

Christians and Interreligious Dialogue

The melting pot of American society is becoming religiously as well as ethnically diverse. J. Gordon Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions states that there are more than 500 religious groups in America, and over 600 of these are non-Christian.

1 Most of these 600 non-Christian groups are new religions and cults. A 1991 Gallup poll claims that nearly 10 percent of the population, or over 17.5 million Americans, claim membership in a new religion or cult.

New religious movements and cults are frequently out-pacing mainstream Christian groups in their rate of expansion. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention, a Protestant denomination, recorded a growth of .2 percent, making it one of the fastest growing denominations in the country.⁴ In contrast, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is now considered the sixth-largest "denomination" in the country.⁵ The LDS Church grew by over 324,000 members in the U.S. alone in 1997, an increase of 1.9 percent.⁷ Over 45,000 people were baptized as Jehovah's Witnesses in the U.S. last year, an increase of over four percent.⁸

New religions are having an increasingly profound impact on American culture. Eastern studies programs in many universities have seemingly legitimized the alternative religious groups based on eastern religions. Popular music, literature, and movies frequently present a pantheistic religious worldview in commercially acceptable formats. The New Age Movement is now an approximately \$1 billion industry.

Many people who profess to be Christians are responding to these dilemmas by "circling the wagons." They have little or no interaction with non-Christians, viewing members of other religions as threats to the faith who must be converted or avoided. These individuals take 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 very seriously - they are not only not yoked with unbelievers, they are frequently not even within earshot of such people.

In contrast, other self-professed Christians accept non-Christians as spiritual equals with little or no examination of religious differences. Advice columnist Abigail Van Buren once stated, "In my view, the height of arrogance is to attempt to show people the 'errors' in the religion of their choice."⁹

Other individuals, both Christians and non, are taking another tack. These people, recognizing that religions in America must of necessity function within a pluralistic context, are engaging in a growing endeavor called interreligious dialogue.

What is Interreligious Dialogue?

Simply stated, interreligious dialogue involves "meet[ing] people themselves and get[ting] to know their religious traditions."¹⁰ More formally, it consists of "discussions for mutual understanding held among differing religious bodies."¹¹ Paul F. Knitter describes his experience with interreligious dialogue as "the interaction of mutual presence, speaking and listening, witnessing the commitments, the values, the rituals of others."¹² The guidelines for interreligious dialogue established by the Presbyterian Church (USA) agree with Knitter's statement: dialogue is "witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbors."¹³

The most common form of interreligious discussion is when two individuals, be they friends, neighbors, or acquaintances, discuss their religious beliefs in a casual setting (Calvin Shenk calls this "living dialogue"¹⁴). For example, a Christian youth may be invited to the birthday party of a Mormon child, or a Baha'i neighbor may speak with a Christian over the backyard fence. These discussions can be very valuable in promoting better understanding of the different religions that

make up our pluralistic society. While valuable, however, such discussions do not constitute formal interreligious dialogue.

Perhaps the best definition of interreligious dialogue comes from John Taylor, a former missionary and Anglican Bishop of Winchester. Taylor states: "Interreligious dialogue is a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect contradictions and mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking" (emphasis added).¹⁵ John Stott gives a similar definition: "Dialogue is a conversation in which each party is serious in his approach both to the subject and the other person, and desires to listen and learn as well as to speak and instruct."¹⁶ In other words, interreligious dialogue is a formal process in which authoritative members of at least two religious communities come together for an extended and serious discussion of the beliefs and practices that separate the communities.

Syncretism: The Danger of Interreligious Dialogue

The roots of interreligious dialogue can be found in the ecumenical (or interfaith) movement, comprised primarily of participants from mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. The goal of the ecumenical movement is to establish commonality within Christianity, identifying areas of agreement in doctrine and practice. One of the leading organizations in the ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches, which endeavors to establish a "common expression of the apostolic faith today."¹⁷

This rapprochement in the ecumenical movement has been carried over into interreligious dialogue. The desire for commonality among Christian groups has been extended into a desire for establishing common ground between religions. Dialogue has thus become, for many in the interfaith and interreligious movements, simply another word for negotiation.¹⁸ The pursuit of common statements between adherents of different religions has frequently resulted in negotiations over doctrines and practice, with religious distinctives being compromised to attain unity. The name for this compromise is syncretism.¹⁹

Syncretism, in ancient philosophy, refers to the blending of different philosophical or religious perspectives.²⁰ Today it is pejoratively used to refer to "a collection of views without coherence or unity."²¹ The study book for the 1938 International Missionary Council in Tambaram, South India, concisely defines syncretism as "illegitimate mingling of different religious elements."²² In keeping with this definition, the 1989 Manila Manifesto (an elaboration of the evangelical Lausanne Covenant of 1974) rejects "the syncretism which tries to mix faith in Christ with other faiths."²³

Examples of syncretism in interreligious dialogue abound. Marian Bohen, a former Roman Catholic missionary in India, proclaims,

Because of one thing I am certain: the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Jesus Christ, the God of Muhammad, the nameless One of Hinduism, of Buddhism, of all faiths and of all unfaiths, is the God who created Adam as one humankind, to live in solidarity, in a harmony which reflects the dynamic, living harmony of God who is Father, Mother and Musician for us.²⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung, whose presentation on the Holy Spirit generated substantial controversy at the 1988 WCC assembly in Canberra, claims that her hope for theology "is that it move away from the doctrinal purity of Christian theology and risk the survival-liberation centered syncretism."²⁵ John Cobb advocates syncretism when he exclaims, "It is the mission of Christianity to become a universal faith in the sense of taking into itself the alien truths that others have realized. This is no mere matter of addition. It is instead a matter of creative transformation."²⁶ Cobb elaborates by explaining that Christians must accept the truthfulness of the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, where the extinguishing of all human passions will free us from reincarnation and enable us to realize our indivisible unity with the personless Brahma.²⁷

Nicholas Rescher aptly (and negatively) describes syncretism as depicted above: "Confronted with contradictory beliefs or doctrines, we need not - on syncretism's telling - see ourselves as constrained to make a choice among them; we can and should conjoin them."²⁸

Many participants in interreligious dialogue argue that syncretism is an essential component of successful dialogue. Such individuals believe "that to hold an exclusivist position [i.e., to believe that one religion is superior to another] is necessarily unreflective, obscurantist, and dogmatic; and that to try to persuade others to change their views from one position to another because we think that they are mistaken is always wrong."²⁹ Ironically, syncretism itself is often dogmatically presented and defended with little tolerance for non-syncretistic faiths.

Does this mean that it is impossible to engage in interreligious dialogue without also being syncretistic? David Lochhead answers this question, "It is difficult to see syncretism as a danger to dialogue unless the goal of dialogue is construed as achieving agreement."³⁰ In other words, syncretism is a danger only if your motives are syncretistic.

What Should Be the Goal of Interreligious Dialogue?

Lochhead continues, "Rather than defining dialogue as a search for agreement, it would be more helpful to define dialogue as a search for understanding. To understand another tradition, I do not have to agree with its precepts. I do not have to create 'common ground' in order to proceed."³¹ The primary function of interreligious dialogue should be to promote greater understanding between Christians and people of other religions. A sustained, scholarly discussion between representatives of religious groups will clarify the areas of agreement and disagreement in belief and practice.

Focus upon, and acceptance of, honest disagreement is essential to fruitful interreligious dialogue. Christians must not compromise the gospel in the course of dialogue; it should likewise be expected that members of other religions will be equally devoted to their beliefs. It is for this reason that Leslie Newbigin states, "The integrity and fruitfulness of the interfaith dialogue depends in the first place upon the extent to which the different participants take seriously the full reality of their faiths as sources for the understanding of the totality of experience."³² An individual who is not fully committed to the distinctives of the religion he or she is presenting will not adequately present that religion as it is held and practiced by the majority of its adherents. The dialogue would thus be compromised and unproductive.

Effective dialogue enables participants (and later non-participants) to correctly identify areas of genuine religious disagreement, as well as identify misconceptions regarding the beliefs and practices of different religions. Craig Blomberg, the evangelical participant in a dialogue with a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (see "New Religious Movements and Interreligious Dialogue" and "Disguising the Divide" in this issue), admirably states this purpose: "We recognize that crucial issues divide us. But for our conversations to be fruitful and honoring to God, we must stop misrepresenting or caricaturing each other, always speaking the truth to each other in love."³³

Another purpose for dialogue, frequently abandoned by many participants, is to share the gospel message with others. Newbigin proclaims, "The purpose of dialogue for the Christian is obedient witness to Jesus Christ and declares it to the Church as that which belongs to Christ the Lord. In this encounter the Church is changed and the world is changed and Christ is glorified."³⁴ Dialogue is an opportunity to give a reason for the hope that is within Christians.³⁵

How Does Interreligious Dialogue Relate to Evangelism?

It is important to note that, while interreligious dialogue provides a forum for proclamation of the gospel, it is not evangelism. At the same time, neither does it preclude evangelism. Instead, dialogue should be viewed as an activity that complements and enhances evangelism.

Interreligious dialogue is related to evangelism in two ways: "Christians must practice dialogue with non-Christians (1) to understand the situation of non-Christians and how the gospel answers their needs; (2) answer questions raised by people to involve them in a personal encounter with the claims of God."³⁶ This relation of dialogue and evangelism can be seen in the Bible.

A Biblical Basis for Interreligious Dialogue

The Bible does not directly address interreligious dialogue as it is understood and practiced today. The Greek word *dialogomai*, which appears in such verses as Acts 17:17 and Jude 9, means "to say thoroughly, i.e. discuss (in argument or exhortation)."³⁷ The New Testament writers were thus using *dialogomai* to describe a period of questions and answers following the proclamation of the gospel.³⁸

Nonetheless, the Bible gives several examples of sustained interreligious conversation. Jesus spent several days in the temple as a young man, discussing religious issues with the teachers.³⁹ Jesus questioned the teachers on various points, amazing them in turn with his responses to their questions. While an example of interfaith rather than interreligious dialogue, this discussion almost certainly involved insights from Jesus that would have been understood by the teachers as transcending the common boundaries of contemporary Judaism. The method of education through questioning was common among both Jews and Greeks: the rabbinical method of teaching involved mutual questioning and discussion,⁴⁰ and even earlier the Greek philosopher Socrates utilized this method in what is now called Socratic dialogue. Such mutual discussion is at the heart of interreligious dialogue. This also fulfills the second purpose listed in the section above: the process of answering questions can involve others in a personal encounter with God.

Paul's discourse on Mars Hill in Athens exhibits a similar willingness to engage in interreligious dialogue.⁴¹ Rather than avoiding any contact with the idolatrous practices of the Athenians, Paul closely observed them and then used these practices as the springboard for presenting his beliefs. Note that Paul did not initially engage in evangelism or debate: he debated with the Jews and the "devout" (i.e., God-fearing Gentiles),⁴² but he merely "beheld" the practices of the people outside his religious community.⁴³ Paul was fulfilling the first purpose listed in the section above: Paul examined the religions of the Athenians to determine their spiritual state and to present the gospel in a way that would be most comprehensible to them. The knowledge used by Paul could only be obtained through direct interaction with the practitioners of the Athenian philosophies and religions.

Paul also shows that Christians can acknowledge truth in other religions without accepting the entirety of the religion as true. His affirmative quotation from the Cretan poet Epimenides⁴⁴ (whom he again quotes in Titus 1:12) is an example of approvingly noting a truth in the beliefs of the Athenians. The fact that he was nonetheless presenting the gospel, however, also shows that acknowledging the limited truth to which the Athenians held does not mean one should compromise advocating the supremacy of God's full revelation in Christ.

The episode on Mars Hill is an example of Paul becoming all things to all people in order to win some.⁴⁵ Through the clarified understanding of other religions that results from interreligious dialogue, evangelists are able to express their beliefs so that they will be correctly understood by people in other religions and cultures. This can only result from, to use the old cliché, walking in the shoes of others. Dialogue is a way for understanding how non-Christians perceive Christianity.

Apologetics and Interreligious Dialogue

As will be shown in the following article, interreligious dialogue is not debate. Does this mean that there is no place for addressing conflicting or erroneous religious claims?

Paul Griffiths makes an excellent case for the necessity of apologetics in interreligious dialogue:

I am claiming that there are empirically recognizable religious communities; that they usually have representative intellectuals; that these representative intellectuals typically engage, among other things, in the formulation and defense of sentences expressing doctrines of the community; that it is possible for the doctrine-expressing sentences of one community to be incompatible with those of another; and that when the representative intellectuals of a particular community judge this to be the case, they should respond apologetically.⁴⁶ Griffiths' statement requires close examination. Most religious communities have leaders who are responsible for defining what is considered orthodox doctrine. These doctrines frequently contradict the doctrines held by other religious communities. Thus, for interreligious dialogue to be effective, participants must be allowed to make doctrinal claims, to temperately criticize the doctrinal

claims of others, and to defend their doctrinal claims when criticized. The caution is that such criticism and defense must be done in a respectful, non-aggressive manner.

The position of the dialogical apologist defends dialogue against the danger of syncretism. By allowing open and honest disagreement among participants, real interreligious dialogue enhances the clarification of beliefs and practices, and thus generates greater understanding of the similarities and differences between religions.

The Benefits of Dialogue

Our discussion of interreligious dialogue has been, to this point, somewhat distant from the life of the average churchgoer. Because formal interreligious dialogue is held by scholars and other authoritative religious representatives, most people have little involvement in the process. Why, then, should the average person care about dialogue?

Interreligious dialogue increases the understanding Christians and non-Christians have of the beliefs and practices of the other. This enhanced understanding can lead to a more peaceable coexistence in the pluralistic culture of 21st century America. As people of different religious communities encounter each other in mutual service in schools, in government, and in civic activities, the foundations established through dialogue will enable these people to know the areas in which mutual activity can enhance society (as well as to know in advance the areas in which religious differences can make mutual undertakings difficult).

As stated above, dialogue enhances the efficacy of evangelism. The clarified understanding of other religions will be published in books and articles about the religions, many of which will be read by pastors and evangelists, as well as transmitted to average churchgoers. These people will then be able to present the gospel in a way that most effectively addresses the needs and thinking of people in other religions.

Interreligious dialogue also helps Christians to better understand their own faith. Because the focus of interreligious dialogue is on the differences between religions, Christians are forced to examine their own beliefs in order to support these positions. This examination will increase the self-understanding of Christians, helping them to differentiate between the pure gospel and the cultural lenses through which people too frequently interpret the gospel.

Interreligious dialogue enhances apologetics and discernment. By better understanding the beliefs and practices of other religions, Christians are able to understand how true Christianity is different. This enables Christians to both identify and contextualize the teachings of other religions, and to present a reason for why Christians believe differently.

Finally, interreligious dialogue increases the ability of Christians to love their neighbors. Dialogue will enhance our ability to see that each person is their moral equal - the only difference is that they are sinners who have been saved through God's grace. The knowledge that Christians had nothing to do with their salvation should inspire them to reach out and share the undeserved love of God with their neighbors. Relational evangelism will improve as clarified understanding of the faith and lives of neighbors erases misconceptions about other religions.

Conclusion

Terry Muck succinctly states the function of interreligious dialogue:

In situations where hostility is not present, where the mutual exclusions of truth are assumed, where commitment is allowed, and where agreement is not the minimal expectation (which I assume eliminates a great deal of what passes for interreligious dialogue today), interreligious dialogue is not just allowed, but I would suggest the world situation demands it.⁴⁷

