the story of Israel that led to the story of Jesus Christ, God was doing something of decisive importance for the whole world. The First Testament's religious tradition is therefore of unique and decisive importance to all peoples because it is part of the Christian story.

Perspectives from Creation: Humanity's Awareness of God and Distance from God

Genesis 1–11 assumes that human beings are created in God's image and aware of God. Their disobedience and their expulsion from God's garden did not remove the image or the awareness; this is presupposed by their religious observances in act and word (e.g., Gen 4:1, 3, 26). The God they refer to in connection with these observances is identified as Yahweh, though on the usual understanding of Exodus 6 this identification is a theological interpretation of their practice rather than an indication of the name for God they would themselves have used. They acknowledge God as creator, giver of blessing, judge, and protector, and respond to God in offering, plea, and proclamation. The chapters imply an understanding of the religious awareness of human beings in general that corresponds to the understanding of the ethical awareness of human beings expressed in Amos 1–2, and they imply a universal lordship and involvement of Yahweh among all peoples corresponding to that stated in Amos 9:7.

This understanding also bears comparison with that of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs. These works have particularly clear parallels with others from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Sometimes the relationship with these involves direct dependence, as is the case with the "Thirty Sayings" in Proverbs 22–24. Sometimes the parallels are matters of theme, form, emphasis, and mode of treatment, which as such apply also to features of proverbial, skeptical, philosophical, dramatic, and erotic literature from other times and areas. In either case non-Israelite insight is set in a new context within the religion of Yahweh (cf. Prov 1:7), but the implication of the parallels is that pagan

thought has its own insight. The First Testament pictures God's wisdom involved and reflected in creation (Prov 3:19–20; 8:22–31) and pictures God's breath infused into human beings by virtue of their creation (e.g., Job 32:8). Both ideas suggest a theological rationale for expecting that the nature of the created world and the experience, thought, culture, and religion of the human creation will reflect something of God's truth. The Wisdom literature is thus evidence of the ability of Yahwistic faith to incorporate the insights of other cultures, recognizing its value while removing from it idolatrous or polytheistic elements. We might thus reflect on the significance of the Wisdom tradition as a starting point for cross-cultural communication of biblical faith and interreligious dialogue.²

Both sides to Genesis 1–11 have implications for attitudes to the religions of our own day. On one hand the religions reflect humanity's being made in God's image and being in a form of covenant relationship with God. Books such as Proverbs, too, point us toward an attitude to other cultures (of which their religions are part) that looks at them as sources of insight and not merely as expressions of lost-ness. On the other hand, Genesis 1–11 suggests that the religions, like all human activity, belong in the context of a world that needs restoration to the destiny and the relationship with God that were intended for them, which God purposed to bring about through the covenant with Israel that culminated in the mission and accomplishment of Jesus. Similarly, books such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs illustrate the limitations of what can be said on the basis of human experience outside of Yahweh's special involvement with Israel.

The religions can thus be viewed both positively and negatively. They are not inherently demonic or merely sinful human attempts to reach God. We can learn from them. Yet they are not equally valid insights into the truth about God. They may provide a starting point and certain areas of common ground, but not a finishing point. They cannot tell us about the special and vital activity of God in Israel that came to a climax in Christ. Further, all human religion is not only inevitably tainted by our wayward life in this earth, but can be the very means we use to keep at arm's length the God we

choose not to obey. Religion can express our rebellion as well as our response. This, of course, is as true for Israelite religion (as the prophets pointed out) and for Christian religion as for any other faith. Religion always has this duality or ambiguity, a simultaneous seeking after God our creator and fleeing from God our judge.



Baalshamin or Ba'al Šamem is a Northwest Semitic god and a title applied to different gods at different places or times in ancient Middle Eastern inscriptions, especially in Canaan/Phoenicia and Syria. The title was most often applied to Hadad, who is also often titled just Ba'al. These are first-century deities found near Palmyra, Syria.

Perspectives from the Stories of Israel's Ancestors: The Possibility and Limitations of "Ecumenical Bonhomie"³

The stories in Genesis 12–50, following the book's opening exposition of the world's created-ness and turning away from God, speak of special acts and words in relation to Israel's ancestors in connection with a special purpose God has for them. In a sense these later chapters are thus moving from a more inclusive to a more exclusive attitude, but this purpose is one intended to benefit the whole world. Further, the ancestors' words and deeds do not imply the belief that other peoples in Canaan have no knowledge



Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* (1635) as described in the book of Daniel, chapter 5.

of God, though the ancestors do seem to establish their own places of worship, near those of the Canaanites, rather than making use of Canaanite sanctuaries. Like some other peoples in the Middle East, Israel's ancestors enjoy a particular awareness of God as the God of the head of the family, a God who enters into a special relationship with their leader and through him guides them in their lives.

In keeping with Genesis 1–11, Genesis 12–50 presupposes that this God is the one whom later Israel worships as Yahweh. It also speaks of this God as El, commonly in compound with other expressions, in phrases such as El Elyon (El Most High; 14:18–22), El Roi (El Who Sees Me; 16:13), El Shaddai (El Almighty; 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3), and El Olam (El Eternal; 21:33). Like its equivalent in other Semitic languages, *'il*, the Hebrew word *'el* can be both a term for deity, like *'elohim* (e.g., Exod 15:2; 20:5), and an actual name for God. It is thus sometimes properly transliterated El, sometimes properly translated “God” or “god.”

There are a number of correspondences between Yahweh and El as the Canaanites know him, but these correspondences do not constitute identity (see Gen 14:19, 22; 18:33; 41:16, 39, 45; Amos 1:2; Ps 50:1). They do not indicate that Canaanite and Israelite faith are either identical or equally valid alternatives depending on where you happen to live. From the perspective of the historical development of religions, it might be feasible to see Yahwism as a mutation from Middle Eastern religion, as Christianity was a mutation from Judaism, but this does not imply that the mutation is of similar status to its parent; rather the opposite. Canaanite religion

had its insight and limited validity, but what God began to do with Abram was something of far-reaching significance, even for the Canaanites themselves. The process was not merely syncretistic in a natural development of human religious insights. In dealing with the ancestors of Israel, the living God, later disclosed as Yahweh, made an accommodation to the names and forms of deity then known in their cultural setting. This does not thereby endorse every aspect of Canaanite El worship. The purpose of God's particular action in the history of Israel is ultimately that God, as the saving and covenantal God Yahweh, should be known fully and worshipped exclusively by those who as yet imperfectly know God as El. The end result of what God began to do through Abram was of significance for the Canaanites precisely because it critiqued and rejected Canaanite religion.

Perspectives from Exodus and Sinai: The Distinctive Importance of Yahweh's Acts of Redemption

The distinctive foundation of Israelite faith is that the true God, El Most High, the creator of heaven and earth, Eternal and Almighty, has acted in a specially significant way in relation to Israel. God gives concrete expression to the relationship with and guiding of the particular people whose story Genesis 12–50 tells, by bringing them out of service to Egypt and into service of Yahweh and renegotiating the covenant with them at Sinai. This God goes on to give them the whole land of Canaan as a secure home. All this happens in fulfillment of specific promises made to their ancestors long before. That gives new content to the understanding of the God they share with the Canaanites, new content anticipated in this God's self-revelation to Moses as Yahweh (even if some form of that name was already known, perhaps even as an epithet of El) and reflected in the centrality of the name Yahweh henceforth. The God of these other religions is now more fully known in Israel—ultimately so that this God may be more fully known among other peoples, too. The creator's victory over Sea (of which Canaanite stories told) has been won in history.⁴ El's decrees and judgments are delivered on earth at Sinai.

It is still the God worshiped within these other religions who is more fully known here, and the First Testament apparently assumes that Israel can still learn from these other religions. Many religious observances and concepts in Israel correspond to those of other Middle Eastern peoples, and for that matter to those of traditional religions elsewhere. Parallels with traditional religions remind us that at a number of points Israelite and other religions developed independently in parallel ways. Since priesthood and sacrifice are common human institutions we need not imagine Israel “borrowing” these ideas from Canaan, though other cases apparently did involve adaptation from contemporary cultures. Perhaps it makes

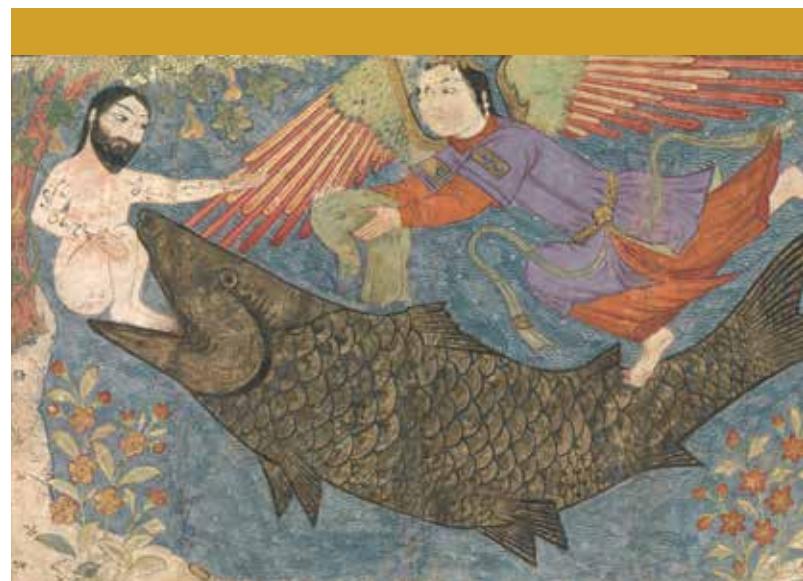
little theological difference which of these routes applies in different instances; in either way, God expects Israel to utilize human instincts in order to think of Yahweh and to worship Yahweh.

We have noted that the First Testament treats worship of El offered by Israelites and non-Israelites as worship of the true God. The story of Jonah presupposes that Yahweh alone is God, but it does not initially picture the Ninevites (or the sailors) consciously relating to Yahweh, as Jonah himself does. Yet when Jonah tells his story, the sailors do call on Yahweh (as Jonah does not!) and subsequently the Ninevites' fasting and crying to God ('elohim) meets with a response from the one whom Jonah can call 'elohim, Yahweh, and El.

Indeed, Deuteronomy suggests that worship of other deities by non-Israelites is ordained by God (see Deut 4:19; cf. 32:8–9).⁵ This may be an example of the way the First Testament attributes to Yahweh as sole cause phenomena that we tend to attribute to secondary human volition. If Israelites observed that other nations worshiped their own deities, and if Yahweh was sovereign high God over all, then Yahweh must in some way be responsible for the fact. However, seeing Yahweh as bearing responsibility for all events still leaves a theological question unresolved (and cf. Ezek 20:25). There remains a tension between the stance of these Deuteronomic texts and the expectation commonly expressed in the Psalms that all peoples should or will come to acknowledge Yahweh as Lord of the whole world. Perhaps the first is an interim acceptance, while the second is God's ultimate purpose.

Such interim acceptance has to be interpreted, however, in the light of the later fuller awareness of the inadequacy of such religion. The Bible does not hint that in finally coming to acknowledge Yahweh, these peoples' own religion finds its fulfillment. Rather, the acknowledgment of Yahweh exposes the inadequacy of any earlier religious understandings. Once the fullness of Yahweh's self-revelation is earthed in Israel, the way is open to a critique of other gods and religions, and to the expectation that one day all peoples will acknowledge that truth and salvation are to be found in Yahweh alone. They will then either join Israel in worshiping and obeying Yahweh or face a destiny of judgment and destruction. The progress of history thus does change things. Joshua's renewal of the covenant (Josh 24) implies that, whatever kinds of polytheistic worship may have been part of Israel's ancestry, polytheism was no longer appropriate in light of Yahweh's great redemptive achievements in relation to Israel. Fresh choices had to be made "today." This seems consistent with Paul's affirmation of God's apparently differential attitude to human religion at different stages of either history or awareness, in Acts 17:27–31. The knowledge of Christ requires repentance even from things God had previously overlooked.

On the other hand, the First Testament does not explicitly base its condemnations of other peoples on the grounds that they believe in the wrong gods. Condemnation of the nations, where reasons are given, is usually based on their moral and social behavior (see the pronouncements about the nations, e.g., Amos 1–2; Isa 13–23). Condemnation of religious deficiency is reserved for the people of God (cf. Amos 2). The gods of the nations are regarded as simply impotent. Worship of them is not so much culpable as futile. They cannot save. So, whether Jonah's sailors or the Ninevites pray to Yahweh consciously or to whomever they recognize as God, it is Yahweh who saves them. The whole point of much of the mockery of other gods, by Elijah, but even more so in Isaiah 40–55, is that when the crunch comes, they are ridiculously powerless to save. Worse, they are an encumbrance to their worshipers. It is Yahweh alone who saves.



Jonah and the Whale in the *Jami' al-tawarikh*, a work of literature and history, produced by the Mongol Ilkhanate in Persia (c. 1400).

In First Testament terms, then, the question whether there is salvation in other religions is a non-question. There is salvation in no religion because religions do not save. Not even Israel's religion saved them. It was at best a response to Yahweh, the living God, who had saved them. And only this God can save. When the nations come over to Israel, in the prophet's vision, it will not be to say, "Now we realize that your religion is the best one," but to acknowledge, "In Yahweh alone is salvation" (Isa 45:14, 24). When people such as Jethro or Rahab come to acknowledge Yahweh, it is on the basis of a realization that the story they have been told

about Yahweh demonstrates this. It would be an exaggeration to say that First Testament faith was not ethnic; it was to an ethnic group that Yahweh reached out. But belonging to the right ethnic group was not enough; the members of this ethnic group needed to make their response to Yahweh. And not belonging to this ethnic group was no bar to making its story one's own and thus being adopted into it.

On the part of Israelites themselves the First Testament rejects worship of any deity alongside the true God (e.g., Exod 20:3). Their confession is, "Yahweh our God Yahweh one" (Deut 6:4): Yahweh is the object of their entire commitment. The worship of El need not contravene this commitment because it is a form of worship of Yahweh. The worship of deities distinguishable from Yahweh does contravene it.

Perspectives from Life in the Land: The Shortcomings of Baal Religion

While the First Testament can be implicitly open to other peoples' understandings of deity, it is by no means consistently so. There is a conflictual dimension to its view of other religions, which also needs to be seen in its context. While Joseph and the Pharaoh of his day presuppose that they serve the same God, the Pharaoh of Moses' day has notoriously forgotten Joseph and refuses to acknowledge the God of Israel. Thus while Moses can accept the identification of Yahweh and El, he must represent the opposition of Yahweh to the Egyptian gods served by Pharaoh. The exodus signifies the former's victory over and judgment on the latter (see Exod 12:12). The basis for Yahweh's action here is both a commitment to the descendants of Abraham and a commitment to compassion; Pharaoh and his gods are opposed to both. A major subplot of the exodus narrative seeks to show the stages by which Pharaoh is forced to acknowledge Yahweh (the train of thought runs through Exodus 5:2; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:16, 30; 14:18, 25). No matter how positively we view the openness to other people's experience and worship of God, there are circumstances that demand a conflictual stance. In this case it was because of rival claims to deity, resistance to God's redemptive work in history, and manifest, unrepentant oppression and injustice.

The worship of Baal (who apparently displaced El as the most prominent god among Israel's neighbors) and of other gods and goddesses also has a different status within the First Testament from the worship of El. Admittedly there are hints that at certain stages Yahweh could have been worshiped under the name Baal. Baal is an ordinary noun meaning "owner" and could have been used, like 'adon ("master"), to acknowledge the authority of Yahweh (cf. Hos 2:16 [18]). Behind the biblical text there may be what F. M. Cross calls a conflation of El and Baal in the person of

Yahweh.⁶ In the First Testament itself, however, the worship of Yahweh utilizing the word "Baal" is never accepted. Even a name such as Esh-baal (man of Baal; 1 Chron 8:33) is altered to Ishbosheth (man of shame; 2 Sam 2:8). Baal religion is seen as a negative influence on Israelite religion. Baal sanctuaries are to be destroyed rather than adapted (Deut 7 and 12). The Baalistic influence on Israel's religion introduced by Solomon is a perversion. Thus worship of God as El is affirmed, worship of God as Baal is repudiated. Israel does not have to choose between Yahweh and El, but does have to choose between Yahweh and Baal (1 Kings 18:21; cf. Josh 24:14–15).⁷

If we reflect on the contexts in which the conflict between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt and the Baals of Canaan is characteristically presented, it becomes clear that it had a moral dimension that provides some help for our own evaluation of human religions and cultures.

The presenting cause of Yahweh's hostility to Pharaoh (god himself and representative of the gods of Egypt) is his oppression of the Hebrews. There is no such conflict and hostility in the narratives of Genesis when first Joseph and then his brothers have their long interaction with Egypt. On the contrary, there is a recognition of the God of Joseph by the then Pharaoh (e.g., Gen 41) in a way echoed later in Daniel. But the exodus Pharaoh, having initiated a state policy of oppression that has political, economic, social, and spiritual aspects, refuses to acknowledge the God of Moses (Exod 5:2). It is this that arouses Yahweh to action—faithful action in the biblical sense of acting against the oppressor and rescuing the oppressed. The destruction of Pharaoh is thus a declaration of Yahweh's opposition to a religion that sanctions a social order that in turn sanctions inhumanity and oppression.

We can discern again a differential response to other religions related to the kind of social and moral characteristics they foster among their adherents.⁸ What Elijah (and Yahweh) so vehemently opposed was not merely the worship of the wrong God (or rather of a no-god), as focused on Mount Carmel, but the hijacking of the whole social, economic and legal ethos of Israel by the religious vandalism of Jezebel's Phoenician Baalism, as focused in the Naboth incident (1 Kings 21). The struggle was not simply over what was the right religion, but over what was a right and just society for Naboth to live in. Baal religion undergirded, or at least imposed no restraint on, the way Ahab and Jezebel treated Naboth. It could be argued, therefore, that the moral, social, and cultural effects of a major religious tradition do give us some grounds for a discriminating response to it, though this can be as uncomfortable an argument in connection with Christianity as a cultural religion as in connection with any other.

“While the First Testament can be implicitly open to other peoples’ understandings of deity, it is by no means consistently so. There is a conflictual dimension to its view of other religions, which also needs to be seen in its context.”

Perhaps openness to the influence of other religions can be an enrichment or a perversion according to whether it allows a religion to come to full flowering as Yahweh's nature is more clearly grasped and Yahweh's lordship more fully acknowledged, or whether it turns it into something other than itself and leads to the ignoring of Yahweh's nature and expectations. But we have to come to terms with the fact that we do not know the rationale for a number of God's requirements of Israel in religious affairs and that a number of these requirements may be culture-relative and/or arbitrary. In deciding about the adapting or avoiding of different humanly devised forms of worship, it seems likely that a significant part is played by tactical considerations regarding what may do more harm than good. Another factor often underlying Yahweh's requirements of Israel is simply the desire that they should look and behave differently, as a means of advertising to them and to other peoples that they are different in the sense of having a distinctive place in God's purpose. The Cornelius story marks the termination of the period when God operates by this principle, though the new period it introduces is not one in which differences between one religion and another can now be ignored but rather one in which they can now be confronted rather than avoided.

Perspectives from the Babylonian and Persian Periods: The Interrelation of “Universalism” and “Exclusivism”

The stances taken in the literature that relates to the Babylonian and Persian periods offer further pointers regarding the contextual nature of attitudes to other religions and their adherents. Prophecies in Isaiah 40–55 take a polemical stance over against the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo, the equivalents of El and Baal. Either Yahweh is God, or they are gods; the possibility of seeing Bel as the name under which the Babylonians worship the one God is not entertained. Yahweh alone is creator; Yahweh alone rules in heaven; Yahweh alone acts in world events; Yahweh alone reveals the significance of those events (see Isa 40:12–26; 41:1–7, 21–29;

42:5–9; 46; and cf. Jer 10). Babylon and its religion will be put down. The affirmation that Yahweh creates both light and darkness and is responsible for both prosperity and disaster (Isa 45:7) perhaps sets itself over against the dualism of other religions.

In its mono-Yahwism and its affirmation of Yahweh's commitment to Israel, Isaiah 40–55 might be seen as the most exclusivist and nationalist section of the First Testament. Yet alongside this aspect of its stance is a conviction that Yahweh's relationship with Israel is of significance for the whole world, a conviction that has often made these chapters seem the most universalist in the First Testament; the same two-stranded attitude continues in Isaiah 56–66. Perhaps one implication is that Yahweh offers people alternative scenarios: on the basis of what they see Yahweh doing with Israel, the nations will come to acknowledge that Yahweh alone is God; but they choose whether they do so willingly and joyously or unwillingly and profitlessly.

It is an oversimplification to suggest that the separatist strand to Ezra-Nehemiah characterizes the Second Temple period as a whole and contrasts with a more inclusive attitude earlier. Ezra-Nehemiah is capable of expressing its theology with the help of the terms of the surrounding culture and religion, as Exodus and Hosea do. Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Hosea are separatist in a parallel sense to that of Ezra-Nehemiah. Isaiah 19 belongs among a number of passages in the prophets that are usually listed as especially inclusivist and that are usually dated during the Second Temple period. We have noted that Isaiah 40–55, often reckoned the universalist highpoint of the First Testament, includes the First Testament's most scathing treatment of other religions. The stance the First Testament takes to other religions apparently varies not only with the nature of the religion but also with the nature of the power and the pressure exercised by its adherents, but both openness and guardedness seem to feature in all contexts.⁹

Perspectives from the Greek Period: The Creativity of Exclusiveness

Similar considerations arise from the closing scene of the period covered by the First Testament, related in the visions in Daniel. Like Daniel (see Dan 5:23), the Syrian king, Antiochus, seems to have presupposed that Yahweh could be identified with “the Lord of Heaven,” the Syrian high god. In some sense or in some periods one might have expected Jews to accept this assumption, but the visions in Daniel presuppose that the two are incompatible. To accede to the religious prescriptions of the king would be to abandon one's commitment to the God of Israel. Once more the First Testament suggests that there is a time or a case for openness to other religions and a time for recognizing that this risks the survival of Israelite religion and the Israelite people.

The Narrative Nature of Biblical Faith

If other religions make a starting point in relating to God but not a finishing point, the fundamental reason lies in the nature of the gospel. The significance of Israelite religion does not lie in itself, or in the number of distinctive features we can chalk up for it in comparison with other religions (always a risky business, because parallels elsewhere then have a way of emerging). Israel's significance lay in its status as witness to the deeds of the living, active, saving God. This is the repeated thrust of Isaiah 40–55:

written in the context of overbearing religious plurality, the prophet did not encourage Israel to compare its religion with the Babylonians' and feel superior, but directed their thoughts to the acts of Yahweh in its actual history and declared, "You are Yahweh's witnesses."

The framework of First Testament faith, like that of New Testament faith, takes narrative form. It is a declaration about things God has done. It is good news, not a good idea. It states that in the history of Israel and of Jesus, God has acted in love to restore humanity to



Early 15th-century Persian illuminated manuscript, with Moses and Pharaoh at the Red Sea.

God and to its destiny. The gospel is the news that God created the world, stayed involved with it when it went wrong, became involved with Israel in order to put it right, commissioned God's son to become a Jew himself, let him die, and raised him to a transformed life. Christian faith involves the conviction that this story offers the central key to relating to God and to what it means to be human.

It is the narrative nature of this gospel that binds together the First Testament and the New Testament and gives the First Testament a distinctive place in relation to the Christian gospel. In this sense

there cannot be "other First Testaments" for people with a background in other religions. There is a distinctive sense in which Jesus came as the climax to the story of Israel. This is not to imply that God was simply absent from these other people's stories. Walter Moberly speaks of the story of Israel's ancestors as "the Old Testament of the Old Testament"; it leads into Israel's story as Israel's story leads into the story of Jesus and the church.¹⁰ One might then see Genesis 1–11 as "the Old Testament of the Old Testament of the Old Testament"; the story of the world leads into the story of Israel's ancestors. And we might see the stories of other peoples and other religions as testimonies to God's involvement with them and as declarations of the significance of their stories, analogous to the story of God's involvement with the nations in Genesis 1–11. But the First Testament itself is still *the First Testament*.

It is sometimes argued that translation is a fundamentally impossible enterprise. A mediating view on this question is the suggestion that narrative is fundamentally translatable in a way that many other genres are not. Poetry loses in translation, which means the wisdom books, the Psalms, and the prophets lose. Paul's discursive theology also takes considerable translation, because it takes considerable interpretation; it is very dense because of its use of metaphor, and very contextual. But a story is another matter. Stories lose less in translation. There is then some irony in the fact that while Paul kept in touch with the narrative nature of the gospel, in their discursive theological work subsequent church fathers had a harder time doing so. One fateful development of their centuries was the reworking of the gospel into Greek terms, which is often called a translation into Greek concepts, but it was more than translation. The reworking involved the effective abandonment of the narrative dynamic of Christian faith.

It is as well that the principle of translatability applies especially to narrative, because of that fact that the Bible is dominated by narrative for the reason just suggested. This is not merely a statistical fact but one that reflects the nature of scriptural faith, as not a collection of concepts, even declarations such as "Yahweh is God" or "Jesus is Lord," but a story, a piece of news, a gospel. The scriptural narrative becomes a gospel again when its implications are worked out in a context, as happens in different ways within Scripture and then in many subsequent different contexts. Mother-tongue Scriptures make the articulation of the gospel possible because they make it possible to work out how that narrative is gospel in a context. It would not be surprising if other religions possess narratives that illustrate the significance of the biblical narrative and illuminate the nature of the gospel. They will thus bring blessing to people who share the gospel with people of this culture and make it possible for them as storytellers to respond to that gospel. But they are not the gospel story.

The Narrative Nature of Biblical Faith and Religious Dialogue

Awareness of the narrative nature of the gospel thus gives us a point of contact with people living in other religious contexts. But it also distances us from them, because it makes the claim that this narrative is of unique importance. This is so not because of its nature as revelation but because it tells of the key events that determine the way God relates to the world. As a matter of fact, God created the world as a place that was good and not half-finished, to contradict a common modern narrative. When humanity then flouted God's word, God determined to "carry" its wrongdoing (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word routinely translated "forgive"). God determined to put up with it, not to be put off by it, to pay the price for it in God's own being in order to keep the relationship going. God did that through Israel's story in a way that came to a climax in the cross, where God went so far as to let Jewish and Gentile humanity do the last thing it could possibly do by way of rejection, by putting God to death, and God carried that too, and thereby frustrated it. God declined to be overcome by it, in either sense of "overcome." God did not give up on the relationship, nor did God agree to stay dead. Jesus' resurrection and his appearing to his disciples is the indication that he declines both these.

This story is a revelation of the nature of God, but it is that because it is more fundamentally an account of something God did once-for-all. In other religions (as in Hollywood movies) there might be promises of this story, or prophecies of it, or metaphors for it, or even revelations of it, but there cannot be regular narratives of it, because these narratives need to come from the people who experienced these events and who in the Scriptures give their testimony to them.

Religious plurality involves competing narratives. Israel's neighbors had very different narratives about the origin of the world from Israel's, and Genesis 1, at least, seems to have been written to counter these by giving a very different narrative account of deity, the world, and humanity. The New Testament story is intolerant and exclusive in its claim that cross and resurrection are the final and effective expression of God's resistance to being overcome by humanity. The Holy Spirit may indeed be involved in enabling different peoples to perceive and respond to insights about God and about life in the context of many ways of living religiously, but all such possible insights need to be brought into the context of the gospel expressed in the biblical narrative.

Both the First Testament and the New Testament are exclusivist in the sense that they believe in the supreme importance of the history that begins with the promise to Israel's ancestors and the exodus. Both are universalist in the sense that they believe that this history is designed to embrace all peoples; its benefits are

not simply for Israel or the church. Thus a passage such as Isaiah 2:2–4 shares God's dream that at the End all peoples will come to learn from Yahweh in Jerusalem. The situation in Genesis 1–2 is more than restored.

The shortcoming of other religions is that they cannot and thus do not focus on this story. Humanity's problem was not merely lack of knowledge concerning the nature of God and humanity but the need for a restoration of the relationship between these two so that humanity may realize its destiny. We needed redemption, not merely revelation. Whatever insight other religions may have on the nature of God and humanity, they lack the key to the restoration of the relationship and the realization of the destiny, because this lies in what God did in Israel and in Christ. Biblical religion is not primarily another set of religious teachings about God but a witness to what God did to save creation. That witness does generate insights about God and creation, some of which are so fundamental to the reality of "the way things are" that they are held in common with the religious understandings of other groups of human beings made in God's image. But merely listing the common beliefs between biblical faith and other religions (like drawing parallels between movies and the gospel) does not dissolve the significance of the Bible as witness to the unique events by which God has acted to restore creation.¹¹

Conclusion

In his book *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism*,¹² Kwesi A. Dickson notes that there are "exclusivist" and "open" strands within the First Testament's attitude to other religions and cultures. He sees the New Testament as taking up the first rather than the second, regrets that modern Christian mission has followed (partly through its involvement with imperialist expansionism), and argues for the opposite stance. I have argued that there are good theological reasons why the First Testament has both exclusivist and open strands, and that we should follow.

EFD

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Featured Article

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THINKING WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT ABOUT OTHER RELIGIONS

What attitude does the First Testament suggest with regard to religious plurality? Different parts of the First Testament suggest a variety of perspectives on this question. Two insights emerge from the First Testament as a whole. One is that it is possible to recognize foreign religions as reflecting truth about God from which Israel itself may even be able to learn; the other is that nevertheless the First Testament sees these religions as always in need of the illumination that can come only from knowing what Yahweh has done with Israel.

I grew up as a Hindu and the spirituality and symbols of my parents' religion suffused our house. I remember my mom doing her daily prayers before the festal lamp. I remember receiving blessings from temple priests on holidays. I remember how excited I was to get an Om Hindu necklace as a gift when I was a child.

When I converted to Christianity as a teenager, though, it did not take much for me to dispense with attachments to Hinduism. While I was surrounded with Hindu practices and images growing up, I was not formally taught "the Hindu way." So, setting it aside was simple. In fact, I probably felt the need to put any such elements of my "former life," so to speak, at a far distance, and I treated any other religion aside from Christianity with suspicion and, to be honest, repugnance. This was rather easy for me to do in America where I was born and raised, but the challenge multiplied when I paid a visit to India to see my relatives, as I had often done with my family while growing up.

Once I was re-immersed in a Hindu environment, surrounded by Hindu relatives who loved me deeply (and had no problem with my being a Christian, I might add), I found it quite difficult to untangle my Christian faith from my deep and loving relationships with my Hindu family. I never felt tempted to accept any particular Hindu beliefs or rituals, but I found it impossible to despise the piety of people like my gracious Nani (grandmother). Interreligious relationships are complex because people are complex. Somewhere along the way, though, I had been taught—as a *Christian!*—to hate the non-Christian other. How did that happen?

The New Testament and Other Religions

For the apostles and the earliest Christians, Jesus Christ was not just a word of good news, but Jesus was *the* good news, the gospel. The early Christians contextualized this good news in view of a distinctly Jewish narrative of a world originally created good but thrown off balance and plunged into darkness and depravity by sin. At just the right time, though, Jesus was sent as Messiah to put things right in the world. As Lord, *kyrios*, he would reign as king of a whole new world order.

Today, especially in North America, most people are monotheists—Jews, Christians, Muslims—and polytheists (like my parents) are viewed as peculiar. But in the first-century Roman Empire, it would have been quite the opposite.

The average John or Jane, Phoebe or Marcus, worshipped as many deities as necessary to ensure personal, familial, and national blessings and ward off curses.¹ Jews and Christians, monotheists, were the “peculiar” ones.² *Why worship one when you could worship all?* (That reminds me of when a Hindu took a Bible course with me and said she found the Bible interesting enough that she wanted to add Jesus to the groups of gods to which she paid homage. That makes sense to many Hindus.)

But the Christians were insistent that there was only one solution to the problem of sin in the world, so there is only one Savior. The early Christians, according to the New Testament, simply could not imagine the world being restored through another being in heaven, on earth, or under the earth. Jesus alone is the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:10), the one mediator between mortals and the one God.

For someone like Paul, religion was not about finding a route to heaven. As a Jew, Paul believed that there is one Creator God, and he created humans in his image, created them to be like him; the human soul bends and gravitates towards imitation of the living and true God. With sin came the corruption of human hearts and the creation of idols. The tradition of the Old Testament would have taught Paul that idols are the work of human hands, creatures *making gods for themselves*. But idols are not gods—they are dumb, deaf, blind, lacking efficacy, and devoid of life itself.³ Because humans were created to reshape themselves into the master image, as *sinful* humans they will become like their gods of wood, metal, or stone—blind, deaf, weak, lifeless, and useless. No wonder when Paul entered Athens he became deeply troubled by the many gods and many idols (Acts 17:16). For Paul there was only one God the Father and only one Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 8:6)—and the gospel revolves around their unified work and no other.

Interfaith Dialogue in Early Christianity

When I became a Christian, I got into many arguments and fights with my parents over my new faith and how it affected my life. At the age of sixteen, I had nearly written off my parents and spurned their authority. (Did I mention I was a teenager?) There would be no “interfaith dialogue” as far as I was concerned. The assumed “models” for interfaith dialogue for me were represented in two places in the Bible. First, we have Elijah and the prophets of Baal—framed in that way, it was a clash of religions and Elijah felt quite comfortable resorting to mockery and scorn. His goal was

to triumph victorious and humiliate the Baalists into repentance. So I thought “dialogue” should be.

The second kind of model I assumed was Jesus’ debates with the Pharisees. When I was young in my faith, I saw the Pharisees as the quintessential villains, Jesus’ opponents, and I simply presumed that the way Jesus interacted with them—*woe to you, hypocrites!*—was his model for how Christians should view and treat “the other.” Separate. Accuse. Reject. Despise.

As I came to penetrate more deeply into Scripture, though, I was better able to see the *heart* of God, not simply what I saw as the rejection and *wrath* of God.

Once I was re-immersed in a Hindu environment, surrounded by Hindu relatives who loved me deeply (and had no problem with my being a Christian, I might add), I found it quite difficult to untangle my Christian faith from my deep and loving relationships with my Hindu family. I never felt tempted to accept any particular Hindu beliefs or rituals, but I found it impossible to despise the piety of people like my gracious Nani (grandmother).

Pagans Will Surprise You!

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has a clever nickname for his disciples: “little faith-ers” (*oligopistoi*). On the one hand, Jesus commends them for their willingness to follow him and how they can see and understand things that the Jewish religious leaders cannot (see Matt 16:17). However, the *real* heroes of faith in Matthew are the pagans. Matthew seems to go out of his way to demonstrate that the very *last* people you would expect to

demonstrate faith in Jesus are the very ones who seem to really “get” who Jesus is. For example, when the Roman centurion shows unwavering trust in the power of Jesus to heal—from a distance—the centurion’s servant, Jesus is stunned: “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith!” (8:10). Jesus says much the same for the Canaanite woman (*your faith is great!*) when he sees her faith and heals her daughter (Matt 15:28).

Again, what is surprising about this is that these pagans do not know Torah; they were not expecting the Messiah; they were steeped in the worship of foreign gods. But what Matthew seems to be drawing out of these examples is that *your past* does not overprivilege you in respect to the gospel, nor does it underprivilege you. All that matters is whether you place your trust in Jesus. Jesus was not commanding their belief systems or religious rituals. He was responding to their trust in him.

We Christians must be careful not to draw too distinct of a line in the sand to keep pagans away from Jesus, because sometimes they are the ones who respond to him most impressively. In the case of the Canaanite woman, when she first tried to approach Jesus, the disciples wanted to get rid of her. They said to Jesus: “Tell her to go away. She is bothering us with all her begging” (Matt 15:23 NLT). They did not want her to be with Jesus because they found her annoying! How much they forgot the way of Jesus, and how little they understood the faith that pagans could demonstrate. Are we listening to Matthew’s lesson about the possibility of great-faith-pagans-for-Jesus, or are we like those disciples who dismiss outsiders as nothing but a nuisance?

Learning to Translate the Gospel into All Cultural Languages

When Paul, a devout Diaspora Jew who came to serve and follow Messiah Jesus, entered into the strange territory of Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:16–34, he could not convey the gospel in the way Peter had done to the men of Judea in Acts 2:14–36. He had to translate the gospel, not into another language, but into another culture and worldview. He found common ground, and identified Jesus Christ with something in their own realm (i.e., the altar “to an unknown god,” 17:23). Paul clearly saw his role as someone who had to interact with the wider world around him in the Roman Empire and bring his own perspective to the table of discussion rather than simply to interject it.

Non-Christian Jews faced similar challenges. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the middle-to-late first century CE, found himself struggling to defend his Jewish commitments while also engaging with Roman attitudes and practices. Professor John Barclay explains how people like Josephus had to operate under these conditions.

Jews who knew something about Greek and Roman religion were not compelled simply to assault it, as a unitary system, from the outside. Rather, they could insert themselves into the internal debates among their pagan contemporaries, positioning themselves not outside the Greco-Roman tradition, but at least partially within it, as contributors to long-running internal discussion about the appropriate means to represent, worship and speak about the divine.⁴

Today, I believe there is an element of self-inflation in what I have seen as a Western Christian resistance to try to learn and understand the religious perspectives of Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and others. At least part of this alienating tendency is due to the general acceptability of Christianity in the West (despite its unpopularity). We can learn much about interfaith dialogue from how Christians interact with their neighbors in places that do not know Christendom.

Not long ago, New Testament scholar David deSilva spent an extended period of time teaching at a seminary in Sri Lanka. DeSilva paid particular attention to the way his Christian Sri Lankan students related to the majority-Buddhist world around them. He noticed that they could easily relate to the challenges faced by Paul regarding living as Jesus followers in a society with a different understanding of religion. DeSilva explains that, in such a context,

Finding constructive bridges between the Christian gospel and the Buddhist dhamma is an area of great concern so that Christian converts can articulate their faith in a way that shows respect for, and ongoing engagement with, the Buddhist heritage shared by so many outside the church. Such engagement could also help allay the fear of non-Christians that converts to Christianity from Buddhism are (or will become) opponents of Buddhism and agents of Western imperialism.⁵



DeSilva came to recognize that his Christian Sri Lankan students reinforced the early church's tradition of *parparatio evangelica*, reflecting on former cultural and religious traditions and experiences as positive contributions on the way toward embracing the Christian gospel, rather than simply obstacles.⁶ This is, perhaps, a salutary reminder of how the early Christians probably approached life alongside those who worship other gods—the gospel cannot simply be shot as an arrow into the heart of the other, but rather it must be planted with proper attention to the unique “soil” of each person and community.

At the Well: John 4:1–42

In his famous work *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Lesslie Newbigin describes the modern Christian tendency to place the focus of interfaith dialogue on getting to the truth because souls must be saved for heaven. Newbigin insists that it is a futile exercise to ask “what happens to the non-Christian after death?” because this is a question only God can answer.⁷ A more fruitful approach that Newbigin offers, and one that avoids the temptation towards gnosticism, focuses on this question: “What is the meaning and goal of this common human story in which we are all, Christians and others together, participants?”⁸ There is a striking similarity between this argument by Newbigin and how biblical theologian Walter Moberly reflects on how one should and should not use John 14:6 (“I am the way, the truth, and the life”) in interfaith dialogue. Moberly urges that the tendency in a “*this* religion, not *that* religion” approach is to position Christianity as the better option as a *religion*. Proof texts like John 14:6, when unmoored from the context of the Fourth Gospel and its theology, do more

damage than good. According to Moberly’s careful theological reading of the Gospel of John, the true vocation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not to win out against Judaism (or Hinduism or whatever), but rather “to bear witness to the truth of what it means to have life in all its fullness in God’s world.”⁹

If there is one story from the New Testament that points the way forward towards healthy interfaith dialogue today between Christians and others, it is probably the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Conversation at the well (John 4:1–42). John tells us that Jesus is compelled to travel back to Galilee through Samaria (4:4). Jews and Samaritans were not on “friendly” terms, which makes Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan all the more striking. The Samaritans were descendants of pagan tribes settled by the Assyrians in the northern kingdom. Samaritans acknowledged only the five books of Moses as Scripture. That Jesus considered her religiously “other” is clear enough when he says, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (4:22). The enmity between Jews and Samaritans was such that the woman was shocked that Jesus asked her for something (4:9a). John adds, as a narrator aside, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” (4:9b). Despite this natural barrier between them, Jesus chose to converse with her at a well.

No doubt John wanted to highlight the location as part of a “betrothal-type scene.” That is, in the Bible, when a man and woman find themselves meeting at a well, a marriage is coming (Gen 24:10–61; Exod 2:15b–21)! Normally, in the Old Testament patriarchal narratives as well as in the history of Israel, there is concern that one marry someone of the same nation (endogamy).

Samaritans and Their Religion

The group of people described in the New Testament as Samaritans lived in the region between Galilee and Judea, with Mount Gerizim at the center. The Samaritans were not held in high esteem by the first-century Palestinian Jewish community, who viewed Samaritan lineage and religious life and practices as compromising religious purity with the incorporation of Hellenistic influences.¹ The Samaritans, for their part, viewed themselves as the true Israelites and other Jewish communities as being apostate.²

The Samaritan religion was monotheistic and had its own Pentateuch that alone constituted authoritative Scripture (excluded are other parts of the Hebrew Bible including the Prophets and the Writings), a sacred place of sacrifice in Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem, and resolute belief that God would raise up a “prophet like Moses” (Deut 18:18–22) who would deliver his people.³ The New Testament includes several passages that locate the Samaritans somewhere between Jews and Gentiles and with a remarkable openness to faith in Jesus (see, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of the grateful Samaritan leper, Luke 10:25–37 and 17:11–19).

Here part of the controversy is Jesus speaking intimately with a “foreigner.”

Obviously they do not get married literally in John 4, but perhaps John is underscoring a betrothal of “worship and mission.”¹⁰ What happens at the well is a conversation that is born out of caring on the part of Jesus. He has addressed the yearnings and hopes of the Samaritan woman, and he has done so in a warm and gracious environment. Obviously this encounter with Jesus had enough of an impact that she immediately becomes a “missionary” for the good news Jesus offers, as she returns home and proclaims this Messiah to her own neighbors.¹¹ So enamored was she with Jesus that she abandoned her water jar at the well (4:28).

Needy people. Jesus does not approach this conversation, at least not exclusively, with an offer of salvation. It begins: “Give me a drink” (4:7). This is not a ploy, a conversational “hook.” Jesus is “tired out by his journey” (4:6). He has no bucket, so he cannot draw water. By asking her for water, he is exposed as a person in need. No doubt part of why this woman dared to engage in conversation with this Jew was because he did not come across as threatening, but as someone—like herself—who was willing to be vulnerable.

Perhaps evangelicals have a hard time exposing their needs and being vulnerable in interfaith dialogue because it may weaken their position. But we all know that deep relationships can only truly form when we seek to eliminate the barriers that we put up to make ourselves feel safe.

One common hope. The Samaritan woman has many questions for Jesus and, when she discovers that he is a prophet, she challenges him on the location of worship—should it be Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim (4:20)? While Jesus eventually does uphold the Jewish way as proper, his first concern is to imagine the redemptive nature of what it will be in the end (4:21)—all will worship in spirit and truth (4:21–24). Jesus is less concerned with the proper *place* of worship than with the proper *heart* of worship. His interest here is the satisfaction of her deepest yearnings to worship God.

Interfaith dialogue sometimes tries too hard to score points by making contrasts and comparisons between religious views, as if in a chess game with moves and countermoves. What Jesus does is deconstruct the compare-contrast approach and he simply dreams out loud about the rich vision of final redemption. Because of the sterile and often “academic” nature of how we do interfaith dialogue, we forget that spiritual and emotional longings lie at the heart of worship.

In John 4, Jesus engages in what we may think of as a form of “interfaith dialogue,” perhaps the clearest example in the New



Elijah's challenge of the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table (1 Kings 18:19) is depicted in two scenes on the walls of the third-century (CE) synagogue at Dura-Europos in modern Syria.

Testament (with the back-and-forth of true dialogue). He is witness-bearing, he speaks directly and transparently, but all of this transpires in a context of sharing and conversation.

Conclusion

I believe the New Testament writers were clear on the exclusive nature of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Embracing the gospel requires rejection of other gods and turning towards the “living and true God” to serve him and anticipate the complete reign of his Son Jesus Christ the savior (1 Thess 1:9–10). Because people like Paul considered this one gospel of the one God to be *for all people*, his apostolic ministry took him to Gentiles across Asia Minor and ancient Macedonia and beyond. Undoubtedly, he conversed with pagans on street corners, in the workshop where he plied his trade, in houses, and on the highways. His passion to translate the gospel arose, not out of a sense to proclaim the “truth” per se, but because he believed the gospel was *good news for everyone*, that new creation is life-giving. If “evangelical interfaith dialogue” is worthy of its name, it must be dialogue that bestows on the other blessings (Rom 12:14). **EFD**

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CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM INTERFAITH SOLIDARITY IN GAZA



Nijay Gupta points us in his essay beyond point-scoring or sterile academic approaches to interfaith dialogue, lifting up instead how Jesus deconstructs the “compare-contrast approach” and rather “simply dreams out loud about the rich vision of final redemption.” John Goldingay, for his part, ably traces how the Hebrew Bible (which he calls the First Testament) includes both “exclusivist” and “open” approaches to other religions. In this brief essay, I will build on what I take to be Gupta’s insistence on grounding reflection on interfaith matters in the lives of real multifaith communities by considering instances from the Middle East, of Christians and Muslims showing solidarity with one another in their worship. Such solidarity does not, I suggest, require Christians and Muslims to temper strong claims regarding the truth to which their respective worship points; rather, I argue that for Christians practical solidarity with ones’ non-Christian neighbors is an expression of a confession of Christ’s lordship.

My examples come from Gaza, where I lived and worked for two years. Christians make up a distinct minority in Gaza, with less than two thousand Christians living there. Gaza’s Christians worship at Greek Orthodox, Roman (Latin) Catholic, and Baptist churches. The architecture of the old neighborhoods of Gaza City bear witness to a complicated religious history. The stones and layout of the Great Omari Mosque, for example, reflect a history of architectural and religious supersessionism. The mosque stands on the site traditionally associated with the Philistine temple to Dagon in which Samson was held captive and which he brought crashing to the ground. In the early fifth century CE, the church leader Porphyrius convinced Empress Eudoxia to demolish the pagan temple standing at the same site and in its place build a church (the Eudoxiana); in fact many of the main pillars in the present-day mosque date back to this Byzantine-era church. With the Muslim conquest of Palestine by Omar Ibn al-Khattab’s forces, the church was repurposed into a mosque: the name of the present-day mosque hearkens back to Omar the Conqueror. Then, upon their arrival in Gaza in 1149, the Crusaders demolished the mosque, erecting in its stead a cathedral in honor of John the Baptist. This church was short-lived, being reconverted to a mosque after Salah ad-Din’s Ayyubid troops took control of Gaza. Yet the contemporary mosque bears within it architectural traces

of its past, with the pillars from the Byzantine church and the very directional layout of the building preserving the orientation of the Crusader church. This orientation does not align with the mosque’s *qibla* (which points worshippers to Mecca), illustrating the mosque’s prior history as a church.

The history of the Great Omari Mosque tells one story of interfaith relations, namely, one of violent conquest and replacement. Not too far from the Great Omari Mosque, however, one finds a more nuanced architectural history. The St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza’s Zaytoun quarter dates back to 425 CE. When Muslim forces conquered Gaza in the seventh century CE, this church, unlike the Eudoxiana church, was left standing. Crusaders renovated the church during their short stay in Gaza in the twelfth century CE, and when Ayyubid forces defeated the Crusaders they too left the church standing. In 1432 the Mamluk rulers of Gaza constructed the Katib al-Wilaya mosque next to the church. While a skeptic might take the fact that the mosque’s minaret towers over the church as an architectural assertion of Islam’s superiority, the image of church and mosque in close proximity to one another is often cited by Palestinian Christians and Muslims as exemplary of their close, fraternal relations.



The Church of Saint Porphyrius is the Orthodox Christian church of Gaza, and the oldest active church in the city. Located in the Zaytun Quarter of the Old City, it is named after the 5th-century bishop of Gaza, Saint Porphyrius, whose tomb is situated in the northeastern corner of the church.

Now let us fast forward from Byzantine, Crusader, and Mamluk architecture to the present. Together with their Muslim neighbors, Palestinian Christians in Gaza today face the same harsh economic and political realities of hermetic enclosure within the Gaza Strip, a territory that human rights organizations routinely refer to as the world's largest open-air prison. Given the high unemployment rate and bleak economic future facing the Gaza Strip, many Gazan Christians who have opportunities to move to the West Bank or Israel because of family connections have seized on those opportunities, dwindling their numbers still further. Already under the economic siege that the Israeli State imposes on them and their Muslim neighbors, one might rightly expect Gaza's Christian communities to be insular and withdrawn, exhibiting a siege mentality. Yet Palestinian Christians in Gaza have for centuries been an integral part of the cultural landscape. On numerous occasions, Gazan Christians recounted to me how they and their Muslim neighbors celebrate religious feasts with one another, with Christians visiting Muslim neighbors in celebration of 'Eid al-Fitr and 'Eid al-Adha, and with Muslims visiting their Christian neighbors to mark the Christmas and Easter feasts. Gaza's churches operate schools where the vast majority of the students are Muslims, with their families (including families affiliated with Hamas) having no qualms about sending their children to these Christian schools. The depth of Christian integration into the broader society in Gaza was evident during Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014, during which hundreds of thousands of Gazans had to flee their homes. Gaza's church



Children playing at the Great Mosque in Gaza. Also known as Great Omari Mosque—which stands on the site traditionally associated with the Philistine temple of Dagon—it is the largest and oldest mosque in Gaza.

compounds and school buildings opened their doors to fleeing families looking for safe shelter. At the height of the bombings, Father Manual Musallam, who had served for over 15 years as the Catholic (Latin) parish priest said to Gaza's Muslim community: "If they destroy your mosques, lift the call to prayer from our churches!"

This interfaith solidarity has been reciprocal. When threats were issued against Gaza's churches in the wake of the Danish cartoon scandal and Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address about Islam, police from the Hamas-led government in Gaza stationed themselves around the churches and church schools, pledging their protection. Just as Egyptian Muslims surrounded churches during revolutionary unrest in Egypt after some churches had been burned, so have Gazan Muslims acted to protect their Christian neighbors.

My point in this brief essay is not to paint a romanticized picture of interfaith solidarity in Gaza. The church in Gaza faces a very challenging future, above all because of the economic and political siege under which all Gazans live, yet also because of the worrying growth of radical Salafi movements that challenge Hamas's authority. Western Christians often succumb to the temptation of portraying Middle Eastern Christians as besieged on all sides by hostile Muslim forces. Yet such a portrayal fails to do justice to the lived reality of Christian-Muslim solidarity experienced not only in Gaza but in other parts of the Middle East. Without minimizing the very real dangers the church faces in Gaza and other parts of the Middle East, we should not overlook how the church shows practical solidarity with its Muslim neighbors, solidarity that is warmly reciprocated. This practical solidarity expressed by the church does not flow from some pluralist theology of religions, but rather from its centuries-long witness to Christ as Lord. The church in the Middle East is both "open" to its Muslim neighbors while also strongly maintaining its witness to Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Interfaith "dialogue" in Gaza and other parts of the Middle East is less a matter of an academic debate about theological propositions or about a points-scoring apologetics, and more about a "dialogue of life," in which Christians and Muslims share in one another's lives. In some parts of the Middle East this centuries-long dialogue of life is under threat due to various political and religious forces: thanks be to God for the many ways in which it continues through practical acts of interfaith solidarity.



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BEYOND HOSPITALITY AND TOWARDS HUMILITY



Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, sola Christus, and sola Deo gloria. Of the five *solas* from the Reformation, *sola scriptura* resonates heavily with the evangelical tradition. When we are presented with new ideas we often respond, “where is that in Scripture?” John Goldingay and Nijay Gupta have provided thoughtful meditations on how Scripture can inform our understanding and approach to other religions. Goldingay weaves exegetical fidelity with historical insight to suggest how the “First” Testament recognized reflections of God’s truth in other religions and yet called them to the fuller narrative of God’s particular relation with Israel. Gupta draws on his personal experience interacting with other religions, particularly Hinduism, to argue that the New Testament moves us past absolute questions and towards mutual investigations of how God interacts with humanity. Although Goldingay and Gupta examine two separate Testaments, they come to a number of similar conclusions. There are two in particular I find encouraging for interfaith relations.

The first, and perhaps most controversial conclusion, is that salvation is a non-question when engaging in interfaith relations. Goldingay separates “religion” from the human relationship with God where he states, “There is salvation in no religion because religions do not save.” Religion cannot save for Goldingay because it is simply a reaction to God. Salvation only comes from God. Thus, the question “which *religion* saves?” is not an appropriate question. Rather one should ask, which religion most reflects God’s revelation and restorative relationship with creation? Gupta emphasizes the same conclusion with his use of Lesslie Newbigin’s critique of Christians whose only goal in interfaith relations is to find the truth to save souls. Inquiries into soteriology are futile as certainty lies only with God. Rather, we should shift our attention to understanding how different cultures and religions can contribute towards embracing the gospel narrative. Goldingay and Gupta are not saying that salvation is not important. What they are saying—and this is an important nuance—is that we cannot know another’s salvific status with absolute certainty. Therefore, evangelical interfaith dialogue should shelve such discussions and engage in a more fruitful investigation.

Goldingay and Gupta suggest the more fruitful path is through open engagement with non-Christian religions. The foundation of their approach is the belief that non-Christian religions have some level of interaction with God. This is not pluralism. Goldingay filters the contributive potency of other religions in accordance with their moral, social, and cultural effects. Gupta is clear that Jesus Christ is the fullness of truth. The goal is to shift evangelical perspectives from at best ignoring other religions or at worst attacking them towards a witness to other religions of Christ as the fullness of all religious desires. As Gupta suggests, evangelical interfaith dialogue does not seek to problematize other religions but to bestow a blessings on the other.

I applaud this shift from antagonism to hospitality. Yet evangelical interfaith relations need to take a further step from viewing the religious other as guest to the religious other as legitimate. Christians should absolutely seek to bless the religious other through all manner of witnessing. Yet Christians should also be open to receiving blessing from the religious other. As long as we are the ones inviting and we are the ones blessing, we neglect the veracity of the other religion to speak into our own understanding. If other religions truly do have some relation with God, then we must be open to receiving what God might have wrought among them. Just as Israel was awaiting the coming of the Messiah, so too are we now awaiting Christ’s return. As we live in this penultimate time we must be humble in our claims to certainty. The postponement of certainty, our humility before the work of God in other religions, elevates the legitimacy of the religious other so that we might also be *their* guests and receive *their* blessings. EIFD

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DIALOGUE AT 21ST-CENTURY WELLS



If there is one question that I believe gets most overlooked in our discussions about multifaith dialogue, it is the question of “Where should we meet?” It is common to address *why* we should meet, *who* we should meet with, *when* we should

meet, and *how* we should organize dialogue. However, the question of *where* is often decided by pragmatics rather than intentionality.

One of the many things I appreciate about Dr. Gupta’s article was his emphasis on place. In his analysis of interreligious encounters in the New Testament, he examines Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well as a model for dialogue (John 4). In my years of participating in dialogue events, I have heard many people draw insights from Jesus’ encounter with Samaritans, but Dr. Gupta is the first to draw our attention to the importance of the well, the actual place of the encounter. He describes the well as “a warm and gracious” environment. It is a place of common humanity, where both Jesus and the woman come as thirsty people who need a drink.

Over the years, we have learned that the physical place of dialogue is not just functional, but formational, and thus should be a vital consideration as we seek to make disciples who are both peacemakers and gospel proclaimers. Places communicate; they teach. They silently shape the culture and conduct of the people within the place. For example, when a person enters a library, they are compelled to speak in whispers, while a football stadium invites us to make noise. Therefore, when organizing dialogue, it is important to consider the place of meeting and what that place communicates about our intentions and expectations.

The “Wells” of the 21st Century

Places of worship, such as churches, mosques, synagogues, and so on, can often provide a good context for dialogue, especially if the gathering is focused on learning about the particular religion that worships in that building. However, many people are intimidated by entering places that are unfamiliar and devoted to the worship of something they do not believe in. They find themselves walking on eggshells so as to not inadvertently offend either their neighbor or their God.

We at Redemption Church continue to accept invitations to houses of worship and to welcome people into our churches, but we are always searching for better places. We are looking for modern-day “wells” in which we can share a common cup of water and discuss crucial questions of life.

What do these places look like? These are places that affirm the common humanity of all parties involved without having to share a common theology. These are places centered on the common good or a common meal, places where both kindness and boldness can flourish. We have found many such “wells” scattered throughout our city. Some of the best include service projects, gardens, and playgrounds.

1. Dialogue through Service Projects

Sometimes people need to work shoulder-to-shoulder before they can talk face-to-face. Therefore, walls with graffiti, homeless shelters, and litter-filled highways can often be better contexts than a lecture hall or place of worship. In these settings, people do not have to build on a common theology, but come together out of a common commitment to the flourishing of the city. This has been a good thing for conservative Christians and Muslims, who have often felt excluded from dialogue because of their belief in exclusive truth. They are hesitant to attend gatherings that start with common theological convictions, because they believe the differences are vitally important, and do not want to leave the impression that “we all believe the same thing.” I am sympathetic to this, and have often felt uncomfortable in interfaith settings that diminish the differences between faiths. My imam friends have expressed similar concerns. However, working together on a service project that pursues the common good frames the gathering around our identity as neighbors and a common commitment to the flourishing of our city.

Phoenix has a sizeable Uzbek community that consists of many devout Muslims. My church built a strong relationship with them through a city beautification project focused on repainting walls that were covered with graffiti. After several hours of working shoulder-to-shoulder, we sat along the side of a road for a picnic. Having had an opportunity to get to know each other, and having

a shared sense of accomplishment as we looked back at our work, we were ready to ask the deeper questions about our beliefs, backgrounds, and convictions. If you had listened in to those conversations, you would have heard sincere questions, respectful disagreements, heartfelt stories, and even belly laughs from newly developed inside jokes. Organic friendships grew out of a common commitment to common good, not common beliefs.

2. Dialogue in the Dirt

Perhaps the best place to find common ground is the literal soil of a garden. Few things hinder fruitful dialogue like pride and arrogance, but the garden has a unique ability to humble us. It brings us close to the ground, with our knees on the earth and our hands covered in compost. Pretensions that easily bind themselves to lecterns and designer suits seem to be washed away when watering plants. In the garden, we become reacquainted with our frailty, knowing that we are dependent on God and connected to our neighbors through the food that sustains our life. The humanity of the Samaritan woman and Jesus were both demonstrated through their need for water. The garden, like the well, is a place where we are humbled by the acknowledgment of our need. Before our mouths are engaged in dialogue, it is often good for them to be filled with heirloom tomatoes.

For the past year, I have shared a garden with my friend Ali, who is from Afghanistan. I have known him for years, but there is a depth to our friendship that has grown over the past year. We have shared unbearably hot peppers, debated our strategy to deter pests, and had the opportunity to extend generosity to others by giving away our harvest. During our times in the garden, we have had deep conversations about our individual stories and the Story that we believe defines the world. They are different stories, but we understand each other better, and appreciate each other more. Rather than a cold exchange of propositions, we have discussed the deepest concerns of our hearts, from his fears of the Taliban and my fears about my daughter's autism. The zucchinis, eggplants, worms, and watermelons have witnessed the deepening of a friendship and commitment to each other's good.

3. Dialogue at the Playground

The meeting at the well was not a planned event, but was an organic conversation that happened in a common area, in the natural flow of life. A comparable place is a playground at a local park, which is one of the best places for spontaneous multifaith

engagement and for organized multifaith playgroups. I have heard countless stories of people who have met their Muslim, Jewish, or Hindu neighbors as they have watched their children play. Depending on the city and on the intentionality of people, this can be a very common occurrence. I have even heard of a group in our city that formally organized a multifaith group that had deep discussions while their children played on the swings.

The presence of children provides a visual reminder of the importance of peacemaking. With the Phoenix area being one of the most religiously diverse places in the country, but also one of the most divided, we know we are sowing peace for future generations.

Furthermore, Dr. Goldingay's article shows us the tension that emerges from the First Testament's affirmation of people from other religions as image-bearers of God and the exclusive nature of the biblical story that calls people to repent and believe in Christ. The presence of children can help us live within that tension without compromising friendship or the gospel. Because we want to model respectful discourse to our children, we are less likely to be combative and rude. We are also less likely to water down our deep convictions about the gospel story because we do not want to confuse our children. The presence of children keeps us accountable to being both gentle and bold at the same time, filled with grace and truth, because we know that our kids are watching.

Conclusion

Those of us who organize and participate in multifaith events often find our minds occupied with complex things like theology, politics, cross-cultural dynamics, media narratives, addressing misunderstandings, and the many delicate relationships that are integral to this work. With all of these complex issues on our mind, it is easy to overlook something as seemingly simple as the issue of place. However, our God is a placemaker who carefully crafted a hospitable world. As his image-bearers, it is our privilege to do the same. As we pursue peace and promote dialogue, let us consider the importance of place and meet Jesus and our Samaritan neighbors at the wells of the 21st century. EIFD

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FEAR, DEATH, FAITH, AND TRUST:

Muslims and Christians Fighting Ebola Together in Sierra Leone



The unprecedented 20-month-long Ebola epidemic that has devastated Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone overwhelmed international emergency health systems and tested the faith of believers, both Christian and Muslim. Yet as the crisis ends, it is clear that this enormous suffering provided the impetus for Muslim and Christian leaders to work together to change behaviors, save lives, reduce fear and stigma, and restore hope.

I was in Sierra Leone in May 2014 when reports of the first cases emerged. Initially, it was hard to convince people that Ebola was real. Rumors were rampant. Some suspected that news of an invisible killer virus might be a political ploy of the central government in Freetown jockeying for advantage in upcoming elections. People did not trust or believe the public health warnings broadcast from the capital. Desperation and resistance grew. As the virus spread, people hid sick family members and deceased loved ones, exacerbating the outbreak. Traditional burial practices, with last rites of washing the dead and kissing them farewell, became secret, rapidly multiplying chains of virus transmission. Few knew that the corpse of an Ebola victim is at the most infectious stage.

The weak national healthcare system was immediately overwhelmed. Healthcare workers with limited protective equipment valiantly tried to cope, even when their low pay was delayed by challenges in the payroll system. Delayed international assistance and media hysteria further aggravated the crisis. National ministries of health, the World Health Organization (WHO), and other UN and international agencies were initially slow to react to and contain rapid cross-border chains of transmission of the virus. Fear, skepticism, and resistance prevailed as weekly death counts soared.

"It was very hard to grasp what Ebola was and how to respond to the threat," said Ayeshata Turay, chair of a Muslim women's association and vice principal of a secondary school in Bo, Sierra Leone. "Early radio alerts announced that Ebola kills and had no cure. Fear gripped everyone. However, when our faith leaders began to teach us about Ebola they helped us take it seriously."¹

Sierra Leone is a fragile state, among the poorest in the world, still recovering from a devastating ten-year civil war that ended in 2002. The population of 6 million is about 70–80 percent Muslim, with a history of harmonious interreligious respect, mutual acceptance, and solidarity. Most people trust their imams, priests, or pastors to interpret the world around them. As one imam observed, over 75 percent of all Sierra Leoneans hear from their faith leaders at least once a week during worship and prayer services.

From 1997 to 2002, faith leaders played a critical role in ending the civil war, working through the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL).

Although uneven in its influence, the IRCSL played a significant role in facilitating an end to the war. Not only did IRCSL leaders capitalize on their longstanding reputations as respected leaders, but they used a unique set of tools unavailable to other groups to achieve their goals. From initiating public ceremonies with prayers to referencing the Bible and Koran in their individual negotiations, "religion" was instrumental—not incidental—in the IRCSL's success as a "neutral" peacebroker, at the end of the civil war.²

In June 2014, some leaders of the IRCSL reorganized to fight Ebola, leveraging the people's trust to lobby the government to act. Ebola was still considered a remote problem under control in isolated corners of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. The Rev. John K. Yambasu, the United Methodist bishop for Sierra Leone, foresaw the far-reaching repercussions of the epidemic and convened a more inclusive National Religious Leaders Task Force on Ebola, with some members of the IRCSL and nonmembers as well. "We all came together, imams and pastors, and trained in the area of basic Ebola prevention," Yambasu said. This task force encouraged the president to declare a national public health emergency on July 31, 2014, putting in place stringent measures to curb the Ebola outbreak.³

I was in Bo, Sierra Leone, in May 2014 to lead a World Vision workshop entitled "Christian and Muslim Cooperation for Child Health and Protection." World Vision trained and mobilized 50 imams and pastors from its 25 area development programs across the country to promote the well-being and protection of children,

recognizing that the good will and cooperation of Muslim and Christian faith leaders was essential to bring about needed change. These faith leaders would later swing into action against Ebola, reaching out to their paramount chiefs, the traditional leaders of clusters of small communities. Rapid community engagement by paramount chiefs with their chief imams and chief pastors/priests began to implement bylaws, codes of conduct, for behavior change to protect their communities from Ebola.

Meanwhile, infection rates skyrocketed across all three affected countries as WHO, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF [Doctors Without Borders]), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and numerous emergency medical agencies implemented a range of standard outbreak control measures to stop the epidemic.⁴ By late summer 2014 it had become clear that traditional burial practices with unprotected touching of corpses of Ebola victims, compounded by stiff resistance to clinical approaches to dead body disposal were spreading the virus. The religious convictions and cultural practices of families were being violated. "Paying last respects by praying as a family at the burial of a loved one is essential. Celebrating death by washing the body of the dead is a vital part of life. Our people believe there will be no rest for the soul without a proper burial. The spirit of the deceased hovers, provoking bad dreams, haunting the living." Bio-medical solutions promoted by international health organizations were not addressing the cultural, traditional, and religious aspects of the transmission and so not making the impact expected on the epidemic. "There was over-emphasis on establishing clinical ETUs [Ebola Treatment Units] for treatment. The people felt forgotten and de-humanized."⁵

Recognizing the need to change tactics, WHO asked the World Council of Churches (WCC) and UNAIDS to apply lessons from the HIV-AIDS crisis by mobilizing faith leaders to help create a new safe and dignified burial protocol for Ebola.⁶ Public health experts in WHO partnered with the International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to form an interdisciplinary working group with the WCC, Caritas, World Vision, and Islamic Relief to develop a new Safe and Dignified Burial standard operating procedure for Ebola.⁷ This was rapidly rolled out in October. World Vision, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and other faith-based organizations partnered with the Red Cross to manage these more religiously and culturally sensitive burials. This approach was important as part of the suite of measures that dramatically reduced infections and helped to put the epidemic in decline.

For almost 20 years, World Vision Sierra Leone has partnered with faith leaders and their communities—both Christian and Muslim—

as well as government ministries and fellow development organizations to improve health, education, food security, and protection for children.



Top: The Reverend Peter Kainwo (*right*), pastor of the United Brethren in Christ Church, and Alhaji Mustapha Alpha Koker, chief imam of Bo district (*left*), Sierra Leone, in a graveyard in Bo; *Middle:* Grave markers of a Christian and Muslim baby who died days apart in December 2014 in Bo; *Bottom:* Imam Koker and Rev. Kainwo celebrate a deep friendship and close collaboration (photos by Sahr Ngaujah).

Prior to Ebola, to support and enhance pioneering work of faith leaders in Sierra Leone, World Vision introduced Channels of Hope (CoH) to combat HIV-AIDS. CoH aims to transform and motivate faith leaders and their congregations to respond to tough issues that affect their communities. The CoH process addresses faith leaders' perceptions about especially volatile or taboo community issues; it equips them to break down walls of stigma and discrimination and respond with compassion, particularly to issues relating to children's well-being. Since the start of CoH for HIV in 2005, some 400,000 faith leaders and their community members have participated in more than 17,700 workshops, reaching every global region where World Vision operates.⁸

In late 2014, World Vision adapted the Channels of Hope methodology to address the ignorance, fear, hopelessness, and stigma about Ebola. World Vision Sierra Leone (WVSL) immediately began to train imams, pastors, priests, and traditional leaders to deliver life-saving information about Ebola across West Africa. By complementing bio-medical messages with informative messages of hope, faith leaders helped shift their followers' knowledge, attitudes and practices about Ebola, especially burial traditions.⁹

"We convinced people that, according to our respective faiths, it was theologically acceptable to lay aside certain traditions, such as washing the deceased, during this national emergency," explained Imam Alhaji Mustapha Alpha Koker, chair of the Muslim Council of Bo, an accredited Channels of Hope for Ebola trainer. "In the CoH workshops, we pointed out that the Qur'an tells us that warriors who died in battle were not washed before being buried. It helped people to know that they were abiding by their beliefs in not preparing their loved ones for burial as they would normally do."¹⁰ The Reverend Peter Kairwo, Pastor of the United Brethren in Christ, Bo, found the biblical basis for Channels of Hope guiding principles very powerful motivators for all the Christian leaders he trained in CoH Ebola. "The love of Christ compels us to care for all our neighbors."¹¹ Dr. Alhaji Sanyi Turay, the Bo District medical officer, described the impact of the faith leaders' work: "When faith leaders got involved in the fight against Ebola, it was a turning point. They convinced people in churches and mosques to stop touching and burying Ebola victims, who remain highly infectious."¹² Families of ill patients and the deceased were instructed to call the national 117 Ebola hotline, which would dispatch an ambulance or an official burial team.

"Channels of Hope gave us the opportunity to prove what we could do as religious leaders for this country," says Imam Koker. "The

program is unique because it is based on the divine scriptures of the Qur'an and the Bible."

Sierra Leonean faith leaders who attended World Vision CoH workshops reached more than 379,000 people over an eight-month period from November 2014 to July 2015, in partnership with Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, and local interreligious councils. A reported 18,840 focus groups on Ebola prevention and treatment were conducted by interreligious teams. Countless sermons were preached in churches and mosques. One measure of impact, in part, of this community engagement¹³ is that not one of over 58,000 sponsored children in World Vision programs, nor their families, were infected with Ebola.

The Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone is slowly ending, although the virus will remain. Continued vigilance will be vital once the country is declared Ebola-free. Recently, on my third trip to Sierra Leone, I met with several Christian and Muslim leaders trained in CoH Ebola, who had worked so diligently to protect their country. They are now planning to cooperate to reduce the incidence of early marriage, a major obstacle to girls' health and education in Sierra Leone. Working together on Ebola was so satisfying that they want to continue to build a better future for their children. Their enthusiasm and energy about the work remaining was impressive.

Sierra Leone is an important example of solidarity and social cohesion between Muslims and Christians in contrast to other nations in West Africa and globally.¹⁴ Over the last 20 years, when under existential threat, Muslim and Christian leaders have taken the initiative to unite and work together to save and rebuild Sierra Leone. In the late 1990s they led efforts to bring a decade-long civil war to an end in 2002. They battled together against malaria and cholera between 2008 and 2012. Over the last year they restored dignity to the dead and grieving, building trust in holistic bio-medical solutions to stop the Ebola epidemic. A challenge in the post-Ebola recovery will be not to take for granted mutual respect and tolerance, but to deepen and strengthen a more effective and inclusive interreligious platform while passing the torch to the next generation of Muslim and Christian leaders. 

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THE CHALLENGE OF ACCOMMODATION IN RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL INDIA



John Goldingay has established that ancient Israel did not deny that the other religions reflect truth about God. However, that does not lead to a conclusion that all religions are the same and that all paths lead to God. The First Testament was convinced that other religions are “always in need of the illumination that can come only from knowing what Yahweh has done with Israel.”

While pluralism is a rather new experience for the West, it is not for a Christian in India. Besides the various traditions that differ and even conflict with each other within Hinduism, an Indian Christian is also exposed to Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, and Baha’ism. This experience necessitates that an Indian Christian approach the issues differently than those who are in the West.

Any Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, or follower of one of the numerous eastern Gurus will be comfortable with the idea that there is some illumination or truth in other religions, including Christianity. This accommodation is fundamental to the Indian religious psyche. The most persuasive statement of this principle comes from Mahavir, the founder of Jainism, who proposed the principle of Anekāntavāda.¹ Anekāntavāda, roughly translated as “non-absolutism,” holds that truth is beyond human comprehension. According to Mahavir, truth claims are relative and partial. From this perspective, the understanding of a partial truth claim leads people to a lifelong quest for truth. This view is best explained by the parable of the elephant and the blind persons where each person describes an elephant through his or her partial experience. The problem is that the elephant is bigger than the partial explanations. The real picture emerges only when the blind people put all their narratives together.

Since all truth claims including one’s own can be regarded as partial and biased, other truth claims can be tolerated in a similar way—as part of the complete truth. Without the partial truth of others, one’s own truth will remain partial. However, despite these limitations they are useful as essential building blocks for constructing the whole. This led Swami Vivekananda, one of India’s great thinkers, to say, “Let noble truths come to us from all corners.” For the Indian mind, truth claims of other religions are not threatening but enriching. Another 20th-century example

is Mahatma Gandhi, who titled his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*. The Hindu mind is set on a never-ending search for truth. Truth is something that can be pursued, experimented with and explored.

So, principles of accommodation make life easy for an Indian Christian in a pluralistic Indian society. I am not ignoring that there is opposition to the preaching of the gospel in India. I am only looking at the philosophical aspect of the issue and not the political realities. However, the latter points out a significant challenge in relation to the second aspect of Goldingay’s proposition: “these religions [are] always in need of the illumination that can come only from knowing what Yahweh has done with Israel.” I am not questioning the validity of Goldingay’s finding, but trying to highlight the challenges it poses to a Christian in a pluralistic society.

From an Indian perspective, this exclusive claim of the Bible and thus of Christianity turns out to be patronizing. It is a claim of superiority, which the Hindu mind finds difficult to tolerate. The situation in a pluralistic society like India is different from that of Mars Hill of Paul’s time. Paul took advantage of ignorance explicit in the Greek religions when he said, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23 ESV). But in the pluralistic landscape of India there are no gaps to fill—there is only room for enriching each other. So, we need to find some way of connecting Christian faith narratives with those of others. They should be connected in such a way that they lead to the God of the Bible who calls people to him through Jesus Christ.

There are two possible ways of connecting our religious discourses depending on what type of conjunctions one would like to use. The choice seems to be between “no, but” or “yes, and.” The first choice is to see a discontinuity between world religions and Christianity. The second is to see Christianity as the fulfillment of human longing that other religions witness to. Indian Christian theologians reflecting on the Indian religious plurality have been on both sides of this divide. EIFD

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BEYOND TEXTUAL AND DISCURSIVE DIALOGUE IN EASTLEIGH, NAIROBI



The Centre for Christian Muslim Relations in Eastleigh, Nairobi, was established in 2010 through an initiative of the faculty of theology at St. Paul's University, Kenya. The centre was envisioned as a space where students, academic staff, and practitioners in the field of interfaith relations would engage with theory and practice. This brief article will reflect on some of the ways in which we have engaged with interfaith questions in a real existential context.

Over the years there have been various formal dialogues held in different parts of the world between Muslims and Christians. Before focusing our on present activities in Eastleigh, it may be helpful to offer a brief history of dialogue and diapraxis within this context. Some of the earliest recorded attempts at formal dialogues in Eastleigh go back to 1973. These events were organized by an American Mennonite by the name of David Shenk who first worked in Somalia from 1963 under the umbrella of Eastern Mennonite Missions. However, a Marxist revolution forced him and his wife, Grace, and their two daughters to migrate to Kenya in 1973, where they settled in the Eastleigh section of Nairobi "so as to be within the Muslim community."¹ Shenk immersed himself in the life of Eastleigh through participation in dialogues and through hospitality. In his book *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church*, Shenk reports:

A Qadiriyya Sufi mosque was across the street from us. Our home provided a setting for dialogue with Muslims, including key leaders. We would remove all the chairs from our living room, sit on mats in a circle, and drink tea as we conversed earnestly about God and faith and truth and the Qur'an and Muhammad and Jesus and salvation.²

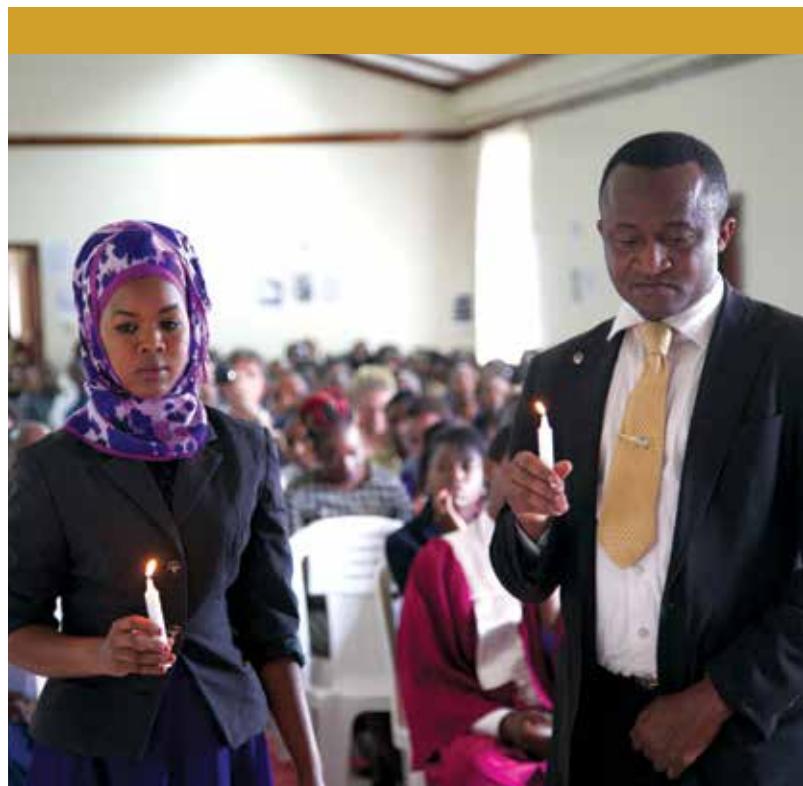
The above approach to dialogue was complemented by the production of texts referred to as "a Bible study series that engaged the Islamic worldview and addressed misunderstandings and objections Muslims have concerning the Christian faith."³ These courses, entitled *The People of God*, are still taking place and are widely distributed to Muslims throughout East Africa.

An important development in Shenk's conversation with Muslims was a long-term dialogue with Prof. Badru D. Kateregga. At the time, both Shenk and Kateregga were teaching at Kenyatta University College of the University of Nairobi. They debated

and discussed doctrinal issues together as their students listened and watched.⁴ These conversations were later published in the book *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*.

To be sure, the legacy of Shenk's encounter with Muslims was not limited to formal dialogues. His approach also involved social action that was very much driven by Shenk and his Christian counterparts. Thus, according to Ahmed Ali Haile, a Somali Muslim convert to Christianity who spent some time at the Centre: "The Mennonites had rented a five-apartment complex on Eighth Street in Eastleigh intending to develop the facility into a community centre. In the meantime they had opened a reading room and library."⁵

During the 1980s and 1990s, the conceptualization and practice of dialogue has shifted from a more formal orientation (from "above") to a renewed emphasis on a practice approach (from "below") that entails cooperation in joint issues for the common good. Rasmussen has referred to this approach as "a dialogue of commitment through practice."⁶



Eastleigh is a suburb east of Nairobi that is largely inhabited by Somali Muslims. However, there are also Oromo, Sudanese, Eritreans, and Congolese immigrants in this large area. The number of residents in Eastleigh varies depending on the source of information. According to Refuge Point (2011) there are 100,000 people living in Eastleigh. However, the Daily Nation, September 26, 2010, stated that around 300,000 people occupy this area. The fluid nature of immigrants in Eastleigh contributes to the difficulty getting exact demographics of the area. Religious demographics are even harder to come by because of the Kenyan government policy not to include this category during a census since it has been so contested. Because of the immigrant/refugee origins of much of the population, significant poverty issues exist that exacerbate tensions between Muslims and Christians and also within the various groups there.

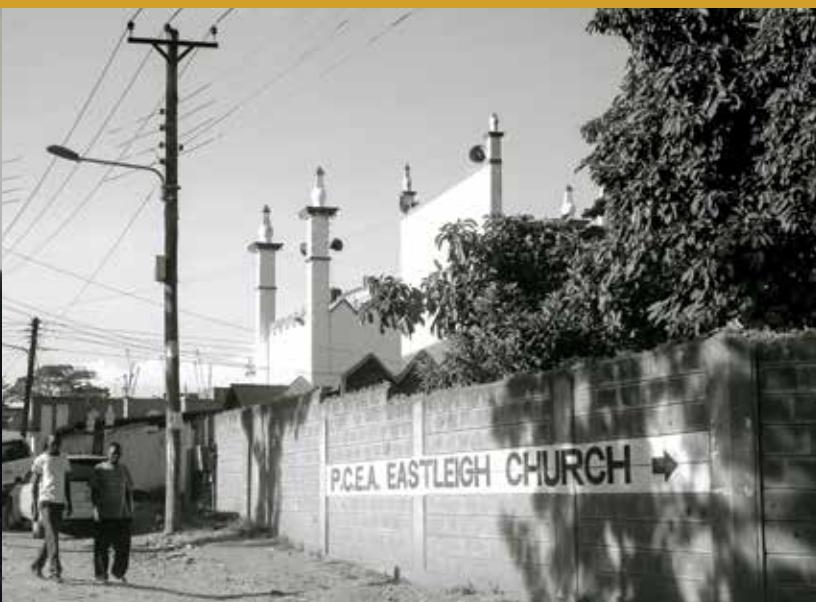
The context of Eastleigh, Nairobi, required dialogue through practice because of the tension that abounds between Muslims and Christians and the socio-economic conditions of the area. Similar to but also varying from Shenk's approach, is the centre's new emphasis in encountering Muslims through joint practice, while not overlooking other forms of engagement. Eastleigh's increasingly polarized environment calls for more imagination in the encounters between members of the two traditions.

Towards a Diapraxis Model of Interfaith Engagement

It is no longer sufficient for religious traditions to merely talk about their respective theological beliefs. We therefore encourage Muslims and Christians in Eastleigh to engage in joint action on matters of common concern in order to contribute towards social transformation. The activities that Christians are involved in are largely determined by the social, economic, and political needs of the residents of Eastleigh. The following examples illustrate areas of joint action on matters of common concern.

Networking

In order to create possibilities for joint action with Muslims in Eastleigh, one must get to know them and establish bonds of trust. Therefore, right from its inception, CCMRE's focus on networking with Muslim groups and individuals has continued to be one of its major activities. On November 22, 2011, the centre got in touch with the Somali Embassy Attaché of Culture and Higher Education, Mr. Abdirizak M. Diriye. This culminated in a meeting between St. Paul's University officials and the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Abdiqader Sheikh Ali at the embassy, where issues of collaboration between the embassy and the Centre were discussed. Of particular interest to the minister was how post-war Somalis could benefit from the Masters of Arts in Development



Left: An interfaith worship service organized by the Centre for Christian Muslim Relations in Eastleigh, following the tragic April 2015 Garissa University attack in Kenya; *Middle:* A street in Eastleigh, showing a church side by side with a mosque; *Right:* Visit by faculty of Islam and Christian Muslim Relations at St. Paul's University to the 3rd Street Mosque and Zahra Islamic healing Centre (photos by Azornu Why).

“Perhaps the most abiding joint activity among Muslims and Christians at the CCMRE has not been in the formal activities but in the spontaneous sharing of friendship over a soda or a meal of rice and goat meat. This has often led to strong friendship and enriching conversations that continue until today. In contrast to the common stereotypes of Eastleigh as a dangerous place to be avoided, it is always fulfilling to find Muslims and Christians sitting together at the Eastleigh Fellowship Centre, sharing life.”

place during the month of November 2013 and the “Faith in the Media” workshop that was held November 1–2, 2013. The mapping project has been exhaustively documented in the book *Mapping Eastleigh for Christian-Muslim Relations*.⁷

The objective of the mapping exercise was to jointly study Eastleigh’s spatiality by Christians and Muslims as a “lived experience” and “understand together how mapping the commonly shared space can enhance our insights into Christian-Muslim Relations.”⁸ The significance of the mapping exercise went beyond the map-drawing of the Eastleigh space. According to Peters,

We were interested in the mapping behavior itself and how such behavior can impact our own perceptions, especially with regards to Christian-Muslim relations. The underlying hypothesis in such an approach was that an existential and phenomenological engagement with place can have a transformative impact on our earlier perceptions.⁹

Among the most significant findings of this exercise was that it radically transformed the mappers’ perceptions. Thus, according to Peters,

Twenty-three out of twenty-four of the members of the teams, regardless of their faith, were surprised to see how their perceptions of Christian-Muslim relations changed from negative to positive after mapping Eastleigh.¹⁰

On November 1–2, 2013, CCMRE organized a workshop entitled “Faith in the Media.” The event focused on the role of the media in fostering positive interfaith relations through objective coverage of religious issues. Over fifty journalists from the horn of Africa, Muslim and Christian leaders, as well as youth attended this event, which culminated in a document on best practices in the media’s reporting of religious topics.

Providing Learning Space

A critical mission of CCMRE is to provide a platform for academic and practical learning engagements between Muslims and Christians. Here the centre’s vision is to identify, test, and evaluate the various approaches and concepts in interreligious and intercultural dialogue and to attempt to apply them in various contexts. Towards the attainment of this mission and vision, we have hosted numerous local and international scholars who have participated in our activities. Scholars from Emory Divinity School, Tilburgh University, University of Rostock (Germany), Columbia Theological Seminary (USA), St. Paul’s University (Kenya), Moi University (Kenya), University of Nairobi (Kenya), Egerton University, and Tangaza University College, among others, have used the centre as a base for their research by participating in our activities. The centre has also hosted various practitioners in interfaith

Studies offered at St. Paul’s. As a result of the networking activities of the centre, contacts have been made with numerous Muslim individuals and institutions, such as teachers with local *madrassas* and mosques, as well as public preachers in Eastleigh. The Centre has also made contacts with Christian institutions such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastleigh, the Roman Catholic St. Teresa’s Church, the Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM), who have considerable experience working in the area, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, who run a centre, and the Eastleigh Fellowship Centre, who host us. Other institutions with which we have made contacts include Kituo cha Sheria (Legal Centre), Rugta Maskaxda (Centre for the Arts), Mama Fatuma Good Will Centre, and the College of Shariah and Islamic Studies. International groups include the Initiatives for Change (Netherlands), Emory University (USA), and the African Study Centre (Germany).

Joint Activities

Numerous joint activities between Muslims and Christians have been conducted through the centre. These include exposure tours for guests around Eastleigh, watching films and participation in joint reflection, participation in common spirituality practices such as prayers, sharing a common meal, a mapping project, and workshops on religion and media, among others. I would like to focus on two of these initiatives: the mapping project that took

dialogue such as the world-renowned Pastor James Wuye and Imam Mohammed Ashaf of Nigeria, former members of competing militias in Nigeria who experienced personal transformations through their friendship and now work cooperatively to head the interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria. The Centre has also hosted street preachers of Eastleigh, imams of local mosques, and madrassa teachers, as well as others. As a result of their engagements with us, participants have exchanged ideas and best practices, contributing immensely to their learning.

Sharing in Common Spirituality

During all our joint activities between Muslims and Christians, we begin and end with prayers from the two traditions. Sometimes one tradition leads the opening prayer before the activities begin while the other offers a closing prayer. In March 2013, a group of more than thirty Muslims and Christians gathered at the Centre's offices and had prayers with both Muslims and Christians focusing on the forthcoming general elections. Since the hotly contested, previous election in 2007 led to serious violence in which more than 1000 people were killed and badly injured as well as property destroyed, Muslims and Christians in Eastleigh felt that it was important for members of the two faith communities come together to pray. In addition to the prayers, religious leaders from both traditions offered reflections on the elections based on the Bible and the Qur'an. The very presence of Christians and Muslims in the act of joint worship created an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding. It also affirmed the great value of diapraxis at the level of spirituality, in coming to know and understand people of other faiths as people of prayer and spiritual practice, as fellow seekers and pilgrims for peace and justice. It affirmed that the Spirit of God works beyond the Christian or Muslim compounds and across the frontiers of religion, ushering us into the struggles of the world.

Sharing Hospitality

Perhaps the most abiding joint activity among Muslims and Christians at the CCMRE has not been in the formal activities but in the spontaneous sharing of friendship over a soda or a meal of rice and goat meat. This has often led to strong friendship and enriching conversations that continue until today. In contrast to the common stereotypes of Eastleigh as a dangerous place to be avoided, it is always fulfilling to find Muslims and Christians sitting together at the Eastleigh Fellowship Centre, sharing life. These occasions have frequently resulted in dialogue about common challenges faced and the doctrinal issues that so divide the two communities as well as those that bring them together.

Challenges Faced

CCMRE has broken new ground in the area of Christian-Muslim relations in the region. Numerous networks and joint activities have been undertaken, all aimed at creating space for positive encounter and transformation in Eastleigh. However, the project has not been without its challenges, which I would like to briefly describe.

The changing context of Eastleigh characterized by the ongoing tension and violence has been a continuing challenge for the project. On several occasions we have had to suspend going to Eastleigh for security reasons. Yet these events have also continued to be a reminder that our agenda for Eastleigh—that of building peaceful community relations—is yet to be fully accomplished.

From its inception the project aimed to bring on board in equal measure participants from both the Christian and Muslim traditions. This would effectively embody the positive spirit of cooperation that such a project needs. Although we have very good Muslim partners, most of the initiatives have been conceptualized and operationalized by Christians. Perhaps this state of affairs can be explained by the fact that the idea of CCMRE was first born in a Christian ecumenical institution. We feel that this needs to be rectified by bringing more Muslims into the decision-making level of the project.

Lastly, CCMRE relies fully on funding from our partners abroad. Although we are grateful for this support, it raises the challenge of the project's future sustainability. We need to pursue more avenues for both local and international support for the project.

Conclusion

This contribution has reflected on diapraxis as a way of interreligious encounter in Eastleigh. It has argued that although dialogue has been used in the past as a form of encounter, diapraxis offers new opportunities for engagement. The practice of diapraxis opens new and surprising doors for interreligious encounters. In contexts of great unrest and tension such as in Eastleigh, this approach also contributes in practical ways towards the transformation of the community, opening doors for other forms of engagement. 

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ANDREW SMITH

Andrew Smith is the director of interfaith relations for the Bishop of Birmingham.

BETWEEN MANDIRS AND MOSQUES: Engaging People of Other Faiths in the UK



I currently hold the post of director of interfaith relations to the Bishop of Birmingham, a city and region which is complex in its “superdiversity,” with citizens from over 185 nationalities and all branches of the major religions represented (and most of the smaller ones too). Consequently, working out how to live as God’s people in this cultural and religious melee is one of the most urgent tasks for the church, yet one that is too often addressed in simplistic terms with appeals to proof-texts with little regard for the depth of scriptural resources we can draw on.

My work often involves giving evangelical Christians a taste of life and ministry in Birmingham, and this usually involves walking down a crowded shopping street where being white and Christian means you stand out and feel very much in the minority. We also visit places of worship, including mosques and mandirs (Hindu Temples), and regularly arrange visits to coincide with prayer time—when there are services taking place, we do not participate, but rather observe neighbors (and friends) of other faiths in worship.

For many evangelicals the visit to the mandir is by far the most challenging. Mosques tend to be quiet and have fairly plain rooms where reading a holy book and prayer is the focus. There is a certain familiarity despite the obvious differences such as the absence of chairs and the almost exclusively male worshippers. However, the mandir is full of color, with people making offerings of food, milk, and money to a range of deities, and the worship time including chanting, bells, burning incense and oil lamps. We are clearly somewhere very “other,” with few points of reference to connect with.

These encounters raise many questions for the participants and evoke a wide range of responses from anxiety to wonder, from confusion to enrichment. Inevitably questions about idol worship and foreign gods come to the fore, with groups expressing a wide range of views and often turning to favorite biblical passages to reinforce their view of what they have encountered.

Goldingay's article on how the First Testament looks at other religions presents some helpful insights that speak into our current

context, and in many ways reflect the questions people have with any form of interfaith engagement. By starting in the early chapters of Genesis, Goldingay highlights, what I believe, to be one of the great tensions the Bible holds for us: the universality of God’s salvation and the exclusivity by which it was expressed through the people of Israel. As he makes clear, other religions are not to be written off as demonic, yet neither are they equally valid insights into the truth about God.

Goldingay goes on to make the observation that, in the First Testament, criticism, and even condemnation, of other religions is focused on their moral and social behavior rather than their belief in the wrong gods. If we accept this premise, then our engagement with people of other faiths can be framed around



The Feast is a Christian charity based in Birmingham in the UK, working to promote community cohesion between Christian and Muslim young people. The picture was taken at one of the youth encounter programs (photo by Natasha Griffith).

challenging injustice or unethical behavior wherever it is found, whether within religious groups or in other institutions. This kind of coworking is creating interest between different faiths in Birmingham and leading to interesting projects, particularly around issues of tackling poverty, working with asylum seekers and the homeless. Programs such as Near Neighbours, which is a government-funded projects run through the Church Urban Fund, has done much to promote this way enabling people of different faiths to work together.¹

While this can seem like a very positive way forward, the passages highlighted by Goldingay also present challenges for us. He argues that the reason people were not condemned for worshipping other gods was because it was futile since the gods were regarded as impotent and simply could not save. If we hold this belief in relation to the Hindus, Sikhs, or Muslims that we meet, any discussion of faith becomes deeply problematic. One of the criticisms I hear, particularly from Hindus is, “Why are Christians so arrogant in relation to other faiths?” Why do we insist on exclusivity and, consequently, have a focus on evangelism? Clearly biblical texts such as these Goldingay writes about can lead to a belief that

we alone are worshipping the one true God, and therefore, to an arrogance or dismissiveness towards the beliefs and practices of others. Gupta's article on the New Testament sheds some light on how Jesus negotiated this terrain. Gupta points out that Jesus was able to affirm the faith of, and to be seen with, non-Jews or “pagans” without denying or compromising who he was and his message. He cites Moberly's argument that the gospel of Jesus is not to win arguments against others but to bear witness to life in Jesus.

Learning to speak well of our faith in a way that maintains our integrity as well as making sense to others, and without being critical of them, is a vital and challenging task. This is not to say that we cannot critique or question others, but rather, the question is how to do it in a way that does not simply dismiss sincerely held beliefs that others find enriching and life enhancing. Gupta draws our attention to Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, highlighting that Jesus did not dismiss her or speak arrogantly, but instead came in vulnerability and engaged in discussion drawing out her thoughts, concerns, and beliefs. Jesus, as



The Faithful Neighbourhood Centre (FNC) exists to (1) provide a space where people of all faiths and none can meet one another; (2) resource people living in a diverse society; (3) support people as they discover ways of working together to improve and strengthen their local areas.

Gupta rightly points out, was not compromised (i.e., he did affirm that salvation is from the Jews) because his concern was for right worship, leaving the way open for her to be included in the worship of the father in spirit and truth. His conversation with her is not about contrasting truth claims in order to score points. But is rather the sharing of a rich vision of final redemption.

This story gives us an exemplar for how we can effectively discuss faith with those of other faiths. We can move away from a competitive approach where each tries to prove the validity of one's own argument to a discussion about the vision for humanity and the world as revealed through different faith traditions. In Birmingham, this approach has been adopted by The Feast² in its work with Christian and Muslim young people and through the Birmingham Conversations,³ which seeks to create space for people of all faiths to discuss some of the really controversial and challenging issues facing people of faith in society today.

While engaging people of other faiths is a daily reality for many people in Birmingham as well as other towns and cities in the UK, there are still many areas where Christians, agnostics, or secular people represent the predominant groups. Yet through the media, both traditional and social, one cannot but help be aware of the presence of other faiths in our society. How we relate to these fellow citizens will be an increasing challenge for the church. The way both Goldingay and Gupta have engaged with biblical texts is a helpful way for us to reflect on this most vital—and exciting—of tasks. EIFD

Dr. Andrew Smith is the director of interfaith relations for the Bishop of Birmingham and is the founder and chair of trustees of The Feast, a charity working with young people of different faiths. He has been involved in interfaith work for 20 years and has written and spoken on the subject frequently. He was recently made an honorary lay canon at St. Philip's Cathedral in Birmingham.



BILL HEERSINK

Bill Heersink is a pastor and as a professor of intercultural studies at Salt Lake Theological Seminary.

STORYTELLING WITH REFUGEES IN UTAH



The story of my life in Christian ministry could be summed up as hearing and telling stories—listening to stories of other people and then relating the story of Jesus so that in some way they can link theirs with his. I have especially enjoyed this challenge when the stories I have heard come from a faith perspective different from my own.

During my seminary days and while pastoring a church in Arizona, I dreamed about serving in a foreign country, perhaps Peru or Nepal. But the answer to my prayers was not to be some far off exotic place, rather, a move just one state to the north. The mountains I have looked up to are not the Andes or Himalayas, but the Wasatch Range in Utah. So a good number of the stories I have heard over the past forty years have come from those with a Latter-day Saint background. In recent years, however, Latino immigrants from countries like Peru and refugees from camps in Nepal, along with people from many other Asian and African nations, have been coming to Utah in significant numbers. And this has given me many opportunities to interact with Hindus from Bhutan and Muslims from Iraq.

Mindful of this story-characterization of ministry experience, I immediately resonated with the prominence John Goldingay gives to the narrative nature of biblical faith and its relevance for religious dialogue. That same emphasis emerges in the other lead article when Nijay Gupta notes Lesslie Newbigin's insistence that the focus for interfaith dialogue must be the story that conveys the meaning and goal for our lives as humans. Following the quotation cited by Gupta, Newbigin continues: "Therefore, the essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible."¹

To engage meaningfully in that level of storytelling requires trusting relationships. In my experience, the simplest and easiest way to cultivate such relationships is by an exchange of "lesser" stories—stories of a shallower though not necessarily insignificant nature. For example, with Latter-day Saints the question, "Have you lived most of your life in Utah?" seems superficial and safe, yet it has often opened opportunities for them to relate a lot about their Mormon roots, which can often go back to their ancestors who

came as refugees from persecution in the Midwest. I in turn can reciprocate with stories from my religious background and identity. Given their propensity to hospitality, "get-acquainted" conversations with Iraqis and the Bhutanese have frequently taken place in their homes over a cup of tea or some other beverage. The mere extension and acceptance of their invitation creates a context of trust, and conversation flows easily from food preparations and preferences to stories about making adjustments in a new environment.

Refugees arrive with stories for which I have no parallel to tell. Whether it has been years in a crowded camp or a recent flight from violence, life has been harsh, hazardous, and not infrequently traumatic. I can only listen, but an empathetic ear does enhance trust.

With Iraqis there is at least one event to which we both relate even though our involvements in it are hardly comparable—the United States' invasion of their homeland. To hear (and tell) the differing perspectives on this event has been most fascinating. Saad is a Shiite who wholeheartedly welcomed the invasion; he served as the bureau chief for the USA-backed news agency in Baghdad until seized and nearly executed by a militia. Azad, a Sunni, was a general in Saddam Hussein's army who fled to Egypt when the Ba'athist government was overthrown; he had long believed that without a forceful, strong-armed leader, chaos would reign. Suhad, a young woman who knows both men well, shakes her head and asks, "What's your choice—freedom or stability?" Salim, a construction contractor, mourns the current corruption that undermined his Baghdad skyscraper building business. And Muhammad Rasheed can relate his experiences from a Kurdish, northern Iraq perspective.

While such stories hardly qualify as interfaith dialogue, they do begin to deal with values and issues that one's faith informs. Such stories also open the door to exposing our deepest hopes and fears, and when trust reaches a level for that to take place, authentic interfaith dialogue can happen. There may be, to be sure, intermediate steps. It feels less threatening, for example, to relate to some aspect of our religious rituals, as in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (the dialogue model Gupta utilizes). Salim invited

my wife and me to share in the breaking of the fast with his family during Ramadan. Dina Rizal, a Hindu of the Brahman caste, welcomed us to join his family sitting in a circle on the floor as a priest read from Sanskrit parchments, a ceremony blessing Dina's daughter's on her fourth birthday.

Stories from the Qur'an, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Book of Mormon, or the Bible can be told in ways that do not involve us directly or personally. The same could be said for anecdotes from our faith community or an account of a close relative's faith journey.

All the above "lesser" stories could be interpreted as evasions or an avoidance of the "essential" story Newbigin says should be a Christian's contribution to the dialogue. I would rather agree with Gupta and see them as stepping-stones, "positive contributions on the way toward embracing the Christian gospel, rather than simply obstacles." Attentive listening to accounts of the traditions, scriptures, experiences, and even (or especially) the "essential" story of someone from a different faith can enable us to tell the gospel story in a more engaging way.

This listening is not the sort that is preoccupied with finding flaws and faults and making mental notes for a rebuttal or refutation. I fear this has been the predominant approach in many evangelical dialogues with Mormons. For example, I have read countless articles and newsletters that seek to detail and document discrepancies in Mormon history, inconsistencies in their theology, the folly of certain customs, or hypocrisy in their lifestyle. And I know how tempting it can be to use this material trying to win arguments and establish the superiority of my faith. But this does not win friends or followers of Jesus; it is not the more engaging way. Both lead articles note how both Testaments discourage this. Goldingay points us to the "Yahweh's witnesses" texts in Isaiah 40–55: "The prophet did not encourage Israel to compare its religion with the Babylonians' and feel superior." Gupta explains what Jesus did in dialogue with the woman at the well, noting we should "deconstruct the compare-contrast approach."

To what then should we be attending as we as listen? I believe we are to attempt to see life as our dialogue partners are seeing it, and to seek to be sensitive to those longings for which they are seeking fulfillment in their faith. To be sure, we must not assume we can read minds or interpret emotions, but we can express what we perceive and ask if we are anywhere near accurate. Empathetic listening can enable us to tell the Jesus Story in a way that he engages them at the point of those longings.

I am struck by how ready the people I relate to are to talk about Jesus. Mormons, of course, assert that they are "the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." And over the forty plus years I have lived among them, I believe many have become increasingly conscious that the central message of their Book of Mormon is the grace Jesus offers and that relating to him must have a center place in their religious quest. I have also been surprised by the high regard given to Jesus in the Qur'an. And in the Bhagavad-Gita, the central character, Krishna, appears to be a Jesus-like figure coming as a god incarnate and a wise counselor/teacher as he talks with Prince Arjuna and drives his chariot. This is not to minimize the significance of who Jesus Christ is according to the biblical story, but to take note that talk about Jesus is neither a novel notion nor a taboo topic.

How then can I best tell "the Story"? To begin with, I do not feel compelled to pause and point out where the Qur'an, Book of Mormon, or a Krishna character gets it wrong, nor at those key points to inflect my voice in such a way so as to be sure they do not miss the correct account. I agree with both Goldingay and Gupta that the Christian gospel will have an excluding edge, but at this juncture my hope is that my listeners will feel they are included in the story—God's love in Jesus is for them too—and not be put back on their heels, feeling they must defend their variation of the story.

There are other means for communicating the story without my being the one to tell it. The Jesus Film Project has translations of their video dramatizing the Gospel of Luke in both Arabic and Nepali, the languages spoken by my refugee friends. I also found an Arabic translation of Luke that is especially sensitive to Middle Eastern Culture. I wrote a short tract based on John 3:16 which Subash, a Bhutanese Christian friend, translated into Nepali. I have handed these out and trust the Spirit is using them.

Still, dialoging in person has advantages. It makes possible a highlighting of those aspects of all God has done in Christ that most meaningfully relate to friends who have trusted me enough to share their deeper hopes and fears. Also, I can then relate the story of how I came to find my place in the Jesus Story and how they too may be included. EIFD

Bill Heersink has lived with his wife, Claire, in Utah for over thirty years, working as a pastor and as a professor of intercultural studies at Salt Lake Theological Seminary.

SAMUEL LIVINGWAY (*Pseudonym*)

Samuel Livingway currently lives with his family in the Middle East.

MUSLIMS AND FOLLOWERS OF JESUS READING THE FIRST TESTAMENT



John Goldingay's lucid and comprehensive overview of the First Testament's perspectives regarding and the God of Israel's interaction with other religions is reflective, not only of the author's depth, but more importantly of the God who "tabernacled" as a human and with humans. Goldingay's summary is reflective of the text itself and is therefore redemptive.

The clear delimitation of Yahweh's special revelation balanced with the honor and respect given to the man who was created in his image touches at the heart of God throughout salvation history. By defining the "exclusive" elements present in the First Testament as an intentional calling to fulfillment, Goldingay has reframed those passages of Scripture that sometimes are used by adherents of either Judaism or Christianity as justification for exclusiveness. By reframing those corrective elements found in the First Testament as ways that God was acting to help those created in his image fulfill their purpose and be the best that they can be (regardless of their religious background), we begin to see "boundaries" and "discipline" and "commandments" and "exclusiveness" from a different perspective. It is not as if God is above saying, "do this or else you are out." Rather, God is indicating that if we live by his prerogatives and his plan we will fulfill our purpose and live "long lives" to our fullest.

In moving from "Perspectives from Creation" and an overview of Genesis 1–11, which Goldingay describes as the story of all humanity, to "Perspectives from the Stories of Israel's Ancestors" and Genesis 12–50, and on to the Exodus and Sinai, we see how the Yahwists could incorporate the understanding of El, a Canaanite deity, and ultimately reject the beliefs and practices of idolatrous Canaanite religion, which was for the benefit of the Canaanites themselves.

I have been working closely with Muslims for the past twelve years and living among them in the Middle East for the past seven. One question that Christians (i.e., Western and non-Arab Christians) ask regularly is about the name of God in the Qur'an, Allah. Many Christians wonder if, in Arabic, it is okay for followers of Christ to

use this name for God. The answer I give is "yes." Etymologically, it is the name for God that was used before Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, was born. It is also the name by which all major Christian translations of the Bible into Arabic have used for God. Historically, it has been the only name for God in Arabic.

Theologically, like the name El in the First Testament, it needs to be filled with the meaning and content as revealed in the First and Second Testaments.¹

Living in the Middle East and regularly having spiritual discussions with Muslims, some of whom have chosen to follow Christ, has provided many opportunities for reflection on sections of the Hebrew Scriptures. One period of Israel's story that is particularly interesting for Muslims is the narrative of Joshua and Israel entering the land of Canaan. Because of the current conversations among Muslims concerning violence and whether or not it is sanctioned, the stories that deal with killing in the book of Joshua peak their interest.

One day, two Muslims (one of whom has embraced Jesus as savior, and the other who is very close to doing so) and two of us Christians were discussing the book of Joshua. The question was asked, "Why did God command the killing of people *and animals* in the book of Joshua?" The real question was "Why kill the animals?" As we pondered, I postulated, and am still asking this question (to which I would appreciate knowing if there is any supporting scholarship): Perhaps the people of Canaan, who had been worshipping their Baals for 400 years without the benefit of insight concerning Yahweh, had their chance to repent. Perhaps, as Goldingay indicates, "there are hints that at certain stages Yahweh could have been worshiped under the name Baal" (p. 6) and there were those Canaanites, like Rahab in one of the earliest encounters between the people of Israel and the Canaanites, who acknowledged the Almighty God. EIFD

With 23 years in ministry, Samuel Livingway (MDiv, Fuller Theological Seminary; ThM, Princeton Theological Seminary) started sharing the gospel with Muslims in 2003. In 2008 he and his family moved to the Middle East, where they currently live, and have seen dozens experience new life in Christ. Currently he and some local believers are using social media to spark a spiritual Arab Spring with Jesus at the center.



JEFFREY BOS

Jeffrey Bos is a theological educator and leadership developer with Christian Reformed World Missions.

WHOSE SCRIPTURE IS IT ANYWAY?



"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). With these words of Simon Peter to Jesus, my students and I started every session of a course on biblical interpretation at the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh.

Unlike Peter, who could turn face to face with Jesus to seek the words of eternal life, Protestant and evangelical Christians now turn to the codified words of the Bible, comprised of the two testaments, while seeking those same words of eternal life. If, as Christians profess, Christ is the Word of God, then how do we draw near to Christ? How are our practices forming us? I wanted to inquire with my students into our Christian identity by attending to the practice of reading Scripture.

As a community of interpreters, the students and I turned the pages of the codex and clicked on the text not to find the absolute answers but to find the questions that God is asking us here and now. We sought to turn toward Christ through our practices of engaging Scripture. On the first day of class, I had warned the students that this course would not be about the Bible or even what the Bible says, but an inquiry into what we do when we study, hear, meditate, pray, or sing the words of the Bible, and what the Bible does to us when we engage in these practices.

Frankly, I did not know what I was doing, but I knew that I wanted to do things differently to find a way around merely asking, "What does the Bible say about this or that?" I wanted to move beyond the disputes over differing interpretations. So, in this course, I sought to lead the students on an exploration and questioning of our Christian faith and the practices that surround our attempt to interpret, understand, and apply the book containing the words of eternal life in the unique context, culture, and language of Bangladesh. My sense is that it is not just "what" we learned that is significant, but the process of learning and relationships we have to those "with" and "from whom" we learned. To *whom* shall we go?

My own attempt to understand myself, my identity, and the Christian faith has led me in a hermeneutical venture deep into relations with persons from other religious communities. However, my interreligious experience, attempts to connect with others in meaningful conversation and engage in dialogue, often lead me into places where the options to respond can be characterized

as receptivity and vulnerability. A serendipitous meeting with Father David Burrell and his abiding mentorship have sustained me in this quest for self-understanding that reaches beyond the confines and comfort zone of my own religious community.

In my response, as it is profoundly shaped by my experience in Bangladesh, I want to problematize the Christian claim to the Bible and the notion of *sola scriptura* by posing the question "To whom does Scripture belong?" through a sharing about the practice of scriptural reasoning.¹ I do this in an ongoing effort to uncover who we are and to *whom* we should go.

“Unlike Peter, who could turn face to face with Jesus to seek the words of eternal life, Protestant and evangelical Christians now turn to the codified words of the Bible, comprised of the two testaments, while seeking those same words of eternal life.”

As Gupta claims, "The pagans will surprise you!" Rather than "drawing a line in the sand to keep the pagans away from Jesus," why not go to those very others who stand outside of the Christian community to find Jesus, to learn from others how to follow Christ, and to read anew the words of *our* Scripture. While we may have faith in Scripture alone, it is not only Christians alone who have faith in the Bible. Others, for example, in Bangladesh, are also reading the Bible. Segments of both Testaments are claimed and revered by Muslims. The gospel of Jesus has even been embraced by some Hindus, including Mahatma Gandhi. So if others are already reading our Scripture, why not be intentional about sharing our Scripture and read it together?

What if coming to an understanding of religious identity requires knowing and learning about oneself in community with others outside one's own religious tradition? As Merold Westphal (2009) wrote, "the (ongoing) formation of pastors should include learning the hermeneutical humility that recognizes the limits of one's own tradition by learning to recognize and treasure the resources found in other traditions."² When we listen to the religious traditions and sacred texts as others hold them, cultivate interreligious dialogue and conversations across religious boundaries, and forge friendships with others, we enter into mutual and liminal spaces of ongoing dialogue and interpretation.

Since last year, I have been involved in organizing interreligious dialogues among Muslims, Christians, and Hindus using an adaptation of the Scriptural Reasoning approach with a group of college and university students working as volunteers of the social welfare organization, Shanti Mitra (Friends of Peace) founded by the Taizé community, located in Mymensingh, Bangladesh.³ The group is exploratory and will provide a basis for my dissertation research related to interreligious dialogue and religious learning. Shanti Mitra has sought to involve youth from diverse religious communities in religiously neutral peace-building activities. However, the staff is finding this increasingly untenable, especially given communal violence among religions and the dubious, political use of religion leading up to and following the 2015 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh.

A driving question of this project is posed by David Ford: "As conflict related to religions threatens to destroy our world, how might particular faiths come together to draw on their resources for mutual understanding and peacemaking?"⁴ Similarly, David Burrell asks: "If religious traditions, taken singly, have proven ineffectual in responding to violence committed in their name, could it be that persons from others traditions may empower persons to be critical of the distortions of their own traditions, as well as help us discover our respective resources for peace?"⁵

Prompted by such questions, my research seeks to understand how adherents of other religious traditions might play a role in helping one come to an understanding of one's own faith tradition and religious identity. I hope to observe how participants come to an understanding of religious identity, contributing to the emergence of interreligious leadership and friendships that foster peace by reading each other's scriptures together. I want to make a case that understanding religious identity and articulating our own religious commitments (*apologia*) requires knowing and learning about oneself in community (dialogue) with others outside one's own religious tradition.

Scriptural Reasoning dialogue sessions are based on the reading, expounding, and questioning of each other's sacred texts with the

hope that the experience of coming to understand how others understand their sacred texts might lead to a deeper understanding of one's own hermeneutical tradition and a deepening of relationships across religious boundaries. While the practice and process of Scriptural Reasoning has usually involved members of the Abrahamic faiths, it holds promise for enabling young people in Bangladesh from Muslim, Hindu, and Christian backgrounds to go deeper into their own religious traditions through meaningful encounters with persons from other traditions. According to David Cheetham, the goal of Scriptural Reasoning is to "raise the quality of disagreement" and "degree of honesty," that allows the ensuing discussion to delve more deeply into divisive issues.⁶ Scriptural Reasoning sessions are liminal moments and mutual spaces, characterized as "tents of meeting," for inquiry, conversation, and forging friendships using the sacred text as a device to open a hermeneutical process.

In a recent article titled "Scriptural Reasoning," Nicholas Adams challenges Christians to rethink 2 Timothy 3:16.⁷ What does it mean to say that "all scripture is inspired by God"? As Adams observed, the learning in Scriptural Reasoning is not merely an opportunity for participants to learn about other religious traditions but has an unusual and potentially powerful dimension. Participants interpret each other's texts, and they interpret texts together. They learn about their own tradition's scripture through others' interpretations, about the generativity of scripture across traditions, how to articulate the power of their scriptures to reveal God's address, and from their formation in their own traditions to interpret each other's texts.⁸

The key to understanding one's own faith will often be provided by religious others, as Burrell has often noted. The presence of persons belonging to other religious traditions and interreligious encounters can help individuals from different traditions gain insight into their own tradition and the ways it has been compromised by the seductions of political power.⁹ Our particular scriptures need not be exclusively ours but openly shared and read with others, who may in turn help us seek the words of eternal life. This is happening as we read the Bible together across the religious boundaries between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in Bangladesh. The one to whom we should go is found in others, in our neighbor and in the stranger. Not only is all Scripture God-breathed, but God's Spirit breaths through all persons (Acts 2:17) to illuminate our understanding and call us toward transformation. 

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EQUIPPING YOUNG ADULTS FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE



"I can't talk to 'them!' I'm too afraid!" "Why are we spending time talking about our beliefs together? Is there any way to tell what's 'right'? And, if there is, don't we basically believe the same thing anyway?"

These two extremes, with little by way of a middle ground, typify many of the initial responses we see when young people are invited to think about (and engage in!) interfaith dialogue. For many—and in this, young adults are no exception—interfaith dialogue can elicit a host of emotion: fear, excitement, intrigue, anticipation, and more. Situated within an unknown, and potentially uncomfortable encounter with another, these emotions are quite understandable, and ought to be firmly acknowledged and legitimized. Rather than merely learning about another religion from a book, engaging in interfaith dialogue involves encounters with real people and hearing anew (or maybe for the first time) an articulation of another belief system. This can be a rather intimidating undertaking, but Facing Your Future, a three-week summer program for high school juniors and seniors interested in exploring theology and vocation, presents students with multiple opportunities to have this type of hands-on, dialogic encounter with believers of another faith.¹

While the practice of engaging in interfaith dialogue certainly takes a long time to cultivate, we have attempted to introduce students to the concept and practice of interfaith dialogue in our three-week, theologically and experientially intense summer program. This often-first-time encounter ought to be seen as a beginning, not a climax, of the young person's engagement with interfaith dialogue, and yet it has had a marked impact in the lives and resulting practices of many of our students.

When introducing young people to the concept and practice of interfaith dialogue, there are two main reactions we generally have to address, broadly characterized as fear and relativism. As we guide our students through thinking about and engaging in interfaith dialogue, we spend about a week and a half preparing for the experience(s), both implicitly and explicitly.

As some students think about, prepare for, and engage in interfaith dialogue, they do so with a lot of fear. Some of the young people have a sense that if they dialogue with someone who disagrees with them, they may not have an appropriate response, fall short in addressing some of the theological concerns that someone may state, or be so challenged that their own faith is questioned.

Others are fearful that they will say something that is offensive to the person with whom they are dialoguing. Still others have developed ideas about another faith tradition that cultivate a widespread sense of fear or danger as they talk to someone who holds different beliefs. As a way to address all these fears, however varied they may be, we open up a space to both concretely name the fears that students are experiencing and the assumptions the students hold. Often, students are unaware of the specific fear that prevents them from embracing something like interfaith dialogue, and these fears can often stem from long-held, but perhaps unnamed assumptions.

An intensive, extended, in-residence program, like ours, has the potential to create a space where these assumptions can be named without fear of judgment; once named, these assumptions can also be challenged and corrected. As we discuss them, we encourage students to reject any notion of a single narrative that characterizes a person or members of a particular faith tradition. For our students, their first engagement with interfaith dialogue is as evangelical Christians meeting together with Muslims. As our students prepare, certain media-fueled assumptions arise. Naming these and beginning to understand people as *more* than just this stereotype is our first step towards mitigating the defensive posture many hold. This practice is furthered as we create spaces to form relationships with people of another religion, allowing them to see a person holistically—someone with hobbies, someone who goes to school, someone who is, in so many ways, quite similar to them! Instead of simply learning about Islam, they spend time eating Arab-American cuisine with chefs we have cultivated relationships with throughout the years, learning about Arab-American culture from others their age, alongside visiting mosques and dialoguing with various religious leaders. One of our students noted, upon finishing a meal with a local imam and a Christian minister: "Wow! I would have never known we all had so much in common! I never imagined myself laughing together so freely with someone from another faith." In this encounter, his fear began to be displaced by a sense of familiarity as he saw the "other" as a person—and a friend. 

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DAVID W. SHENK

David W. Shenk is currently Global Missions Consultant with Eastern Mennonite Missions with special attention to Islam.

THE SECOND TESTAMENT IS AN OPEN DOOR



Over the lunch table I told Vanessa, my eight-year-old granddaughter, that I am writing an essay about the New Testament. I asked, "What should I say is most important about the New Testament?"

While munching on a tuna salad sandwich, she exclaimed: "Grandpa, the most important thing about the New Testament is that is where we learn about Jesus!"

I grew up in East Africa among the Zanaki people who had never heard of Jesus; they did not know about the special love of God revealed in Jesus that our granddaughter knows. They believed in God as creator, but they did not know his character for they believed that God had taken a journey and would never return. They had no notion that God is love. In fact, a nearby society believed that God was the leopard, and completely terrifying.

When my parents arrived within this society, they focused first on language study, and then my father, with an African colleague, set about translating the Gospel of Matthew into the Zanaki language. Three years ago my wife, Grace, and I took three of our teenage grandchildren to visit the village where my parents had served ninety years ago. The church was packed with some 700 people present. In the midst of the choirs, aged Mukami bent with arthritis came dancing down the aisle singing exuberantly, "This book tells all about Jesus." She was holding high a tattered Gospel of Matthew. She was probably the fourth person among the Zanaki to believe in Jesus. As a young woman she had committed her life to Jesus and now in her aged years she was bearing exuberant testimony to the salvation revealed in her tattered Gospel of Matthew.

Twenty years after my childhood years living among the Zanaki, Grace and I and our family settled into Somalia, a Muslim society in northeastern Africa. One of my dear friends from those Somali years was Ahmed Ali Haile. On one occasion Ahmed and I were enjoying tea together, when he exclaimed, "How can I speak negatively of the Qur'an, when it is the Qur'an that planted the seeds in my soul to quest for the Bible and its message!"

"How did that happen?" I prodded.

Ahmed explained, "The imam in the mosque where I worshipped met us little boys in the evenings where he taught us Islam. He frequently commented that the Qur'an is one of several revealed scriptures. The other revelations are the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel. The imam also spoke highly of the Bible that God had entrusted to the Christians."

However, the general consensus of the imams in Somalia was that it is likely that these former scriptures, which Christians refer to as the Bible, have been tampered with. For that reason the Qur'an is the most reliable scripture.

Ahmed mused, "Those comments planted a yearning to read all the holy books of revelation." Ahmed doubted that God would permit any of his books to be tampered with. So he hoped that sometime he would find these other scriptures.

Ahmed continued his story:

Then a terrific attack of malaria took me to the Christian hospital in my hometown in Somalia. When I improved, I asked the Christian nurse to give me something to read in English. She gave me the Bible. For the first time I had in my hands all the former scriptures that the imam had referred to. In the next two years I read the entire Bible through two times.

Those scriptures opened my heart to meet Jesus the Messiah. The day I believed in Jesus, I knew I had come home. Jesus the Messiah, as revealed in the Gospel, opened the door for me to receive the gift of salvation.

I travel extensively meeting Muslim-background believers. I ask these believers quite frequently, "How did you become a believer in Jesus the Messiah?"

Most often the response to that question is, "I acquired a Bible."

Many will respond explicitly, "A friend gave me the New Testament." Often they will say, "Someone gave me the Gospel of John." I continue to be amazed by how central the Bible is, and especially the New Testament, in the journey to faith in Christ.

When a Muslim meets the Second Testament, he or she is encountering a scripture that the Qur'an might have prepared him or her to receive. It appears that the Holy Spirit quite frequently

uses the Qur'an as a stepping-stone toward Jesus. The Qur'an might have prepared a Muslim to consider the gospel message. For example, the Qur'an says surprising things about Jesus, including these: Jesus is born of a virgin; Jesus is a sign to all nations; Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus is coming back again; Jesus is without sin; Jesus fulfills the former scriptures; Jesus the Messiah is the healer; Jesus is the Word.

Within Islam, Jesus of the Second Testament is held in high esteem and he is the great mystery. Nevertheless, although Jesus is honored as a prophet, he is not the Savior. In Islam, we need instruction; redemption is not necessary. So among the many affirmations of Jesus within the Muslim community, there are also forthright disclaimers. For example, Jesus is the Word only in the sense that he is created by God; Jesus is the Spirit in the sense that God breathes his spirit into all life;¹ it is impossible for Jesus to be crucified for the Messiah could not suffer on a cross; since there is no cross for the Messiah to bear, there is no resurrection victory. A Muslim scholar, Tarif Khalidi, observes that the Jesus of the Gospel is in conflict with the Jesus of the Qur'an. He asserts that the cross is the heart of the Second Testament message whereas in the Qur'an there is no cross.² So when we view the Qur'an as an indication of truth that sometimes leads Muslims into a revelation of Jesus the Messiah, we also recognize that the Qur'an denies the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus. Although there might be signs of the gospel within Islam, nevertheless, Islam is not the gospel.

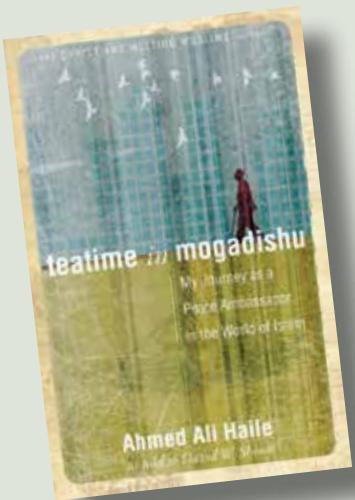
This means that in bearing witness we never stop at the Qur'an. The Zanaki woman danced in joyous witness that the God who went away has in fact come to us in Jesus; the Qur'an does not invite us to share in that dance. Ahmed exulted when the Holy Spirit opened his heart to the revelation that God is love. So it is around the world in every culture and religious system. When people discover the Second Testament, they meet the revelation in Jesus that God is love.

There is a yearning in all religious systems to meet the One who is love. Poignantly, in a passage in the Qur'an called "the Table," the disciples appeal to Jesus for the bread from heaven that sustains life continually. God responds, proclaiming that the table is spread!³ Surely this passage reveals a yearning for the Eucharist commemorating the eternal bread from heaven.

In the concluding message of the Second Testament we hear all of heaven and earth resounding with the good news that the gates of the great city are always open and the tree of life bursts forth with fruit for every season and leaves for the healing of all.⁴ Indeed the Table is spread! EIFD

David W. Shenk was born to pioneer Mennonite missionaries in Tanzania. For sixteen years he and his wife, Grace, served within Muslim communities in Somalia and Kenya and then as pastor couple at Mountville Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania. David has also served in missions administration with Eastern Mennonite Missions and as academic dean at Lithuania Christian College. His interest in Christian peacemaking and faithful witness to Christ among Muslims has taken him into some 100 countries. He has authored, co-authored, or edited numerous books on themes related to the mission of the church in our pluralist world. At present he is Global Missions Consultant with Eastern Mennonite Missions with special attention to Islam.

Book Excerpt



In 1991, Ahmed Ali Haile returned to the chaos of his native Somalia with a clear mission: to bring warring clans together to find new paths of peace—often over a cup of tea. A grenade thrown by a detractor cost Haile his leg and almost his life, but his stature as a peacemaker remained.

Whether in Somali's capital, Mogadishu, or among Somalis in Kenya, Europe, and the United States, Haile has been a tireless ambassador for the peace of Christ. Into this moving memoir of conversion and calling, Haile weaves poignant reflections on the meaning of his journey in the world of Islam.

SAMUEL LIVINGWAY (Pseudonym)

Samuel Livingway currently lives with his family in the Middle East.

MUSLIMS AND THE INJEEL (GOSPEL)



I am very grateful for this timely and generous look at interfaith dialogue. Nijay Gupta's call to be ready to meet "great-faith-pagans-for-Jesus" is similar to what we are experiencing in the Middle East where Muslims are encountering Jesus and demonstrating great faith. Although Muslims do not fit into the category of "pagan," the vast majority are missing a full and transformative life of faith in Christ. Two of the texts that Gupta highlights have been part of the foundation upon which our ministry is built: Acts 17 and John 4.

In Acts 17, Paul not only uses the "altar to the unknown God" but he also quotes from religious writings in 17:28. Paul first quotes Epimenides when he says, "In him we live and move and have our being." Then he quotes Aratus saying, "For we are indeed his offspring." The shocking fact is that these quotes were originally about Zeus so that "in him," and "his offspring" in its original context, referred to Zeus. According to Richard Longenecker, "In his search for a measure of common ground with his hearers, he is, so to speak, disinfecting and rebaptizing the poets' words for his own purposes."¹ Paul uses religious writings that were familiar to his audience as a way to connect with them and lead them to deeper truth about the person of Jesus.

This practice is bearing fruit in the Muslim world. As we seek a "measure of common ground" in our conversations with Muslims, we are starting with things Muslims already accept about Jesus. For example, in the Qur'an, Jesus is born of a virgin, he is born "holy," he is the Word of God, he is exalted in this world and the next, he is a sign to all peoples in the spiritual and physical world, he is one like Adam (which can lead to discussions about Jesus as the "second Adam"), and he is a spirit from God (which can lead to discussions about how the "second Adam became a life-giving Spirit," 1 Cor 15:45). In the Qur'an these statements are scattered throughout, but when brought together in one conversation, it can have the same effect as Paul's messages when some in the crowd wanted to know more.

One day I was talking with a young Muslim man who found a Bible (intentionally left behind at a place where Muslims worked by a discerning Christian) and this young man wanted to know more.

At the end of our conversation I told him, "You, as a Muslim, know that Jesus is the Word of God. And you know he is alive in heaven. He doesn't have a grave with bones in it. So go and ask to hear the Word of God." He did and came back the next night and told me, "I didn't hear anything, but I felt such peace." We got together a week later with another Muslim believer in Jesus and talked about the kingdom of God. This time when we prayed together, he looked up with tears in his eyes and said the Lord spoke his name. He was being called and it opened up for him a new spiritual reality, under the authority of Christ and in the name of Jesus, where he was experiencing the Holy Spirit in transformative ways.

There are numerous reports worldwide of Muslims experiencing the Lord in creative ways through healings, dreams, and visions. Now when I pray with a Muslim friend, I often say, "God created our hearts, and minds, and souls, and emotions, and imaginations, and gave us the ability to feel and hear and know things in a deep way. Why is it that when we pray, it is usually us talking or asking God for something? Maybe we have memorized something and we recited it." Then I say, if the time seems right, "why do we not ask God if he would like to reveal something to us? Maybe we will hear something, maybe we will see something, maybe we will feel something." As we have gone to the Lord in openness, he has been faithful to reveal his heart. Some Muslims have seen visions of light coming down from heaven and actually warming their body. Others have seen Jesus approaching them and taking them by the hand with the promise that he is with them. Others have heard the Lord say *Udrik wajuudi*, which my pocket Arabic translator tells me means "Realize, I Am."

Nijay Gupta says, "Matthew seems to go out of his way to demonstrate that the very last people you would expect to demonstrate faith in Jesus are the very ones who seem to really 'get' who Jesus is" EIFD

With 23 years in ministry, Samuel Livingway (MDiv, Fuller Theological Seminary; ThM, Princeton Theological Seminary) started sharing the gospel with Muslims in 2003. In 2008 he and his family moved to the Middle East, where they currently live, and have seen dozens experience new life in Christ. Currently he and some local believers are using social media to spark a spiritual Arab Spring with Jesus at the center.



JOSEPH WANDERA

Joseph Wandera is a senior lecturer at St Paul's University, Kenya.

BEING CHRISTIANS IN AN AFRICAN PLURAL CONTEXT

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, and another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. We have to try to sit where they sit, to enter sympathetically into the pains and griefs and joys of their history and see how those pains and griefs and joys have determined the premises of their argument. We have, in a word, to be "present" with them. – Max Warren



The article "Thinking with the New Testament about Other Religions" points to the reality that mission is always articulated, carried out, and often shaped in response to the context in which religious communities live side by side. My own experience of growing up as a young boy in a rural part of Mumias, Western Kenya, where traditional African religion was practiced as a daily routine alongside Islam and Christianity resonates with the Gupta's "initial religious experiences."

Mumias had one of the earliest contacts with Islam during the 20th century as a result of trade between Nabongo Mumia (a traditional monarch) and the Arab traders. I grew up among Muslims neighbors, friends, and relatives. I still remember vividly one of my childhood friends, Abdullah, who I played with at about the age of nine. I watched closely as Abdullah excused himself from play to go and conduct the ritual act of ablution before *salah* (prayer). Abdullah invited me to his home on many occasions where we shared meals and went hunting for birds in the wild. I, in turn, invited him to our home for all sorts of games. My present engagements working with Muslims and Christians at the Centre for Christian Muslim Relations (CCMRE) of St Paul's University, in Eastleigh, Kenya, has widened my appreciation of religious diversity, and the challenges and opportunities it provides for mission.

In response to the article, I would like to offer some further reflections on two aspects: the first is the question of how we Christians are influenced and in turn influence our contexts of faith within our communities. Second, I focus my reflections on the question of witness to Christian faith in a plural context.

Nurturing Faiths in a Plural Community

Being a Christian is about being in relationships with others, a real relationship among real fellow human beings in concrete situations. If, as I believe, Christians are to reject religious pluralism and uphold the conviction that Jesus Christ is the unique and decisive revelation of God for salvation of the world, we must do so with a proper attitude towards believers of other religions in our midst.

In my community three religious influences impacted me: the practices of Luhya traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam. A traditional shrine where the gods dwelt and sacrifices were offered was not unusual in rural Mumias. As a young child in Khabukoshe Primary School, I vividly remember some pupils, especially girls, shaking in frenzy for several hours while producing a disturbing sound. I was told they had been possessed by spirits (*emisambwa*) and that the spirits needed to be appeased in order for the pupils to receive healing. Second, as indicated above, I was influenced by Islam at an early age through childhood friendships and later through my work with Muslims in a community project.

Third, I was nurtured under the strict evangelical ethos of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The CMS, established in 1799, originated in the evangelical revival movement of eighteenth-century England. The revival movement was part of "a pan-European eighteenth-century Protestant revival of piety."¹ This movement began in the German Pietist and Moravian initiatives of Halle and Herrnhut, associated with Francke and Count Zinzendorf.²

The evangelicals emphasized the importance of the individual encounter with the divine. They also focused on conversion as the epiphany in the life of an individual. The conversion motif was unmistakable in missionary work in East Africa. According to Odhiambo, citing Warren, these were the priorities of CMS evangelicals:

proclaiming the "word of God" in a sinful world and "this is the market place rather than the sanctuary"; secondly the emphasis on conversion as the direct encounter between God and Man as an individual, leading to the doctrine of assurance or the certainty of being "in grace"; thirdly the trusting to the Holy Spirit which will make the convert a new man able to stand up for himself; fourthly the priesthood of all believers.³

The evangelicals demanded that every practicing Christian separate good from evil, the convert from the nonconvert, the pagan from the Christian.⁴ The establishment of CMS was a response to the perceived moral decadence in church and state. Justification by faith was a central doctrine in the CMS conception and practice of mission. This form of articulation was accompanied by the claim that the Christian tradition had an obligation to assist others in both their spiritual and material context. This approach was also partly based on the supposed inherent superiority of

had the most influence on me in the construction of my Christian identity and practice. This inevitably left me torn between the demands of my Christian identity and the plural religious context under which I was nurtured.

Despite my strong exclusivist evangelical ethos, my pluralistic religious context constantly demanded building positive and respectful relationships. These religious others were, and still are, my neighbors, coworkers, and sometimes relatives with whom I share a common social space.

Reflecting on these questions with the New Testament, I am convinced that unconditional love of neighbor and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of Christianity (Mark 12:29–31). Christians must at all times understand God's invitation to us to be good neighbors. Christian self-understanding and articulation of faith is often shaped in response to the context in which communities live and interact. Indeed, mission stems from a profound recognition of the mutuality of our common life.

A common definition of theology is "faith seeking understanding," a phrase associated with the writings of St. Anselm of Canterbury and St. Augustine of Hippo. It implies that the knowledge of God presupposes faith; and faith continuously seeks deeper understanding of God and his relationship to the world.



Muslim students sit alongside Christian classmates at Malindi Central Primary School, a Catholic-sponsored public school in Kenya. Muslim girls are allowed to wear their hijabs at Malindi Central, while many other Catholic schools in the coastal region have banned them.

Western culture.⁵ Such culture was promoted through schools and churches, among other institutions. In such a binary approach to the other, there was little room to meaningfully seek engagement with other religious traditions, especially Muslims, to understand and learn from them. Nothing good could come from the "other."

Therefore, although I had an upbringing that exposed me to both African traditional religion and Islam, the evangelical form of Christianity with which I had a longer exposure through a lengthy period of formal schooling and subsequently theological education,

Respectful Witness in a Plural Context: Building on the Wisdom of Others

It is CMS General Secretary Max Warren who stated in relation to members of other religious traditions that when you approach a member of a different tradition, remove your shoes because the ground upon which you stand is sacred. Throughout my Christian life, and especially upon theological training, I have been deeply aware of my identity as an African Christian with a deep loyalty to my Christian values as well as those in indigenous African religions, especially values for life and community. Until today, I still fall back on the narrative wisdom of my traditional religious upbringing; for example, I try to weave into my pastoral and theological work the proverbs and wise sayings that have such rich meaning.

My encounter and experience with Islam and Muslims, initially in my village in Mumias and later during my pastoral work, has been a part of my existential experience of continued mutual respect and learning. Although this experience has not been without its difficult moments, holding my traditional African and Christian identities in creative tension has helped me and others find fulfillment in plural communities. For example, some of the questions Muslim neighbors, friends, and colleagues have posed to me have helped me think more about my faith as an African Christian and how better to relate and clarify both to myself and to them what it is that I believe (1 Pet 3:15).

The challenge of witnessing to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ within such a plural context cannot be underestimated. St. Paul teaches us that it is unnecessary for a missionary to condemn the cultural and religious heritage of a community in order to convert them (Acts 17:16–34). The experience of Paul in Acts 17:16–34 offers many lessons to present-day Christians in Africa in their engagements with other religious traditions. Paul walked around, observing their “pagan” religion, engaging in friendly conversations, and responding to their invitation to speak. We, too, learn about Muslim beliefs and practices, including their variations, and we also inquire for clarification about their faith and practice. This process also involves looking for common ground, as Paul did, for example, when he saw they were “religious” and worshipped “an unknown god.” He also quoted from their poets. We, too, share patiently what Muslims and members of other religions consider seriously at this time. Paul helped those who decided and believed in Jesus by teaching and helping them form a church. Christians should similarly assist new Muslim converts to Christianity with training, fellowship, and contextualized worship while being sensitive to the pressures they face.

Gupta's article demonstrates the respect that the Gospel of Matthew shows towards the “pagan” (e.g., Matt 16:17; 8:10; 15:28). The point being made here is the imperative that Christians expect surprises of God as the “other” responds to God’s grace. Such an attitude must inevitably be accompanied by respectful language in the framing of the other. I come from a background where earlier missionaries and scholars' attitude to African traditional religion and Islam was reflected in their language. Consequently, such Christendom terms as “pagan,” “fetish,” “heathen,” and “primitive,” among others, were used to frame the other, hence making it particularly difficult for Christians to expect surprises. Underneath the issues of worldview and values lay a struggle for power and

control of territories. True to the colonial antecedents of missionary work, their interest in mission also extended to “territory.” Later this approach shaped the missionary strategies employed.

Genuine witness in a religiously plural context is impossible where one side denigrates the other because of an inexcusable superiority complex enhanced by imperialist motives. According to Jesse Mugambi, “generally both the mainstream and sectarian Christian missionary attitudes towards African cultural and religious heritage have been at best condescending and at worst condemning.”⁶ Regretfully, mission language and activity linked with colonization and empire has often denigrated cultures and failed to recognize and draw from the wisdom of the local people, not to mention the amazing ways in which God is working among other religious traditions. Coming from an African context that has suffered from the challenges of slavery, colonialism, and now neo-colonialism, the language we employ can create, destroy, or build bridges of witness. Certain terms as employed by scholars and missionaries can be quite alienating if not put in context. Use of respectful language is very necessary as it demonstrates respect and acknowledgment of the sacred story of the other and prepares them to listen to the saving grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Mission in the third millennium calls for renewed concerns for cross-cultural and interreligious sensitivity. Although Christianity is a missionary religion with a clear eschatological vision, claims for absolute truth and universality and a commitment to the *missio Dei* should not surrender our missionary calling and vocation to neighbor love within the contexts of our religiously diverse communities. Indeed, living together as religious communities is a human necessity that presupposes and imposes mutuality. Only through this process can the gospel become fully internalized cross-culturally. 

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We have framed our discussions around a well-known Second Testament story, that of the Samaritan woman. Thus, our title, *Conversations at the Well*, signals that people of various backgrounds often encounter one another at pivotal social locations in particular cultures. Whether it is at a first-century well or in 21st-century San Francisco, Christians find themselves in a wide variety of places, talking with their religious neighbors about common problems and questions while sharing their hope in Jesus Christ. Far from leading evangelicals to a position of relativism, respecting and listening to the diversity of Scripture's witness yields tremendous resources for Christians today as we wrestle with how to be faithful disciples in our particular contexts.

About the Artist

Grigor Malinov is an artist working in the field of oil and acrylic painting. He obtained his master's degree in fine arts at the University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, in 1995. Since then he has been creating, working, and experimenting in that trade.

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