

CHRISTIANS IN AN INTERRELIGIOUS WORLD

Preached by the Rev'd Grace Burton-Edwards on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 7 August 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Genesis 37:1-14, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33.

Today's epistle lesson provides the opportunity to reflect on a matter that has been on my mind for many years but came into greater focus during a visit to India last fall. I traveled with a group of eighteen clergy from Indiana, representing ten different denominations or independent church groups. We spent the first week in Gujarat in northwest India, immersed in a particular form of Hindu practice. We lived in the homes of members of the community, visiting their temples, exploring their religious path. We spent the second week at a Christian seminary and research institute in southern India, learning about Christian history in India which, according to tradition, dates back to the arrival of the Apostle Thomas in the first century. These two faith traditions were placed side by side for me, as these and all religious traditions dwell in increasingly close proximity in our shrinking world.

Romans 10:9, from today's lesson, was one of the verses I was required to memorize as a Southern Baptist child – *If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* I was taught to understand that God's salvation was given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who believed this good news were saved, which I understood to mean kept forever in God's care in heaven. Those who did not confess that Jesus is Lord were outside God's salvation.

Even as a young person, I wrestled with this worldview. I was the child you did not want to teach in Sunday School because I always asked the tough questions. "What about the people living in the jungles of the Amazon who have never heard about Jesus? Does this mean that God will not save them?" In the churches of my childhood, the answer to that question was usually no, with the caveat that our duty as Christians was to go and tell them about Jesus so that God could save them. I was never very at ease with that idea.

For many years the American religious experience was rather isolated from many of the world's great faith traditions. For most of our nation's history, while American society embraced many different kinds of religious practice, most of those practices were Christian.

Christianity is still the dominant religious identity in this country. However, the religious landscape changed dramatically with the Immigration Act of 1965. Prior to 1965, immigration policy sought to maintain the existing ethnic composition of the United States. Since people from Asia and the Middle East and recent immigrants from Africa were a very small minority of the population, that formula severely limited their immigration. The changes in 1965 sought to encourage the immigration of people with specific talents and skills, and as a result highly skilled workers from many parts of the world began to arrive in the US, bringing their religious traditions with them.

Let's look at some data about this shift. The American Religious Identification Survey was a phone survey conducted in 1990, 2001, and 2008 that asked respondents to self-identify their religious

traditions. From this survey, researchers extrapolated an estimate of the religious identification of the US population. The 2008 data is consistent with other estimates of religious affiliation, such as that from the Pew Forum on Religion and Research.

As you would expect, Christians of all kinds were and are the majority in the US, 151 million in 1990 and 173 million in 2008. However, US population grew from 175 million in 1990 to 228 million in 2008, so as a percentage Christianity declined in those 18 years, from 86% to 76%. Judaism also declined from 3.1 million to 2.7 million. But almost all religious traditions other than Judaism and Christianity grew both in numbers and as a percent of the population. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ba'hai, the Sikh faith – while these traditions are still a small minority of the US population, they have grown tremendously in our lifetimes.*

Of course, this is only the US. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, 33% of the world's population is Christian, 22.5% Muslim, 13.6% Hindu, 6.7% Buddhist, 3.9% Ethnoreligionist, meaning traditional religion practiced by a particular ethnic group. Increasing travel, the ease of international communication, and our global economy mean that people of different religious traditions encounter one another with far greater frequency than in the past.

All of this leads us to ask ourselves, what is a Christian response to non-Christian religions? Given that Christianity is still the majority religion in the world, the Christian response to this question has a greater effect on the religious life of the planet than the response of other traditions, so this is an important consideration.

One response is to say that all other traditions are wrong, that Christianity contains the only possible truth. This is the view held by the churches of my childhood and by many Christians today. At its best, this view is born of a deep love for Christian faith and deep thanksgiving for the mystery of the incarnation in which God became human and lived among us in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. This view acknowledges the history-changing reality of the resurrection. Most Christians who make this claim do so with great humility. However, at its worst, this response can lead to an exclusivism that breeds hostility. It can turn Christians into militants. It sometimes offends our neighbors. When it leads Christians to avoid learning from members of other faiths, it can lead to a rather limited experience of the sacred.

People do not not want to say that Christianity offers the only truth often go to the other extreme and say that all religions are basically the same. This is the blind men and the elephant approach, where five blind men try to understand the elephant, but one holds the tail and another holds the trunk. Some people put it this way: We're all going to the same place. We're just taking different paths.

It is easy to see why some people say this. I do not consider myself an expert, but in my limited exposure to the world's traditions, I have been awed to discover how much common ground we do share. Religions across the board bear witness to a holy other that is beyond human existence and yet enters it in some way. Religions call communities to a certain ethic, to justice and care for the neighbor. Religions say that the way we live matters, and I have to confess that many of my Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist friends and acquaintances live with a holiness of life that puts me to shame.

Most significantly for our time, this inclusive approach provides an important antidote to religious violence. While in India, we visited a Hindu temple that was part temple and part educational attraction. The group sponsoring this temple has found such peace and fulfillment in their religious

life that they want others to share it, so they try to spread their teachings in any way they can. It was interesting that along with an IMAX film about the life of the founder, a museum displaying artifacts that the founder had owned, and a laser light and water show telling a moral tale about choosing the religious path, all designed to invite people to begin or deepen their religious journey, this venue also included a Hall of Religions which attempted to reveal the essential unity of all religious traditions.

Our hosts at this temple were very excited for a group of Christian pastors to see the Hall of Religions. But some Christians in the group were offended by what they felt was a reduction of Christianity, making it just another religion alongside other traditions. How could they say that Christianity and Zoroastrianism were basically the same thing? Our guide later explained that this exhibit had been built in response to religious violence. Several years earlier, a gunman from another religious tradition had entered the temple complex and killed many worshipers before being killed by police. The members of this religious group were careful not to inflame religious passions. They made a point of offering the same religious rituals for the gunman, who was not part of their community, as they did for deceased members of their community. They refused to allow the media access to the site so that what happened there would not become a media spectacle. And they built the Hall of Religions as a way to encourage religious peace.

Recent events in our world continue to remind us that we do need to find enough common ground among religions so that we do not seek to harm one another. The search for common ground is a valid and holy search. But note that when Christians heard Hindus say that Christianity was just like everything else, something felt wrong about that. I suspect that when Hindus or Buddhists or Jews hear Christians say that all religions are basically the same, some feel that there is something wrong about that as well. Saying that all religions are basically the same does not do service to the real, profound, and significant differences that do exist in the world's traditions, differences that must be honored.

So how do we chart a path between the first response, which says that we have the only truth and everyone else is wrong, and the second response, which says that it does not matter which religion you choose because they are all basically the same? Here are some thoughts, rooted in my own experience and in recent statements from the Episcopal Church.

First, it is important for Christians living in an inter-religious world to claim and respect the Christian tradition. Sometimes the claims of Christianity seem somewhat outlandish, so that thoughtful, intelligent people may be somewhat embarrassed to say that we believe these things. However, learning about other traditions shows us that our faith claims are part of a universal human phenomenon. Religion is everywhere. People everywhere believe in something greater than themselves. As Christians, we believe that that something greater than ourselves entered this world in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. And the message revealed in the claims of Christianity is a message about God's eternal favor for the whole world. So our first job as Christian inhabitants of a religiously diverse planet is to respect our faith and seek to grow more deeply within our tradition. We will grow more in the spiritual life if we immerse ourselves fully in our own tradition rather than stick our toes into twenty.

Second, Christians living in an inter-religious world need to respect the traditions of others. One way to respect traditions is to learn about them. To that end, we are offering at Trinity this fall and next spring a series of conversations after the 10:15 service about Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We need to learn about the traditions of our neighbors. We need to defend religious freedom. We need to

practice hospitality. When Sikh or Muslim neighbors move in next door, get to know them. Learn as much as you can. Respect also means recognizing that it is not fair to compare the worst examples of one traditions with the best examples of ours. There are extremists in every tradition. There are false prophets in every tradition. There are saints in every tradition. So be gracious and discerning as you learn.

The third response, which I believe holds respect for the Christian tradition and respect for different traditions together, is to participate in the mission of God. Mission does not mean trying to convert everyone to our way of thinking. Mission means sharing with God in the ongoing reconciliation and healing of all things. The mission of God is revealed to us in the history of Israel and in the ministry of Jesus. It continues to this day in all kinds of ways. As the parables in our recent gospel lessons remind us, this mission of God grows and spreads like a weed, like leaven in a loaf, in places where we least expect it. Where we find that mission growing and erupting in a culture or religion that is different from ours, we celebrate it and cooperate with it. And where we need to proclaim the mission of God in a culture or part of the world in need of God's healing, especially our own, we proclaim it.

In 2009, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved a Statement on Interreligious Relations which included the following affirmations: "God's gracious love is not confined to the Christian community alone. Because of our faith in the incarnation, we expect to meet God in our neighbor, whom God commands us to love as we love ourselves."

The Statement goes on to say, "Professing salvation in Christ is not a matter of competing with other religious traditions with the imperative of converting one another. Claiming Jesus as the Way, therefore, requires us to "respect the dignity of every human being" (BCP, p. 305). This grounds our expectation that we shall discover new insights and develop new relationships through interreligious dialogue. In mutual encounters and shared ascetic, devotional, ethical, and prophetic witness, we dare to hope that God will reveal new and enriching glimpses of a reconciled humanity." **

As Christians living in an interreligious world, we claim the tradition that has been given to us in all its fullness, we respect the traditions of others, and we seek to participate in God's mission of love and reconciliation for all the world. Amen.

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* Islam in the US increased from 527,000 to 1.3 million, Buddhism from 404,000 to 1.2 million, Hinduism from 227,000 to 582,000, Baha'i from 28,000 to 49,000, Sikhism from 13,000 to 78,000. <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/>

** Full document at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/interreligiousrelations.pdf>

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