Interfaith interaction—integral to Christian proclamation

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For more than twenty-five years, Mennonite Christians have been engaged in interfaith dialogue with Shi'a Muslims.[1] The conversations grew out of a tragedy: in the early morning hours of June 21, 1990, the area of northern Iran between the towns of Rudbar and Manjil experienced a massive earthquake that killed some forty thousand people, injured sixty thousand more, and left half a million homeless. The event was catastrophic, and the resulting economic hardship for Iran was extreme.

Then something unexpected happened. After Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sent material aid and assisted in reconstruction projects alongside the Iranian Red Crescent Society and the Housing Foundation of Iran, Mennonites and Muslims began talking with each other. Soon, both sides wanted to interact at a deeper level. By the mid-1990s, exchanges were organized, making it possible for students from the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) in the city of Qom to study in Toronto; at the same time arrangements were made so that North American Mennonite students could study in Qom.

In the meantime, MCC and IKERI began planning formal dialogues involving Christian and Muslim scholars. The first of these took place in October 2000 in Toronto and focused on the challenges of modernity. Eventually, other dialogues were held, in Waterloo (Ontario), Winnipeg, and Qom. The conversations centered on issues related to revelation and authority, spirituality, peace and justice, theological anthropology, and religious ethics.

Since then, Muslim students from Iran have attended the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Virginia) and the Canadian School of Peacebuilding at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg). Several Mennonite scholars have also presented lectures in Iran, and Muslim scholars have given presentations in

1 Variations of this essay have appeared elsewhere. See "Das Christentum und die Religionen," in *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 2002* (Lahr: Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden in Deutschland, 2001), and "Christianity and the Other Religions," in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 9 (2001): 86–91.

North American settings. Learning tours have also enabled Mennonites to travel to Iran to become better informed about the country and its religion.[2] Much organizational effort has gone into these exchanges, and planning for further interaction continues.

What are we to make of these efforts? What are Mennonites' aims and objectives, when they are involved in planning exchanges of this nature? What assumptions do planners and participants make about the relationship between Christianity and Islam or other world religions?

Christian responses to world religions

In the past, Christians living in the West have typically been able to ignore the existence of other world religions. In recent times, though, we have found it harder and harder to sustain a posture of ignorance or obliviousness. The world has grown smaller as a result of increasing global communication, travel, international trade, immigration, and other factors, and Christians are now regularly in contact with people of other faiths. As tensions have intensified between Western and Muslim countries, Christians have begun to ask what it means to live alongside Muslim neighbors, acquaintances, and friends. Perhaps with greater seriousness than ever before, they have also been compelled to ask theological questions about the salvation of those outside Christianity and about the relevance of Christian proclamation in light of the religiously pluralistic context in which we now find ourselves.

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A prevailing theological assumption throughout much of Christian history has been the view that only Christians will experience salvation. The official teachings of churches have often concluded that "outside the church there is no salvation" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Today many

2 For additional background information on the history of the Mennonite-Shia exchanges, see Harry J. Huebner, "Mennonite-Shi'a Engagement: Proclamation, Friendship, Peacebuilding," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 47–59, http://www.directionjournal.org/45/1/index.html.

Christians find this view troubling, because they are aware that the religion that one adheres to often has more to do with happenstance than with decision. As John Hick has observed, "When someone is born into a devout Muslim family in Pakistan or Egypt or Indonesia, it will nearly always be a safe bet that he or she will become a Muslim, either observant or nonobservant. When someone is born into a devout Christian family in Italy or Mexico, it will nearly always be a safe bet that he or she will become a Catholic Christian, again either observant or nonobservant."[3]

How then should Christians understand the place of the world religions in the context of salvation history—in the light of the mercy and the judgment of God, both of which have their place in the scriptures?

Already in the seventeenth century, during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), French philosopher René Descartes was aware of how culturally conditioned and geographically dependent religious beliefs are. Today his point of view is hardly questioned, and many Christians find it difficult to believe that God would consign billions of people to eternal punishment because of their adherence to another religious faith. Many Christians argue that this kind of judgment would contradict the very character of God, who is first and foremost loving and just. Some point out further that Christianity does not appear to be a morally superior religion; compared to people of other faiths, Christians do not necessarily exemplify a higher morality. An observation often made by Christians who have come into contact with people of other faiths is that the moral character of a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist may be equal or even superior to that of a Christian.[4]

Christian faith and other religions: Three views

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3 John Hick, "Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, ed. Roger Badham (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 25.

4 Ibid.

Christians, attitudes toward other religions vary widely, but those who study the subject commonly recognize at least three general views.[5]

The exclusivist position has been widely held in the past. Christians holding this view argue that only those who hear the gospel proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ as their Savior will be saved. This perspective emphasizes that God sent Jesus Christ to bring salvation to the world, and that salvation in Christ is available only through faith, which comes from hearing the gospel. Some proponents of the exclusivist view would add further elements to their position, such as the necessity of repentance, baptism, embracing a new life in Christ, discipleship, and so on.

Many exclusivists admit that the reality of eternal damnation for those who have not made an explicit Christian confession is a horrifying thought, but they would argue that because of the inherent sinfulness of humanity, human beings simply do not deserve redemption. Those who hold this view stress that God in his mercy has provided salvation for those who choose to believe and live by faith. (Or, in the case of a Calvinist perspective, God in his infinite mercy has provided salvation for those whom he has elected.) Instead of finding incomprehensible the notion that God would consign billions of people to eternal punishment, the exclusivist argues that one ought to be thankful for God's infinite love that has been expressed in Jesus, who died on the cross for a world that only deserves damnation. One ought to be in awe of God's willingness to save those who enter by the narrow door. An obvious implication of the exclusivist position is that Christians should be greatly concerned about missions, and should support every effort to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

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A very different Christian response to the world religions is t**he pluralist position**. This view has emerged primarily in the modern period,

5 It is probably the case that most Christians do not fit neatly into any one category, but the effort to describe general postures is still helpful. For the following summary, I am mostly drawing from an article by Gavin D'Costa, "Christian Theology and Other Faiths," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 291–313. Another helpful summary that outlines seven typologies delineating various ways of understanding the relationship between Christian faith and other religions is found in Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 319–28.

although traces of it can be found in early Christian history as well. Those holding the pluralist view argue that all religions are equally valid, and Christ is one revelation among other equally important revelations. Religions may take on a variety of historical manifestations, but they all have a common core or essence, or a common belief in the transcendent (personal or nonpersonal), or a common experience of salvation or liberation.

Without making any special claims for Christianity, Christians may view the history of religions as a story of God's activity. According to this perspective, Christians should not try to convert others to Christian faith, and they should not claim superiority. Instead, they should exemplify a willingness to grow together with other religions toward the truth. Missionary energies should be carried out jointly throughout the world, not aimed at converting people of other faiths to one's own religion. Christians should find ways of cooperating with other religious bodies and focus on common concerns and goals, for the good of all.

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A third response to religious pluralism has come to be known as **the inclusivist position**. Inclusivists are similar to exclusivists in upholding the view that Jesus Christ is the normative revelation of God and that salvation is only found in Christ. However, they also hold that salvation is possible for those who are outside the Christian faith. There may be people who do not explicitly confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord who will nonetheless experience salvation, for God's grace is present throughout God's creation and throughout history. Grace can be mediated through a non-Christian religion, even if that mediation is incomplete. While Christ is the sole cause of salvation in the world, this grace may be mediated historically, socially, and through creation.

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner is probably the most influential inclusivist of the twentieth century and is known for the terms "anonymous Christian" and "anonymous Christianity," by which he means that believers in other religious traditions may experience salvation in Christ, whether or not they know Christ. Inclusivists argue that it is important to tell others about Christ and to hope and pray for the conversion of all people to the Christian faith. At the same time, most holding this view are open to the possibility that God works in other religions and that

Christians can learn from other religious traditions. The Roman Catholic Church has taken this position, as reflected in documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), especially *Nostra aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) and *Ad gentes* (Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church), and more recently in its declaration *'Dominus Iesus': On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000).

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Biblical perspectives

From a biblical perspective, the question of the relationship between Christianity and other religions is not easily resolved. Cultural and societal understandings and assumptions often govern our biblical exegesis. Our confessional backgrounds, the families and churches we come from, and our personal prejudices shape our belief systems and often determine which biblical texts we give greatest attention and priority. This is true, regardless of which point of view we gravitate toward.

Without question, some passages in the Bible suggest that salvation is possible only through an explicit confession of and commitment to Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded as saying: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).[6] For many Christians, this text (among others) is the definitive answer to the question of the status of the world religions outside Christianity. These Christians would say there is no need for further discussion, because the Bible is clear on the matter.

According to other biblical texts, however, salvation may be experienced through other faiths. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter comes to the realization that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34–35).[7] Many Christians see this and other texts as an indication that non-Christian religions have value and contain elements of the truth.

Unfortunately, Christians often gravitate to one set of Bible passages or another. We are tempted either to try to refute the possibility that God

6 See also Matt. 11:27; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 3:11; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Tim. 2:5.

7 See also Acts 14:16–17; Acts 17:22–31; Rom. 1:18–2:11; Rom. 2:12–29.

may be at work among people of other faiths or to idealize the religions of the world as a whole.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to resolve these tensions present in the biblical writings, and in any case perhaps we should be content to leave unresolved the question of the final destiny of those outside the Christian faith.[8] As far as Israel is concerned, the scriptures are fairly clear that Israel, as God's chosen people, has a special place in salvation history (Rom. 9–11). While the Bible speaks of a "new covenant" and a "new Israel," biblical tradition is also clear that God has not rejected his people, and his promises continue to accompany Israel into the future. Several Christian theologians, especially since World War II, have emphasized that to speak of the new covenant as the fulfillment of the old (a theology of fulfillment) is implicitly to point to the theological extinction of Judaism, and historical attempts at liquidating the Jews is an inevitable corollary. They suggest that "Jews, in remaining Jews rather than becoming Christians, are being faithful to their covenant with God—the same God who forged a further complementary covenant into which the Gentiles were grafted."[9]

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As far as the world religions in general are concerned, it is evident that a range of New Testament texts support the belief that God is present in other cultural and religious contexts. While the Bible does not say that all religions should be viewed equally, it does make clear that among people of varying religious traditions and worldviews God is present and at work. How God will ultimately judge these people is not discussed in any

8 For Mennonite perspectives, see, for instance: George R. Brunk III, "The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ," in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990), 33–55; John E. Toews, "Toward a Biblical Perspective on People of Other Faiths," *Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 1996): 1–23; Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2000), 259–78, 290, also published as an article entitled "The Discernment of Wisdom in the Encounter between the Christian Faith and People of Other Religious Faiths," in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 8 (2000): 119–37.

9 D'Costa, "Christian Theology and Other Faiths," 305.

detail, and perhaps this is a signal that we should not presume to stand in God's place with our own judgments.

In a broad sense, love of God appears to be what is essential in order to have true knowledge of God. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Beyond this, the biblical witness recognizes that goodness, wisdom, and moral integrity are found among people of other nations, and where these virtues are present, God sees these nations in a favorable light. At the same time, the central message of the New Testament is that in Jesus Christ, God has begun a new work, and in Jesus Christ we encounter the presence of God most completely (Heb. 1). This is the gospel that we have been called to proclaim and to live out, in harmony with the life and teachings of Jesus. Clearly it would be irresponsible for Christians to withhold this message and witness from others.

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Dialogue as imperative

In the North American context, the intermingling of religious cultures currently under way is relatively new. In times past, Christians have not always been convinced that there is value in cooperating with people of other religious traditions. Certainly one did not expect to learn from people of other faiths. In medieval Spain, there was a period of time when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together, but if there ever was a golden age of cooperation, it did not last. Unfortunately, the relationship between Christianity and other world religions has often descended into bitterness and bloodshed. And while Christians have often exemplified a zeal for proclaiming Christ, they have not always paid attention to contextual matters, nor have they always been attentive to the means by which their proclamation takes place.

Will the mistakes of the past be repeated? Some years ago, Manfred Kock, then president of the council of the Evangelical Church in Germany,[10] noted that "anyone who is concerned with developing peaceful

10 Formed in 1948, the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland [EKD]) is a federation of twenty Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional churches and denominations; the vast majority of Protestants in Germany are part of it.

relations among people of differing cultures will certainly understand and take seriously the responsibility of religion for peace in the society."[11] Even though Christians have lived with people of other faiths, knowledge of others' religious beliefs, customs, and practices is inadequate. Kock went on to say that "peace in our society in the years to come will depend on how well we have practised living together as neighbours in respect for one another."[12]

The religious conflicts that have emerged in Eastern Europe and in many parts of Africa and Indonesia in recent decades, and the tensions that have mounted in the last years between the Christian and Muslim worlds on a global scale, suggest that the question how Christians relate to people of other faiths is not hypothetical or inconsequential. We now live in a single interdependent world, and if we do not find ways to promote positive interaction among the cultures and religions of the world, we may well succeed in bringing life on earth to an end. For the sake of the planet, people of different faiths must find ways of living in harmony with one another. Yet encountering the other is not just about saving the planet; it may also be a means by which we come to new, profound experiences of the presence of God.

To opt not to interact with our neighbors of other faiths is not really an option, then. It is a constitutive dimension of Christian proclamation and an integral aspect of what it means to be human.

Christians might be able to list several reasons why interfaith dialogue has merit, but perhaps we should think of such activity not simply as an interesting pursuit for a special interest group but as an imperative, an activity incumbent on us all. In his article on Mennonite-Shi'a engagement, Harry Huebner notes that dialogue—in the general sense of including all our engagements, not just the formal dialogues—"can promote mutual understanding, enable appreciation of differences, break down stereotypes, and it can help to clarify one's own faith."[13] Yet Huebner believes that thinking of interfaith engagements as justified by some larger end is a

11 Manfred Kock, "For a Climate of Active Tolerance," *Ecumenical Dialogue* 4 (2000): 3, http://www.kirchegeld.de/english/1645-4188.html.

12 Ibid.

13 Huebner, "Mennonite-Shi'a Engagement," 49.

problem. When we dialogue, he says, we should "see where the dialogue itself takes us, the vistas it opens up. In other words, dialogue is its own justification. The reason is our shared humanity. . . . Choosing not to speak with another person requires justification—to engage in dialogue does not."[14]

To opt not to interact with our Muslim (and Jewish and Buddhist and Hindu and secular) neighbors is not really an option, then. It is a constitutive dimension of Christian proclamation and an integral aspect of what it means to be human. As our neighborhoods continue to evolve, increasingly reflecting a landscape with many religious faiths, the need for dialogue will likely increase. Will we see this kind of conversation as integral to our proclamation of Christ?

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14 Ibid.