

truly interacting only with the Christian minority of the world's population?

7. Do you think that truth is relative to context? In other words, does context ever change or affect what is true? Is there an absolute truth, and are humans equipped to comprehend it?

8. Do you believe that God's love is universally intended for the whole of creation? Regardless of how you answer that question, how do you think God acts to save and redeem the world?

9. What do you think is the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to persons who follow other religious paths? Where do you witness the Spirit of God at work in the world?



Interfaith Relations and the Church

THE THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

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Interfaith Relations and the Church: The Theological Challenge

We are living in a religiously diverse and highly globalized world, a world of shared vulnerabilities and hopes. With globalization triggering the movement of peoples and flow of ideas, areas that were once relatively homogenous have become more and more ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. More than ever before Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Buddhists, and followers of traditional religions or Eastern philosophies have joined Jews and other Christians as our office colleagues, university classmates, town merchants and healthcare workers, active-duty soldiers, or local firefighters and police officers. We meet these neighbors at backyard barbecues and pool parties. At school their youngsters become our children's and grandchildren's classmates and friends. In some cases, they will one day become our daughters- and sons-in law. We cannot ignore or discount religious diversity. More than ever, it is already informing and affecting our daily living.

Faced with the presence and religious diversity of people of other faiths, Christians must ask the difficult but necessary theological questions about our relationships with people of other faiths. Christians hold a variety of perspectives on the role that other faiths play in God's work of salvation. The goal of this study is to present a range of those perspectives and to help us think theologically about interfaith relations.

What is Our Response to Religious Diversity?

Exploring and expanding our ideas about God *is* thinking theologically. Interfaith encounter calls us to examine our beliefs

Prayer

God, whose ways we cannot fully fathom, give us new insight as you did give it to the apostles of old who also lived in a multi-religious world. Help us to be receptive to your vision, despite whatever predispositions and even prejudices we may have nurtured for years. If you have something to teach us about how to relate to people who follow different religious paths, then please, God, help us to be receptive and to learn. We know that your heart is greater than we can see or understand. We long for your Spirit to lead us into the truth about how to conduct our interfaith relations. In the name of Jesus, who in his life on earth was so filled with your Spirit. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you see as the central theological issues regarding interfaith relations? What makes these questions so controversial?
2. How do you understand or interpret the meaning of the New Testament affirmation that Jesus is the "way"?
3. Do you think that God is working in the hearts and minds of persons who follow other faiths and, if so, can Christians learn anything of God from them?
4. Have you ever been in relationship with someone of a different faith? If so, what did you learn and how did it stretch your own faith?
5. What traits should characterize a "Christian" approach to persons of other faiths?
6. Do you think that God is everywhere present in creation or

other worldviews. Thus, the one whom Christians confess in faith as Savior and Lord is also truly "the light of the world" (John 8:12). Admittedly, this is something of a mystery. However, according to Jesus the Holy Spirit by nature moves in mysterious manners (John 3:8). Yet the Holy Spirit is never other than the Spirit of God and of God's Christ (Rom 8:9).

The Christian Scriptures and traditions provide us a compass in our theological exploration. The Spirit who will lead us into new understanding and will empower us to do great things in the name of Jesus is the same Spirit that was in Christ Jesus. God will do what is in accord with God's nature and within God's power, for God is not going to be imprisoned by the limits of our hearts and understanding. It is here that the paradoxical language opens rather than closes, expands rather than shrinks, reaches out rather than withdraws.

Our openness and ability to participate in such an adventure is not, of course, without foundation and preparation. We seek the *continuity* of being rooted in the biblical and historical tradition of Christianity, while opening to the *creativity* of the Holy Spirit who cannot be contained or directed. The Spirit blows where it will. In reaching out to our interfaith neighbors, we hold continuity and creativity in tension. We are not reinventing the faith, but we are opening to a deeper, broader experience of the majesty, grace, and providence of God.

We have the courage to take part in such an adventure because we have experienced assurance; we are ready to explore because we have a compass; we are equipped to navigate because we have a map; we are prepared to fly because we are rooted; we have the confidence to test new waters because we know we have a norm and a guide. Our compass is God in Jesus and we take the adventure propelled and guided by the freedom of the Spirit.

about God. What is the nature of God? How does God interact with creation? What is God's intention for humanity? What is Jesus' role in healing and transforming the world? How does God's Holy Spirit act in the world? And finally, what does God call *us* to be and do in this world?

Beyond the practical reality of learning to live together peaceably in a religiously diverse world, people of faith in general, and Christians in particular, need to respond to the challenge of religious diversity in accord with our faith convictions. Serious engagement with people of other faiths does not require that we abandon our deeply-cherished convictions. Instead, it involves the commitment to engage believers of other faiths with our own deep commitments. This is why it is important to be clear about what our commitments are!

Christian responses to People of Other Faiths: *Historical Answers to Questions about Salvation*

As can be expected, the response of Christians to questions about salvation have been varied. Christian theologians have tried to answer questions about how followers of other religions are in relation to God and what God's will is for all people and for the world. Understandably, several theological positions have become prominent. Each position emphasizes different aspects of interreligious identity or understanding.

Categorical labels such as "exclusivist," "inclusivist," and "pluralist" have been used to name various theological positions that Christians hold. Exclusivists believe that the only saving religious path is the Christian one. Inclusivists believe that persons of other faiths can be saved, but that ultimately it is the work of Christ that effects their salvation. Pluralists believe that there are a number of faiths with a variety of equally valid religious paths toward salvation, some emphasizing the common

essence, others recognizing real difference between faith traditions. These theological positions may be problematic when they limit or stereotype people and their beliefs.

Other models have been used to describe the emphases that some Christians place on particular types of interactions with people of other faiths, such as “evangelizer,” “dialoguer,” and “cooperator.” But again, many people practice all of these types of interactions in different contexts, and all are legitimately part of a full Christian witness of our faith.

Another way of understanding the theology of religions includes four major theological models. These four models are the “replacement” model, the “fulfillment” model, the “mutuality” model, and the “acceptance” model. These four categories are used to describe the relationship of a variety of religions to each other and to God, while offering in a more elaborate and nuanced way the variety of theological positions regarding the presence and claims of other religions. The focus here tends toward revelatory truth or how Christians understand God to be revealing God's self in the world and working with creation.

The “total replacement model” sees one truth, rendering other religions irrelevant. For a Christian, this model would suggest that God's love is realized only through Jesus Christ. In other words, only those persons who explicitly confess their sins and put their trust in Jesus will be saved. Among biblical passages that might suggest this view is Acts 4:12: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” A “partial replacement model” would remain ambivalent about whether God might be present in other religions, but would still affirm that only Christianity offers a whole and saving truth.

Jesus as the “Way”: What is God Calling Us ‘to Be’ and ‘to Do’?

Even if Christians agree about the necessity of giving a witness about Jesus without criticizing other religions or their religious figures, a variety of Christians still may disagree about what it means to say that Jesus is the “Way” (Jn 14:6). The Greek language used in the New Testament provides some helpful insight. The word translated “way” is *hodos*, a term with three meanings: a road or path; a traveler’s journey; and a course of action or manner of thinking. Some will understand Jesus as a **doorway**, a manner of thinking (belief) that ushers one into life everlasting. Others, however, will think of him as a **pathway**, a course of action (lifestyle) that leads one on a journey of becoming.

Some Christians understand Christian conversion as an act of subscribing to certain beliefs that enables a person to enter the “door” that leads to life everlasting. Others tend to view Christian discipleship as practicing a certain lifestyle that enables a person to traverse a similar “path” to the one Jesus himself walked.

While we may seek certainty, the conviction that we find is a conviction of faith based in our experience of God's love and grace. It is not propositional certainty or trust in ideas. This deeper kind of faith is rooted in trusting in our relationship with God, rather than trusting in ideas about God.

Thus, we may establish a deeper unity of affection or love without compromising commitment to unequivocal belief in truth. Christians can trust God ultimately to be the arbiter of truth. Meanwhile, we seek understanding in a consistent and coherent fashion through a worldview decisively shaped by the Christian Scriptures and genuinely informed by conversation with the culture around us, including with religions informed by

diverse elements of reality—for example, the doctrines of the Trinity of God or of Christ's full divinity and humanity. God's admittedly amazing grace may be yet another example, especially regarding interfaith understanding. As Christians, can we confess our own belief in Jesus Christ—loving others and desiring to share the meaning, joy, hope, purpose, and calling he gives to our lives—without feeling compelled to judge other persons' pathways?

How can salvation be attained and who will attain it? Perhaps that is not a question to which we are called to provide an exhaustive answer. A statement from the World Council of Churches in 2005, entitled "Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding," went even further than the paradoxical statement of 1979 by emphasizing the humility inherent in our finite nature. "Human limitations and limitations of language make it impossible for any community to have exhausted the mystery of salvation God offers to humankind.... [Thus we affirm] that salvation belongs to God, God only. We do not possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer salvation; we witness to it. We do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the providence of God."

The Christian doctrine of providence asserts that chance or fate do not rule the world. Biblical and historic Christianity contends for God's continuing loving care and governance of the entire created order and its creatures. God continues to be directly involved with all creation in a loving and just manner. Divine providence is purposeful and universal. God's care and governance of humanity includes everyone's welfare—present and eternal, physical and spiritual. Consequently, divine providence extends into the religious realm. All of God's children in all religions are never beyond the scope of divine providence; indeed, no human being is outside of God's care and guidance. To believe otherwise is to lessen the very love and grace of God whom we confess.

The "fulfillment model" affirms God's revelation or presence in other religions, but still argues that they find their fulfillment only in the particularity of the saving act of Jesus Christ. This position suggests that while people of sincere faith who follow other pathways may be saved, it is in fact Christ who accomplishes their salvation by his death and resurrection, even when they do not recognize nor accept it. This position accepts the idea that there is partial light or some truth in other major world religions, though the fullest light and the complete Truth are found in Christ. Among biblical passages that might be referenced to support this view is John 1:9: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

The "mutuality model" suggests that all religious adherents mutually need each other in order to understand better the fullness of God. There is a recognition that we can learn from each other and experience mutual transformation through our interfaith dialogue and our relationships. This model affirms that God was and is at work in Jesus but suggests that God is also at work beyond Jesus. The Christ Spirit, this model suggests, is more than Jesus and manifests throughout diverse forms in the world. Therefore we need the diversity of people and cultures and religious traditions to share their experience and insight mutually, so that we can all discern the breadth and depth of God's work throughout the world. Among biblical texts that might suggest this understanding is the description in John's gospel of Christ as the Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (1:1-3). This text can be interpreted to mean that the Christ has been present outside the Christian tradition and before the historical appearance of Jesus.

Lastly, the "acceptance model" affirms that there are many

true religions. Some make a case for many ways of salvation through the many religions. Some think of the diversity in the world's religions as a reflection of the plurality that is present in a Triune God. Additional theories describe how the differences we see in diverse religions help us understand that God is different from us. Others simply accept the diversity as the way it is; after all, what do we really know of how God operates in this world? "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Cor 13:12)

A key to understanding these theological models is based in our understanding of God's love. If God's love is universally intended for the whole of creation, then how does God act to save and redeem the world? Is it only through the particular form of Jesus? What about the role of the Holy Spirit? Where is the Spirit of God at work in the world, and how can we know the answer to that? Engaging these kinds of questions is how we develop our theology of interfaith relations.

The Paradox of God's Grace: Embracing the Majesty of God and Being Rooted in Humility

In addition to (and sometimes instead of) relying on categories and models of theological thinking, Christians have sometimes embraced **paradoxical language**. The use of paradoxical language is more than simply a strategic move to accommodate various views. A paradox by nature confesses that there is some limitation to our capacity to understand.

The World Council of Churches, for example, adopted a statement in 1979 which said: "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot put any limit to God's saving power. There is a tension between these affirmations which we acknowledge and cannot resolve."

Paradoxical language is not a language of contradiction, but a way of giving words to our encounter with the Divine mystery in all its depth, breadth, height, and glory. The Christian scriptures suggest there is a vision that can incorporate both sides of this paradox—by expanding rather than restricting our view of Christ our Redeemer and Christian redemption. In Ephesians 3:19, we are reminded that Christ's love surpasses knowledge. The limits are not on Jesus or the Christ or God, but the limits are on our understanding. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13:9, "we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part."

Accordingly, Christians may affirm equally and without contradiction that Jesus Christ alone is the way of salvation to which they may point and still refrain from restricting God's saving power. This Christian confession expresses not *who* God is, but *how* we have experienced God. This confession, offered humbly, describes the lens through which we see.

The world's great religions, including Christianity, are concerned with addressing questions of ultimate truth. Christian theology of religions recognizes that different faiths sometimes offer competing truth claims. But an uncompromising commitment to Christian truth is nevertheless compatible with respectful conversation with people of other religions regarding their faith and worldviews. Human limitations of knowledge and understanding should humble every human being regarding the absolute accuracy of his or her own prized opinions. The limits of language in conceptualizing and communicating knowledge and truth is also an important consideration. None of this implies relativism. We may continue to distinguish between divine truth as absolute reality and human conceptualization of that truth as limited.

Christianity has been historically comfortable with paradoxical truths, or careful affirmations holding in tension