

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Interfaith Relations

(Fourth in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

John 4:19-23; 14:6; 10:11-16; Matthew 8:5-13; Isaiah 56:7 NRSV

The way that people of different religions relate to each other has been a prominent issue for Americans in the past ten years. John Lennon may have imagined a world without religion, and considering the way that people of different religions often abjure and fight with each other it is little wonder that he did, nevertheless, religion lives on. And some scientific and intellectual circles may think of it as a quaint leftover from pre-enlightened days but religion and its adherents, in the best and worst ways, still often grab the world's attention. As Protestant Christians, and therefore at least to some degree as students of St. Augustine, we might think of religious belief as a natural inclination for human beings, a sort of spiritual instinct if you will, implanted in the human soul by God. "Our hearts are restless," Augustine once famously prayed, "until they find their rest in thee."

Surely most of us know that there have always been many religions but prior to 9/11 we may not have given those other than our own much more than a glancing thought. Perhaps we knew someone who was a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Muslim but what did we know about their faith? After all, how many people learn all that they need to know about their own religion, let alone the religions of others? I remember taking a world religions class in college and losing interest in it about half way through, finding some of the concepts alien to those of my own faith tradition and not wanting to take the time to understand and remember them. I got by with the minimum required for that class. It was my loss, then and now. To show just how much I still need to learn about other religions I was recently writing on the computer and spelled Buddhist B U D H I S T. I thought I was really clever knowing that there was an H in it. But the spell checker program underlined it anyway. I thought that maybe I finally beat the spell checker. But when I looked it up I found that Buddhist not only has an H but two D's!

People need to talk with each other about what they believe if they are going to learn to respect each other's faith, and I can think of no other more urgent need in the world than that. Let me say that once more. There may be no more urgent need in the world today than that the people of different religions learn to respect each other's faith. Really, what is more important than that? Would someone say that peace and the end of war is a greater need? Well, surely peace is our desperate longing but how many violent conflicts have as at least one component cause not only a twisted understanding on one's

own religion but also the making of the people of another religion into an enemy? Do we want to end hunger and starvation? Consider what could be accomplished if the different organized religions would cooperate with each other, out of mutual respect for each other, in order to address such a basic human tragedy as mass hunger and starvation. What I do understand about all the major religions is that they have as one of their core values caring for people in need. Think if we could orchestrate that concern into cooperative ministries of hunger relief and prevention? What a difference religious people could make! There is a World Council of Churches but what if there was also something like a World Council of Interfaith Concern for the Poor? Why not?! Perhaps one reason is that the members of different religions don't understand each other's faith or else they are so busy emphasizing their differences that they neglect to act upon the values they hold in common.

The crux of the problem may lie in this: religion, by definition, is what people believe to be the absolute truth. For Christians, that absolute truth is the revelation of God in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Christianity can not compromise on that idea or else it is no longer Christianity. If a person believes that the absolute truth is found in any other way, in any other place, other than the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament scripture, then that person is not a Christian.

But some argue that if we Christians believe that we have knowledge of the absolute truth, and therefore our religion is right, than what other appropriate Christian response might there be to people of other religions except to seek their conversion to Christianity? And if we are of the slant which believes that God will damn to eternal torment all those who are not Christians, what more compassionate thing can we do for people of other religions than to try to convert them? A verse of scripture often used to support this thinking is what Jesus said in John 14:6. *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* I admit that is a hard verse to bear in mind for Christians like me who champion respectful interfaith dialogue and cooperation and even worship. If we consider that verse apart from everything else Jesus said, it may just be the trump card resigning all of us on the Christian side to the endless squabbling of religious conceit and intolerance. But here is what gives me pause. Does it really make sense to us that the God of the boundless compassionate love we see in Jesus would consign billions and billions of people to eternal damnation just because they were unfortunate enough to be born into areas of the world or into families that are Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Confucian? Is that really what we think the God revealed in Jesus Christ would do? Because I think it only reasonable to assume that if we were not born into Christian families or into a nation saturated with Christian churches, we would not be Christians either. The vast majority of people adopt for themselves the religion of their families of origin. So does God really consign all people of other religions to hell? I can not accept that. The idea is simply too unjust, too ruthless, too un-Godly. But how then are we to understand John 14:6?

Well, could not the truth about God and life which was ultimately revealed in the man Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago, also be revealed, albeit incompletely, in some other ways at some other times through some other people? If we answer no to that

question then we must categorically reject even the teachings of all the Old Testament prophets. Of course God has revealed God's self at different times and places and not just through Jesus Christ! In order for us to accept Christ as our personal Lord and Savior we do not need to think that no other religion contains any truth about God at all! It is not necessary to believe that the Way and the Truth and the Life was never revealed to any degree anywhere else at any other time in order to believe that it was perfectly revealed and contained in the historic man Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, for Christians, Christ is the final authority for all things spiritual but there can be spiritual truth in other religions as well. So we can respect other religions for all the ways they are consistent with our own. We can believe that people can truly worship and learn about God through them, yet still insist that Jesus is the world's Savior and Lord, the Son of the living God!

Earlier in the gospel of John are the passages about Jesus the Good Shepherd. In one of them Jesus says, *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.* Now just who are the other sheep to which Jesus refers who do not belong to *this fold*, and who are those of *this fold*? Does *this fold* specifically refer to the followers of Jesus to whom he is presently speaking, and are the ones who do not belong to *this fold* all those who would become Christians later on? Or does *this fold* mean all who were Jewish and followers of Jesus and the ones who do not belong to *this fold* the gentile followers of Jesus? Those two interpretations have been the traditional understandings of the verse. But could there be a third interpretation? Could it be that Jesus is not just talking about Jews and Christians here, but also people of other religions who have encountered the truth of God's righteousness and love, and welcomed it, and by so doing are sheep of the Good Shepherd under a different name? Jesus does not tell us here who all of his sheep are. But Jesus knows who they are. *I know my own, Jesus says, and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.*

Jesus had so much respect for people of faith who were members of other religions. Remember what he said about the Roman Centurion who asked Jesus to heal the Centurion's servant? The Centurion said that he was not worthy to have Jesus come into the Centurion's house, but if Jesus would just say the word the Centurion's servant would be healed. And Jesus said, *Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from the east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Finally, one more passage from John's gospel. This one is a portion of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. The woman thought that it was only possible to worship God rightly on certain land, either on the mountain upon which she and Jesus were standing or in the city of Jerusalem. Jesus replied, *Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.*

Yes, true worshippers, a concept to go with true religion. All that affirms God's love and teaches love of neighbor is true religion and everyone who worships sincerely with a heart of love for God and others are true worshippers. *The time has come*, Jesus said. So it is now. The time has come for people of true religion by whatever name to respect each other, to learn about each other and from each other, to serve God together by serving others, and even sometimes to pray and worship together. And when we come before God with people of other religions sincerely out of love for God and others, then it is true worship. And lest we too quickly judge anyone of another religion without getting to know him or her and what that person believes, remember, Buddhist has two D's.