

# Anabaptist Witness

*A Global Anabaptist and Mennonite Dialogue on  
Key Issues Facing the Church in Mission*

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# Anabaptist Witness

*A Global Anabaptist and Mennonite Dialogue on Key Issues Facing the Church in Mission*

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# Editorial

Anabaptist witness, like Christian witness more generally, necessarily involves interaction with persons and communities of other religions and none. This necessity arises from two considerations. The first is the missional constitution of the church: the church is sent into the world as a liberation community embodying and announcing God's peaceable reign. As sent, the church's activity takes the form of witness to its sender, Jesus Christ. This witness, as is evident in global Anabaptist witness today, includes worship, prayer, collaboration, protest, sharing, friendship, argument, teaching, learning, and many other practices undertaken to, for, and with the world.

The other consideration is the reality of globalization and the geographical extension of religious pluralism that it has enabled. Although it is true that Christianity has always been in contact with religious others, many observers suggest that globalization represents a new context for Christian witness. Mass transportation and media enable people, goods, and ideas to circulate around the globe at unprecedented speeds. If rampant economic inequalities mean the world is far from "flat," it is yet connected across its peaks and valleys like never before.

Consideration of the church's missional constitution and context lead, therefore, to the claim that interaction with religious others is a necessary element of Anabaptist witness. But what does this interaction look like? What *should* it look like? What resources do Christian theology and missiology offer as guides to understanding and engaging other religions? The essays in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* offer various responses to these questions, questions that make up the field of the "theology of religions."

The Finnish Pentecostal theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen suggests that the Bible provides two guidelines or parameters within which Christian theologies of religions fall: first, God desires the salvation of all and, second, salvation is only available in and through Jesus Christ. Kärkkäinen states that "how one puts these two affirmations together and accounts for the built-in tension between them largely determines one's theology of religions."<sup>1</sup> Theologies of religions are accordingly often placed on a spectrum ranging from "pluralist"

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1 Kärkkäinen, *Introducing the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 26–27.

(salvation through God, as met through any religion) to “inclusivist” (salvation through Christ, as met through any religion) and “exclusivist” (salvation through Christ, as met through the church).<sup>2</sup>

While some of the contributors to the present volume take up similar terms and reflect explicitly on the problems typically associated with the theology of religions, many do not. However, all of them explore how Christians ought to interact with persons and communities of other religions. Although the contributors might be categorized differently, they all point to lived encounter with persons and communities of other religions as the center of any theology of religions. It is in encounter that identity markers and community borders are negotiated, and it is in encounter that religious gifts can be given and received. For some contributors encounter represents openness to “the Other”; for others it makes peacemaking possible; and for others it is the moment in which the call to conversion can be made. For all, encounter with religious others is intrinsic to Anabaptist witness.

Content in this issue can be divided into three sections. The first five articles are more formal and academic in presentation, while the next five are shaped around personal narratives. The stories are a great place to begin for those readers unfamiliar with the theology of religions. The third section, the book reviews, may also provide an entryway into the discussion. Each of the reviews is of a book or film relevant to the issue theme. The reviews also point helpfully to additional resources for those interested to explore the topic more.

The first article, by Marius van Hoogstraten, argues that theologies of religions that emphasize either the commonalities or the differences among religions evade the fragility of inter-religious encounter. He thinks his more vulnerable approach, which he develops in conversation with hermeneutical philosophy, can support Anabaptists and others working on inter-religious reconciliation. SeongHan Kim's article likewise finds connections between Anabaptism and peaceable inter-religious encounter. Kim develops his case through a review of ecumenical statements on the theology of religions, and focuses his conclusions on his own Korean church and global Anabaptists.

Anicka Fast then relates the question of the gospel's cross-cultural “translatability” to discussions about pluralism. She suggests that the tension between cultural particularity and universality is eased in the new humanity created by the cross. In the next article, Dorothy Yoder Nyce contends that a pluralist theology of religions aimed at inter-religious symbiosis needs a good understand-

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 24–25. Kärkkäinen prefers the terms “Theocentric,” “Christocentric,” and “Ecclesiocentric.” He adds the category “Realitycentric” for pluralists who suggest that religions lead to “ultimate Reality,” rather than God.



ing of past patterns of engagement. To that end, she plumbs various archives and reviews the history of Mennonite-Hindu interaction.

Philemon Gibungula Beghela and J.N.J. Kritzinger's article emerges from Beghela's work as a Mennonite missionary and educator in his own Democratic Republic of Congo. The authors review the history of Christian-Muslim strife in the DRC, summarize Beghela's research into present attitudes about religious others there, and propose an irenic approach to peacebuilding rooted in an Abrahamic reading of the Sermon on the Mount.

The pieces by David W. Shenk, Andres Prins, Jonathan Bornman, and Sheryl Martin come from their presentations at the Council for International Anabaptist Ministries gathering in January 2015. The authors all work with Eastern Mennonite Missions on Christian/Muslim relations, and that focus is reflected in their work here. Shenk's longer essay tells of the development of the *People of God* Bible study for Muslims in eastern Africa, while Prins, Bornman, and Martin briefly share stories of interactions with Muslims.

The final article comes from Andrew Bush, who speaks from his experience of working for peace among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Palestine and Israel. Bush writes that in mission we learn God's "surprise": God's "love and compassion cannot be bounded by walls which we might construct of concrete, of national pride, of theological exclusivity, or of religious affiliation." We hope that this issue of *Anabaptist Witness* will deepen your surprise!

Jamie Pitts, Co-Editor



# Restoring Difficulty:

## How Theology of Religions Seeks to Avoid the Fragility of Encounter and Why We Need to Reclaim It

MARIUS M. VAN HOOGST RATEN<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Interreligious encounters can be profoundly unsettling. Exposing one's cherished, deeply personal beliefs and traditions to outsiders makes us vulnerable to their potentially unexpected or uncomfortable questions. What we considered self-evident or well argued could turn out difficult to explain,<sup>2</sup> and what we thought was singular to our tradition could unexpectedly prove to be shared with our conversation partner. On the other hand, exposing oneself to the testimony of the other means risking the possibility that there is faith and light outside one's own tradition—or quite the opposite, that the differences are much greater than we expected. This experience can be distressing, and holds the double temptation of either closure or the withdrawal into a merely metaphysical, uncommitted faith. In the words of theologian Marianne Moyaert, “the religious other is the vulnerable other who challenges us to understand her. But that challenge is not experienced as ‘pleasant’ as a matter of course. The religious other can be experienced just as easily as disruptive or disturbing, as someone whom we'd rather ignore. In this respect, hospitable openness... is a difficult virtue.”<sup>3</sup>

It is this fragility, this difficulty, of interreligious encounters that I am interested in. I believe recognizing, accepting, and embracing this fragility, this unsettling, opens up ways of meeting authentically, of authentic encounter with a stranger *as* other. To facilitate interreligious encounter

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<sup>1</sup> Marius M. van Hoogstraten (*Amsterdam, b. 1985*) is coordinator of interreligious engagement at the Berlin Mennonite Peace Center in Berlin, Germany. He is a PhD candidate at VU University, Amsterdam, and is connected to the Institute for Peace Church Theology and the Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg, Germany.

<sup>2</sup> I have frequently seen Christians go through this experience when asked about the Trinity.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 277.

and reconciliation, the task of theology and theory in this respect should therefore be to find ways to embrace this difficulty, to be unsettled well. However, typical approaches in theology of religions have focused more on attempts to still this difficulty, to resettle the scene by means of comprehensive answers to the question of religious difference. Although this may be soothing and reassuring to a distressed Christianity faced with an unpredictable and uncertain world of plurality, it also hinders authentic meeting, hospitality, and reconciliation.

In this article I will argue that the dominant approaches in theology of religions are insufficiently capable of embracing the difficulty of interreligious encounters, and that theory needs to turn to philosophical hermeneutics in order to find an approach that appreciates and embraces this unsettling as a means to open up the conversation and let it flourish. I am inspired in this endeavor by philosopher John D. Caputo, who is looking for a “hermeneutics of facticity”, in order to:

keep a watchful eye for the ruptures and the breaks and the irregularities in existence. This new hermeneutics would not try to make things look easy, to put the best face on existence, but rather to recapture the hardness of life before metaphysics showed us a fast way out of the back door of the flux. That is the notion of hermeneutics with which I wish to begin: hermeneutics as an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics.... Metaphysics always makes a show of beginning with questions, but no sooner do things begin to waver a bit and look uncertain than the question is foreclosed. The disruptive force of the question is contained; the opening it created is closed; the wavering is stilled.<sup>4</sup>

I will start by briefly describing two approaches to theology of religions current in wider ecumenical circles: pluralism and postliberalism.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that each of these seeks to arrest the conversation, rather than opening it up, and by so doing, hinder real relationship. The other person, as soon as she or he

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<sup>4</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>5</sup> For more elaborate discussion of this kind, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, or, for a different typology, Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002). These authors also include “inclusivism” and “exclusivism.” I am omitting these categories for reasons of brevity, as they appear to be less relevant in academic debate. Paul Hedges lists six reasons why the debate between exclusivist and more open approaches is no longer a real issue: Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 11–12.

appears at the horizon, is made to disappear again into the service of my meta-physical scheme, not allowed to be other, or kept at such a distance that their story is not allowed to affect me. These approaches, then, are insufficient—as is reflected in the apparent impasse in the academic debate.

For the second part of the article, I will discuss two hermeneutical approaches to religious difference that embrace difficulty and avoid the easy way out. The first is from Catholic theologian Marianne Moyaert. Rather than starting from concerns with universality, and taking a page from the postliberal playbook, she starts with a deeply particular approach, seeing religious tradition as constitutive of faith, rather than as a secondary byproduct. Comparing this horizontal role of the tradition to that of a language, she then argues for an approach to interfaith encounter as translation, a going back-and-forth between particular practices, concepts and experiences, accepting that there is no “neutral” ground, no “perfect” translation. Emphasizing the fragility and unsettling character of interreligious encounter, her work allows a “re-focus” away from big answers towards the fragile difficulty of building relationship and understanding the other.

The second approach I will discuss is that of philosopher Richard Kearney who, after the post-enlightenment and post-Holocaust “death” of the God of metaphysics, argues for encountering anew a sacredness in love and service to the stranger. The temptation to absolutize the other in distance or deny her otherness entirely is suspect—the relationship to the other is always to a recognizable other human, marked by both commonality and remaining difference. Kearney espouses a “hermeneutic pluralism of otherness,”<sup>6</sup> which takes as its core not a singular experience of the divine (as in liberal pluralism) but rather the remaining strangeness of the divine, the other and ourselves. I argue that both Kearney and Moyaert can offer us valuable insights for a theology of encounter that avoids easy answers and takes seriously the difficulty, facticity, and “hereness” of the world and our others.

Before moving on to the conclusion, I will then briefly pause to consider connections to specifically Anabaptist thought and practice, which I understand as favoring the ethical over the metaphysical, and orthopraxy over orthodoxy. Both traits offer a valuable foothold for a re-appreciation of the difficulty in relating to the stranger. As my training is primarily in western philosophy, not theology, these connections will necessarily be somewhat roughly sketched.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 81.

## Theology of Religions

To start with, I will describe two of the main ways theology of religions seeks to make sense of the unsettling experience of interreligious encounter. Both are second-order discourses, arguing within the space opened up by the clash of first-order theological discourses.<sup>7</sup> The first is *pluralism*, which describes the experience as primarily one of *commonality*, the realization that all religions share a common core. The second is *postliberalism*, which describes the experience as primarily one of *difference*, even incommensurability.

### *Pluralism*

Pluralism asserts that different religions share a common essence. This perspective has a certain intuitive attractiveness, as it is capable of answering the apparent contradiction that there are various religions which all claim to be true with an affirmation of a deeper commonality. There have been, and continue to be, many proponents of pluralism. These include Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Paul Hedges, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, and many more, leading to a wide variety of pluralisms to which this short article could never do justice. I will therefore discuss the basic argument of philosopher of religion John Hick, arguably the most influential and foundational thinker in pluralism.

According to Hick, the plurality of faiths presents itself as a problem. There is a point to religion, but the apparently conflicting claims of religions cannot all *simply* be true. The diversity of the realm of religious experience “must preclude any simple and straightforward account of it.”<sup>8</sup> The possibility that in an interreligious encounter I am confronted with approaches that are simply *wrong* whereas mine is *right* is an “implausibly arbitrary dogma.”<sup>9</sup> There is a need for a theory that can explain how different religions can be valid responses to the divine alongside each other, without contradiction or conflict.

As a response to this problematic, Hick advances the “pluralist hypothesis” “that the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all

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7 By “second-order” discourse I mean an argument that is not directly based on religiously specific (“first-order”, e.g., biblical) arguments, but is a more abstract philosophical reflection on those arguments and on the nature of religions. A second-order discourse is *about* first-order religious language. See David Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 4.

8 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 235.

9 *Ibid.*

our varied versions of it.”<sup>10</sup> He thus makes a distinction between the object of religious experience in a given religious tradition, on the one hand, and a transcendent and ineffable reality, which underlies that experience, on the other. The distinction is made along the lines of the Kantian epistemological distinction between the *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, between the thing-in-itself and the object of perception as it appears to the perceiving mind.<sup>11</sup> The contribution of the perceiving mind to perception is not merely one of passive reception or active grasping, it is *productive*: perception happens at the intersection of the human categories of perception and the thing-in-itself. Human consciousness thus contributes actively and positively to the world as it experiences it.

In parallel to Kantian epistemology, the pluralist hypothesis postulates a noumenal Real, “whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience.”<sup>12</sup> This Real can never be experienced directly by human consciousness, but only ever through the mediation of religious speech, myth and tradition,<sup>13</sup> a view that is in line with the traditional Christian doctrine of divine ineffability.<sup>14</sup> God, Brahman, Sunyata, and so on are the various personal and impersonal phenomenal manifestations of the Real.<sup>15</sup> Faith in one or more of these manifestations enables some kind of appropriate response to the “ultimate mystery.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus it [the Real] cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm. All that we can say is that we postulate the Real *an sich* as the ultimate ground of the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience. Nevertheless perhaps we can speak about the Real indirectly and mythologically. For insofar as these gods and absolutes are indeed manifestations of the ultimately Real, an appropriate human response to any of them will also be an

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10 Ibid., 235–36.

11 Ibid., 241.

12 Ibid., 243.

13 Hick describes the Real as “postulated” (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 350).

14 To support this point, Hick quotes amongst others Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, the Qur’an, and the Upanishads. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 238–39.

15 Ibid., 243.

16 Ibid., 349–50.

appropriate response to the Real.<sup>17</sup>

Different religions, then, are not mutually exclusive truth-claims, but rather mutually complementary perspectives on the final truth, existing but unattainable as the transcendent, ineffable core of each tradition. This means religions have a certain primary interconnectedness; any differences are superficial. The stranger in interreligious encounter is, when it comes to the ultimate truth, never really stranger.

There have been many critiques of Hick's and other pluralisms. These critiques have focused on, amongst other topics, the effacement of difference, a perceived crypto-relativism, and an implicit rethinking of Christology, none of which I will go into here.<sup>18</sup> I want to take issue with one specific aspect of pluralism's modernist, metaphysical approach: how pluralism works as a response to the unsettling character of interreligious encounter.

Hick started life as a conservative, exclusivist thinker, but was moved by his interreligious encounters to question those views and move in the direction of pluralism.<sup>19</sup> This is a good illustration of the disruptive force of authentic encounter: it can cause fixed ideas to waver, creating an open space for something new to emerge from beyond the control of either conversation partner. However, it seems that, barely having set out on this journey, pluralism purports to arrive at its destination. The emerging open space is not cherished, but closed by the assertion of underlying commonality.

It is not hard to imagine why this strategy is appealing. It makes believers less vulnerable to the other, less exposed to what is not under their control. In addition, it allows them to look away from their own strangeness, protecting them from the discomfort of their own otherness and vulnerability.<sup>20</sup>

In adopting a pluralist world-view, loosening my attachment to the particularities of my faith tradition and embracing a faith in a general, universal essence, I am effectively expanding my own metaphysical scheme to include the other's religious tradition. The other person is thus not allowed to appear *as an other person*, but only as an illustration of what I already know in essence. She has nothing essential to tell me about their own perspective, as I already

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17 Ibid., 350.

18 For good overviews, see the works cited under note 4.

19 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 35; John Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 2.

20 Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Value of Openness; Taking the Vulnerability of Religious Attachments into Account," *Heythrop Journal* 51, no. 5 (September 1, 2010): 737, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2265.2010.00574.x.



know—before even encountering her—that, in essence, her perspective is the same as mine. I might even have a *better* grasp on the other's religion than she does, as she might not yet have reached the enlightened stage of pluralism.

Universalist pluralism thus removes the risk of rupture, distress, and vulnerability, but it does so at the cost of the opportunity for particularity, difference, and relationship. The disruptive force of the encounter is contained; the opening it created is closed; the wavering is stilled.<sup>21</sup> The conversation is arrested before it begins. The loss of particularity in pluralism gives rise to its main competitor in the theology of religions: postliberalism.

### *Postliberalism*

Another prominent perspective on Christian relations to other religions is postliberalism. Where pluralism emphasizes commonality or similarity, postliberalism emphasizes difference or alterity. The deeply communal and specific nature of truth in religious traditions means interreligious encounters cannot simply be explained by referring to a purported shared root—indeed, respect for our own tradition and that of the other means approaching the others as entirely different systems of thought and experience.

Again, postliberalism is a broad movement, including theologians of wildly different plumage, from John Milbank and Kathryn Tanner to Stanley Hauerwas. I will therefore focus on one of the foundational arguments of the postliberal position: the view of religion put forward by George Lindbeck.<sup>22</sup>

Where the liberal perspective “locate[s] ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience,”<sup>23</sup> Lindbeck suggests a reversal: the religious tradition is not a response to an experience of transcendence, but rather, the experience arises in the context of, and is conditioned by, the tradition. “It is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience.”<sup>24</sup>

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21 John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

22 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, underlined edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

23 Ibid., 21.

24 Ibid., 37.

Lindbeck calls his model the “cultural-linguistic” (postliberal) model in contrast to the “experiential-expressive” (liberal, modern) model.<sup>25</sup> “Instead of deriving external features of a religion from inner experience, it is the inner experiences which are viewed as derivative.”<sup>26</sup> Doctrines, then, are primarily rules of conduct, much like grammatical rules. Their normativity in community is their primary justification; there is no reason to “insist on an ontological reference.”<sup>27</sup> There is a certain nonfoundationalism to Lindbeck's argument, and he describes his approach as “intratextual”: “meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it.”<sup>28</sup> For postliberalism, there is no “final” foundation or ground (common or otherwise) that we should seek outside the particularities of our own tradition.<sup>29</sup>

As the very structure of our experiences is conditioned by the cultural-linguistic context in which we have them, there are no primal or unshaped experiences, which could be related directly to a transcendent Real as an interreligiously shared essence. Speaking of an inexperiencable, inexpressable, unattainable root of all religious experience is, for the postliberal, not only philosophically problematic, but also irrelevant, as this is not what lived religious reality is about. Being a Christian means learning the Christian stories and coming to see the world through them, much like how one learns language when growing up.<sup>30</sup> Being religious, having religious experiences, and subscribing to certain confessions of faith are fundamentally conditioned by the particular tradition through which one learned to view the world.

Faith, religious tradition, and identity, then, are not aspects of one's life which one can regard from outside. It is rather scripture and the church that allow the Christian to regard the world.<sup>31</sup> There is no neutral, common field from which we can look at the world or even at our own tradition—especially not science or secularism. In a way, the second-order discourse of postliberalism works to emphasize the

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25 Ibid., 31–33. A third model, the “cognitive-propositionalist” model, which takes religious statements as propositional truth-claims, is disregarded early on in the work.

26 Ibid., 34.

27 Ibid., 106.

28 Ibid., 114.

29 Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 5.

30 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39–40.

31 Michener, *Postliberal Theology*, 6.

primacy of first-order discourse.<sup>32</sup> Scripture and other Christian texts are all that is necessary for engaging with the world and maintaining identity. Understanding the meaning of other religions can only be the result of reflection upon Christian sources.<sup>33</sup> It does not require any knowledge or consideration of the nature, history, or lived experience of the other religion.<sup>34</sup> Given the constitutive role of the specific traditions, there is even a certain incommensurability between them, as there is no neutral third language both traditions could express themselves in.<sup>35</sup> Although postliberals are not typically opposed to dialogue, the only goal of such dialogue can be practical cooperation or mutual respect in difference<sup>36</sup>—certainly not an unsettling of settled identities.

According to postliberals, this rejection of commonality and emphasis on difference means the other is respected *as other*, as opposed to the reduction to the Same in pluralism. But at the same time, the other is kept at arms' length: nothing of relevance to our identity or our understanding of God in the world can happen in our dealings with them. Similarly to pluralism, postliberalism reassures Christians worried by a plural and confusing world, soothing us with the affirmation that the experience of alterity can only be reflected upon by ceasing our exposure to it, by withdrawing within the safety of a Christian discourse.

In their response to the unsettling experience of interreligious encounter, postliberalism thus arrives at the same goal as pluralism, albeit by a substantially different route: the other person still has nothing of essential value to tell me, she is not allowed to *relate* to me as an other person, but only as an illustration of what I already know: the unbridgeable chasm separating Christians from the rest. “In both approaches the religious other is seen as a problem that can and should be solved, either by retreating to the security of sameness (pluralism) or by distancing otherness (particularism),”<sup>37</sup> as Moyaert puts it. The conversation

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32 An issue noted by David Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 4.

33 Hedges mentions the view that postliberals are “simply exclusivists or inclusivists in post-modern guise,” Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 161.

34 As pointed out eloquently by Hedges (*ibid.*, 155).

35 Michener, *Postliberal Theology*, 107–9.

36 *Ibid.*, 9; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 53.

37 Marianne Moyaert, “On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology,” *Religions* 3, no. 4 (December 2012): 1149.

is arrested before it begins.<sup>38</sup>

So, what now? Having considered two dominant approaches to the question of interreligious encounter, one giving the answer of commonality, the other giving the answer of irreconcilable difference, we are no closer to embracing the difficulty of interreligious experience. Both are united in that they answer an ambiguous and unresolved question with a singular, clear answer. Encounter with the other, they seem to say, is only difficult if you do not come prepared: with the right theory, one can sail through the experience risk-free, without being exposed to its dangers.

### Interreligious Hermeneutics

We have seen that neither pluralism nor postliberalism can offer us insights that let us restore a sense of difficulty to our encounter with the other. Pluralism, through its emphasis on commonality, does not let the religious other be other. Postliberalism, through its emphasis on irreconcilable difference, keeps the other at arm's length. In order to find insights that can help us avoid either of these extremes, I will examine two thinkers who have been inspired by philosophical hermeneutics, most notably by Paul Ricoeur.<sup>39</sup> Hermeneutics means, in this sense, an avoidance of fixed answers, returning always to the question, knowing that there is no God's-eye view available to us, but that our being in the world is always conditioned, indeed, made possible, by our presuppositions. I will start with theologian Marianne Moyaert, and then consider the philosopher Richard Kearney.

#### *Fragility: Marianne Moyaert*

Theologian Marianne Moyaert's work on interreligious hermeneutics is formulated as a response to the "impasse" in academic debate between pluralism and

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38 In this context, Thomas Finger argues for expressing universal truths to enable authentic conversation. Thomas Finger, "Universal Truths: Should Anabaptist Theologians Seek to Articulate Them?," in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA and Scottsdale, PA: Pandora and Herald, 2000), 75–90.

39 In theology more broadly, hermeneutics means interpretation, particularly of the Bible or other texts. Here I understand philosophical hermeneutics as that branch of philosophy, building on Heidegger and Gadamer, which takes the process of interpretation beyond the reading of texts and understands it as constitutive to human life and being in the world as such.

postliberalism, which she sets out to break through.<sup>40</sup> Her approach is marked by a recognition of the fragile nature of religious identity, and the concurrent distressing nature of encounters with the religious other, “for it is especially in the encounter with the other that the human person becomes aware of his/her own strangeness and vulnerability.”<sup>41</sup>

Neither pluralism nor postliberalism formulate appropriate responses to this fragility and to the tension between the foreign and the familiar, according to Moyaert. Both exhibit “a nostalgic longing after purity and unity.”<sup>42</sup> Where pluralism overemphasizes similarity, postliberalism overemphasizes difference. Both emerge from a desire for a “definitive solution—the correct theological interpretation of religious plurality,”<sup>43</sup> which is at the same time “a desire to be redeemed from restlessness.”<sup>44</sup>

Moyaert agrees in principle with the postliberal claim that religions can be understood as languages, but she disagrees with the claim that this would make them incommensurable. If religions are somewhat like languages, then interreligious dialogue could be somewhat like translation. She therefore looks to Paul Ricoeur's work on translation<sup>45</sup> for a way forward. In order to better understand interreligious dialogue, we need an appreciation of the work of the translator: “a constant mediation between the foreign and the familiar,”<sup>46</sup> marked by “the pragmatic tension between faithfulness and betrayal.”<sup>47</sup> Interreligious encounters are possible, but they are not *easy*. Like interlinguistic translations, they are “won on the battlefield of a secret resistance motivated by fear, indeed, by hatred of the foreign, perceived as a threat against our own linguistic [or religious] identity.”<sup>48</sup>

A translator is always moving back and forth between two masters: the author, who demands a faithful translation, and the reader, who desires appropriation of the text into the target language, “doubly sanctioned by a vow

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40 Marianne Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions? Ricoeur's Linguistic Hospitality as Model for Inter-Religious Dialogue,” *Exchange* 37 (2008): 338.

41 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Value of Openness,” 737.

42 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 353.

43 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 298.

44 Ibid.

45 Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

46 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions,” 351.

47 Ibid., 354.

48 Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 23.

of faithfulness and a suspicion of betrayal.”<sup>49</sup> The translator needs to bring the reader to the work, and the work to the reader—a task that is doomed to fail, as some particularities and idiosyncracies of the text are always lost in their translation. The work of translation therefore “implies a labour of mourning, applied to renouncing the very ideal of the perfect translation.”<sup>50</sup>

The only reason why the translator feels sadness and guilt is because s/he experiences a calling to be faithful to both particularities of the familiar and the foreign. To not feel this guilt implies the absence of this promise of faithfulness, and for this rather awkward situation, there is no solution. That is why it is appropriate to designate the space between the familiar and the foreign as fragile.<sup>51</sup>

Lacking a third, neutral, “pure” language that could assimilate all of both languages and create fully transparent understanding without the need for translation, the only answer to an imperfect translation is *another* translation. The work is never *finished*, the problem is never *solved*. This is cause for mourning, but it also means that “what drives the foreign and the familiar apart also keeps them driving towards each other.”<sup>52</sup>

Interreligious translation means, then, letting go of the dream of perfect, transparent understanding as well as the fear of the strange, and allowing this fragile space to open itself up. The willingness to be interrupted by the strangeness of the other requires “the trust that there is something, which can be understood,”<sup>53</sup> while recognizing that there will always be a remaining strangeness. This is a stance she describes as “the ethical posture of hermeneutical hospitality for the religious other.”<sup>54</sup> It is a willingness to make space in one’s own tradition to welcome the other in their otherness;<sup>55</sup> this openness is accompanied by a willingness to accept such hospitality in turn, to become guests, to become strangers ourselves.<sup>56</sup>

To be unsettled in the encounter is not a sign of a lack of openness; rather, the difficulty is a necessary part of genuine engagement. “To be disturbed is to

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49 Ibid., 4 referring to Franz Rosenzweig; Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 351.

50 Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 23.

51 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 354.

52 Ibid., 355.

53 Ibid., 359.

54 Ibid., 339.

55 Ibid., 359.

56 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, 314.

be touched.”<sup>57</sup> It is not the answer, be it commonality or difference, that enables reconciliation, but rather it is an embrace of the unresolvedness of the question. To reject the *a priori* answers of theology of religions is a way of holding back the violent imposition of our metaphysical frame, of engaging nonviolently with an other who is allowed to speak with her own voice, as a subject.<sup>58</sup>

In this vulnerable, fragile, and potentially unsettling space, people of faith are not there to reach consensus, or to debate, but rather to give *testimony*, to witness to a fragile certainty. Our faith, when expressed as testimony, is “fragile because there are no irrefutable criteria to decide its truth, fragile because of the risk of rejection.”<sup>59</sup> The question of truth is not bracketed or left out, but rather, in this space, it coincides with the truthfulness of the speaker's faith commitment. To believe is to trust.<sup>60</sup>

It must be accepted and mourned that the wholeness desired by both pluralism and postliberalism is not available in the here and now. However, eschatologically, this wholeness *is* promised to us. The vulnerability and imperfection of the encounter must therefore be understood in an eschatological framework of hope. Vulnerability in interreligious encounters thus also opens us up to the opposite: a foretaste of what is yet to come. Moyaert describes this as a *feast*.<sup>61</sup>

The generosity of understanding, we could say, presupposes the generosity of festive hospitality. This ritual framing is thus not secondary to interreligious dialogue but shows precisely that, despite the real differences, the misunderstandings, possible injuries, and the non-recognition of the religious other, a choice is made for solidarity in the hopeful expectation of final reconciliation. Making room for the religious other is not simply a question of the understanding. Only when the adherent of another religion is recognized as a table companion is hermeneutical openness also theologically meaningful.... In the feast people acknowledge their fragility on the one hand and, on the other, draw the strength to enter the fragile hermeneutical space in which interreligious dialogue occurs in the hope of the final reconciliation.<sup>62</sup>

In Moyaert's work, we find a great appreciation for the difficulty, the fragili-

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57 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 360.

58 Moyaert, “On Vulnerability,” 1155–56.

59 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 293.

60 Ibid., 294; Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures 3: Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 95.

61 Moyaert, *Fragile Identities towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, 298–314.

62 Ibid., 313–14.

ty, the restlessness that occurs in interreligious encounters. Not only does she recognize that meeting the religious other can *be* unsettling, she moves further and rejects the longing for purity of pluralism and postliberalism, stressing that the difficulty is a sign of genuine engagement. Her move towards translation, including the mourning of the perfect translation, does not seek to give big answers but, rather, asks how to understand the question better. In order to enter the fragile space of dialogue, we need to understand the difficult work of moving back-and-forth between the familiar and the remaining strangeness of the other.

This remaining strangeness plays an even greater role in the hermeneutic pluralism of another Catholic author: Richard Kearney.

*The Stranger: Richard Kearney*

Kearney's philosophical project is rooted in a deeply personal discontent with the way we understand religion in postmodern societies. "The fact that two of my uncles refused to mention religion after what they witnessed during World War II left a lasting impression on me,"<sup>63</sup> he intimates. Facing off both dogmatic theism—he grew up in Northern Ireland—as well as dogmatic atheism, he seeks to rediscover something of God after the death of the God of metaphysics.<sup>64</sup> After the enlightenment critique of theism, but most of all after the terrors of the twentieth century, "the Omni-God of theodicy, invoked to justify the worst atrocities as part of some Ultimate Design"<sup>65</sup> is dead—necessitating, and making possible, the rediscovery of faith as "a commitment not to some transcendental otherworld but to a deep temporality in which the divine dwells as a seed of possibility calling to be made ever more incarnate in the human and natural world."<sup>66</sup> He calls this re-turn to God "Anatheism."

This return to the sacred, this re-discovered faith is summed up as the preference for "a God of hospitality over a God of power."<sup>67</sup> Kearney inscribes this preference in an eschatological understanding of God's promise to Moses in Exodus 3:15, paraphrasing God's *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as "I am the God who may be, can be, shall be, if you listen to my summons and choose liberty over slavery, life over death...."<sup>68</sup> God and the *eschaton* are active, not as a metaphys-

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63 Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xvi.

64 *Ibid.*, xii, 16.

65 *Ibid.*, 73.

66 *Ibid.*, 141–42.

67 *Ibid.*, 165.

68 *Ibid.*, 54.



ical solution to wrap up existence at the end, but as a concrete possibility for people of faith here and now. This is a *wager*, for which we first need to lose our certainty in the God of metaphysics: “The *ana* signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief... Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God.”<sup>69</sup>

The encounter with God-as-Stranger, as never *mine*, remaining always ungraspable, also opens us up to the divinity in the stranger, to the Stranger-as-God. “The message is this: the divine, as exile, is in each human other who asks to be received into our midst.”<sup>70</sup> This means hospitality and nonviolence take center stage as leading ethical virtues. This necessarily includes interreligious hospitality, which Kearney describes as “indispensable... a summons of cultural imagination to translate between one's own religion and that of others.”<sup>71</sup>

Guided by the interpretation of John 14:6 as the exclusion of exclusion—you cannot come to the divine except through the least of these, the stranger<sup>72</sup>—Kearney emphasizes the commonality and connectedness between the religions.<sup>73</sup> But this commonality does not mean embracing a general, universal, rationally posited Real, expanding my own metaphysical scheme to include the other, as in Hick's view. For Kearney, hospitality always also means recognizing the other *as different*, recognizing an irreducible strangeness.<sup>74</sup> “There is always something more to be said and understood, some inexhaustible residue never to be known. And it is this 'more'—which many religions call God—that allows the stranger to remain (in part at least) always strange to us.”<sup>75</sup>

Kearney's understanding of God *as* stranger allows him to cross commonality and difference over each other—not a middle ground between the two, but commonality and difference in dynamic interaction, a “hermeneutic pluralism of otherness.”<sup>76</sup> Compared to Hick's modernist pluralism, this hermeneutic pluralism comes with an important anti-metaphysical twist: the ineffable mys-

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69 Ibid., 7.

70 Ibid., 20.

71 Ibid., 149. In expanding on this notion of translation, Kearney follows many of the same cues in Ricoeur's work as Moyaert does, albeit via a less extensive engagement.

72 Ibid., 55.

73 Ibid., 150.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 180.

76 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 81.

tical point of unity, common to all religions, *is* the unsayable and untranslatable, the remaining, unsettling otherness. This gives the old doctrine of ineffability a new turn, as it takes seriously the *unavailability* of the divine, allowing at once a post-metaphysical pluralism *and* a move towards concrete hereness.<sup>77</sup> Deep down, we are all “answerable to an alterity which unsettles us.”<sup>78</sup>

It is the incapacity to embrace this irreducible alterity, the unwillingness to find a certain peace with the strangeness and difficulty of life, which leads us to close in on ourselves in sanitized communities. Thus we “project onto others those unconscious fears from which we recoil in ourselves,”<sup>79</sup> defining our own identity in opposition to a well defined enemy or exotic object of fascination, suppressing “the stranger before us as a singular other who responds, in turn, to the singular otherness in each of us.”<sup>80</sup> The claim of postliberalism that religions are untranslatable and unreconcilably different, then, is suspect: “the claim of untranslatability is inspired by a fear of contamination.”<sup>81</sup>

Hermeneutic pluralism involves an insistence that the stranger must, somehow, be recognizable *as* another, neither as an absolutized Other<sup>82</sup> nor as assimilated into the Same. The possibility of relationship is in allowing the other to *be* as another, neither so much like myself to make relationship impossible, neither quite so different as to make it unattainable. “For how are we to address otherness at all if it becomes totally *unrecognizable* to us?”<sup>83</sup>

Though Richard Kearney does not explicitly address pluralism or postlib-

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77 Compare also Jeannine Hill Fletcher's emphasis on mystery: “God is the incomprehensible mystery of overabundance whose reality might be reflected in the stories and experiences of our neighbors of other faiths. In this way of thinking, it is the very distinctiveness and particularity of the other—his or her religious ‘otherness’—which is seen as an invaluable resource for an ever-broadening vision of the mystery of human existence and the mystery which Christians call ‘God.’” Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 136–37.

78 Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 5.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 353.

82 For Kearney the absolutization of the other includes any *unconditional* hospitality, as it also makes the stranger unrecognizable. “Unconditional hospitality is divine, not human,” Kearney, *Anatheism*, 48. It would lead “less to praxis than to paralysis, less towards new tasks of communal emancipation than to a certain bedazzlement before the mystical sublimity of the event itself.” Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 107–8.

83 Ibid., 10.

eralism, he starts his argument with an initial agreement with the postliberal skepticism of disembodied God's-eye-view metanarratives. “*D’où parlez vous?*,” he quotes his mentor Ricoeur asking each of his seminar students.<sup>84</sup> From where do you speak? Every experience is embedded in a framework that gives it meaning. However, he continues, hermeneutics cannot end there. There is something outside the tradition, as well. “Hermeneutics is a lesson in humility (we all speak from finite situations) as well as imagination (we fill the gaps between available and ulterior meanings).”<sup>85</sup> This puts him at odds with both modernist pluralism and the postliberal tradition—we speak *from* somewhere and have no absolute, neutral perspective available to us, but this does not mean we are so without imagination that we cannot relate to what is outside our tradition.

Like Moyaert, Kearney is seeking ways to navigate the extremes, to avoid giving unambiguous answers and give space to indeterminacy. Kearney's hermeneutics are marked by carefulness: this, but also that. That, but always this as well. Irreducible strangeness, but also commonality. The stranger as the divine, but always also as the concrete person she happens to be. His “*anatheist*” return to the primordial wager in the face of God-as-stranger means a rejection of the fixed answer for the sake of a rediscovery of the question. It is this tendency of dissatisfaction with reassuring answers that makes his insights so valuable in embracing the difficulty, the never-finished-ness of encountering the other.

### Anabaptists and reconciliation

I am not proposing the above as an Anabaptist theology of religions, nor do I believe there should or even could be such a thing, given the wide diversity of theological profiles in our global communion.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the above contribution and my continuing research is, by the grace of the author being a committed Anabaptist in life, *an Anabaptist approach* to interreligious encounter and theology of religions. I believe that there are valuable connections that can be made between interreligious hermeneutics and Anabaptist theology and witness. I will sketch these briefly, focusing on the preference of Anabaptists for ethics over metaphysics and the resulting understanding of reconciliation

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84 Kearney, *Anatheism*, xi.

85 *Ibid.*, xv.

86 Scott Holland, “When Bloch Pointed to the Cages Outside the Cathedral,” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA and Scottdale, PA: Pandora and Herald, 2000), 150.

as central to theology.<sup>87</sup>

An Anabaptist approach to interreligious encounter should take seriously an understanding of truth not as a metaphysical universal, but as always embedded in a community of faithful witness.<sup>88</sup> Anabaptists therefore, when the question of interreligious encounter arises, often refer to the ethical imperative of service to the stranger and love for the enemy as primary over any theological considerations.<sup>89</sup> Fernando Enns describes Mennonites as “less concerned about doctrinal orthodoxy and more focused on orthopraxis, [a] specific ‘undogmatic’ way of *doing* theology that is very conscious of the contextuality of any theological reflection.”<sup>90</sup>

The central theme to such an Anabaptist “orthopraxis” is, typically, reconciliation. In opposition to a Constantinian, enforced wholeness or imposed purity, however, Anabaptists emphasize the practical and at times dangerous *work* of reconciliation. Mennonite peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach describes peacemaking as “a reiterative process, accumulated and built slowly over time, and one that is easily destroyed with a single wrong move or action.”<sup>91</sup> The resonance with Moyaert’s emphasis on fragility is clear.

Above, I spoke of an appreciation of difficulty, the recognition that there is always something left to say, that interreligious translation is never finished and that no metaphysical schemes can provide easy answers. Again, this is echoed in the field of peacebuilding, and Lederach calls this “the Gift of Pessimism”:<sup>92</sup> “Pessimism suggests that the birth of constructive change develops in the womb of engaging complex historical relationships, not avoiding them. To be gauged authentic, that change can neither be ahistorical nor superficially utopian. The birth of the genuine requires the embrace of complexity and the

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87 The potential for connections between the adult baptism of Anabaptism and the “return to God” of Anatheism I can only mention here.

88 Stanley Hauerwas, “The Christian Difference: Or Surviving Postmodernism,” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA and Scottsdale, PA: Pandora and Herald, 2000), 41–59.

89 E.g., Gayle Gerber Koontz, “Evangelical Peace Theology and Religious Pluralism: Particularity in Perspective,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 14, no. 1 (1996): 57–85.

90 Fernando Enns, “Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Peace,” in *Just Peace: Ecumenical, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Fernando Enns and Annette Mosher (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 29.

91 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, reprint edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59.

92 *Ibid.*, 51.

commitment to nurture birth and growth through thick and thin.”<sup>93</sup>

As was the case with hermeneutics, peacemaking is never only one thing. As interreligious hermeneutics must be both humble and imaginative, as it must both mourn the unavailable wholeness and celebrate the promised reconciliation, so peacebuilding from a faith perspective must be imaginative of what is still to come. Lederach describes it as “a journey through difficult terrain in search of a place with great promise but where it is hardly possible to live except in short, extraordinary moments.... This is also the place where the heart of peacebuilding pounds a steady but not often perceived rhythm....”<sup>94</sup>

The connections between Anabaptist work for reconciliation as an expression of its specific faith commitment and the above field of interreligious hermeneutics can only be superficially indicated here. I hope to have shown, however, the points along which such connections could be made in future research: a distrust of patent solutions and an appreciation for the difficulty of the work, while being maintained by hope in what is yet to come.

## Conclusion

Interreligious work for reconciliation will continue to be of vital importance to faithful witness in the world. At the same time, interreligious spaces are fragile and interreligious encounters can be unsettling and uneasy. I hope to have shown that the two dominant approaches in theology of religions primarily function to reduce this fragility and reassure us in the face of a religiously plural world. I have argued that neither enables a relationship with the other *as* other. Real encounter and real relationship require an embrace of difficulty and vulnerability. I have explored insights from philosophical hermeneutics, as worked out by Moyaert and Kearney, which can help us to avoid the extremes. I hope these insights allow us to see interreligious dialogue as something that is never finished and must be waged, riskily, again and again, knowing that we do not know it all, indeed, that we cannot know it all, as the wholeness we seek is not available to us, not yet, and is the subject of an eschatological hope. Encountering the other in dialogue is neither a subsumption of difference, nor the impossibility of understanding, but “just that, *dia-legein*, welcoming the difference.”<sup>95</sup>

These have all been very initial sketches, and further research is necessary

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93 Ibid., 55–56.

94 Ibid., 67.

95 Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions?,” 358. “*Dia-legein*” is Greek for “having a conversation”; it is the verb corresponding to the noun “*dia-logos*” (conversation), from which the English “dialogue” originates.

to better understand the potential contribution of philosophical hermeneutics and postmodern philosophy of religion to the debate in theology of religions. Particularly the relation to recently popular deconstructive and phenomenological approaches such as that of John D. Caputo or Jean-Luc Marion should be explored, focusing, for example, on the aporia of unconditional hospitality in a hermeneutic of otherness, or on a comparison of the saturated phenomenon and the Derridean impossible (justice, hospitality) as it relates to pluralism's shared mystery. Further research should also focus on the development of the above in conversation with peace theologies as an Anabaptist contribution to theology of religions, of which I have only scratched the surface above.

Another necessary connection future research should make is to postcolonial theology. Hedges submits that interfaith encounter takes place within the context of empire and western (Christian) hegemony.<sup>96</sup> Seen in this context, it might be argued that by stilling the unsettling experience of religious difference, both pluralism and postliberalism stabilize, rather than transform, oppressive relations and systems. In the words of Kwok Pui-Lan: "a postcolonial theology of religious difference needs to examine how Christianity constructs difference.... The issue before us is not religious diversity, but religious difference as it is constituted and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials."<sup>97</sup>

But above all, what is necessary is practice. If I am right and interreligious dialogue is a fragile, unfinished space, then churches, institutions, and individuals cannot content themselves with official meetings between church representatives, resulting in statements of solidarity and reconciliation, however indispensable these may be. It is necessary for Christians at all levels, from professors to youth groups, from missionaries to otherwise uninvolved churchgoers, to approach people of other faiths openly, vulnerably, and personally. Christians and people of other faiths need to enter that fragile space of encounter together, maintained and encouraged by the eschatological hope of final reconciliation.

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<sup>96</sup> Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 109.

<sup>97</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 205.

# Christian Witness among Religious Others:

## A Korean Mennonite Perspective

SEONGHAN KIM<sup>1</sup>

### The WCC'S Tenth Assembly in Busan and Turmoil in the Korean Church

It was a very strange scene at the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Tenth Assembly at Busan in October 2013. There were daily protests of the WCC assembly in front of the convention center where the assembly took place. The strong protest movement among Christians is the hottest news in the media.

Many public statements came out against the WCC's Tenth Assembly in Busan. These statements widely circulated in the church with provocative video clips from the Canberra assembly in 1991, clips containing the Korean theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung's controversial speech and performance.<sup>2</sup> These statements largely represent the voice of Conservative-Reformed-Presbyterian denominations. I will briefly describe a statement from the largest Conservative Presbyterian denomination, HapTong: The General Assembly of Presbyterian Church in Korea (GAPCK).

According to this statement: (1) the WCC is rejecting the inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Bible; (2) the WCC is rejecting the distinctiveness and finality of Christ as the savior; (3) the WCC is advocating a syncretic pneumatology; (4) the WCC is insisting on a false soteriology and ecclesiology; (5) the WCC is advocating religious pluralism; (6) the WCC is accepting of same-sex relationships; and (7) the WCC is overlooking the importance of mission and

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<sup>2</sup> Chung Hyun-Kyung is a Korean theologian and teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1991, she was invited to speak at the WCC's Seventh Assembly in Canberra. Her speech and performance created a huge controversy, and she was accused of syncretism by conservatives.

evangelism.<sup>3</sup>

These accusations also reflect some of the long historical debates over the WCC. Several points in particular caught my attention, such as the fact that five out of seven accusations directly or indirectly related to the theology of religions. Clearly, the primary theological concern of this conservative denomination is the theology of religions: the distinctiveness and finality of Christ, interreligious dialogue, religious pluralism, and religious syncretism.

In this paper I will take a look at important theological-missiological documents with a particular interest in the theology of religions and its implications for the mission and evangelism of the church. I examine how these documents define and describe religious others, interreligious dialogue, and religious pluralism, and how they discuss mission–evangelism–witness–proselytism in a multireligious context. These are the questions that I want to address here.

To do that I chose to look at *Together towards Life*, which is the official statement on mission and evangelism from the recent WCC assembly. I will also discuss the *Cape Town Commitment* and the progress of the discussion among evangelicals regarding the theology of religions. Although there are wide varieties of interpretations and implications of these statements and documents, these documents have their own normative meanings and values. At the least, without these documents, we cannot even start a dialogue among ourselves, as Christians dedicated to the task of witnessing among religious others.

I also read these documents with my own context in mind as a Korean Mennonite studying at an evangelical institution in the United States. I hope that this interesting combination provides a better understanding of theology of religions in a broad context. I will also propose an Anabaptist option for the church in Korea and beyond.

## A Critical Reading of Ecumenical Documents

### *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation (EA)*

Before we discuss *Together towards Life*, we need to take a brief look at EA, produced by Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) and approved by the WCC's Central Committee in July 1982.<sup>4</sup> The historical background of this document recalls significant documents on mission and evange-

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<sup>3</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Korea, "A Public Statement of Objection to WCC Tenth Assembly in Busan, 2013," *Accusation* (2013), accessed December 26, 2014, <http://www.accusation.kr/board/board.php?board=myhome-board&command=body&no=643&category=14>.

<sup>4</sup> World Council of Churches, "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 2 (April 1983): 65-71.



lism such as the *Lausanne Covenant* (1974) and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). At the WCC assembly in Nairobi in 1975, the intense debate on evangelism called for the WCC to articulate clearly the relationship of the traditional missionary outreach of the churches with involvement in justice issues. As a result, *EA* has a strong emphasis on the “proclamation of the Gospel among the poor” and the missionary role of the local congregation.<sup>5</sup> We will find the theology of religion behind this document in section 7, “Witness among People of Living Faiths.” I will now highlight statements 42 and 43.

42. The Word is at work in every human life. In Jesus of Nazareth the Word became a human being. The wonder of his ministry of love persuades Christians to testify to people of every religious and non-religious persuasion of this decisive presence of God in Christ. In him is our salvation. Among Christians there are still differences of understanding as to how this salvation in Christ is available to people of diverse religious persuasions. But all agree that witness should be rendered to all.

43. Such an attitude springs from the assurance that God is the Creator of the whole universe and that he has not left himself without witness at any time or any place. The Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected. In entering into a relationship of dialogue with others, therefore, Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of God and the way he deals with humanity. For Christians who come from cultures shaped by another faith, an even more intimate interior dialogue takes place as they seek to establish the connection in their lives between their cultural heritage and the deep convictions of their Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

There is a strong notion of the Trinitarian approach to the theology of religions in these statements. However, “the Word” is presented as higher than God’s decisive presence in Jesus of Nazareth. Also, since God is presented as the Creator of the universe, and the mystery of God’s self-limitation in Christ is unthinkable, the Creator God must reveal himself beyond Jesus of Nazareth. The Spirit of God is also constantly working beyond human understanding, therefore there are some things we do not know. Each person of the Trinity is not concisely standing for the assurance of “the decisive presence of God in Christ” and “our salvation in Christ” in Scripture and tradition; rather the three persons of the Trinity stretch the conventional idea and traditional un-

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5 Birgitta Larsson and Emilio Castro, “From Missions to Mission,” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume 3, 1968-2000*, eds. John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Georges Tssetsis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), 137.

6 WCC, “Mission and Evangelism,” 65–71.

derstanding. Of course, although we have different understandings about other religions, “all agree that witness should be rendered to all.”

*Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (TTL)*

*TTL* was approved by the WCC’s Central Committee in Crete, Greece, in September 2012 and officially adopted at the WCC assembly in Busan in 2013.<sup>7</sup> This document follows the spirit of the *EA* in 1982, yet tries to clarify the challenges that churches are facing today.

*TTL* consists of three larger parts: (1) “Together towards Life” (statements 1–11); (2) “Mission and the Spirit of Life” (12–100); and (3) “Feast of Life: Concluding Affirmations” (101–12). The middle part is also divided into four subsections: “Spirit of mission: breath of life” (12–35); “Spirit of liberation: mission from the margins” (36–54); “Spirit of community: church on the move” (55–79), and “Spirit of Pentecost: Good News for all” (80–100).

The first part, statements 1–11, identifies the new challenges and sets the framework of mission in order to respond to these challenges. The first statement clarifies the nature of mission in this document: “God invites us into the life-giving mission of the Triune God and empowers us to bear witness to the vision of abundant life for all in the new heaven and earth.” This statement demonstrates the theme of *missio Dei* with its Trinitarian emphasis and also makes a strong connection to the Holy Spirit as the life-giver, which is the main theme throughout *TTL*.

We can identify some of the document’s major concerns in statements 2–10: (2) “mission in a changing and diverse world” (3) “mission as a life-affirming and transformative spirituality;” (4) “the good news for every part of creation;” (5) “mission and “the shift of the center of gravity of Christianity;” (6) “the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins;” (7) mission and the global scale of ecological and economic injustice;” (8) “proclaiming God’s love and justice in an individualized, secularized, and materialized world;” (9) common witness and life-giving mission “in a world of many religions and cultures;” (10) and the renewal and unity of the church.

This scaffolding allows us to see the location where theology of religions take place and how theology of religions plays out for mission and evangelism, and vice versa. There are also four explicit statements (93–96) regarding interreligious dialogue in this document. The subtitle to these statements is “Evan-

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<sup>7</sup> World Council of Churches, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (2012), accessed December 26, 2014, [http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes#\\_edn28](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes#_edn28).

lism, Interfaith Dialogue and Christian Presence.” These statements are located relatively close to end of the document, which follows the similar order of *EA*.

93. In the plurality and complexity of today’s world, we encounter people of many different faiths, ideologies and convictions. We believe that the Spirit of Life brings joy and fullness of life. God’s Spirit, therefore, can be found in all cultures that affirm life. The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, and we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions. We acknowledge that there is inherent value and wisdom in diverse life-giving spiritualities. Therefore, authentic mission makes the “other” partner in, not an “object” of mission.<sup>8</sup>

Unsurprisingly, pneumatology is the center of interfaith dialogue in *TTL*. Plurality and complexity is the given context, and in this given context the “Spirit of Life” or “God’s Spirit” or “Holy Spirit” or “Spirit” is working in mysterious ways among other “life-giving spiritualities.” There is a noticeable change from the “Word-” or Christ-centered discourse of *EA* to the Spirit-centered discourse of *TTL*.

Although evangelism and dialogue are not separable from each other in the context of a multireligious society, in a Christendom setting evangelism and dialogue are in tension. Again, in a multireligious society it is impossible to think of evangelism without encountering religious others and without dialogue.

The following statement shows the distinctiveness of dialogue and its close relationship with evangelism:

95. Evangelism and dialogue are distinct but interrelated. Although Christians hope and pray that all people may come to living knowledge of the Triune God, evangelism is not the purpose of dialogue. However, since dialogue is also “a mutual encounter of commitments,” sharing the good news of Jesus Christ has a legitimate place in it. Furthermore, authentic evangelism takes place in the context of the dialogue of life and action and in “the spirit of dialogue”—“an attitude of respect and friendship.” Evangelism entails not only proclamation of our deepest convictions, but also listening to others and being challenged and enriched by others (Acts 10).<sup>9</sup>

This statement clearly rejects the notion that evangelism is the purpose of dialogue. Evangelism and interfaith dialogue are closely related, but they are not the same. Statement 90 shows the proper evangelism in a multireligious world. We may find here some further clues as to *TTL*’s position on the relationship

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8 WCC, *Together towards Life*.

9 WCC, *Together towards Life*.

between evangelism and dialogue.

90. Aware of tensions between people and communities of different religious convictions and varied interpretations of Christian witness, authentic evangelism must always be guided by life-affirming values, as stated in the joint statement on “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct”:

- a. Rejection of all forms of violence, discrimination and repression by religious and secular authority, including the abuse of power—psychological or social.
- b. Affirming the freedom of religion to practice and profess faith without any fear of reprisal and or intimidation. Mutual respect and solidarity which promote justice, peace and the common good of all.
- c. Respect for all people and human cultures, while also discerning the elements in our own cultures, such as patriarchy, racism, casteism, etc., that need to be challenged by the gospel.
- d. Renunciation of false witness and listening in order to understand in mutual respect.
- e. Ensuring freedom for ongoing discernment by persons and communities as part of decision-making.
- f. Building relationships with believers of other faiths or no faith to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, the major part of this statement is an adaptation from another document, “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.”<sup>11</sup> There are a few quotations throughout *TTL*, but this is the only one extensive adaptation.

### Critical evaluation of *Together towards Life*

*TTL* reflects not only ecumenical reflections and voices. As we already observed, *TTL* adapts a joint document written with other Christian bodies: the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church, and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA),<sup>12</sup> and includes content

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<sup>10</sup> WCC, *Together towards Life*.

<sup>11</sup> This document was issued in June 2011 by the WCC, the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church, and the World Evangelical Alliance. “The document represents a broad consensus on appropriate missionary conduct ‘according to gospel principles’ when sharing the Christian faith,” “Editorial,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35 (2011): 194.

<sup>12</sup> “The CWME working groups have been able to draw on rich resources of

from the Cape Town Commitment from the Lausanne Movement.<sup>13</sup> It is fair to mention that *TTL* shows a strong intention to listen to other Christian bodies, to discern with them and include their voices as well.

However, the strong pneumatological emphasis in *TTL* is controversial. When *TTL* chose the phrase “Spirit—the Life-Giver,” it not only serves as an overarching theme, it also pushes significant changes from “theology” (mission of God) to “pneumatology” (mission of Spirit). The Life-Giving Spirit is now the instrument of discernment for God’s mission in this world.

Noort argued this way: since *TTL* claims that the Spirit of God is at work where life is affirmed and blossoms, “the affirmation of life” (1) serves as an instrument to observe where God’s Spirit is at work, and (2) establishes a theological bridge between Christian faith, secular worldviews, indigenous religions, and wisdom traditions.<sup>14</sup> This is an important discussion regarding the theology of religions. There is no clear distinction between God’s Spirit and the spirit of the world, and even the meaning of “life” is loosely defined in this discussion.

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen once stated that “Christian trinitarian theology anchoring within the biblical and classical theological parameters, maintains that the talk about Father, Son and Spirit is the only possible way of identifying the God of the Bible.”<sup>15</sup> However, there are constant efforts from religious pluralism circles towards “mythologizing the concept of God” or replacing the theological concept, using such as “Ultimate Reality” or “the Real”, in the arena of the theology of religions. In the case of *TTL*, a strong emphasis on “life” and using the terms “Spirit of Life,” “God’s Spirit,” “Holy Spirit,” and “Spirit” in an interchangeable manner can be considered as a case in point.<sup>16</sup>

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reflection on mission and evangelism both from within the WCC family and also from other bodies, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Lausanne Movement. Pentecostal and charismatic reflections also enhance the document.” Kirsteen Kim, “Introducing the New Statement on Mission and Evangelism,” *International Review of Mission* 101 (2012): 316.

13 Statement 81 starts with the sentence “evangelism is the outflow of hearts that are filled with the love of God for those who do not yet know him,” which is an adaptation from *The Cape Town Commitment, The Lausanne Movement* (2011), Part I, 7(b), accessed December 26, 2014, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>.

14 Gerrit Noort, “So What?—Dutch Responses to the New Mission Statement,” *International Review of Mission* 102, no. 397 (November 2013): 194.

15 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 169.

16 Bård Maeland, “A Free-Wheeling Breath of Life? Discerning the Missio Spiritus,” *International Review of Mission* 102, no. 397 (November 2013): 137–47.

TTL shows a new synthesis of theology of religions and mission and evangelism under the Spirit-led Trinitarian formula in a multireligious world. However, there are remaining questions such as its view on the nature of the Trinity (mutual witnessing among the Trinity), its biblical and historical-traditional foundations for its understanding of the Trinity (the distinctiveness of Trinitarian Christianity), etc.

## A Critical Reading of Evangelical Documents

### *Lausanne Covenant*

Many Korean Christians who boldly protested against the WCC's Tenth Assembly in Busan identify themselves as evangelicals.<sup>17</sup> If, as they would charge, the WCC represents a false "liberal theology," then what is the evangelicals' theology of religions? What is the historical development of evangelicals' attitude towards religious others and dialogue in this multireligious world?

We need a historical consideration regarding the progress of the WCC and the ecumenical movements and their direct and indirect relationship with the Lausanne Movement.<sup>18</sup> The first Lausanne Congress shares a common historical context of the 1960s and 1970s with ecumenical movements. Often the Lausanne Movement is considered as a reaction to the ecumenical movement. There were great efforts to reach consensus on the meaning of gospel and an emphasis on evangelism among evangelicals. According to John Stott, who was considered to be the leading figure of the evangelical movement from the 1960s through the 1990s, although Edinburgh 1910 was a significant gathering in mission history and is also considered to be the beginning of ecumenical movement, there were no theological-doctrinal discussions regarding "the con-

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<sup>17</sup> Although there are varieties among Korean Christianity, but they used the term "evangelical" as the opposite word for "ecumenical," without a deep theological understanding of evangelicalism.

<sup>18</sup> The Lausanne Movement (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization) emerged from the first International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. The Lausanne Covenant from the first congress is still considered to be a significant document on mission and evangelism among evangelicals. Although the Lausanne Movement is often considered as a reactionary movement against the WCC and the ecumenical movement from the evangelical camp, there are many organizations and denominations that have been founded by both sides. Mennonites also made some significant contributions in the early Lausanne Movement as well. See Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), chapter 6: "Christian Mission and Social Justice: Lausanne 1974 and the Challenge from the Majority World."

tents of the gospel, the theology of evangelism and the nature of the church.”<sup>19</sup>

In this historical context, the first Lausanne Congress was focused on re-defining evangelism and, not unexpectedly, it is hard to find any explicit and positive statements regard religious others in the *Lausanne Covenant*.

We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies....Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord.<sup>20</sup>

The sole purpose of statement 3 is to make explicit the affirmation of the uniqueness and universality of Christ. Although statement 3 affirms “general revelation in nature,” it also clearly rejects any notion of “syncretism and dialogue” with other religions. There is no room for dialogue or space for the theology of religions in the *Lausanne Covenant*, other than an “a-theology of religions.” The effort of dialogue is considered as a form of syncretism.

### *Manila Manifesto*

The Second International Congress on World Evangelization took place in 1989 in Manila, Philippines. One of the unique characteristics of Lausanne II was that it served as “the first significant involvement of evangelicals associated with the charismatic movement and global Pentecostalism.”<sup>21</sup>

The *Manila Manifesto* consists of two parts, and includes twenty-one affirmations and twelve themes for mission and evangelism at the end of the twentieth century. Affirmations 4–7 are closely related to the uniqueness and absoluteness of Christ, and affirmation 7 explicitly rejects religious pluralism: “We affirm that other religions and ideologies are not alternative paths to God, and that human spirituality, if unredeemed by Christ, leads not to God but to

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19 John Stott, *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974–1989* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), xii.

20 Statement 3: “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ,” *The Lausanne Covenant, The Lausanne Movement*, 1974, accessed December 26, 2014, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>.

21 Robert A. Hunt, “The History of the Lausanne Movement, 1974–2010,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35 (2011): 83.

judgment, for Christ is the only way.”<sup>22</sup>

As a result of the strong influence of the “charismatic movement and global Pentecostalism,” affirmations 10 and 11 vividly demonstrate the role of the Holy Spirit and spiritual warfare in the work of mission and evangelism. In retrospect, this presents a stark contrast with the role of the Spirit in *TTL*.

Finally, we find a paragraph regarding interfaith dialogue here.<sup>23</sup> It conveys repentance for the wrongdoing in the past regarding other religious faiths. At the same time it also shows the limitations and boundaries of interfaith dialogue, which it considers as a subset of evangelistic work.

In the past we have sometimes been guilty of adopting towards adherents of other faiths attitudes of ignorance, arrogance, disrespect and even hostility. We repent of this. We nevertheless are determined to bear a positive and uncompromising witness to the uniqueness of our Lord, in his life, death and resurrection, in all aspects of our evangelistic work including inter-faith dialogue.<sup>24</sup>

In the *Manila Manifesto*, the sole purpose of interfaith dialogue is clear: evangelism. The *Manila Manifesto* demonstrates the special nature of interfaith dialogue for evangelicals. Compared to the *Lausanne Covenant*, the *Manila Manifesto* provides a small space for the theology of religions, yet the stance behind this statement is of a defensive mode rather than an affirmative mode.

Paragraph 11 provides concrete numbers and tasks for the evangelistic challenge in a graphic way. These descriptions are interesting for our discussion. The *Manila Manifesto* uses two unique terms for the people who need to be reached for Christ: the “unevangelized” and the “unreached.”

Thirdly, there are the unevangelized. These are people who have a minimal knowledge of the gospel, but have had no valid opportunity to respond to it...

Fourthly, there are the unreached. These are the two billion who may never have heard of Jesus as Savior, and are not within reach of Christians of their own people. There are, in fact, some 2,000 peoples or nationalities in which there is not yet a vital, indigenous church movement.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Affirmation 7” in, *Lausanne Movement*, 1989, accessed December 26, 2014, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/manifesto/the-manila-manifesto>.

<sup>23</sup> I loosely use the terms “interreligious dialogue” and “interfaith dialogue” in this article, following the usage of my primary sources.

<sup>24</sup> *The Manila Manifesto*, “The Whole Gospel: 3. The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>25</sup> *The Manila Manifesto*, “C. The Whole World: 11. The Challenge of AD 2000 and Beyond.”



There are no religious others in these descriptions. I suspect that the people who are unreached or unevangelized do not live in a religious vacuum; we are humans, and religiosity is a unique aspect of our humanness. These are people who live in “living faiths” and are “religious others.” However, the description here does not contain any religious connotation. While the *Manila Manifesto* described the “unevangelized and unreached,” it not only—intentionally or unintentionally—missed the religious context, but it also rejected the necessary discussion of the theology of religions.

Netland explains this evangelical tendency as a selective attention to and omission of the theology of religions:

At least three issues demand attention in a theology of religions: (1) the soteriological question of the destiny of the unevangelized; (2) a theological explanation for the phenomena of human religiosity; and (3) the missiological question of the extent to which we can adapt and build upon aspects of other religious traditions in establishing the church in various cultural contexts. Evangelical theologians have generally focused on the first issue, and missiologists have at least indirectly addressed the third in discussions of contextualization. But the second issue has been largely ignored.<sup>26</sup>

The *Lausanne Covenant* and *Manila Manifesto* exclusively discuss “the soteriological question” and “the missiological question” without consideration of “human religiosity.” Let us then take a close look at the *Cape Town Commitment* which came out twenty-one years after the *Manila Manifesto*.

#### *Cape Town Commitment*

The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization took place in 2010 in Cape Town, South Africa. There were six daily themes for the congress: Truth, Reconciliation, World Faiths, Priorities, Integrity, and Partnership. The theme for the third day was “World Faiths: Bearing witness to the love of Christ among people of other faiths.” Discussing “World Faiths” as a theme for a day was an interesting development for the Lausanne Congress. There had been some presentations and discussions regarding religious others in the past, yet this was a significant change. Later these daily themes were developed as the second part of the *Cape Town Commitment (CTC)*, the “Cape Town Call to Action.” The structure of the congress already reflected the content of the commitment.

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<sup>26</sup> Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 310.

The *CTC* consists of two parts: “Part I—For the Lord We Love: The Cape Town Confession of Faith” and “Part II—For the World We Serve: The Cape Town Call to Action.” Part I, paragraph D, section 7, titled “We Love God’s World,” provides the core foundation for the view of religious others, and mission and evangelism in this document. It profoundly demonstrates the gospel of Jesus Christ:

We love our neighbours as ourselves. Jesus called his disciples to obey this commandment as the second greatest in the law, but then he radically deepened the demand (from the same chapter), “love the foreigner as yourself” into “love your enemies.”

Such love for our neighbours demands that we respond to all people out of the heart of the gospel, in obedience to Christ’s command and following Christ’s example. This love for our neighbours embraces people of other faiths, and extends to those who hate us, slander and persecute us, and even kill us. Jesus taught us to respond to lies with truth, to those doing evil with acts of kindness, mercy and forgiveness, to violence and murder against his disciples with self-sacrifice, in order to draw people to him and to break the chain of evil. We emphatically reject the way of violence in the spread of the gospel, and renounce the temptation to retaliate with revenge against those who do us wrong. Such disobedience is incompatible with the example and teaching of Christ and the New Testament.<sup>27</sup>

The statement “we love our neighbours as ourselves” includes everyone, including enemies and neighbors of other faiths. To love our neighbors, including our enemies, is not an easy thing to do. This is a powerful statement and it also reflects some concrete historical contexts, such as 9/11 and the many religious conflicts that followed around the world.<sup>28</sup>

Part II, section C more explicitly discusses the relationship between evangelism, proselytism, and interreligious dialogue. The subtitle of this section expresses the foundational idea of this document as “love,” which supports the distinction between proselytizing and evangelizing and provides the motivation for evangelism and dialogue.

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<sup>27</sup> “Section 7, We love God’s world — D,” in *The Cape Town Commitment*.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting in this context to read the common preface for the thirty-one Lausanne Occasional Papers that came out of the 2004 Forum on World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, written by the series editor, David Claydon. Claydon, “The Context for the Production of the Lausanne Occasional Papers,” in Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 31, *The Uniqueness of Christ in a Postmodern World and the Challenge of World Religions*, 3–5, *The Lausanne Movement*, 2004, accessed December 26, 2014, <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lops/844-lop-31.html>.

In view of the affirmations made in The Cape Town Confession of Faith section 7 (d), we respond to our high calling as disciples of Jesus Christ to see people of other faiths as our neighbours in the biblical sense.... We wish to be sensitive to those of other faiths, and we reject any approach that seeks to force conversion on them. Proselytizing....<sup>29</sup>

These positive attitudes point toward interreligious dialogue. The *CTC* never uses the term or wording for “interreligious” or “interfaith dialogue,” yet this statement clearly refers to the same kind of effort in relation to religious others.

We affirm the proper place for dialogue with people of other faiths, just as Paul engaged in debate with Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue and public arenas. As a legitimate part of our Christian mission, such dialogue combines confidence in the uniqueness of Christ and in the truth of the gospel with respectful listening to others.<sup>30</sup>

The discussion on the issue of interreligious dialogue in Cape Town started with the statement that “‘love your neighbour as yourself’ includes persons of other faiths.” For evangelicals, those who claim to be “the people of the book,” this reminder of this fundamental biblical mandate is a powerful invitation.

The following statement, statement 2, is even more powerful and concrete: “the love of Christ calls us to suffer and sometimes to die for the gospel.” This is the most forceful expression regarding religious others in the *CTC*:

Suffering may be necessary in our missionary engagement as witnesses to Christ. . . . Being willing to suffer is an acid test for the genuineness of our mission. God can use suffering, persecution and martyrdom to advance his mission. “Martyrdom is a form of witness which Christ has promised especially to honour.” Many Christians living in comfort and prosperity

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Claydon explicitly mentions historical events in the follow quotation: “‘9/11,’ the war in Iraq, the war on terror and its reprisals compel us to state that we must not allow the gospel of the Christian faith to be captive to any one geo-political entity. We affirm that the Christian faith is above all political entities. We are concerned and mourn the death and destruction caused by all conflicts, terrorism and war. We call for Christians to pray for peace, to be proactively involved in reconciliation and avoid all attempts to turn any conflict into a religious war. Christian mission in this context lies in becoming peacemakers” (4). Not surprisingly, Claydon emphasized that evangelization is the most important expression of the Lausanne movement, yet he is aware of the situation in which mission and evangelism take place in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, 9/11 was an urgent awakening call for some Christians to rethink mission and evangelism in the context of the multireligious situation and of religious conflicts. Pattaya 2004 was the important pre-event for Cape Town 2010.

<sup>29</sup> *Cape Town Commitment*, “IIC. Living the Love of Christ among People of Other Faiths 1. ‘Love Your Neighbour as Yourself’ Includes Persons of Other Faiths.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

need to hear again the call of Christ to be willing to suffer for him. For many other believers live in the midst of such suffering as the cost of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in a hostile religious culture. They may have seen loved ones martyred, or endured torture or persecution because of their faithful obedience, yet continue to love those who have so harmed them.<sup>31</sup>

While many documents discuss the subject on an abstract theoretical level, the *CTC* in a timely way reintroduces the radical witness of Christ's follower in the world. Furthermore, this is a clear call for nonviolent witness to religious others in this violent world.<sup>32</sup> This invitation commands our attention, especially when we consider the ongoing and increasing religious conflict in the world.

### Critical evaluation of the *Cape Town Commitment*

The context of Lausanne III and the *CTC* is important for our discussion. Evangelicals are starting to become aware of the complexity of the world. In between Lausanne II and III, evangelicals faced radical changes in the world such as the fall of Berlin Wall, the rapid breakup of the Soviet Union, ecological crisis, and the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, followed by wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This new evangelical response to global issues forms the main backdrop of the *CTC*.<sup>33</sup>

The extensive discussion of "religious others" in the *CTC* is evidence of the new awareness of human complexity that includes religiosity. Compared to the *Lausanne Covenant* and the *Manila Manifesto*, while the *CTC* still holds the evangelical claim to the "unique and definitive salvation brought by Christ," it also shows love and tolerance for religious others.<sup>34</sup> The *CTC* provides a much improved theological-missiological foundation for Christian witness to religious others and a better position for further discussion of theology of religions as well.

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31 *Cape Town Commitment*, "2. The Love of Christ Calls us to Suffer and sometimes to Die for the Gospel."

32 Chris Wright, who drafted the *CTC*, makes a strong connection between Christian pacifism and nonviolent witness in a religiously pluralistic world. See his "What Difference Does Jesus Make?" in *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World*, eds. David Shenk and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999).

33 Robert A. Hunt, "The History of the Lausanne Movement, 1974-2010," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35 (2011): 84.

34 Robert J. Schreiter, "From the Lausanne Covenant to the Cape Town Commitment: A Theological Assessment," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35 (2011): 90.

## Suggestions for the Korean Church: An Anabaptist Perspective

As I mentioned at the beginning, I am writing this article with my own context in mind, the context of a Korean Mennonite studying at an evangelical institution in the United States. This unique context brings at least two specific suggestions for Christians in Korea and Anabaptists in a broader context.

### *Toward a global theology of religions*

Many statements and documents from the ecumenical movement are new to me. Born and raised as a (once) conservative Presbyterian, I would seem to have no reason to read ecumenical documents and listen to the “liberals.” However, while I was reading the documents, I was surprised by the constant interactions among Christian bodies and theological camps. “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct” is a great example.

In this paper, I have tried to read both ecumenical and evangelical documents as the outcome of a global theologizing process. This process is a result of dialogue among many different Christian bodies. Sadly, in many cases we see what we want to see from such documents. Many of the accusations against the WCC from the Korean (conservative) evangelicals shows this tendency. Although I am concerned about the vague usage of “Spirit” in the *TTL*, I do not reject the whole value of the *TTL* for the sake of the church’s mission and evangelism. However, the more serious problem is that evangelicals also do not read the documents from evangelicals, too.

As a Korean Christian who lives in the twenty-first century, watching the Korean evangelicals’ hostile reaction toward the WCC and ecumenicals is a painful experience. Indeed, there is no future for deep schisms among Christians, especially for the fears and animosity of many evangelicals toward ecumenicals. I want to see a genuine cooperation among evangelical, ecumenical, and other Christians for a common witness in the Korean context, a context that faces increasing challenges.

Vinoth Ramachandra rightly raised the question of religious pluralism in the Asian context; as with religious pluralism in Asia or the Greco-Roman world, religious pluralism is not a brand-new challenge for the global church and its mission.<sup>35</sup> Religious pluralism is a religious phenomenon that is part of human history, especially outside western Christendom.

Dermot Lane more explicitly sets the stage for our theological discussion.

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<sup>35</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), ix.

His theology of religions begins with the reality of 9/11 and its implications.<sup>36</sup> We live in the post-9/11 period, and that means we live in a world where religion has become more important than ever before. The Korean church is not free from this global religious phenomenon.

I think the WCC's Tenth Assembly in Busan left significant theological-missiological questions for the Korean church to address. For the flourishing church in Korea, which is a unique case in the Asian context and where there exists a long multireligious history, how the church responds to these complicated issues of theology of religions is crucial. How should the Korean church witness to religious others? As part of the global church, what is the contribution of the Korean church in this particular endeavor? Of course, I do not have all the answers to these questions, yet my simple—perhaps simplistic—hope is that the Korean church becomes aware of the complexity of both humanity and the world behind the terms “unevangelized and unreached people.” Reading carefully and listening to other Christians' voice is the first step forward to loving religious others.

### *Threefold testimony in a multi-religious world*

As an Anabaptist, what can I contribute to this particular discussion? How do we construct a better theology of religions in a corporate way? One of the ancient texts comes to mind, written in the first century in a very religiously pluralistic world: “This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree” (1 John 5:6–8, English Standard Version).

While John used three elements of testimony for Jesus Christ as the Savior, water, blood, and Spirit have a unique historical connection with the Anabaptist tradition. Anabaptists believe that there are three baptisms: the baptism of Spirit, the baptism of water, and the baptism of blood. Each baptism symbolizes the unique Anabaptist combination of pneumatology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. Historically, in many cases their baptism of blood became a great opportunity to witness to their faith, a form of mission and evangelism through radical discipleship in a violent context.

I think this Anabaptist way of understanding baptism allows us to take new steps into forming a Christ-centered theology of religions and to attend to its implications, such as nonviolent interreligious dialogue and witness among

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<sup>36</sup> Dermot A. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions: A Christian Theology of Inter-Religious Dialogue*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 24.

religious others.

As an analogy, while ecumenicals intentionally emphasize the “Spirit” in their theology of religions, evangelicals try to maintain Christ as the center—for example, by holding up Jesus’ water baptism as a model—but neither camp necessarily emphasizes Jesus’ nonviolent path and his suffering and death—his “baptism of blood.” However, the gospels and epistles consistently refer to Jesus Christ as the role model for Christians living in a religiously diverse and violent world (e.g. Matt. 26:52; Mark 8:34–35; 2 Cor. 4:10–12; Gal. 2:20; Heb. 13:12–13; 1 Pet. 2:18–24).

These three components of testimony are still validating. Here I have a small illustration. I was surprised when I found an article by David Shenk titled, “The Gospel of Reconciliation within the Wrath of Nations” in a Christian encounter with world religions course at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.<sup>37</sup> It was one of the required articles for the class. Shenk’s article contains many examples of peacemaking efforts with religious others in a troubled world, and it enabled a whole different discussion for my evangelical friends regarding mission, peace, and reconciliation. It is a small example, yet I count this as an important contribution of Mennonites to the theology of religions and to the broader missiological discussion. We need more stories like this.

Now we live in a world where religion is often considered to be the ultimate source of conflicts. We live in a world where we daily meet people who have a “living faith” in our hometowns. This is the given context for the Christian witness that takes place by deeds and by words. How does one hold the truth firmly and at the same time follow the Spirit? How do we hold God’s mystery in Christ without compromising, and yet share a genuine dialogue with religious others in this violent world? Without cost, without suffering, and without sacrifice it is impossible. As the *Cape Town Commitment* expressed the idea so plainly, “the love of Christ calls us to suffer and sometimes to die for the gospel.”

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<sup>37</sup> David Shenk, “The Gospel of Reconciliation within the Wrath of Nations,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32 (2008): 3–9.





# Translation and the New Humanity:

## Rebuilding the Doctrine of Translatability on the Foundation of the Cross

ANICKA FAST<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Faced with the tension between the particularity of Jesus Christ and the plurality of cultures and religions, it is increasingly necessary to develop a robust theological account of cultural diversity within the world church. I will use the concept of translatability—the affirmation that the gospel can be expressed in the terms of any human culture—as a handle with which to approach this task. While discussions of translatability are often associated with mission historians or Bible translation scholars, I believe translatability can also be a fundamentally useful concept for understanding global Christianity, and for responding to the challenges of a globalizing, yet post-Christian West. While I will focus on cultural diversity within the church, questions about the theological importance of cultural diversity are also relevant to a theology of religions, especially in today's context of pluralism and relativism. Discerning how to relate to people of other faiths requires wrestling with some of the same fundamental questions about the nature of culture, the nature of the church, and the role of diversity within the faith community.

Several examples from my personal experience illustrate how different ideas about the role of cultural diversity in the church can lead to conflict and alienation between Christians from different cultural backgrounds. As a “missionary kid” growing up in Papua New Guinea, I listened to expatriate missionaries justify the task of Bible translation through appeal to an eschatological vision of many peoples, tribes, nations, and languages praising God together, and began to wonder about the contrast between this discourse and the lack of regular common worship between expatriate and Papua New Guinean Christians

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living in the same community. While doing research for a master's thesis in Burkina Faso, I saw that missionaries and church leaders disagreed about the importance of using a lingua franca in worship services or church meetings in order to facilitate comprehension.<sup>2</sup> Missionaries pleaded that using the vernacular would ensure that the most vulnerable, the monolingual elderly women, would be included—but they mixed this with a discourse that essentialized the vernacular by equating it with culture or ethnic identity. Church leaders argued that focusing on vernacular literacy was a way to limit people's options and that pushing for vernacular use in a church service led to exclusion of visitors and those of other ethnic groups, thus betraying the gospel. Yet both parties strongly affirmed that God's word could and must be expressed in the vernacular. Finally, in Montréal I have attended churches that seem unable to drum up much interest in other cultures and peoples—and whose more established members confess to feeling insecure in the face of an influx of newer African and Haitian members and adherents. These cross-cultural struggles are not unique to my experience, but will find echoes among many who are committed to a culturally diverse church.

Each of these experiences has led me to ask why, in so many churches, we do not act like we believe that the hard work of developing cross-cultural relationships, and the work of resolving the inevitable cross-cultural conflicts that will result, are imperatives grounded deeply in the gospel itself.

They have motivated me to try to identify widely divergent assumptions about culture and identity, about plurality, and about the nature of church that may lurk behind a common discourse of translatability. Finally, they have led me to insist that an account of the plurality of cultures and languages in the church must move beyond affirmations of translatability, beyond challenges to pluralism and relativism and even beyond the incarnation, to a fuller exploration of the cross as an event that broke down barriers between groups of people and thus created a new humanity. Any account of plurality must foster the urgent conviction that Christians in a particular place, who come from different cultural backgrounds, must find ways to do church together across cultural boundaries.

I will begin by examining the accounts of translatability proposed by three different theologians. In some cases the translatability language is explicit, while in others it must be inferred from discussions about mission or church or culture. In this section I will show how similar-sounding discourses about the

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<sup>2</sup> Anicka Fast, "Managing Linguistic Diversity in the Church," in *Language Documentation and Description* 6, ed. Peter K. Austin (London: SOAS, 2009), 161–212.

tension between the particular and the universal, and about the relationship between translatability and cultural diversity, may rest on widely divergent and even contradictory presuppositions and biblical underpinnings, leading to quite different understandings of how the multiplicity of cultures within the world church relates to the church's identity and mission. In a second section, I will identify and engage with five specific factors that differentiate the accounts. These factors will form the framework for the development of a fuller account of cultural plurality within the church. Drawing most heavily on John H. Yoder,<sup>3</sup> but including the ideas of other scholars as well as my own, I will suggest that the church is best understood as the true new humanity; moreover, because of the incarnation and the cross, we have a way of welcoming diversity within that body without succumbing to cultural relativism. Translation can then be understood as a way to integrate new cultures into the church, with the conversion of each culture and the reconciliation across cultural boundaries mutually reinforcing each other. I will conclude by making some practical suggestions and identifying some of the challenges that remain.

### Part I: Talking about Translatability

Part I gathers together three relatively well-known accounts of translatability, pluralism, and the global church. Each of them discusses how the uniqueness of Jesus is related to the plurality of cultures, either inside or outside the church. All have in common a conviction that Jesus is Lord: all refuse (at least on the surface) a relativistic account according to which Jesus is one of many manifestations of a larger, universal truth about the divine. All moreover agree that the gospel can and must be translated into different cultural forms. However, it will become clear that they diverge significantly with respect to the role that

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<sup>3</sup> Having recently become more aware of the extent of Yoder's wide-ranging and long-term sexually abusive behaviour, I am painfully conscious that it is insufficient to simply note Yoder's transgressions and then proceed to use his work as though it is divorced from his life. I welcome the discussions that are developing in which Yoder's work is being reanalyzed in order to probe which specific theological claims may need to be revised to take into account blind spots deriving from his abuse of power, or even dismissed in light of his behaviour (for one important contribution, see Hannah Heinzekehr's August 9, 2013 post on *the femonite* blog [www.thefemonite.com], entitled "Can Subordination Ever Be Revolutionary? Reflections on John Howard Yoder"). Yoder's work on intercultural reconciliation in the church resonates deeply with me. At the same time, I am attempting to consider how his ideas on this subject might be flawed. While I comment on one specific example later in the paper, I welcome suggestions from others about what I might have missed. I believe the process of working through and reevaluating Yoder's work in light of his personal legacy will take time, but that it is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor.

cultural plurality plays in their account of the everyday practices of the congregation, their understanding of the nature of culture, the theological bases they propose for translatability, and the way they address the tension between the universal and the particular.

*Lamin Sanneh: Culture as a force for the expansion of Christianity*

Sanneh's ground-breaking work, *Translating the Message*, is one of the most comprehensive treatments of the role of Bible translation in the growth of the church, with a particular focus on Western Africa during the modern missionary movement. Sanneh is concerned to demonstrate that mission and the destruction of local cultures by no means go hand in hand,<sup>4</sup> but that, in spite of themselves, missionaries who translated the Bible into the vernacular liberated a force for cultural renewal and revitalization, and for the development of nationalist identities and sentiments.<sup>5</sup> It is in support of this thesis that Sanneh develops his concept of translatability, based on both biblical and historical analysis.

For Sanneh, translatability is defined as follows: when Peter and Paul recognized that the gospel needed to be translated from its Judaic origins into a Gentile context, this involved a simultaneous affirmation both of the destigmatization of the target Gentile culture (and thus, of all cultures) and of the relativization of the source Jewish culture.<sup>6</sup> Since then, no culture can be seen as a privileged vessel for communicating the gospel; but, at the same time, the particularity of each culture is affirmed.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most important contributions of Sanneh's work is the recognition that since the gospel is always conveyed in cultural garb, it is worth paying much more attention to the role of the recipients of the message in their efforts to appropriate or translate the message into their own culture. This is an important corrective to the simplistic tendency to castigate missionaries for bringing a gospel clothed in western culture (as if they could have brought any other kind) and then assume that everything interesting has been said. Sanneh thus argues that even though "colonial co-option weakened Christianity by presenting it as a freshly minted European creed...Africans rejected that view

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4 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 2, 7, 206–7.

6 *Ibid.*, *Translating the Message*, 1.

7 *Ibid.*, 34.

by circulating the religion as local currency.”<sup>8</sup>

However, on closer examination, Sanneh’s account seems incoherent or inconsistent in several important ways. First, when it comes to providing a theological grounding for this view of translatability, Sanneh proceeds in an inconsistent manner. While he argues that culture is both destigmatized and relativized through the gospel, only the relativization of culture is given a biblical foundation, and a very sparse one at that. The destigmatization of culture, on the other hand, is justified on mostly extrabiblical grounds.

For Sanneh, cultures are relativized because God’s universal love transcends culture, such that faith has now become a purely personal, acultural matter. For example, Sanneh suggests that in Peter’s dealings with Cornelius, it was his recognition that “God is no respecter of persons” that “breached the walls of separation between Jew and Gentile.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of drawing on Paul’s explicit teaching that the breaking down of the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile is grounded in Jesus’ work on the cross (Eph. 2:14), Sanneh instead repeatedly grounds this new relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the idea that God is above culture; and, since Jesus is one with God, human cultural differences no longer matter. For example, Sanneh argues that early Christians’ understanding that Jesus was actually God’s Exalted One “gave an otherworldly direction to Christian life and devotion, with faith in the absolute righteousness of God finding its corollary in the provisional, relative character of this world. This opens the way for pluralism by stressing the nonabsolute character and coequality of all earthly arrangements.”<sup>10</sup> Sanneh also suggests that the relativization of culture, for Paul, was due to his understanding that “the center of Christianity...was in the heart and life of the believer without the presumption of conformity to one cultural ideal.”<sup>11</sup> Sanneh’s more recent work reiterates this point.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, if the only theological foundation for the relativization of culture is our recognition that God calls us to a purely inner faith that is unrelated to our social organization, then it becomes difficult to imagine what relevant role is left for culture to play in the church.

Interestingly, Sanneh does develop a foundation for the dignity and importance of culture, but he does so mostly on an extrabiblical foundation. At a

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8 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 161.

9 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 24.

10 *Ibid.*, 15.

11 *Ibid.*, 25.

12 Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 6.

minimal level, reference to God's non-partiality provides some dignity to culture because no one can say that their culture is inferior to anyone else's; so in this way, Christianity provides a constant challenge to any claims for cultural exclusivity. However, mixed in with this basic affirmation are rather strange ascriptions of power and autonomy to cultures and languages themselves. It seems that for Sanneh, culture itself has a certain latent force that is somehow unlocked through translation. For example, by engaging in Bible translation, Sanneh says that missionaries let the "genie...out of the bottle"—a force was unleashed that they could no longer control,<sup>13</sup> one that "endows persons and societies with the reason for change and the language with which to effect it."<sup>14</sup> Sanneh speaks of the vernacular as being like a weapon that "Africans...came to wield against their colonial overlords."<sup>15</sup> Going even further, he suggests that the existence of multiple cultures in the worldwide church, beginning with the overcoming of the barrier between Jew and Gentile, is actually due to the power of culture and language, rather than to the power of the gospel: "As the religion resounded with the idioms and styles of new converts, it became multi-lingual and multicultural. Believers responded with the unprecedented facility of the mother tongue, and *by that step* broke the back of cultural chauvinism as, for example, between Jew and Gentile. Christianity's indigenous potential was activated, and the frontier beckoned."<sup>16</sup>

Second, along with this personification of culture and language comes a strong tendency to talk about saving or preserving cultures, whose basic goodness and validity he never really questions. The missionary plays an important role in this process as he or she tends to become interested in and fascinated by the beauty of other cultures.<sup>17</sup> Sanneh claims that Paul's encounter with Gentiles led to a personal experience of being able to relativize his own culture. In this way, he contributed to "indigenous revitalization."<sup>18</sup> For Sanneh, Paul "desired above all to safeguard the cultural particularity of Jew as Jew and Gentile as Gentile, though challenging both Jews and Gentiles to find in Jesus Christ their true affirmation."<sup>19</sup> Although it seems rather dubious to project a concern for cultural preservation onto Paul based solely on the observation

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13 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 206.

14 *Ibid.*, 207.

15 *Ibid.*, 5.

16 Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 27 (emphasis added).

17 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 25.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, 47.

that he wanted Jew and Gentile to express their faith authentically within their culture, Sanneh uses this to justify a much broader general agenda for cultural preservation apart from the church.

Third, the church is strikingly absent as a relevant social grouping affected by translatability. In Sanneh's romantic appeals to the idea of the cultural "frontier," the missionary plays a surprisingly central role as the carrier of a disembodied entity that he calls "Christianity," and as the source of indigenous renewal through his or her special role of initiating translation and recognizing the intrinsic value of other cultures. This is completely divorced from questions of the social shape of the church and of its role as a place where cultural differences may be wrestled with and overcome. In defining translatability, Sanneh is not attempting to account for the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one body, but only for the legitimacy of Jews and Gentiles being able to express the gospel in the terms of their own culture and language. He is saying nothing about the relationship between cultures in the church, just that any culture and language can be used for faith purposes. The most relevant social realities for Sanneh are the groups of those who share a culture or language—hence his frequent references to indigenous renewal and nationalist sentiment.

Fourth, even as Sanneh affirms the particularity of local cultures, there is a strong universalizing current to his thought that ironically undercuts this concern. Particularity is presented as a contribution to a more universal reality, for example through his claim that "particular Christian translation projects have helped to create an overarching series of cultural experiences, with hitherto obscure cultural systems being thrust into the general stream of universal history,"<sup>20</sup> or through his image of a "universe of cultures" with God in the middle.<sup>21</sup> Pluralism is seen as a good in its own right, with Bible translation being a mechanism for releasing "forces of pluralism" into the "culture."<sup>22</sup> Thus in the end, culture for Sanneh is a concept that is ironically abstracted away from the real particularities of local settings.

In conclusion, Sanneh's views boil down to cultural relativism. He sees God's universality—his being above culture—as the basis for translatability, without any reference to the particularity of Jesus in his life or his death. Culture for Sanneh is a second basis for translatability: it is personified as an autonomous and powerful force, ironically divorced from local realities, that is awakened through Bible translation and ends up driving the expansion of

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20 Ibid., 2.

21 Sanneh, *Disciples of all Nations*, 25.

22 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 2.

Christianity. As I have argued elsewhere, this is bound up for Sanneh with a strong equation of language and culture, and with a distinction between vernacular language and other, to him inferior, languages of wider communication.<sup>23</sup> The social groupings to which this theory relates are indigenous peoples and missionaries as privileged agents of translation, while Christianity as an entity is abstracted away from church bodies or congregations.

*Andrew F. Walls: The church as full-grown humanity*

Although translatability as a concept is often associated with Sanneh, Walls provides by far the more detailed and explicit discussion of it. Grounding his presentation firmly in the incarnation, in the apocalyptic vision and in the Ephesians image of the full stature of Christ, he makes a unified and coherent case not only for the need for multiple cultural perspectives in the church, but also for relationships across cultural boundaries. However, he leaves a few important questions unexplored when it comes to the cross, the practices constitutive of the new humanity, and the nature of culture.

The incarnation is fundamental for Walls as the basis for translatability, the source of both diversity and unity in the church, and as a protection against relativism. Walls argues that the incarnation is the original translation of God's word into a particular human setting in Jesus, despite the riskiness and even impossibility of the translation enterprise.<sup>24</sup> At the very heart of our faith is the recognition that Jesus came as a person into a particular culture; Jesus accepted "that taking a seat in the theatre of life means taking a *particular* seat."<sup>25</sup> This original act of divine translation provides the rationale for Bible translation as well as for the generations-long process of conversion not just of people but of cultures or "national distinctives,"<sup>26</sup> and even of nations.<sup>27</sup> The process of conversion of communities or nations (not just individuals), that is, the long process of bringing the former cultural system "into relation with the word about Christ,"<sup>28</sup> will lead to diverse outcomes because it is a turning of what is already there, a transformation rather than a substitution.<sup>29</sup> Thus, he argues

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23 Fast, "Managing Linguistic Diversity," 202–3.

24 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 26–27.

25 *Ibid.*, 47, emphasis original.

26 *Ibid.*, 27.

27 *Ibid.*, 49–51.

28 *Ibid.*, 53.

29 *Ibid.*, 28.



that “Christian diversity is the necessary product of the incarnation.”<sup>30</sup> Yet because there is an original act of translation in Jesus, different translations of the gospel have a firm source version that leads to unity between these cultural expressions by ensuring coherence between various translation attempts.

Translation takes place at the intersection between the universal and the particular, since the irreducible particularity of the source or target text is juxtaposed with the fact that translation is possible at all. To address this tension, Walls proposes two principles that must both be adhered to. The “indigenizing” or “homing principle” is based not on God’s universality but on the recognition that Christ came into a particular culture, making it possible for the gospel to be at home in any culture. In contrast, the “universalizing” or “pilgrim principle” is the recognition that there is only one Christ.<sup>31</sup> This explains why faith communities from different cultures exhibit a “family resemblance,” and causes Christians to live in tension with their surrounding society, knowing that they are not ultimately at home there.<sup>32</sup> The two principles can be summarized as follows: “The Church must be diverse because humanity is diverse. The Church must be one, because Christ is one, embodying in himself all of the diversity of culture-specific humanity.”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to drawing on the incarnation as the justification for cultural diversity within the church, Walls also develops other New Testament images in order to account for the necessity not just of a multiplicity of culturally homogenous churches, but of cross-cultural relationships both between and within these bodies. First, by drawing on the Revelation vision of the church as a city with doors open on all sides to the riches of the nations and on Ephesians images of the church as a temple and a body,<sup>34</sup> Walls argues that the contributions of all cultures are necessary in order to attain to the full stature of Christ.<sup>35</sup> Cultural expressions of the faith, or “converted lifestyles,”<sup>36</sup> are building blocks for an eschatological worldwide church or temple or body that

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30 Ibid., 27–28.

31 Ibid., 30, 54.

32 Ibid., 54.

33 Andrew Walls, “The Ephesians Moment in Worldwide Worship: A Meditation on Revelation 21 and Ephesians 2,” in *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, ed. Charles E. Farhadian (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 32.

34 Ibid., 27.

35 Ibid., 31.

36 Ibid.

has attained the “full stature of Christ,”<sup>37</sup> or “the Full Grown Humanity” of Ephesians.<sup>38</sup> Second, it is not enough for Walls to see these “culture-specific segments” as free to exist in isolation of each other,<sup>39</sup> each enjoying its authentic converted lifestyle alone without relating to Christians of other cultures.<sup>40</sup> As the New Testament documents show, it was essential for the apostle Paul that the “two races and two cultures historically separated by the meal table now [meet] at table to share the knowledge of Christ.”<sup>41</sup> For Walls, this necessity of eating together—despite the cultural barriers that prevented circumcised and uncircumcised persons from doing so—derives from the fact that neither Jewish nor Gentile Christianity could be valid in isolation of the other. “Each was necessary to complete and correct the other; for each was an expression of Christ under certain specific conditions, and Christ is humanity completed.”<sup>42</sup> Thus the necessity of breaking existing cultural rules in the church is grounded in Christ as the fulfillment of humanity.

One important contribution of Walls’ account is that he makes a clear distinction between language and culture. Translating the Bible into a language is not the same thing as translating the gospel into a culture. This distinction is important, since it speaks to the Burkinabè conflict from the introduction, illuminating the extent to which both Sanneh, and missionary Bible translators in that context, tend to conflate the vernacular with cultural identity. Walls clarifies that what really matters is that the Word takes flesh in different contexts; and by providing two contrasting historical examples, he shows that this may or may not include the use of a vernacular language in every area of church practice. Thus, while he emphasizes the importance of the vernacular, there is also a place for languages of wider communication to serve as languages of unity.<sup>43</sup>

I would identify three potential shortcomings in Walls’ account. First, while Walls clearly longs for true “fellowship across the broken middle wall of partition,”<sup>44</sup> it is still not fully clear to what extent the ideal is a multitude

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37 Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 77.

38 Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 51.

39 Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 81.

40 *Ibid.*, 79.

41 *Ibid.*, 78.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 40.

44 Walls, “Ephesians Moment,” 37.

of fully converted monocultural churches, many of whose members relate to each other regularly, or a struggle to overcome cultural divisions in every local congregation, even if that might prevent adherents of one culture from having the space to work out without interference the implications of conversion just in their own culture. Walls sometimes makes it seem a little too easy, as if just the fact that other churches exist somewhere out there might be enough: “it is a delightful paradox that the more Christ is translated into the various thought forms and life systems which form our various national identities, the richer all of us will be in our common Christian identity.”<sup>45</sup> As a result, it sometimes remains ambiguous to what extent the redeemed and culturally diverse body itself is the most relevant category for Walls, in contrast with the converted nation or people.<sup>46</sup>

Second, Walls’ view of culture seems slightly too neutral. In his exposition of the church as a new structure or body that is made up of converted cultural segments, he does not sufficiently develop the question of how to critique elements of culture within this new structure. Thus the “acid test” of the meal table,<sup>47</sup> while a crucial contribution to this discussion, was a tantalizing one that left me hoping for a clearer explanation of *how* the redeemed body develops practices that allow it to transcend the rebellious aspects of culture.

Finally, it seems to me that Walls does not develop the event of the cross quite fully enough in order to clarify precisely how Jesus’ death caused the breaking down of the barrier between Jew and Gentile. When he talks about the dividing wall broken at the cross, he does refer to the “union of irreconcilable entities...brought about by Christ’s death.”<sup>48</sup> But Walls seems to focus more on the way that the decision of the Jerusalem Council not to enforce the Torah for Gentiles was the act of breaking down this barrier,<sup>49</sup> rather than grounding it in something that happened on the cross.

To summarize, Walls’ definition of translatability as grounded in an original act of divine translation provides a much more satisfying rationale than Sanneh’s for the subsequent translations both of the Bible into diverse languages and of the gospel into diverse cultural expressions. He wants to account for the need of converted peoples to relate to each other, not just to check and improve each other’s translations, but to be built into a full-grown humanity. Thus

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45 Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 54.

46 Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 48.

47 *Ibid.*, 78.

48 *Ibid.*, 77.

49 Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 77; and Walls, “Ephesians Moment,” 30.

he gets at the idea of a new entity that is made up of groups of people whose cultures are converted, calling this a full-grown humanity or an expression of the full stature of Christ. For Walls, the goal seems to be about having Christ expressed more fully, as each converted culture brings the best it has to the new city or body. His exploration of Pauline and apocalyptic literature for teaching about the relationship between “culture-specific” segments of the body opens many interesting avenues for reflection. However, questions still remain about the exact relevance of the cross-event for Walls to the constitution of the new humanity. His account also still leaves us hoping for a clearer rationale of why the culture-specific building blocks of the global body need to relate to each other. Finally, while his focus on “conversion” presupposes the idea of cultural critique, his neutral attitude toward culture leads him to frame conversion in a mostly positive way, more like bringing out the best of what is already there, rather than struggling to turn an inherently rebellious structure toward Christ.

*John Howard Yoder: Hammering culture into submission within the new humanity*

Yoder makes three important contributions to the debate. First, instead of being predisposed to affirm culture’s intrinsic value, he tends to evaluate cultural practices in terms of their faithfulness or rebelliousness. Second, the ideal of cultural plurality in the church is grounded firmly in the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross. Thus Yoder is able to develop a unique perspective on translatability that sees it as a process of cultural conversion inseparable from the reconciling practice of the new peoplehood that is the church. Third, this account seems to overcome the tension between the universal and the particular in a more satisfactory way than the other accounts.

While the diversity of cultures, for Yoder, derives from God’s divine intention from creation (Acts 14:16; 17:26),<sup>50</sup> there is nothing particularly sacred about culture itself. On the contrary, cultural assumptions, and even language,<sup>51</sup> are among the rebellious powers that have a “vested interest in keeping peo-

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50 John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 63.

51 Andrew Scott Brubacher Kaethler, “The Unruliness of Language: Language, Methodology and Epistemology in the Thought of John Howard Yoder” (doctoral dissertation, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2013), 299. Kaethler’s exposition of Yoder’s theology of language is based mostly on an unpublished lecture to which I did not have direct access.

ples separate and alienated from one another.”<sup>52</sup> What matters is being able to judge if a given cultural form is right and faithful or not. Yoder also points out that cultures do not convert as a whole: the transformation of culture through the gospel will usually include a split or conflict between those who are being transformed by the gospel and those who are not—yet both groups belong to that culture.<sup>53</sup> He thus moves away from any personification or essentialization of culture toward seeing culture as an imperfect structure that can be partially redeemed to the extent that some of its actors are willing to participate in the new humanity, thus transcending the ways in which cultural structures tend to reinforce divisions and injustice between people.

At the same time, Yoder in no way denies the rootedness of the gospel in particular cultures, but rather emphasizes that no “acultural” gospel can exist.<sup>54</sup> His affirmation of particular, historically contingent culture as a valid (and indeed the only) “skin” for the gospel is based on the incarnation in a way that resembles Walls’ account.<sup>55</sup> For Yoder, the incarnation demonstrates a unity of medium and message, since “when God wanted to communicate with us, God had to come among us.”<sup>56</sup> Thus Yoder insists that it is a mistake to believe that particularity can be transcended.<sup>57</sup> The possibility of translation is grounded in the “ordinariness” or historical particularity of Jesus that “frees us to use any language, to enter any world in which people eat bread and pursue debtors, hope for power and execute subversives. The ordinariness of the humanness of Jesus is the warrant for the generalizability of his reconciliation.”<sup>58</sup>

Building on his view of culture as rebellious, Yoder develops a concept of translation or “cultural transition” that is similar to Walls’ idea of conversion,

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52 John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), 39.

53 John Howard Yoder, “The Homogenous Unit Principle in Ethical Perspective” (unpublished essay prepared for the Fuller Seminary Pasadena Consultation in May 1977), 10. Accessed March 11, 2014, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15705coll18/id/306/rec/1>.

54 *Ibid.*, 11.

55 John Howard Yoder, “‘But We Do See Jesus’: The Particularity of the Incarnation and the Universality of Truth,” *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 56.

56 John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 315.

57 Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 49.

58 *Ibid.*, 62.

but with a more conflictual tone.<sup>59</sup> In an analysis of five New Testament cases in which the apostles try to proclaim the message of Jesus in the terms of a particular cosmology (such as the gnostic or Athenian worldviews), he emphasizes that their strategy is always to use the language of that cosmology, but to refuse to fit Jesus into a slot in that cosmos. Instead, they always insist that Jesus is Lord over that cosmology, but that his lordship has been attained through suffering. Yoder's emphasis differs from Walls' here: he is not saying that the gospel can be translated out of one particular world into other particular worlds because all worlds are essentially equivalent. Rather, translation is the act of seizing culture from within and making it serve Christ. Yoder's account of the early Christian attempts at translating Jesus into other cosmological terms suggests that translation required a lot of nerve. This small group of Jews "refused to contextualize their message by clothing it in the categories the world held ready. Instead, they seized the categories, hammered them into other shapes, and turned the cosmology on its head, with Jesus both at the bottom, crucified as a common criminal, and at the top, pre-existent Son and Creator, and the church his instrument in today's battle."<sup>60</sup>

This audacity was based on the conviction that they did not need to "join up with, approve, and embellish with some correctives and complements" the wider world, but to proclaim the "Rule of God."<sup>61</sup> While this may seem to lead to an anti-cultural stance, it does not; rather, because the rule of God is seen as the basic category, these early translators could relate to cultural systems, cosmologies and other powers as having already been defeated, but also "reen-listed" to serve God's purposes.<sup>62</sup> Thus culture is both relativized and valorized. Culture has value, but only to the extent that one can find a way to confess, in the terms of that culture, that Jesus is Lord—even when cultural categories tend to rebel against letting one make that affirmation.

Both Sanneh and Walls note that the gospel's first boundary crossing, or translation, occurred when Jews began to welcome Gentiles into the church. Walls notes a connection in Paul's teaching between the overcoming of the barrier between these two cultural groups, and the event of the cross. However, only Yoder provides an account of exactly how Jesus' death accomplished this reconciliation. In Yoder's view, the cross shows us Jesus' complete rejection of any logic that would limit "love" to "one's own"—i.e., to those who share a

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59 Ibid., 49.

60 Ibid., 54.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 61.

cultural, ethnic or national identity.<sup>63</sup> Rather, the full “scandal of the cross” is that no lives, even the lives of aggressors and enemies, are worth less than other lives,<sup>64</sup> and therefore, using force to usher in the Kingdom would breach the harmony of medium and message that existed in Jesus.<sup>65</sup> Jesus’ life thus demonstrated the possibility that one can be fully human and rooted in a culture, yet reject any cultural logic that would make necessary the sacrifice of some in order to be “effective in making history move down the right track.”<sup>66</sup> His death demonstrated the world’s rejection of this stance, while his resurrection was God’s vindication of his radical “willingness to sacrifice in the interest of nonresistant love, all other forms of human solidarity.”<sup>67</sup> Thus at the cross Jesus decisively demonstrates a new way of being fully human.

This understanding of the cross makes it clear exactly how Christ’s death abolishes the wall of separation, that is, the rebelliousness of culture. Yoder argues that Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5, is responding to those who criticized his practice of making Jews and Gentiles pray and eat together in the church, rather than allowing them to do so separately.<sup>68</sup> Paul’s response is based on the “inclusiveness of the cross”—the fact that Christ died for everyone leads to the end of discrimination, or of relating to people “ethnically.”<sup>69</sup> As a result, one’s adherence to the new humanity is inseparable from the refusal to defend any form of cultural or national identity with force. This may explain why Yoder exhibits little to no sense of need to preserve a cultural grouping for its own sake. Instead, he insists that Paul’s message of true equality is “rooted not in creation but in redemption”: it is because Christ died for all that a new way of relating across social boundaries is possible, whereas creation from the beginning divides people “among tribes and tongues and peoples and nations.”<sup>70</sup> Another way of saying this is that in Christ, a “new phase of world history” has begun: the church can be called “a ‘new world’ or a ‘new humanity’...because its formation breaches the previously followed boundaries that had been fixed

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63 John Howard Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998), 164.

64 Ibid.

65 Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 310.

66 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 242.

67 Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?” 149.

68 Yoder, *Body Politics*, 28; and Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 100.

69 Yoder, *Body Politics*, 30.

70 Ibid., 35.

by the orders of creation and providence.”<sup>71</sup>

Yoder’s understanding of the cross allows him to address the tension between the universal and the particular in a clearer way by providing a stronger version of the pilgrim or the relativizing principle than what Walls and Sanneh can provide by basing their account either on the incarnation or on God’s lack of partiality. For Yoder, though the possibility of translation derives from the incarnation, its necessity derives from the cross; to state this using Walls’ terminology, one can only be truly at home in a culture (indigenizing principle) if one participates in the new humanity that profoundly relativizes cultural claims (universalizing principle). Yoder’s “new humanity” resembles Walls’ concept of “full-grown humanity,” except that it is more clearly defined as being intercultural even at the local level, rather than being a supra-cultural body that includes many monocultural social bodies within it. Thus the two extra pieces that Yoder brings to the puzzle—the rooting of cultural relativization in the cross, and the perspective of culture as fallen and needing redemption—allow the indigenizing and pilgrim principles to relate to each other in a clearer way.

Yoder’s account has several important implications for the church’s mission strategy. First, because the cross constitutes this event of breaking down boundaries that divide, the existence of the new humanity must be understood as inseparable from its message. He argues strongly that “if reconciliation between peoples and cultures is not happening, the Gospel’s truth is not being confirmed in that place”<sup>72</sup> and that the “new peoplehood... is *by its very existence* a message to the surrounding world.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore, since the message is not disembodied but is carried by a community, it is translated into new settings not in the way that a seed is planted, but as a new shoot is grafted into an existing plant. This occurs through the opening of one’s cultural identity to outsiders in concrete practices of fellowship at the meal table, reconciling dialogue, and the recognition of the gifts of each one. Because of the incarnation, identity did not need to be “smashed.” But because of the cross, it “needed to be cracked open.”<sup>74</sup> In this view, the process of translation itself can be understood as the constant breaking open of local manifestations of the new humanity to welcome yet another culturally defined group to the concrete, actual meal table in order to have that group, too, express Christ’s lordship in the terms of its own cosmology.

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71 Ibid., 37.

72 Ibid., 38.

73 Yoder, *For the Nations*, 41 (emphasis original).

74 Yoder, “Homogeneous Unit Principle,” 14–15.



Second, as the gospel moves into new cultural settings, it is not primarily abstract concepts, but practices and guidelines, ordinary social forms and realities that must be translated into the new setting. This does not mean that “forms” are translated while an acultural “essence” remains the same. Yoder rejects the idea that some cultural elements are essential and others are secondary, unimportant, or “just” formal. Noting that Peter and Paul disagreed about table fellowship, which was clearly a matter of form and yet considered essential to the gospel, he reminds us that content and form cannot be distinguished that easily.<sup>75</sup> Since the church in its social and political specificity is a foretaste, a paradigm, of the way the entire world is called to live,<sup>76</sup> its specific practices must be translatable into various cultural contexts. Thus, if the body is constituted through what he has called sacramental or evangelical practices—such as eating together, baptism, reconciling dialogue, the involvement of all community members in church business, and the multiplicity of gifts in the church<sup>77</sup>—then such practices are “procedural guidelines,” flexible enough to be adapted to any culture.<sup>78</sup> They should be able to be practiced in a way that includes people from different cultures practicing them together. This is easiest to see for eating together, since the early church conflict about the inclusion of Gentiles was centrally about their inclusion in the meal,<sup>79</sup> but would apply to the other practices as well.<sup>80</sup>

Third, because the cross creates a new intercultural humanity, we must be able to identify the specific cases where cultural sensitivities must be offended because they threaten “the inter-cultural quality of the Messianic [*sic*] community.”<sup>81</sup> This is not a denial of the importance of proclaiming the message in ways that are not unduly alien,<sup>82</sup> but a reminder that, as in the early church conflict about table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles, the gospel speaks to the need for offending homogeneities because of the cross. Thus Yoder strongly rejects a conscious church growth strategy aimed at the creation of ethnically homogenous churches.<sup>83</sup>

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75 Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 215.

76 Yoder, *Body Politics*, 78.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 46.

79 Ibid., 18.

80 See the discussion of other similar cases in Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 213–27.

81 Yoder, “Homogeneous Unit Principle,” 13.

82 Ibid., 11.

83 Yoder, *Body Politics*, 37.

Fourth, because of the importance of the new peoplehood as being both the message and the medium for communicating it, Yoder suggests that we take a cue from Paul's missionary strategy. Paul, he argues, never planted a new community from scratch by bringing together individual converted Jews and Gentiles. Instead, he always began his proclamation with the existing synagogue.<sup>84</sup> Those from the synagogue who accepted his message then formed the "sociological base" that was opened to Gentiles: "There was a community before there were converts."<sup>85</sup> This contrasts, of course, with modern mission strategy, where we "do carry a message without a synagogue."<sup>86</sup> This observation has led Yoder to propose a mission strategy that he calls "migration evangelism," worked out most fully in the 1961 pamphlet, "As You Go."<sup>87</sup> While I believe this method needs significant updating and refinement, it does have the great advantage of trying to overcome the major shortcoming of modern missions, namely that the more mature, sending church believes it has "the right to lob the message over the cultural fence rather than associating [itself] deeply with the host culture." This tragically causes the sending church to miss out on truly experiencing the "foretaste of the heavenly choir from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" through a focus on how the new Christians must change, without being willing to change itself.<sup>88</sup> Through an analysis of New Testament literature,<sup>89</sup> Yoder suggests that Paul required the Jewish "senior believing community" to make the more significant changes to their cultural dietary practices in order to open their table fellowship to include Gentiles.<sup>90</sup>

One element of Yoder's account that still seems incomplete is the relationship between diversity and particularity in the church. Yoder's account does not quite make enough room for Walls' insight that each redeemed culture contributes to showcasing Christ more completely. Yoder sometimes seems to emphasize reconciliation even to the point where cultures might lose their particularity in order to form the new (though still particular and historical) people of God. Surely the image of the church as a city in which riches from all nations are brought in must presuppose some space for adherents of each

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84 Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 105.

85 Ibid.

86 Yoder, "Homogeneous Unit Principle," 15.

87 John Howard Yoder, *As You Go: The Old Mission in a New Day* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1961).

88 Yoder, "Homogeneous Unit Principle," 16.

89 Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 75–128.

90 Yoder, "Homogeneous Unit Principle," 16. See also the discussion in Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 97.

culture to work at the redemption of their specific culture, even while they engage in reconciling dialogue with those of another culture. Yoder doesn't clarify sufficiently where this space might be found.

To sum up, Yoder comes at the question of translatability primarily via discussions about the tension between the particularity of Jesus and the pluralistic or relativistic worldview, and also via an overarching concern to exposit the church, both local and global, as constituting a new humanity established at the cross. Because he tends to see culture as a "power" in rebellion against Christ's lordship, he associates translation with the act of seizing a cosmology or worldview and making a confession of Christ's lordship possible within this frame of reference. The basis of translatability for Yoder is not that languages or cultures are simply neutral and interchangeable because they were all created equal. Instead, translation is possible only because at the heart of Jesus' message of reconciliation was the medium of coming and identifying with the ordinariness of a particular culture and place.<sup>91</sup> And yet, the cross remains central to Yoder's account: faithful translation cannot happen in isolation from the social structure of the new humanity created at the cross. It was there that Jesus demonstrated for the first time the possibility of being fully human in a particular cultural setting, while at the same time rejecting any cultural solidarities that would lead to the separation of peoples rather than their reconciliation. Thus any translation of the gospel that does not both derive from and lead to a practicing intercultural fellowship would not be a translation of the gospel at all, but of some "other gospel" (Gal. 1:8). In sum, translatability for Yoder could be defined as the redeemability of culture for God's good purpose, through participation in the new humanity that has been inaugurated by the suffering triumph of Jesus in his particularity.

## **Part II. Towards a Constructive Account of the Global Fullness of Christ**

In the anecdotes related at the beginning, I suggested that local and expatriate Christians on a Papua New Guinea mission station should place a higher priority on common worship, that the conversion of Québec culture in isolation from other cultural groups living in Québec is not enough, and that translation of the Bible into the vernacular need not lead to mono-ethnic churches in a multilingual West African context. At this point in the argument, it has become clear that theologians with different assumptions about translatability might not agree with me about each of these statements. One's underlying assumptions about translatability are linked with concrete practical realities;

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<sup>91</sup> Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 315.

thus, understanding these assumptions matters. In this section, I propose five criteria that capture the crucial differences between Sanneh’s, Walls’ and Yoder’s accounts. I then engage with each criterion in order to move closer to a theologically robust account of translatability and of cultural diversity in the global church.

As we move through the discussion, Table 1 will facilitate comparisons between the different authors along these five dimensions.

	Sanneh	Walls	Yoder
Nature of culture	A universalizing force	Neutral, though conversion is necessary	A rebellious power that can be reenlisted into Christ’s service
Relevant social grouping	Indigenous peoples; “Christianity”; missionaries	Worldwide church; Christian nation; cultural group	Local and regional church
Basis for translatability	Cultural relativism: God is above culture	Incarnation	Incarnation and cross
Goal of translation	The release of forces for renewal and nationalism; The revitalization of culture	Building the church into the full-grown humanity and so displaying Christ more fully	Bringing worldviews into submission to Christ’s lordship through their integration into the new humanity
Naming the tension between universal and particular	Destigmatizing vs. relativizing culture	Homing principle vs. universalizing principle	Faithful vs. unfaithful translation
Addressing the tension between universal and particular	No	Mostly	Fully

*Table 1. A comparison of translatability accounts for three scholars*

*The nature of culture: an understanding of culture as a rebellious power*

The various scholars have quite a variety of different attitudes toward culture. As I have shown, Sanneh tends toward cultural relativism, while others insist on the possibility of comparing a culture to a baseline, whether it is Jesus as the original translation and the embodiment of all human diversity (Walls), or Jesus as Lord due to his having accepted to demonstrate and vanquish, from within a culturally particular vantage point, the power of culture to keep people apart (Yoder). Yoder has the most coherent account of what exactly about culture is rebellious: culture as a structure or power rebels against its God-given mandate by working to keep human beings apart, by reinforcing enmities

and rivalries.<sup>92</sup>

While I agree that it is necessary to emphasize the rebellious nature of culture, this statement needs to be qualified so that it does not lead to an anti-cultural message. The danger is that, while agreeing that we cannot escape particularity, we simply develop a new church culture that is unrelated to our former identities. Although I do not think Yoder is promoting this, his strong emphasis on the radical novelty of the new humanity can lead in this direction if we are not careful. Three clarifications are in order. First, we need a clearer account of what elements of culture might be morally neutral and thus not require critique. Yoder points in this direction when he suggests a differentiation between the evil, the finite or fallible, and the good that is “simply [cultural] ‘identity.’”<sup>93</sup> Second, more reflection is needed regarding the question of whether cultures ever need to be the target of salvaging or revitalizing operations, in order to preserve human diversity for its own sake. Third, it is important to reiterate that culture should not be defined in a way that essentially conflates it with language. For example, in the case of Burkina Faso mentioned earlier, discourses that equate language with cultural identity can delegitimize local church leaders’ concerns about the risks of developing ethnically homogenous churches.<sup>94</sup> Finally, it is essential not to define the new humanity in a way that glosses over power differences related to cultural identity. There needs to be space for lower-power groups to work out what it means to live in a truly reconciled way with former enemies in cases of structural cultural conflict, without using the idea of the “new humanity” as a whitewash for ongoing inequality. While Yoder’s work points us in this direction in theory, awareness of the stark abuses of power in his own life will lead us to also look elsewhere for ideas.

As long as it is properly qualified in these ways, I believe that a view of culture as a rebellious but redeemable power is necessary, both in order to avoid the trap of cultural relativism and to prevent cultural or national identity from ever taking the place of the primary allegiance to the new humanity. The particular strength of both Walls’ and Yoder’s accounts is their understanding of the new humanity as the true, redeemed form of culture. Walls goes furthest in exploring the New Testament metaphors for this new humanity as a body, a city or a temple. However, to correct for his tendency to abstract away from the local congregation, we need Yoder’s emphasis on the way that the new humanity is lived out in concrete practices of truth-telling, conflict resolution, and

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<sup>92</sup> Yoder, *Body Politics*, 39.

<sup>93</sup> Yoder, “Homogeneous Unit Principle,” 10.

<sup>94</sup> Fast, “Managing Linguistic Diversity,” 204–5.

sharing of meals. Also to compensate for Walls' overly neutral view of culture, we need Yoder's conception of the cross as a radical challenge to any cultural norms that would keep people from fellowship with one another.

Putting these pieces together, we arrive at the idea that the new humanity does not abstract away from culture but is a foretaste of what culture is ultimately meant to be. The diversity of the church is necessary to demonstrate Christ's fullness, but the overcoming of culture's rebelliousness by subjecting it to Christ's lordship (especially overcoming culture's tendency to divide people) is how it is truly redeemed. In short, I believe it is true to insist that the only "real" culture is the culture of the Kingdom of God. In this Kingdom, every culture that God has created is able to bring its best to the table (Walls); yet no rebellious aspect of culture remains that would prevent fellowship across cultural lines (Yoder). This is a global body that learns to value the contributions and new perspectives brought by others; but it is also local bodies working diligently to overcome the social barriers in their midst, even when this means that their members sometimes give up time to focus on the conversion of their own cultures so that they can learn a new thing about Christ from the perspective of other brothers and sisters.

### *Relevant social grouping*

The various authors envision their account of plurality in the church as being relevant to quite a variety of different types of social bodies. Sanneh leaves a strong impression that translatability has the greatest effect, not on the church per se, but on indigenous cultural groupings. Walls tends to abstract away from the local church in order to rhapsodize about the global body; it might be this abstraction that makes it possible for him to open the door to considerations of a Christian nation whose boundaries may or may not coincide with that of the church. Those who share a culture become the most relevant social grouping to which the translatability imperative is addressed. Finally, Yoder's insistence that the church is both the message and the medium means that, for him, particular Christian communities with specific social practices are of paramount importance.

A comparison of the different positions leads me to conclude that the social grouping to which the challenge of translation is addressed can only meaningfully be the new humanity. However, this social grouping is not just *made up* of various cultural building blocks; it is itself, in some way, a culture. If the faithful church is sociologically specified in ways that derive from Jesus, then the gospel itself requires a particular, redeemed cultural form in certain cases. Form is not ultimate, but within an Anabaptist ecclesiology it must play a greater role than simply that of a "casing" for a gospel essence, as per Walls'

analogy.<sup>95</sup> If the most relevant social body is really the new humanity, then the gospel is not just the oxygen that breathes life into the habits and practices shared by one cultural group; it is a lifestyle shared by many groups whose culture has been redeemed.

*The basis of translatability*

We have seen that for Sanneh, translatability has no firm basis beyond the universality of God as transcendent above human culture, thus relativizing them all. Walls draws on the idea of the incarnation as an original translation against which subsequent translations need to be checked. He also touches on the concept of the new humanity, though it is grounded neither in the cross nor in specific local church practices, but in biblical images of the church that speak of Christ’s fullness being reflected through multiple cultural resources. Only Yoder develops the theme of the cross as a central part of his thought about the transmission of the gospel into different cultural forms.

In order to respond to the challenges of the Ukarampa, Québec, and Burkina Faso churches mentioned earlier, I believe we need an account of translatability that is firmly grounded not only in creation and in the incarnation, but also in the cross. Figure 1 expresses how, in my view, the three valid bases for translatability need to relate to each other in order to lead to a full account of what translation actually accomplishes.

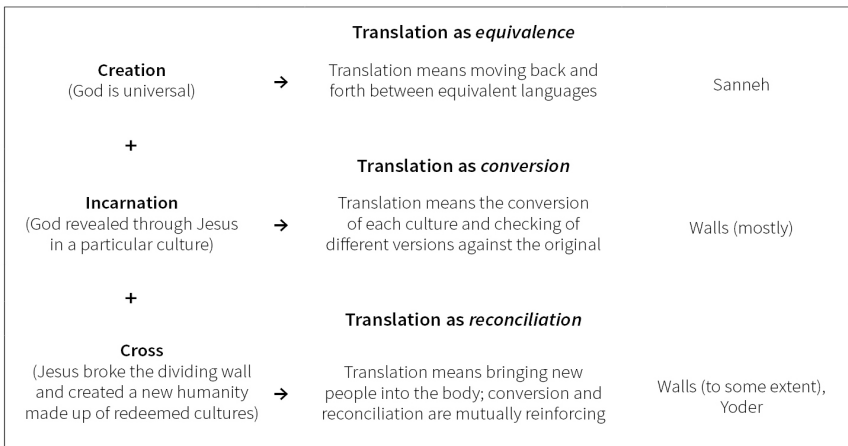


Figure 1. *The three valid bases for translatability*

As the plus signs show, the different versions build successively on the insights of previous versions, such that the creation or incarnation alone lead to

95 Walls, “Ephesians Moment,” 32.

incomplete views: translation seen only as equivalence or only as conversion will lead to distortion unless the reconciling element of the cross is also included.

### *The goal of translation*

As the previous discussion has already implied, different accounts of translatability are animated by differing views as to the ultimate purpose served by translation. For example, the goal of translation may be to revitalize a culture (Sanneh), to build the church into the full-grown humanity through which Christ can be fully displayed (Walls) or to bring worldviews into submission to Christ's lordship through their integration into the new humanity (Yoder). I propose that we understand the purpose of translation within the larger perspective of the mission of the church. The church's ultimate goal is to attain to the full stature of the body of Christ that includes the converted versions of every tribe, nation, people, and language. Within this ultimate goal, the purpose of the translation of the gospel is to help bring new groups *in* to the existing body. The purpose of translation can never be to create an isolated church that somehow reflects Christ really well on its own, because what is most fundamental about Christ is not being reflected if reconciliation is not happening across cultural boundaries.

### *The tension between the universal and the particular*

I will finish this discussion by relating it to one of the points with which I began: the question of translatability is relevant to the contemporary discussions about cultural relativism and to the tension between the universal and the particular. The different accounts are not all equally successful at addressing this tension. Translatability indeed relativizes culture by showing that none is absolute, as Sanneh says, but that is not enough. We need to be able to critique culture in terms of faithfulness and sinfulness, as Yoder rightly points out. This requires Walls' notion of an original version that qualifies the subsequent versions. The fact that this original is still culturally specific because of the incarnation allows us to reject relativism to some extent, since God's universal truth is expressed through irreducible particularity. Translatability then affirms that because this truth is expressed in one particular culture, it can be expressed in any other cultural terms as well.

However, while this approach guards against relativism to a degree, I believe that Yoder's account allows us to go even further. The new humanity is the place where the tension between universal and particular can be fully addressed. This is because the new humanity is made up of particular cultures redeemed through submission to Christ's universal lordship, and because this lordship was attained not only through the embrace of a particular identity,



but also through the demonstration at the cross that the rebelliousness of that identity could be vanquished. In fact, the new humanity might be the only place where cultural diversity can be welcomed without succumbing to cultural relativism, because this is the only place where culture is truly redeemed.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to make three contributions to the debates about translatability, the worldwide church, and the challenge of pluralism or relativism. First, I have shown that different scholars use the concept of translatability in very different ways. Translatability can be associated with radically divergent underlying ideas about the nature of culture, the most relevant social grouping, the theological basis of translatability, its ultimate purpose or goal, and its ability to address the tension between the universal and the particular. In other words, “translatability” as a Christian doctrine cannot be translated that easily from one scholar to the next.

Second, I have attempted to show that the translatability and pluralism debates can be brought together fruitfully. The pitfalls of pluralism that philosophers point out are also relevant inside the translatability debate, where cultural relativism remains a tempting perspective. The discourse about translatability is relevant to the tension between cultural pluralism and Jesus’ unique truth-claims, with the tension between the universal and the particular being resolved in the new humanity. Thus the translatability concept helps to clarify the challenges of pluralism, and vice versa.

Third, I have engaged with each of the five dimensions of translatability mentioned earlier in order to move closer to a theologically robust account. I suggested that translatability takes on its true meaning and purpose within the context of the new humanity brought into being at the cross. Only the cross provides a perspective within which translatability can be understood as integrating people(s) or “culture-specific segments” into the global church, and only in the new humanity is the tension between the destigmatization and relativization of culture satisfactorily addressed. While the incarnation destigmatizes cultural particularity, culture must be recognized as rebellious through its tendency to divide and exclude people. Through Jesus’ willingness both to embrace cultural particularity and to overcome sinful human divisions at the cross, the new humanity is created as a historical, timeful, and particular people who by its concrete practices experiences a redeemed way of being human that is a foretaste of the full stature of the universal Christ. Translation can be understood as a mutually reinforcing process in which the conversion of our culture leads to reconciliation between cultures, and in which reconciliation between cultures leads to the conversion of each one.

The implications of such an account are multiple. I conclude with several practical suggestions to help us navigate the challenges of living out this new humanity in our local congregations.

First, we must expect conflict as we negotiate the cross-cultural differences in our congregations; coming up with practical tools to resolve our conflict should be a priority, and we should not be surprised if the New Testament offers us several such tools on a close reading. David and Cynthia Strong's analysis of the Jerusalem Council suggests that a community hermeneutic can be a useful tool for cross-cultural decision-making and unity inside a multicultural church.<sup>96</sup> The sacramental practice of reconciling dialogue<sup>97</sup> can be carefully adapted to different cultural contexts to help us resolve interpersonal conflict. While we can affirm that some might have a special gift of cross-cultural expertise,<sup>98</sup> all are called to the hard work of conflict resolution across social boundaries, and all should be pursuing "cross-cultural competence."<sup>99</sup>

Second, if there is an older Christian community, mostly monocultural, that "has the law,"<sup>100</sup> it should make the more significant concessions when welcoming members from other cultures. Just as Paul did not want Galatian Gentiles to be circumcised, the prior members of a congregation should not impose their alienating cultural forms on new members.

Third, everyone's culture reveals Christ in a different way and has a part to play in the body or temple or new humanity. The potential of everyone's culture should be affirmed, but cultural sensitivity or political correctness should not prevent us from challenging cultural forms that from our perspective are rebellious. However, this hard work of challenging each other's cultures needs to occur while sharing in congregational life; it cannot happen if we are not also worshiping together, eating together, and making decisions together.

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96 David K. Strong and Cynthia A. Strong, "The Globalizing Hermeneutic of the Jerusalem Council," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 134.

97 Yoder, *Body Politics*.

98 Paul G. Hiebert, "The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 288–308; Yoder, *For the Nations*, 73.

99 Sam Owusu, "To All Nations': The Distinctive Witness of the Intercultural Church," in *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground: Growing a New Future for the Church in Canada*, ed. John P. Bowen (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 124.

100 Yoder, "Homogeneous Unit Principle," 14.

Fourth, in contrast to Paul's strategy, the modern missionary movement has involved planting churches from scratch rather than starting with a "synagogue."<sup>101</sup> Even if we see this as a mistake, we must find a way to respond to this unique situation. Perhaps it is time for a new push to develop gospel-sharing methods that focus primarily on the creation of truly intercultural communities around the world: communities that embody the good news in ways that profoundly call into question old ways of relating between expatriate missionaries, sending churches, and believers in the host country.

Fifth, the challenge of intercultural existence brings us face to face with the grave disparities in power and wealth that undermine the unity of the world church. Many approaches exist to try to balance power in the worldwide church, including Ron Sider's plea for rich North American Christians to give far more to the poor,<sup>102</sup> and Jonathan Bonk's exposition of the way that riches prevent authentic relationships and undermine ministry for expatriate missionaries.<sup>103</sup> Some approaches have a particular focus on re-establishing relationship by emphasizing inter-congregational connections and global gift-sharing.<sup>104</sup> As essential as all these contributions are, there is a great need to build more firmly on a foundation of intercultural existence at a local level, where social boundaries are being scandalously disrupted every day. This would rest on the starting point that "people are crucified for living out a love that disrupts the social order, that calls forth a new world. People are not crucified for helping the poor. People are crucified for joining them."<sup>105</sup>

Sixth, we can continue the conversion of our own rebellious culture by evaluating our existing church practices to see how well they contribute to the constitution of the new humanity. For example, Metzger calls for caution about the tendency for North American evangelical and emerging churches to be built on homogenous small groups.<sup>106</sup> Cavanaugh brings wisdom about

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101 Ibid., 15.

102 Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

103 Jonathan Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem... Revisited*, revised and expanded edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006).

104 Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind, *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment* (Intercourse: Good Books, 2003); Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2011).

105 Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, large print ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 86.

106 Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 62.

how the Eucharist can help us to address particularity with a non-consumerist mindset. Instead of treating our differences as something to be consumed,<sup>107</sup> thus draining the “particular...of its eternal significance,”<sup>108</sup> we become “more universal, the more [we are] tied to a particular community of Christians gathered around the altar.”<sup>109</sup>

Finally, the work of living out the new humanity will require special attention to music and language. Music is an element of culture that is bounded and yet to some extent accessible across cultural boundaries; language on the other hand can only be understood and appreciated by those who speak it. How can we develop ways of relating in intercultural churches that take into account the imperative both of doing church together, and of affirming the value of particular musical and linguistic traditions? More work is needed to develop a balance between incorporating musical traditions of those who are far away as an expression of solidarity with the worldwide church,<sup>110</sup> and working with multiple traditions that are all represented by local church members. Much more work is needed to develop similar principles of intercultural worship when it comes to language choice in church services.

To conclude, we dare not abstract away from the concrete work of being intercultural congregations who work together on transcending the cultural and social barriers that divide us, while continuing to honour the particularity of each other’s cultures. In our churches, whether in Ukarumpa, Burkina Faso, Québec, or elsewhere, we participate in the conversion of our cultures and the reconciliation with others as we eat together in defiance of social divisions, resolve our conflicts through reconciling dialogue, welcome diverse cultural elements into our worship, and include those of different backgrounds in making decisions together.

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107 William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 67.

108 *Ibid.*, 71.

109 *Ibid.*, 85.

110 C. Michael Hawn, “Praying Globally—Pitfalls and Possibilities of Cross-cultural Liturgical Appropriation,” in *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, ed. Charles E. Farhadian (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 212.

# Glimpses of Mennonite Engagement with Hindu Thought and Practice

DOROTHY YODER NYCE<sup>1</sup>

*We must learn to affirm pluralism of all kinds. — Frances Hiebert<sup>2</sup>*

*The gospel always appears in a certain cultural cloth. — Alle Hoekema<sup>3</sup>*

*My views regarding India are like the price of sugar, subject to change.*

— Peter A. Penner<sup>4</sup>

*Conversion is one of the most politically charged acts  
in contemporary India. — Chad Bauman<sup>5</sup>*

While it is not a thorough analysis of Mennonite understandings of Hindu experience, this article selects from anecdotes as well as formal writing from an extensive bibliography gathered by the writer. That bibliography will enable

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1 Dorothy Yoder Nyce of Goshen, Indiana, is a feminist researcher, writer, and retired teacher with a DMin degree in *Interreligious Dialogue from Western Theological Seminary*. In addition to nine occasions of living in or visits to India, beginning in 1962 with Mennonite Board of Missions, she values friends loyal to Hindu and diverse faiths.

2 Frances Hiebert, “Doing Mission with a Universal Gospel and Cultural Diversity,” *Direction* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 81. Hiebert is a Mennonite Brethren missionary to India.

3 Alle Hoekema, “Why the Dutch were the First Mennonites to Send Missionaries Overseas,” in *Toward a Global Mennonite Historiography*, eds. Wilbert R. Shenk, James C. Juhnke, A.G. Hoekema, et al. (conference proceedings, Elkhart, IN: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, April 4–7, 1995), 32. Hoekema is a Dutch Mennonite theologian.

4 Peter A. Penner, “Bharatiya General Conference Mennonite Kalisiya, India,” [http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Bharatiya\\_General\\_Conference\\_Mennonite\\_Kalisiya](http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Bharatiya_General_Conference_Mennonite_Kalisiya). Information compiled by Matt Yoder (research paper for Anabaptist history class, Goshen College, Spring 2009; accessed June 8, 2014). Penner is a General Conference Mennonite missionary to India.

5 Chad Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 3. Bauman is a Mennonite and a religious studies scholar.

future writing on present or related subjects. A key desire for this article is to commend, and make better known to western readers, writers from three Mennonite groups who have observed and studied Hindu thought or practice. Indian voices appear along with both academic and missionary writers, with no intent to contrast them.<sup>6</sup>

This article reflects more from the historical experience of one body of Christians engaged with another dominant religion—Hinduism—than it does from the typology that often characterizes the “theology of religion,” the overall theme of this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*. Thought about God and “faith seeking understanding”—ways to express theology—appear here. But the focus is less on how value or meaning within religions surface and more on how writers of one faith attend to the features of another. Whereas theology of religion (or its plurals) may emphasize how different religions explain or prioritize terms like revelation, faith, or salvation, this article avoids comparison with intent to evaluate.

This writer cares for how Mennonites write and interact with Hindu themes and people. Her current concerns include the following: being a loyal Christian open to learn from faithful others who differ; combining another’s religious self-description with an awareness of the limits of personal bias; being alert to Hindu perception of Hindu tolerance toward difference and Hindu dislike for the seeming arrogance of “only/best/final” language used by Christians. Some views and convictions differed a century ago. The intent here is to report on, not judge, time periods.

Alongside many Christians’ *exclusivist* view that salvation comes only through Christ, a view that has been dominant since the fifteenth century, and a more *inclusive* option that was added in the sixteenth century—a view that is more open toward people loyal to other religions but intends eventually to seek Christ among them based on points similar to Christian belief—a more recent *pluralist* stance has emerged that sees multiple possible ways to realize

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6 As the term “missional” is in use today, the term “missioner” replaces “missionary” throughout this article. Research resulted in an extensive bibliography including materials from Mennonite Church US Archives (Goshen, IN) and Bethel College Archives (Newton, KS). Librarians to be thanked include: Colleen McFarland (Mennonite Church Archives), John Thiesen (General Conference Mennonite Archives), Eileen Saner (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart), and Joe Springer (Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College). Dr. Mary Eleanor Bender and family members of the writer graciously read and advised about earlier manuscript drafts.

salvation.<sup>7</sup> Rather than misjudge pluralism—as some exclusivists might, for example, when faulting a pluralist to mean by *relativism* that “all religions are equally true” rather than that it means *limited*—the present writer claims pluralist views as worthy of consideration and here to stay. She especially values Jesus’ example of openness to learn from people of diverse, non-Jewish religions and his consistent call to followers to witness to *God’s* universal kin-dom.<sup>8</sup>

Early Mennonite missionaries, as well as most people whom they represented in the west, were more exclusivist than Mennonites sensitive to Hindu integrity today will choose to be. Early missionaries also faced harrowing conditions of poverty, economic hardship, little education, and medical limits, all conditions that needed immediate attention. Future interfaith engagement will combine basic elements of given religions. This combination will occur, not via syncretism—compromised belief from several religions—or synthesis—combining faiths to make a whole—but through and toward symbiosis: shared, diverse views of faith that enable living and working together. Relationships across religions during the next century will require loyalty and conviction, deep knowledge of the other, honest exchange, and shared rituals and worship. To plan for the future requires keen awareness of past patterns to understand why a belief or practice matters, how best to transition, and what remains flexible within

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7 Many have written about this typology. While Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen reflects an exclusivist stance in *Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), other options include: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), where the author offers a fourth term for the typology as well as alternative words for all four terms; K.P. Aleaz, *Theology of Religions* (Calcutta: Moumita Publisher, 1993), in which Aleaz offers a strong Asian alternative to western schemes that he calls “pluralistic inclusivism”; or the book of essays in Aleaz’s honor, edited by V.J. John, *Many Ways of Pluralism* (Kolkata: Bishop’s College, 2010). In addition, see writing on the subject by Shirley Guthrie, S. Wesley Ariarajah, and Kwok Pui-Lan.

8 Writing on theology of religion by Dorothy Yoder Nyce includes: *Multifaith Musing: Essays and Exchanges* (self-published, 2012), 30–34, 140–43; and “Sharing God’s Gift of Wholeness with Living Faiths: Biblical Examples,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 15 (2007): 60–61. From the experience of living in India multiple times and through sustained friendships with people loyal to Hinduism, she wishes to be a Christian sensitive to the integrity of multiple faiths. For her, multifaith sensitivity includes the conviction to honor Jesus’ emphasis on the One God’s inclusion of all nations rather than that he himself be idolized. Further, she welcomes the vision possible through feminist thought, beginning with Mujerissta theologian Georgene Wilson’s use of “kin” to refer to divine compassion for all people, rather than being skewed by patriarchal bias through “kingdom.”

plural reality. Therefore, this present look into history is offered.

## Mennonites Meet India and Hinduism

Hinduism, the oldest living, formal world religion, has added to its complexity during the past five thousand years as it absorbed aspects of other religions and cultures.<sup>9</sup> I.P. Asheervadam, a Mennonite Brethren historian, observes how religions that were welcomed into India also absorbed distinct Indian and Hindu features.<sup>10</sup> The misused, secular word “Hindu” originates from the Sanskrit word Sindhu, the ancient name of the Indus River found in the subcontinent’s northwest. The name “Hinduism” was not attributed to the religion dominant in this region until centuries later.<sup>11</sup>

### *Mennonite groups*

Three Mennonite groups receive attention here: the Mennonite Brethren (MB) who first went to India in 1889, the Mennonite Church (MC) who went to India ten years later, and the General Conference (GC) who arrived a year after that. Although MC and GC groups merged in North America in the mid-1990s, the two remain distinct in India. Smaller Anabaptist groups—Brethren in Christ and United Missionary—also exist there.

Mennonites encountered Hindu thought when two MB couples first went to India from Russia. For nearly fifty years they joined American Baptists with

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9 Among many sources about Hinduism that a reader might consult are: Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, rev ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981); Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: Unwin, 1927) and *The Bhagavadgita* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963); and Louis Renou, ed., *Hinduism* (New York: Washington Square, 1963). Among worthy non-Indian writers, see: Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998); Antony Copley, ed., *Hinduism in Public and Private* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Abbe J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906); and Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1981), *Encountering God* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), and *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Harmony, 2012).

10 I.P. Asheervadam, “The Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” in *Churches Engage Asian Traditions: A Global Mennonite History*, eds. John Allen Lapp, C. Arnold Snyder, et al. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2011), 128.

11 Hinduism has no single starting point or charismatic leader. One writer calls it “the relentless pursuit after truth” while another describes “a kind of coalition of religions.” By the thirteenth century, the term Hindustan (“land of Hindus”) became an alternative name for India. Centuries later, British writers applied “Hinduism”



mission efforts that had begun in the Telugu language area of Hyderabad State in 1875.<sup>12</sup> The earliest MB missionaries from the United States, N.N. and Susie (Wiebe) Hiebert, arrived in 1899. I.P. Asheervadam observes that early Mennonite missionaries who located in Central Provinces (later called Madhya Pradesh, now Chhattisgarh) seemed unaware of the Russian MB work that was already active. The first MB church was begun in 1904; in part due to mass conversion movements, 964 congregations with roughly 200,000 members now exist.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Dutch Mennonites established a mission organization in 1847 for work in Indonesia, famines and philanthropy prompted North American Mennonite missions. Individuals concerned about the 1894–95 famine in India preceded missionaries from MC and GC agencies. George Lambert (MC) from Elkhart, Indiana, and David Goertz (GC) of Halstead, Kansas, had gone separately to observe conditions before returning to India to oversee the distribution of tons of aid gathered by North American Mennonites. After the great Indian famine of 1897–98, the first MC missionaries William (a physician) and Alice Page and Jacob Ressler arrived in the Hindi/Chhattisgarhi-speaking state of Central Provinces.<sup>14</sup>

The first GC Mennonite missionaries, Peter A. and Elizabeth Penner and John F. and Susanna Kroeker (the latter couple from Russia), also went to CP state. While finding a region in which to locate, those four lived and studied Hindi for ten months with MC missionaries already located in Dhamtari, CP.

### *Religion and culture*

As the predominant North American worldview contains Greek and Judeo-Christian influences, so the majority philosophy of life of South Asian In-

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to the beliefs and practices of the majority Brahmanic people of India. In addition to Internet information regarding origins of the term “Hinduism,” other resources to consult include: Philip H. Ashby, *Modern Trends in Hinduism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); John Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Hinduism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); K.M. Sen, *Hinduism* (London: Penguin Books, 1961); Ed Viswanathan, *Am I a Hindu?: The Hinduism Primer* (San Francisco: Halo Books, 1992); Karel Werner, *A Popular Dictionary of Hinduism* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997); and R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

12 This south central state, later called Andhra Pradesh, was more recently divided with Telengana.

13 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 135. MC and GC membership remains much less than MB in India.

14 Later named Madhya Pradesh, this is now divided between MP and Chhattisgarh states.

dians is partially shaped by Hindu thought. As an Iowa farmer might turn to the biblical Noah to ponder a summer flood, so Viola Wiebe (MB) accepted in the 1940s her Indian friend's consulting an astrologer regarding the auspicious timing for a journey.<sup>15</sup> After living decades in south-central India, anthropologist Paul Hiebert (MB) wrote that villagers' religion had less to do with formal Hinduism and more with local spirits living in trees, rivers, or hills. Christian converts might no longer go to Hindu temples, but they continue to struggle with realities of spirits, magic, or ancestors. Therefore, Hiebert nudged missionaries to understand village beliefs and practices, and not only to study formal Hinduism.<sup>16</sup>

Paul Hiebert's 1960s PhD field work centered on the dynamics of culture and religion in the village of Konduru.<sup>17</sup> Not only did he write about encountering dozens of caste groups; he also pondered the honor given to higher animals such as cows. He learned how customs regulate caste, how castes cause factions. Using anthropological, comparative categories and aware that people might worship deities named Shiva or Vishnu of the Hindu Great Tradition alongside supernatural beings of Low Religion, Hiebert asked how best to translate the basic word "God." For village folk "see gods as part of the present illusory universe" or know "only gods who share in the weaknesses, rivalries, and sins of the rest of creation." Further, since Indian villagers knew little of a role such as "missioner," their options being landlord or ranked, superior policeman, Hiebert asked how to be "brothers" with national church leaders.<sup>18</sup>

P.B. Arnold, physician and MB national leader through several decades, notes the importance of approaching Asian cultures and religions with genuine love and empathy. Rather than rejecting other people's cultural values and meaning or conveying a judgmental spirit, observers will "appreciate all that is good and genuine in them," he said. That pattern suggests building upon

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15 Viola Berghold Wiebe and Marilyn Wiebe Dodge, *Sepia Prints: Memoirs of a Missionary in India* (Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1990), 96.

16 Paul G. Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, eds. R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tienon (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 9.

17 Paul G. Hiebert, *Konduru Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

18 Paul G. Hiebert, "Missions and the Understanding of Culture," in *The Church in Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J.B. Toews*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), 256, 259–60. See also Jacob Loewen, "Which God Do Missionaries Preach?" *Missiology: An International Review* 14, no. 1 (January 1986): 3–19.

Hindu thought that calls for complete surrender to and absorption into God (*moksha*). It involves genuine befriending of others rather than seeing them as “trophies to be won.” Arnold states that the Indian church will best express faith “in its own way,” shaped by its sociocultural context that includes religious pluralism.<sup>19</sup>

### **Mennonite Encounter with Religious Difference**

Writing in the early 1900s amidst famine, poverty, and very limited study, Peter Penner (GC) described Hinduism as: “a conglomeration of philosophical systems, pantheism, fatalism, ceremonies and ceremonial washings, and downright, common idolatry.” He thought of high-caste Brahman Hindus as “arrogant and pedantic”; although degraded, low-caste Chamars were “willing to listen.”<sup>20</sup>

Dutch Mennonite missionary and writer Alle Hoekema writes that early sending boards and missionaries “did not consider theological education to be important either for missionaries or indigenous believers.” Nor did they emphasize Anabaptist identity.<sup>21</sup> John A. Lapp (MC) and James Juhnke (GC), historians working in the 1970s and 1980s, noted the limited understanding—of Indian life and culture, of Christianity in relation to world religions, or of how to make the gospel relevant—that missionaries took with them to a Hindu land. Juhnke adds that although Mennonite missionaries saw “value in being well informed,” none of them “ever became notable authorities on Hindu religion and custom.”<sup>22</sup>

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19 P.B. Arnold, “Witnessing Discipleship in Asia,” *Mission Focus* 14, no. 4 (December 1986): 49–52.

20 James Juhnke and Robert Kreider, eds. “India,” *Mennonite Life* (June 1980): 10–14. Also James Juhnke, *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Mission* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1979), 20–42.

21 Alle Hoekema. “Christianity in Asia,” in J.A. Lapp, Snyder, et al., *Churches Engage Asian Traditions*, 18.

22 John A. Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1972), 39, 68–9; Juhnke and Kreider, “India,” 10; Juhnke, *People of Mission*, 24. However, two Mennonite Brethren writers did become notable authorities—Paul Hiebert in anthropology (second generation in India) and Paul Wiebe a sociologist (third generation). Their extensive writing and experience in India as scholars and professors commend them. Several later MC missionaries also pursued serious study of Hinduism, but their studies were rarely publicized. Further, several world religion professors, with background or loyalty among Mennonites—Ronald Neufeldt (MB), Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger (GC), and Chad M. Bauman (MC)—today are disciplined scholars of Hindu thought and practice.

Missioners arrived in India with love for people and concern to “save souls.” Although they had little professional preparation for their work, they proved effective in immediate tasks. For example, Jacob Ressler (MC) confessed: “How little I knew the workings of the Indian mind.”<sup>23</sup> But already in 1900 he had become “honorary famine Relief Officer,” a program that fed fourteen thousand people twice a day in forty-one kitchens located in thirty-eight villages not far from Dhamtari.<sup>24</sup> And on several occasions Peter Penner (GC) was honored by the Viceroy of India for his notable work with leprosy in the leper home.<sup>25</sup>

Asheervadam also credits Indian Christians. Throughout decades MB Indian leaders carried the main work of evangelism—via organizations of Church Extension Workers and Interfaith Ministries—of going from village to village to preach. They knew sacrifice, selfless service, and tribulations within their own communities.<sup>26</sup> Asheervadam describes MC national leaders Stephen and Phoebe (Sheela) Solomon, who were active with established programs. They grew up in mission hostels and later both were graduated from universities. Stephen became a prolific writer, musician, ordained pastor, and translator with the Bible Society of India. Phoebe, an ordained deacon, became a notable teacher.<sup>27</sup> Existing accounts do not disclose how those capable leaders engaged their Hindu neighbors which presumably they did through holiday celebrations, meeting Hindu parents of students whom they taught, and friendship with local shopkeepers.

Several MC missionaries shifted location north in the 1940s and 1950s to Bihar state (now Jharkhand state from 1999 when Bihar divided). New churches developed among numerous tribal languages in addition to Hindi. John Beachy’s seminary study, pursued after years as a missionary, focused on coun-

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23 Jacob A. Ressler, *Stories from India* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald), 73.

24 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 156, 158.

25 Penner received Kaiser-i-Hind silver medals in 1926 and 1941, medals given for public service in India from 1900 to 1947. “Biographical Sketch” for Penner, GC Mennonite Archives form, Newton, KS

26 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 140–41. Indian Bible women who took the Christian message into homes could also be credited here. Missioner Thelma Miller Groff describes Bible women as effective—good at meeting women, telling scripture stories, and authentic prayer—in a video created by Dorothy Yoder Nyce, “Holy Respect—No Less,” (1996), 31 minutes. Also informative is Indian James Taneti’s “Telugu Women in Mission” (DMin thesis, Western Theological Seminary, 2012). Taneti is known to present MB leaders in Andhra Pradesh.

27 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 159.

selling among Oraon and Munda tribal groups. He understood their animist belief in and worship of a hierarchy of spirit beings alongside one Supreme Being.<sup>28</sup> Often motivated by fear, the people might express allegiance in order to appease evil or hostile deities. Tribal folk who claim Jesus as their *guru* (teacher) may return to former rituals or ceremonial activities in times of crisis. So, Beachy wrote of being pastoral alongside acknowledging Hindu influence.

Broader ecumenical links emerged through the decades, writes Asheervadam. P.J. Malagar, certified by the South Indian Bible Seminary, was the first Indian MC ordained bishop (1955). He helped form and lead an ongoing, inter-Mennonite group, Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India. It sent the first Indian missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. R.S. Lemuel (MB) to Bangladesh, where the Islamic religion dominates.<sup>29</sup> The first inter-Mennonite conference was held in Dhamtari in 1971. Paul and Esther Kniss (MC) managed a bookstore, called Good Books, that was useful for non-Christian customers. Strong Indian leadership also made possible the 1997 Mennonite World Conference that convened in Kolkata, India. For that event, Bishop Shant Kunjam (MC) composed words and music for the conference theme, “Hear what the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches.” Public ecumenical gatherings—with Lutherans, Methodists, Disciples, and Pentecostals—increased Mennonite self-confidence and provided occasions for pilgrimage or festival events, for praising God together.

Encounters with Hindus recurred; illustrations of this fact appear in anecdotes from Peter Penner’s experience. Physician Herbert Dester (GC)<sup>30</sup> reports that Penner bought lots of rice for the leprosy home that he managed. Asking a merchant for a donation for the home, he heard this reply: “I’d rather give for the upkeep of a *guy shalla* (home for old cows) than for those with leprosy who are being punished or ‘getting their due’ from God.” Whether Dester understood the Hindu’s strong view of evil or good consequences (or *karma*) is unclear.

After Tina Block (later Ediger, GC) worked for a year as secretary-treasurer at the evangelical seminary in Yeotmal, India, where Mennonites both studied and taught, she returned to Newton, Kansas. In a paper about Pen-

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28 John Beachy, “Pastoral Counseling: Counseling the Christian, former Animist, in Crisis Experience” (General or Student Papers, AMBS Library, January 11, 1968).

29 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 159, 161.

30 Herbert Dester, *About Hinduism* (North Newton, KS: Women’s Missionary Association of General Conference Mennonites, 1946).

ner for a Mennonite history seminar,<sup>31</sup> she describes his early encounters with Hindu practices. Some troubled him; others humbled him. On one occasion of the festival of Dashera, the local *zamindar* (village owner) sent the missionaries greetings and gifts: rice, flour, sugar, salt, lentils, peppers, bananas, and a goat. Recipients gratefully received such generosity, aware of the Hindu need to gain merit or find favor with deity. But Penner agonized on seeing Hindus pay hard-earned rupees for images of god forms, intent to worship them.<sup>32</sup>

Block further reports the time that a Hindu begged Penner to come to where a mother of the Kurmi caste lay dying. Her small room was full of people. After water and sour milk were poured into the dying woman's half-open mouth, her husband sprinkled sandalwood ashes into her mouth. Then a calf was brought into the room, and its urine poured into her mouth while the woman held to its tail. Penner could only reflect, "Poor, blind people." He recalled another occasion of death when people called upon "Ram-Ram" for assurance and performed a religious dance, each movement of which was significant.<sup>33</sup>

## Mennonites Write about Hindu Themes

### *General*

Writing in 1921 when a professor at Hesston Academy in Kansas, J.D. Charles (MC) includes chapters on several religions in his book, *Present Day Religion*.<sup>34</sup> Topics from Charles' chapter titled "Hinduism (Brahmanism)" include: origin, caste, scriptures, the Supreme One (Brahma), and salvation. He notes shifts in Vedic hymns from belief in one God (monotheism) to seeing God in everything (pantheism) to belief in many gods (polytheism). In addition to commending the prominent place given to prayer by Hindus, Charles faults several features of Hinduism: that touching a low-caste person is not to be pardoned; that the duration or number of re-births might be reduced through strict adherence to law or acts of merit; that widows consecrated to Krishna

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31 Tina Block, "'That They May Know Him': P.A. Penner's First Term in India, Dec. 9, 1900–Mar 10, 1908" (seminar paper, North Newton, KS, 1965).

32 Western Christians often negate sacred Hindu images or god forms as mere *idols*. They may in turn overlook their own "idols" (replacements for God). To negate diverse forms and names of Hindu images may prompt critics to fail to understand that whereas illiterate village folk may indeed worship an object before them, educated Hindus understand their diverse images to represent the One Universal Being.

33 Block, "'That They May Know Him,'" 29, 32.

34 John D. Charles, *Present Day Religion* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1921).

may become prostitutes when resident in temples.<sup>35</sup> In the study of religions, Charles cautions against either becoming liberal to the point of granting salvation through them all, or so narrow as to refuse to learn or receive good ideas from others. Since all religions provide interest and instruction, he expects a student who compares religions to keep focused what is “true.”

George J. Lapp (MC) and his first wife, Esther, went to India in 1905. Esther and a daughter, Pauline, were among the missionaries and children who died and were buried in India. An intellectual and alert observer, George wrote about themes of Hinduism for diverse occasions and in numerous journals: caste, transmigration of the soul, Hindu scriptures and mythology, philosophical schools, religious fears, and Hindu practice with images and festivals. He wrote sensitively of Hindu *pandits* (teachers) for missionaries when studying Hindi, ecumenical ties, the hermit saint Maharishi of Khailash, “Gandhi’s Gospel,” and a visit to noted social activist Pandita Ramabai at Kedgaon. Mission administrators encouraged his seminary study and writing during a 1930 furlough.<sup>36</sup> During his forty years in India, Lapp absorbed religious and cultural features at a profound level; his writing communicated them effectively.

A 1972 PhD dissertation by historian John A. Lapp (MC) notes George J. Lapp’s undergraduate study titled “Strength and Weakness of Hinduism.”<sup>37</sup> Regarding Hindu scriptures, John reports that George saw “outstanding literary qualities” in the Upanishads and called the Ramayana epic a “wonderful piece of literature.” He defended important deities of Hinduism and its six philosophical systems. John A. Lapp also refers to the elder Lapp’s writing about superstition, festivals, and pilgrimage. Weaknesses for which George J. Lapp faulted Hinduism included: shortness of life due to early marriage, regressive medicine, promotion of poverty, denial of education for the masses, and tyranny through certain customs.

In his 1939 book titled *Our Mission Work in India*, M.C. Lehman (MC) reviews six principles within Hinduism, India’s main religious force.<sup>38</sup> The first refers to the One yet Many concept of deity: the three main God names of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva known alongside numerous subdeities and incarnations. The second concerns written texts: belief in four Vedas—Rig, Atharva, Sama, and Yajur—plus Brahmanas, Puranas, Upanishads, the Ramayana and

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35 Ibid., 27–31.

36 George J. Lapp, “Strength and Weakness of Hinduism” (Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, IN, History mss. 1–143, Box 4).

37 J.A. Lapp, *Mennonite Church in India*, 81.

38 M.C. Lehman, *Our Mission Work in India* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1939), 10–11.

Mahabharata epics, and the Suras. The third principle is transmigration of the soul, in which Lehman stresses the influential caste system shaped by *karma*. *Karma* results from good or evil actions that lead to the fourth principle: “final salvation through successive rebirths until released from evil.” Wholeness is achieved through observing caste rules. A fifth principle calls for obedience to *guru* teaching, and the sixth combines worship of a god form with sacrifice and ceremonies required during holidays.

Lehman exposes readers—primarily Mennonites in the United States and Canada—to the religious context for those engaged in “mission endeavor” in India. He commends knowledge of and integrates what centrally matters in India. Although his brief book does not elaborate Hindu practice, he introduces western readers to realities that both differ from and resemble their own attention to doctrines. Both God-concept and salvation matter, writes Lehman; how each is explained is important in a missionary’s presentation. For a missionary to tell biblical stories without listening to and learning from Hinduism’s two main epics creates a gap in understanding. Lehman proposes two steps: (1) effective communication of Christian thought to God’s people immersed in Hindu belief and culture, and (2) a new capacity among western Christians to examine their convictions in light of Hindu thought.<sup>39</sup>

Writing in 2009, pastor and part-time teacher John Murray (MC) expressed concern that Christians deepen their understanding of and respect for other religions.<sup>40</sup> His direct encounter with Hinduism occurred through the Menno Clinic India, located in Andhra Pradesh state, founded by Subbarao and Olga Yarlagadda, former Hindus. Murray has accompanied several groups of nursing students from Hesston College (KS) to the clinic for short-term, cross-cultural learning. Staff members there include Hindus: a priest administrator, and a nurse practitioner who faithfully worships through multiple senses in a Shiva temple. Murray writes about the “manyness of God” for Hindus—God’s reality being perceived, revealed, and known in many ways. Murray hopes that students value the Hindu view that God is within each individual (which the greeting *Namaste* suggests); develop and reflect on friendship across religions; discover how truth exchanged enhances personal faith; and

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<sup>39</sup> Lehman’s Yale dissertation about the Hindu poet Harishchandra’s God-concept deserves attention as does Jacob Loewen’s (MB) five-lecture series titled “A Fresh Look at the God Concept” given at the Mennonite Missionary Study Fellowship (March 12–14, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> John Murray, “Breaking down the Dividing Wall of Hostility: Toward Life-Giving Encounters with Persons of Other Faith Traditions” (paper for AMBS Great Plains course, fall 2009).



understand the purpose of Hindu images. Such insight reminds the observer of “Universal Reality”—the Supreme Lord or highest concept of religious philosophy—beyond the image. He notes key Hindu scriptures and describes the four yoga paths that undergird the view that “many roads lead to the top of the mountain,” a view with which he differs.<sup>41</sup>

A Hindu theme that deserves careful attention is *karma* with its inevitable rebirth; for this concept meanings can vary. Ronald Neufeldt (MB), retired professor of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has written more than other Mennonites about *karma*.<sup>42</sup> Most Hindus believe that they experience multiple lives on earth; after death, the soul transmigrates to a new incarnation or rebirth. Acts in this life are duly “rewarded” in the next, a process that is central to the concept of *karma*. Salvation occurs at the conclusion of transmigrating cycles. Herbert Dester (GC) wrote of two incidents that reflect this theme. When Dester asked a *sadhu* (Hindu holy man), “Have you received salvation?” the man replied, “Salvation is far away.” On another occasion Dester and two other missionaries trekked 125 miles to a source of the Ganges River at an altitude of 10,000 feet. There a nearly naked, silent *sadhu* lived year-round. Asked by one of the three what merit the *sadhu* expected, his *chela* (disciple) explained his hope for release from present existence and rebirths. He expected his body to be offered to the Ganges River.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Caste System*

The caste system based on *varna* (color) remains the social foundation of Hindu experience. Mrs. H.T. Esau (MB) writes: “For twenty-five centuries Hindu people have had every detail concerning occupation, kind of food, type of dress, mark or caste, home and marriage decided for them by rules of caste to which they belong.”<sup>44</sup> A person’s birth shapes identity and dignity, and determines occupation and position within the local hierarchy of castes. Thousands of sub-castes or *jatis* follow the four main groups: *Brahmins* (priests/teachers), *Ksatriyas* (rulers/soldiers), *Vaisyas* (merchants/traders) and *Shudras* (laborers/

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41 Murray, “Breaking Down,” 6.

42 Ronald W. Neufeldt, ed. *Karma and Rebirth: Post-Classical Developments* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986). Neufeldt’s chapter “In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement” describes the Theosophical Movement’s distinct approach to *karma* (233–56). The present author’s future writing will give more attention to Neufeldt’s broad writing and understanding of Hindu concepts and scripture.

43 Dester, *About Hinduism*, 5–6.

44 H.T. Esau, *First Sixty Years of M.B. Missions* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1954), 73.

artisans).<sup>45</sup> People outside the *varna* or caste system—over the decades known by names like Untouchables, Children of God, or Dalits—are assigned tasks that may pollute or defile them. Through time they may have been refused temple entry or the use of public wells.

After serving as a hospital administrator in India from 1962 to 1968, Paul Dyck (GC) wrote a thesis on new castes in India.<sup>46</sup> He found Indian caste to be “one of the most highly elaborated systems of social stratification in the world.” Its bases are multiple, such as labor specialization, distance between segments of society, or views of purity and pollution. Dyck’s writing centers on tribal peoples—Gonds, a dominant political force, and Santals, known for an 1855 rebellion—from 1850 to 1950, in the Chhattisgarh region of India (then Madhya Pradesh state). Tribes that transform into castes rarely give up all of their cultural traits. While “Christian” may become a new caste name, converts retain their caste status though they may take on newly emerging occupations, Dyck reports.<sup>47</sup>

*India Calling*, a General Conference Mennonite newsletter, includes many missionary anecdotes from the 1940s and 1950s that reflect the realities of the caste system:

- A caste *guru* (religious leader) faulted a man for continuing to eat with his granddaughter whose father had become a Christian;
- An employer said to a newly baptized person: “You have dishonored the caste and blotted our religion. Leave work immediately”;
- A critical situation transpired in a Mennonite boarding school when caste Hindu boys moved out as a group because an outcaste fellow began to eat and live among them;
- Caste restrictions are crumbling, especially in cities, but a rural, orthodox Hindu may go thirsty rather than accept water from a lower-caste person.<sup>48</sup>

While B.R. Ambedkar, the well-known advocate for Dalits, enabled many to become Buddhists, other Dalits and tribal folk (25 percent of India’s pop-

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45 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 129.

46 Paul I. Dyck, “Emergence of New Castes in India” (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1970).

47 Dyck, “Emergence of New Castes,” 80, 107. Current political efforts among strident Hindus strive to “make India Hindu.”

48 *India Calling* (GC newsletter, 15 November 1941, 30 January 1942, June 1947, 19 March 1956). See also, Arthur Mosher, “This is India,” *Mennonite Life* 5, no. 3 (July 1950): 18, 20.

ulation) have converted to Christianity, Islam, or Sikhism.<sup>49</sup> Ninety percent of MC Indians are from low caste, Satnami or tribal background. Outside of caste and perhaps not self-identified as Hindu, tribal people may prefer for themselves the term *adivasi* (first inhabitants).

## Mennonites Encounter Hindu Worship

### *Puja in home or temple settings*

*Puja* refers to worship. Within Hindu homes will be a small room or alcove, perhaps a portion of a kitchen counter, where a family member performs daily rituals. Verbal expressions may accompany gifting with grains, cut flowers, incense, or colored powder. Photos or posters of a form being honored appear; small brass plates or silver cups used for distinct ritual steps take on meaning with specific requests. *Puja* may also involve going to a temple to perform rituals. Small temples may stand along a roadside: a stopping place for a bus driver beginning a journey or a farmer headed toward a field. Or they may loom large in a bustling city. In each of several areas of a temple a distinct form is honored; a high tower designates the sacred sanctum location; steps may descend nearby into a pond for ablution rituals.<sup>50</sup>

In his extensive research notes on eastern religions, J.D. Graber (MC), missionary and missions administrator, describes *puja* as practiced by an individual or family or within a temple.<sup>51</sup> Graber notes varied features of Hindu worship: daily morning care of *ishta-devata*—attending to a personal god form that best suits personal needs; *sucertas*—five representative forms to honor; or *advaita* (meaning non-dual)—the worship of One Great Being. “The Hindu monotheist does *puja* to only one God,” Graber says. A worshiper goes to the temple, where God dwells in a single or multiple forms, to offer gifts, ask for strength or a particular benefit, have sin destroyed, or appease the god.<sup>52</sup>

Florence Nafziger (MC), missionary nurse and educator, reports on visits to Hindu temples. The goddess form located in the peaceful interior of a Jain temple in Calcutta impressed her more than did the pot-bellied, “ugly” form with an elephant-shaped head and “superhuman,” multiple hands located in a small brick structure set within the temple garden. Inside a small, whitewashed

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49 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 130. See also Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*.

50 These details reflect the author’s experience in homes with Hindu friends. See also parts of chapters 6 and 10 in her *Multifaith Musing*.

51 J.D. Graber, “Hinduism” (HM 1 -503, Box 3, Folder 3/2, no date).

52 Ibid., 7–8.

temple of two rooms in Dhamtari, Nafziger observed colorful posters of deities, and a huge cobra carved in stone; the latter reminded her of ancient religion. In a nearby village temple Nafziger noted the small bed on which god forms sleep each night; a temple bell and conch shell announce both bedtime and morning awakening rituals for the god form.<sup>53</sup>

Paul Hiebert (MB) reports worship related to the goddess of smallpox, Misamma.<sup>54</sup> A Christian father, on feeling his daughter's fevered forehead and seeing increased, red spots on her body, struggled with whether to give even one paisa (small coin) to satisfy the angered goddess. Pressure from Hindu brothers and the village mounted. Hiebert writes that when the village diviner concluded that the local godling or spirit, Misamma, was angered by the village folk, donations were gathered from every household to sacrifice a water buffalo on the village's behalf. High-caste elders resent Christian claims that loyalty to the God of the Bible makes impossible such donations; to disobey the village elder can be unforgivable. Hiebert knew that noncooperation could lead to banning the Christian from the common well or access to irrigation, or from being free to work in his field.

### *Hindu festivals, holidays, and celebration*

At least twenty-eight Hindu holidays are faithfully observed during a year. A new convert notes the contrast with the Protestant celebration of primarily only Christmas and Easter plus a Thanksgiving or Harvest occasion. Feasts, fasts, and holidays honor religious details of story, deity, and season. Diverse descriptions explain practices and purpose according to location.

Diwali, perhaps the most significant Hindu holiday, honors the goddess Lakshmi, who is known as the consort of the god form named Vishnu. Little flames in clay holders line home windows, verandahs or balconies as well as shop doorways and ledges along streets. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger (GC), currently professor at Emory University, a researcher, and a sensitive writer, describes the dance that accompanies inviting Lakshmi into homes and businesses. Goddess Lakshmi, linked to wealth and well-being, is symbolized by

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<sup>53</sup> Florence Nafziger, "Temples I Have Visited in India," *Youth's Christian Companion* (July 1931), 658, 664. See also Dorothy Yoder Nyce, "Crossing Cultures in Sacred Arts: Drama, Dance & Temples," in *Multifaith Musing*, 47–57.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Hiebert, "A Sacrifice to the Goddess of Smallpox," in *Case Studies in Missions*, eds. Paul G. Hiebert and Frances F. Hiebert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 126–28. See also Christina Duerksen's account of appeasing Indra, god of thunder, in her *Come with Me: 19 Children's Stories* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1971).

the elephant or lotus.<sup>55</sup> Family gift-giving and celebrative meals accompany nights marked by sizzling, booming firecrackers.

Burkhalter Flueckiger (GC) also explains Dashera, a Hindu festival “to mark the killing of the demon raven by the deity Rama. The act of burning Ravana’s effigy is often interpreted as the triumph of good over evil.”<sup>56</sup> Friends greet each other, “Happy *Durga puja/Dussebra!*” Gangadashura is a day for worship of the Ganges River. Some Hindus believe that King Bhagirath brought the Ganges down from heaven to enable salvation for ancestors. Through bathing in the river, giving alms to the poor, or pouring water on one’s head the festival continues.<sup>57</sup>

Some missionaries wrote of their dislike for Holi festival; they avoided being included among the revelers. While some Hindus draw from an ancient story and practice, others see the hilarious occasion as mainly an opportunity for throwing colored powders on each other. A historic account tells of people gathering wood for a fire around which they marched, throwing sweet-smelling objects into it to purify them while singing lewd songs.<sup>58</sup> All then squirted deep purple color onto others. The original account, according to a missionary, suggests that a father, unable to persuade his son to worship the same god form as he, asked a daughter named “Holi” to sit in the fire with the son. Since the daughter, not the son, was consumed, the day is observed to remember Holi.

### Bhakti and bhajans

When Stanley Friesen (MC) reflected with the present author on Mennonite perceptions of Hindu thought or practice, a memory from his missionary father, John Friesen, linked *bhakti* (Hindu devotion) with *bhajans* (hymns) sung by Christians.<sup>59</sup> Both express *devotion* to the Divine; both express longing to be near or desire to be faithful to the One God. *Bhakti* is one of three key Hindu *marga* (spiritual paths or ways) toward salvation, the other two being *jnana* (knowledge) and *karma* (action).

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55 Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 101–2. See also the Mennonite Church resource, *India Mission News* 5, no. 11 (November 1926), 4.

56 Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger offered this description on a Facebook post (October 3, 2014). She has written extensively about Hindu celebration, including in her book, *When the World Becomes Female: Guises of a South Indian Goddess* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

57 *India Mission News* (June 6, 1926).

58 *India Mission News* (April 4, 1926).

59 Personal conversation in Elkhart, IN (August 26, 2014).

A helpful resource by R.R. Sundara Rao reveals how complete surrender to the *istadevata* (favored God) was adopted from Hindu culture for Christian purposes. Rao suggests that two-thirds of Indians today look to *bhakti*, a phenomenon known for twenty-five centuries, for spiritual redemption.<sup>60</sup> That Indian Christians—literate or illiterate—sing faith or also express *bhakti* through *bhajans* is equally clear. Aware of ancestral composers brought up with intense *bhakti* in Hindu temples, Christian *bhajan* writers glorify the Son of God through names like Giver of Life and Personification of Light. The first Protestant Telugu hymn was written by Purushotham Choudhury on the occasion of his baptism in 1833. Of his additional 130 hymns, 20 appear in present Mennonite Brethren hymnals.<sup>61</sup> Through *bhajans* Christians witness to a desire for stability in life, the Lord’s divine presence, and the Spirit’s guidance from darkness to light.<sup>62</sup>

Chad Bauman (MC), currently professor of Asian religions at Butler University, has written about themes of conversion, Hindu–Christian violence, Indian “Christian” womanhood, and Hindu Sathya Sai Baba’s many devotees. Bauman describes “blind Simon” from India’s Chhattisgarh region where Mennonites are located. Whereas Hindus might link Simon’s blindness to *karma* (his previous negative action), Christian Simon openly praises God through it. He links his musical skills to *bhajans* about healing. He conveys biblical stories and expresses devotion to Jesus. As Hindu scriptures often appear in poetic form, Simon creates Christian lyrics. Bauman reports that Hindus familiar with their major epics know stories similar to blind Simon’s accounts from Hebrew scripture. His 250 *bhajans* are sung in church settings; some incorporate music from Hindu folk songs while others focus on Christian doctrine.<sup>63</sup>

## Mennonites Interact with Hindu People

### *Gandhi*

Numerous Mennonites have written about the notable Hindu, Mohandas K. Gandhi. Among others, MC authors include Weyburn Groff, J.N. Kauffman, and John Howard Yoder; MB authors include Henry Krahn, Jacob Loewen,

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60 R.R. Sundara Rao, *Theology in the Telugu Hymnal* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983), 20. Mennonite Brethren are located primarily in the Telugu language area.

61 E.D. Solomon (Indian MB) recently completed a PhD dissertation on Choudhury. Thanks to Paul Wiebe for his email of October 24, 2014 that reports this and related information.

62 Rao, *Theology in the Telugu Hymnal*, 7, 12, 77, 80, 100.

63 Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 200–9.

and Ronald Neufeldt; GC authors include Ella Bauman, Luben Janzen, and Orlando Waltner. Gandhi's nonviolent stance—*ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*—explains in part this attention. From direct conversation with Gandhi at his ashram in 1929, M.C. Lehman (MC) learned that Gandhi's belief in nonviolence stems from Hindu scripture rather than being purely politically motivated.<sup>64</sup> Several Mennonites received mail directly from Gandhi, including Gilbert Gehman (GC) in 1931 and J.N. Kaufman (MC) in 1947. The former had in a sermon commended Gandhi's nonviolent way of life; the latter, with others, had requested that conscientious objection status be built into India's new constitution.<sup>65</sup> James Pankratz (MB) describes Mennonite nonviolence as "obedience to God and a symbol of separation from the world." He writes about both caution among some Mennonites living in India prior to independence in 1947 regarding Gandhi's confrontational noncooperation with Britain, as well as Gandhi's dislike for Christian clergy who "blessed killing" on battlefields.<sup>66</sup>

Indian Mennonite Church member Shant Kunjam's MA thesis on Gandhi adds perspective. He identifies the Hindu Gandhi's personal characteristics as sincerity, disciplined determination, selfless service, identification with the masses, untiring energy, and harmlessness. Kunjam further observes that:

Gandhi claims no perfection.... A firm believer in God, his sole object was to know God face to face.

Honesty, truthfulness, and openness in personal life are central qualities that he chose to develop.

Gandhi believed in one God, rebirth, and salvation.

Gandhi did not realize that God is dynamically present and active in the world.<sup>67</sup>

### *Other Hindu friends*

In addition to the more formal writing identified here, more definite anecdotal

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64 M.C. Lehman, "Gandhi's Program of Non-Violence—A Critical Estimate from a Christian Point of View," *Goshen College Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (May 1936): 2.

65 Griselda Gehman Shelly, "A Letter from Mahatma Gandhi," *Mennonite Life* (June 1983): 27; Leonard Gross, *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, 44, no. 2 (April 1983): 5–6.

66 James Pankratz, "Gandhi and Mennonites in India," *Conrad Grebel Review* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 136–61.

67 Shantkumar S. Kunjam, "An Exploratory Examination of the Ethics of Gandhi in the Light of Biblical Teachings" (MA thesis, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1982), 26, 41, 56, 72.

writing appears in archival materials. Anecdotes appear in letters, missionary accounts from events in India or when “on furlough,” and mission newsletters or reports via journals, like *Christian Monitor* or the *Gospel Herald* (MC).

Irene Lehman Weaver (MC), daughter of missionaries Lydia and M.C. Lehman, reports playing inside their Dhamtari compound (property) as a three-year-old. A troop of elephants stopped when going by. A *rajah* (Indian prince) traveling with his entourage noticed her and invited her to have a ride. Seated between the *rajah* in his gold and blue chair and the *mabout* (driver), she watched the latter lead the elephant by pulling its ears or prodding it with a stick. The Lehmans remained connected with that rajah who later sent Irene a pony.<sup>68</sup>

Single missionary Martha Burkhalter (GC) served in India over forty years, retiring in 1959. A Bluffton College graduate, she received the advanced B.R.E degree in education from New York Biblical Seminary in 1934. She described in verse the missionary’s 1927 January and February “touring.” Those were weeks spent “tenting” in villages: preparing meals, conversing informally during the day with villagers, and gathering in the evenings to sing and share gospel stories. Hindu villagers did not always welcome them:

.... But what happened? Late one evening  
 Came a crowd of angry natives,  
 Pelted tent with stones and mud clots  
 Tried to drive the missionaries....  
 Long and tedious were the dealings.  
 Finally it was decided  
 That a tract of wooded acres  
 Would be given in the jungle  
 In exchange for what the natives  
 Had been fighting for that evening....<sup>69</sup>

The dramatic ever characterized Burkhalter: she was known to hail a train to stop for her to board when she had missed it at a station. She adopted an In-

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68 Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, “A New Day in Mission: Irene Weaver Reflects on Her Century in Ministry,” *Missio Dei* 8 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2005), 3.

69 Martha Burkhalter, *A Fragment of Missionary Life* (Bluffton, OH: Women’s Missionary Society, 1927).



dian daughter, Dilasie. Missioners, Indians, and students valued Burkhalter's administrative skills, for elementary- or seminary-level schools. Her "energy and vivid, dramatic methods of teaching" were often recalled.<sup>70</sup>

Blanche Sell (MC) wrote several times to family and friends about her deep, abiding friendship with a Jain family named Shah.<sup>71</sup> Ever open to their possible conversion, she never relinquished the friendship because of their strong loyalty to another religion. The mother, "so full of love," asked her sons to read Jain scriptures for her. Sell writes of often praying with her. When Sell accompanied her to a hospital via ambulance, Mrs. Shah asked the driver to stop at a Hindu temple so that she could offer a small sacrifice to the image. She died calling out, "*Paras Ram.*"

Sell wrote her conviction: "I will not manipulate or demand that they convert.... Although I believe that Christ is the way to salvation, I cannot judge another.... I can never hold a grudge.... I do not need to defend myself or prove that I'm right."<sup>72</sup> A doctor son of Mrs. Shah closed a letter to Blanche requesting information about medical supplies, "With prayers, Yours Always." Believing that "there are many ways to believe in God," he read the *New English Bible* that Sell gave him because "his one mother is Christian."<sup>73</sup>

Two accounts from more current experience in Kansas conclude this article. Having worked at Union Biblical Seminary, an ecumenical school that Mennonites attend in India, Tina Block (GC) welcomed a Hindu Indian woman arriving to study at Wichita State University. Their friendship deepened. While the Hindu woman earned a master's degree in city planning, she valued time spent with Block. She observed and discussed details: from an abundance of pillows on a bed to prayer before meals and worship at church. Block too learned: about fatalism when the guest's best friend was killed, about Indian family adjustments when her friend married a man of lower caste than she, about living one's faith without "pushing" another to change her religious loyalty.<sup>74</sup>

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70 "Burkhalter, Martha Rose (1889–1965)," *The Mennonite* (October 19, 1965): 654. Available from the online Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College, Kansas (accessed June 8, 2014), [https://mla.bethelks.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Burkhalter,\\_Martha\\_Rose\\_\(1889-1965\)](https://mla.bethelks.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Burkhalter,_Martha_Rose_(1889-1965)).

71 Jainism is a religion that broke from Hinduism.

72 Sell, "Notebook" (MCUSA Archives, Goshen, IN, HMI 183, Box 2/12).

73 Sell, paper from September 21, 1964 (MCUSA Archives, Goshen, IN, HMI 183, Box 1, Papers, *circa* 1900–2001).

74 Block Ediger's conversation with the author took place in Newton, KS, July 7, 2014.

LaVonne Godwin Platt (GC) worked in service projects in Indian villages in the mid-1950s with a Hindu friend Bela Banerjee. Platt describes Bela as a “dear friend” to many, as fluent in Indian languages, and as skilled with “treating patients, delivering babies, teaching health workers, and visiting with villagers.” Platt also writes of Bela’s final visit to the United States and Canadian friends in 1992.<sup>75</sup> When faithful Hindu Bela died in Platt’s living room, they acquired authorization from her family in India for cremation. They planned a memorial service in harmony with Hindu tradition, incorporating a garland of marigolds, an oil lamp with incense, a coconut, tape recordings of Indian songs, plus poems and music by noted poet Rabindranath Tagore. Dwight Platt later delivered Bela’s cremains to be scattered in the Ganges River.

## Conclusion

Culture, change and conversion, all part of pluralism, are both revealed and lie behind the scene in this manuscript. More Mennonite voices regarding Hinduism—as from United Mission to Nepal or Mennonite Central Committee workers beyond Kolkata, committed missionaries, and academic professors—deserve extended hearing. More reporting from the author’s bibliography will follow. What diverse Mennonites have experienced and written from living among or study of ever-complex Hindu thought and practice is a gift to treasure. All who live with and learn from diverse religions, all who need neither to apologize for nor misrepresent personal loyalty, have insight to share. Better understanding the “God of all nations” will enhance Anabaptist witness for years to come.

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<sup>75</sup> LaVonne Godwin Platt, *Bela Banerjee: Bringing Health to India’s Villages* (Newton, KS: Wordsworth, 1988), ix; LaVonne Godwin Platt, *In Memory of Bela Banerjee: A Coda to Her Biography* (Newton, KS: Wordsworth, 1996), 19–33.

# Peacemakers and Descendants of Abraham:

## Christian-Muslim Encounter in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

PHILEMON GIBUNGULA BEGHELA AND J.N.J. KRITZINGER<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This article is a missiological reflection on the conflict between Christians and Muslims in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>2</sup> The central concern of the paper is the question: how can Christians be witnesses of the Kingdom of God in their relationships to Muslims in that context by embodying the Sermon on the Mount? To set the scene for answering this question, the article starts by surveying the history of the relations between Christians and Muslims in the eastern DRC.

The first Muslims in the area were Arab merchants who came into the country via Tanzania. Over a period of a few decades they introduced a new culture and established a powerful administration in a large part of the east. The arrival of Belgian colonialists in the area during the late nineteenth century destabilized the relatively peaceful relations between Muslims and the rest of the population. Since then this relationship has been characterized by ongoing tension and conflict. In addition to a brief historical description of the

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*2 This article is based on Dr. Gibungula Beghela's DTh thesis in missiology, which was supervised by Professor Kritzinger. The thesis is entitled "Vivre l'évangile de paix parmi les Musulmans à l'Est de la République Démocratique du Congo: Une lecture missionnelle du Sermon sur la Montagne" (doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2010).*

foregoing developments, this article explores the key findings from interviews with some Christian and Muslim leaders in the area in an attempt to assess the present relationship between the two religious communities.

After doing context analysis, the article moves to theological reflection, by making a missional reading of some key passages from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7).<sup>3</sup> This is a contextual reading, which looks for guidance and orientation regarding appropriate ways of doing Christian mission in the eastern DRC. It is a reading that moves from the context to the biblical text, and back to the context. In this process it leads to the proposal for “peacemaking mission” that challenges the existing relations between Christians and Muslims. Finally, some strategies and plans are suggested for this to be a successful peacemaking mission in the DRC.

The theological method used in this study is that of a “praxis cycle,” as proposed by Holland and Henriot<sup>4</sup> and later developed by Karecki.<sup>5</sup> It constructs a “cycle” of praxis that includes the dimensions of identification, context analysis, theological reflection, strategy and planning, with spirituality at the center. The paper consequently moves from a historical and empirical description of Christian–Muslim tension in the eastern DRC (context analysis), to the development of an irenic approach on the basis of a missional reading of the Sermon on the Mount (theological reflection), and finally to reflection on specific areas of peacemaking mission (strategy and planning). An irenic spirituality and a commitment by the two authors to put these ideas into practice (identification) guide and sustain the whole project.

## Brief History of the Muslim–Christian Encounter in the Eastern DRC

### *Arrival of the Arabs and Islam*

For a long time central sub-Saharan Africa remained closed to any contact with

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<sup>3</sup> The term is used in so many different ways that I should specify how I am using it. In this paper the term “missional” is not used in the technical sense of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in the UK and USA as part of the “missional church” movement, but as an inclusive term to encompass both “mission” and “missiology.” For us a “missional” reading of a Bible passage is neither a narrowly missionary nor a narrowly missiological reading, but an attempt to integrate both these perspectives.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Madge Karecki, ed., *The Making of an African Person: Essays in Honour of Willem A. Saayman* (Pretoria: Southern African Missiological Society, 2002).

the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> The first newcomers were Arab traders who moved south along the eastern coast of Africa and had already established important trading centers along the coast by the eleventh century.<sup>7</sup> In the ensuing centuries they moved gradually inland and succeeded in extending their influence into the territory now known as the eastern Congo. By the nineteenth century, this Arab influence had spread into the whole of the east and the north of Congo. After a period of confrontation with the local population, they succeeded in establishing the city of Kasongo, in Maniema province, as the center of their influence, with Kasongo becoming the stronghold of Islam. Unfortunately, Kasongo also became the centre of the Arab slave trade in the region.<sup>8</sup>

The province of Maniema and the neighbouring provinces of Orientale (in the north), South and North Kivu (in the east), Kasai (in the west), and Katanga (in the south), were also deeply affected by the Arab slave trade.<sup>9</sup> The majority of Muslims in the present-day DRC live in these provinces and they constitute the nucleus of the conflict and tensions that exist between Muslims and Christians to this present day.

An important Muslim trader was Tippu Tip (1840–1905), known in Arabic as Ahmed ibn Muhammad el-Murjebi, who originated from Zanzibar.<sup>10</sup> As an ivory merchant who also dealt in slaves, Tippu Tip travelled on several occasions from the coast through central Tanganyika and deep into Congo where his most important business interests were located. He established a powerful empire during the late 1800s. Working between the east coast and Lake Tanganyika, Tippu Tip gradually built up a military force and gained control of the Upper Congo region. When the Belgians made him the governor of the Upper Congo region in 1887, he already had authority over a large territory.<sup>11</sup> Tippu Tip appointed his own officials, including many Arab traders, and administered justice. He also negotiated an arrangement between Zanzibar and the Belgians and kept peace among the competing local chiefs. In an effort to expand his business empire, he actually became an influential political

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6 Verney Lovett Cameron, *A Travers l'Afrique: Voyage de Zanzibar à Benguela* (Paris: Harmatan, 1977), 75.

7 Cameron, *A Travers l'Afrique*; cf. Georges Hardy, *Vue Générale de l'histoire de l'Afrique* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1948).

8 Isidore Ndaywei e Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo: De l'héritage ancien à l'âge contemporain* (Bruxelles: Ducolot, 1997), 235–36; Robert Cornevin, *Histoire du Congo-Léopold* (Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1963), 75; Cameron, *A Travers l'Afrique*, 75–76.

9 Cf. René Jules Cornet, *Les Phares verts* (Bruxelles: Editions L. Cuyppers, 1965).

10 Ndaywei e Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo*, 237.

11 *Ibid.*, 293.

leader. Because he was the only person allowed to own firearms in the area for a period, he was able to maintain political domination over a large area. He died in 1891 after returning to Zanzibar and his empire was soon conquered by European forces.

*The Belgian colonization and exploitation of the Congo (1877–1960)*

When Europeans established their presence in the country, it caused multiple conflicts. One of these was the religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. As pointed out already, by the late nineteenth century Muslims had already established firm control over a large region of the eastern DRC. When Leopold II of Belgium entered the scene to establish his personal kingdom (“The Congo Free State”) in 1885, he wished to demolish that control.<sup>12</sup> From 1891 onwards his approach led to open warfare, which gradually also attained the character of a war between Christians and Muslims. This became known in French as the *Campagne Arabe* (Arab campaign).<sup>13</sup> It left a legacy of estrangement among the population, with the tombs of combatants and other memorials at geographical sites serving as reminders of the conflict.<sup>14</sup> These sites bring back painful memories until the present time.

The period after this *Campagne Arabe* was characterized by frequent movements of resistance and open revolt, which continued after the Belgian state took control of the territory from Leopold II in 1908 and it became “The Belgian Congo.”<sup>15</sup> The more prominent revolts were those of Batetela in Kasai (1895), the revolt of the “Arabisés” in Orientale province (1897), the revolt of Shinkakasa (1900), the revolt of rubber collectors in Equateur province (1891–92), and the popular revolt of Bapende in Bandundu province (1931). Sociopolitical movements like Kitawala, which involved the entire Swahili-speaking region, and Mulidi, an Islamic movement, played an important role in the period before independence (1960). The “Muléliste” rebellion lasted the longest and started after independence.<sup>16</sup>

*During the struggle for independence*

It is important to note that the resistance movements already mentioned later

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12 Cf. E.P. Lumumba, *Patrice Lumumba: Le Congo terre d'avenir est-il menacé* (Bruxelles: Office de Publicité, S. A., Editeurs, 1961).

13 Ndaywei e Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo*, 292.

14 Cf. Cornet, *Les Phares verts*; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan Books, 2006).

15 Ndaywei e Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo*, 298.

16 Ibid., 298–330, 409.

became associations with a sociopolitical character. Most of these associations became active political parties on the eve of independence.

With the establishment of political parties, Muslims had the opportunity to be heard again. Among the political parties that became influential in Maniema, two were nationalist and radical, namely the Congolese National Movement Lumumbiste (MNCL) and the Centre of African Regrouping (CEREA). Only one was moderate, namely the Popular National Party (PNP). The process of joining these political parties reinforced the confessional split between Muslims and Christians, since the majority of Muslims rallied behind the nationalist and radical political parties (MNCL and CEREA), whereas the Christian leaders joined the moderate party (PNP).<sup>17</sup>

After the victory of the nationalist parties in the election, Muslim leaders—although less qualified—tried to gain positions of authority in the administrative affairs of the region. This political situation brought back memories of former conflicts. Taking advantage of political identity membership, Muslims seized the opportunity during the Muléliste rebellion to take revenge against the Christians. Christian leaders, who represented a minority in the region, were eliminated.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the opposition between the two religious communities became more and more pronounced.

When some order returned at the end of the rebellion, Christians took the opportunity to take revenge against the Muslims, initiating a cycle of violence that persists to the present day.<sup>19</sup> It established a climate of hostility that seriously strained the relations between Christians and Muslims, which will not end without a concerted and sustained effort from both sides of the conflict.

#### *During the Mobutu regime*

When Mobutu Sese Seko seized power in a bloodless coup in November 1965, the church initially welcomed the new regime and supported the consolidation of its authority. Later, however, Mobutu's ambitions for state expansion created conflict with organized religion, so that church (both Catholic and Protestant, representing 70 to 76 percent of the population) ironically became the main adversary of his expansionist regime. The role of the church was widespread and

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17 Cf. Armand Abel, *Les musulmans noirs du Maniema* (Bruxelles: Centre pour l'Etude des Problèmes du Monde Musulman Contemporain, 1959); Émile M. Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme au Congo* (Bruxelles: Editions de la Librairie des Eclaireurs Unionistes, 1961).

18 Théophile Kaboy, ed., *Souvenirs du Centenaire et Élargissement des Connaissances sur Kasongo* (Kasongo: Catholic Diocese of Kasongo, 2003).

19 Cf. AMAE, *Dossier sur le Kitawala au Congo Belge* (Bruxelles: AFI/1-6, 1956).

its moral authority made it an uncomfortable opponent to the comprehensive political allegiance that Mobutu sought.

The “authenticity campaign” launched by Mobutu’s regime in 1971 was experienced as a direct threat to Christianity. It struck at key symbols of the Christian education system by absorbing both the Lovanium University (Catholic) and the Free University of the Congo (Protestant) into the new National University of Zaire. More problematic to the church was the announcement that branches of the JMPR (the ruling party’s youth wing) had to be set up in all seminaries. The ideological battle centred on Mobutu’s concept of “authenticity,” which the church saw as a direct threat. The regime’s stress on “mental decolonization” and “cultural disalienation” in its authenticity campaign promoted the values of traditional African culture to counteract westernization. When the campaign banned all Christian names, the Zairian bishops briefly resisted, but then backed down. In 1972, the regime banned all religious publications and dissolved church-sponsored youth movements, insisting that the indoctrination of Zairian youth was the prerogative of the Party. This campaign reached its climax at the end of 1974 when the regime nationalized all religious schools, banned the public celebration of Christmas, and restricted the display of religious symbols to church buildings.<sup>20</sup>

In 1974, some measures were taken for the freedom of religion, which established a kind of religious equality in the Congo.<sup>21</sup> In this process, the church lost its favored position and advantages it had enjoyed under Belgian colonialism, and Islam emerged as the third most important religious confession in the country.<sup>22</sup> Since then, the conflict has moved into its current phase.

### **Manifestation of Tension between Christians and Muslims**

Sadly, the legacy of violence in the eastern DRC continues. It has become a zone of military operations, an area of rebellion that provides shelter to both refugees and armed militia. It remains a terrain of tension and ongoing conflict. The present situation of Christian–Muslim relations in that context was

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20 Information in this paragraph was obtained from Photius Koutsoukis, “Democratic Republic of Congo: Religious Groups,” December 1993, [http://www.photius.com/countries/congo\\_democratic\\_republic\\_of\\_the/government/congo\\_democratic\\_republic\\_of\\_the\\_government\\_religious\\_groups.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/congo_democratic_republic_of_the/government/congo_democratic_republic_of_the_government_religious_groups.html).

21 Thomas Turner and Sandra W. Meditz, “Zaire,” *Country Data*, September 9, 1994, <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-14972.html>.

22 Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, “From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Current African Issues* series, number 28 (Upsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004).



investigated by means of interviews in 2006 and 2007.<sup>23</sup>

Two main trends emerged from these interviews, carried out with representatives of the two religious communities in the eastern Congo: a more positive and a more negative approach.<sup>24</sup> In the following we give examples of these contrasting attitudes that were encountered in the two religious communities.

## Illustrating Negative Attitudes

### *Muslim opinion*

Referring to the memories of the war, an informant from the LMM group said: “The war took place in the past. The Muslims were put in chains and maltreated. There was a fight against Islam expansion in Maniema: the Muslims were pursued and relegated. Mutinies were livid.... Nowadays, we experience provocations from the newest churches. Among the leaders of Revival Churches we mention Kutino in Kinshasa and here in Kindu, we have Pastor Kosaamani Macaba who defamed the Quran...they describe the Muslims as lazy and will then cause these conflicts between the Muslims and the Christians.”<sup>25</sup>

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23 Dr. Gibungula Beghela visited the DRC from December 2006 to February 2007 and conducted twenty in-depth interviews with representative Muslim and Christian leaders in the eastern DRC. On the basis of the informed consent granted by the informants, none of their names are mentioned in this article, but the groups from which they were chosen are identified in footnote 25 below.

24 A more complex set of categories was used to analyze the interviews in Gibungula Beghela, “Vivre l’évangile de paix.” That analysis used the five-fold typology of interfaith “ideologies” developed by David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988): hostility, isolation, competition, partnership, and dialogue. In this article only a small selection of interviews could be used, and the attitudes have been reduced to two categories: “positive” and “negative.”

25 The following abbreviations are used for the religious groups selected. The informants spoke in their personal capacity, not on behalf of these religious groups:

CEU: *Corps enseignant de l’Université islamique du Congo* (Muslim lecturers at the Islamic University of Congo);

LMM: *Leaders Musulmans de Maniema* (Muslim leaders in Maniema province);

LMK: *Leaders Musulmans de Kivu* (Muslim leaders in Kivu province);

ECR: *l’Eglise Catholique Romaine* (the Roman Catholic Church);

PLEP/M: *Pasteurs Leaders des Eglises Protestantes au Maniema* (pastors and leaders of Protestant Churches in Maniema);

PLEP/K: *Pasteurs Leaders des Eglises Protestantes au Kivu* (pastors and leaders of Protestant Churches in Kivu);

AMC: *Anciens Musulmans Convertis* (former Muslims who have become Christians).

Moreover, speaking about marriage between members of the two communities, one group of Muslims said: “If you could marry our daughters, we would separate from both of you. If you take her away against our will, we will get rid of the girl and exclude both of you from our community; she will not be part of us anymore. Moreover, we will curse her forever and chase her away.”

Conversion to any other religion is regarded as apostasy, which must be punished with death. A group of Muslims said it clearly: “According to Islamic law, apostasy is a crime which is punished with the death sentence.”

### *Christian opinion*

Speaking about the social impact of Muslims, a PLEP/K group argued that: “Islam brought along atrocities to Congo; it should be compared to an open ulcer, a wound which cannot be healed.” Some others supported that by saying: “In our opinion, a Muslim is a pagan.” They went on to reaffirm that: “Islam is actually a consequence of a lack of true faith in God...people collected some segments of the Bible which were badly transmitted and interpreted, which consequently became the Qur’an.” The same negative attitude was found on the side of Muslims against the Bible. This is the way Christians and Muslims judge each other.

## **Illustrating Positive Attitudes**

### *Muslim opinion*

According to the LMK, a sense of common identity and unity among Congolese Muslims and Christians could contribute to the achievement of peace. Other groups of Muslims claimed a common spiritual heritage with Christians: “Abraham was a monotheist believer and he bequeathed this heritage to his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. However Ishmael incarnates the Muslims today and Isaac incarnates Christians as well as the Jews.” Such a sense of family belonging could contribute to peacemaking.

### *Christian opinion*

The PLEP/K also emphasized the common Abrahamic heritage as a potential unifying factor: “Both Christians and Muslims are the wire [*sic*] of Abraham. Abraham as the common ancestor becomes a focus of attention for Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. If they start from Ibrahim or Abraham as the father of the faith, there will never be friction. Abraham, the common ancestor, as well as Isa the prophet are an undeniable historical reality.” They further stated that: “We are serving the Prince of peace. For this reason, we should carry that image in us to build peace within society.”

## Controversial Issues

In spite of these positive trends, there are some controversial issues that keep on creating tension.

### *Interfaith marriage*

Muslims expressed a strong opinion against marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man.<sup>26</sup> It is prohibited in terms of Islamic law: “Basically, Islam does not allow a believing woman to get married to a non-Muslim; it is idolatry. Such prohibition is to preserve the faith and good behaviour. Islam recommends submission to Allah, the unique God” (CEU informant). If a Muslim woman does not submit herself to this rule, she is disowned and even cursed by her family.

### *Conversion*

Conversion is also an emotive issue, with both religious communities expressing firm rejection. From the Muslim side, a CEU informant, quoting Surah 109, said, “It is a loss of faith in Allah, the unique God.” A LMM informant added, “When somebody adheres to Christianity, it brings radical change. Spiritually he is no longer a *human being*, he becomes like a magician. He is blinded by the belief of a certain Jesus, God. For us Muslims, such a person becomes *profane*. He is like somebody who has his eyes bandaged and closed to accept profane beliefs.”

On the other hand, a Roman Catholic leader said: “If somebody says to you that he is a *follower of Islam* that means that he is still a pagan and must be converted. In fact, someone can call Islam a religion, but for us, it is closer to paganism since they do not meet the requirements to be Christian.”

### *The use of money*

The PLEP/K group expressed fear that financial assistance given to poor Christians by Muslims could lead to conversion: “It becomes very dangerous, because for the sake of faith, one can consent to offer himself even by dying.” AMC argued strongly that: “Christian believers must abstain from any Islamic assistance. Anyone has to banish material and financial interests so that he can stand firm in his faith. Denying Jesus because of money is to compromise one’s beliefs in a dangerous way.” PLEP/K added, “If you abdicate your faith, you

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<sup>26</sup> The marriage of a Muslim man to a non-Muslim woman is not controversial, since it is assumed in the patriarchal culture of the eastern DRC that such a woman would have to become a Muslim. When a Muslim woman wants to marry a non-Muslim man he has to become Muslim for the marriage to be approved by the family and community.

must be excommunicated from the community of believers.”

## Resources for Peacemaking

A number of people interviewed pointed out that peace would be possible if all available resources were mobilized for that purpose. Some Christians emphasized that “it is a loss on the part of Christians if they don’t act peacefully among Muslims. The concept of shalom covers all the good aspects that are integral to a healthy society” (AMC informant). As “children of Abraham,” both Christians and Muslims have much in common. On the basis of a common Abrahamic faith, Christians and Muslims should mobilize their shared *ubuntu* traditions for the sake of peace.<sup>27</sup> These are crucial factors in building a common home, which could be called the “house of shalom.”

Another positive factor is the unifying identity of African religion. African people remain attached to the ethos (or mentality) of their culture, religion, and morality. Resistance to change is a significant motivation in the religious behaviour of many African people, in view of their cultural and political circumstances. African people converting to a new religion (like Christianity or Islam) publicly practice the rituals of their newfound faith to show that they have become believers, but often those Christian and Muslim religious practices unconsciously have a different significance due to the deep-seated motivations and thought patterns of African religion that persist in their lives.<sup>28</sup> In this unobtrusive way, African religion still plays a fundamental role in shaping the lives of African Muslims and Christians alike. Consequently, the believers belonging to different “new” religions have a common history in their culture, morality, and religion. Instead of developing hostility to each other or to African religion, African believers who become Christian or Muslim can make use of the values of African religion to enrich their faith in God the Creator. This opens a way to building peace within society.

Finally, there is also the positive factor of Scripture. Starting with the Bible, Christians can become advocates of peacebuilding by learning how to embody the message of shalom, which is so clearly expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.

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<sup>27</sup> The *ubuntu* tradition is found across Africa and is expressed in the notion that a human being can only exist together with—and in relationship to—other human beings. Such a communal culture attaches great value to human dignity and human relationships, and both African Islam and African Christianity exist in this cultural milieu.

<sup>28</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

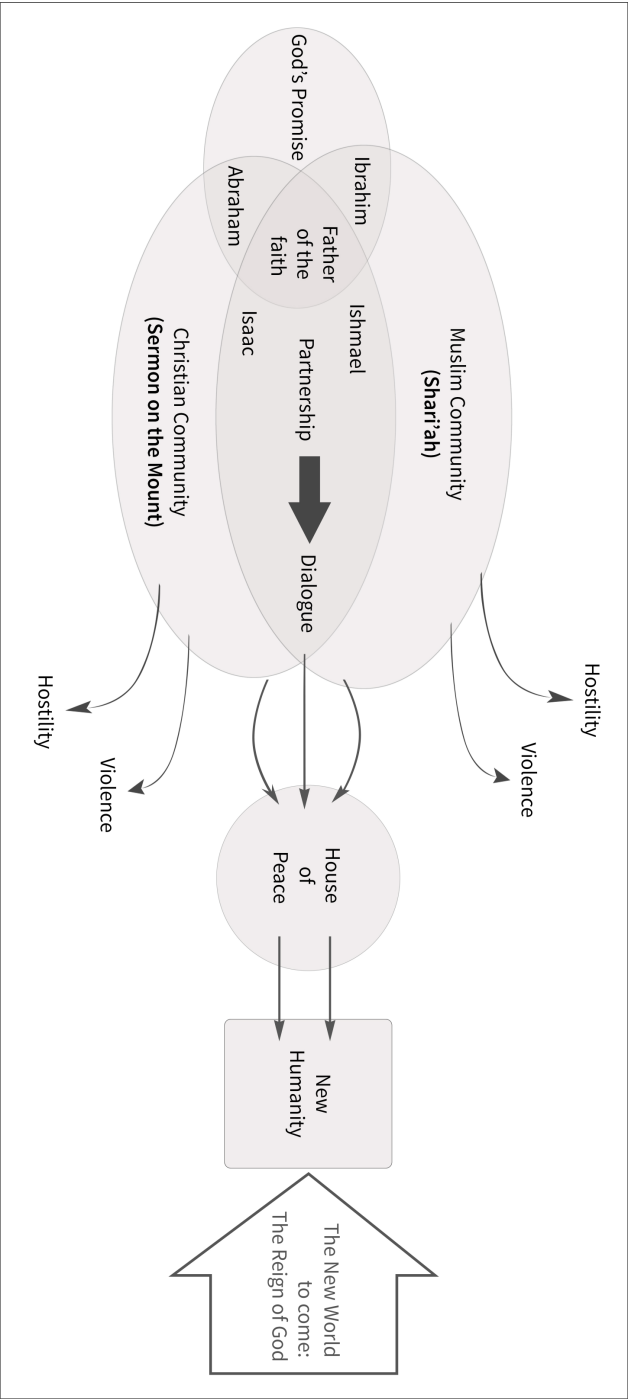


Figure 1. Irenic Diagram

## The Outline of an Irenic Approach

Figure 1 suggests how the different peacebuilding resources mentioned above could be mobilized in a situation where there are significant numbers of Christians and Muslims in a community. It outlines the “space” that needs to be created to build convergence between the positive peacebuilding strengths present in both religious communities. It requires engagement in a path of dialogue for peacebuilding—in the eastern DRC and elsewhere. The starting point is the figure of Abraham, as role model of how God’s hand operates in history to initiate a project of gathering new humanity within a house of shalom. The dynamic of this initiative is based on the promise of faith and the obedience of Abraham. Abraham is the father of numerous people, through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3). Through Abraham all the families of the earth, which constitute humanity, should find “well-being,” “integral peace,” and “the plenitude of the salvation in God.”<sup>29</sup> In this perspective God becomes the architect and author of an inclusive and embracing house of shalom.

Placing the Muslim community at the top of Figure 1 does not suggest a position of superiority. Figure 1 should rather be seen as viewing the two communities “from above,” as they strive together to create a new future for society. It is intended to portray them as working side by side, “shoulder to shoulder,” as they move ahead towards the coming reign of God.<sup>30</sup>

Figure 1 presents the two religious communities as striving to counter the divergent forces that constantly threaten to polarize them into opposing “camps,” which would increase the risk of exclusion and violence.<sup>31</sup> The more entrenched and ideological they allow their differences to become, the greater the likelihood of ongoing confrontation, leading to an escalating spiral of violence.<sup>32</sup> This often happens when the religious symbols and practices of the two communities are used to rationalize and legitimize economic and/or political interests and power struggles in a society. When that happens, the future of the house of shalom is threatened by deepening polarization and antagonism.

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29 Analetta Van Schalkwyk, “‘Sister, We Bleed and We Sing’: Women’s Stories, Christian Mission and Shalom in South Africa” (doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, 1999), 8.

30 J.N.J. Kritzinger, “Faith to Faith: Missiology as Encounterology,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29, no. 3 (2008): 764–90.

31 Cf. Louis Schweitzer, ed., *Conviction et dialogue: Le dialogue interreligieux* (Vaux-sur-Seine, France: Edifac, 2000).

32 Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1970).

Figure 1 presents the possibility of creating a space of convergence through mobilizing resources from both religious communities on a path of dialogue and collaboration for peacebuilding. There is a need to establish sufficient common ground between the two religious groups to build a solid foundation for lasting peace. With respect to the eastern DRC, one could suggest the following aspects:

- Affirmation of a common spiritual legacy in Abraham, the father of believers;
- Attachment to principles of *ubuntu*, which recognizes the dignity of each human being and respect for African cultural values;
- Recognition of a common national identity;
- Recognition of and total respect for the current constitution and its structures, while waiting to eventually negotiate a new constitution;
- Commitment to participate actively in the construction of the house of shalom.

If these resources (and others flowing from them) are mobilized effectively, it is possible that common ground could emerge for a deepening dialogue and collaboration between the two groups. Doing so is an attempt to make the two religious confessions aware of their interdependence within a community of human beings created in God's image.<sup>33</sup> It is necessary for Muslims and Christians to collaborate across religious barriers and collectively focus on addressing the urgent common problems of starvation and poverty that the DRC is facing. They can do this on the basis of God's promise to Abraham, in expectation of the coming of the Lord's Day, and by erecting signs of the coming reign of God through shared action for peace in the world.

The escalation of violence should be avoided at all costs in the eastern DRC—and everywhere else. It is the role of religious communities, and particularly of religious leaders, to make civil society and government aware that every person who practices violence sets in motion (or perpetuates) a process of the ongoing renewal of violence. Violence imprisons those who practice it in a "vicious" circle that is very difficult to break, once it has gone beyond a certain "tipping point" of mutual exclusion and hatred. This is what Ellul calls "the law of violence."<sup>34</sup> It is the calling of Christians and Muslims, as descendants of Abraham, to work side by side against this destructive "reproduction" of violence.

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33 Christian W. Troll, *Dialogue and Difference: Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).

34 Ellul, *Violence*.

## A Missional Reading of the Sermon on the Mount

As alluded to earlier, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) is one of the key resources that Christian leaders and theologians could use to mobilize Christian communities for peacebuilding action in society. What is needed is a contextual and missional reading of the sermon that interprets the passage as a call to Christians to build an irenic partnership with Muslims in the eastern DRC. The sermon is about the “good news of the kingdom of heaven,” which is the “gospel of peace” that Jesus Christ was charged to proclaim. This proclamation was the aim and focal point of his mission. From this “gospel of peace,” Jesus affirmed through his teaching and deeds how the reign of God was already present among people.<sup>35</sup> The missional reading of the sermon in this article concentrates on three passages: Matthew 5:9–12; 5:43–48; and 5:11–12 (in this order).

### *A Peacemaking Identity (Matthew 5:9–12)*

The analysis of the interviews above has revealed a distinct level of hostility between Christians and Muslims in the eastern DRC. The question is: what direction or guidance can one find in a passage like this to address such challenges? Matthew 5:9 reveals the basic orientation of a life of discipleship in and towards the reign of God. The two important Greek expressions in the verse are *eirenopoioi* and *klethesontai huioi theou*. Most English Bibles translate *eirenopoioi* as “peacemakers” (NIV), similar to the Vulgate, which rendered it as *pacifici*, from “*pax* and *facere*”: peacemakers.<sup>36</sup> The focus is on “doers of peace” or, as the New Living Translation (NLT) puts it, “those who work for peace.” This, in our view, captures the meaning of the verse quite well. It suggests an active participation by the disciples of Jesus in creating peace wherever there is hostility. That was the project of Jesus, who called his disciples to be “activists for peace” or “peace workers.”<sup>37</sup> This reveals their identity as God’s children who imitate their “heavenly Father” by becoming “creators of shalom”: “those whom Israel’s god will vindicate as his sons will be those who copy their father;

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35 Perry B. Yoder, *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 143.

36 Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 89. See also Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988).

37 John Driver, *Kingdom Citizens* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 68. See also Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).



and that means peacemakers.”<sup>38</sup>

The second expression, *klethesontai huioi theou*, is translated as “they will be called sons of God” (NIV) or “God’s children” (NLT), where the term “sons” includes both male and female disciples. The verse reinforces the bond between God’s active children on earth and their “heavenly Father.” It marks a new identity for those working actively for the establishment of the reign of peace. This verse contains more than a promise of future blessing; to create peace in a violent world is to experience the presence and joy of the coming reign of God here and now. *Eirenopoioi* are the activists who find their identity in working for the manifestation of peace, justice, and salvation, which represent the arrival of the messianic reign.<sup>39</sup> Shalom becomes a reality when people experience integral peace—salvation in all its dimensions—according to God’s original covenant plan. In addition to this qualitative aspect, God’s promise to Abraham also has a quantitative dimension: through Abraham God blesses the whole of humanity. This gives meaning to the change of Abraham’s name from *Abram*, “father is exalted,” to *Abraham*, “father of a multitude (of nations)” in Genesis 17:5.<sup>40</sup> Social injustice, sufferings, and hostility should be considered as a lack of shalom and a threat to the divine plan of peace,<sup>41</sup> but the absence of armed conflict does not necessarily mean the presence of shalom. It is fully present where people live in harmony with themselves and with God and where the structures of society embody this.<sup>42</sup>

Since the attempt to establish such comprehensive shalom represents a threat to some vested interests and power relations in society, peacemakers often encounter resistance and their work therefore requires sacrifice. That is why Matthew 5:10, “blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” follows directly on verse 9. A key distinguishing mark of these peacemakers is that they are not motivated by the desire for power or revenge, so that they do not retaliate when opposed. The house of shalom that they are building has its foundation in an inclusive love that extends even to their enemies.

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38 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 288.

39 Driver, *Kingdom Citizens*, 68.

40 See G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

41 Driver, *Kingdom Citizens*, 68.

42 See also Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

*Love of enemies (Matthew 5:43–44)*

Love for one's enemies opens the prospects of a house of hope and shalom that all Abraham's descendants can build and inhabit together. Such an approach is what the Sermon on the Mount projects as the vision of the messianic community.<sup>43</sup> On this basis Christians cannot consider Muslims (or anyone else) as enemies to be conquered at all costs. Since Muslims are fellow human beings bearing the image of their heavenly Father, and are joint heirs of God's promises to Abraham, Christians should regard them as brothers and sisters within the family of Abraham. If Christians could show love to Muslims consistently, their testimony for peace would become powerful. However, to release the transformative dynamics required to make such a relationship possible, a close reading and faithful embodiment of the Sermon on the Mount is essential.

In Matthew 5:43–44, Jesus shows a way to transform broken human relationships, bringing an innovation in the understanding of neighborly love.<sup>44</sup> The Torah instructed believers to show love to all the members of the covenant community, particularly to relatives and kinsfolk (e.g., Exod. 20:16–17; Lev. 19:1–18). That love included aliens and foreigners (e.g., Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:18–19), but not the enemies of Israel. There is no command to Israel in the Old Testament to hate their enemies (as implied in Matt. 5:43), but some psalms (e.g. 83, 94, 109, 137, 139) show that the sentiment of hating one's enemies was not completely absent. It was a "popular maxim" among Jews at the time of Jesus,<sup>45</sup> which was particularly evident at Qumran, where the War Scroll (I QS, 9–10) contained a command "to love all the sons of light...and hate all the sons of darkness." It is possible that Matthew 5:43–44 was responding directly to this attitude prevalent in the Qumran community.<sup>46</sup>

Jesus calls his disciples to be consistent peacemakers by loving even their enemies (5:44). By doing so they build an inclusive and nondiscriminatory identity that links them with their "heavenly Father" (5:48) who shows his goodness to good and bad alike. The disciples are called to a way of life that aims at transforming their environment into a house of shalom. Due to the resistance and rejection that peacemakers often encounter, however, it is important for them to develop a resilient spirituality that can sustain this countercultural

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43 See also Driver, *Kingdom Citizens*.

44 See also Glenn M. Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice, 2004).

45 Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Berlon: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 176.

46 Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 177.

lifestyle. The spirituality encouraged by the Sermon on the Mount is based on the reign of God as a gift, pronounced over the “poor in spirit” and over those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is a spirituality of receiving the promises (indicatives) of Matthew 5:13–14 (“You *are* the salt of the earth”; “you *are* the light of the world”) and of embodying them in daily practice. It is also a spirituality of imitating the divine example of inclusive *agape* by becoming “perfect” in loving both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). It is a spirituality that Jesus not only preached but also practiced on his way to the cross. He endured the suffering of the cross due to his sacrificial love for his enemies.<sup>47</sup>

*Peacemaking and suffering (Matthew 5:11–12; Isaiah 53:1–7)*

As stated already, peacemakers often experience hostility and rejection. These two passages express the notion of the “suffering servant(s)” of the Lord and of the redemptive potential of their suffering. For the disciples on their healing and peacemaking mission, suffering is neither a new nor a surprising experience. Matthew 5:12 makes the remarkable claim that the faithful disciples of Jesus who suffer ostracism and humiliation on his account stand in the tradition of Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (and other prophets) who endured persecution for speaking God’s word fearlessly to Israel and Judah.

Matthew 5:12 also highlights an additional dimension of the spirituality of peacemaking mission: rejoicing in persecution as a mark of authentication for prophetic witness. It seems that the “school of suffering” is an integral part of the training of peacemakers working for the coming of God’s reign. The way of peacemaking presented by the Sermon on the Mount is not that of an intervention by a powerful outsider who “rushes in to solve the problem.” It is rather the way of identification and accompaniment, characterized by the willingness to bear the pain of estrangement and to love the “unlovable” parties in the conflict. It is also the way of rejoicing at a “reward in heaven” since a life spent sacrificially in peacemaking mission has eternal significance.

Only those who are prepared to be “suffering servants” are suitably qualified to generate peace in a violent world.<sup>48</sup> This gives new relevance to the notion of the “wounded healer” developed by Henri Nouwen, who “must look after his own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds

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<sup>47</sup> See also Yoder, *The Meaning of Peace*; and Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> See also Young Kee Lee, “God’s Mission in Suffering and Martyrdom,” in *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom: Theological Reflections*, eds. Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (Johannesburg, South Africa, and Bonn, Germany: AcadSA and Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2010), 215–30.

of others.”<sup>49</sup> Peacemaking mission in deeply divided societies like the eastern DRC requires the admission that one is involved in the “problem” and not a neutral observer. Kahane gives a helpful description of the “reflectiveness” required for peacemaking in situations of entrenched conflict:

To create new realities, we have to listen reflectively. It is not enough to be able to hear clearly the chorus of other voices; we must also hear the contribution of our own voice.... It is not enough to be observers of the problem situation; we must also recognize ourselves as actors who influence the outcome. Bill Tolbert of Boston College once said to me that the 1960s slogan “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem” actually misses the most important point about effecting change. The slogan should be, he said, “If you’re not part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution.”<sup>50</sup>

A Christian community that embodies the Sermon on the Mount will admit its complicity in a conflict situation and be willing to commit itself to peacemaking mission, even if that requires suffering. In the words of Kenneth Cragg, veteran interpreter of Christian–Muslim relations, “In our time we may be unable to see *the way out* of the human problems of the world. But *the way in* is clearly evident. It is to invest our lives in the service of those problems as they bear upon people.”<sup>51</sup>

### *Abraham as father figure*

It is highly significant that Matthew began his Gospel with the words: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). As a “Jewish” Gospel written for a community of Jewish Christians, probably in Syria, before the “final and absolute break with the synagogue had arrived,”<sup>52</sup> Matthew highlights the continuity between the message of Jesus and the Hebrew Bible by presenting Jesus the Messiah Christ as the descendant of Abraham and David. The continuity of the power of the kingdom of David opens the channel that ensures the effectiveness of the promise made to Abraham for all the nations. Abraham is the key figure ensuring his role as the witness and guarantor of the promises that bound God to Israel, God’s cove-

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49 Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image, 1979), 81 and following.

50 Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007), 83–84.

51 Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 214. Emphasis added.

52 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 58.

nant people. Abraham is also the vital agent who ensured the transmission of spiritual virtues to his children and future generations. This is the reason why Abraham could not remain a mediator of salvation exclusively for Israel; he is, rather, the new beginning of a history of blessing, made possible by God, for the renewal of humanity. Abraham's faith history served as anticipation of the message of salvation for the nations.<sup>53</sup> Abraham became the ancestor of Israel and of the multitude of people to whom God would grant his blessing. It is in all other families on earth that the purpose of God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled.<sup>54</sup>

Ishmael, through whom Muslims trace their spiritual ancestry to Abraham, is not identified as the "son of the promise" in the Hebrew Bible; but he was circumcised and as such carried the sign of God's covenant. Even when he had been sent away, he still remained under the special protection and blessing of God. The bond of affinity between Isaac and Ishmael, as Abraham's two sons, was so strong that it was not destroyed by the hostility surrounding the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's household. Significantly, Genesis 25:9 says: "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah." The two brothers buried their father together, united in their grief and remembrance of him. As a result, Abraham will always be regarded as the spiritual father of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He can possibly serve as a unifying figure to bring Christians and Muslims closer together in the eastern DRC. Around the towering figure of Abraham, as "father of all believers," it may be possible to strengthen the fragile process of reconciliation between these two religious communities in the eastern DRC.

The story of Abraham is the powerful testimony of a man who had a personal experience of journeying with the living God. The Hebrew Bible does not offer a theological discourse to the world, but Christians and Muslims have argued endlessly over him.<sup>55</sup> However, the way of "exceeding righteousness" in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:20) and the "more excellent way" of 1 Corinthians 13 point us in a different direction altogether: This way of peacemaking mission calls us to stop seeing each other as infidels or apostates. Christians and Muslims should begin to accept one another as brothers and sisters in the family of the God of Abraham, and embark on a shared pilgrimage of interreligious dialogue. Instead of only having a face-to-face relation-

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53 Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM, 1995), 200.

54 *Ibid.*, 23.

55 *Ibid.*, 200–01.

ship (often characterized by confrontation and mutual accusation), Christians and Muslims as descendants of Abraham are summoned to adopt a basically shoulder-to-shoulder position to each other, committing themselves to the way of love.<sup>56</sup>

### Strategies for Peacemaking Mission

Since peacemaking mission requires deeds rather than mere words, practical projects are needed to promote peace in communities. We suggest three areas in which peacemaking projects could be developed, with specific reference to the DRC.

#### *Bread for Peace (Pain pour Paix)*

In the social field, the “Bread for Peace” initiative (*Pain pour Paix*, abbreviated to PP in French) was established in Lubumbashi, Katanga, the southeastern province of the DRC. In order to concretize the peacemaking vision of the Sermon on the Mount in the DRC, one cannot limit oneself to spiritual reconciliation. The peace that Jesus, the bread of life, brings to society includes a material peace which has to do with the sharing of bread. Sharing one’s food is a vital dimension of peacemaking, since the modernist separation between spiritual and material makes no sense in Africa and cannot be justified from Scripture. Emmanuel Katongole comments as follows on the words of Jesus to his disciples, “You give them something to eat” (Matt. 14:16):

Through his response, Jesus resists the spiritualization of his ministry. His ministry is not simply about a spiritual message to be listened to and later applied. The Good News that Jesus proclaims is a material vision, which involves the reordering of such material realities as geography, time, food, bodies, and communities.... Jesus’ response is a full-fledged social vision—a social vision that is radically different from the one assumed by the realism of the disciples’ suggestion to send the people away to the villages to buy food for themselves.<sup>57</sup>

It is not meaningful to engage in abstract dialogue with someone who is starving. In peacemaking mission, Christians are summoned to embody the social vision of Jesus by affirming human solidarity with those who suffer and by

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<sup>56</sup> See J.N.J. Kritzinger, “Interreligious Dialogue: Problems and Perspectives. A Christian Theological Approach,” *Scriptura* 60 (1997): 47–62; and “A Question of Mission—A Mission of Questions,” *Missionalia* 30, no. 1 (2002): 171, who argues that love is expressed in three basic “postures”: face-to-face; shoulder-to-shoulder, and back-to-back. He further suggests that the shoulder-to-shoulder posture is fundamental to love.

<sup>57</sup> Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology of Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 167–68.

sharing what they have. This is at the heart of the prophetic Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, namely that worship and peace-with-justice may never be separated. A passage from the Hebrew Bible puts this very clearly: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6–7). Such an approach does not merely create a conducive environment for dialogue and peace; it *is* dialogue-for-peace.

A great deal of crime and violence perpetrated among the religious groups in the DRC and elsewhere originates in communities where poverty, unemployment, and hunger have become endemic. Peacemaking mission cannot adopt an individualistic approach; it seeks to address personal needs but also structural and power issues that affect the lives of whole communities. Even people who appear well-to-do are often famished, languishing in misery, unable to pay their debts, unemployed and resentful. Often people in such positions get drawn into crime syndicates or mob violence. In such contexts, organizations like PP can create the space for new processes of affirmation and solidarity to become a reality.

This can help initiate social dialogue and provide food and other material resources to needy communities, without consideration of their ethnic identity or religious belief. It can also foster discussion between Muslims and Christians of their common interests in social and economic development. Organizations like Bread for Peace, and equivalent movements in the Muslim fold, can contribute substantially to building the house of shalom in broken and suffering communities across the world.

The establishment of consciously interfaith relief organizations could also help to make it clear that the aid is not intended to “score points” for, or attract converts to, a particular religious community. An example of this is Gift of the Givers, a South African nonprofit organization that provides relief and support to communities in crisis. It was initiated by a Muslim medical doctor, Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, and has succeeded in drawing widespread support from Muslims, Christians, and people from other religious communities in the service of suffering humanity.<sup>58</sup>

### *Educating for peace*

As intimated above, one should not think idealistically about Christian-Muslim collaboration, since power issues often intrude. It is necessary to address

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58 See <http://www.giftofthegivers.org>.

the persistent temptation for religious communities to use aid to poor communities as inducement to conversion. Both Christian and Muslim communities need to be educated to renounce this temptation in the spirit of their ancestor Abraham, who delighted in practicing hospitality for its own sake, in order to be a caring neighbor.

The shared journey of faith suggested above also requires breaking down the caricatures of one another that have been developed by both groups over the centuries. Miroslav Volf has pointed out that the way of exclusion (and eventually violence) begins with language, with the words we use to designate or address each other.<sup>59</sup> This journey of faith therefore requires dealing with the widespread ignorance and misinformation about the beliefs and values held by other religious traditions: “Symbolic exclusion is often a distortion of the other, not simply ignorance about the other; it is a wilful misconstruction, not mere failure of knowledge.”<sup>60</sup>

Overcoming this way of exclusion means to begin speaking honestly about people of other religions, their beliefs, and practices, particularly when they are not present to explain or defend themselves. This is the “back-to-back” posture of love as “truthfulness” to which we referred above.<sup>61</sup> This implies, among many other things, a thorough revision of all the instructional material used in nurturing Christian and Muslim believers in their respective faith traditions. Peacemaking mission involves a “politics of recognition”<sup>62</sup> and an affirmation of “the dignity of difference,”<sup>63</sup> so that it becomes possible to build a home of peace together.<sup>64</sup>

It is also important to take note of various initiatives to draw up a “missionary code of conduct” to regulate or discipline the “evangelizing” activities of

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59 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 75–76. “Before excluding others from our social world we drive them out, as it were, from our symbolic world” (75). This “symbolic exclusion” reveals itself in hurtful and disparaging words (“dysphemisms”) that dehumanize other people and provide justification for acts of discrimination and (eventually) physical violence against them.

60 *Ibid.*, 76.

61 See Kritzinger, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 60.

62 Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

63 Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002).

64 Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together* (London: Cromwell, 2007).



religious communities.<sup>65</sup> Declarations are not enough, however. The reception of such statements needs to be facilitated and fostered in religious communities, particularly through education. New Christian and Muslim leaders need to be nurtured to influence their religious communities at large towards a peace-making ethos. One concrete example is the University Peace Centre (*Centre Universitaire de Paix*, abbreviated to CUP in French) in Bukavu in the eastern DRC.<sup>66</sup> As its name indicates, the CUP is a platform for peace education. It educates Christian missionary candidates and other professionals as peace-making agents, and could become a prototype for other educational institutions in the DRC. Higher education institutions have the responsibility to nurture peacemaking activists for every sector of public life in order to stop the cycle of violence which has become rampant in eastern DRC.

### *Justice and peace: implementing shari'ah?*

The final dimension of peacemaking mission that we address may prove to be the most fundamental to Christian–Muslim relations in the medium and long term. Most Christians are ignorant of the Islamic understanding of shari'ah, partly due to sensational images of severed hands in the popular media and partly due to the widespread modernist assumption among Christians, particularly in the global north, that religion is a private matter with nothing to say for public life. In countries where Christians share life with a significant percentage of Muslims, they face the challenge of the Islamic vision of a theocratic state embodied in shari'ah. On the one hand Christians, particularly Calvinists, are attracted to the Islamic vision of the lordship of God over every domain of life, but on the other hand they are suspicious and fearful of the “second-class” status to which Christians and other religious communities are often relegated when shari'ah is implemented in an Islamic state. They are also painfully aware of the harm and violence that was done in the past by political systems based on theocratic Christian visions, and are understandably careful not to repeat those mistakes.

It is our conviction that there is a way between these one-sided and polarizing alternatives. It is a way in which Christians and Muslims jointly strive to give public, legal shape to the vision of peacemaking mission developed in this article. This will mean mobilizing the public justice resources of their respective faith traditions for the common good, by trying to find a viable po-

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65 E.g., “The Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief,” *The Oslo Coalition*, 1998, accessed March 6, 2015, <http://www.oslocoalition.org/oslo-declaration/>.

66 Philemon Beghela, “Une expérience d'éducation à la paix: l'Eglise Mennonite dans la région des Grands-Lacs,” *Perspectives missionnaires* 43, no. 1 (2002): 41–46.

litical consensus on shared public values, structures, and processes that could embody the key principles of shari'ah as well as the holistic kingdom vision of the Christian tradition. In addition to honest interfaith dialogue, this will also require serious interdisciplinary reflection among theologians, legal scholars, economists, political scientists, sociologists, and other interested parties, since the aim will be to design a “hybrid” democratic state that moves beyond oversimplifications like “secular” and “theocratic.”<sup>67</sup> Contributions from the Jewish strand of the Abrahamic tradition will also be vital in this debate, especially the covenantal emphasis of someone like Sacks.<sup>68</sup>

Christian theologians concerned with “public theology” have started taking this interfaith dimension seriously, emphasizing the importance of living with pluralism and working for a “communicative”—rather than an “agonistic” or a “liberal”—civil society.<sup>69</sup> Storrar goes further to suggest that the three “publics” of theology identified by David Tracy (church, academy, and society) should be supplemented with a fourth in the pluralist global era of the twenty-first century: “that of the world religions and inter-faith relations.”<sup>70</sup> According to him, this kind of public theologizing requires new resources and skills: “They are the theological resources that can affirm common ground through dialogue and diverse commitments with civility. They are the skills of cross-cultural communication and contextual understanding. As Bosch shows, they are the skills of true evangelism and interfaith dialogue.”<sup>71</sup>

The surprising thing is that Storrar, in two seminal articles on public theology, while emphasizing the crucial importance of interfaith dialogue, does

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67 The debates about the way in which religious freedoms and responsibilities are formulated in the constitution of a postcolonial African state should be traced and analyzed in depth. The work of the South African “chapter” of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) is one of the resources that could be helpful in this regard (see, e.g., WCRP(SA), *Believing in the Future* [Johannesburg, South Africa: WCRP(SA), 1991]; J.N.J. Kritzing, “A Contextual Theology of Religions,” *Missionalia* 20, no. 3 [1991]: 215–31). Numerous publications on religion and democratization in Africa also need to be consulted, e.g., Jeff Haynes, “Religion and Democratization in Africa,” *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (August 2004): 66–89.

68 Sacks, *The House We Build*.

69 William Storrar, “Public Anger: The Stranger’s Gift in a Global Era” (presentation, symposium on “Responsible South African Public Theology in a Global Era: Perspectives and Proposals,” Centre for Public Theology, University of Pretoria, August 4–5, 2008).

70 Ibid., 6.

71 Ibid., 22.

not quote a single author from another faith tradition!<sup>72</sup> The time for such “talks about talks” is clearly over. In the African context, as everywhere else in the world, Christian and Muslim leaders and scholars need to start in-depth dialogues on how God’s will for public life—as they variously understand it—could be embodied in shared societal values, structures, and processes. When the debates among Muslim scholars on democracy and shari’ah,<sup>73</sup> and the debates among Christian scholars on the reign of God, law, and democracy are brought together, something significant could emerge for the good of African societies.

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted the legacy of Christian–Muslim tension in the DRC and the spiritual resources for peacemaking mission that are available to Christians in an Abrahamic reading of the Sermon on the Mount. It has also identified three broad areas of action (relief, education, justice) in which Christians and Muslims could collaborate to build the house of shalom together, especially in conflict-ridden African societies. The responsibility to pursue this joint peacemaking mission is more urgent now than ever.

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72 Storrar, “Public Anger,” 22; and William Storrar, “Public Spirit—The Global Citizen’s Gift” (presentation, symposium on “Responsible South African Public Theology in a Global Era: Perspectives and Proposals,” Centre for Public Theology, University of Pretoria, August 4–5, 2008).

73 E.g., Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari’a* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008); Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, The West and the Challenges of Modernity* (trans. Saïd Amghar; Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2001); Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Tariq Ramadan, *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (London: Allen & Lane, 2010).



# The Bible in Anabaptist Witness among Muslims:

## The Development and Distribution of *The People of God* Bible Study for Muslims in Eastern Africa

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When they became teenagers, my wife, Grace, and I took our three oldest grandchildren to visit Bumangi, my boyhood home in Tanzania. My parents were the first emissaries of the gospel among the Zanaki people of Bumangi. Seven hundred people filled the church as the community gathered to greet the great-grandchildren of the first missionaries. When there was a pause in the singing of the choirs, Muse danced and sang her way into the middle aisle. She was aged, with her body crippled from arthritis. She was among the first to believe in Jesus, seventy-five years ago. As she danced she held high a little tattered booklet for all to see. She sang, “This book tells all about it!” She was holding up the Zanaki translation of the Gospel of Matthew. That was the first book ever written in Zanaki. My father, with a Zanaki colleague, had translated Matthew into the Zanaki language; that mission was my parent’s first priority.

In a recent visit to Fungdu University in Shanghai, China, professors impressed upon us their amazement about the rapid growth of the church. They estimated that there are now some two hundred million Christians in China. Then we visited Amity Publishing House in Nanjing that is now printing over a million Bibles a month. The availability of Bibles in China is an indispensable contributor to the growth of the church.

Annually Grace and I visit Moldova, where I teach courses on faithful Christian witness among Muslims at the Universitatea Divinita Gratia (Riches of Grace University). As many as thirty students are in our classes; these students are mostly Muslim-background believers-in-Christ from across Central Asia. Each year I ask, “How did you become a Christian?” Some 80 percent respond, “Someone gave me a Bible!”

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These three vignettes from the African traditional religion of Tanzania, the Maoist neo-Confucianism of China, and the secularist Islam of Central Asia all demonstrate that the Bible in our day is a key contributor to the global interest in Jesus and the gospel. In this article I will focus on the Bible in witness among Muslims, but many of the themes I highlight are relevant to other world religions and ideologies as well.

In this article I give special attention to *The People of God* Bible study course for Muslims that was developed in the 1970s by the Mennonite Board in East Africa. I present the narrative of bearing witness to the message of the Bible in East Africa and Somalia. Working with this Bible study has been a journey of unexpected surprises as well as unexpected challenges. The serendipitous implications for church formation and missiology are considered.

Developing and distributing *The People of God* Bible study in East Africa has relevance for other settings as well where there are possibilities for Muslims to become engaged with the Bible. This is a narrative of praxis describing an attempt to fruitfully introduce the Bible to Muslims, as well as a narrative of missional engagement and challenge. Welcome to *The People of God* journey!

### **Muhammad's Request for a Bible Study**

Our family had recently arrived in Somalia (1963) when there was a late evening knock on our door. It was illegal to propagate Christianity, so I was surprised when one of my students, Muhammad, stepped into my office and requested, "Please give me a book that explains the Bible message in a simple way for me as a Muslim." I did not know what to give him. So I promised, "I will write that course."

School was closing for vacation break, so I met daily with a couple of Muslim-background believers as we wrote the first drafts of the course. We called the course *The People of God*. Our goal was to introduce chronologically key vignettes of the biblical narrative. We selected twenty-three episodes, each of which was a "lesson" in the study.

A first guiding principle was to present episodes that the Qur'an alludes to. For example, Noah and the flood are mentioned in the Qur'an, so we developed a chapter on the biblical account of Noah and the flood.

A second principle in selecting episodes was to focus on transforming events that would genuinely surprise the Muslim reader. About the time we were developing the course, a Jewish theologian, Emil Fackenheim, wrote that the essence of biblical revelation is "root experiences" that create an "abiding

astonishment.”<sup>2</sup> Although we had not yet read Fackenheim, the conviction that we should focus on biblical events that create astonishment was a guiding light. What are the key biblical events that would plant within the soul of a Muslim reader an abiding astonishment? A Muslim imam would probably say the creation, the sagas of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the Messiah. These would be of special interest, for the Qur’an also refers to these events. So we gave those accounts special attention. Based on the Qur’an, the imam would add the revelation of the Qur’an to Muhammad as a key event. As we developed this course we were well aware that we were writing within a milieu thoroughly influenced by the Qur’an.

### The Bible Cannot Be Scripture

When the students returned from their two-month break, we had the course ready! We mimeographed it; there were twenty-three lessons. Later we organized the course in four booklets. Muslims loved this course! One reason for the interest was that most lessons were accounts that were referred to in the Qur’an. The Qur’an refers to biblical accounts as parables. So there are allusions to the biblical narratives in the Qur’an, but one needs to go to the Bible for a presentation of the narrative as history.

Although Muslims are intrigued by the biblical accounts, they often are, nevertheless, perplexed by them as well. Why? Ibrahim expressed that perplexity. Like Muhammad, Ibrahim also came at night and asked for a Bible. Noting the restrictions we worked with, I asked him to sign a statement that he had voluntarily asked for this Bible.

The next evening Ibrahim returned. He placed the Bible on my desk exclaiming, “This is not the word of God. It is corrupted Scripture. I read the book of Genesis last night, and it is a history book, not Scripture. Some of it should not even be mentioned, like Lot getting drunk and impregnating his daughters.” He left the Bible on my desk and went out into the night, a very disappointed man.

Ibrahim’s comment reveals a most significant divergence between the Qur’anic and biblical views of Scripture. Muslims believe that every word in the Qur’an is an exact copy of a heavenly original. The Prophet Muhammad is just an instrument through whom the Qur’an flowed. They refer to revelation as *tanzil*, meaning “sent down.” Muslims do have their history. That is called *Hadith* or “Traditions.” The *Hadith* are especially concerned with descriptions of the way Muhammad acted, for every faithful Muslim wants to emulate Mu-

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<sup>2</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *The Presence of God in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 8–14.

hammad. But the *Hadith* generally are secondary in authority to the Qur'an. So when Ibrahim read Genesis, from his perspective, that book was a confusing amalgam of revealed instruction and narrative. In Islam the Qur'an is instruction on what we should say, do, and believe. As Muslims look at the Bible, they see both instruction and narrative mixed together.

### Transforming Narratives

Recently I was in Sarajevo and participated in a dialogue with the chief imam in the Muslim university there. In my presentation I mentioned that Christians do not believe that the Bible is a replica of a Scripture in heaven, but rather that the Bible is an account of the saving acts of God in history and our response to what God is doing as he calls forth a covenant people who serve in his Kingdom. The imam was astonished. He pressed me with urgency to come to the university as soon as possible to share with the whole university that the Bible is the account of God coming down to save us, not a book that is a copy of Scriptures inscribed in heaven.

The Sarajevo imam demonstrates that although there is perplexity, for Muslims who choose to read the Bible, it can be exceedingly interesting. They appreciate the narratives! Furthermore, in biblical revelation the narratives are informed by God's acts of coming down and meeting us in our history. The Bible is an account of God's initiative and our response to God. All of that is astonishing—that God would love us so greatly that he has come down in Jesus to meet us and save us and form believers into his covenant people! God's action in Christ is the unifying theme, of course.

We used a name for Jesus found in the Qur'an: Jesus the Messiah. There is an aura of mystery surrounding the meaning of this name. Although the Messiah is a sign to all nations,<sup>3</sup> the Qur'an asserts that the Messiah had a limited mission for a limited period of time only to the house of Israel.<sup>4</sup> From a biblical perspective, however, Jesus the Messiah is much more than that! As a first step in presenting the full identity of Jesus, we commenced with Genesis 3:15 as the first sign of promise that God planned to redeem us when humanity turned away from God. That plan is centered in the life and ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Messiah. We linked Genesis 3:15 with John 3:16.<sup>5</sup>

Within Islam God sends down instruction; within the gospel God comes down. God is the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. Students

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3 Qur'an 21:91.

4 Qur'an 13:38.

5 See, for example, C.K. Leaman, *Biblical Theology: Old Testament, Vol. 1* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 65.



discovered that redemption is the central theme of the biblical message.

### **Exceedingly Chagrined!**

Shortly after the first mimeographed copies began to circulate, a Marxist government in Somalia gradually pushed all Westerners out of the country. It was not the Muslims who pushed us out of Somalia; it was essentially the Soviets. So we moved to Nairobi, Kenya, and lived in the Somali and Muslim part of the city known as Eastleigh. A team of ten joined with me to further develop the course into a more fruitful witness among Muslims. Working as volunteers on marginal time, we invested four years in that commitment.

All lessons were taken into Muslim communities for their response. For example, one of our respondents was a quite polemical opponent of the presence of the church in his community. I took the course to him asking for his evaluation. After two weeks I returned for his comments. He told me it is an excellent course that accurately communicates the Christian message, adding that there is no distortion of the Qur'an or of Islam in the course. However, he was very agitated about the lesson on the "fall" when Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit.<sup>6</sup> The cleric exclaimed, "This chapter about the fall made me exceedingly chagrined!"

So he helped me rewrite that chapter. We did not use "fall" language. Rather we wrote that in their choice to disobey God, Adam and Eve were turning away from God; all of us know what that is about, for we all participate in turning away. In our personal and corporate decision to turn away from God, we experience death and sinfulness. It was quite amazing, for a cleric who would stand on the street where we lived preaching against Christians, also to be giving counsel on how to better communicate the gospel. However, even more significant was the trust we enjoyed from Muslim leaders as a consequence of discussing *The People of God* with them before we began distribution of the course.

### **Connecting with the Muslim Worldview**

We appreciate that the Qur'an commands Christians to stand upon their Scriptures; in our engagement with Muslims we bear witness that we read these Scriptures daily and stand upon them. That confession of commitment to the Bible opened doors as we introduced *The People of God* to Muslims. We grounded the course in those Scriptures that the Qur'an especially mentions:

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<sup>6</sup> Gen. 3:1–24.

the Torah, the Psalms, and the gospel.<sup>7</sup> However, we also recognize the high regard the Qur'an asserts for the entire Bible.

We developed the course as four booklets. The first is based on the Torah, the second also on the Torah and portions of the Psalms; the third on the gospel; the last course we based on other holy writings of God. That final course introduces the student to the Book of Acts and several of the New Testament epistles.

The opening statement of book one is a window on the whole philosophy of the course. We write, "The Torah came from God. The Qur'an says that God revealed the Torah and the Gospel. Muslims, Christians, and Jews all believe that the Torah is God's word. For this reason everyone should read the Torah. This course is about the first part of the Torah that is called Genesis."<sup>8</sup>

### Climbing the Ladder

We conceptualized each lesson in the course as a rung in a ladder. The question in preparing each lesson was how far we could go up the ladder without our students falling off the rung. For example, when we wrote the lesson about Noah and the flood, our Muslim-background team members said that this lesson would throw Muslims off the ladder. The rung was too wide-spaced.

The offense was caused by the biblical statement, "The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled."<sup>9</sup> The implication of this passage is that God is affected by human sinfulness. Our sin causes God grief. In Islam we never affect God. Islam does not present an awareness of a God who grieves because of our sinfulness. The concern was not trivial, for the heart of the gospel is that God is love. Jesus crucified is the ultimate revelation of the suffering love of God. So as we wrote that lesson we sought for a way to present the love of God in an understandable way.

Another example of the ladder approach is the discussion with the cleric

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<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an specifically mentions several biblical scriptures as being revealed. These are the Torah, the Psalms, and the gospel. Muslims generally think of the gospel as one book known as the *Injil*. For that reason there is perplexity about the four gospels in the New Testament. We explain that Jesus the Messiah is the gospel, and the four books are witnesses about the One who is the gospel. We based much of the first portions of *The People of God* upon the Scriptures that are especially recognized in the Qur'an. Muslims also refer to the Scrolls of Abraham, but Muslims believe those scriptures have been lost.

<sup>8</sup> David Shenk et al., "The Beginning of People," *The People of God* (Nairobi: The People of God, 1982), 3. There are five books in the Torah. We based the first course on the first book of the Torah, which is Genesis.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 6:6. All Scripture citations are from the New International Version.

about lesson three. In essence he said that the way we described the “fall” had thrown him off the ladder. After he helped us think through how to communicate that lesson, he said, “I still disagree with your theology, but I can now hear what you are saying.”

Developing such a Bible study course for Muslims is in harmony with the Qur’an’s respect for the biblical Scriptures. In fact, the Qur’an provides helpful advice to Christians and Muslims on the use of the Christian Scriptures. Christians should make their Scriptures freely available, and they are commanded not to hide their Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> They are not to change their Scriptures and are forbidden to write false scriptures.<sup>11</sup> The Qur’an counsels Muhammad to ask any questions he might have of those who are in possession of scriptures written before the time of Muhammad.<sup>12</sup> The Christians are respectfully nicknamed “the People of the Book.”<sup>13</sup>

### Is the Bible Corrupted?<sup>14</sup>

However, there are also challenges. Muslims view the Qur’an as the final revelation of scripture that clarifies all previous revelation. In other words Muslims interpret the Christian Scriptures through the Qur’an, much like Anabaptists interpret the Bible through Christ. A classic example is the denial of the crucifixion of Jesus within the Qur’an. In the Bible, the suffering Messiah who is crucified is an overwhelming theme. Yet Muslims insist that the Messiah was not crucified. The scriptural basis for that denial is the Qur’an. Much like Anabaptists who confess that Jesus has the last word, not Moses, the Muslims say that the Qur’an has the last word, not the gospel.

Or Muslims might seek to resolve the dilemma of contradictions between the Bible and the Qur’an by dismissing the Bible as having been changed or corrupted. Another reason Muslims might believe the Bible has been changed from the original texts is the reality that the Bible is fundamentally historical narrative. As we have already noted, Muslims have their history; it is the *Hadith*. But *Hadith* as history is generally considered secondary to the Qur’an.

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10 Qur’an 3:187.

11 Qur’an 3:78.

12 Qur’an 10:94.

13 Qur’an 5:44–47.

14 For a more complete discussion of the Bible and “corruption” and the realities one faces in comparing the nature of biblical revelation and the Qur’an, see the chapter “The Qur’an—the Bible,” in Shenk, *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church, Exploring the Mission of Two Communities* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2003), 95–112.

So, for a Muslim the Bible seems to be rather irreverent in its intertwining of history and revelation.

Muslims are also often perplexed about the vigorous effort of missionaries to translate the Bible into local vernacular. Muslims believe the Qur'an cannot be translated, for it is an "Arabic" Qur'an. We might have an English version of the Qur'an in our possession, but that book is not Qur'an, for the Qur'an is an exact copy of a heavenly Arabic original. These are core perplexities affecting Muslim reception of the Bible.

### A Trustworthy Bible

It is significant that the Qur'an, as such, has a high view of the Bible. As I see it, the Qur'an does not charge that the Bible is a corruption of the original texts. There are warnings to Christians not to change their Scriptures, but not an accusation that the Christians have actually tampered with their Scriptures. Christians are also commanded to stand upon their Scriptures and not misquote the Bible.<sup>15</sup> The Qur'an observes that God would not permit the scriptures to be corrupted. It asserts that the Messiah fulfills the scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

In an effort to address questions about the trustworthiness of the Bible, we developed a booklet on biblical authority to complement *The People of God*.<sup>17</sup> This booklet describes the nature of biblical revelation and the manner in which the Bible was developed. It looks at the manuscript evidence that strongly supports the conviction that the biblical texts are trustworthy transmissions of the original texts. The booklet also looks at texts in the Qur'an as well as the Bible that assert that the biblical texts are trustworthy.<sup>18</sup>

Admittedly some Muslims interpret some verses in the Qur'an in ways that critique the trustworthiness of the biblical texts. That includes texts I have referred to above. For instance, some Muslim scholars will charge that the reason the Qur'an prohibits writing false scripture is because Christians were actually writing fabricated scriptures. All of this is to say that the representation of the Bible in both the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, as well as in Muslim scholarship, deserves much more attention than this brief essay permits. Nevertheless, we are grateful for those many Muslims who are ready to study the Bible for its message; for example, *The People of God* has been received by thousands of Muslims as a study of the trustworthy Bible.

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15 Qur'an 5:68.

16 Qur'an 5:49

17 David W. Shenk, *The Holy Book of God: An Introduction* (Achimota, Ghana: AC Press, 1995).

18 For example, Qur'an 10:64; Ps. 119:89; John 10:35.

## The Gospel Is Astonishing

When the gospel meets any worldview it is immensely challenging. No ideology or philosophical or religious system can contain the gospel. It breaks open all religious categories. This is why the study of the Bible is immensely challenging to Muslims. The same is true of the Bible in the context of all religions and ideologies. For example, in the Zanaki worldview, which we have referred to above, God is described as the Creator who went away and will never return. When Muse stood up in worship time singing that the Gospel of Matthew tells all about it, what was it that the gospel was telling that she could not find in her traditional religion? Certainly central to the great surprise she was singing about was that God has not gone away and, in fact, has appeared in person in Jesus. In Jesus she saw God revealed as the one who loves so greatly that he gives his life on a cross inviting us to forgiveness and reconciliation!

Some years ago about thirty of us Christians were invited to share our views on the essence of the gospel in a gathering at a mosque in Philadelphia. In ten minutes we described the life, mission, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.

In response to our presentation the imam said firmly, “It is impossible for God to love that much!”

We pled with him, “Let God be God! Let God surprise you by his love! Let God free us from the religious boxes that prevent us from receiving the forgiving, reconciling embrace of Jesus crucified and risen!”

Just as the congregation in the mosque was surprised when they heard the gospel, so also participants who enroll in *The People of God* course are often quite surprised and challenged as they come in touch with the biblical message.

## Empowerment

The availability of the Bible in local vernaculars is empowering in ways that the Arabic Qur’an does not replicate. Lamin Sanneh observes that vernacular translations of the Bible across Africa have empowered the emerging church there to critique the missionaries’ inclinations to cultural imperialism. In contrast, the Muslim missionary who knows Arabic possesses an authority that the local people who do not know Arabic do not possess.<sup>19</sup>

For example, in Somalia the time came to form a conference of the congregations that had emerged. We needed a leader for the conference. At the meeting to choose our leader, the missionary chairperson tried to explain Robert’s

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<sup>19</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 211–14.

Rules of Order.<sup>20</sup> This created total confusion.

Finally the Somalis asked, “Where is Robert’s Rules to be found in the Bible? If it is not in the Bible, then why must we follow the practice of the missionaries? We want to choose our leaders in the Somali way.” After an overwhelming affirmation, the twenty Somalis stood and all shouted at each other in what seemed to the missionaries to be total bedlam. After several minutes matters quieted down, and a spokesperson stood and informed the gathering that the Holy Spirit had revealed that so-and-so would be their leader. A contributor to their self-confidence was the availability of the Somali New Testament in the Somali language. The existence of Scripture in their vernacular empowered them to critique the cultural imposition of the missionaries, and to take a bold step toward the indigenization of the church as a truly Somali movement.

### **Who Is Jesus?**

As the course developed, we gave special attention to “meaning” in our attempt to explain Christology. There are many words in the Qur’an that are the same as biblical words in regard to the Messiah. Notice the convergence in this selective listing of words that are the same in both scriptures. Jesus is Messiah, born of a virgin, the Word of God, miracle worker, fulfiller of the former Scriptures, returning to earth, good news, and without sin.

Yet, when we probe the meaning of these words that seem biblical, we discover that in the Qur’an Jesus is only an apostle, was rescued from the cross, is returning to prepare for the final judgment by turning the world toward Islam, was sent only to Israel for a limited time and limited mission, and he prophesied the coming of Muhammad who is the seal of the prophets. So, although Jesus is the Messiah born of the virgin he, nevertheless, has a limited mission only to Israel. We recognize that there are some remarkable convergences between the Qur’an and the Bible in regards to Jesus. Nevertheless, we discover that the overall thrust of the worldview of the Qur’an is to deny the soul of the gospel, namely the incarnation, life and teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.

### **The Insider Movement**

Currently there is much discussion among missiologists and theologians in regard to the so-called “insider movement.” This movement grows out of a passionate commitment to bear witness to the gospel in ways that authentically

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<sup>20</sup> Robert’s Rules of Order are rules for parliamentary procedure and are widely used in westernized societies.

and understandably contextualize the Gospel within the Muslim worldview. Among these missiologists there is much searching for the way to most effectively communicate the gospel.

For example, we have mentioned that the Qur'an says that "Jesus is the Messiah." Could it be that Muslims are, therefore, near to or even already within the Jesus-centered movement? Some proponents of the insider movement suggest that Muslim background believers might even remain in the mosque joining Muslims in their ritual prayers, but doing so as confessors that Jesus is the Messiah.

However, those who engage in this conversation discover that "Messiah" in the Qur'an does not have the same meaning as "Messiah" in the Bible. Nevertheless, some missiologists might seek to help Muslims reinterpret the meaning of the statements in the Qur'an concerning Jesus as the Messiah. Some might exegete "Messiah" in the Qur'an in such a way that the Qur'an seems to be saying the same things about Jesus that the Bible says.

We struggled with this issue. Should we attempt to reinterpret Jesus the Messiah so that the Jesus of the Qur'an converges with the Jesus of the Bible? As writers of *The People of God*, we made a decision that we would not wrench the text of the Qur'an in ways that did not reflect its actual meaning. So when the Qur'an says that Jesus is the Messiah, we explored what that term means in the Qur'an. We did not impose a biblical meaning on the Qur'an.

A very key term in this regard is the qur'anic assertion that Jesus is *Kalimatullah*.<sup>21</sup> That is to say that Jesus is the Word of God. On the face of it, that term seems to mean that the Qur'an accepts John's assertion that "the Word" became flesh.<sup>22</sup> In our eagerness to communicate the gospel, missionaries might make that assumption. This is to say that we might advocate that Jesus as *Kalimatullah* and Jesus as the Word in John 1:14 are essentially the same.

However, when we examine the Qur'an we discover that is not its intent, for it clarifies that Jesus as *Kalimatullah* means that God spoke and Jesus was miraculously created in the womb of the virgin, just as God spoke and thereby created Adam.<sup>23</sup> This is creation theology, not incarnation theology!

Yet we do reach for a possible connection here. As I pondered Jesus as the Messiah in John 1:1–14 and Jesus as the Word in Islam, I sometimes lay awake in my bed at night, considering how to move forward in explaining the incarnation in a way that would be faithful to the Bible, understandable to

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21 Qur'an 4:171.

22 John 1:1–14.

23 Qur'an 3:59.

Muslims, and would not press the Qur'an into a biblical mold that is untrue to its meaning.

In the Qur'an God creates the Messiah through his Word. Within the Bible the Messiah is the incarnation of the eternal Word of God. We acknowledged that John 1:1–4 is uniquely God's revelation. Although the Word in Islam and the Word in the gospel might seem to converge, in reality they do not converge. Did the Word create Christ or has the Word become human in Christ? The gospel and Islam give radically different answers to that question. And the response to the question is not trivial; these different understandings of the essence of the Messiah reveal the essence of God's relationship with humanity.

## The Son of God

The question persists, "Who is Jesus?"

On a rattling, over-crowded bus in Somalia, a passenger at the front shouted to the back where our family sat tightly crowded. "You are a Christian," he shouted. "That means you believe God has a wife and a son!"

As in the bus that day, the questions about Jesus are quite often far more intense than quiet parlor conversation over a cup of tea. One reason the questions persist is because Muslims often interpret the Qur'an to be saying that Christians believe God had a consort who bore a son. The assumptions of the passenger in the bus are widespread. The Qur'an commands Christians to desist from any such ideas.<sup>24</sup> We agree with that warning! We make it clear that we are not polytheists who believe in God the Father, God the Mother, and God the Son.

What, then, do Christians mean by confessing that Jesus is the Son of God? Several years ago in an overflow gathering in the Central London Mosque I was asked that question. I will describe how I responded, which is in line with the way we expressed our confession that Jesus is the Son of God in *The People of God*. I said,

The Son of God is the name God himself gave to the Messiah. When the angel Gabriel announced the coming birth of the Messiah to the Virgin Mary, Gabriel said, "He will be called the Son of God."<sup>25</sup> Then twice in the ministry of the Messiah God spoke from heaven, declaring, "This is my beloved Son."<sup>26</sup> This proclamation happened at the time when Jesus was baptized, and when he was on a mount with several of his disciples

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<sup>24</sup> Qur'an 5:75; 6:100–101.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 3:22; 9:35.



amidst a brilliant appearance of Elijah and Moses. So the name Son of God is given to Jesus the Messiah by God! What does God mean when he declares that the Messiah is his beloved Son?

There is a statement in the Qur'an that might be a hint as to what it means to say that Jesus is the Son of God. In the Qur'an we read that Jesus the Messiah is *Kalimatullah*. It seems to me that what Muslims mean by saying Jesus is *Kalimatullah* is that God spoke and Jesus was created in the womb of the virgin just as God spoke and Adam was created. Is that what you mean?

There was vigorous nodding of assent, and I thanked them for this clarification. Then I went on to say,

Tonight I want to explain what the Bible means when we read that the Messiah is *Kalimatullah*. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the apostle John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men."<sup>27</sup> "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."<sup>28</sup>

This means that Jesus is truly *Kalimatullah*.<sup>29</sup> He is the Word from heaven. He is the gospel. Jesus did not bring a book. Rather he is the life-giving revelation of the Word of God in fullness.

When we open the Bible to the first four books of the New Testament that Muslims call the *Injil*, we see the gospel according to Matthew, and then we see Mark, Luke, and John. These writers were very acquainted with the accounts of Jesus the Messiah. God appointed them to be trustworthy witnesses of the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. If you go to a court, and there is only one witness, the matter will not be established. But if you have four witnesses, the matter is established. God wanted us to know the Messiah in his fullness, and hence he arranged for these four witnesses to describe the life and ministry of the Messiah who is the living Word of God.

There is a second dimension of Jesus as the Son of God. He had a perfect relationship with God. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one.... When you have seen me you have seen the Father.... All that the Father wants me

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<sup>27</sup> John 1:1–5.

<sup>28</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>29</sup> Qur'an 4:171.

to do, I do.”<sup>30</sup>

When we believe in Jesus the Messiah, we are invited into the family of God. We become God’s adopted daughters and sons. This is why believers in the Messiah pray, “Our Father who is in heaven!” So Jesus is *the* Son. However all his disciples are also sons and daughters of God. We know God as loving heavenly Father.

The positive reception in that crowded mosque was remarkable. My impression is that this was the first time that congregation had heard the meaning of Jesus as the Son of God. They were quite astonished that Jesus as Son of God means that God is love.

Some years ago several dozen of us Christians were guests in a mosque in Philadelphia. The Muslim congregation invited us to explain the meaning of Jesus as the Son of God. We shared as we have just described. The leader of the mosque exclaimed, “So, Son of God means that Jesus is the Word! In that case I could become a Christian!” On another occasion theologians from Mecca were intrigued by the description in John 1:1–14 of Jesus as the Son of God. They exclaimed, “We wish all the theologians in Mecca could hear this essence of the Christian understanding of God.”

### **The Role of the Qur’an?**

I am completing this article in Moldova, teaching Central Asians, whom I have alluded to in the introduction. The Bible has been prominent in the journey to Christ for most of the participants in my classes.

However, another theme has also been prominent in some of their stories. That is the Qur’an. A number of students have mentioned that a significant influence in their journey to Christ has been the teaching of the imams that there are other scriptures beyond the Qur’an that are also revealed from God. Also important has been a high view of Jesus in some passages in the Qur’an, as for example, the passage that says Jesus is a sign to all nations.

Hearing these testimonials of the role of the Qur’an in the coming to faith of some of these students suggests that more attention be given to signs pointing to Christ within the Qur’an, and probably within other religions as well. These testimonials are an affirmation of the approaches developed in *The People of God*, where we occasionally used the Qur’an as a bridge to the biblical message. We do this recognizing, however, that the Qur’an can also detract from the gospel. The Qur’an does not always lead people to Christ!

However, that was not the experience of my friend, Ahmed Ali Haile.

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<sup>30</sup> John 14:8–10.

He was a devout Muslim, who after his conversion to Christ became one of the team members who helped to develop *People of God*. Later, as a university teacher in Mogadishu he used *The People of God* in outreach to students.

Ahmed occasionally commented, “Islam is not the gospel. But how can I speak critically of the Qur’an when it is that book that planted in my soul a quest for the Bible and a curiosity about Christ?”<sup>31</sup>

### Launching the Bible Study

Developing *The People of God* Bible study was an exercise in careful contextual communication with strategies for distribution and follow-up. More significant, however, was the substantive theological and missiological engagement. For participants’ engagement in developing this course formed us deeply. There is something about engagement with Muslims that opens fresh understandings of the essence of the gospel; perhaps that happens especially because whenever Muslims and Christians meet at the faith level, we discover the ongoing reality of convergence and divergence. We are so close, yet so far apart.

After four years of development and testing, we were finally ready to begin circulating *The People of God* as a Bible study especially prepared for Muslims. We decided to use it as a correspondence course. We printed a brochure introducing the course as a study prepared for people who were acquainted with the Qur’an. To begin we offered only the first course based upon the book of Genesis. We advertised this first course as being based upon the first part of the Torah of the Prophet Moses. We did not refer to the Bible in the first course, preferring to use the names for Scripture that Muslims are most acquainted with. That is why we found “Torah” (*Taurat*, in Arabic) preferable to “Bible.”

As mentioned earlier, the first course in this four-course series is based upon Genesis. In the brochure introducing the course we listed the different prophets or biblical characters that they would meet in the course: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, and Jacob.

As the course developed we engaged translators for translation of the course material into Swahili and Somali. So when we were ready to begin distribution we engaged several young people to take the brochures into communities where Muslims lived, and to give them to interested people. The distributor might sit in a tea shop, and as persons sat down at his table the conversation would develop:

–Have you heard of the Torah of Moses?

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmed Ali Haile as told to David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2011), 23–27.

–Indeed I have;  
in fact all true Muslims believe the Torah came from God.

–That is so true,  
and I enjoy reading the accounts of prophets in the Torah.

–That is interesting. How did you find the Torah?

–Well, there is a print house in Nairobi that prints the Torah, and in fact if you are interested, I can give you a free copy of the first part of the Torah as well as some lessons that go with it.

When people requested the material, we would tuck several brochures in an envelope with a letter inviting them to introduce the course to their friends who know the Qur'an. So very quickly the distribution of the course shifted from our team to Muslims across Kenya who were enrolling in the course and finding it interesting. As the English version began circulating we launched the Swahili and Somali translations as well. The president of the Bible Society was the chairperson of Mennonite World Conference. He was enthusiastic about this ministry and so the Bible Society provided the funds for publishing the Scriptures needed for all three languages.

Within a year, a thousand students had enrolled. Eighty percent who enrolled went through all four booklets. We kept the course focused on Muslims in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. If a person applied for the course who had a Christian name, we would divert them to one of the other Bible correspondence courses in East Africa, such as the Navigators program. We wanted *The People of God* to be available especially for Muslims.

*The People of God* introduces Muslims to the broad sweep of the biblical narrative. The unifying theme through the course is the Messiah and his saving mission. Jesus the Messiah is an intriguing mystery for many Muslims. What does it mean for Jesus to be Messiah? The Qur'an says it means he had a limited mission. Yet the Qur'an also says he is a sign to all nations. That is a puzzle! So in various ways each lesson is a step-by-step unfolding of the Messianic mystery. The concluding lesson of course four is an invitation to faith in the Messiah and his saving grace. Introducing Jesus the Messiah is the purpose of *The People of God*.

As people studied the Scriptures, read the commentary, and worked through the questions for each lesson, many came to faith in the Messiah. In Nairobi some new believers formed a fellowship. There were baptisms. The same was happening in Somalia.

### **Meeting Those Responsible for Developing the Course**

Then questions emerged. People wrote, "We do not know if the course is good,

because we have not met the persons who are handling the course.” One of the first persons to use the course came to faith in Christ. After her conversion she became a river of joy, and besought us for a way to help distribute this course that had introduced her to Jesus Christ. She therefore joined our team.

We also shifted the location of *The People of God* course to one of the most congested Muslim areas of Nairobi. It was administered within the Eastleigh Fellowship Center which was an Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) community center touching hundreds of Muslims a week. So the course was not an outside intervention, as it were; it was administered and distributed right within a key activity crossroads of the Somali people of Eastern Africa. People passing through could stop in and meet the person handling the course.

We determined to make the identity of the agency handling the course completely open. Our conviction was that offering the course as a secretive movement would only raise suspicions. So the second names of the eleven people who were engaged in writing the course are included, and the church agencies who worked with EMM are mentioned. The address is, of course, public knowledge for most of the lessons were sent back and forth through the mail.

The Nairobi Mennonite Church meets within the Eastleigh Fellowship Center. For forty years multiethnic communities of Christians have functioned within the Eastleigh Fellowship Center. That center is a “see and tell” revelation of the presence of the Messiah and his kingdom within this crossroads of Muslim people. Somalis are always on the move. A thousand miles from Eastleigh, Somali Muslims know about the center and its variegated ministries. *The People of God* Bible study emanates from the Fellowship Center and is closely related to the Nairobi Mennonite Church.

Paul writes to the Corinthian Church, “you are a letter from Christ” that is “known and read by everybody.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed through *The People of God* we were making the written word of God available, but our presence in Eastleigh was an incarnation of the presence of the living Word of God.

### Developing Firm Foundations

Some of our team gave attention to Bible studies for those who had completed *The People of God* studies. That took us to the book of Hebrews. Why? The form of Islam that we met in Eastleigh was known as Sufi. In fact, the mosque on our street was a Sufi mosque. The Sufis are Muslims who value intercession as a means to bring them into a relationship with God and lead them into forgiveness of sins.

Sufism is considered to be a quite heretical form of Islam by modernist and

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32 2 Cor. 3:3, 2.

Islamist Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, across East Africa and Somalia, Sufi spirituality permeated all Muslim communities. Sufis were especially committed to the veneration of deceased saints who they believed served as intercessors between the Muslim community and God. Conservative Muslims objected to the veneration of saints as intercessors. However, the Sufis clung to a key verse in the Qur'an that declares there is no intercessor *unless* God has appointed the intercessor.<sup>34</sup> Some influential Muslim theologians worry about who the intercessors might be whom God has appointed. Others insist there can be no intercessors.

Imagine the amazement for a Sufi Muslim who discovers in the book of Hebrews that God declares that the Messiah is chosen to be an intercessor forever. Why? The Messiah is without sin; he has lived among us; he is the sacrifice for the sins of the world; he is risen from the dead and lives forever; he is appointed by God to be our intercessor forever. The theological themes of Hebrews are powerfully relevant and attractive to Muslims, and especially relevant to the Sufis.<sup>35</sup>

For Ahmed Ali Haile it was the book of Philippians that turned his world upside down. He came to faith in the Messiah in Somalia before *The People of God* was developed. But after his conversion, he joined with the team who were writing that course. When we left Somalia for Kenya, Ahmed shortly left as well. He not only joined *The People of God* writing team, but also immersed himself in serious study of the Bible. We arranged for him to attend a one-week youth retreat in which the book of Philippians was explored. After reading Philippians 2, Ahmed's worldview was revolutionized in a way that transformed him for a lifetime of ministry as a Christ-centered peacemaker.<sup>36</sup> Ahmed's experience of God was transformed for in this Philippians passage he met God as the suffering servant who participates in our sufferings and who gives his life for our salvation.<sup>37</sup> In Islam God never comes down to serve us and never suffers with us or because of us. It became clear to Ahmed that Islam and the gospel cannot be reconciled. He needed to choose between Jesus and Islam. He chose Jesus, and the peace theology he developed in the following years was grounded in that paradigm revolution.

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33 By modernist I am referring to secularist and pluralist Muslims, and by Islamist I am referring to purist Muslims who seek to go back to their idealized views of Muslim practice at the time of Muhammad.

34 Qur'an 2:55.

35 See Heb. 4:14–16; 7:21–28.

36 Ahmed 49-51.

37 Phil. 2:5–11.

When a student commits to the Messiah, the church needs to step forward and work with the Holy Spirit to lay firm foundations. That was the purpose of the further studies that we developed, first in Somalia with the early beginnings of *The People of God* as a mimeographed Bible study, and then relating to the developing fellowship in Kenya.

We developed several Bible studies especially related to key implications of Christian faith meeting the Muslim worldview. There was a keenly felt need for such studies, so we developed a seminar especially for Muslim-background believers on the intersection of the gospel and Islam. Muslims sometimes joined in sessions as we worked at the challenges dialogically.

Our conviction was that it was vitally important not only to lead a person into faith, but also to provide a spiritual home within the fellowship of the church. For a number of believers, the Eastleigh Fellowship Center and the developing fellowship of believers provided that spiritual home. Moreover the seminars provided theological foundations.

We grieve that in recent years jihadist Islam has become active in Eastleigh. Consequently believers have to meet in other areas of the city. Likewise the fellowship of believers in Mogadishu have scattered. Remarkably the distribution of the course continues from *The People of God* office in Eastleigh.

## Extending around the World

We launched *The People of God* in Eastern Africa in 1977. Very quickly other church and mission agencies became interested in using this resource in their outreach among Muslims. According to our records, over the years the course has been translated or published in some forty-five languages. In the last decade it has expanded, with quite a number of radio broadcasts using *The People of God*. A supplementary development is a multilingual half-hour broadcast that builds upon the course. This broadcast is called *Fifty-Two Questions that Muslims Ask Christians*, with answers by the wise sage. It is aired mostly within Central Asia.

As far as we know there have been no objections to *The People of God* from Muslims, except for a warning years ago in a Central Asian country that there is a course circulating that seems to be Muslim, but in reality is Christian. The news article then described what the Christian message was so that people could identify it as Christian.

At the end of the four-booklet study there are written questions in regard to the student's faith response. A significant number state that the course has led them into an appreciation and commitment to Jesus the Messiah. The great weakness in our ministry is inadequate follow-up, and helping those who have made a commitment to Christ to find a church home. For some years we had

a full-time staff member working at that kind of follow-up. At present that dimension of the ministry is languishing.

The most fruitful use of the course is in home Bible studies in which a Christian teacher meets with a Muslim and they walk through it together, lesson by lesson. An especially fruitful use of the course has been in South East Asia. There, a pastor strolls through a market with a pouch in which he has the course booklets with the Scripture portions. He meets someone ready to chat, and over a cup of tea he asks if his tea-drinking companion has ever read the Torah of Moses. After giving his companion the booklet and Scripture, they promise to chat about it when they next meet. Two weeks later, the Christian is back in the market and sights his companion. They sit for another tea and discussion about what the recipient has read. The pastor gives his tea-drinking friend the next course and they agree to meet again in a couple weeks. In this manner this pastor has led hundreds to faith in Christ, and in fact started some home-group fellowships of believers.

### **A Surprise in Singapore**

Some years ago I was in Singapore and mentioned *The People of God* in a seminar I was teaching. A man stood at the back of the room and waved his hands. He exclaimed, “I am here because of that course. I am from Lahore. A Christian gave me *The People of God* Bible study. Jesus met me as I studied God’s word as explained in that Bible study!”

When Ibrahim entered our home many years ago asking for a simple study of God’s Word written especially for Muslims, I never imagined how God would prosper our “yes” to that request!



# If You Read This Book...

ANDRES PRINS<sup>1</sup>

The rumbling sound got progressively louder as we neared the two-story cement blockhouse in the diminishing light of evening. I had just finished several hours of teaching Spanish to highly motivated young adults from a mixed Berber and Arabic town of some twenty thousand souls in eastern Morocco. It was the turn this week of Mohamed, the director of the cooperative where I taught, to have me spend the night at his home before I taught another set of classes the following day prior to the hour-and-a-half drive home to my wife and daughter.

As we entered the house it became obvious that the noise was coming from one of the upstairs rooms. Mohamed explained that he lived with his two married brothers, who had married two sisters whose mother had died some years ago, and that tonight they were observing a *tolba* ceremony of Qur'an recitation with a number of neighbors. I mounted the stairs, following my host, toward the sound of the voices and came upon a dimly lit living room with nearly twenty middle-aged men in their caped *djilabas* chanting along with four leaders who, I was told, were local *faqih*s who had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety. My heart sank. When would I be able to get some rest after a long day of teaching? Was this going to be another lost opportunity for personal sharing and conversation?

Benefiting from a brief lull in the recitation, Mohamed launched into a flowery introduction of me as a member of the NGO responsible for many development projects these men would have heard about. As he continued to lavish praise on us something came over me and almost without thinking I interrupted: "All we try to do is follow the example of *Sidna Isa al Masih* (our Master Jesus the Messiah). He did good to everyone. We just try to be like him." The men were delighted! Here was a Westerner who apparently took God and the beloved Prophet Jesus seriously!

I was also quite pleased with myself until I overheard one of the *faqih*s across the room commenting to his neighbor: "You know, it's quite pointless for simple Muslims like us to try to persuade someone like this teacher, who has traveled and studied so much, about the truth of Islam. We actually just need to let people like him continue with their search and eventually they arrive,

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<sup>1</sup> *Andres Prins is part of Eastern Mennonite Missions' Christian/Muslim Relations Team: Peacemakers Confessing Christ.*

on their own, at the discovery of the truth and end up becoming even better Muslims than you and me!”

Was this the impression I was going to leave these new acquaintances? That I was just slowly but surely making my way from my essentially outdated Christian ignorance toward the true enlightenment of Islam? What could I do in the face of such entrenched notions? The situation seemed rather hopeless....

The ceremony continued long into that cold December night. Past ten o'clock the head *fagih* started wrapping things up so that he and his companions could receive their pay and get home for some sleep before having to lead prayers in their respective mosques an hour before sunrise the next morning. Blessings were pronounced in classical Arabic for the organizers of the event, Mohamed and his two brothers and me, their guest. It surprised me somewhat that upon concluding, the sheikh asked if I had understood what he had said in the significantly different Arabic of religious pronouncements. Not wanting to risk falling into an argument, I simply responded that yes, I had understood his blessing (i.e., that I soon embrace the truth of Islam), and thanked him for his kind wishes—he was after all wishing me the best he knew.

Then the elderly, bearded sheikh *really* surprised me: “No. Come on. Let’s be honest. Why can we believe in your Prophet and you refuse to believe in ours?” It took me a few seconds to regain my composure from the impact of such an “impolite” question on such a sensitive subject in such a public setting! How could I give an answer that would be, like my Master, full of grace and also truth?

What finally came out of my mouth was more or less the following: “Dear sir, your question is *very* important. But, it is now past ten o'clock at night and I don't think we have the time or energy to give your question the answer it deserves. However,”—at this point I went to my briefcase and took out a small green publication—“if you read this book, the next time we meet we will be able to have a very good conversation about your question!”

The book's cover read, in Arabic, *Al-Injil* and in Spanish, *El Evangelio*. It was a bilingual copy of the New Testament, employing the name for what all Muslims know is the divine revelation of “Good News” given through the Messiah Jesus, although hardly any of them have ever been able to read it. The sheikh took the *Injil*, showed it to his curious companions, thanked me and left, as did most of the other men. Four however stayed, wanting to hear even a summarized answer to the question I'd been asked.

I proceeded as follows: “My friends, the problem is this: for someone who has read and understood the *Injil*, becoming a Muslim is like going backwards.” (I noticed their bewilderment at my asserting the opposite of what they

had always heard, namely that Islam, coming after Christianity, is the next step forward in God's grand plan).

Yes, because whoever reads and understands the *Injil* discovers there that *all* the prophets and *all* the apostles give witness to the fact that, in the Messiah, God sovereignly chose to come to earth in human form, to experience what we do, and at the end of a blameless life to freely take upon himself the punishment for all our wickedness by giving his life on the cross, and on the third day resurrecting, victorious over sin and death and the devil!

So, whoever reads, understands, and believes this prophetic and apostolic witness experiences the forgiveness of his sins, has a relationship with God as his loving spiritual Father, and knows that the day he dies he will go to be with his Lord forever! Now, for someone like that to start confessing what the Qur'an says, that the Messiah is only human, that he did not die on the cross in our place, that he is not the Savior, that he cannot forgive sin, ...why, look at everything he would lose! It is *very* difficult for someone who has read, understood, and believed the *Injil* to want to become a Muslim.

To my surprise, the four men offered no objections, simply thanked me, and departed into the night.

Once I had calmed down I got to thinking that the small New Testament might make for difficult reading for the not-so-youthful *faqih*, and that at home I had a complete Bible with larger print and explanatory notes which I should try to give him. But when I asked my hosts for his name and address, no one was quite sure of either! In that large town, how would I find him again? The next morning, as I was about to enter the house of a co-worker for a morning of lesson preparation, who should be coming down the hill but the very man I was trying to find! I greeted him with a Moroccan proverb fit for the occasion: "*Sodfa absan min alf mi'ad!* (By chance is better than a thousand appointments!) I was just asking my hosts this morning about your name—they didn't know!"

"Saïd," he replied.

"*Mucharfeen* (Honored to meet you), Saïd," I responded as we kissed on the cheeks a couple of times.

"I was thinking that you will have a hard time reading the small letters of the book I gave you last night. If you are interested, I have another larger one at home that includes the *Taurat* (Torah), the *Zabur* (Psalms), and the *Injil*."

"Sure," he said, "just bring it to me at the mosque."

And that is what I did.

Some three months later when we again met "by chance," Saïd assured me he was still reading the *Kitab al-Muqadis* (the Holy Book)....

From this as well as many other interactions with Muslim friends, I've come to value the following practices:

1. Readily confess love for Jesus.
2. Work for the welfare of others but give the credit to Christ.
3. Never assume that a person who says she or he is a Muslim is uninterested in the gospel.
4. Make regular reference to the witness of the biblical prophets and apostles and invite Muslims to read the “earlier revelations” for themselves.
5. Take every opportunity to correct two common Muslim misunderstandings regarding the Christian faith:
  - a. that Christians have taken a merely human prophet (Jesus, whom Muslims also greatly admire), and elevated him to divine status, thus deifying a created being.
  - b. that Christians, like Muslims, are just trying their best to obey God's commands and to imitate their prophet in an effort to merit God's favor and earn entrance to paradise.
6. Answer questions and objections sensitively but frankly, in accordance with the apostolic instructions in 2 Timothy 2:23–25 and 1 Peter 3:15.
7. Avoid falling into arguments or attacks on Islam—focus rather on the rich blessings derived from trusting in the Messiah as Lord and Savior.

# Surprising Conversations

JONATHAN BORNMAN<sup>1</sup>

When Eastern Mennonite Mission's Christian–Muslim relations team officially formed on January 1, 2013, I was thrilled to be a part of it. After thirteen years of relating to Muslim friends in West Africa, I felt compelled to do what I could in my local North American community to build bridges of peace and witness. I was concerned that there were few if any places that Christian leaders were meeting Muslim leaders.

Our team was asked to help new EMM workers to gain an understanding of the encounter between Muslims and Christians. In an initial attempt to develop the necessary connections, a teammate and I went and stood in the parking lot of the downtown mosque on a Friday before the noon prayers and asked to be introduced to the imam. We received warm handshakes and friendly words from many men arriving at the mosque and were taken into the office and introduced to the imam. He readily helped us set up a day when the EMM workers could visit, listen to the Friday sermon and observe the Muslim community doing their prayers. The visit was a positive first step towards relationship.

When EMM again asked us to train new workers in 2014, we began to explore a relationship with a newly opened mosque outside the city. My teammate and I paid a visit during the Friday prayers and received a warm welcome. Over the following weeks of phone calls and texts, one of the board members of the mosque made himself accessible and indicated that the board was actively seeking relationships with the broader community and especially with Christians. We set up a day for EMM workers to visit and subsequently for a number of other Christians interested in learning more about their Muslim neighbors.

With time, I felt a strong conviction to seek out a deeper relationship. I believe that when Christian and Muslim leaders build and maintain healthy relationships, they create the space for their communities to prosper, to be communities in dialogue. Jeremiah 29:7 says, “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”<sup>2</sup> I called and asked this board

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bornman is part of EMM's Christian/Muslim Relations Team.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, Inclusive Language Edition.

member if he could meet me for coffee. He was probably as nervous as I and proposed that we each bring along a friend. This was wise on his part because it helped us all feel more at ease.

Why this strong desire for relationship? What would push already busy men to start a new friendship? For me the reasons are deeply spiritual and biblical. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Matthew 5:9 says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

On the global stage, relations between Christians and Muslims are at perhaps an all-time low. In Syria, a civil war rages and the Christian community is trapped in the middle. The Central African Republic has been swept with violence, first by Muslims burning churches and killing Christians and then by Christian vigilante groups randomly killing Muslims. ISIS and Boko Haram have both declared caliphates and anyone they see as a threat is eliminated. In America, the TV news is flooded with these stories and people everywhere are asking questions, they feel confused...and mistrust between Christian and Muslim communities is growing. Mosques are infiltrated by government informants working to protect the country from acts of terror. When I look at some of the postings and comments on Facebook by Christian people I know, I am ashamed at the hateful words and attitudes.

It is in this climate that the words of David in Psalm 34, as quoted in 1 Peter 3:10–11, ring in my ears: “Whoever among you would love life and see good days must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” I want my witness to be that I love life, that I want to see good days. Terrorist groups brag that they love death more than their opponents love life. I believe peace is possible; I am not without hope. I still believe it is possible to see good days; the dark fear that is consuming many is not the only option. As I talk about faith and about relationship between Christians and Muslims, I am committed to making sure that I am not speaking evil or deceitful things about others who are different than me.

Peter says to turn from evil and do good. The last time the board member of the new mosque and I along with our companions got together, we talked about possibly doing a joint service project at the Mennonite Central Committee Material Resource Center. Doing something like that together would be a fitting way to obey this command to “do good.”

Peter says to “seek peace and pursue it.” Currently relations between Christian and Muslim communities in Pennsylvania seem to be neutral but distant. The urgency in my soul is to work now to build peaceful relationships for an uncertain future. Seeking and pursuing peace means building relationships

in which we have enough relational capital, enough shared experiences and deposits of trust, that we can hear each other's witness and each other's concerns, where we can all be clear about our identities and our convictions. I am working to create spaces where I can listen to my Muslim friend and he can listen to me. All this comes out of my commitment to be faithful to Jesus and to live out his commands.

Three times board members of the mosque have met with my teammate and me at a local restaurant for a cup of coffee. We have talked about our families, our lives, and our jobs. When Mariam Ibrahim was in prison in Khartoum for apostasy, we asked, "Are people free to choose their religion?" Thinking about our local community, we have been asking, "What builds communities that are capable of making space for people of different beliefs to be able to live together in peace?" On this question, we agreed that building healthy relationships between leaders was a good starting point. We also agreed that learning to see our community as something we shared and for which we had mutual responsibility was part of living together in peace.

When I was preparing for a trip to West Africa I learned that one of the board members had spent his youth in central Nigeria with his family and had gone to university there. He was helpful in orienting me to the various ways he had experienced Nigerians of different faiths living together peacefully. The big questions that evening were, "What should be done about groups like Boko Haram? What about the Christian vigilante groups fighting against them? Are these faithful expressions of Islam or Christianity?" We agreed that there are forces beyond religion at work in these conflicts. Our conversation veered toward how do Christians and Muslims work at peacemaking.

As mentioned earlier, I proposed that we go to the MCC Material Resource center together to explore a joint service opportunity, and another board member asked, "Who are the Mennonites?" My teammate and I shared the Anabaptist story for more than thirty minutes. We zeroed in on nonresistance, first telling of Michael Sattler who was executed for, among other things, his refusal to fight against the Turks who were invading Europe. Michael was in Switzerland and the battlefield was not far away in Austria. I also told about my own father who was called before the US army draft board to go to Vietnam. He told them he was a conscientious objector and was allowed to serve in Mennonite Voluntary Service in two different hospitals. These were surprising stories for our Muslim friends!

That evening the conversation went on for two hours. At the end my teammate asked if he could pray, which was welcomed by all. When he ended his prayer "in Jesus' name," I said, "While we were praying I kept thinking, next

time we should invite our wives.” Several persons nodded and one of the leaders from the mosque exclaimed, “That’s incredible! While he was praying I had the same idea!” We all had the shared, amazed sense of God speaking to us.

My teammate and I have also continued to visit with the imam of the downtown mosque and occasionally with others who are part of that community. After a recent visit, I left deeply concerned about the content of the Friday sermon that had focused on a bloody battle in which Mohammed’s followers took vengeance on someone who had mocked him early on in his preaching in Mecca. His severed head was dragged to Mohammed, who declared that divine justice had been achieved. I was left wondering if the point of the message was that modern-day followers of Islam should defend the honor of their prophet in like fashion. After consultation with my teammates, I called the imam and asked for an appointment.

My teammate and I went to the mosque and I shared my concerns. The imam assured me that his intentions were not to promote violence, but rather to tell an important story from Islamic history, a story that shows that God avenges his prophets. I replied that while he was preaching, I had been comparing his story to the one of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. When Peter took out his sword and cut off the high priest’s servant’s ear with a mis-aimed blow of his sword, Jesus told him to put it away and healed the man’s ear. Then after Jesus had been nailed to the cross, he prayed, “Father, forgive them.”

The imam answered, “Islam and Christian faith are different. In Islam, God gave a law that allows people to pay back those who hurt them, up to the same amount they were hurt. This is practical and makes people feel justice has been done. However, the Qur’an does say that to forgive is even better.”

My response was to again ask him to consider the way of Jesus, to which he again replied that Islam takes us a different way. As we prepared to leave, my teammate asked him, “If you preach on violent passages again, could you please tell people explicitly that this is a history lesson and not something to be repeated or put into practice today?”

We got up to leave and as we approached the door of the mosque, the imam thanked us profusely for visiting him and sharing our concerns with him. He said, “I have learned something today, [in my sermons] I need to tell people clearly that I am not promoting violence.” After more good-byes and a strong invitation to come back as often as we are able, we left the mosque. I was surprised at the freedom we had to share our apprehensions, the openness with which he listened to us, and the warm welcome to come back as often as possible. Two years of building relationship with him has led to an open door for productive dialogue.



# Easter Egg Symbols

SHERYL MARTIN<sup>1</sup>

What does one talk about when Muslim friends come for dinner on Good Friday? We hadn't planned our meal together specifically to fall on this Christian day of observance—it was the only evening our families had free that week. As I planned and cooked the halal food, I messaged my friend on Facebook, and asked if it was okay to share a story about why we observe Easter. She said that would be great, so I thought and prayed and involved my family in planning something appropriate.

As I prepared for Good Friday, I was reminded of the time our family spent living overseas. While living in Afghanistan, I realized that even literate people there had an oral tradition of learning. Very few people read for pleasure or enlightenment. In fact, the verb *KhAndan*, “to read,” is the same as the verb “to study.” Mentoring and learning are done around a cup of tea, recounting proverbs, stories, and poems. Highly motivated university students “study” or read, but the rest of the population mostly depends on verbal interactions. Proverbial stories from “Mullah Nasruddin”<sup>2</sup> are chuckled over and a lesson is learned. We enjoyed many cups of tea with friends at Eid al-Fitr and heard stories of hardships and joy, and life in the midst of a country at war. Women marked time and seasons by the moon, or the birth of their children, or the government in power, or the last great earthquake.

I recalled trying to teach my very bright house helper to make chocolate cake. She herself created beautiful embroidery patterns and made complex mathematical calculations in her head for the graphs and supplies. She had recently joined an adult literacy class to supplement her third-grade education. I figured a simple recipe would be easy for her to follow. I helped her write down all the measurements for the recipe. She understood the words and the numbers, but she had a hard time grasping standard measurements and following the recipe. One day I returned home from the clinic to the smell of chocolate cake baking in the oven. My house helper was puzzled. She said, “It’s been baking for more than an hour, but it’s not getting done.” I reviewed the mea-

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<sup>2</sup> Mullah Nasruddin is a popular “wise fool” character in Middle Eastern folk stories. The stories teach morals and lessons on life.

surements with her, and we discovered she had only put in half of the correct amount of flour. Perhaps if I had shown her how to follow the steps, instead of relying on the written recipe, she might have been successful.

So I settled on the idea of a visual story, simple enough for the children to understand and participate in. As I prepared symbols to fit into plastic Easter eggs to illustrate a story about Good Friday and Easter, my ever-encouraging, and sometimes-critical teenagers listened.<sup>3</sup> “You can’t tell the story that way, it will give the poor kids nightmares!” was their response to my symbols of a braided whip, crown of thorns, and three small spiky nails. Finally the family consensus was to start with a baby—the familiar story of Jesus’ birth. Surely Muslims living in the United States have an idea that Christmas celebrates Jesus’ birth. “Let’s connect with Jesus being the Lamb of God” was another idea. A tiny toy baby fit in the first egg, and then came a plastic lamb. A plastic dagger would prompt the story of sacrifice and how people living in the days of the Taurat (or Torah) sacrificed lambs to cover for their sins. The next object would prompt the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son until God provided a ram. Ideas for objects and parts of the story came together: disciples or friends gathering around Jesus, and the miracle of the loaves and fishes—how God multiplied the food and provided for the people. We did eventually have plastic eggs with a “soft” thorny crown and the cross, as well as a purple cloth for the royal robe that they used to mock him. A white facial tissue sufficed for the linen his body was wrapped in, and a stone from the yard would be for the barrier to the grave. A cinnamon stick and whole cloves from our kitchen represented the spices women brought on the third day, and a plastic angel was located to speak to the women.

Our friends arrived on time Friday evening and we greeted one another with hugs and inquiries about each others’ extended families. Soon we were seated at the table and we enjoyed our dinner of pilau, chicken, spinach, and eggplant. The men exchanged views on the weather and world events. My friend complimented me on my Central Asian spinach recipe which, I had to admit to her, I found by searching the Internet! Their two preschool children, with beautiful, expressive dark eyes and quick grins, found it hard to sit still as we ate our meal. After dessert and tea, it was time for the Easter egg story.

We gathered in the living room and I began the story. The children took turns opening each plastic egg and holding the object found inside. I started with the birth of Jesus, *Isa al masih*, or Messiah, and explained how he was also

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<sup>3</sup> See “Family Life Resurrection Eggs,” accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.familylife.com/find-help/key-resources/resurrection-eggs#.VJSXfABA>.

called the Lamb of God. I bit my tongue to keep the more familiar term “Son of God” from rolling off my lips. There are many descriptions of who Jesus is in the Bible, so there is no need to use the most potentially misunderstood name. Of course, the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son was easily understood, as Muslims commemorate this event each year at the Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of the Sacrifice. We moved through the story quickly, as the attention span of the children was short. I noticed my friend hanging on to each word, as though it was the first time she had heard most of these stories of Jesus’ life.

I had struggled with how to present the people who opposed Jesus and eventually sentenced him to be crucified. I used the word “friends of Jesus” for his disciples, and “those people who didn’t like him” or “soldiers” for people opposed to him and his teachings. After all, I was trying to use special English and simple ideas for our friends.

I tried not to linger very long on Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Beware of nightmares, my teenagers had told me! We moved on to Jesus’ body being placed in the tomb and sealed with a stone. His friends were sad because of his death. On the third day, the women brought spices to the tomb, as was their custom. Little noses sniffed the cinnamon stick and whole cloves, trying to name the smell. Then the egg containing the angel took an unfortunate tumble to the floor, as little fingers tried to open it. As the figure inside appeared to take flight, the boy cried, “Ninja!” with delight. We rescued the angel, and corrected the misconception about its appearance and flight to the floor. I explained that angels are God’s messengers, and that the angel had said to the frightened women, “Do not be afraid.” Finally it was time to open the last egg. As the girl’s chubby little fingers opened it, both children looked inside with surprise. There was nothing inside the last egg! “The tomb was empty,” I exclaimed, “because Jesus wasn’t there—he is alive! And that’s why we are happy and celebrate Easter.” Upon hearing this, the boy’s bright eyes gleamed; he clapped his hands and let loose with a gleeful “Hurray”!

After more cups of tea, we said our “peace be upon you” and our good-byes, mine with special gratitude and joy for having had the opportunity to share with friends who had probably never before heard the surprising, life-giving hope the Easter events hold out for each of us.



# The Surprise of the Mission of God

ANDREW F. BUSH<sup>1</sup>

North of Jerusalem, halfway up the climbing road to Ramallah, a ten-meter-high concrete wall cuts abruptly through Palestinian neighborhoods and blocks the way for Palestinians journeying into Jerusalem from the West Bank. This is the “dividing barrier” according to Israel, the “Apartheid Wall” to Palestinians. In the Palestinian village of Kalandia, through which the wall passes, a checkpoint manned by Israeli Defense Forces personnel controls the only way past the wall. Exhausting lines of weary Palestinian travelers shuffle agonizingly slowly through the pen-like maze of locked doors and barred passageways. Finally, arriving at the inches-thick bulletproof window they must present their permit to an Israeli officer. Without the proper papers they are turned back without discussion.

This wall and checkpoint arouse strong passions. To many Israelis they represent security from Palestinian suicide bombers. Palestinians have a very different perspective: they see the wall as one more expression of an oppressive policy to take more Palestinian land. Departing from the “green line” armistice line of 1967, the wall passes deep into the Palestinian West Bank, separating farmers from their land, children from their schools, workers from their offices.

Ironically, many Israelis and Palestinians do agree that the wall represents something else: the boundary of God’s love. For many Israelis and their ardent supporters, God’s blessings in the territory of ancient Israel rest exclusively on the Jewish people. The gift of the land is solely theirs. Their possession of it in its entirety is the project that God endorses. From this widely held popular perspective not only does God’s blessing, his love and grace, not extend to Palestinians, but in fact they are under the weight of God’s curse because of their opposition to Israel. As the Scripture states:

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I will bless those who bless you,  
 and whoever curses you I will curse;  
 and all peoples on earth  
 will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:3)<sup>2</sup>

Conversely it is very difficult for many Palestinian Christians to consider God's love extending to Israel, their tormentors. How can God love such a people as the citizens of the modern State of Israel who have acted so unjustly? There certainly are individuals whose lives shine as examples of reconciliation in the Palestinian community.<sup>3</sup> For many Palestinians—even those in the Christian community—to rise above the wounds they have suffered is impossible. They cannot consider God's love for their Jewish neighbors.

The inability to conceive of God's grace extending beyond the wall to the "other," and the attendant claim to rightness in the conflict, are attitudes that fuel the bitter conflict between Israel and Palestine, and so the suffering goes on. In fact, it was the suffering of Palestinian lives in this conflict that first drew me to Palestine. I had been living in Manila, the Philippines, when I first met a young Palestinian who was studying theology there. This young man, Jack Sara—who has since become the president of Bethlehem Bible College—shared with us the needs of the Palestinian community: their isolation from much of the international Christian community, the lack of engagement by Christians with the majority Muslim community, and the need for Christians to be encouraged in their faith.

Jack's spiritual journey was also compelling. Formerly he had been an activist in opposing Israeli's occupation of Palestine, and was subsequently arrested numerous times. After a powerful conversion experience he turned to Christ and away from confrontational activism, which in Israel and Palestine often lead to violence.

If the suffering of the Palestinian community and testimonies such as Jack's had first drawn me to Palestine, it was the example of their forgiveness that kept me there during the height of the violence of the Second Intifada (Uprising). Their grace in the face of great difficulty helped me dismantle interior barriers to loving the "other." Palestinian friends allowed me to appreciate anew the surprise of the mission of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> Such individuals are highlighted in the present author's text, *Learning from the Least: Reflections on a Journey in Mission with Palestinian Christians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

## The Surprise of the Mission of God

The surprise of the mission of God is that his love and compassion cannot be bounded by walls which we might construct of concrete, of national pride, of theological exclusivity, or of religious affiliation. As soon as we try to domesticate God's grace, to make it the possession of "our" people, God will demonstrate his love in surprising ways; his grace will be given to those regarded as enemies.

That surprise is first revealed biblically in the unfolding of the mission of God in the first family of mission: Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac. The mission of God to bless all of humanity explicitly began with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Abraham's call was not intended to exclude those outside his family; rather, he and his descendants were to be agents of the inclusion of the other nations.

Yet, in this first family the difficulty of advancing the mission of God, and not hindering it by our humanness, was also underscored. After Isaac's birth to Sarah and Abraham, Hagar and her son by Abraham, Ishmael, were seen as obnoxious competitors. "Cast them out," Sarah instructs Abraham. Abraham is deeply troubled. To cast them out in the desert, without the aid of their tribe, would certainly send them to their death. It is terrible for Abraham to send his first son to an agonizing death by dehydration, but God instructs him to follow Sarah's command, because God has a plan (Gen. 21:8–13).

This first family of mission therefore chose to curse instead of bless. Yet, it is through their harshness towards the unwanted son that the surprise of the mission of God is first clearly seen.

The Scripture portrays a pitiful scene. After their water is exhausted, Hagar places Ishmael under a bush and then removes herself far enough away so as not to hear the boy's cries in his thirst. Then when it seems that all hope is gone for these outcasts from the people of God, an angel of God speaks. God has heard the boy crying. God will not let him perish. Because Ishmael also is a child of Abraham, God will make of his descendants a great nation as well (Gen. 21:14–18). God causes Hagar to see a spring that begins to flow for their salvation.

Then we have this powerful statement that reveals the surprise, the true nature, of the mission of God: "God was with the boy as he grew up" (Gen. 21:20). *Where* was God? God was *with the boy*? This was not a transitory blessing. The Lord would dwell with Hagar and Ishmael in the desert.

What? Did God get his signals crossed? Was he camping with the *wrong* people who were *not* the people of God? Not at all. This is the surprise of the mission of God. He is working outside the camp of the people of God, ex-

tending his love to those least expected. This speaks to us that God is always working by his Spirit outside of the Christian community, revealing his love, drawing the people to himself with cords of compassion.

As I recount in *Learning from the Least: Reflections on a Journey in Mission with Palestinian Christians*, one of my prized possessions is of a photograph of Yasser Arafat with his ever-present, black-and-white-checked *kafiyeh*, or head scarf, inspecting his uniformed security guard. The average American Christian, if they happened to see this photograph in the media, would most likely not consider this renegade crew as being likely candidates for the blessing of God. If anyone is beyond the reasonable reach of God's grace, it must be men like this, the leader who was regarded by many as an author of terrorism.

In the front row in the photograph is a young man in a red beret. His name is Ahmad. Raised in Kuwait where his Muslim father was a businessman, he was repatriated to Palestine when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. As a troubled teen in his parents' village, Ahmad's future was bleak. Eventually, after various jobs in the building trade, he found his way to the Palestinian security services, the internationally sanctioned police force of the Palestinian Authority, becoming part of Arafat's personal security team.

The wall and all the hostilities it represents could not hinder the work of God's Spirit in this young Muslim man. His attention drawn to the gospel of Jesus through a Christian radio broadcast from Monaco, he began to read the Bible surreptitiously. In time he turned his heart towards Christ in faith. Ahmad said that the (unlikely!) verse that convinced him of the truth of Christ was Matthew 15:11: "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" It has been fifteen years since his decision to follow Christ. During this time it has been my pleasure to work with Ahmad in the ministry of Living Stones Student Center, which we helped found in Bir Zeit, a Palestinian village on the West Bank.

A Muslim. A member of Yasser Arafat's security detail. An opponent of Israel. Ahmad was an unlikely candidate for God's love in Christ. Ahmad's conversion emphasizes that God's grace will not be confined by the boundaries we create—whether physical, cultural, theological, or spiritual. But that should not be a surprise. Jesus continually shocked the disciples with the grace he extended to the unlikely.

Today in the ancient city of Jericho in the Jordan River valley there is a sycamore tree that stands in the place where tradition has it that Zacchaeus once climbed a sycamore to catch a glimpse of Jesus. According to the biblical account, of all the crowd around Jesus it was Zacchaeus whom Jesus called down



from the tree, announcing that he intended to visit his home (Luke 19:1–6). The reaction of the crowd—which included Jesus’ disciples—was not good: “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). A tax collector—and a corrupt one at that—who worked for the despised Roman occupiers did not deserve the attention of Jesus. And yet it is this man Jesus chooses to meet. Unlikely suspects to receive God’s grace are not only found outside of “our” people. Here is an outcast *within* Israel.

With Ahmad, a son of Ishmael, and Zacchaeus, a son of Isaac, the mission of God is underscored: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost,” Jesus said (Luke 19:10). By the Spirit of God Jesus is always working beyond our self-imposed boundaries. But the mission of God does not end when people encounter the grace of God outside of our boundaries. He intends to draw them into the community of his people, however uncomfortable their presence may be to us.

Consider Ishmael. God not only met him in the desert, but God then drew him back into the fold of Abraham’s family. At Abraham’s death both Isaac and *Ishmael* participated in his burial (Gen. 25:9). Both brothers were together, tenderly carrying their father to his grave in the cave of Machpelah at Mamre.

This reunion could not have been easy. With some poetic license we can surmise that Ishmael would have had to put aside what lingering bitterness he must have felt from having been cast out by Isaac’s mother. And Isaac? Imagine the anxiety he likely felt toward this potential usurper who might seek revenge for his exclusion as a child from his father’s house.

As for Zacchaeus, we only are given his side of the return back to his community, but it is an emphatic return! “But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’” (Luke 19:8). His first impulse in experiencing the grace of God was to seek reconciliation with those he had defrauded. With the return of their monies the people in Jericho might have been motivated to receive him!

In any event, with Zacchaeus’ willingness to recompense those who had been defrauded, Jesus declared that salvation had come to him. The mission of God is to restore those who have been forgiven and welcomed by God into the community of those who serve him. The mission of God always moves antagonists toward reconciliation. Remarkably, in spite of the wall that is meant to separate Israelis from Palestinians, and the hostility that it sparks, Christians on either side of it are working to be reconciled with each other.

Two summers ago I attended a remarkable meeting in Bethlehem on the West Bank for the launching of a devotional entitled *My Brother’s Keeper: A*

*Daily Devotional*.<sup>4</sup> The book is a collection of three hundred sixty-five devotions, one for every day of the year. Remarkably, each day's entry was written by either a Palestinian Christian, an Israeli Arab Christian, or a Messianic Jew. For the dedication celebration the authors each shared a few words about the project. Finally, we all joined in a time of prayer. As voices were lifted in Hebrew and Arabic, Norwegian and English, it seemed like the glory of Pentecost might fall again!

In that room was evidence of the grace of God that can bring formerly hostile neighbors together not only to coexist, but to be joined in love for each other. This is the surprise of the mission of God. Does God love the Palestinian people? Yes! Are the Jewish people the object of his love? Again, yes! Finally, the surprise of the mission of God is that reconciliation can break down every wall of alienation and offense. This is the salvation of the Lord, as Jesus proclaimed when Zacchaeus sought to be reconciled with those he had offended.

Serving in Palestine and Israel is dangerous. The danger is not merely the risk of being caught in a flare-up of violence; rather, it is the threat of offense, the temptation to adopt a partisan perspective, judging those beyond the wall as enemies. Remarkable acts of reconciliation such as at the book launch have continually prodded me back into the way of Christ—the way of mercy, forgiveness, and love. I have also found encouragement to embrace the surprise of God's love in the community in which we worship.

Although I remain still deeply involved with a Palestinian Christian ministry on the West Bank, my wife and I needed to relocate to the United States a few years ago. As we searched for a community in which to worship outside of Philadelphia, we found a small Mennonite congregation. It has become a nurturing and healing place for us as it is immersed in the mission of God. The pastor and her husband spent twelve years in a reconciliation project in Ireland. Another elder served with his wife in Vietnam during the war. There he tried to be a bridge of understanding between Americans and Vietnamese.

Not surprisingly with this orientation towards reconciling the irreconcilable, the congregation brings together a unique mix of the old and young, African Americans and African immigrants, traditional Mennonites and newcomers such as ourselves. Every summer they now support summer camps for Palestinian kids on the West Bank. They are a continual reminder of the surprise of the mission of God that is central to Mennonite missions, and are an encouragement to us as we serve on the West Bank.

Who is regarded as unreachable, beyond the grace of God? What walls

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<sup>4</sup> *My Brother's Keeper: A Daily Devotional* (Jerusalem: The Bible Society, 2012).

have been built that mark the limitations of God's love? The surprise of the mission of God is that Jesus will always be found beyond our limits. Let us follow him there.



# Book Reviews

Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013. 260 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 9780823251186.

In a diverse church and world, navigating difference is a valuable skill. Jeannine Hill Fletcher's book *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* provides readers with concepts and models for developing and implementing this skill. By grounding her work in specific historical and contemporary examples, she moves beyond academic discourse and demonstrates ways in which people negotiate difference with respect, grace, and openness.

Hill Fletcher defines theological anthropology as "a faith perspective on what it means to be human" (2). She challenges individualistic, male-centered theology that has dominated Christian history and remains central in some settings today. In doing so she decenters white, European, male theological lenses and shows that people who have been marginalized from mainstream theological discourse have enriching insights to offer about God, faith, and relationships.

Hill Fletcher's core assertion is that theology begins with people's experiences rather than with an external truth that can be applied to all situations. That is, theological reflection "emerges out of distinctive human experiences, interwoven with the faith tradition, and it offers an invitation to view one's own experience through them" (6). She emphasizes the contrast between a deductive and an inductive approach to doing theology. A deductive approach begins with an external authority such as Scripture or doctrine and proceeds to draw conclusions about human nature and about God. This approach has been prominent throughout Christian history and continues to hold strong sway today. The inductive approach by contrast begins with the unique experiences of people living in their particular contexts. These experiences then inform the development of spiritual practices, theological traditions, and personal and corporate beliefs.

Hill Fletcher illustrates the importance of experience by engaging the lives and relationships of particular women in particular time periods. She describes and analyzes three different examples of women doing mission work, and in each example she makes connections with mothering, nurturing, and caretaking metaphors. First she describes the Maryknoll religious order, Catholic sisters who lived alongside Chinese women and interacted with them in their everyday lives. "Prior to engaging in any theological conversation," Hill Fletcher writes, "the Sisters first offered friendship and friendliness. They had to open themselves to relationship and the many complex dimensions of the women's lives in order to be in a place

to engage theologically” (21). The mission work fostered a sense of mutuality that impacted the sisters themselves as well as the people they encountered. In her second example, Hill Fletcher describes ways that women in the first-, second-, and third-wave feminist movements worked in religious and secular contexts to build relationships and improve the world around them. In her third example, she describes experiences of contemporary women in a Philadelphia women’s interfaith dialogue group. These women get to know each other in personal ways by sharing their spiritual autobiographies. In doing so they show that, as Hill Fletcher writes, “‘religion’ cannot be reduced to doctrines and scriptures, to ‘what I believe’ or ‘what I do.’ ‘Religion’ is always ‘found’ embedded in and intertwined with other aspects of our lived condition” (157).

Themes of relationality, multiplicity, and particularity are woven throughout Hill Fletcher’s book. Though there are places where the writing becomes more technical because the author references concepts less accessible to those who are not scholars of religion, the book’s overall relevance for twenty-first-century mission work is undeniable. For people working to be missional inside and outside of the church, and in formal and informal ways, the author offers both a starting place and a grounding place. In suggesting that human story, subjectivity, and relatedness (rather than an objective truth) become central, she highlights ways in which an orientation toward nonjudgmental listening, personal storytelling, and cultivation of mutual respect creates a culture of openness, grace, and love. Even better, Hill Fletcher’s use of the inductive method means that these claims are not made in the abstract.

Significant challenges related to differences in belief and practice face many Anabaptists today. Hill Fletcher’s approach offers one method for approaching contentious conversations and strained relationships. She questions the prominence of theology done from dominant cultural positions by creating and even demanding space for people who come from marginalized communities. Her focus is on gender, but her method is easily applied across many contexts to people who are LGBTQ, people of color, people whose status is not recognized by the country where they live, and more.

For those seeking a universal theological authority, the emphasis on an inductive approach that begins with experience may present some difficulties or require a shift in perspective. For those seeking to do contextual theological reflection in their own spaces, it may serve to affirm and encourage their efforts. This method means that we work not to fit our stories into a larger narrative that outlines absolute truths, but that we recognize ways in which our spiritual truths rise out of personal and relational narratives.

In her introduction, Hill Fletcher writes, “the story of Christian theological anthropology has been told as if the Christian moved through the world oblivious to

the many and diverse stories that orient humanity to the world” (8). The challenge, then, is to begin moving through the world with awareness of those diverse stories that orient humans in many life situations to divine goodness and hope between and among one another. Her conclusion reminds us that humans are “fundamentally relational” and that we “have the capacity to...know ourselves into interbeing in community with others” (209). When we start with experiences, mine and yours, we can get to different places than when we start with a Bible passage, a confession of faith, or a membership policy. Perhaps we begin and end with fundamental disagreements, but perhaps we also understand one another better and are better able to agree and disagree in love.

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Harold J. Recinos, ed., *Wading through Many Voices: Toward a Theology of Public Conversation*, Rowman & Littlefield, Plymouth, UK, 2011. 392 pp. \$64.95. ISBN: 9781442205833.

I added a new phrase to my lexicon in the process of reading and reflecting upon *Wading through Many Voices*: subaltern theologizing. Put simply, *subaltern theologizing* is theology “from below” and reflects the central conviction that animates this fine collection of essays edited by Harold Recinos. Winston Churchill is reported to have remarked, “History is written by the victors.” The same could be said about theology. Theology has, like many other types of study and discourse, been dominated by white males writing out of contexts of privilege and exclusivity. *Wading through Many Voices* represents an attempt to correct this deficiency by paying attention to themes and perspectives that have often been excluded from dominant modes of theological discourse.

Included in this work are voices from a wide variety of communities. Whether it is Tink Tinker’s critique of modern American conceptions of the “public good” from a Native American perspective, or Nancy Bedford’s analysis of the politics of food production through the lens of its impact on US Latina workers, or Korean American Andrew Sung Park’s plea for a public theology of “enhancement” as a way both honoring *and* challenging the particularity of individual cultures in the American context, each chapter (and its response) reflects the intention of the project as a whole. A theology of public conversation *must* include a diversity of voices. It *must* include the experiences and reflections of those who have historically found themselves on the margins. And it *must* not only accept, but also *prioritize* the themes of justice and liberation that so often emerge “from below.”

This book reflects almost exclusively on the American political and theological

landscape. As such, non-Americans may have some “translation” work to do for their own cultural contexts. As a resident of the Canadian prairies and as a pastor of a (mostly) white Mennonite congregation, the shape this translation ought to take in my own context seems obvious enough. Our city is located next to the Blood and Peigan Nations to the east and the south, and the Siksika to the north, all three of which, along with the South Peigan in Montana, are part of the Blackfoot Confederacy. Like many others, our region is still characterized by deep and abiding attitudes of racism and suspicion toward our indigenous neighbors. How might we make space to listen to—indeed, to *privilege*—these voices “from below”? How might our theology and practice need to change to make space for the voices of those who have not only historically been *excluded* from dominant arenas of discourse and reflection, but actively *stifled* and *vilified* through Canada’s calamitous legacy of Indian residential schools? The challenge is daunting, but desperately necessary.

Which brings us to one of the inherent ironies of this collection of essays. What we have here, of course, is a book advocating for *subaltern theologizing* whose contributors are exclusively academics at respected American institutions. The list of contributors reads exactly like every other collection of academic essays: Prof. \_\_\_\_\_ received their PhD from \_\_\_\_\_ and teaches \_\_\_\_\_ at the University of \_\_\_\_\_. There is racial diversity amongst the contributors, as you would expect, and there are a whole host of different experiences, histories, and perspectives represented by each writer, but academic theological reflection done by academic theologians in American academic institutions is not exactly theology done “from below.” Would not a chapter written by (or transcribed from an interview with) a Central American migrant farmworker been appropriate? Or from a Native American boarding-school survivor? Would not an appropriate gesture toward a genuinely *subaltern theology* have been to include *non-academics* who used non-specialist language to reflect their own lived experience, their own contribution to a broad and expansive genuinely *public* conversation?

In his recommendation of this book, Robin Lovin says, “a public theology for the future must find ways to sustain conversation across the boundaries that now fragment our faiths and divide our politics.” Perhaps one of the “boundaries” that conversation must be sustained across, in addition to the familiar categories of race and gender, could be the academic and nonacademic boundary? Indeed, David Sánchez asks this question in his response to Victor Anderson’s plea for the privileging of “local” voices: “I remain incredulous...as to whether an academic theologian is the optimal voice for such articulations in the construction of the unarticulated local” (197). In other words, instead of academics presuming to speak *for* those who find themselves occupying subaltern positions, maybe we should just let them speak for themselves. And actually listen to them.

In the end, the title of this anthology, *Wading through Many Voices*, is an apt one.



Wading can be a slow, awkward process. It's not swimming and it's not exactly walking either. It's a kind of laborious trudging against the resistance and weight of the water. It is not easy, and we're bound to get a bit soggy and uncomfortable in the process. But we keep moving, nonetheless, because we are convinced that the many voices—particularly those “from below,” as Christ himself reminds us in Sermon on the Mount—are worth wading through if we are to get any closer to truth, to justice, to love, to harmony, to the glorious vision of the peaceable kingdom articulated by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus of Nazareth himself.

I close with these beautiful words from María Teresa Dávila—words that, in my view, sum up the goal of this valuable book and the challenge to all who read it: “Knowledge becomes a matter of location, and location becomes a matter of where we choose to see and ultimately what we choose to love” (69).

I commend this book to all who want to have better theological conversations, and who are convinced that these conversations require that we listen most closely to those whom our Teacher and Lord consistently, stubbornly, relentlessly, inconveniently made space for.

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*We Were Children*, directed by Tim Wolochatiuk. National Film Board of Canada, 2012. 88 minutes. \$24.95. Film.

*Yummo Comes Home*, directed by Don Klaassen. Outreach Canada. 2013. 28 min. \$20.00. Film.

Since the beginning of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2009, several films have been made about the Indian residential schools (IRS) that were run by various Christian denominations and the Canadian Government between the 1880s and 1970s. Two of these films are *We Were Children* and *Yummo Comes Home*.

*We Were Children* tells the story of Lyna Hart and Glen Anaquod through interviews interspersed with dramatization of their experiences at the schools. It depicts the complex relationships between indigenous communities and the churches, between parents, church leaders, and children. The film also highlights the essential purpose of the IRS system—to assimilate indigenous children into settler society through conversion to western European Christianity—and narrates the traumatic impact this had on both the children as well as the larger indigenous community (i.e., intergenerational trauma). A strength of *We Were Children* is that it does not present either the Christians or the indigenous peoples as one-sided, but attempts to display the complexities and conflicting realities of the residential school experience.

rience.

*Yummo Comes Home* tells the stories of Isadore Charters, a residential-school survivor, and that of his friend, Mennonite settler Don Klaassen. The men talk about their respective journeys with Christianity, naming the colonial and missional harms that were inflicted, but also the good they came to see in their faith tradition when it was practiced very differently than in the residential schools. Like *We Were Children*, *Yummo Comes Home* addresses the loss of culture, language, and traditions, and the trauma of residential schools while also presenting moments of resistance to colonization and assimilation.

One fascinating aspect in each of the films has to do with the power of names and naming. All three of the indigenous people in the films underwent a forced name change. All three identify this name change that they experienced in residential school as a life-altering experience. In *We Were Children*, the first name that Lyna Hart hears at residential school is “savage,” applied to her body and people by a nun. Soon after, she receives a second identifier: “Number 99.” Glen Anaquod had a similar experience, beginning his story with the number he was given, “118.” Of course, we don’t even see these as names; they are mere digits, which makes them all the more dehumanizing. Similarly, in *Yummo Comes Home*, Yummo tells us the many names he carries: the name given to him at birth by his indigenous community, his childhood nickname (Yummo), and the Christian name given to him at the residential school (Isadore Charters). He remembers feeling happy about his new name when it was given to him. Like any child who puts on a costume and plays pretend, we can imagine that it must have been exciting to pretend to be someone else. But the novelty soon wore off. When Isadore talks about why he felt he had to return to the residential school, he remarks: “I had to bring little Yummo back outta there.”

Settler peoples, like myself, have a hard time grasping how deeply traumatizing the experience of being renamed by others with English Christian names, numbers, and degrading words like “savage” were for indigenous children. Naming is such an important part of how we understand who we are and who others are. Names that we call each other build us up or tear us down. Naming is a practice of power. While watching the scenes of renaming in the films, I was reminded of a poem by the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn. The poem describes the different ways in which Hahn identifies himself with many different ways of being in this world. He writes, for example, “I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond. And I am the grass-snake that silently feeds itself on the frog.” Hahn identifies with both animals and their very different lifeways. This could mean he sees himself as being, at once, part of life and death, at once victim and perpetrator.

Yummo, Lyna, and Glen all experienced different kinds of trauma during their time at residential school. As Don Klaassen says, “Like so many with childhood

trauma, unless the truth is told and acknowledged as real by others, the trauma just continues.” He adds, “We can’t change the past, but we can change the ongoing effects of the past.” I think one of the ways that we can do this work of healing is by calling ourselves by our true names, whether we are settler Christians, indigenous Christians, traditional indigenous peoples, or immigrants from other cultures and religious traditions. Hahn’s poem seeks to call himself by *his* true names. What would it mean for each of us—and the collective bodies that we are a part of (like the church)—to call ourselves by our true names and to invite others to do the same? What names have we been given by people we trust? What names have we given ourselves? What names have others (including the powers) called us that have been hurtful or empowering?

For myself, it has been important to call myself not only Mennonite, Christian, German, Woman, Disciple of Jesus, but also Settler and Colonizer. I can identify with all of those names. I can see myself in all of those stories. It can be very challenging to identify as a settler but I think it is important to call myself by that true name so that the trauma of that can be acknowledged as real.

At the end of *Yummo Comes Home*, Yummo offers profound words of truth and hope: “We gotta grow together. Don’t feel bad, because you didn’t do it or you couldn’t help then. But now that you know the story [of the IRS] you can help by passing the story on, by walking with us.” I think that calling ourselves by our many “true” names is a way of passing the truth about the trauma of residential schools on to others so that something like that may never happen again, and so that we can enter a path of healing together. As Hahn writes:

Please call me by my true names  
 so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once  
 so I can see that my joy and pain are one...  
 so that the door of my heart can be left open  
 the door of compassion.

*We Were Children* and *Yummo Comes Home* are important films. They can take us to a place of honesty with ourselves. They can open doors of justice and reconciling restoration in our lives.

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Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Colonialism, Han, and the Transformative Spirit*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013. 102 pp. \$72.00. ISBN: 9781137346681.

In case you haven't heard, we have a global ecological crisis on our hands. It's big, it's for real, and, if it hasn't already, it's coming to your neighborhood. There's a window of opportunity to make significant changes in how we source our energy and organize our society, but the window is small and it is closing. If we don't change course soon, politically, and personally, life on earth will experience dire consequences.

As a person of faith, a father, and a sentient being, this troubles me. I welcome any resources, any movements, any signs of hope that address our ecological crisis and aid in shifting our collective consciousness and actions toward a more healthy future. In *Colonialism, Han, and the Transformative Spirit*, Grace Ji-Sun Kim adds her voice to the growing chorus of people speaking into this reality. It's an ambitious work, aimed at unmasking the underlying mentality that got us where we are and calling for nothing less than a spiritual transformation. Not only is our planetary well-being at stake, but also the vitality of theology to illuminate, convict, and energize.

The title provides a basic outline for the book, with the first two chapters dedicated to examining what colonialism looks like in our contemporary global context. The opening sentence of the first chapter, "Today's world is often characterized by imperialism, colonialism, and consumerism" (8), is reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr's naming of the "giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism" in his 1967 speech at Riverside Church. Kim proceeds to paint a picture of a dominant culture held, and holding others, firmly within the grip of these destructive forces. From the outset, she injects points of insight from the Christian tradition, noting that Christian theology had its origins in an imperial setting, starting with John the Baptist's call to repentance, followed by Jesus' persistent challenges to the established social order. Tragically, after several centuries, the church became enmeshed in and a primary voice for the spirit of colonialism, from which we have not yet fully recovered.

In chapter 3, Kim introduces the Korean term *han*, which includes a wrong committed against a person, and the enduring pain it produces. *Han* is "a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered" (50) and "the critical wound of the heart generated by unjust psychosomatic repression, as well as by social, political, economic and cultural oppression" (52). It is a rich word, difficult to translate, which holds within it the weight of injury carried by the natural world and humans. Kim calls for a new worldview of interconnectedness, which will reform the systems that continue to perpetuate *han*.

The fourth and final chapter, “Transformative Power of the Spirit,” provides multiple metaphors of *the Spirit* that contain the content of this new worldview. In doing so she draws from within and beyond the Christian theological tradition or, more precisely, a pneumatological tradition, including the following images and metaphors: Sallie McFague’s proposal of viewing the world as the body of God; the Hebrew notion of the *ruach* of God as the divine presence which gives, sustains, and redeems life; Starhawk’s three categories of “power over,” “power within,” and “power with,” as ways of thinking about methods of spiritual transformation; the Spirit’s intimate relationship with Eros, the beauty and erotic power within creation; and, lastly, Sophia as the feminine manifestation of the Spirit as described in Jewish wisdom writings and embodied in Jesus and the community of faith. For Kim, these multifaceted experiences of the divine Spirit offer the transformative power needed to change both perception and action in our relationship with the created world on which we depend and for which we are responsible. It is through our participation in this transformative Spirit that we reject colonialism and address *han* in a life-giving and healing way.

Although I am familiar with the basic contours of our ecological situation and some of the theological responses to it, I found the chapter on *han* to provide new ways to rethink our theological engagements with our crisis. I had not encountered this word before and it is empowering to have new language with the density to embody a complex set of concepts.

At one hundred pages, the book is well suited as an introduction to the matters at hand—both sociologically and theologically—and would work well for small group study and discussion. Those without a college education might struggle with the accessibility of some of the writing. The book draws heavily from the work of Sally McFague, at times so heavily one wonders if one should put down this book and pick up one of McFague’s.

As I made my way through this material, I had an internal response I don’t often experience while reading. I found myself asking not “is this a good book?” but “is this going to work?” Specifically, in light of Kim’s elucidation of the severity of the colonial mentality, I wondered what in the world can lift us out of it. Or, to use the language of the book, through what media and by what means are we best able to yield to the Transformative Spirit?

A few months ago I watched the film *Chasing Ice*, a documentary that also addresses global ecological concerns.<sup>1</sup> One of the moments that stood out to me was the rationale its creator gave for the film project. He stated that he did not believe statistics and arguments change people’s minds. What he aimed to do in the film, rather, was to show people something beautiful vanishing in front of their

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1 *Chasing Ice*, directed by Jeff Orlowski (Submarine Deluxe, 2012), film.

eyes; in this case, the glaciers of the northern hemisphere, rapidly receding due to human-induced climate change. One of the most transformative experiences I've had in the last five years involved a week-long course in southern Ohio, where we walked among what is left of our native forests. I was awestruck, and I fell in love with trees. Kim appeals to this dynamic herself in the latter pages of the book—the Spirit as the presence of erotic beauty charged with life and energy. Is it our longing for beauty and our capacity for awe that will ultimately penetrate our colonial practices bent on destroying beauty? Maybe this book is best read in a place that you find stunningly beautiful—a place that, if it were lost, would cause you great sorrow.

I also think that I, as a reader, would have benefited from a metaphor that functioned as an antidote to *han*. The word provides such a helpful way of speaking about the colonial legacy in which we live—but is there an equally dense metaphor for how to heal *han*? The best suggestion I have come across is approaching our current crisis as a collective addiction, calling on society to undergo an ecological twelve-step process toward a path of recovery: My name is Joel, my name is Columbus, Ohio, my name is the United States, and I'm addicted to gasoline and overconsumption, dependent on violence to sustain my way of life. Step 1: We admit that we were powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable.

I'm grateful for Kim's voice and contribution to this vital conversation. For the sake of future generations and this beautiful planet, I hope it works.

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**Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton University Press, Library of Jewish Ideas, Princeton, New Jersey, 2012. 244 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 9780691155692.**

Simply put, Jon D. Levenson is one of those rare scholars whose every word repays careful reading. *Inheriting Abraham* is no exception. In this beautifully written book, Levenson examines how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam depict the figure of Abraham, concluding that “Abraham has functioned much more as a point of differentiation among the three religious communities than as a node of commonality” (9). To be sure, each religious tradition emphasizes the centrality of Abraham. Such broad agreement, though, papers over some very real differences. For instance, both Judaism and Islam stress Abraham's monotheistic turn in ways that Christianity does not. On the other hand, Christianity and Islam have historically detached Abraham from his natural descendants, the Jewish people. Finally, Islam differs from both Judaism and Christianity in the fact that it does not hold the Abraham narrative of Genesis to be authoritative. And, even though Christianity and Judaism share the same foundational story about Abraham, they differ consid-

erably in how they portray Abraham's significance. As Levenson provocatively puts it, "although both Christianity and Islam came to see themselves as the restoration of Abrahamic religion after a long interruption, neither of them represents the pattern of religious practice of the figure of Genesis. And neither does Judaism" (140).

The first four chapters of Levenson's book examine aspects of the Abraham narrative of Genesis 12–26: Abram's call and commission (Gen. 12), the frustrations and fulfillments of God's promises to Abram, particularly as they relate to descendants (Gen. 13–21), God's testing of Abraham in the Aqedah (Gen. 22), and Abram's discovery of the one, true God (Gen. 12). In these chapters, Levenson's discussion centers on both Genesis and Jewish interpretations of Genesis in second-temple and rabbinic literature. There is a wealth of information here on the different ways in which Jews, and to a lesser degree Christians and Muslims, used and developed Genesis's depiction of Abraham to address their own contemporary concerns.

The fifth chapter, "Torah or Gospel?," provides a brief, but excellent, comparison of the Jewish portrayal of Abraham as a fully Torah-observant Jew to Paul's treatment of Abraham. Levenson demonstrates that many Jews understood the claim that Abraham obeyed all of God's commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen. 26:5) to signify that even though Abraham lived before Sinai, he kept the entirety of the Mosaic law (cf. *Mishnah Qiddushin* 14.4; Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 28b). Such a depiction of Abraham appears to fly in the face of Paul's emphasis upon Abraham's Torah-free faith (Rom. 4:9–10; Gal. 3:17–18). Paul's treatment of the Jewish law is a notoriously difficult question—one that continues to generate an almost unreadable amount of scholarly literature. And yet, Levenson rightly claims that this question is no mere scholarly pursuit: "In the whole history of New Testament interpretation, there is perhaps nothing that has been more misunderstood than the intertwined topics of Paul's relationship to the Torah and his understanding of the promise to Abraham, and the consequences of these misunderstandings for Jewish-Christian relations have been catastrophic" (153). Central to Levenson's reading of Paul, and contrary to the New Perspective on Paul fashionable today, is the realization that Paul is no universalist opposed to the particularism of Judaism. Levenson rightly highlights the fact that Paul believed it essential to his gospel that Gentiles become related to Abraham—they need to become both sons and seed of Abraham and do so in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:7, 3:29). Against the apologetically driven concerns of New Perspective proponents, Levenson concludes: "Were Paul truly intent on transcending the difference between Jews and Gentiles, would he have so stressed the man known as the father of the Jewish people? And would he have advanced the claim that those who have faith in Jesus had, by that very act, become nothing short of descendants of Abraham?" (157). This reading of Paul goes a long way in correcting some of the damage done in using a supposedly ex-

clusivistic Judaism as a foil for a supposedly universalistic Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

In the final chapter, Levenson provides a trenchant critique of three recent efforts to use Abraham as unifying figure for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: the statements of the Abraham Path; Bruce Feiler's *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, a *New York Times* best seller; and the ecumenical work of the German Catholic theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel. The Abraham Path, for instance, bases its call to unity on the following fact: "Three and a half billion people—over half the human family—trace their history or faith back to Abraham, considered the father of monotheism" (173). Similarly, Feiler asserts that all three religious traditions should focus on the fact that Abraham functions as the first person to understand monotheism. Levenson argues that such assertions ignore very real differences between the three faiths, prioritizing one faith's claims about itself over the others. For instance, no one disputes that Judaism and Islam are monotheistic religions. In contrast, both Jewish and Islamic thinkers almost universally reject Christianity's claim that it is monotheistic. Consequently, to claim that Christianity is monotheistic is to privilege Christianity's claims about itself, while disagreeing with Jewish and Islamic understandings of Trinitarian thinking. In fact, the Qur'an itself denies Jesus' divine sonship (e.g., 4.171; 5.116; 19.35; 112.3).

Further, while each faith believes Abraham to be its father, those claims are naturally contested. For Jews, Abraham is their genealogical father—Jews descend naturally from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. For Christians, Abraham is the father of all Jews and Christians who share in his faith (cf. Rom. 4 and Gal. 3). For Muslims, Abraham is the father of all who share his monotheistic religion. Are such claims mutually exclusive, as most proponents of these religions believe? For that matter, both Jews and Christians stress Abraham's election, and the subsequent election of Israel and the church, respectively. As Levenson states, "to deploy, as the focus of a vision of universality, a figure who in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament represents election is unwise at best" (203–4).

Such criticisms rightly highlight the difficulty involved in ecumenical work. How can practitioners of these three faiths find commonalities with each other without privileging one particular faith over the others? In other words, how can those interested in ecumenism guard against the danger of turning dialogue into monologue? The thrust of Levenson's work, I would suggest, is that honest and sympathetic disagreement might bring us much closer to peaceful coexistence than paper-thin claims about shared beliefs ever will.

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1 Here Levenson depends upon the superb work of Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).



Harry J. Huebner and Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen, eds., *On Being Human: Essays From the Fifth Shi 'i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue*, Canadian Mennonite University Press, Winnipeg, 2013. 269 pp. \$27.50. ISBN: 9780920718940.

Readers may recall Columbia University President Lee Bollinger's 2007 remarks introducing then-President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Speaking before Ahmadinejad did, Bollinger assailed the Iranian President for denying the Holocaust and his record on academic freedom and human rights, telling him that he bore all of the signs of being a "cruel and petty dictator." Ahmadinejad began his speech, in turn, by complaining about being treated poorly by Bollinger as his guest at the university.<sup>1</sup> The essays printed in *On Being Human* chronicle a very different, more fruitful exchange. The fifth installment in a series of Muslim-Mennonite dialogues that took place in summer 2011 at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Canada, the essays explore differences in religious anthropology between scholars of two faith communities committed to both hospitality and generous engagement with theological difference. The dialogues have their origins in the extension of disaster relief to victims of the 1990 earthquake that struck Rudbar, Gilan, Iran.

The essays serve several purposes that recommend them to the reader. First, because the authors from each tradition mix reflection on faith with explanation of belief, the essays are accessible to non-specialists. Rather than pursue new interpretations or questions, authors return to their unstated assumptions of their faith. In making those assumptions visible for their interlocutors, the authors also illuminate the underlying commitments that link the traditions. The most important of these is the centrality of dissent in both Shi 'i Islam and Mennonite Christianity. Both faiths are reformist in their origins and prioritize the conscience of believers to choose to follow the path towards divine guidance. Second, these essays reveal the importance these beliefs take on in a community of believers for both Shi 'ah and Mennonites. Authors share a concern for articulating the features of the virtuous community and because the authors see human achievements as possible only by the grace of God, there is special attention to the role of divine mercy and grace in each tradition. The volume concludes with essays that focus on flash points in discussions of religion and culture: the status of human rights and gender in each tradition.

The introduction makes clear that the essays were prepared in advance of the dialogue and do not reflect that dialogue. As the editors put it in their introduction, "what is most lacking in this collection is the give and take and answers after the delivery of each paper." While they invite readers to explore "the issues in dialogue" with the participants, the current format leaves us only to "observe the similarities and differences" (17) that the essays lay out. As they are now, the essays sit alongside one another, sometimes in uncomfortable silence on issues that beg for and probably were the focus of questioning among participants.

As an American-born Muslim, I read these essays from the perspective of someone who has only lived in the context of religious pluralism and then only as a religious minority. What struck me is how divergently the contributors seemed to treat religious pluralism in their reflections. On one side, writers representing the Shi 'ah tradition seemed to ignore the problem of pluralism in their essays. Ali Mesbah's contribution "Religion, Culture, and Social Wellbeing from an Islamic Perspective," for example, imagines the possibilities for virtue within an Islamic paradigm and, judging from his provocative attack on humanism, which might be secured only if Islam is made identical to the state.

For Mesbah, humanist commitments to the preservation of freedom as the highest priority are premised a narrow understanding of humanity and a misplaced confidence in human potential operating without the benefit of divine guidance. Yet Mesbah's analysis of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto produces a scarecrow version of humanism that feels out of date with the way that scholars like William Connolly and Talal Asad have been reconsidering the mutual imbrication of the secular and religious. He does not consider why deeply religious individuals living as minorities might commit to secular, liberal-democratic regimes or why a majority of religiously minded people might nonetheless commit to protecting the rights of members of all faiths to practice freely.

Abolfazl Sajedi's "Islam and Human Rights: Equality and Justice" betrays a similar instinct. By locating human rights in Islamic principles of gender equality, fraternity, and a commitment to justice that is the natural accompaniment to equality and fraternity, Sajedi assimilates human rights discourse to Islam without difference. Here is Sajedi, "Since Islamic human rights emphasizes brotherhood and equality, Islam supports justice and recommends Muslims to expand it in society. Justice is the result of equality. If brotherhood is valuable, justice should be respected, established and supported" (163). Based on my reading of the essay, Sajedi suggests there is no "outside" to Islam. As a Muslim, I believe that Islam illuminates a path for believers yet part of the challenge that believers face is to live with ideas that are not located in or are only part of the tradition.

On the other hand, writers representing the Mennonite tradition portray sensitivity to pluralism that sometimes invites questions of the limits or borders of the tradition. David W. Shenk's account of biblical exegesis in the context of the translation of Scripture into new languages and cultural contexts undoes any claim to privileged knowledge that the missionary or seminarian might claim. Writing that the Kekchi people of Guatemala were empowered by reading the Bible in their native language to challenge his interpretation of the text, I wish he had said more about how Mennonites might resolve tensions rooted in issues of translation, which are ultimately issues related to authority. It seems as if the Mennonite missionary commitment to organizing cultures around Christ (rather than proselytizing, which Shenk explains involves drawing individuals away from their cultures insert-

ing them into Christianized culture) invites the possibility of divergent Mennonite communities. But this, too, may be the inheritance of dissent.

While I admire such radical receptivity and as several essays attest its centrality in the Mennonite tradition, I was glad to see Peter Dula wrestle with what is not part of the tradition, namely human rights. Observing the lack of rights mentioned in Scripture, Dula sees the attempt to read rights in Scripture as others have, as an effort not to listen to the Scripture on its own terms. Instead, Dula reads the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 as an example of discerning what it means to follow Jesus' injunction to show mercy to his neighbor. For Dula, there is no universal concept of human rights but only the struggle of believers to identify what actions might be appropriate to a particular time and place. The essay sounds a discordant note when read next to other contributions in the volume.

My sense is that readers, like the contributors, have the most to gain from dwelling with points of tension provided they are explored with the generosity and respect that the editors write characterized the meetings in Winnipeg. With the grace of God, another installment in this series is on the horizon. My hope is that the next volume might offer readers a closer view of the disagreements that bind these scholars in dialogue so that we, too, may learn from them.

ALI ASLAM, *Princeton University*.

**Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010. 294 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 9780199329281.**

*Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* invites the reader into the stories of West African immigrants as they find their way in a new home. The stories frequently describe encounters with the variety of challenges faced by newcomers. The author has structured the book so that each chapter addresses one of those challenges. "Unlike similar works, this book does not simply cover these immigrants in isolation. It takes on the way they publicly engage others; shift their religious, racial and ethnic identities; alter the urban terrain; and give new meaning to our world" (13).

Abdullah does an excellent job of exposing the range of issues and difficulties facing newcomers to the United States. Nothing, it seems, is simple or to be taken for granted. There are the obvious difficulties of language and culture, and the unavoidable hard work of getting acclimated enough to function well in one's new location.

As Abdullah discovers, Islam is critical to the survival of his interviewees. But it is also the source of strain on some newly forming relationships. For example, in their home countries, many of those interviewed lived among those whose faith

they shared. The daily rhythms of work were shaped in large measure by the claims of religion. In Harlem, however, many employers are not Muslim and have little awareness of Islam. So, Abdullah invites his interviewees to talk about their experience of negotiating with employers about something as fundamental to Islam as the five daily prayer times. Many have to explain this practice to their employers, and, in some cases, choose between staying faithful to their religious practices or keeping their jobs.

Then there are the inevitable tensions that arise when newcomers enter an already inhabited space. Abdullah devotes a chapter to the complexity of the relationship between African immigrants and Black Americans for whom Harlem has long been home. Some Black Americans believe the immigrants to be haughty and condescending. Some African immigrants have absorbed the racial stereotypes fostered by American films. For many, distrust is the starting point for any interaction. Even the clothing worn by African immigrants, clothing that reminds them of home, can be a barrier to communication with their Black neighbors.

And there is the search for meaningful employment that also pays the bills and leaves enough left over to send home. For many, coming to America meant leaving family, friends, and property behind. But it was for the sake of those left behind that the journey was made. Some of those interviewed had well-paying, professional positions in their home country, but, because of an economic downturn or family tragedy, were suddenly unable to provide for all those for whom they were responsible. And so they left home, hoping that they would earn enough in the United States not only to meet their own needs, but also to provide financial support to those they left behind. Whatever success or wealth is accumulated in the United States is meant to be shared, not kept for one's own.

This sense of familial obligation and responsibility is carried over into the new setting. Abdullah describes the ways in which Senegalese immigrants gather around new arrivals and do what they can to make sure that each person has what is needed to settle into their new home. A room is offered. A loan is given. Local vendors will rally together to provide the newcomer with funds and merchandise enough to start their own street-side business, and with no expectation of repayment. It seems Mennonites are not the only people who consider mutual aid to be part of their social and religious vocation.

In fact, one of the most surprising aspects of reading *Black Mecca* was the number of times I found myself thinking, "We Mennonites are like that." For example, much of Abdullah's research was done in and around the mosque, because it serves in many ways as the center of the community. The mosque is where folks gather to worship and to learn. It is where festivals and other communal events take place. It is a place for networking and community problem-solving. And it is what happens in the mosque that reminds the people who they really are. Isn't that how we

Mennonites see the meetinghouse?

Other similarities revolve around questions of identity. What do the clothes we wear say about us? What is the relationship of the individual to the community, and which takes priority? How does one go about finding one's place in a new setting, while remaining true to what one has inherited as tradition? How does one go about being a good American and a good Muslim? A good American and a good Mennonite?

While there are many good reasons for reading *Black Mecca*, what benefited me the most is the sense of recognition I experienced throughout the book. This is not to diminish the uniqueness of those stories and their tellers, or to downplay the many ways in which my life and the lives of those whose stories fill the book are different.

It's simply to say that at a time when Mennonites are seeking to reimagine mission in ways that don't condemn us to repeat past mistakes, there is something to be said for discovering that the distance between us and them, whoever they may be, is not so great as we thought. It turns out that our commitment to community, and our respect for the tradition, and the centrality of communal worship, are not just Mennonite values. They are also the values of the West African Muslim immigrants whose stories are told in *Black Mecca*. To my mind, that's well worth knowing.

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**Jonathan Boyarin, *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul: A Summer on the Lower East Side*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2011. 226 pp. \$18.00. ISBN: 9780823254040.**

While visiting New York City earlier this year, I took a guided tour of the Eldridge Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side. Built in 1887, the synagogue was for five decades a vibrant hub of religious life and social services for thousands of Eastern European Jews who had recently immigrated to the United States.

Now those days are a distant memory. The congregation dwindled in the 1930s as Jews began to leave the neighborhood's crowded tenements for other boroughs. By the 1950s the sanctuary had become decrepit from disuse (it would later be restored to its original grandeur). Over the years, other immigrants came to replace the Jews who left. The neighborhood eventually became absorbed by what is known today as Chinatown. A small congregation continues to worship at Eldridge Street, but these days the synagogue is better known as a museum, where tourists like me flock to admire its Moorish-style architecture. As a casual visitor, it's tempting to think that the synagogue is a remnant of a vanished world.

Jonathan Boyarin has written an interesting book showing that Jewish life on the Lower East Side still has a pulse, however faint. *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul* is an intimate ethnographic portrait of the Stanton Street Shul, one of the last Jewish congregations in the historic neighborhood. Boyarin, an anthropologist, is no detached observer. He and his wife are longtime residents of the neighborhood and active members of the shul, which belongs to the progressive wing of Orthodox Judaism. The book is essentially Boyarin's journal from the summer of 2008 when he attended morning prayers every day, recording everything he saw and heard.

Boyarin's notes reveal a fragile congregation struggling to find its identity amid constant flux. Like Eldridge Street, Stanton Street's story has been powerfully shaped by demographic changes, including the outward migration of Jews and gentrification. "The Lower East Side ain't what it used to be, and it probably never was," Boyarin muses.

But that's not the whole story. Some families from the immigrant generation stayed, and gentrification brought a younger generation of Jews, which enabled the congregation's survival. Boyarin notes how the progressive values of the "new Jews," such as supporting the expanded roles of women, sometimes created conflict with the other remaining Orthodox shuls in the neighborhood. Despite these difficulties, Stanton Street Shul carries on by straddling two worlds: old and new, traditional and progressive.

As one might expect from a journal, there isn't much of a narrative arc. Many of Boyarin's entries pertain to the mundane nature of keeping a house of worship going: reminders to turn off the lights, interviewing candidates for a new rabbi, petty disagreements between members. A recurring theme is the congregation's struggle to maintain the morning minyan—the quorum of ten Jewish males required to hold a prayer service. Only rarely does Boyarin pull back from relaying events to reflect on the import of what he's seeing. "What is it we are trying so hard to desperately hold on to, and why assume at all that it should still be there?" he wonders, as he surveys a neighborhood that has lost most of its Jewishness. It's an important question for any religious group that finds itself in cultural decline. Sadly, he doesn't pursue it further.

Boyarin deserves praise for his lively writing that captures the colorful personalities of the shul's members. The book is refreshingly free of academic jargon, though readers may occasionally be stymied by the many specialized terms relating to Judaism. Thankfully, there's a glossary in the back for that. But when it comes to answering the question of "So what?" the author is of less help. When the book is over, you're left wanting a postscript about the ultimate meaning of his twelve-week experiment.

In his defense, Boyarin states in the introduction that he didn't set out to write a "meditation on Jewish identity." The book might be better understood as a tribute

to the resilience of community, especially one facing an uncertain future. Who knows if Stanton Street Shul will eventually suffer the same fate as most other Orthodox synagogues on the Lower East Side? Yet its members diligently continue to meet together, even if it's not always clear what it amounts to.

Perhaps togetherness is the point. "Ultimately, while we continue to listen for the still, small voice, we have to rely on ourselves and each other," Boyarin concludes.

NICK LIAO *is a writer based in Washington DC.*

# News and Events

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## *Anabaptist Witness* at 2015 Mennonite World Conference

- July 22, Wednesday afternoon, 1:30–3:00pm
- Co-editors Jamie Ross and Jamie Pitts will lead a session, “*Anabaptist Witness: Walking with God into the future of Anabaptist and Mennonite Missiology.*”
- Please join us as we discern how the journal may fulfill its mission and be a dialogue on key issues facing the global Anabaptist and Mennonite church in mission.
- We have requested translation into Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

*We will also be at the 2015 Mennonite Church USA Convention, Kansas City, MO*



## **A Call for Submissions for the October 2015 issue of *Anabaptist Witness*:**

*Taste and See: Anabaptism, Food, and Mission*

Submission Deadline: May 1, 2015

In the beginning God created. This chef of all things cooked up a feast of earth, plants that grow fruit, and beings to enjoy and care for this abundance. And God called these creations good.

We are the custodians of this good earth. Every meal we eat we are connected with those who dreamed up the recipes, nurtured the soil, picked and washed and shipped the goods, and sold the ingredients to us in our markets and stores. From the bread we break at the Lord's Supper, to the potlucks we share and the cookbooks we produce, our interaction with food connects us with our creator and sustainer, and to individuals living around the world.

In this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, the Co-Editors invite you to reflect and engage Anabaptist understandings of food and mission. Share with us your stories of students learning to farm so that their ministries might be sustainable. Consider what response we are called to when we are vegetarian, but we live in a community where meat is a rare commodity shared with us in a feast of thanksgiving. Question what it means for us to be a people committed to non-conformity when living in a culture of excess, or how we might reconcile God's abundant and giving love with the reality of missed meals when food is scarce.

Co-Editors welcome submissions from a variety of genres including reflections on recipes, photo-essays, prayers, poems, interviews, biographies, and academic papers. We also encourage submissions in languages other than English, particularly in French and Spanish.

Address all correspondence to *Anabaptist Witness* Co-Editor, Jamie Ross (jamier@mmnworld.net). For additional information on guidelines and deadlines, please visit our website: [anabaptist.org/calls-for-submissions/](http://anabaptist.org/calls-for-submissions/)

*Anabaptist Witness* is sponsored by *Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*,  
*Mennonite Church Canada*, and *Mennonite Mission Network*.

**A Call for Submissions for the Conference:**  
*“Mennonite Education: Past, Present, and Future”*

Hosted by Bluffton University  
October 16-18, 2015

Proposal deadline: May 15, 2015

Mennonite educational practices and institutions in the 21st century face a time of upheaval and transformation arising from the impact of new communication technologies such as the Internet and digital media, from changing assumptions about the organization and worth of knowledge, and from shifting religious and cultural demographics. On the occasion of the publication of a new biography of Mennonite historian and educational pioneer C. Henry Smith, the C. Henry Smith Trustees and the Mennonite Historical Society invites proposals for panels, workshops, and presentations from teachers, researchers, administrators, staff, students and anyone else who is invested in Mennonite education both within and beyond Mennonite educational institutions.

We encourage presentation proposals from across the academic disciplines on a broad range of topics related to the past, present, and future of Mennonite education in all of its varied North American settings, including from early childhood through graduate programs. Please send inquiries and proposals to Gerald Mast: [mastg@bluffton.edu](mailto:mastg@bluffton.edu). For more information, see the conference website: <http://www.bluffton.edu/conference/>

