

Building Bridges: Toward Constructing a Christian Foundation for Inter-Religious Relationships in the Shift from Religious Privilege to Spiritual Plurality

Ken Chitwood

Abstract: Religious pluralism is a fact in an ever more globalized, individualized, and post-modern society. The reality of religious pluralism, and its attendant ideology of tolerance, presupposes a serious shift for the Christian Church from a position of privilege to one of marginality among many. It is necessary then that faithful, missional, Christians reconsider their foundational theology concerning other religions and worldviews and begin constructing a revitalized and benevolent approach to the “religious other.” This paper is an attempt to not only outline the facts, trends, and philosophy of religious pluralism, but also sketch a blueprint for a friendly, missionary, encounter with other religions founded on God’s Word.

Introduction: The Architecture of Modern Religious Pluralism

Architecture may seem a strange term to introduce a discussion of Christianity in an age of pluralism. Even so, religious buildings reflect the religious and cultural *Zeitgeist*. For example, in past millennia Christian cathedrals stood at the center, and at the highest points, of Christian communities. Mosques dominated Islamic territories. Monasteries, temples, and stupas dotted the landscapes of Buddhist areas. Where one religion superseded another, often as a show of imperialistic dominance, a house of worship of the new dominant religion would be built upon the ruined foundations of the former faith. Such was the case when mosques were built on Jewish holy sites in Israel or Christian cathedrals were constructed on top of Incan temples in Peru. The latter examples of religious architecture highlight, albeit negatively, the connotation of privilege inherent in the ability of ascendant or authoritative religious groups to build as, where, and how they please. In the modern world, this is not a possibility; the age of religious imperialism has, if not come to an end, been found suspect.

Ken Chitwood is a religion scholar and appointed PhD student at University of Florida studying Religion in the Americas with attendant emphases on globalization, transnationalism, immigration, Latina/o religion, and Islam. Chitwood is also a forward-thinking Lutheran theologian, preacher, and popular speaker who weaves together historical context, societal exegesis, and a winsome voice to address relevant issues in mission and ministry.

Copyright 2014 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 2 (2014) at www.lsfmissiology.org.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com if you would like to subscribe or order a print copy of this issue.

In the twenty-first century, public *and* private space are contested by a plurality of competing religious constituents. Buddhist statues are destroyed in Afghanistan, Christian churches are razed in Iraq, and mosques are the victims of arson in the United States. In publicly neutral spaces, another phenomenon has begun. Multi-faith, or interfaith, spaces are common in “airports, hospitals, prisons, shopping malls, entertainment complexes, and universities”;¹ and the populace, for the most part, is comfortable with such religiously neutral locales. What these spaces suggest is the rise of religious pluralism in the public square. As Bender notes, “we can trace the genealogies of ‘expanding’ religious pluralism,” via architectural developments. By way of illustration, an architectural competition was staged in Berlin recently for the design of a private, stand-alone space for Muslims, Jews, and Christians to worship as neighbors under one roof.² It is being called the “House of One” and was described sarcastically as “the world’s first churmosquogogue.”³ This project is not unique,⁴ and the trend toward interfaith architecture is telling; it reveals not only the fact, but the *ideology*, of religious pluralism.

The fact of plurality is evident when one considers statistics. Despite the claims of philosophical secularism and “the secularization theory,”⁵ religion remains a potent force in the world today. Upwards of 5.8 billion people (83%) around the world identify with a religious group.⁶ Approximately one-third (32%) of the global population is Christian, another quarter (23%) Muslim, 16% are “Unaffiliated,” another sixth (15%) are Hindu, and a significant sliver (7% and 6%) are Buddhist or follow a “folk religion,” that is, beliefs and practices closely tied to a particular people, ethnicity, or tribe with no creed or formal clergy (including African indigenous religion, Chinese folk beliefs, Australian aboriginal customs, and Native American Indian practices).⁷ These sundry faith traditions and practices are widely distributed across the globe. While many remain largely concentrated in particular regions, e.g., Hinduism in India, Chinese folk religion in China, all are globally dispersed to some extent, even if some not as much as others, e.g. Christianity, Islam, Judaism. This extensive geographic distribution of religion arises from globalization, trans-nationalism, and immigration. Due to the influence of these flows of people, ideas, and institutions, the religions of the world are now omnipresent in just about every nation on earth. There are Hindus in Holland, Muslims in Mexico, Christians in China, and Buddhists in Burkina Faso.

Indeed, religious diversity is part of the very fabric of the United States. Not only is our nation inherently secular (thanks to the aforementioned First Amendment), but it has always been shaped by individual liberty, choice, and the free flow of people and ideas. While religious diversity was more Protestant and Roman Catholic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and more Judeo-Christian in the early to mid-twentieth century, today our religious diversity is stunningly eclectic. It is common today to have a Hindu co-worker, a Mormon neighbor, and a “spiritual, but not religious” nephew, not least because there are more than 1,700

religious groups in the U.S., 600 of which are non-Christian entities.⁸ These various faiths compete for the nation's soul. Forty-two different religious bodies, including Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, the LDS, and indigenous religions can claim to be the largest religion in specific, selected U. S. counties.⁹ When it comes to the principal non-Christian tradition by county, this list expands to include Bahá'í, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.¹⁰ In Houston, the fourth largest city in the U.S., and labeled "the most diverse city in the United States" and "a glimpse of America's future,"¹¹ there are four times as many Muslims as there are Lutherans.¹² Certainly, the U.S. is a religiously diverse landscape contested by various spiritualities.

Several trends that have led to this situation and several antecedent results of this assortment deserve analysis before we explore options for responding to religious diversity from a Christian perspective. Diana L. Eck notes that "the religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past thirty years, but most of us have not yet begun to see the dimensions and scope of that change...so gradual has it been and yet so colossal...an astonishing new reality."¹³ Observing this subtle but significant new spiritual reality, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell identified as causes "a shock and two aftershocks." The shock was in the 1960s—the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll culture. The first aftershock was the conservative religious reaction steered and channeled by charismatic leaders into an evangelical "religious right" movement. The second aftershock was a reaction provoked by the first aftershock: the abandoning of the church in the 1990s by many young people, repulsed by the politicization of religion.¹⁴ These domestic trends melded with the advent of the global transfer of information via the internet and other communication technology; the increased immigration flows from Latin America, Africa, and Asian nations; and the combined effect of transnational flows of people, goods, and ideas to create the current religious topography of the U.S. This spiritual panorama includes the following trends:

- the rise of secularism and "the nones"¹⁵ concomitant with an acceptance of secularization and its attendant consequence of the privatization of religion
- the increased numbers of "spiritual, but not religious," wanderers who mix-and-match their spirituality in America's buffet style religious marketplace¹⁶
- the swelling influence of Latina/o religion, including the reshaping of American Catholicism and the rise of Latina/o Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, non-religion, and Islam¹⁷
- a surging multi-cultural, multi-generational, and marginalized Muslim population

- the proliferation of Asian religious influence via traditional sources such as Hindus and Buddhists (although with new communities in unlikely locales, like the American South), but also Sikhs, Baháís, Chinese folk religions, and Western interpretations of Asian religions (Western Zen, popular Yoga, etc.)
- the widening scope and sequence of conflict and mutual compromise in regard to religion in the public square

Beyond these factual trends, there is also the *ideology* of religious pluralism. Lesslie Newbigin wrote, “it has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralistic society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.”¹⁸ This cherishing of pluralism is what educator and author Andy Wrasman calls “metaphysical pluralism”¹⁹ and is elsewhere referred to as “literal,” “transcendental,” or “agnostic” pluralism. This pluralism is in apposition to “social” or “religious pluralism in the public square,”²⁰ which reflects the pure facts of pluralism. The ideology of religious pluralism not only celebrates pluralism, but seeks to point to a sole, transcendent, truth to which all religions aspire, but none individually apprehends.

As the architecture of religious pluralism continues to expand, it looms large in the façade of Christian privilege. Essentially, both the fact and mythos of religious pluralism threaten to erode the foundations of Christian privilege. Not only is Christianity no longer privileged as *the* religion in the United States, let alone globally; but, philosophically, many religions now compete with Christianity in the marketplace of spiritualities. Betwixt and between pluralism as fact and ideology, Christianity shifted from the center to the margins, “from privilege to plurality.”²¹ The above overview provides a foundation for understanding the pluralism on the rise around the globe and calls into question the Christian foundations of society that many still hold dear. What follows is an attempt to provide a blueprint for how Christians can successfully navigate a pluralistic world, with or without Christian hegemony.

The Eroding Foundations of Christian Privilege

Fear that the architects of plurality are deconstructing the foundations of our Christian privilege often leads to a typical response to plurality and the concomitant posture toward other faiths: aggressive engagement. An editor for a popular book review publication recently rejected my request to review two apologetic books dealing with the world’s religions. The refusal was not based on the specific content of the books, but on their genre. The editor lamented, “All I am seeing from publishers right now is apologetics books. Enough already.” Why the exasperation?

The popular posture of aggressive, apologetic, engagement with other religions is indicative of a desire to shut out the pluralism, to draw strict boundaries between Christianity and other religions, and to reassert Christian privilege. At its best, this posture engages in combative apologetics and/or polemics; at its worst, it espouses physical violence against “the religious other.” At this posture’s core is a philosophy that says Christians must fight fire with fire and aim to deconstruct errant beliefs, cast down idols and, if absolutely necessary, destroy those who would deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Those who propose such an approach believe that if our commitment to Christianity is strong, then our response to other religions must be bellicose. That is a false correlation. First, physical violence against those of other faiths in the name of Jesus has no place in the Christian community. Second, in our current climate there is no way that even a verbal strike (in the form of assertive apologetics or vigorous polemics) is the most effective way to interact with people of other religions. Often, books that are written to defend the Christian faith and undermine other religions are read only by the choir to reinforce their worldview and to act as a comfort blanket for them in a religiously pluralistic world. The response of many non-Christians to such approaches is one of accusation—that Christians are arrogant, believing that they are the sole arbiters of truth and, therefore, superior to other believers and practitioners. For good or for ill, amidst “this cultural milieu, the confident announcement of the Christian faith sounds like an arrogant attempt of some people to impose their values on others.”²² As one young person shared with Timothy Keller in New York City, “It’s arrogant to say your religion is superior and try to convert everyone else to it.”²³ With this posture of aggressive engagement, Christians are not only not gaining a hearing but are in danger of confirming the rumor that they are more akin to “founders of empire” than “fishers of men.”²⁴

Such a perspective derives from the perception that Christianity has long enjoyed its position of privilege at the expense of other religious and spiritual voices. From the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, Christianity was associated with empires, empires that marched on as colonial powers, carving up the world and claiming indigenous lands for their own. These hegemonic powers sought to replace older world systems with their own civilization and, hence, their own religion—Christianity.²⁵ In the late twentieth century, there arose a desire among post-modern and post-colonial researchers to permit “the lesser voices of history to speak.”²⁶ These “lesser voices” are the voices of indigenous populations, of subjugated peoples and, often, non-Christian religions. In India and Latin America, in Africa and Oceania, these “subaltern” voices²⁷ are attempting to counter the hegemony of Western, Christian, imperial representations, research, and religions by re-telling, re-writing, and re-presenting their story to the world. With increasing globalization, syncretism, and plurality, hybridity or fusion becomes their point of resistance and their platform for recognition. And so, Christians who speak out against these voices with aggressive engagement, seeking to shut them down or drown them out, are

quickly accused of neo-imperialism or worse. Employing a posture of aggressive engagement with other religions and worldviews in this pluralistic world puts Christians in danger of being perceived as self-important presumptuous preachers who seek the reassertion of their privilege rather than peaceful prophets in an age of plurality. This will not do for successful encounters with the world's sundry spiritualities.

Regardless of the degree of the entanglement of Christianity with imperialism (the overriding perception of Christendom by popular culture) and Millennials' suspicious perceptions of traditional Western institutions (especially the Church) preclude any attempt by Christians to re-establish privilege or engage in any form of aggressive engagement. The cry for the subaltern voice to be heard means that in order to gain a foothold for proclaiming the Gospel, the Christian may first have to be silent. Lesslie Newbigin suggests that "we must now learn to listen humbly to the voice of other cultures. In this climate all judgments about culture and about the relation of the gospel to culture are colored by this profound pessimism about our own."²⁸ Yes, in moving from privilege to plurality, Christians will have to adjust their posture from one of aggressive engagement to something else if they wish to gain a hearing in a hybrid context. It may seem paradoxical, but the importance of such a posture—this "sacred duty" or "friendly engagement"—will be elucidated more fully below.

The good news is that, in navigating such a seemingly perilous landscape, we are not left without guidance from Scripture. Christianity has always, in one way or another, existed in a pluralistic context. Whether it was the religious milieu of the ancient Near East, the imperial cultus of the Roman Empire, the mixture of Germanic fetishisms, Islam, Medieval spirituality, or the contemporary pluralism in the West, the Christian church has always had to construct its character in a context of multiplicity.

Foundations for Inter-Religious Relationships

In seeking to address religious pluralism without engaging in aggressive apologetics, we must first ground ourselves in our own Scriptures and search out how we can shift from a strong, aggressive Christianity to what Brian McLaren calls "a strong, benevolent" one.²⁹ The space of this essay, and its chosen scope, does not warrant a full exposition of the passages that can be mined to help us re-construct our approach to other religions, but a few comments on three key passages will suffice.

Genesis 1—Shared Creation, Shared Fall

One of the central moves I propose Christians make in order to engage other religions in a pluralistic world is to deconstruct the "us vs. them" mentality,

resurrecting an “us *for* them” attitude. This would mean turning “us *apart from* them” to “us *with* them”; “us *above* them” to “us *alongside of* them”; and transforms “us *in spite of* them” into “us *respecting* them.”³⁰ To cultivate that type of attitude, friendly engagement, and love, we need to search our beginnings. As I said before, Christianity has always existed in a pluralistic context. Thus, as African post-colonial philosopher Mandivamba Rukuni advocated, “to know where we are going, we must know where we come from.”³¹ Therefore, the best place to start in our search for source material for the friendly engagement of other religions is in the narrative poetry of Genesis 1.

The creation poem, “in the beginning,” reveals the foundational elements of humanity—who we are, what we are made from, and who made us. Thus, looking back on Genesis, we get a sense of how to navigate our world. There are two things in particular from the account of creation in Genesis that are relevant here: (1) all of humanity and its people—Confucians, Christians, and Candomblé initiates—are all created in the *imago dei* (the image of God); (2) likewise, we all share in the fallenness of humanity and creation. We also see here in the book about beginnings that, “human life is both personal and corporate. [That] [n]o human life can be rightly understood apart from the whole story of which each life-story is a part.”³² As Timothy Keller offers, “Christians believe that all human beings are made in the image of God...[which] leads Christians to expect nonbelievers will be better than any of their mistaken beliefs could make them.”³³ The *imago dei* says we are all alike in creation—Christian and Muslim, Hindu and atheist. We are all interwoven into a divinely woven tapestry of life and human history. Therefore, we can view one another positively, sharing in a common humanity and a common Creator. But that isn’t, unfortunately, the end of the story. We fell from this unity. We lost this communion. Now we live with this heritage of hate, the original sin of the “us vs. them” divide. Where once we shared in a pure *imago dei*, we now share in an impure *imago ipsum*—an image of selfish desire. As Brian McLaren writes, “The tensions between our conflicted religions arise not from our differences, but from one thing we all hold in common: an oppositional religious identity that derives strength from hostility.”³⁴ Keller adds, “[t]he biblical doctrine of universal sinfulness also leads Christians to expect believers will be worse in practice than their orthodox beliefs should make them.”³⁵ Thus, part of the restoration project of the universe that we see in Jesus is the goal of bringing unity out of diversity, wholeness out of division, *ubuntu* and communion out of disunion and discord. Jesus is the realization of a new genesis that interrupts the regression of human history. He is the embodiment of divine creativity, and, as such, Jesus is an end to the era of hostility and a restoration of that which truly unites us—our Creator.

John 4—Not Just Red Text . . .

You see this restoration clearly in John 4, when Jesus grabs a drink with a woman of scandal at the local watering hole. In this episode, we see Jesus breaking down many barriers. First, he is with a woman at the well in the middle of the day. Not only is this not *kosher* (a man and a woman together like this in public is scandalous), but he is a Jewish rabbi and she is a Samaritan woman of ill repute. Yet, beyond these massive gender issues there is also a significant religious divide that Jesus bridges as he sits down to dialogue with her. Samaritans were not simply the Jews' neighbors to the north, they were a splinter religious sect that worshiped on a different mountain and, by extension, a different deity. In the eyes of the Jerusalem establishment, Samaritans were non-Jewish "others." Samaritans were "them." Realizing this significant split, the woman said, "'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)" (Jn 4:9).

Even so, Jesus wades into this woman's world at the well, drinks with the "them" in the flesh and, shockingly, talks *with* her, not *at* her. Yes, Jesus preaches a corrective; He brings conviction, but He does not lecture, pontificate, or sermonize. As I like to say of this passage, *it is not all red text*. It is black and then red.³⁶ She talks, and then Jesus talks—dialoguing. Jesus appreciates what this woman has to say and listens to her talk about her faith, her practice, her religion. She shares according to John 4, "'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem'" (Jn 4:16). Jesus does not exactly sidestep this argument over right practice and worship; rather, He speaks the truth in love and invites her to drink from His "spring of water welling up unto eternal life" (Jn 4:13) and, with a fair bit of invitational mystery, promises that despite present religious differences there will come a day when we all will worship the Father in Spirit and truth (Jn 4:21–24). Listening to Him, the woman apperceives that the promise of a Messiah who is going to come to restore all things—even worship—is realized in this man sitting next to her. He Himself is that One. Jesus does not end by telling her how wrong she is, how horrible she is, or how she is going to burn in hell. Instead, Jesus simply reveals Himself. He shows her Jesus. We might do the same when interacting with people of other religions, seeing that "the essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue [not the lecture, sermon, or diatribe] will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible."³⁷ When all else fails, it seems, the best course of action is to share the story of Jesus.³⁸

Acts 17—That They Might Grope Their Way

Even so, Jesus tells the woman, concerning her religious ritual and that of the Samaritans, "you worship what you do not know" (Jn 4:22). Similarly, in Acts 17,

we see that Paul not only illustrates that he is educated in the beliefs, history, and practices of the Athenians, but he also offers them something more, something they have been looking for but did not know. Let us take a deeper look at this exchange.³⁹

Without a doubt, Acts 17, specifically Paul's encounter with the philosophers and interlopers at the Areopagus, abounds with wise insights for engagement with other worldviews. First, we notice that Paul was provoked by what he observed in the city of Athens, a city described as "full of idols." Here, Paul provides an example of being aware of the religious scene of the people and engaging with it. Moreover, his engagement with, and even exasperation over, the pluralism he saw led him to the spiritual centers of the city: the synagogue, the city streets (marketplace), and the town hall. The synagogue was the spiritual center of his religious homeland, the marketplace the locus of the popular multi-religious milieu, and the Areopagus the place where issues and ideas were discussed and decided upon. Following Paul's precedent, we might be led to engage with pluralism not only in our religious comfort zones (church/synagogue), but also in places where the religious debates of our age are being waged—in popular media and pubs, on university campuses, and on the internet.⁴⁰ While not forgoing Bible study, that should not be where our religious education or engagement ends. We should be able to balance the both the private and the public, the practice of biblical interpretation and cultural exegesis—to "keep our look in the book and our feet in the street."⁴¹ This approach will produce results; notice how Paul's popular encounter and presentation of Jesus (cf. Jn 4) led to an invitation from those Paul wanted to engage.

The second and third elements of Paul's method to consider involve respect and revelation. Invited to address the Areopagus, Paul began from a place of commonality and publicly voiced his respect for the very same "idolatry" that had so irritated him upon initial contact.⁴² Following his initial offense at pluralism, Paul was urged on to talk with the people in the synagogues and in the streets. Listening and learning, he came to an appreciation of where the Athenians were in their religious ritual and devotion. He expressed his respect for and knowledge of their traditions when he said, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious."⁴³ Upon beholding their religious devotion, Paul expressed his respect for their religiosity and appealed to the common ground that he and the Athenians shared in their beliefs and practices, referencing God's hand in creating and crafting cultures like his *and* theirs. He affirmed God's will that the Athenians be Athenian. In so doing, Paul asserted that the ethnography of cultures and the sociology of religions are teeming with divine promptings and religious intimations.⁴⁴ This respect then led to a point of revelation concerning "the God who made the cosmos and everything within it" (v. 24).⁴⁵ Through Paul, it is revealed that these cultures, created by God, and their attendant religious doctrines and practices are a means by which the people of the cosmos might "grope their way to God as if in the dark."⁴⁶ Other religions, philosophies, and worldviews are therefore preparatory programs for the revelation

of Jesus. John Howard Yoder states that there is no sense of supplantation, superiority, synthesis or syncretism called for in the collision of the revealed story of Jesus with other religions, but rather a sense that other religions are *preparations* and, in light of Christ, are in need of *reconception*. Paul proclaimed, alluding to the people's own poets and prophets, the uniqueness of Christ as the remodeling factor of their historical religious outlook. In this sense, there is less a deconstruction of their religions than a reconnection of their culture and story with the narrative of the cosmos and its Creator in, and through, the testimony of Christ.⁴⁷ In these ways, Paul not only respects the Athenian religion, but reveals the fullness of their spiritual quest in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

These references, as well as their short explications, are just the beginning of the biblical basis for bridge building between Christianity and other religions in a pluralistic age. What follows is a fleshing out of some key concepts that are derived from the passages above.

Toward Constructing a Friendly, Christian, Approach

Below is a six-step process for better engaging with individuals from another religious point of view. It draws on the Scripture passages above and from my own experience as a ministry leader and interfaith activist over the last decade. The process is not meant to be comprehensive, but a sketched blueprint for your own constructive efforts as an individual or, as I suggest, as a congregation.

Pay Attention

The first thing any of us must do in understanding other religions and responding to them is to attend to what is happening around us. While this paper presented some national and global trends in religion, non-religion, and spirituality, it is good to remember the axiom that "religion is always first and foremost local; it lives and thrives in particular places, cultures, and people."⁴⁸ Thus, it is important to pay attention to your neighborhood, your city, your community, your workplace, your family, and your friends. Mark Labberton of Fuller Seminary writes, "[h]uman existence, including global theology, involves acts of paying attention to God and paying attention to the world (to the particular world of people, relationships, culture, economics, religion, sociology, power, art, land, and more) in God's name...."⁴⁹ Thus, it is good for you to ask: What religions are present in my locality? What is the religious and spiritual make-up of my community?

While the "religion question" is not posed on the U.S. census, other resources are available. Discover your resources, whether they be census data or polling percentages or studies from organizations such as Pew Research Center or Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). If the data is scant, use Google to discover

places of worship. You can learn a lot by mapping where religious institutions are. Is there a Buddhist temple in your community? Where is it? Is it on the outskirts of town? Why is that? Is there a local *masjid*? Where is it? How easy is it to find? Who lives on your street? Do your own informal polling of your community and discover what religions are around you. Religion is everywhere. It is in our hearts and in our hands. We see it in coffee shops and on college campuses, on street corners, and in the local mall. Have you taken the time to notice how much of a *melange* your hometown is? The U.S. is growing more diverse by the day. Maybe you live in a small town and you feel like you're trapped in a homogeneous cage. Look again, and you will find pockets of religious and cultural miscellany in the most unlikely of places. Take a moment the next time you are in a public place—a mall, a post office, or an airport—and recognize the mosaic that is your community. You might be surprised at what you find.

Find, and Form, Friendships

The next step in the process might be the most radical of them all—make a new friend. One of the most central moves that you can take to reach people of other religions is to form an intimate relationship as a friend. While this may not seem revolutionary, it is positively progressive.

We “need more ordinary radicals”⁵⁰ who are willing to build friendships for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project report that favorable opinions of Muslims in the U.S. continue to decline (since 2005) and posit that one of the reasons for this may be that only 41% of Americans say they are acquainted with someone who is Muslim.⁵¹ Putnam and Campbell proposed that where interpersonal religious tolerance and religious diversity grow, it is due to the fact that increasing numbers of Americans know someone of a different faith through social networks or via family. The authors call this the “Aunt Susan Principle” and claim that it is “the most important reason that Americans can combine religious devotion and diversity.”⁵² The corollary to this familial connection is the “My Friend Al Principle,” reflecting connections across religious boundaries through non-kin social networks. The authors suggest that these connections, these friendships, engender a small, but comprehensive, religious tolerance and can mitigate the potentially divisive aspects of religious differences in the U.S. We need people who are willing to take bold, but simple, steps to befriend the people they live next to—even if it stretches you, pushes you out of your comfort zone, or grinds against your prejudices. The simplest step can often be the most difficult. The good news is that you may already know these people—they may be part of your family, your best friends, your teachers, your co-workers. Take the step to become a friend, rather than just an acquaintance. Make the radical move to

change the party line from, “I’m friends with a Muslim even though I’m a Christian to I’m friends with a Muslim because I’m a Christian.”⁵³

To do this, it is best to seek “persons of peace.” In Luke 10, Jesus introduces the idea of “persons of peace” as those who open their doors to you, invite you in, and provide you with hospitality. While these physical elements may not be present, there is also a psychological and spiritual side to this concept, that is, individuals with whom you can more naturally build a relationship. Lean into those relationships. Furthermore, drawing on the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in Luke 19, Mike Breen states that once you “find the person of peace, the person who is open to you, interested in you, likes you, wants to be around you: go to *their* turf, where they’re comfortable; allow them to serve you, show you hospitality; spend intentional time with them; and be ready to do the works of the Kingdom and speak the words of the Kingdom (in appropriate ways).”⁵⁴ However, on this last point, be sure that as you find, and form, a friendship with a “person of peace” that the relationship is not a means to an end, but the end in itself. Simply be a friend of someone of another faith. That is radical, and world-changing, as it is.

Listen and Learn

When asked about the most important step in witnessing to people of other religions, I often reply, “shutting our mouths.” While crass and potentially disturbing, I frame my response with such disquieting language to prove a point—the U.S. is suffering from a case of multi-generational, multi-national, and multi-cultural religious ignorance, a religious illiteracy, or what Stephen Prothero calls, “religious amnesia.”⁵⁵ The United States, in spite of its established secularism, is a thoroughly pluralistic nation with robust expressions of myriad world religions, from the wheat fields of Iowa to the buckled asphalt of Los Angeles. Yet, we are simultaneously “a nation of religious illiterates”⁵⁶ who flunk the most basic of quizzes on religion—even our own. It seems, “[m]ost Americans remain far more committed to respecting other religions than learning about them.”⁵⁷

In 2010, The Pew Research Center noted in its Religious Knowledge Survey that America is one of the most religious countries in the developed world.⁵⁸ However, as their report revealed, atheists and agnostics, not people of faith, recorded the best scores on a test that examined individual knowledge of various religions. Questions ranged from topics such as the Hindu pantheon to who sparked the Protestant Reformation. It seems that white evangelical Protestants had some of the least knowledge concerning other religions, averaging only 16 correct answers out of 32 questions on the quiz. On the other hand, atheists and agnostics “excelled” with an average of almost 21, just beating out Mormons and Jews, who averaged closer to 20. Although most Christians missed questions about other religions, even questions from an individual’s own religious tradition proved stumpers, as Catholics

failed to identify transubstantiation as their own belief and Protestants did not know that Martin Luther initiated their own church movement. With that said, Mormons and Protestant evangelicals scored the highest on questions of a biblical nature. Rather than making atheists and agnostics look like religious gurus and white evangelical Protestants look like stereotypical uneducated bigots, the survey points out an altogether more depressing fact—the U.S. is fundamentally ignorant when it comes to the world’s major religions. If the best average of any demographic is 21 out of 32 (65%), Americans fail in making the grade on religious knowledge. In one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, it is not acceptable that our religious knowledge is somewhere between failing and barely passing.

Advocates of religious literacy say that one of the crucial components in combatting religious ignorance, and the related bigotry and religiously motivated violence, is better education. David Smock of the U.S. Institute of Peace observes, “[o]ne antidote to hatred among religious communities is to teach communities about the beliefs and practices of the religious other.”⁵⁹ Yet, books and lectures alone are insufficient. As Yehezkel Landau urges, “[W]e need to develop educational strategies to overcome the ignorance that leads to prejudice, which in turn leads to dehumanizing contempt, which in turn breeds violence.”⁶⁰ Thus, champions of religious literacy will encourage individuals to study other religions in the presence of “the religious other” and to make sure that what they are learning is true to that religion’s own perspective and grounded in its local experience. Such experiences “re-humanize” the religious “other” more than any lecture or in-class discussion.⁶¹ Those with more education on religion, particularly those who took a course on the subject, did much better on the quiz than the average American. Although there are those who rightly point out that religion is more than head knowledge, that faith involves experiential knowledge as well, a basic education (whether experiential or book based) covering other religions goes a long way in building bridges. This is why I fully advocate the Christian’s friendly study of other religions, particularly in the context of cultivated relationships, and fully agree with Mahatma Gandhi who said that, “the friendly study of the world’s religions is a most sacred duty”⁶² and Lesslie Newbigin who held that, “mission [is] not only a matter of preaching and teaching, but also of learning.”⁶³

Dine, Dialogue, and Do Together

There are distinct ways that Christians can foster these relationships and create environments that are conducive to the friendly study of other religions. In particular, I think there are three means by which Christian individuals and churches can take the next step in learning about other religions: dining, dialoguing, and doing together.

While I continue to advocate classes, programs on other religions, and visits to other places of worship/devotion for the sake of learning, we must be careful to not conduct these courses in isolation. Instead, they should be informed, in some way led and shaped by “the religious other.” Too often, Christian studies of other religions are centered around straw man arguments and ex-member testimonies. While apologetic/polemic studies may seem helpful, they are often taught by a pastor or leader who lacks expertise in other religions. These types of studies usually treat other religions as simple worldviews that can be easily deconstructed. In real life, this is not the case. For example, Hinduism cannot be understood by reading one book, listening to one podcast, or in one 45-minute Bible study. It is an ancient, complex, and multifaceted faith practiced by nearly one billion people. Thus, these studies do little more than affirm Christians in their superiority and privilege and do little to educate them about other religions as they are really and truly believed and practiced. And, although ex-member testimonies can be useful, they are often biased and unreliable for an accurate, comprehensive, picture of that religion or sect. In both cases, it is a one-sided conversation, and the careful student of religion will have to “listen to the testimony of [both] the disillusioned apostate and the enthusiastic convert” from a perspective of critical evaluation.⁶⁴

Instead of relying on untrained pastors without proper religious studies training or on ex-members with an axe to grind I suggest co-taught studies or a *dialogue* series that involves the leadership of a Christian pastor or theologically informed layperson alongside a practitioner or advocate of another faith or worldview. These dialogues should be shaped around mutual interests and not be focused on a central divisive question or organized as a debate. “The dialogue [should] not be about who is going to be saved. It will be about the question, ‘what is the meaning and goal of this common human story in which we are all, Christians and others together, participants?’”⁶⁵ This gives both sides an opportunity speak to their beliefs and rituals and gives the Christian an opportunity to embody the story of Jesus, rather than proclaim it through a bullhorn on top of the nearest egg crate or soapbox.⁶⁶

Meals are sacred events. Lutherans, of all people, should comprehend the vast mystery involved in sharing a meal with another. While we accept the Lord’s Supper as a sacramental meal because of its institution by Christ and by His command, we also recognize the communal blessedness of a shared meal—just look at our potlucks! Therefore, it is good if we *dine* together with people of other religions. Beyond this notion of consecrated collations, we also value the gift of hospitality. There are numerous examples of the divine nature of having someone into your home, over for a meal, or allowing them to invite you in to dine with them.⁶⁷ Inviting someone over for dinner, even (or especially) when it involves going above-and-beyond for those who have specific religious dietary restrictions (e.g. Kosher, Halal), is a supreme example of hospitality. If one is not keen on having someone over for a meal, instead share a coffee, a curry, or a cold beverage with a friend from another

religious perspective and use this as an opportunity to deepen the relationship and dialogue. Sharing some companionship over a meal, you can, in the words of McLaren: “[a]sk them questions. Display unexpected interest in them, their traditions, their beliefs, and their stories. . . . Enter into their world, and welcome them into your world, without judgment. If they reciprocate, welcome their reciprocation; if not, welcome their nonreciprocation. . . . Join the conspiracy of plotting for the common good together.”⁶⁸

Finally, it is advantageous if we engage in *doing* interfaith work projects together. As Christians, we should be eager to cooperate with people of other faiths in all projects which are in line with the Christian understanding of God’s purpose in history and, according to the “Left Hand Rule of God,” those projects that honor and bless our neighbor. Patel shared that dialogue is not enough, that interfaith action and social justice is key to not only repairing relationships between different religions, but also between the realm of religion and the world at large.⁶⁹ As Newbigin offered, “[i]t is indeed the duty of Christians in multi faith societies to cooperate with people of other faiths in seeking a just ordering of society, but this is in no sense a substitute for the missionary preaching of the Church.”⁷⁰ What projects could we share in? Habitat for Humanity offers “interfaith work projects,” and many homeless shelters permit multiple faith groups to work together on site. Other projects that various faith-bodies could work together on could be a park clean-up or the provision of shelter for the local homeless population during the winter months—mosques, synagogues, churches, and temples offering the gift of hospitality to those without a home in mutual extension of “good faith.” Times of community crisis also provide ample opportunity for various religious groups to come together and offer a unified response to the needs of the community they share. Whatever the project, as long as worship services are eschewed, there is nothing blocking interfaith cooperation in the civil, left-hand, realm. All the while, these shared undertakings continue to deepen the bonds between Christians and non-Christians and build bridges for understanding, appreciation, and continue dialogue and peacemaking.

Discern

A wise and loving Christian will also seek to know how, when, and why they might be able to share the story of Jesus in thought, word, and deed. Even so, the most important prayer for the Christian engaged in a friendly association with someone from another religion should be, “Thy will be done.” Newbigin, again, said “[t]he central responsibility of the Church is indicated by that prayer. It is to seek the doing of God’s will of righteousness and peace in this world.”⁷¹ This prayer not only leads us deeper into relationship with our Heavenly Father and His divine desires and decrees, but also permits us the freedom to accept the course that our relationship with the religious other takes—no matter the outcome. All the same, the thrust of our

discerning prayer will be when to witness to the worldview of those we love and cherish in interfaith kinship.

Witness to the Worldview

An honest friendly engagement with individuals from another worldview will involve being fully ourselves. It will incorporate transparency and full disclosure. That will mean sharing our story and its part in the divine record of history. And yet, we do not want this witness to be cast into a context without proper reflection and forethought. It must take root within the worldview of the one to whom we are witnessing. This will not only require a deep, intimate, knowledge of another person's worldview and religious narrative, but also the sensitivity and sagacity to know exactly when and where to turn on the light—to know what the Gospel looks and sounds like to the person from this particular spiritual perspective.

To appreciate the science of interfaith engagement, we turn again to Acts 17 and Paul's interaction with the people of Athens and his witness at the Areopagus. As we mentioned earlier, Paul knew the religious belief of his audience, their history, and showed them his respect, speaking their language, in their idioms, quoting their own poets and including their culture in the divine, and abiding, strategy of God. To turn the light on for those "groping around as if in the dark," Paul shared the story of Jesus, pointedly in the context of the altar to "the Unknown God." Eventually, regardless of our method or delivery, "what we are trying to convince people *about* is a story."⁷² This is the content of our proclamation, and, in witnessing to the worldview of the religious "other," we affirm that these "other" "stories have validity to the extent that they share similarity to Jesus' story."⁷³ We see this missiological approach to witnessing to people of other faiths clearly in Acts 17.

This form of approach is also grounded in the concept of "mission as translation," advanced by the missiologist Lammin Sanneh. In his book, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, and several other essays and works, the Yale scholar expounds upon the idea that "translation" is embedded in the Christian message, and particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus. From a missionary perspective, "Christianity is recognizable only in the embodied idioms and values of the cultures in which we find it."⁷⁴ There is much potential here, as Sanneh intimates, "[for] the receiving culture [to become] the decisive destination of God's salvific promise. . . ."⁷⁵ However, there is also inherent danger, as "mission as translation" commits to a bold and radical step that must be accompanied by attendant safeguards against syncretism or imposition. There is an assortment of methodologies for engaging in "mission as translation" (a subset of the field of "contextualization"),⁷⁶ but at their heart is the notion that the story of Jesus must be told, and embodied, in such a way that it is simply an extension or re-conception of the religious story these loved ones already know. It is asking the question, "What

does the Gospel look/sound like for these people?”⁷⁷ Or, in the words of Newbigin, “How can the Gospel ‘come alive’” in this cultural context?⁷⁸ This is the essential query of “mission as translation” and the foundation to witnessing to the worldview of the religious “other.”

All the while, in this final step, we must be ever mindful of not forsaking a friendship. The friendship we forge with a person from another religion, we remember, is not simply “a means unto an end,” but “an end unto itself.” I must not, as a witness to the story of Jesus, abandon a relationship because the proclamation of the Gospel was not received. The friendship must endure, for this very act is part of the irresistible force of the resurrective, restorative, and recreative kingdom of Jesus—to bring unity and fellowship where there was disharmony and division.

As an example, let me tell you of my friendship with a Hindu man, whom we will call “Soumil,” a dealer in deities who imports bronze and sandstone sculptures from India for use in *puja* and *bhakti* (Hindu ritual and worship of their gods/goddesses). He and I would, on regular occasion, gather for a good Thai lunch and discussion of our metaphysical opinions and personal stories. In the course of our conversation, I would share the story of Jesus and he would share his testimony to the divine mysteries and embodied practice of Hinduism. His Hinduism could always accommodate my Jesus, but my following of Jesus could not accommodate his ritual devotion to Sai Baba or Ganesha. In time, it became clear that, spiritually, we were at an impasse. He was not going to convert me to broaden my horizons and become a Hindu. I was not going to usher him through the pearly gates and into the kingdom of Christ. And that was okay. Really. Our lunches did not end. Our friendship did not cease. Our mutual exchange of hospitality continued and our friendship endured. Still to this day, I count Soumil as my friend and that will never change. As I sit in my office writing this article, I glance at the bronze sculpture of Lord Shiva that Soumil gave to me. It often reminds me of our connection, of my learning, and of my appreciation and respect for Soumil’s sincere faith; but, most of all, it prompts me to remember the divine purpose and the beatific tenor of our friendly encounter with one another over pad thai and Singha beer.

Conclusion

This essay is a beginning. It is meant to work *toward* a blueprint, not be the blueprint itself. There will be revisions, additions, subtractions, and perhaps a crumpling of the entire project and a total rewrite before we can, together, build a “strong, benevolent Christianity” that can successfully navigate a context defined by religious pluralism. What is evident are the following points: Christian privilege can no longer be assumed; trying to reassert Christian privilege will not prove successful in the current context; Christian Scripture warrants a different approach; and, finally, the Christian Church can seek helpful, orthodox ways forward in friendly encounters

with the religious “other.” Certainly, there are blind spots in this work, further research that can be done, and more teasing out of this proposal to be accomplished. Even I am unsure of exactly where this might lead and how best to move forward. For now, it is a conversation starter for a new (and yet, *renewed*) friendly engagement with other religions and worldviews that, I believe, is best suited for our age.

Given the current pluralistic landscape, the attitude that accompanies this spiritual atmosphere, and the ever-increasing religious hybridity of our time, it is necessary for the Christian Church to encounter the world’s religions with a posture of open eyes and open ears, open hearts and open minds. It is time that we set aside our polemics of aggressive engagement in favor of the peacemaking of friendly engagement. This does not equate to a forfeiture of the Gospel; rather, it is an amplifying of it, a commitment to Jesus’ kingdom of peace and reconciliation, a restoration of a Gospel that invites all of humanity into the riches of His resurrection and the eternal and global human story. Hopefully, this essay moves us closer toward the future hope and potential reality of an architecture of bridges built between Christian and the world’s sundry spiritualities. This bridge building effort, not to mention its final product, is most definitely a sacred duty we must not disregard in the present age.

Endnotes

¹ Courtney Bender, “The Architecture of Multi-Faith Spaces: An Introduction,” *Reverberations: New Directions in the Study of Prayer*, August 4, 2014, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2014/08/04/the-architecture-of-multi-faith-spaces-an-introduction/>.

² Stephen Evans, “Berlin House of One: The first church-mosque-synagogue?” *BBC News Magazine*, June 21, 2014, accessed August 5, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27872551>.

³ Peter Sagal, “Panel Round Two,” *NPR’s Wait-Wait-Don’t-Tell-Me News Quiz*, July 11, 2014, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/07/12/330786002/panel-round-two>.

⁴ Zahra Ahmed, “Interfaith Peace Garden sows seeds of religious harmony,” *The Houston Chronicle*, October 20, 2011, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.chron.com/life/houston-belief/article/Interfaith-Peace-Garden-sows-seeds-of-religious-2228709.php>.

⁵ Advanced by scholars such as Peter Berger, Harvey Cox, Bryan Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, and Rodney Stark.

⁶ Pew Research, “The Global Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project. December 18, 2012, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gallup, “Religion Trends,” accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

⁹ Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, “2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study,” image (map), 2012.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- ¹¹ Michael O. Emerson, Jenifer Bratter, Junia Howell, P. Wilner Jeanty, and Mike Cline, *Houston Region Grows More Racially/Ethnically Diverse, With Small Declines in Segregation: A Joint Report Analyzing Census Data from 1990, 2000, and 2010* (Houston, TX: Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2011), 3.
- ¹² Kate Shellnutt, "Mormon, Muslim faiths surge across Houston," *The Houston Chronicle*, May 3, 2012, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://blog.chron.com/believeitornot/2012/05/mormon-muslim-faiths-surge-across-houston/>.
- ¹³ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001).
- ¹⁴ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 91–133.
- ¹⁵ See Pew Research Center, "Nones' on the Rise," Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.
- ¹⁶ See Paul W. Robinson, "Pluralism and Mix-and-Match Religion," in *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ*, ed. Robert Kolb (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Press, 2010), 68–77; Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970); and Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).
- ¹⁷ See Elizabeth J. Dias, "The Rise of the Evangélicos," *TIME Magazine*, April 4, 2013: <http://nation.time.com/2013/04/04/the-rise-of-evangelicos/>; Daniel A. Rodriguez, *A Future for the Latino Church: Models for Multilingual, Multigenerational Hispanic Congregations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011); Philip Jenkins, "Coming Home," in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ken Chitwood, "Islam en Español: the narratives, demographics, conversion causeways, and conditions for community cohesion of Latina/o Muslims in the U.S." Thesis, Concordia University Irvine, CA, July 2014; Chitwood, "Latino Religious Trends," RNA Conference, Austin, TX, September 19, 2013.
- ¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 1.
- ¹⁹ Andy Wrasman, *Contradict: They Can't All Be True* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2014), 4–5.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Crown Hill, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 25.
- ²² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 8.
- ²³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Publishing, 2009), 3.
- ²⁴ To use David Stoll's terminology from his book of the same name.
- ²⁵ While the imperialistic forces involved in Christian mission advancement are often overstated, they cannot be ignored. We must combine our apologetic with an apology. For more nuanced views on imperialism, power, and the global spread of Christianity from the West, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*; Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?*; and Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*.
- ²⁶ John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
- ²⁷ Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern," but his work and theory was grounded in Marxism proper. Since then, Gramsci's subaltern theory has been nuanced by postcolonial and postmodern writers, cultural theorists, and social scientists.
- ²⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 194.

²⁹ Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 10ff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57ff.

³¹ Mandivamba Rukuni, *Being Afrikan* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2007), 83.

³² Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 167.

³³ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 19.

³⁴ McLaren, *Christian Identity*, 57.

³⁵ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 19.

³⁶ This is poignant only if you have, or are familiar with, the “red-letter” versions of Scripture texts in which all of Jesus’ dialogue is printed in red, all others in black.

³⁷ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 186.

³⁸ This is typified in the approach of Carl Medearis in his two seminal works: *Speaking of Jesus: The Art of Not Evangelism* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2011) and *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2008).

³⁹ Before moving into that text, I suggest you spend some time reading and reflecting on it, specifically verses 16–34.

⁴⁰ The best, most lively, and engaging discussions I have enjoyed with others on religion and pluralism occurred when we studied religion together at a local brewery, via my blog on the topic of religion, via news articles on the topic, or in the collegial conversations with students and faculty at U.S. universities.

⁴¹ Gregory Seltz, “Urban Multi-Cultural Ministry,” (lecture, Concordia University Irvine, CA, June 10, 2011).

⁴² The word *παροξύνω* translates as “to be urged on, stimulated, provoked, or irritated.”

⁴³ Paul opened his eyes to the religious plurality of Athenian faith and ritual and was able to “behold” or “see” (θεωρῶ) what made them tick.

⁴⁴ Jack Schultz, “Elements of the Anthropological Study of Religion,” (lecture, Concordia University Irvine, CA, June 8, 2010).

⁴⁵ Connecting back to the earlier discussion about the importance of the *imago Dei* and the commonality of all humanity found in the Genesis 1 account.

⁴⁶ This translation is based on the sense of verses 26–27 and the word *ψηλαφῆσαι*, which means “to feel or grope about; as if in the dark.”

⁴⁷ There is also the possibility here that Paul’s respect and revelation were even more deeply entrenched in the culture of the Athenians. In *Eternity in their Hearts*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1981), Don Richardson claims that Paul’s reference to the altar to the “Unknown God” (Ἄγνωστος Θεός) and his quotation of the poet Epimenides in Titus 1:12 reveal Paul’s historical knowledge of the Cretan poets’ prophecy concerning a “high God” in the midst of a plague that struck the city of Athens. While the historical validity of this claim cannot be sufficiently substantiated, it suggests some stimulating possibilities.

⁴⁸ Timothy Beal, *Religion in America: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

⁴⁹ Mark Labberton, “Some Implications for Global Theology, Ministry, and Mission,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 228.

⁵⁰ RJ Grunewald, “Ordinary Radicals,” accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.rjgrune.com/ordinary-radicals/>.

⁵¹ Pew Research Center, “Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam,” Religion Polling and Analysis, accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/08/24/public-remains-conflicted-over-islam/>.

⁵² Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 526ff.

⁵³ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013), 141.

⁵⁴ Mike Breen, “Understanding Jesus and Persons of Peace,” accessed September 10, 2014, <http://mikebreen.wordpress.com/2010/11/24/understanding-jesus-and-persons-of-peace/>.

⁵⁵ Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ The survey, and its subsequent results, can be found and taken here:

<http://www.pewforum.org/quiz/u-s-religious-knowledge/> (accessed July 2010).

⁵⁹ David Smock, “Teaching the Religious Other,” *United States Institute of Peace: Special Report 143* (July 2005), 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶¹ I use the terminology religious “other” tentatively. I am reticent, due to the theology of Genesis 1 I share, to classify anyone as “other.” However, from the viewpoint of respecting the various truth claims of religions grounded in religious literacy, and the sentiments of Christian orthodoxy, it is impossible to demarcate those with different worldviews and contrasting spiritual practice as anything but “the religious other.” While wanting to avoid the forced binary of “us” and “them,” it is helpful as a pedagogic tool to refer to the religious “other” for the sake of contrast and the concept of contextualizing the Gospel for “them.” Thus, the choice to use the term “other” is pragmatic, not philosophical.

⁶² M. K. Gandhi, “Crime of Reading Bible,” *Young India*, Vol. VIII, No. 35 (September 2, 1926), 308. For a discussion of Gandhi’s “friendly study” of world religions, see Diana L. Eck, “Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference,” in Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll: New York, 1991), 84–85.

⁶³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 128.

⁶⁴ George D. Chryssides and Ron Geaves, *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 85–86.

⁶⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 185.

⁶⁶ At one congregation I was part of, we hosted an event entitled, “Interview with An Atheist.” It featured two local, renowned atheists who were invited to come and speak about their experience of the Christian Church and reflect on why they adhere to, and advance the cause of, atheism. They spoke first and then I shared my own perspective. Following these three addresses, we moved to a question and answer session with questions for one another and the audience. It went over well in the Christian community and among atheists/agnostics in the area. A synopsis from the atheist perspective is available here: <http://emilyhasbooks.com/why-would-a-christian-love-atheists/> (accessed May 15, 2013).

⁶⁷ See Genesis 18; Isaiah 25:6–9; Matthew 22:2–4; Hebrews 13:32.

⁶⁸ McLaren, *Christian Identity*, 231.

⁶⁹ Patel, 65ff.

⁷⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 161.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷² John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believer’s Church Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 216.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Lammin Sanneh, “The Significance of the Translation Principle,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 37.

⁷⁵ Lammin Sanneh, *Mission as Translation: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

⁷⁶ Included would be the concept of Gospel handles, learning and reshaping, and/or other methodologies and concepts revealed in the likes of Gerald R. McDermott's *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2000); Don Richardson's *Eternity in their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World* (New York: Regal, 2006); and, for an overview of various contextualization methods, A. Scott Moreau's *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012). While I do not have experience with, advocate, or fully support all of these models and methodologies, they are worth exploration.

⁷⁷ Alan Hirsch, "The Gospel and Culture," (lecture, Detroit, MI: Lutheran Hour Ministries SENT Conference, July 24, 2014).

⁷⁸ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 177.