Interfaith friendship as an act of reconciliation

Susan Kennel Harrison

Not long ago, I met a Buddhist monk at a conference in Montreal on "The World's Religions after 9/11—A Global Call to Peace." He and the other monks stood out because of their gold robes, sandals, and shaved heads. I watched with curiosity as a Catholic woman, apparently motivated by good-natured curiosity, approached him and started a conversation. At one point in their exchange, she reached out to touch his arm. Another woman quickly intervened and told her, "You can't touch him." I mused about what it means to be together as people with faith-based peace commitments but unable to touch each other.

The incident reminded me of another, in 1992, near Amman, Jordan. I was a part of an archaeological excavation project and living on a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) college campus, for Palestinians. That summer one of the "dig kids" got into a scrap with the son of the campus canteen owner. The parents of the boys got involved and tempers flared; because of language barriers, they did a lot of gesticulating and shouting.

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With time, the dispute was resolved. In a gesture of goodwill, the Canadian mother reached out to shake hands with the Palestinian father. But he drew back, raised his hands in the air, and said something in Arabic. Seeing the upset expression on the woman's face, some present tried to explain: "He can't shake your hand; he has to go pray." Later I would learn that Muslims generally do not touch people of the opposite gender unrelated to them.

What does it mean to live in reconciled ways with people of other faiths? It first requires us to be in relationship, but interfaith relationships must be negotiated and cannot be taken for granted.

Biblical strands

The Hebrew Bible includes some material counseling separation from those of other faiths, and some that commends a striking openness to those outside Israel's religio-political group. The New Testament also contains these divergent strands with respect to contact with and treatment of those seen as alien (religiously other). Christians, as heirs to the Judaism of the first and the second temples, have been influenced by an inherited aversion to "what is foreign in religion."[1]

The Gospels portray Jesus as someone with a typical first-century Jewish tendency to keep separate from non-Jews. His message was primarily directed to those within the Jewish household of faith; for the most part his conversation was with Jews of various kinds. His visit with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and his healing of a Gentile woman's daughter (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) are exceptions to the general rule that his interactions were with other Jews.

Yet the Jesus of the New Testament also calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and he illustrates the meaning of that command by telling a story of a Samaritan who shows compassion for a Jewish neighbor. Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that in Jesus' parable, "The neighbor was the Samaritan who *approached* the wounded man and *made him his neighbor*. The neighbor … is not he whom I find in my path, but rather he in whose path I place myself, he whom I approach and actively seek."[2] The shock value in this story resides in the fact that Jesus' religious community considered Samaritans religious outsiders, people of another faith, yet in this parable it is the outsider who exemplifies righteous behavior.

Jesus is known for instructing his followers to love their enemies. Although the word *enemy* connotes one with whom we have an adversarial relationship, some Hebrew Bible texts label all those outside the Israelite religio-political group as enemies (see Lev. 19:17-18, 33-34). Jesus' commandment to love our enemies could therefore be understood as an injunction to love those who are not of our religious faith.

In Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25, the stranger—foreigner or outsider—is the one in whom the Lord is encountered. Thus, to show kindness to an outsider is to show hospitality to the Son of

Man. The teaching has resonances with the Genesis 18 account in which Abraham and Sarah act hospitably toward three men through whom the Lord is present (epiphany) and promises the couple posterity (salvation). By the time the New Testament is canonized, Christian tradition understands that in showing hospitality to strangers, one may unknowingly entertain angels (Heb. 13:1-3). Given the religious nature of all nations in the ancient Near East, any people not of the Israelites were regarded as religious others. Thus the pluralistic or multireligious setting was the context in which faith in the one God formed and developed. Both the Jesus movement and the Jewish religion that developed into rabbinic Judaism were situated in multireligious contexts.

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Another point of continuity with the Hebrew Bible is the Leviticus 19:33-34 commandment not to oppress the alien residing in your land: "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." According to ethicists William C. Spohn and William R. O'Neill, "no command is repeated more frequently in the Old Testament, with the exception of the imperative to worship the one God."[3]

In the New Testament, Luke-Acts demonstrates this pluralistic context most actively.[4] The Jesus movement understands itself as participating in a new reality in which religious divisions are overcome. Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, all are children of God through faith: "There is no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal. 3:28). It is God's desire that different religious communities live in right relationship to one another.

How do we live a reconciling faith?

If God in Christ has demonstrated that compassion and mercy are to characterize the faithful, and that righteousness is manifested in reconciliation between peoples, how do we live this faith? What does it mean to embody a faith understood as a discipleship of reconciling peoples to each other and to God? At a minimum, whatever our current location, we will be engaged in meeting and

befriending others as we live together in society. A commitment to justice and the dignity of all its citizens and residents should characterize our multireligious society, and our interpersonal relationships ought to bring glory to our Creator.

Christians, Muslims, and many others wrestle with the question of whether a just and harmonious society can exist without significant agreement on things theological. Mennonite history has seen many schisms arising from differences in religious convictions, but in spite of our fractious past, some Mennonite communities are unified in their worship of God, and they work to maintain fellowship and community despite some diversity in beliefs. Our questions about the truth of other religious traditions need not be resolved before we can begin to relate to people of other faiths and coexist harmoniously. Our starting point is our common humanity; reconciliation in our age is about recovering an ability to see and relate to one another first of all as fellow human beings.

Lessons of experience

Not long ago several Mennonite women embarked on a short camping trip with several Muslim women, most of them from Iran. Our goal was to have fun, enjoy nature, and get to know one another better, as religious women but also as people with pronounced cultural differences.

At the end of our trip, when it was time to pack up, I became aware that those camping around us had been watching us keenly. I assumed that these observers were intrigued by the presence of the Muslim women dressed in their modest traditional garb *(hijab)*. But then I concluded that a source of greater wonderment to our neighbors was this curious mixing of Western and Eastern women, laughing and spending time together. The very fact of our visible, public relationships seemed to mediate something important to these observers.

Wasn't Jesus criticized for just this kind of behavior, for relating publicly to those outside his religious community? He risked becoming impure, as his religious tradition defined it, for the sake of inclusive relationships—and he did so in public in ways that challenged prevailing understandings about what God desired, about God's will for human relationships. This risky relating was

not contingent on theological agreement; Jesus did not insist that those he related to first accept a certain set of beliefs. He initiated relationships and criticized those who challenged his choices. In Jesus' time and ours, the mere activity of risking relationships, in public and in private, goes a long way toward building bridges of reconciliation between communities that many forces are working to keep apart.

I have had the privilege of interacting with two Shiite Muslim families from Iran who are living in Canada as guests of Mennonite Central Committee. Initially my motivation to relate to these Shiite families arose in part from naive notions about the monotheism that both Christians and Muslims profess. More significant, though, was my desire to live out Jesus' teaching to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:24, Luke 6:27), as I understood it.

When I remember that our own canon includes multiple understandings of God's nature and multiple descriptions of how we are to serve God, I see possibilities for the coexistence of multiple understandings—theirs and mine—of how to seek and honor God.

Early in my work with the MCC exchange program, I still accepted the North American media portrayal of Iran and Islam as enemy. As my relationships with these Iranians developed from acquaintance to friendship, I had to admit that they were not enemies to me as a Mennonite Christian, as a Canadian resident, or as an American citizen. I no longer accepted the mass media descriptions of their country or their religion.

I began to explore other motivations for relationship. For a time I considered a missional goal as a basis for our relationship. I thought my primary motivation needed to be a desire to live among these Muslim families in ways that communicated God's grace and love, as known in Jesus. If I cared authentically about them, I would want them to experience God's love and grace.

But again, as our relationships deepened, I recognized that through their scriptures, prayer life, and respected teachers, they already had a relationship with and commitment to God. They already knew God to be loving, merciful, and forgiving, as I do. Our traditions have given us different narratives that teach similar things about the nature of God. Like me, they believe deeply that the way they live in this world has implications for their relation-

ship with God, as well as for the day of judgment and the afterlife. To be sure, our religious traditions have vastly different views of divine revelation, but we share a desire to live lives that glorify God, and we all struggle to discern what that means for our time.

When I can remember that being Mennonite is not the ultimate good, I feel less anxious about reaching agreement on the details. When I remember that our own scriptural canon includes multiple understandings of God's nature and multiple descriptions of how we are to serve God, my anxiety diminishes and I see possibilities for the coexistence of multiple understandings—theirs and mine—of how to seek and honor God.

Another shift in my motivation for being involved in relationships across religious boundaries came out of a more active affirmation that every human being is God's creation, that God has called each of us good. Our Creator accepts and loves each of us, regardless of creed. To recognize our mutuality before God, and to relate to one another in ways that make it "possible for all to become the persons God created us to be"[5] has facilitated a healthy humility in me and made it easier to risk relationship.

In this way, interfaith relationship becomes a mutual journey undertaken jointly. My imaginative picture is no longer one in which I make my way across a long bridge to see—and judge, or fix—what is lacking on the other side; I no longer feel responsible to bring my Muslim friends back to my side of the bridge. Sometimes the grass seems greener on the other side, and sometimes it is good to taste and see from another's point of view. Sometimes I walk across the bridge and sojourn a while in their land, and sometimes they join me on my territory, but often we just meet somewhere along the way. When we meet in between, we all make a lot of effort, because we have left the places where we are comfortable. We meet there for a time, but we do not try to live on the bridge; we don't cease to be true to ourselves just because we have reached out to one another.

Necessary disciplines

Rabbi David Rosen, a proponent of interreligious dialogue, has proposed that relating across faiths and other similar kinds of difference requires patience and compassion most of all.[6] I agree wholeheartedly, but I would add that one must be prepared to

risk, listen, and befriend. Risking, listening, and befriending become the spiritual practices needed if one is to live among people of other faiths in reconciling ways.

For me, patience means managing anxiety, in me and in those I relate to. To relate to people outside one's faith community often requires that one leave more than one comfort zone. In Canada, where many people of other faiths are new arrivals in North America, to relate to them means crossing differences in language, gender roles, etiquette, politics, education, class, race, child-rearing practices, leisure activities, food and eating schedules—let alone faith![7] Crossing all these divides at once is exhausting—and noteworthy. I believe that the attempt to relate to people of other faiths is itself an act of reconciliation.

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We may think that after we've taken the risk to reach out and initiate relationship, the rest will fall into place. In my experience, the high-stakes nature of religious belief keeps us in a constant state of anxiety even as we get to know one another. We may become anxious because we learn things that challenge our beliefs, and sometimes our anxiety climbs because we become restless in our own tradition. So we have to practice patience with the journey; it brings us to terrain that can be exotic and fascinating, but sometimes we only get there by putting one foot in front of the other, patiently moving forward even as we question what we've gotten ourselves into.

We also need patience with ambiguity. If we set out to learn to know someone of another religion but turn back partway because we are impatient that we, or they, aren't getting anywhere, or because we are not comfortable with the journey itself, then we have not crossed what separates us, and the split in God's reign goes unreconciled. The commitment to mutuality has to overrule our desire for results, so we risk, and we seek patience with the ambiguities and uncertainties that are a necessary part of the process. It is the nature of reconciliation that the way matters for the outcome.

Mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes that "the healing of what splits humanity, of what separates one from the

other, is the authentic meaning of reconciliation. If what separates us is not bridged, justice will not be able to triumph and the kindom of God will not become a reality in our midst."[8] She is convinced that the work of reconciliation requires "a mature ethical commitment and work that allows and obliges one to sustain a reconciling attitude and behavior."[9] The most important element in developing and sustaining this kind of attitude is the discipline of compassion. Mutual compassion brings people to want to heal rifts, to live in unity, to find possibilities for life together. It is the basis of Jesus' teaching on love of enemy, and the basis for his commitment to justice for those who are not living the life for which God created them.

Compassion is modeled on the mercy God extends to us. The way I find myself able to develop compassion, especially for a very different other, is by getting to know that other person or group of people. I try to practice curiosity, patience with my anxieties, a dogged determination to keep looking for what will build relationship, and an overarching commitment to the reality that God's love is as deep for them as for me. A compassion rooted in Christian faith can motivate us to keep trying to find ways to be in relationship with people of other faiths. The goal is not just to understand the other, not just to heal the rifts that political and personal circumstances cause to divide us, but to work together at mending the world.

Notes

[1] Geoffrey Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 263.
[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 198 (Gutiérrez's italics).
[3] William R. O'Neill and William C. Spohn, "Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Immigration and Refugee Policy," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 84–106.
[4] John Koenig, "Hospitality," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 299–301.
[5] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Reconciliation: An Intrinsic Element of Peace and Justice," in *War or Words? Interreligious Dialogue as an Instrument of Peace*, ed. Donald W. Musser and D. Dixon Sutherland (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 188.
[6] David Rosen, "Are We Changing? An Interfaith Dialogue" (workshop, World Religions after September 11: A Global Congress, Montreal, QC, 13 September 2006).
[7] It is a sad commentary on North American society that the place people most often meet is in the shared world of consumption.

[8] Isasi-Díaz, "Reconciliation," 186–87.
[9] Ibid., 191.

About the author

Susan Kennel Harrison is working on her ThD in theology at Toronto School of Theology. She is interested in interfaith dialogue, especially between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and she coordinates the Toronto side of the Mennonite Central Committee exchange of students between Iran and Toronto. She and her family worship at Hagerman Mennonite Church, Markham, Ontario.