

A Hispanic Mennonite perspective on proclaiming Christ in pluralistic contexts

Byron Pellecer

In Hispanic circles in the Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition, Christology holds a central place. We highlight belief in Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh and as the Son of God who is Lord and Savior of the world.

Our community is convinced that God in Jesus Christ has prepared a new covenant. We believe that through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Christ's followers enter a covenantal relationship with the Triune God and with one another. In the context of this covenantal relationship, we live out God's peace.

This community affirms that in Jesus Christ, God reveals himself to humankind and becomes accessible. Through Jesus, God entered a reconciling dialogue with humanity by calling all to repentance, announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, and creating a new community of faith. We also believe that this Jesus, through the incarnation, experienced human life and human reality in all its complexity.

We affirm that, by and through Jesus Christ, God calls and commissions this new community of faith to continue his ministry of reconciliation. Responding to this call means a life of discipleship. In addition to experiencing a relationship with Jesus Christ and newness of life, Jesus's followers follow his example in engaging in God's mission, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near.


Paying attention to God's activity

On the one hand, Hispanic Mennonite congregations sustain a missional approach and practice founded in the affirmation that the Father sent the Son, Jesus, and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, who empowers the church for God's mission in the world. As God's sent people called to reach out to others, we must be attentive to God's activity in this world. We are compelled to hang out in places where God is already hanging out.

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open the door to witness to Jesus. The challenge ahead is to find ways to engage and build social life beyond the church buildings. To do this, Hispanic congregations rely on the presence and instruction of Christ's Spirit, on scripture and prayer.

On the other hand, Jesus's instruction is to go everywhere, including local neighborhoods and marketplaces. Our purpose is to see and hear



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what God is already doing and join in. In the midst of daily life and ordinary conversation, we discover that Jesus is already hanging out in our neighborhoods.

The challenges of secularism

This proclamation of the kingdom today occurs not only in the middle of cultural and religious pluralism but also in a secular and atheistic context. Religious pluralism is about as old as humanity, and

today it is a real challenge not only for Christianity—whether the individual or congregation is theocentric or Christocentric, Evangelical or Protestant or Mennonite-Anabaptist, Anglo or Hispanic—but also for other religions. And the challenge is heightened where religions articulate their beliefs in exclusivist terms, with a sense of superiority and even arrogance.

Today, because our world has seen recent rapid advances in technology, especially in the field of electronics, the phenomenon of pluralism has affected human existence at all levels, including religious life.

Effects of globalization and religious pluralism

In recent years, developments in transportation have allowed greater access even to some of the most remote parts of the planet. Human mobility is increasing now. Displacement of peoples—whether voluntary, or forced because of politics or violence or economic need—is comparatively common. And the pervasiveness of digital devices and social media has made the effects of globalization widely felt. A global awareness is no longer reserved for travelers who use ground, air, or sea transportation. In order to travel to distant parts of the globe, one just needs to use a smartphone with access to cyberspace. These changes, in conjunction with innate human curiosity, have increased our awareness of the politics, economies, cultures, and religions of other places.

We can see the effects of globalization on a worldwide scale as well as in the places we shop, in our neighborhoods, and even in our churches. For Anabaptist-Mennonite Hispanics, these effects include cultural and religious pluralism in our own backyards. Our culture has been influenced by other cultures, and also by other religions, though in our case the effects of other Christian traditions have been greater than the influences of non-Christian faiths. While it is true that religious pluralism is nothing new, it is also true that now there is no need to travel to the other side of the world to encounter other religions. Cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity is not limited to certain regions of the planet. Now this diversity can be experienced anywhere in the world, in rural and in urban contexts.

Cultural and ethnic diversity, besides offering the richness of folkloric festivals, gastronomic delights, and Indigenous practices and customs, also sometimes offers us particular spiritual expressions and experiences that are presented as ultimate and salvific. Adherents encourage a personal relationship with their deities.

Theological identity and dialogue amid difference

For Hispano-Latinos who profess Christian faith of a Mennonite-Anabaptist variety, this interrelationship of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors, this pluralistic context, makes it more challenging to reach out and proclaim the risen Christ. As Harold Coward asserts in his introduction to pluralism in the religions of the world, “Strange religions have become a part of everyday life, and we experience them as a challenge to the truth claims of our own faith.”¹

A healthy approach to religious pluralism would help us understand the diversity of faith traditions that other people bring to our communities. However, every religion also claims to have the truth, and that makes dialogue across religious difference almost impossible. The experts of various religious traditions may be able to sit at the table and engage in theological dialogues, but does such theological conversation produce anything concrete in terms of coexistence without a sense of superiority?


I contend that an open mind and willingness to learn are crucial in a pluralistic context. That does not mean that individuals and communities should renounce their theological identities. I concur with Coward that

1 Harold Coward, *Una Introducción al Pluralismo en las Religiones del Mundo* (Mexico: Oceanos, 2000), 12.

imposing religious pluralism can be not only threatening but harmful. Only when religious pluralism is open to a dialogue that welcomes those who embrace a theological identity might it be possible for different faith traditions and their adherents not only to know and understand one another but even to learn from the others' religious faiths. Only then, as in an economy of reciprocity, can individuals and groups decide in healthy ways what to believe and whom to follow.

Pluralism and Hispanic Mennonite-Anabaptists

As I noted at the outset, Hispanic Mennonite-Anabaptists have their own theological identity, which unfolds through a Christ-centered approach. An understanding of the phenomenon of religious pluralism in our context starts by acknowledging how crucial religion—especially Christiani-



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ty—is for Hispanics. Therefore, any approach and potential relationship with other religions should assume an understanding and practice of Christian faith within that cultural framework.

The vast number of Hispanic Mennonites do not see pluralism apart from their culture and religion. For this group, Jesus is at the center of God's mission. Religious pluralism, instead of becoming a threat to our Christ-centered faith, becomes a good field for Christian mis-

sion that is characterized by respect and invitation. An exception would be where the theological influence is other than Anabaptist; then the approach could be somewhat less invitational.

And we may need to consider the possibility that religious pluralism might somehow contribute to the evolution of the Christian faith, not necessarily to dilute it, but to engage us in self-examination and contemplation of new approaches to the challenges pluralism presents. Also important is the view that “not all religious beliefs and their values are compatible with others but it is likely that many perspectives will be complementary to one another.”²

2 Alan Race, *Thinking about Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religions for Our Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 86.

Openings for reflection

As part of this reflection, we need to consider several questions and their implications: Who is Jesus? Where is God in all this? What does it mean to be a Christian? How do we understand the nature of the church? What does Christian mission mean today? How does God reveal himself to the world? What is the difference between syncretism and pluralism? Is religious pluralism good for humankind or God? Surely many more questions could be posed, but these questions can serve as an opening for reflection and conversation about our understandings of Christology and ecclesiology.

Our church is increasingly aware that in our neighborhood are people who confess a creed and a religion different from ours. We have also discovered, little by little, that some of these people are deeply and sincerely committed to their religious traditions. My own reality impels me to recognize that even within the same Christian tradition, there are many spiritual currents and theologies that provide spiritual care for their adepts. By this I mean that even within Christian circles and traditions, there are a vast number of creeds. Perhaps here too, amid this Christian pluralism, people of each tradition believe they have a message of salvation, a unique truth.

A faith centered in Jesus Christ

Even in the midst of this diversity of Christian traditions, a common denominator seems to be a conviction that Jesus is directly identified with God. In Jesus, God's redemptive action toward humanity is embodied for all time. In other words, the saving act of God through Jesus is central and crucial to these various Christian traditions.

Hispanic Mennonite congregations assert that within Christian faith, Jesus does not appear just as a prophet within Jewish tradition and culture. On the contrary, Jesus is presented as God incarnate. His messianic identity and his divinity lead him to make faith claims about his person: whoever has seen him, he says, has seen the Father. Moreover, he forgives sins as the Father would. And according to the New Testament testimony, the church experiences the resurrected Christ's presence through the presence of the Holy Spirit in its midst.

It is in and through this Jesus, the young prophet of Nazareth who has been transforming the hearts of humans with his revolutionary and fresh understanding of the kingdom of God, that individuals and multitudes can see and have access to that God who is also Father. In Jesus, people

and nations who listened and received him experienced the Divine as never before. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. That is, in Jesus, God has not only become incarnate but has also become tangible and present, and lives the human reality.

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Jesus, who confronted individuals and systems that dehumanize people, was respectful even of those with whom he disagreed. The life and teachings of Jesus are true light for the path of life. His followers have no other course but to accept the challenge of being imitators of him and becoming a healing community that testifies to his good

news, even knowing that it may cost us everything. Hispanic Mennonites understand that the call is to join in God's mission, both individually and collectively, to be a sign of the kingdom characterized by God's love and by his redeeming grace.

Witness shaped by scripture and Spirit

So then, from the perspective of the Mennonite Hispanic congregations, Christology is of the utmost importance. In our mission we proclaim—amid religious and cultural pluralism—Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior of the world. Likewise, we assume the responsibility and cost of living a transformed life. In addition, we are committed to living as an alternative culture amid a society that suffers and dreams of a better tomorrow.

In scripture, and especially in reading the book of Acts, one notices how the Holy Spirit moves and leads people and groups to be missional. In both personal and communal experience, we hear the Spirit's call to us to reach out beyond the four walls of our church buildings. Hispanic Mennonite congregations understand that witnessing is marked by knowledge of scripture, by the Spirit's guidance, and by obedience. We are convinced that God will find ways and vessels through which to make himself known to the world.

Our congregations understand that we are guests in the communities in which we attempt to reach out. We are challenged to know these communities and their reality, in order to proclaim in a compassionate way

that God's kingdom is at hand. Hispanic Mennonite congregations firmly believe ourselves to be called and empowered to be witnesses.

About the author

Byron Pellecer is associate conference minister for Western District Conference (Mennonite Church USA) and works from Dallas as he supports congregations and pastors in Texas and plans for the annual assembly when it is in Texas. He works with the Church Planting Commission to nurture emerging congregations and sister church partnerships, and he advocates for intercultural transformation, undoing racism, and Hispanic ministries across WDC.