

Pathways for Reconciliation

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Where We Dwell in Common

Pathways for Dialogue in the 21st Century

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Friends:

I want to thank Gerard Mannion, first, for inviting me to speak in this gathering. I am rather a theologian gone astray from the academy, having spent most of my life in directly mediating, interpreting, consulting in actual conflicts, but I have found our theology departments not the worst place to teach ways of reconciliation.

Religion has a very bad name among those committed to making peace. They tend to see it fundamentally as trouble and are anxious to exclude the religious actors from the dialogue. There are ways, as I'm sure you understand, that religion does lead to violence and exclusion.

I find it necessary to distinguish clearly between faith and religion. We place faith in God, trusting that he provides for our good and is our reason to face the world unafraid to act confidently in his sight and commit ourselves in his name to the good and service of others. Those others are so much involved in our life of faith that we do not do this alone, as solipsists, but in community – communion – with each other. Religion is an institutional service to our community of faith. Without some kind of structure, as much or as little as we need, we have no true association as a community in our faith, but once we have that institution, we have to guard carefully that it not be used for purposes that have nothing to do with that agenda of faith, for instance, for the power or privilege interests of its own leaders, or as a buttress for our identity.

I speak from within a Christian community of faith, and I have learned to recognize those essentials of faith as common to the Abrahamic family of religions, Jews and Muslims as well as my own Christian fellows. All three of these religions arose in the context of a world of polytheism, in which the myriad governing powers of the world, fire and storm, war and peace, love and hate, all hypostasized into gods and goddesses, tell us that our life and the world has no true center, that we are the playthings of these multiple powers, which at best are indifferent to us, at worst actively hostile. This is religion, and may be strongly institutionalized. Its practice amounts to a kind of bribery, placatory offerings to these many deities to keep the harm they might do us at bay, all the while with the knowledge that they are stronger than us and we will ultimately lose. It is therefore essentially a religion of terror.

The Abrahamic monotheisms, all alike, teach us that none of the above is true, that God is one, that he wills our good, so that the world, our life and our history make sense, and we can commit ourselves, in faith, to the good of others.

I must not say that our faith, our religion, and therefore we ourselves, are better than others. Our various religions, in fact, are highly permeable. We have plenty of people who go to our churches, our synagogues, our mosques, to whom this is social convention and no serious part of their lives. Even for those who aspire to monotheistic faith, it is not easy to put full trust in God in all circumstances. If you are married, have a house and mortgage and several children to care for, it is hard to keep all that clear, and we are often left like the man who asks of Christ: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." If basically our life is simply about keeping at bay all the many crises and dangers that could engulf us, we are practical polytheists, little as we may tend to hypostatize the many powers that we fear. I would not presume to classify faiths such as Hinduism, with its many spirits, as religions of fear, because a sense of unity does clearly stand behind them. But we have here two generic types of religion: depending on how central religion is to our lives, here are two distinct classifications: monotheism or polytheism, before which the particular named religious communities are very permeable.

And there is a third generic possibility: dualism, a form of religion for which the world is fundamentally a place of contest, a battle of good and evil, so equally matched that it is uncertain which will win, and the task of our life is to discern the evil (we always see ourselves, of course, as the good) and defeat it: a religion of war. Through the years of the Cold War, or now in the atmosphere of what our leaders have called the War on Terror, we have obviously been religious dualists. And with that we have the third generic class in a taxonomy of religions, with as many dualists in our churches, our mosques or our synagogues as anywhere else.

What has all this to do with a commitment to the peace of the world?

The burden of this must rest, because of our numbers, with Christians and Muslims. Between us we make up more than half of the world's population, and if we are not able to live peacefully with each other we can expect a very miserable 21st century. And because of the strategic place of the State of Israel in our world's affairs, this burden is shared too by Jews, even though their numbers are smaller. It is true that all our religions need to make this their goal, but the weight of responsibility for our mutual safety and good is with this our Abrahamic family.

I believe the most significant step to this goal was made from within the Islamic community, when on October 13th, 2007, 138 Muslim scholars, drawn from every branch of Islam, issued their statement, *A Common Word Between Us and You*. This was a magnanimous response to the grievance they had felt when, on September 13th, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI had spoken at Regensburg in ways that were seen as classifying Islam as a violent religion, to which a first 38 Muslim scholars had responded a month after that speech, on October 13th, 2006. I am not convinced that an adequate Christian response has yet been made to the Common Word

statement, granted that Miroslav Volf and his colleagues at the Yale Divinity School have worked admirably at it.

We Christians have long been accustomed to think that everyone must, for their salvation, become like us. Missionary zeal has characterized Christian life and we have always rejoiced in converts, not always recognizing, as a definition of that conversion, that conversion of heart is something recommended to the membership of our own faith community itself. It is in this sense that John the Baptist and Jesus himself preach conversion to their fellow Jews. They are not talking of a change of religion. But when it comes to recognizing and validating the faith of others we are aware that not everything goes, that the answer to the problem is not a generalized “That’s all right” to every perception. It is in this context that I draw up the taxonomy of religions that I have described, in quest of some criteria.

I heard Miroslav Volf himself, in a recent lecture on my home ground at Boston College, speak of our inclination, within any of our faith communities, to some degree of religious exclusivism, a supposition that, whatever God’s intent for our salvation, he is more open to us than to the others, but that those who are religiously exclusive in this way may yet be civilly more open to the others. I know it is not a common insight, but I would like to be able to validate the life of faith of those who follow different traditions than mine.

Growing up, as I did myself, in the time of the Holocaust/*Shoah*, and understanding even then the horror of the deed and the innocence of the victims, I had learned well before the time of the Second Vatican Council that Jews remained, as they had always been, beloved of God, their Covenant a permanent and irrevocable promise from God to which he would be faithful. And so, when the Council produced, in the Decree *Nostra Aetate*, its recognition of the validity of Jewish faith, I found myself already in the cheering section. A corollary to this is that Christians should neither despise Jewish faith nor seek conversion to Christianity as a necessity for Jews. When a significant number of Christian theologians signed a document to this effect a few years ago, many other Christians were bent out of shape, but when we look to the actual practice of the years since the Council we find that Christian efforts to proselytize Jews have for the most part disappeared.

I didn’t need, until the early 1980s, to pursue this question with regard to Muslims and Islam. I had known Palestinians for many years, Muslim and Christian, without ever having to confront questions of their difference. Palestinian Christians and Muslims had their issues, but those were not what their life was about; they had problems in common as Palestinians. It was only when I spent time in Lebanon in the midst of a civil war that presented itself as between Christians and Muslims that Muslim faith and my response to it became a serious theological and even existential question, which I had to discuss with everyone, of either group, I met. Did I mean it when I spoke, ever so easily, of the spiritual riches of Islam? I knew the difference between our mutual monotheistic faith, shared with Jews, and the classical paganism of the ancient world from the midst of which all three of these Abrahamic faiths had arisen.

As a believing Catholic Christian, I take these things not as merely religious phenomena, to be studied without commitment, but as matters of actual faith. The study of theology, for Jew, Christian or Muslim, as distinct from a mere religious phenomenology, is built on this supposition of faith, and on that basis looks for understanding, always asking the question: “What are we talking about?”

What then am I to believe of the faith of Muslims? Is it – to put it bare-facedly – of God, and not simply a case of deception? My Christian faith teaches me that I do not own God, nor does my Church, but that God is free, and may breathe where he wills. Seeing the faith and practice of Muslims, I must conclude that it is gift of God, just as I had long learned of Jews.

At the point when our belief in the exclusive value of our tradition of faith leads us to the exclusion of others, as not receivers of the gift of God, I conclude that this is in fact a form of dualism, a promotion of our own faith identity rather than of our whole-hearted reliance on God.

When I read then of the Idea of the Holy, as Rudolf Otto would have it, the *fascinans et tremendum* that can lead us equally to good or evil, I conclude that Otto speaks of religion, the institutional thing, so essential to a community of faith but its instrument rather than the thing itself. This can indeed, if an object of fear, lead to all the terrible things of which we know religions have been guilty. But if we are to speak of a faith in the one good and merciful God, I believe this is not so.

My interest is in the peace, a just peace that can work for the welfare of humankind, and I do know that it is always wrong to make religion an instrument for some other purpose than its own, which is faith, even when it is people of the best will who so use it, for agendas like this, of peace, which they see as good. Faith dictates its own agenda and must be left to do so. It is not to be made an instrument for something else.

People of peace will not readily trust it to its own agenda, because they have so often seen religion misbehave, used to promote an identity group through exclusion of those outside and through violence. But the agenda of genuine faith will in fact, of its nature, promote the peace, the reconciling of enemies in justice.

What then should we be seeking if we are friends to just peace? It is quite simply that people of faith be true to their faith, fully reliant on God, who brings his loving care to all people and in whose name we are delivered from all fear.