

October 29, 2017 **Inter-faith Relations - Salvation beyond the church?**
by Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Earlier this year Nutana Park Mennonite invited Imam Ilyas of the Saskatoon Islamic Association and his daughter Sophia to speak from our pulpit during the sermon time of our worship service. I appreciated the reflections from both daughter and father: Sophia for her spirited call that people of good will ought to join together in shaping our city for the better, and the Imam for his theological observations on a few similarities and dis-similarities between Islam and Christianity. One item in particular has provoked great reflection within me.

In the course of conversations with the Imam, and he said it during the sermon time that day as well, I have learned that Muslims do not believe Jesus actually died on the cross. I have wondered to myself: is this a deal breaker? The death and resurrection of Jesus are really important for me. The death of Jesus comforts me in that God identifies with us in our dying. The death of Jesus, and his subsequent resurrection, is vital for me because it affirms that Jesus and God have the power to put mortality to death. I would find non-violence a much less compelling option without the death and resurrection of Jesus. Can I work for the common good, I pondered, with a group who appreciates Jesus but does not include his death and resurrection in their belief structure? This is where the Good Samaritan found me.

The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) is linked with a lawyer's question of eternal life on one side (Luke 10:25-28) and Mary's mediation at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42) on the other. The choice of a Samaritan as the parable protagonist is shocking given the Jewish audience and the "long standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans. The latter were regarded as unclean, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen northern kingdom. By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, therefore, Jesus demolished all boundary expectations. Social position—race, religion, or region—count for nothing. The man in the ditch, from whose perspective the story is told, will not discriminate among potential helpers. Anyone who has compassion and stops to help is his neighbor".¹ In this story Jesus has looked at right action (orthopraxi) as the defining measure of eternal life, salvation we might say, rather than right belief (orthodoxy). In the next episode Jesus continues his assault on boundaries by tutoring Mary, who assumes the role of a disciple as she sits at the feet of Jesus taking in his wisdom. In 1st century Palestine women just didn't do this kind of thing. The categories we create, the boundaries by which we abide, are not recognized by Jesus. We are left with the disturbing fact that in this scripture the disciples of Jesus include the likes of Samaritans and women. Jesus leaves the salvation door open to those who defy our definitions of "disciple"; his other sheep we might say (see Jn 10:16). If this interpretation of the scriptures has any merit, there may indeed be salvation beyond the church.

Far from a universalistic understanding of salvation, as some might try to dismiss my reading of the text, I think these verses from Luke clarify that eternal life, salvation, comes through the integration of belief and action. A godless Samaritan is on the road of salvation while a Jesus respecting Jewish lawyer is stuck in the blocks trying to figure out his neighbours. In 21st century North American parlance we might say there are some Muslims on the road to eternal life while some Jesus worshipping Christians are stuck. This is not universalism. Rather, this follows the trajectory of Jesus in clarifying that salvation, eternal life, has more to do with how a person treats neighbours than the cultural peculiarities of a race or the creeds of a religion.

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections on the Gospel of Luke* (v1 IX) (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 229.

If the creeds we hold do not foster love of neighbour, the creeds and we do not measure up. In this respect salvation, eternal life, is not even necessarily within the church. Clearly salvation can be found within the church, but also beyond the church.

This is where Paul's reflections on the cosmic Christ found in Colossians are particularly helpful for me. Paul describes Christ as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of **all** creation in whom **all** things in heaven and earth were created, who is before **all** things, and in whom **all** things hold together; six times Paul affirms Christ's eternal and universal presence in Colossians 1:15-20. If "all" really means "all", then aspects of religious systems beyond Western or Eastern Christianity will bear some mark of Christ, for they too were created by the eternal Word and are held together by the eternal Christ. These other people are not "anonymous Christians" as Karl Rahner suggested—"religious people who are Christians even though they do not know about Christianity expressly"². Rather, they are distinct traditions which bear elements of the eternal Christ. Hans Kung rightly suggests we need to take our differences seriously.³

When I hold Paul's words about the eternal Christ making "all things"—even those other faith traditions far from our Mennonite islands located in the Western Christian sea—alongside the words of Jesus that he is "the way, and the life, and the truth; that no one comes to the Father except through" him (John 14:6), I am led in a slightly different direction than sermons often preached on these words of Jesus. I truly believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. I believe this unconditionally. According to Paul, though, in Jesus Christ these other faith traditions have been created by the eternal Word who holds them together. This would mean that when a Muslim or Hindu is able to live into the mark of Christ residing in their tradition they would be walking the way of truth and life which leads to the Father. When we live into the way of Jesus, be we Samaritan or Jewish lawyer or Christian, we find Eternal Life, salvation we might say.

I have people a part of my life who do not agree with the interpretation I have just laid out. They say to me, "Patrick, those Muslims are bad people. Suicide bombings, forced conversions, kidnapping children, rigid patriarchy—there is nothing Christ like about that." And I agree. I have a twofold response. First, in inter-faith considerations it is essential that we compare apples with apples and bad apples with bad apples. The worst of Islam (Taliban, Isis, Boko Haram, etc...) must be compared with the worst of Christianity (Crusades, the Sons of Odin, KKK, etc...). We simply can not compare the worst of one group with the best of another. Secondly, I say, there are Muslim communities actively working at de-radicalization and defeating hate. Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, for example, has authored the book *I Shall not Hate* which chronicles the terrible day in Gaza when an Israeli bomb killed his family, and his choice to keep working at a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; almost living the words of Jesus to bless and not curse. Earlier this year I picked up Syed Soharwardy's book *Defeating Hate: A Comprehensive Rebuttal to Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Islamophobes*. The Muslim communities in Saskatoon, Imam Ilyas' people, are as outraged as we are by the violence done in the name of Islam. In an editorial in the Star Phoenix last summer, Fatima Coovadia described her personal revolution of these so called Muslims. She used words like "corrupt ideology" and "warped minds".⁴

² For a description of anonymous Christians see Ed. L. Miller & Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introductions to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 194-195.

³ *Ibid*, 196-197.

⁴ Fatima Coovadia, "Facing an Invisible Burden" in *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (D3 of the Sat June 25, 2016 edition).

If traces of Christ may be found in other religions, as I am implying, then there are a couple of things asked of us. We will need to be open to the Christ gift which may be present in other faith traditions. We will need to own the Christ gift which is present in our tradition⁵. We will need to be mindful that each culture (Mennonitism in fact) has trappings which have been conflated with or distort Divine Revelation and go beyond the intent of the eternal Christ. I will conclude my remarks focusing on three gifts I see Mennonites and Christians offering the world.

The first emerges from our scripture reading in Luke. The lawyer is told to “go and do” while Mary is praised for sitting and listening. The life of a disciple requires both.⁶ As Chandra Mohan Jain puts it, "My whole teaching consists of two words, 'meditation' and 'love.' Meditate so that you can feel immense silence, and love so that your life can become a song, a dance, a celebration. You will have to move between the two, and if you can move easily without any effort, you have learned the greatest thing in life."⁷ We have stories of Jesus, and teachings of Jesus, which link together meditation / worship with charity in our world. This is what the world needs. The world needs people deeply grounded in the love of Jesus Christ who reflexively impact the world for the better. Meditation and worship which translates into kindness and mercy is our gift. It is what we have to share.

Secondly, we Mennonites have a particular gift in the Christian family. I am talking about non-violent theology. It appears elsewhere in other Christian denominations and movements within other world religions, so I do think this is an impulse from the eternal Christ. No war has ever solved the problems it set out to address. War, in fact, often makes things worse. Non-violence is a gift which has been entrusted to Mennonites as a people. For all their problems Menno Simons, Conrad Grebel, Hans Denk, and most other early Anabaptist rightly observed that Jesus Christ asks us to forgo violence, and the Apostle Paul affirmed the same (see Romans 12:9). For all the problems Mennonite communities have had through the centuries they have more or less held on to the teaching of non-violent peacemaking. It is the gift we have inherited and the gift we must share. Now more than ever.

Finally, I will conclude as I began. We Christians have the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus is important for all God’s people and the world. Jesus, the Risen Christ, guides us through the dying process; we are never alone. More broadly, in Jesus Christ God has taken death captive—and that is really great news. And knowing that an instrument of death becomes the source of life gives us courage to do good things, right things; it gives us courage to suffer well. This story is a gift for the world. The Muslim contention that Jesus did not die on the cross is not a deal breaker for me. It only means that in due course, when the Spirit says the time is right, I will have a chance to share something Divine with my conversation partners. And along the way I may learn a thing or two as well. Amen.

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⁵ Dr. Darren Dahl of the Prairie Centre of Ecumenism refers to this model as “receptive learning ecumenism”. It broadens the ecumenical or interfaith conversation from a focus on those things we share in common to owning our differences, and hopefully learning from other parts of Christ’s body.

⁶ Culpepper, 232.

⁷ Chandra Mohan Jain, 1931-1990. Quoted from an Alan Reese journal entry.