

Walking Deliberately Into Difference: A Theology of Enabling Interreligious Understanding

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I needed a tag-line for my business card: an umbrella-phrase under which all of my freelance work as a Christian moral theologian—the teaching, the consulting, the writing—would fit. Stephen Cherry¹ had seen me in action; he had an idea. My calling, he declared, is that of “enabling interreligious understanding”; my skills, he continued, make me a good companion when one “deliberately walks into difference.” Stephen was right. For years, that has been the nature of my ministry: walking deliberately into difference; bringing others along as I do; enabling interreligious understanding as we proceed. This essay explains the substance of, and theological roadmap for, that walk.

What I do . . .

As a specialist in multifaith concerns, I take on educational, consultative, and writing projects. I sometimes teach in explicitly secular universities—settings in which my colleagues and students would be surprised (perhaps even distressed) were I to describe my work among them as “ministry.” However, much of my teaching occurs in seminaries and churches, and in those settings, “ministry” is an entirely appropriate description. In these venues, the fact that I have bound myself to the strong Name of the Trinity is not only taken for granted, it is celebrated.

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¹ The Reverend Canon Dr. Stephen Cherry had been directed to me for research assistance during his sabbatical in New York City; he is now Residentiary Canon at Durham Cathedral, U.K.

Work as an “interreligious relations consultant” is multifaceted. It may entail coordinating or advising the development of curricula; brainstorming multifaith partnerships; organizing or facilitating interfaith dialogues or field trips; designing or chairing conferences, seminars, and colloquia; researching whether and how religious leaders-in-formation are taught about religious diversity. What of this is ministry? None of it, or all—depending on the attitude with (and possibly the setting in) which it is performed.

Surely, a writer’s task can be pastoral. Certainly, my intention with my *Faith in the Neighborhood* book series was to model and encourage Christian love of the neighbor whose religious convictions and commitments are different from ours. I may be asked to pen a journal article, a book chapter, a lecture, or (occasionally) a sermon. All such labors, it seems to me, have the capacity to involve “loving God with my mind.” For me, however, writing is ministry most explicitly when I am able (even invited) to bring to the surface the theological basis on which all of my work in interreligious relations rests—as happens when I am involved in drafting church documents on multi-faith concerns.²

... and why

Whenever I offer an explanation of the theological basis for my ministry of enabling interreligious understanding, I draw heavily upon the ideas and language of those who have affirmed an inclusive, profoundly incarnational theology of religious difference, who appreciate the generosity of God’s love, and who uphold the possibility of multiple truths.³ And I often begin with a traditional Christian motto: *lex*

² See particularly *Renewing Our Pledge* (February 2008), which I authored on behalf of the Episcopal Church in response to the pan-Muslim call for dialogue known as *A Common Word* (October 2007). *A Common Word* is available at www.acommonword.com; *Renewing Our Pledge* is available from The Episcopal Church Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.

³ See particularly the interfaith documents of the 1988 Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion—the first of these decennial gatherings to speak of a positive place for Islam in an Anglican-Christian worldview: *Christ and People of Other Faiths and Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue*, prepared by the Dogmatic & Pastoral Concerns Section of the Lambeth Conference 1988. I am also much indebted to David Lochhead and Kenneth Cracknell, whose biblically rooted arguments in favor of appreciation and acceptance of religious manyness underscore the wideness of God’s mercy and the generosity of God’s love. See David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*

orandi lex credendi (the law of praying is the law of believing)—a fondness for which I share with many Anglicans over the centuries.⁴ This motto reminds us that in order to understand what Anglicans believe, we must look at *The Book of Common Prayer*; and if our praying does indeed shape our believing, it also informs our practice of that faith. The clue to the question of why I, as a Christian ethicist, work on multifaith concerns, can be found in the Prayer Book, beginning on page 304: The Baptismal Covenant.

The 1979 Prayer Book invites us to reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant at intervals throughout the liturgical year. In so doing, it reminds us that this action with water is anything but mere ritual; with the water and the reminder of Jesus' own baptism come our marching orders. This formula is foremost an affirmation of our identity and allegiance—beginning as it does with the Apostles' Creed; but it also has ethical implications. Its litany of vows calls upon us to remember and act on the highest values and purposes of human life. In those vows, I discern an imperative to promote positive interreligious relations.

As Christians, we insist that the One and Only God is Triune. That is, assert the 1988 Lambeth documents, "the very life of God is a 'being with'." We celebrate that in Christ Jesus we have come to know Emanu-El: *God with Us*. Notably, in every reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant we promise to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons. We recall that the Christ whom we promise so to seek and serve is he who told us that the greatest commandment is to love both God *and* neighbor; and who, through the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), defined "neighbor" in terms of the *other* who makes a claim on us by virtue of his or her *nearness*.⁵ That is, the neighbor is

(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), particularly chap. 13; Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006). John Berthrong and others have issued elegant reminders that multiple things may be simultaneously true; see John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), particularly chap. 3.

⁴ For discussions of this motto's meaning and relevance, see (among many possibilities) Leonel Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on the Book of Common Prayer* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1985); see also, W. Taylor Stevenson, "Lex Orandi—Lex Credendi," in *The Study of Anglicanism*, revised edition, ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty, and Jonathan Knight (London: SPCK, 1998), 187–202.

⁵ Thanks to Thomas E. Breidenthal for this definition of *neighbor*; see his *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1997), 22.

the one who demands that we “be with”; when we are commanded to love God and to love our neighbors *as ourselves*, we are (in effect) commanded to “be with” our neighbors.

When it comes to neighbors whose religions are different from ours, the Lambeth 1988 interfaith documents teach that each encounter is an opportunity to *eavesdrop*: “to overhear what dialogue there may be between God and these people—between the God who calls all into being by a process of sharing and communication, and other people in their religious cultures.”⁶ A more recent document (from the Anglican Communion Network of Inter Faith Concerns) reminds us that “the God who has created our world is generous in grace and rejoices in diversity.” We well know that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23a). Therefore, “when we meet these qualities in our encounter with people of other faiths, we must engage joyfully with the Spirit’s work in their lives and in their communities.”⁷

We fulfill the command to “be with” our neighbors whose religions are different from ours by taking advantage of opportunities to eavesdrop on our neighbors’ own dialogue with the divine, thus opening our soul to our neighbor. An open soul is a beautiful thing; but writes Joan Chittister, “The beauty of the open soul is not easy to come by in a world where the other . . . threatens [our] sense of security and the pyramids of social control.” Sadly, “we” and “they” are hallmarks of “a world in which there are no more natural boundaries,” a world which is now “intricately intertwined, painfully stratified.”⁸ How are we to behave in the midst of this?

Our increasingly interreligious world provokes a range of responses to the religious other, stances of hostility and competition among them. A vastly preferable response, as David Lochhead has argued, is that of *dialogical relationship*: a relationship of openness and trust which is clear, unambiguous, and has no other purpose than

⁶ See paragraphs 42 and 48 in *Christ and People of Other Faiths*; http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/documents/lam88_section_report.pdf.

⁷ *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue, An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations*, a report from the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns (February 2008), 1, 2.

⁸ Adapted from Joan Chittister, “Xenophilia, The Love of Strangers” in *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010), 127–128.

itself. In fact, he asserts, Christians have a biblically-based mandate to unconditional openness to the neighbor: an “imperative to seek dialogue and to be open to dialogue whenever and from whomever it is offered.”⁹

Properly understood, dialogue (while it is indeed characterized by courtesy and forbearance) is *never* mere polite conversation. Rather, dialogue is dialectical and reciprocal; unlike debate, its purpose is the gaining of clarity rather than the winning of an argument. Dialogue is a technical term for *transformative activity*—a constellation of strategies employed for the purpose of strengthening relationships or solving problems.¹⁰ That dialogue is by nature transformative was acknowledged by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, when they agreed in January 2002 to sustain a formal relationship between their offices: “We believe that friendship which overcomes religious, ethnic and national differences is a gift of the Creator in whom we all believe. . . . We believe that direct dialogue results in restoration of the image of each in the eyes of the other.”¹¹

The engagement so characteristic of a dialogical relationship, of the effort to wage reconciliation, is enhanced when we take the trouble to become sufficiently “theologically and religiously multilingual.”¹² In fact, we must. If the ninth of the Ten Commandments orders us not to bear false witness against our neighbor (Exod. 20:16), we will be hard pressed to bear *accurate* witness to the religion of our neighbors if we have little sense of what their religions are about. Bearing truthful witness regarding our neighbor includes what we say about their religious beliefs and practices. Certainly, we can be of better service, more loving, more respectful of dignity, more likely to establish justice and peace (all of which we promise to do every time we reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant) if we bring to that effort an understanding of how our neighbor is enabled to “establish, maintain, and celebrate a meaningful world”—which is a helpful working definition

⁹ Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative*, 81. Lochhead develops the biblical and theological evidence for this mandate in chapter 13, particularly.

¹⁰ Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 12.

¹¹ From the agreement text as published by the Anglican News Service, January 18, 2002; see <http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/work/declarations/al-azhar.cfm>.

¹² Martin Forward, *Inter-religious Dialogue: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One-world, 2001), 70.

of religion itself.¹³ Theological and religious multilingualism improves our ability to bear truthful witness about our neighbors.

By means of our Baptismal Covenant, we Episcopalians promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being,” each of whom, according to Genesis 1:26, is made in God’s image and after God’s likeness. We recall that Jesus has taught us: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt. 5:9). We hear Micah ask: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). The psalmist enjoins us to “seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). St. Paul admonishes us: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things . . . and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8–9). With such in mind, the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops responded to the events of 9/11/01 by calling upon Episcopalians to “wage reconciliation.” Might they just as well have asked that we engage in the ministry of enabling interreligious understanding?

I embrace the notion of *anakephalaiosis*—the end shall resemble the beginning: if, as we claim, God desires us to “be with” him, as he “is with” us, then God is drawing all of creation to Godself through Christ.¹⁴ I also appreciate the wisdom of desert mother Amma Sarah—a monastic of the early church—who said: “I would rather pray to God that my heart be pure toward all people than that I change something in theirs.”¹⁵

Admittedly, my understanding of the economy of salvation leans more toward the universalist than particularist. There are those who would at this point raise concerns about *pluralism*, defined as buying into some sort of theological relativism—a watering down of Christian faith. They might point to the third-to-last promise of the Baptismal Covenant, in which we promise to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ. Yet the well-known Evangelical Tony Campolo, who although he contends that “there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ,” is also

¹³ H. Byron Earhart, *Religious Traditions of the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 7.

¹⁴ See paragraph 43 in *Christ and People of Other Faiths*, which mentions the notion of *anakephalaiosis* in Ephesians 1:10.

¹⁵ Adapted from Chittister, “Xenophilia,” 126.

willing to say, “I am not convinced that the grace of God does not go further than the Christian community.” Campolo unpacks the seeming paradox for his fellow Evangelicals by inviting a revisit to the description of Judgment Day in Matthew 25. Recall that according to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, *anyone* who has cared for “the least of these” has taken care of Christ; any such person, Campolo insists, has indeed had a saving “personal relationship with Jesus.”¹⁶

On such a basis, I assert with confidence that the mandate to neighborliness, to hospitality, is incumbent on all Christians, no matter where our soteriology and eschatology may fall in the “Exclusivist–Inclusivist–Pluralist” paradigm.¹⁷ When it comes to the Great Commission, I think it is helpful to keep the Golden Rule in mind: treat others as you wish others to treat you (Matt. 7:12; also Luke 6:31); speak to others about your religion in a manner (and to the extent) that you would have them speak to you about theirs. At this point, St. Francis of Assisi is also helpful. He and his band of brothers lived intentionally amid the religious diversity of northern Africa for a time. St. Francis’s advice to his followers? “Preach the gospel always—and if necessary, use words.”

As a Christian deeply involved in interreligious work, I define pluralism not as simple relativism, but, in the words of Diana Eck, as the “encounter of commitments”—deep faith engaging deep faith.¹⁸ Remember, says Yale scholar Miroslav Volf: “Deep faith expresses itself in love, and love, understood as active care, leads to respect of and struggle for others’ rights.”¹⁹ That is, love of neighbor as oneself also entails delighting in our differences—even the deepest ones, thus allowing neighbors to remain “other”—indeed, to *thrive* as other.

¹⁶ Shane Claiborne, “On Evangelicals and Interfaith Cooperation: An Interview with Tony Campolo,” *Cross Currents* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 58–60.

¹⁷ Alan Race is often credited with originating this paradigm. See his *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1983). Each of its three terms have come to be applied to a variety of theological and sociological stances, making the paradigm itself less useful than once was the case.

¹⁸ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper-San Francisco, 2001), 71.

¹⁹ Miroslav Volf, “A Common Word for a Common Future,” in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 24.

To care actively, we need deep faith. That is why—just as my neighbors with other religious commitments will continue in the practices which nurture them—the Eucharist remains an important aspect of my practice of enabling interreligious understanding. It is a matter of minding my manners in the very best sense, acting on the promise made with each renewal of our Baptismal Covenant to “continue (with God’s help) in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers,” recharging my spiritual batteries, in search of deep faith, so that I can see Christ in (and be of better service to) those around me whose expressions of deep faith differ from mine. Then I can continue walking deliberately into difference, inviting others along as I do.