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ON OUR WAY

Living a whole life
attentively . . .
together . . . in the
real world . . . *for
the good of all . . .
in response to God

10* Knowing and Loving Our Neighbors of Other Faiths

Scott C. Alexander

At first, I couldn't get the images out of my head. I still can't. Angry faces with gaping mouths. Clenched fists. Women draped in black. Young men with beards as black as the women's clothing. American flags set ablaze in the street. And the sound—a chant in a language I had never heard of—expressing a sentiment I had never conceived: “*Marg bar Amrika!*”

TV news commentators told us it meant “Death to America!” They also told us why a group of university students in Tehran, Iran, had stormed the U.S. embassy there and taken the embassy personnel hostage, just weeks after the Iranian people had risen up against and ousted the U.S.-backed Iranian king and his cronies. “Experts” informed television viewers that the cause was a tidal wave of “religious fanaticism” that was sweeping

through the Iranian body politic. When asked how this fanaticism could take hold in a society as modern and Westernized as late-twentieth-century Iran, some contended that these events represented the death rattle of traditional religion as Iran was wisely giving itself over to Western secular modernity. Both the revolution and the hostage crisis, they insisted, could be best understood as a function of what they perceived to be the dark essence of the people's religion, namely the "Shiite mentality."

This sounded to me a bit like the racist attempts to blame the Watts riot of 1965 on the "black mentality." Were there no important historical or socioeconomic factors at play in this major political upheaval in a major Middle Eastern nation state? I had a hunch that there was more to all this than met the eye of the television camera, but what did I know? It was November of 1979 and I was a freshman in college. Almost every night, my suitemates and I were huddled before the sorry excuse for a television in our sorry excuse for a living room, watching what I would one day learn was a sorry excuse for in-depth network news coverage of the Iranian Revolution and its central drama known simply as "the hostage crisis." This drama, destined to last more than a year, would indelibly etch negative images of Middle Easterners onto the psyche of most U.S. Americans and topple President Jimmy Carter's administration after one term.

About eight months later, I found myself in a very different place. Almost daily, I was visiting Boston's renowned Children's Hospital, where my girlfriend's younger sister was recovering from surgery to correct a chronic medical condition. Directly opposite her room was a quarantined room where only authorized medical staff and immediate family, properly gowned and gloved, were allowed to enter. On my second or third visit, I noticed a slightly chubby, dark-complexioned man of medium height sitting quietly with his head in his hands on a small bench under the windowsill at the end of the hallway. I'd like to think it was compassion that made me first sit next to him and introduce myself. Truth be told, it was probably boredom. "Hi, I'm Scott," I said as I extended my hand. He looked up at me with a face that had gone unshaven for a couple of days and smiled politely. "My name is Ahmad. I am pleased to meet you." That encounter initiated a three-week relationship that would literally set the course of my life over the next three decades. If someone had told me that back then, I would have said he or she was crazy.

Ahmad, in his late twenties, had come to Boston from Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, to accompany his seven-year-old brother for what his family and doctors back home hoped would be life-saving surgery to repair a severely ruptured intestinal tract. Now that the surgery was over, he was keeping vigil as his little brother fought the massive sepsis that had resulted from the rupture. Over long summer afternoons, Ahmad and I conversed about many things—from his brother's progress to Boston's muggy summer heat to Middle Eastern politics. With time, our conversations turned more personal. Ahmad diplomatically expressed surprise that my girlfriend's father would let her dress "in so very few clothes" (on most days, a halter-top and shorts, if I recall correctly). He expressed even more surprise that, though she was not my sister, she would go to and from the hospital with me and not her father. I had no explanation for these aspects of my own culture, to which I had barely given any thought. My new friend did not intend to put me on the spot; he just wanted to understand the strange culture

“My new friend . . . wanted to understand
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that now enveloped him, so different from his own. I asked him if he were married. He said he was not, but that one day he hoped to marry, "*in sha'a Allah*" ("God willing"). For the present, his responsibility was to care for his beloved brother.

Then something happened that gave me a chance to look into my new friend's soul. Whenever I visited the hospital cafeteria and suggested that he join me, he politely refused. Worried that he wasn't eating enough, I brought him a piece of fruit and some water, insisting he eat or drink something. He gently gestured me to sit beside him. He gave my knee a pat, bowed his head, and very softly said: "I will drink and eat after sunset, *in sha'a Allah*. It's Ramadan and I am fasting." He asked if I knew anything

about Islam, and I mumbled something about fasting's being one of the "five pillars," along with testimony, prayer, almsgiving, and pilgrimage. His face lit up with a joy I had not yet seen there: "So you know something about my religion!"

After that, we spent hours talking about God, prayer, and the moral life. He asked me questions about my Christianity that I had never before asked myself. I had taken my faith very seriously ever since I palpably felt the call of Christ a few years earlier. Yet somehow I had never felt so spiritually alive in conversation as I did when I was talking to Ahmad. I asked him questions about Islam in order to learn more about this religion from the perspective of an actual believer rather than the mass media coverage of the hostage crisis. I also had discovered that Ahmad never seemed happier or more animated than when talking about his faith.

Over time I realized that as significant as the Iranian Revolution was in shaping my academic interest in Islam, the revolution that had the most profound impact on my life began quietly inside of me in the hallway of that hospital as I made a new friend. What I could not see then but do see clearly now is that Ahmad—whether conscious of it or not—was tutoring me (and perhaps I him) in knowing and loving my neighbor of another faith. What I had no way of knowing then but try to thank God for every day is that this practice—a practice we Roman Catholic Christians usually call "interreligious dialogue"—would become my life's ministry.

In simplest terms, knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths, like the other practices in this book, is rooted in the practice of Christ Jesus himself. Specifically, it is the practice of crossing cultural boundaries in humility and grace, as Christ so often did. The Christian purpose for crossing these boundaries is to engender greater solidarity within the human family, and thus to realize more fully the reign of God on earth by means of sincere witness, increased mutual understanding, mutual respect for human dignity, and the exercise of a love that knows no limits.

Jesus forged relationships with a stunningly diverse array of people—especially those whom many of his fellow first-century Jews considered outcasts beyond redemption, such as tax collectors, Samaritans, and pagans—in order to share with them the unsurpassable gift of God's presence and healing love. As his disciples, we are called to do the same with one important caveat: we are not Christ. Although we may be witnesses

to Christ and the healing power of God's love, we are not its source, and thus it is not ours to give. When we cross boundaries in Christ's name, be these boundaries religious or otherwise, we do not bear Christ as a gift for us to bestow on others. Rather, we bring our relationship with Christ into our other relationships. The Holy Spirit brings new, even unimagined possibilities for healing and transforming the human family in solidarity and love. Practiced in this Spirit, knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths—especially in an age of increasing globalization, conflict, and unavoidable religious diversity—is interwoven with other practices explored in this book, especially seeking justice, living as community, and making peace.

Unfortunately, our Christian forebears have not always recognized the value or fully understood the scope and implications of this practice. Indeed, across the centuries many have labored under the erroneous impression that a Christian crosses any kind of cultural boundary mainly to destroy it or render it irrelevant in pursuit of a false "unity" imposed by domination. By doing so, they, and we, too often miss the sacred mystery at the heart of this practice.

*A Sacred Mystery

Meeting Ahmad helped me discern part of my vocation: I knew I wanted to major in comparative religion. My encounter with him made me more interested in studying my own religion and the religion of others than I ever had been before. Knowing Ahmad made me want to learn as much as I could about an Islam that had less to do with political upheaval and more to do with twenty-four-hour vigils at the bedside of a sick brother thousands of miles from home; an Islam that gave a man the strength and courage to abstain from all food and drink, including water, for nearly nineteen hours a day, for thirty days straight; an Islam that taught him to respect and befriend a stranger whose culture and beliefs could hardly be more different from his own. I was hungry for these insights and also for something more. I had encountered a sacred mystery that would take years for me to begin to fathom.

The sacred mystery at the heart of interreligious dialogue is this: in trying to understand and appreciate another's very different relationship with God, we somehow come to understand more deeply and cherish

more dearly our own. This mystery unfolds not in the context of a competition over which religion is superior but in the context of humility. In the humility of dialogue we develop what the Lutheran bishop and biblical scholar Krister Stendahl called "holy envy." In recognizing life-giving elements in the faith of another that are not apparent or that have lain dormant in our own tradition, we come to yearn for a deeper relationship with God and others that sometimes leads in new, rich directions. For example, my friend and colleague Dan Spencer, who wrote the chapter on care for creation, says that he and other North American Christians were inspired to search their own tradition for sources of creation spirituality after experiencing "holy envy" for the deep respect accorded the sacredness of the natural world among practitioners of indigenous American religious traditions.

“In trying to understand and appreciate another's very different relationship with God, we somehow come to understand more deeply and cherish more dearly our own.”

In the humility of dialogue we also develop what Lee Yearley, a Western scholar of Chinese religions, calls the virtue of “spiritual regret.” Sometimes, we come to recognize that certain elements of our various religious traditions are ultimately, at least as far as humans can see, incompatible with each other. Here, as persons of faith, we can do nothing other than stand firm, all the while recognizing that the Truth to which we are bound to give witness by our words and deeds is not something any of us can possess, much less use as a stick for beating those who believe differently than we. Those of us who are Christians can do this by remembering always that the Truth to which we give witness is not a set of propositions. This Truth is the person of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, the One who is

constantly calling all humanity into a deeper relationship with God the Father, in the power of the Spirit.

*Jeremy, Rosa, and Bao

After a recent interreligious conference in Chicago, three Christian participants sat down to “dinner”—leftover pizza from a party two nights before and soft drinks. They were amazed at the variety of people they had met in just one day: a bunch of mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics; a handful of Evangelicals; two Mennonites; a Native American practitioner; three or four Mormons; a female rabbi and two members of her Reform congregation; six or seven Muslims (with all but one of the women wearing a head scarf); one Hindu; a Buddhist monk and a Buddhist nun; and a Jain.

All three of these friends had attended the conference because they wanted to commit themselves, as Christians, to knowing more fully their neighbors of other faiths. They wanted to enter the Christian practice of crossing cultural boundaries for the sake of the solidarity of the human family and the realization of the reign of God. Even so, each of them responded very differently to what they had encountered that day.

Jeremy came away feeling deeply disappointed and frustrated. Most of the discussion that day, with the exception of a lively but respectful exchange between the rabbi and one of the Muslim participants over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was not very “hard-hitting.” He thought some of the speakers compromised or toned down their beliefs in order to present a more irenic face to their dialogue partners. He believed that such “timidity” and “compromise” demonstrated the weaknesses of interreligious dialogue.

Rosa believed Jeremy's concerns were valid. She had a strong sense that the integrity of interreligious dialogue could be undermined if parties consistently avoided difficult issues or felt pressured to soft-pedal their faith instead of freely offering sincere testimony to what they believe and practice. However, Rosa felt that what Jeremy was reading as timidity and compromise were actually forms of prudence and respect. Rosa reminded Jeremy that meaningful dialogue, like any other meaningful relationship, cannot be rushed. Without the requisite level of trust, Rosa argued, candor and the eagerness to tackle the “hard stuff” can very easily lead to debate, which is very unlike dialogue. Debate is a contest of ideas oriented toward

Dialogue cultivates mutual understanding through attentive, receptive, and compassionate listening.

discovering truth. Dialogue cultivates mutual understanding through attentive, receptive, and compassionate listening—without winners or losers.

Bao listened to all of this quietly but with a growing sense of despair. Raised in a very religious home, he knew how hurt and angry his parents would be if he decided to leave their church. He believed in God; he just wasn't sure anymore exactly what he believed *about* God. Then, today alone, he had heard three intelligent and spiritual people talk about Jesus in three different ways. One described him as "God incarnate" and the "greatest act of divine love the world will ever know." Another said that "Jesus" was the name under which generations of his ancestors had suffered marginalization, persecution, and ultimately genocide. A third said that, for her, Jesus was a great prophet and teacher whom she respected but nothing more.

Somewhere deep inside himself Bao took refuge in the orthodoxy of his parents' beliefs. He had gone to the conference with Jeremy and Rosa because he wanted both to hold on to his Christian identity and to be open to the religious beliefs and practices of others. But he now felt a deeper ambiguity about the nature of his own Christian faith and an overwhelming confusion in the face of what struck him as a troubling cacophony of dissonant worldviews. When Rosa asked Bao what he thought about the conference, he shrugged his shoulders and answered, "There's a lot to think about, isn't there?"

*The Four Modes of Interreligious Dialogue

Jeremy, Rosa, and Bao can teach us several things about the practice of knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths. First, even those

who belong to the same tradition come to the practice from different perspectives. Second, no two people interpret the same words or set of events in the same way. Third, interreligious dialogue can be frustrating, slow-moving, or overwhelming, just as it can also be exhilaratingly transformative and enlightening. As with other Christian practices, the experience of these three individuals teaches us that *one size does not fit all*.

Bao was not ready for the day of dialogue that had such different but largely enriching effects on both Jeremy and Rosa. If the exchange of theological perspectives that shaped so much of this particular interreligious encounter were the only way of building relationships with people of other faiths, then Bao's reaction would suggest that, although it may be a practice that some Christians can and should take up, interreligious dialogue is not a practice for every Christian at every point in life. One could even argue that, because it's not a lifelong practice open to all Christians, it cannot be a practice integral to the Christian faith.

This, however, is not the case. Theological exchange is one indispensable *mode* of being in relationship with people of other faiths, but—thanks be to God—there are other modes of dialogue as well. Are any of them more accessible and democratic than the *dialogue of theological exchange*? According to Roman Catholic theology, at least three additional modes of dialogue are more important and accessible to a wider range of believers than the dialogue of theological exchange.

One of these modes is the *dialogue of social action*, in which Christians and people of other faiths act together for the benefit of the human family and the planet it inhabits. Bao, who may not be ready for a broad exchange of conflicting theological ideas, would eagerly work at the local interfaith food pantry, side-by-side and in solidarity with the other Christians and people of other faiths he met at the interreligious conference. Although he may be confused about certain aspects of Christology, he has never doubted the centrality to Christian discipleship of service to the poor. He would find great spiritual and intellectual nourishment talking with those companions about the values that impel them to work for greater social justice.

Bao might also greatly enjoy the *dialogue of spiritual experience*. Growing up, he said the rosary as part of a daily family ritual. Now that he is

away at school, he's pretty much neglected the practice. He didn't give it much thought until he saw the Buddhist monk and one of the Muslim participants at the interreligious conference with what looked very much like rosary beads. When he asked the Buddhist nun about the beads, she smiled, said she used them for meditation, and then offered them to him as a gift. When he said he couldn't accept them, she again smiled and said, "Okay." Since then, Bao has thought he would like to talk to a Buddhist and a Muslim about his own experience praying the rosary and theirs with their own special beads. Bao would be a perfect candidate for a dialogue of spiritual experience in which any sincere practitioner can share the meaning and power of her spiritual practices and experiences with any other sincere practitioner.

The most important mode of dialogue is the *dialogue of everyday life*. In many ways, it is the framework in which all interreligious dialogue ideally takes place and the end toward which all practices of dialogue should lead. It is also the simplest and yet most difficult to define. Those who practice the dialogue of everyday life quite simply and literally try to know and love one another by striving "to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations," as an important Roman Catholic statement on dialogue puts it.

When a Jewish mom offers to watch the children of her Muslim neighbor while that mother takes her eldest to a doctor's appointment; when a Christian man, aware that his Hindu coworker does not eat meat, orders vegetarian fare for the upcoming office retreat; when the Buddhist family living down the street from Grandma visits her in the hospital and comes to the church for her funeral; when the local Islamic center offers space to the local Jewish community that just lost its synagogue to a fire; when a Muslim man far from home gently instructs an inquisitive Christian teenager who is clueless about Ramadan and is worried that he's not eating—all these are living examples of the dialogue of everyday life.

The dialogue of everyday life lies at the heart of any and all genuine efforts to develop good relationships with people of other faiths. This kind of profound dialogue has been at work in the lives of countless and nameless Christian individuals and communities throughout the ages—as well as in the lives of exemplary individuals like Francis of Assisi and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and in the movements they inspired.

Even so, it has yet to emerge across the vast cultural and denominational spectrum of contemporary Christianity as an explicit and uncontested hallmark of Christian living.

*The Jericho Road

A Christian practice, by definition, meets a basic human need. Knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths meets at least two. The first is the human need for dignity: every human being must come to recognize herself—and be recognized by others—as a beloved child of God, made in the image of the Creator. The second, distinct but closely related, is the need for reconciliation. Given the pervasive brokenness of our selves and our world, the healing that comes with reconciliation is essential to living out our basic dignity as human beings. We need to be reconciled with God through and in a loving communion with our fellow human beings and all the rest of creation.

Many stories in Christian sacred scripture speak of humankind's need for dignity and reconciliation. One well-known parable speaks especially powerfully and explicitly about how these needs are met through loving encounters with people of other faiths. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" a legal scholar asks Jesus, testing to see if this charismatic preacher has what it takes to be a respected teacher of the divine law (Luke 10:25). Jesus answers that he must obey the two central commandments of the Torah—to love God unreservedly (Deut. 6:5) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18). But the scholar wants more. Like an ambitious journalist at a presidential press conference, the scholar seizes the opportunity to ask a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with a story that takes place on the hilly, rock-strewn road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30-35).

In first-century Palestine the Jericho road was as rough a setting, topographically and socially, as it is today. Imagine a narrow, winding version of an unpaved interstate highway, which many people travel on foot or on slow-moving pack animals. Imagine that this is the only artery connecting two important cities. Imagine all the types of people one might come across as fellow travelers—some of whom you might know, some who might know you, many who are complete strangers, and some you would

never care to know in a million years. It's a place where fear and apprehension are the dominant ethos.

Jesus tells a story about a man—presumably Jewish—who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the Jericho road. A priest and a Levite, fellow children of Israel and members of the same covenant community as the victim, both have the opportunity to come to his aid. For some reason, most likely a superficial interpretation of the law and an equally superficial concern for their own ritual purity, this particular priest and this particular Levite avoid the victim by walking past him on the other side of the road. In contrast, a Samaritan—a religious pariah, whose group is absolutely despised by the victim's covenant community—is “moved with pity.” Counterintuitively, especially for Jesus' largely Jewish audience, a consummate outsider cleanses the victim's wounds with his own precious resources, places the victim on his own mount, spends the night caring for the victim at an inn; and the next day, he provides the innkeeper with money for the victim's continued convalescence, promising to reimburse the innkeeper for any additional expenses when he returns.

After telling the story, Jesus turns the scholar's question back to him, asking, “Which of these three, do you think, was a ‘neighbor’ to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” If the scholar were to answer this question strictly in a demographic sense, he could reply, “the priest and the Levite,” who were the victim's fellow Jews. In this answer the term “neighbor” carries with it no real moral obligations. The scholar, however, answers the deeper question: Which of these three *acted* like a neighbor? Which of these three actually obeyed the divine law of which the priest and Levite are supposed to be exemplars? The scholar responds, “The one who showed [the victim] mercy” (Luke 10:36-37).

Were this the end of the interaction between Jesus and the scholar of the law, the lesson might be to appreciate those neighbors who share one's own values, regardless of their political or religious identity. This scriptural passage then could serve as the basis for loving neighbors of other faiths whose values are most like our own. But the passage does not end here. To the one who asked, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” In other words, Jesus instructs him not to ask, “Who qualifies as my neighbor?” or “Who is worthy of my compassion?”

“Our world is filled with Jericho roads—places marked by violence and traversed by a stunning variety of people, including folk with sharp religious and political differences.

but rather, “Whom am I obliged to treat like my neighbor?” and “How can I best love my neighbors, especially those least like myself?”

Our world is filled with Jericho roads—places marked by violence and traversed by a stunning variety of people, including folk with sharp religious and political differences. Like the Samaritan of the parable, we too encounter violence in the context of religious difference and wonder what we should do. Jesus' answer warns against making the mistake of the priest and Levite by indulging in a superficial understanding of our religious identity; such a superficial understanding can prevent us from living out the core values of our tradition. Instead, Christ calls us to dig deep into what it means to follow the way of the Cross. Following this way, we speak a resounding no to the violence and alienation we encounter in the human family. Further, we speak this no by entering into relationships of compassionate care and concern, especially with brothers and sisters whose religious ways seem strange and different from our own.

*The Witness of the Saints: Francis of Assisi

Francis of Assisi faithfully embodied many Christian practices, including living simply, doing justice, and caring for creation. Most people do not know that Francis also embodied—in his own way, and shaped by the circumstances of his own time—the practice of knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths.

This story begins nearly eighty-five years before Francis was born, at the dawn of a particularly dark chapter in the history of the human family. In 1095, Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade to wrest the Holy Land from the hands of those he called “the Saracen infidels” (read Muslims) who, by that time, had ruled Jerusalem and its environs for well over four centuries. Historians have disputed what motivated the pope, but whatever the reason, the Crusades introduced a virulent heresy into Christian thinking and practice.

Ever since the time of Augustine, the church had understood that, even though acts of violence ran counter to the central teachings of the Gospel, there were times when violent confrontation with one’s enemies could be morally justifiable and even imperative for a Christian society. (This understanding, known as just war theory, is discussed in depth in chapter 11 on peacemaking and nonviolence.) With the Crusades, however, came the theological proposition that war could be sanctifying and redemptive; if it were in the service of God, war could actually be “holy.” The great Cistercian monk and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, who in 1146 preached what would come to be known as the Second Crusade, had written some years earlier that when a knight kills an evildoer or a pagan (that is, a Muslim), “he is not the killer of a human being, but, if I may so put it, a killer of evil.”

A century later, as the Crusades continued, Francis fiercely resisted the heresy of “holy war.” The Christian response to Muslims and Islam should not be violent confrontation, he believed, but courageous evangelical witness. After two failed attempts to journey to Muslim lands in order to preach the gospel, Francis finally succeeded in 1219. According to Franciscan lore, he journeyed to the port of Acre with Italian reinforcements for the Fifth Crusade and then made his way, with a small company of fellow friars, to the Crusaders’ camp in the Nile delta. Here Francis questioned the legitimacy of the Crusades in his preaching to the troops. After spending several days there, he finally crossed enemy lines with one other friar and entered the camp of the Muslim Sultan Malik al-Kamil.

There are many versions of what transpired once Francis reached the court of the sultan. The truth is, we don’t know what exactly happened. We do know that they parted amicably and that Francis returned, unharmed. One Christian source records that the two parted with the sultan saying,

“Pray for me that God may deign to reveal to me the law and faith which is more pleasing to Him.” A gesture of politeness? Most likely. But perhaps also an expression of the two men’s mutual recognition of the integrity of each other’s faith and relationship with the living God, in spite of the significant differences that divided them. In any case, by virtue of their meeting, both Francis and Sultan Malik al-Kamil bore *countercultural witness*. They witnessed against the dominant ethos of Christian-Muslim violence, and they witnessed to the heart of their respective traditions’ foundational teachings of peace and of the inherent dignity of all God’s creatures, especially human beings. The story of Francis and the sultan demonstrates that God raises up saints as “good Samaritans” who encourage and inspire us to travel today’s Jericho roads as Christ’s disciples.

*Dialogue and Evangelization

When I was discerning my vocation and preparing for it through many years of schooling, I never imagined I could land a teaching job at a Catholic institution that would value both my baptismal commitment to Christ and his church *and* my longstanding intellectual and spiritual love affair with Islam and Muslim peoples. But I have found a professional and spiritual home at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Here the practice of knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths—or inter religious dialogue—is considered an essential part of the evangelizing mission Christ fulfilled and then entrusted to the church. In fact, in my eight years at CTU, I have come to believe that *interreligious dialogue is the only truly workable framework for evangelization—for living the gospel and giving witness to Christ—in a religiously plural society and an increasingly globalized world*. It is critical, however, that my Christian sisters and brothers not misunderstand me when I use this language. Building relationships with people of other faiths can never be legitimately used as a strategy for Christian or any other kind of proselytism. It absolutely cannot. Evangelization does not mean proselytism. In fact, these two are subversive to each other.

The difference between *proselytism* and *evangelization* is that between conquest and partnership, between denigration and respect, between genocide and life together. It’s the difference between a legacy of sin in God’s name (manifest in things like the Crusades and European colonial

decimation of native peoples and their cultures in the Western hemisphere) and love in God's Spirit (manifest in the work of countless missionaries who truly loved and gave their lives for the people they genuinely sought to serve). It's the difference between, on one hand, seeing oneself as the agent of "conversion" and the other as its object, and, on the other hand, understanding that the Holy Spirit is the true agent of transformative, sanctifying, and redeeming grace, and that all of humanity, indeed all of creation, is the permanent object of this grace.

Not too long ago I was on an airplane bound for a largely non-Christian country. A few rows behind me sat a group of young Christian missionaries—most in their early twenties and traveling outside of the United States for the first time. Even through my minimally adjustable seatback, I sensed their exuberance over their adventure; they were going "to bring people to Christ." I chatted with a few of them and asked if they knew anything about the culture and religion of the people to whom they would be witnessing. They were honest: they knew nothing. All they really needed to know, one woman explained, was that they would meet "good people with bad ideas." Their mission, she said, was to show them just how "bad" their ideas were, and to offer them the good news of Christ instead.

Whether by coincidence or providence, this group and I met again on the flight back to the U.S. The young people were visibly worn, tired, and without a trace of the infectious exuberance they had exhibited just five weeks earlier. They spoke soberly about what a "difficult time" they had had. They did not realize that what they had wanted so desperately to dismiss as a people's "bad ideas" was actually a venerable and rich culture and religion that grounded this people's dignity as human beings. As a result, they left with noticeably hardened hearts. They were headed home with stories of obstinacy and confrontation that would cover the real truth: as victims of their own arrogance born of theological and cultural ignorance, they squandered countless opportunities for dialogue. They missed every chance God gave them to build relationships of mutual respect and trust—relationships in which both missionaries and hosts could have been transformed by sharing their respective faiths with one another in sincerity, humility, and love.

I would say their mission failed because it lacked the spirit of dialogue. Dialogue is grounded in uncompromising respect for the dignity of

others—fellow Christians, people of other faiths, and people of no faith. It is a practice of love that admits no attempts to coerce, dominate, or take advantage of the weakness of others. In the words of a 1984 Roman Catholic statement, dialogue "is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation. Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel."

*Some Words of Caution

The Jericho road is filled with pitfalls. One is illustrated by the young missionaries' failure to realize that true evangelization first and foremost involves our own transformation. Being in dialogue with people of other faiths might have deepened their own faith, revealing that evangelization is not the work of human beings but of the Holy Spirit. We can neither take credit when our efforts "bear fruit" nor despair when they "go awry." Our role is to dedicate ourselves to loving our neighbors, not to causing some change in them that we deem to be the goal.

The practice of knowing and loving our neighbors of other faiths can also lead to difficult encounters with other Christians. Amidst the brokenness of our selves and our world, this one faith has splintered into many manifestations, across differing denominations and various leanings within each denomination. As we build relationships with people of other faiths, we should try also to sustain a dialogue of hope and reconciliation among different communities of Christ's fractured body. As a practice of our faith we need to exercise dialogue with every bit as much strength *ecumenically* and *intrareligiously* as we do *interreligiously*. Just as we learn not to demonize those of other faiths, we must be careful not to demonize sisters and brothers in Christ who do not, for one reason or another, share our vision of friendship across boundaries of faith. Instead we are called to know, understand, and love them more fully, trusting the Spirit is at work transforming and healing the whole body of Christ.

A final danger arises when we begin to think that because words like *love*, *relationship*, and *dialogue* sound pleasant, they refer to work that is easy and safe. It is neither. As both history and personal experience

demonstrate, would-be peacemakers and bridge-builders often threaten the status quo—and the status quo rarely, if ever, changes without a fight.

My own relatively short career in interreligious dialogue includes a painful experience that took me by surprise. In doing what I thought was the right thing in relation to one set of dialogue partners, I deeply offended and hurt another set of dialogue partners; the two are currently locked in conflict with each other. During this difficult time, I felt what it was like to be maligned as an outcast. Hate mail arrived every day, and nightmares disturbed my sleep every night; and even now, several years later, some people still exclude me from personal and professional gatherings. The experience made me desperately aware of my own sinfulness and weakness, and I considered giving up my ministry. At the advice of a spiritual director, however, I took my doubts and anxieties to the foot of the Cross. There I heard Christ saying three things to me. The first was, “Yes, I did call you to this work.” The second was, “No, I never said it would be easy.” His third word to me, as I envisioned him hanging on that tree, was: “And I never said you would not get hurt.”

*That We May Have Life and Have It Abundantly

For Christians, the mystery of coming to know God by entering into right relationship with our fellow human beings and with the rest of creation lies at the heart of our faith. When we confess that the one God is a Trinity of divine persons in relationship, we are expressing this same mystery. Through our baptism into Christ's death and Christ's life of radical love for God and neighbor, we have become reconciled as adopted daughters and sons to the One whom Jesus called “Father.” In and through the only-begotten Son we are invited into an ever-deepening communion with the Father by entering into relationships of reconciliation and love, not only with our sisters and brothers in Christ but with all humanity. This includes, in a very special sense, those who relate to God in ways that are very different from our own, but in whom we can see and marvel at the work of the Holy Spirit which “blows where it chooses” without our knowing “where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8).

When Christians trust that we are held in this relationship with the Triune God, we become free to embrace the practice of knowing and loving

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our neighbors of other faiths as part of our uncompromising commitment to Christ. We do not stray into relativism, which supposes that truth does not matter, and we do not adopt absolutism, which makes an idol of a single truth known only to a few. Instead, we experience a more profound humility before the triune God who, we discover, is revealed in ever new ways and in constantly surprising places—including the lives of people of other faiths.

My Muslim friends—through the distinct goodness and holiness of their devotion to *the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Sustainer of the Universe*—have taught me about my own relationship with God and what God expects of me. Although I am not a very good Christian, I know that in and through my encounter with the Spirit in the holy practice of knowing and loving my neighbors of other faiths, I am a much better Christian than I would have been otherwise.

Only when we genuinely desire to understand the ways in which God lives in the hearts, minds, and circumstances of our sisters and brothers of other faiths can we begin to act as true and effective ambassadors for Christ. Without such a desire, we cannot pretend that we wish to love them as Christ did: by sharing both their suffering and their joy. In the dialogue made possible by this desire, however, we may begin to work together against all the forces—be they greed or deprivation, pride or fear, anger or indifference—that prevent the entire human family from having the life won for us by the great Shepherd of the sheep, and having it abundantly.