

## ***Faith in a World of Religions***

Acts 17:16-34

When President Trump left on Friday for his first overseas trip (after the week we all had been through), I thought to myself, “This is a man who needs some good spiritual counsel!” I found it remarkably providential that he was to spend the next two weeks engaging three of the world’s great religions, visiting sites in the Holy Land, meeting with Muslim and Jewish leaders there before spending a day or so at the Vatican in Rome.

I could be wrong, but in my recollection, this is the first time a sitting U.S. President (to his credit) has taken such a timely spiritual pilgrimage. I especially applaud the President for meeting with a number of Muslim leaders, where I trust he will not only solicit their help in fighting terrorism, but also listen and learn a bit about Islam and what it has offered the world—an important message to counter the negative impressions generated by extremists. A little experience in interfaith education is good for everyone’s soul. I hope he not only benefits from the experience, but our country does as well, as Jews and Muslims are still too often targeted with bias, suspicion, and malice.

One of the reasons I’ve engaged interfaith dialogue over the years is not only to expand my understanding of other religious traditions, but also to think more deeply about my own. I find that when I only talk with Christians about matters of faith, or when I limit my conversations to those who share my theology for the most part, or when I perceive the world solely through the religious sensibilities and value system I’ve inherited, then it becomes a bit of an “echo chamber”—something which frequently happens in the political world, where Republicans only listen to conservative views and Democrats limit themselves to liberal ones. A

religious “echo chamber” reinforces familiar beliefs and perspectives, oblivious to what others are seeing or hearing or sharing. Personal growth is limited when you shelter yourself from being exposed to something altogether new or which may challenge what your own beliefs are or for what they’re not taking into account. If you are open to critique or alternative claims about ultimate matters, you are then more able to test the credibility and value of what you do believe.

That said, my first structured experience with non-Christian religions tested me in a different way. I attended a large conservative evangelical seminary where it seemed the purpose of academic study was to equip each student to be a Christian evangelist in whatever calling they received. So, theology courses were taught in “apologetic” style—meaning, we studied theology to strengthen our own convictions and to answer questions raised about orthodox Protestant doctrines with the intent of leading other people to Christ (we argue them into salvation!). As far as I was concerned, this approach lacked intellectual honesty and depth and, for me, the proselytizing premise was troublesome, if not arrogant. I, however, was in the minority among my classmates.

This became evidently clear to me when I took a course on World Religions, which I soon discovered wasn’t to explore the teachings and practices of other traditions for insight and dialogue. Instead, our semester consisted of investigating other religions to expose and exploit the weaknesses of that tradition so we could engage followers of that faith with arguments that could convince them of the superior merits of Christianity. I vigorously resisted this agenda in my own way, which earned me a page of “loving” rebuke from the professor in response to my final paper. I realized

I was just in the wrong place for what my head believed and what my heart felt was right.

Since that time, I've approached interfaith engagement with an intent more suitable to my tastes and interests. Rather than viewing adherents of other traditions as religious prey, I consider them like extended family—relatives, not rivals. I don't reflexively presume Christianity alone possesses ultimate and absolute truth—as if to say, “I'm always right and you're invariably wrong.” Instead, I look for common bonds of agreement between those of different faiths that unite us in spirit. So, I easily resonate with Jewish friends on many matters of faith; I also find a sense of mutuality with Muslim friends—Christians and Muslims being people of “the Book”, as well as Islam's deep reverence for Jesus. I affirm the peacemaking values found in Gandhi's writings as a Hindu, as well in the faith of Sikhs, Baha'is, and Jains; I've gleaned much from Buddhism and Taoism, particularly in their wisdom and spiritual practices of self-denial and meditation.

Even though I'm aware of differences and distinctions between religions, I'm not threatened by disagreement, nor do I presume superiority merely because many in my tradition claim it. I choose to believe what I do and respect the right for others to believe as they do. What I believe is very meaningful to me, but I recognize what I find meaningful will not be embraced by everyone else. What I've discovered along the way is, there are many factors for why people come to believe what they do and unless one can understand and appreciate the views of another, it is better not to mischaracterize their religious faith, particularly with any dismissive intent or derogatory judgment.

The path I've followed in my spiritual journey is not unusual—one that can be understood along the spectrum of exclusion to inclusion. On one end of the spectrum is a position of *exclusivity*, where divine truth is believed to be the unique possession of one's own religious tradition, meaning that the claims of all other religions are therefore false. This philosophical stance views one's religious claims as universally absolute without regard to the audience. The objective of exclusion is to convert others to your beliefs or, if not, to exclude them from the benefits. Exclusivists believe they alone represent God and thus serve as spiritual gatekeepers for everyone else. Groups like these exist in every religious tradition, though we see them more frequently in Christianity and Islam.

On the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum from exclusion is *pluralism*, which basically holds that no religion can stake claim to a standard of truth over others. Pluralists affirm the legitimacy and equality of all religious perspectives and traditions. They characterize religions along the lines of the parable of the blind men, who each described an elephant in their own way based on what they touched—ear, trunk, leg, tail, and tusk. The whole truth cannot be known without the sum of their perspectives and then some. For pluralists, each religion is bound by its historical circumstances and cultural views; thus, other traditions are necessary complements to provide philosophical and ethical balance and address what's missing.

Somewhere in between these two extremes—exclusion and pluralism—is a perspective that satisfies most people, i.e., one's own religion is preferred as a path to divine revelation and spiritual truth, all the while recognizing other religions offer legitimate perspectives. The technical term for this is *monolatry* (the worship of one god, though other

gods are recognized as existing). Most people prefer their own religious heritage, but will not discount or disparage other traditions, unless perceived as a threat to their own.

Where a person falls on this spectrum likely will determine the takeaway in a story like our lectionary text today from Acts—an account of when the Apostle Paul was in Athens and experienced his own interfaith encounter. As the story goes, while awaiting Silas and Timothy to join him, Paul went through the city and noted all the temples and monuments erected to various Greek and Roman gods. For a devout Jew, these sights were akin to the idols and images forbidden by the great commandments of Moses. From what we're told, Paul was quite disturbed by their presence and what it meant for the people who inhabited the city.

One might assume that Paul, then, was a proponent of exclusion (given his distress). Yet, if this were the case, then the story would have read differently, I should think—perhaps, with Paul denouncing the idol worshippers, admonishing his fellow Jews to separate from a corrupted, pagan world of Athens. Or, he could have ravaged the streets like a prophetic madman desecrating shrines (using the examples of Elijah, King Josiah, or even Jesus, when he overturned the tables of moneychangers in the temple). He could have stood up in the city streets and warned the Athenians of their doom, like Jonah to the Ninevites, proclaiming that the God of Israel as revealed through Jesus Christ was the only God worthy of worship—all the rest are false gods. If he had addressed his audience in the Aeropagus as an exclusivist, showing utter contempt and disrespect, I believe things would have turned out quite differently.

On the other hand, if Paul had approached it as a pluralist, he would have noted and affirmed the variety of religious expressions, appreciating

the color and complexity of Athenian culture. He would have engaged the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in a generous and respectful dialogue, seeking to hear their thoughts on what is ultimately true in life, what brings meaning to them and others, and how their various perspectives affirm or disagree with his as a Jewish/Christian thinker. They would have parted company as friends, intrigued and energized by the profitable education they had received in listening to each other. It's possible this did occur to a certain extent, as without any respectful dialogue, the local philosophers likely wouldn't have been open to what he had to say, nor given him the time of day.

Yet, in the way this story is written and received, it seems apparent to me that the Apostle Paul approached this as an exercise of inclusion, where he respected his audience and their thoughts, but still brought to the table a firm conviction of his own beliefs. In fact, what may have really challenged (and, hopefully, broadened) Paul's perspective was the non-Jewish nature of his audience—those to whom he had to convey his story about Jesus who lacked any appreciable connection to Jesus' life in Galilee and Judea or with his proclamation of the Reign of God in the coming of a new Israel. Paul was not preaching in a synagogue; none of that would have mattered to anyone in the Aeropagus. Paul couldn't rely on those standard references he made to Hebrew prophecy or appeal to the messianic interests of a Jewish community under Roman oppression. This audience wouldn't care, nor be sympathetic.

So, Paul had to make his appeal about Jesus on a level his audience would appreciate and value, i.e., mutual respect and rationality. He laid the groundwork for this by engaging them with what they shared in common: 1) affirming their mutual religious interests; 2) referencing an idol the

Athenians themselves had erected to an “unknown god”—thus, responding to their own mystery as a starting point of discussion; 3) then explaining his message by beginning at a philosophical point of agreement, i.e., the creation of the world and humanity. Most cultures have creation myths which often sound very similar in language and imagery (usually symbolizing the conflict between good/evil, order/chaos). So Paul was appealing to their shared interests and beliefs.

To further underscore their mutual ties, Paul demonstrated that he was well-versed in Greek philosophy by quoting Epimenides and Aratus. He affirmed the good in other religions and philosophies, before he told them about Jesus, who was presented in a fashion similar to the portrayals of Greco-Roman heroes. Evidently, all would have been received well, until Paul referred to the resurrection, which rational Greeks would not find credible. As the story goes, out of a roomful of people, only a handful were taken enough by Paul’s testimony to learn more and embrace the faith he shared.

I suppose an exclusivist would have interpreted this story as a bit of a failure, especially for an evangelist. The response to Paul’s proclamation was muted, at best. In my seminary days, some would have disparaged the Athenians for their lack of faith in Jesus Christ. That’s often how exclusivists view the world—in binary terms of right/wrong, saved/unsaved, saint/infidel, of the righteous and the unrighteous. Those who don’t respond favorably to the Gospel are lost souls, destined to divine condemnation.

Pluralists, on the other hand, might say that the story would have played out even better had Paul remained to listen to the beliefs and thoughts of others in Areopagus—to learn from them, as much as he

wanted them to hear his message. Pluralists would have wanted to see all ideas presented fairly and equally and let the chips fall as they will as to what people choose to affirm and believe. No proselytizing, just mutual edification.

However, in fairness to this story, Paul and the early Christian community were respectful of other beliefs, but not pluralists. They were evangelists and missionaries, convicted by the truth that Jesus embodied and proclaimed, of the coming Reign of God transforming the earth from evil, and about the meaning of, and the power behind, the resurrection. This was a bold new hope to Judaism and the wider world. They were expressing their hope and amazement of what God was doing through Jesus. They boldly expressed their faith in a world of religions.

In doing so, it tells us something about being inclusive, while still being true to one's own heart and faith. Namely, religions can share space without having to be rivals. They can express ideas in common, while maintaining their unique distinctions. Like relatives, they enjoy similar roots and stories, frequently about the same things, but addressing them differently. No one here appeared to be insulted, offended, or shamed; no one expressed indignation or anger. The interreligious engagement was invigorating, but not divisive. Paul, as an evangelist, was a witness to his faith—not a defiant and arrogant judge of everyone else's fate and destiny.

Two thousand years later, our pluralistic culture demands the same of us. The history of exclusive claims by religions of all types has largely brought much shame and suffering to this world. A lot of blood has been shed for the sake of the "right" religion. In a world of many religions, belligerent rhetoric is just as dangerous and cruel as terrorism. Frankly, what is the real purpose of claiming spiritual absolutes, when to do so

usually results in disrespect, if not inspiring violence in one form or another?

It seems to me, we are called not only to have faith, but to have faith in God's world of religions, not only to articulate and sharpen what we choose to believe, but also to recognize the good God already inspires in other faiths and traditions. We can stake our faith in a world of religions because we trust God's Spirit is at work at all times and in all places, and we can affirm God's image is inherent to all people everywhere, not just a chosen few.

“By their fruits you shall know them,” Jesus once said. May we remember this as we engage people of our own faith and other faiths. May we eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, not to gain license to sin, as that ancient story of Eden goes, but instead to gain wisdom and perspective in order that the very Tree of Life may flourish.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
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