

Sharing the Gospel in a Religiously Diverse World

W. Eugene March

Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

More than three decades ago I had my first personal experience of official, intentional interfaith conversation. I was part of a denominational task force aimed at exploring the past and present of Christian/Jewish relations. There were about twenty of us, mostly Presbyterian Christians but with several Jews as well. We went around the room introducing ourselves, who we were and what we did, and indicating what we hoped might be the outcome of our conversations. We each had a name plate that faced out to the group so we could all learn one another's names. When it came my time, I tried to be oh so polite, oh so careful, hoping not to offend any one with my theology and especially not the Jews who were present. In the middle of my stammering, one of the Jews—a prominent Jewish philosopher—interrupted me saying, “Gene, are you trying to say that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior?” I hesitated and then replied, “Well, yes I am.” To which he responded, “Then just say it! I can handle it.”

That was a most instructive moment for me! I was who I was, and that was what I was to share. I didn't need to worry about somehow offending someone of another faith. They wouldn't have joined the conversation if they were overly sensitive about such matters. As a Christian I am a witness to what I believe God has done in Jesus Christ. That is what I have to share in interfaith dialogue. That is my “job,” my assignment. And you who are preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ have the same task! We are not to forget this. In any interfaith engagement, we are there as followers of Jesus. This said, however, there is much, much left to consider.

“This may be interesting,” I hear you say, “but what does it have to do with me? I already have more to do than I can say grace over. My people aren't concerned or interested in that kind of stuff, so why should I spend time worrying about ‘interfaith engagement’?” Well, let me suggest at least three reasons why you, why we, should be thinking about this matter.

In the first place there is the clear fact of our changing context. Sociologists and other students of demographic statistics have been reporting for some time that the numbers of adherents in religious traditions, Christian and non-Christian, are changing. The 2010 report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that while Protestants, a term inclusive of all the rich variety of those who so label themselves, still constitute a slim majority of the religious population in the United States (51 percent), they are steadily declining. The percentage of Roman Catholics is not declining, holding constant at around 24 percent, but that is only because Christian immigrants entering the United States are twice as likely to be Catholic than Protestant. What's more, 16 percent of the population does not claim any religious affiliation whatsoever. That is double what it was in 2000.¹

At the same time people of other faiths are becoming more visible. Within the United States, according to the Institute of American Religion, there are at present over 1,600 Hindu Temples and study centers.² Likewise, the number of mosques in North America has increased from around 1,200 in 2000 to 2,100 in 2010. There are now more Muslims than Presbyterians in the United States. In many communities this

increase has been peaceful, but the potential is always present for controversy and turmoil as has been witnessed in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, for the past two years.³ And “the others” are always especially vulnerable, as we all have been reminded by the August 5, 2012, senseless murder of a number of Sikhs in Wisconsin.

What is the point? Clear enough I think. The world—the context—in which I grew up has changed! We all know this, but what do we do about it? Preachers have a dual responsibility. First, they need to remind themselves regularly of this altered context. New language, new images, new approaches are called for. Old messages don’t address a changed situation. People of other religions, “the others” once known to me only through books, are now my neighbors. Second, preachers have the task of continually educating their congregants. The job is never complete. In a society where individuals are encouraged to isolate themselves from others and look out primarily for their own interests, particularly in matters of religion, this is difficult. I continue to be surprised at the number of educated people who do not or will not recognize that our situation has changed. I suspect that you know this even better than I, but while we still have time, together we need to find ways to talk differently *with* (not at) “the others” who are now our neighbors.

A second reason to reflect seriously about the issue of sharing the gospel in a religiously diverse world is that this is the world in which God has placed us. We are members of the human family, a family that includes people with hundreds, no thousands, of varying ways to talk about the Holy. And we all have to live together! Peacemaking is not an optional, take-it-or-leave-it matter for us. It is a life-or-death issue. Among a number of enemies who represent a “real and present threat,” ignorance may well be the greatest with which we must immediately contend. Whether we like it or not, we are now world citizens. The only question is whether we will be responsible or irresponsible in the exercise of our duties.

We must help our people know fact from fiction. All sorts of inaccurate and/or false perceptions are being pronounced as “unquestionable” by paranoid harbingers of hate. Key to our situation, at least in part, is providing timely, adequate, and correct information for those whom we serve. The need is critical; the extent of the ignorance is enormous. Consider the following that, while dated, still underscores the point:

Incredible as it may seem, the results of a survey reported by the National Geographic Society (November 20, 2002) revealed that among 18-to-24-year-old Americans, 87 percent could not locate Iraq on a world map, 58 percent could not find Japan, 65 percent did not know where France was, 69 percent were at a loss to locate the United Kingdom, for 29 percent the location of the Pacific Ocean was unknown, and believe it or not, 11 percent could not even find the United States on a world map.⁴

And if geography is such a mystery, how much more likely is it that knowledge and understanding of the culture and religion of “the others” in our human family is also missing? As one of the characters in the espionage thriller *The Bourne Betrayal* puts it, “We have to stop confusing Arab with Muslim, Saudi with Syrian, Azerbaijani with Afghani, Sunni with Shia.”⁵ Peacemaking begins with knowledge and understanding of “the others.” For many, personal study may be necessary in order to be prepared to instruct/engage others in a serious consideration of the religion and customs of our

neighbors, but whatever needs to be done, this educational task should no longer be left near the bottom of the to-do list.

Third, not only do we need to learn about the religions and customs of others, but we need also to learn more about ourselves. Yes, we have all been educated in first-rate seminaries and universities, and yes, we have years of experience, but how many of us have actually attempted to share our faith with someone outside of the Christian “tribe”? Some years ago Diana Eck wrote:

In the give and take of dialogue, understanding one another leads to mutual self-understanding and finally to mutual transformation. My encounter with Hindus has enabled me to understand my own faith more clearly and has required that I understand my own faith differently. It would only be honest to say that my faith as a Christian has been shaped by several religious traditions.⁶

As theologians we have to grapple with the significance of this rich religious diversity in which we find ourselves.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, if we are to be faithful to our calling, it is essential for us to understand ever more deeply what it is that defines us as Christians. It is not sufficient simply to mouth old lectures by a favorite professor; the context has changed. Certainly the Bible provides direction as do the creeds. But what do they mean? I know that I trust in Jesus as my Lord and Savior, but, like Eck, for me the meaning of that confession has taken on ever richer meaning the more I have talked with people of other faiths. For instance, Jews and Muslims have challenged me to explain just what I mean by the terms *Trinity* and *Incarnation* and *righteousness* and *justice*. And as I have tried and as I have heard their continuing concerns, my own understanding has been expanded, given more nuance, and made clear to me that I still have much to learn.

One of my biggest “learnings” has been an expansion and clarification of something I already knew, at least in part. The first several centuries of the Christian movement were marked by a vigorous diversity! In the beginning there were numerous groups who considered themselves followers of Jesus, but no one central authority that defined an “official” theology. Accusations about “heresy” were made by some against others, but there was no established orthodoxy by which to arbitrate these charges. In fact, it was not until the fifth century C. E. that an official “canon” of the Bible became widely agreed upon. Diversity, not uniformity, marked our beginnings. Peter Lampe describes the religious situation in second-century Rome as follows:

Early Christians in Rome formed various house churches. These groups met in private homes. There was no local center for Roman Christianity. This factionalism, similar to that of the Jews in the city, facilitated a theological pluralism. Thus, second-century Rome saw Christian groups following numerous theological directions: Marcionite, Valentinian, Carpocratian, Theodotian, Modalsitic, Montanist and Quartodecimanian teachings. There were Cerdo’s followers and house churches of (what was only later called) the “orthodox” faith. There existed a Jewish-Christian circle that still observed the Torah....Some groups exhibited a logos theology that was

too complicated for lesser educated Christians. Some circles believed in the millennium and others did not. Roman Christianity was multicoloured and as such often also reflected the various geographical and educational provenances of Roman Christians.⁷

What's more, this diversity among Christians was paralleled by an equally diverse number of "pagan" religions. Rome was a very multicultural, religiously diverse city. It was in this setting that early Christians, a distinct minority (as were the Jews), made their way and did so successfully.

As I have reflected upon our beginnings, I have become ever more convinced that diversity is not at all a bad thing. Perhaps God never intended us all to look just alike or believe just alike. Perhaps our witness is better when it is presented – as it was in the first three centuries of our movement – in different ways by contrasting, sometimes even contradictory, voices. Certainly, when speaking with persons of other faiths, we do well to acknowledge our many internal differences even while we witness to our common allegiance to Jesus Christ. Most of the people of other faiths with whom I have spoken understand what I mean. They know of similar diversity within their own groups.⁸ Perhaps we can and should develop a greater appreciation for God's love by carefully considering the multiplicity of ways God has reached out to the incredibly diverse human family of which we are a part.

A second outcome from my encounter with persons of other faiths has been the recognition that for the most part, they simply do not care about our family quarrels. While my position on "transubstantiation" or "prevenient grace" might be important for some, it is not for most Jews, Muslims, or Hindus. They may be a little curious to learn how our differences developed, but they really only care about what we do. They find our response to the instruction found in the letter of James far more important than our official theology:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

What we *do* will trump what we *say* every time!

For too long Christians have maintained that we have the best, indeed the only, true understanding of what God is doing in our world. It is hard to engage with those of other faiths who do not start where we want to start. The Muslims and Jews with whom I have talked are quite prepared to accept my self identification as Christian without asking me to explain differences I may have with other Christians. What they want to know is if I will accept their self identifications in the same way. I cannot have a serious conversation with any one if I begin with a string of exceptions concerning what I am willing to discuss and on what terms. If I approach anyone else—and especially a non-Christian—with the goal to "persuade" the other no matter what, then I need not make the effort. I should have known this just as a matter of common sense, but it has become painfully clear in several early encounters with

others different from me.

Nonetheless, theology does matter to me and to many Christians, so what are we to do? I believe the correct approach will be to prioritize our concerns. There are numbers of theological doctrines that have provoked heated debate among Christians across the centuries: virgin birth, resurrection, spiritual gifts, grace, salvation, eternal life, and predestination to name a few. We have every right, indeed every obligation, to continue to struggle with these matters. But all of this is for *our own edification*. To insist that everyone join the conversation is unnecessary and is doomed from the beginning.

What we need to do is to reflect carefully about those with whom we are willing to share the descriptive term “Christian.” In that consideration we need to remember that we did not call ourselves to be followers of Jesus; Jesus called us. What could a tax collector have had in common with a fisherman or one trained in Pharisaical law? How did women and men of quite varied backgrounds come together around Jesus? They were so different, yet each was a follower of Jesus. I do not say I am Christian because I have fully understood the teaching of the one I call Lord; I know that I haven’t. There are those who know more than I do about all manner of material. I know that there are others who have risked far more than I and who have been more loyal to Jesus. Nonetheless all of us from my point of view (and I hope from God’s as well) are “Christian.”

What I am suggesting is that we be careful about the way we draw the bottom line. I am certain that there are many in Africa who identify themselves as Christian with whom I have serious disagreement, but I am not going to say that they are not Christian. What are the “essentials” upon which we must agree? For me, if one says that Jesus Christ is his/her Lord and Savior, I will begin a conversation with that person assuming that no matter how different we may be, we are both Christian. But, obviously, I do not approach those of other faiths with that same assumption nor do I believe that I have to bring them to my understanding before we can have a mutually beneficial interchange. None of us can impose our view on another. My duty as a disciple of Jesus is to share my understanding of what that means for me: I am a forgiven sinner whose Lord is at work in the world to establish the reign of God. How God may use my witness is not mine to know.

When I went to seminary fifty-five years ago, there was one basic attitude toward those of other faiths: they were pagans we needed to convert! That was it. Gradually across the years another view emerged, a more inclusive theology, which approached people of other faiths with the assumption that while Christianity was the “best,” there could still be some “truth” in views held by others. My own personal experience has brought me to an expanded version of this position. I have met too many people — Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahais — who seem to have as earnest a faith as I and who live every bit as moral a life as I. I have come to believe that they, in some way different than my own, have come to a legitimate awareness of the Holy. I am not a “universalist” — only God can make such ultimate determinations — but I do believe that God’s redemptive act in Jesus Christ extends God’s love to all people, believers and nonbelievers alike. Humanity — all of us — have been forgiven, and that is good news to be shared.

My approach, then, to sharing the gospel in a religiously diverse world is four-fold. First, and most important, is to become genuinely humble before the task. I

do not know everything about anything, and least of all about the fullness of God's purposes. Christians for too many years approached the "unchurched" as God's enemies in need of conversion or eradication. Jews and Muslims especially have every reason to be suspicious of us when we try to establish contact with them. In the past such "contact" too often ended in disaster for the non-Christians. Humility is now essential for us if we want to engage persons of other faiths in any kind of relationships. The burden of proof is on us. Are we going to relate as "superiors" who have something they "need," or do we seek to join with them in learning more about their beliefs and in the process to deepen our own awareness of God's incredible love?

Second, I approach the task of witnessing to the gospel with a different understanding of the purpose of my testimony. At one time I assumed that the goal of "evangelization" was to make all people Christian. That is the way the "Great Commission" has been understood for a very long time. Unfortunately, for some people, in lieu of having any "natives" around to convert, that meant trying to persuade Methodists to become Baptists or Presbyterians to become Catholics. Everyone needed to be a Christian *just like us!*

But as I have studied the foundational text on which this mission has been built, I have become convinced that we have misunderstood the matter. As in many other places, we have forgotten the original context of the text. The early Christian movement constituted a very small minority within the small Jewish minority in the Roman Empire. They were in no way equipped to try to convert all the peoples of the Empire. What Matthew 28:19-20 says, in my opinion, is that we are to go and invite people all around the world to become disciples, with us, of Jesus of Nazareth. As disciples we have the important mission of "salting" the communities in which we live with the vision and good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. We were never intended to be the whole loaf; rather we are the yeast! We cannot control the whole society, but we can and should stand as lights in the darkness ever reminding all that the reign of God has broken in with Jesus, and God's justice and peace will one day be fully realized. "Make disciples throughout the world" is not the same as "convert everyone in the world." Indeed, God has and is already working amidst the whole human family and not only with my company. I have come to understand far more clearly that *I* can't "make" anyone a disciple. I can share with them my own convictions about Jesus as Lord and Savior, but if anything more is to happen, it is strictly the work of God.

In the third place, I now consider it far more important to find venues for conversation, not confrontation, with the non-Christians with whom I live. I think we need to do this for the sake of our own spiritual growth and because shared experiences are the real hope for significant peacemaking. As Stephen Prothero has pointed out,

What the world's religions share is not so much a finish line as a starting point. And where they begin is with this simple observation: something is wrong with the world....They part company, however, when it comes to stating just what has gone wrong, and they diverge sharply when they move from diagnosing the human problem to prescribing how to solve it.⁹

Everyone does not agree with Christians that sin, and salvation from sin, is the primary religious issue. I need to hear this from "the others" and decide what response is appropriate. I have suggested in *God's Tapestry* a number of possible venues for

exploring our differences, from shared meals to shared building projects, from joint political action to in-depth educational events, including the study of some of our various holy texts.¹⁰ Obviously one must begin where one's people are, but there is no reason to shy away from "controversial" topics, at least not if everyone understands that the aim is to learn from one another rather than to try to convert one another.

Finally, my own approach is now defined in large part by the metaphor of "tapestry." In view of the rich diversity everywhere to be found in God's creation, the best way, it seems to me, to understand who I am and what I am to do is to acknowledge and reflect closely upon this reality. If God delighted in the rich number of plants, animals, birds, and people that God created, then perhaps I should also. Rather than assume my way is the only way, perhaps it would be better to see it as one of God's ways.¹¹ That does not diminish its truth or value for me, but by seeing myself and my understanding of the Christian faith as one thread in a magnificent tapestry that God is creating, I find great purpose in maintaining my "thread" in all its uniqueness, even as I consider all the other materials and colors that God is using. Each thread is different and each is valuable.

In conclusion, as I wrote in *God's Tapestry*:

To be able to make the contribution expected of us, we must commit ourselves to becoming better informed about our own religion and to engaging in honest, open dialogue with those of other faiths. We will have to open our eyes and recognize the new context in which we now are challenged to witness as Jesus' disciples. The Bible requires new interpretation appropriate to the new situation. And it can't be only with our heads. It must also involve our hearts. Our intellects will need to be informed by empathy as well as by "the facts."¹²

Notes

1 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: <http://religionspewforum.org>.

2 The Association of Religion Data Archives census of Hindus: www.thearda.com.

3 See: usatoday.com/news/religion/2013-02-29.

4 W. Eugene March, *Wide, Wide Circle* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 66. For more recent data, go to The Association of Religion Data Archives: www.thearda.com.

5 Van Lustbader, *The Bourne Betrayal* (New York: Vision, 2008), 672-673. To be sure, this is not a "scholarly" study, but it offers a succinct, legitimate criticism of many in our society with regard to our knowledge of Islam.

6 Diane Eck, *Encountering God* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), xii.

7 Peter Lampe, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 2004), 26.

8 See Akbar S. Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007) for a discussion of the diversity within Islam.

9 Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 11.

10 W. Eugene March, *God's Tapestry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 96-99.

11 Paul Knitter, *Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 173, urges what he calls an Acceptance Model that recognizes the real differences between the religious traditions of the world and then accepts the integrity of each.

12 March, *Tapestry*, 109.