

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS THE TRUTH

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

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Today's gospel passageⁱ contains proof texts both for Christian pluralists and for Christian exclusivists. On the one hand, Jesus tells his disciples, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." Baptist minister and Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox has used this line of scripture for the title of a book in which he makes it clear that "God can and does speak to us through people of other faiths."ⁱⁱ On the other hand, Jesus also tells his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is the classic line of scripture used by many conservative Christians to insist that the only way to God or eternal truth is through Jesus Christ -- not through the Koran, nor through the Torah, nor through Krishna nor the Buddha nor the Tao nor any other way. My claim this morning is that religious pluralism is the truth -- and that our lives will be transformed when we truly embrace this truth. I'll be speaking to you longer than usual today, pushing a half an hour of preaching, because I think this is a particularly important topic, so please prepare for a ride.

What do I mean by religious pluralism? I'm making both a descriptive claim and a theological claim when I use this word. I don't think the descriptive one is controversial. We all co-exist, at least in this country, in an environment of many different religions, as well as secular philosophies like humanism. The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* defines "religious pluralism" as "the problem and opportunity of the simultaneous presence of different religious traditions within a single society."ⁱⁱⁱ President Obama has told us that we are "no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu

nation, and a nation of nonbelievers."^{iv} So, in this sense religious pluralism is just a fact. It's just a truth.

The theological claim is controversial, however. It's that there are many roads to the top of the spiritual mountain. There's not just one way through Jesus Christ. As a Christian pluralist, I personally affirm Jesus as my way, as my Lord and Savior, but I also believe that the exclusivist claim is wrong. I have no doubt that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, at least figuratively speaking, but I believe that Moses, Muhammad, Krishna, the Buddha and Socrates do too, among others. They're all there at the top of the metaphorical spiritual mountain -- they are all the way and the truth and the life -- and no one comes to the Father except through a multitude of them, or by having walked in many footsteps, or by being in a large presence (whether one fully realizes that or not).

Some of this comes clear through the prism of history. The Christian minister Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, credits the Hindu saint Mahatma Gandhi for his understanding of nonviolence that drove the American civil rights movement. But Gandhi credits Jesus' Sermon on the Mount for leading him to understand the nonviolent implications of his own Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi was also deeply affected by reading works of the Christian Leo Tolstoy, and called his first intentional nonviolent community in South Africa "Tolstoy Farm." But Tolstoy makes his own dramatic turn to an ascetic life of nonviolence from worldly success as a famous novelist through the influence of a fable from the Lives of the Saints that can be traced back through Muslim sources to the story of the life of the Buddha. Christian preaching and action by an African American in the twentieth century has a heritage steeped in Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism.

Or, to use another example, the rosary prayer beads used now by Roman Catholic Christians weren't part of Christian devotion for the first millennium of church history. They

were adopted at the time of the Crusades from the Muslims, many of whom still use prayer beads today. The Muslims practice, however, is traceable to earlier Hindu sources. Buddhists also adopted prayer beads from Hindu sources in India and then carried them out in their northeastern expansion through China to Japan, where they are still used in Buddhist piety today. Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists -- all linked together historically by their use of prayer beads, borrowed from each other, all around the world.^v

But history is not theology, or at least not the whole story of theology. Does God require only a single path to his doorway? Does God have many dwelling places within his (or her) house, or only one? A well-known modern Christian pluralist theologian, John Hick, sees God as the ultimate reality, the ground of being, the source of everything. But because we humans are finite and ultimate reality is infinite, because our life on earth is time-limited and ultimate reality is eternal, we can't use normal human concepts to describe ultimate reality or God. We can't properly describe ultimate reality as impersonal or personal, one or many. It's ineffable, or incapable of being fully expressed in words. That's not to say that God can't be characterized at all, but we rightly may use many descriptive words and still not have encapsulated all that God is.^{vi}

To say that God, in Christian parlance, is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, therefore, cannot encapsulate all that God is. Other non-Christian religions conceive of ultimate reality in other ways -- say as the Dharma or the Tao. Muslims have 99 names or attributes for God. Hindus chant 108 names for God. "This reality...is differently conceived, and therefore differently experienced, and therefore differently responded to from within the different world religions."^{vii} A classic parable to help us understand this theological point is called "The Blind Men and the Elephant." The elephant is a metaphor for God and we humans within our religious traditions are the blind men. One blind man feels a leg and reports that the elephant is a tree.

Another feels the trunk and reports that that the elephant is a huge snake. Another feels the tail and reports that the elephant is a rope. And so on.^{viii} None of the blind men can see or even conceive of the whole elephant. Each is convinced from his personal experience what the elephant really is, and argues that vociferously, claiming that others' perceptions and understandings are wrong. All would, of course, do much better in imagining the whole elephant if they would only engage in respectful dialogue and try to learn from each other. But even so, together they could never fully describe the whole elephant because there are parts of it that none can ever reach. So, according to theologian John Hick, "the great world religions constitute very different but so far as we can tell more or less equally valid ways of conceiving, experiencing, and responding to the ultimate reality with which religion is concerned."^{ix}

What difference does this all make on the ground, though, below the theological stratosphere? Eboo Patel, the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, and our Baccalaureate speaker here at Stanford last year, provides some answers in his book, *Acts of Faith*.^x He starts the book with an account of an abortion clinic bomber who killed and maimed people and then proudly pleaded guilty in court, saying that abortion needs to be "ruthlessly opposed" in the name of Christianity. The bomber cited verses from the New Testament to defend his actions. He evaded federal agents for five years because a number of fellow Christians helped him hide. On the day he was caught, one of the women who supported him defended her actions by exclaiming, "Rudolph's a Christian and I'm a Christian...Those are our values."^{xi}

Eboo Patel calls this bomber a religious totalitarian. Here's his definition of religious totalitarianism: "Only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed." He calls for "religious pluralism" as its antidote." He quotes W.E.B. Du Bois as having

said over a hundred years ago that "The problem of the twentieth century is the color line." Patel says that the problem of the twenty-first century is the faith line. On one side of the line, he claims, are the religious totalitarians. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists.^{xii}

This is a third approach to religious pluralism, somewhat different from the descriptive and the theological claims which I've already explained, although it has elements of each. According to Patel, religious pluralists "hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution."^{xiii} Patel preaches that "The outcome of the question of the faith line depends on which side young people choose." His book is "about how some people become champions of religious pluralism while others become the foot soldiers of religious totalitarianism. Its thesis is simple: influences matter, programs count, mentors make a difference, institutions leave their mark." xvi

Eboo Patel is a realist who recognizes that religious exclusivism is alive and well in the world, and he's not attempting to change Christians who think that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven, or Muslims who think that there is no God except God, making Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ tantamount to idolatry. But the religious totalitarianism that he opposes takes religious exclusivism to the next step: to outright bigotry. It's fomented by "Hindu nationalists, hate-filled rabbis, Christian Identity preachers, and Muslim" extremists.^{xiv}

Here's an example of how religious exclusivists are respected within his version of religious pluralism, without getting anywhere near religious totalitarianism. In building the

Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, Patel found that his first challenge was trying to get religious leaders on board. He met with people at the American Jewish Committee, the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, and several other religious organizations, and they were all apprehensive about involving their young people in interfaith activities. They were worried that the emphasis on harmony and social justice in interfaith programming would drown out the importance of strengthening individuals' religious identity within their own traditions.

It was best summed up by a senior person in the Archdiocese of Chicago who said, "I love the idea of interfaith cooperation. We certainly need more of that in this world. But my primary concern is that Catholic kids become better Catholics. I want them to know more about the Catholic tradition and to be more active in Catholic practices and institutions. Look, I think my religion has the banquet. I agree that all religions are holy and have something to offer, but I think Catholicism has the feast." (This position has an inclusive quality that puts it a step beyond pure exclusivism, but to get into that would be another sermon). Eboo Patel responded, "I totally understand your position. The truth is, most religious people feel that way. I certainly believe that Islam has something unique and powerful that holds my allegiance, and I believe one of my most important responsibilities as a Muslim is passing down my tradition to the next generation."

This worked to ease the Catholic's concerns. As Patel looks back on the conversation, he observes that "By proclaiming strong commitment to our respective faiths, even intimating that we believed what we each had was superior, we had cleared the way for an honest conversation. Neither of us was offended by the other's faith commitment. To the contrary, it had created a common bond -- two men of deep but different faiths talking about religious cooperation."

A critical issue for both of them was how to maintain adherents' faith identity in a religiously plural world. A top priority for the Interfaith Youth Core was "to help young people

strengthen their religious identities by creating a safe space where they could talk about faith." That was done by moving from "mutually exclusive discussions" -- for example where people argue about who's going to get into heaven and who's not -- to conversations about shared values (like, hospitality, compassion, and cooperation) that different religious communities hold in common. They are to be discussed, though, by raising up how each religious tradition in its particularity speaks to that value. So a Catholic student might say, "I really admire how the pope embodied mercy when he forgave the man who tried to assassinate him," and a Muslim student might respond, "There is a story like that in my religion: when the Prophet Muhammad returned to Mecca, he extended mercy by forgiving many of the people who had waged war against him."

This approach to religious pluralism isn't trying to teach that all religions are the same, but it demonstrates that religions have powerful commonalities, even though they each come to those shared values along their own paths. "Each religion has something unique to say about universal values through its particular set of scriptures, rituals and heroes." Going back to Hick's theological definition of religious pluralism, I personally interpret the Interfaith Youth Core approach as substituting "shared values" for "God," which has the added advantage of bringing secular people into the conversation. That is, we all describe the elephant of a shared value, like compassion or hospitality, from different perspectives, but at least we're talking to each other rather than trying to convert each other, or condemn each other, or kill each other. Then we can put those shared values into action too: say, in community service projects that we can work on together.^{xv}

One minimalist shared value could simply be surviving and co-existing on our spaceship earth, rather than blowing ourselves up, as we came close to doing during the Cold War with the U.S. and Soviet Union's doctrine of mutually assured destruction, and as we might do now with rampant religious terrorism and holy war. Patel insists that, "To see the other side, to defend

another people, not despite your tradition but because of it, is the heart of [religious] pluralism." He tells the story of the Indian movie *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*. A Muslim photographer and a Hindu housewife with a baby, who come from very different backgrounds, find themselves on the same cross-country bus in India. The bus stalls in an area of the country where Muslim-Hindu riots are raging and people are being killed. A group of extremist Hindus boards the bus and start checking I.D.'s, murdering each passenger with a Muslim name. As they approach the Muslim photographer, the Hindu woman protects him by saying that he's her husband. The two escape the Hindu extremists and make it to a nearby village, where they are then surrounded by a group of Muslim extremists. Here the photographer risks his life to protect the Hindu housewife and her baby by claiming that she's his wife and the baby is his child. Leaving the movie, Patel remembers his own failure in high school to protect a Jewish friend from anti-Semitic attacks. Then he "thought about the meaning of [religious] pluralism in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. I came to one conclusion: We have to save each other. It's the only way to save ourselves."^{xvi}

Patel reminds us that, "Pluralism is not a default position... Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to *choose* to step off the faith line onto the side of [religious] pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. To follow Robert Frost, it is easy to see the death of pluralism in the fire of a suicide bombing. But the ice of silence will kill it just as well."^{xvii}

In conclusion, religious pluralism is the way, the truth and the life. I see Jesus as a religious pluralist. He described loving your neighbor as yourself with the example of a hated foreigner not of his own tradition, a Samaritan.^{xviii} He saved the life of an adulterous woman he'd never met.^{xix} He fed five thousand people with words of institution that sounded like communion,

even though the vast majority were not followers of his.^{xx} He communed with Roman soldiers^{xxi} and ate with tax collectors.^{xxii} In terms of who would be with his Father in heaven, it was not just Jesus at his side; he told of Abraham being there too.^{xxiii} And when Jesus was transfigured on a mountaintop in the presence of God, Moses and Elijah were at his side.^{xxiv} So, may we too be religious pluralists, seeing it as an intentional commitment, imprinted by action. May we choose to step off the faith line onto the side of religious pluralism, make our voices heard, and engage in saving the world with our bodies, hearts and minds.

BENEDICTION

Take courage friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear,

And the stakes are very high. Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth: you are not alone. Amen.

Wayne B. Arnason

NOTES

ⁱ John 14: 1-14.

ⁱⁱ Harvey Cox, "Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue," *Christian Century* (August 17-24, 1998) pp. 731-735, as adapted from *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 848.

^{iv} Barack Obama, "Call to Renewal Keynote Address" (Washington, DC: June 28, 2006), <http://link.brightcove.com/services/link/bcpid1435509773>

^v Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 6-13.

^{vi} John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 27-30.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 82.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 49.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 149.

^x Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. xi.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. xv.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, pp. 164-167.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 179.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. xix.

^{xviii} Luke 10: 25-37.

^{xix} John 8: 1-11.

^{xx} Matthew 14: 13-21; Mark 6: 30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6: 1-14.

^{xxi} Matthew 8: 5-13.

^{xxii} Matthew 9:10; Mark 2:15; Luke 5:29.

^{xxiii} Luke 16: 19-31.

^{xxiv} Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36.