

“The Four-Fold Path”
Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity

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In June of last year, a panel of the Ninth Judicial Appeals Court ruled that the Pledge of Allegiance was unconstitutional because it included the words “under God”. A plaintiff had said that such a phrase violated his right not to believe in God, and that was prohibited by the First Amendment which guaranteed freedom of religion. It happened in this case that the plaintiff was an atheist, but one of the three judges on the panel broadened the case to say, “what would you feel like if you were made to say ‘one nation under Buddha’, or ‘one nation under Allah’, or ‘one nation under Brahma’?” That is no longer an academic question in this country, where many citizens now practice religions that used to be literally “foreign” to us.

This presence of other religions at our doorstep has challenged the way we see them and see ourselves. We used to deal with them at a distance, as mission fields far away. We sang the old missionary hymn, “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains” that contained the lines:

“In vain with lavish kindness The gifts of God are strown;
 The heathen in his blindness Bows down to wood and stone.
 Can we whose souls are lighted With wisdom from on high
 Can we to men benighted The lamp of life deny?”

That seemed obvious when missionaries encountered the stone-age cultures, outcasts and animist beliefs of the Third World. They needed our help, our religion, our medicine, our education.

But now we are dealing head-on with the other major religions: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and even Judaism. These people are our doctors, lawyers, generals, and professors.

Statistics on other religions in the United States show:¹

- Jews 6.1 million; that is more than the Presbyterians
- Muslims 1.9 million; that is more than the Churches of Christ
- Buddhists 1.4 million; that is more than the AME Zion
- Hindus 844,000–1.1 million; that is more than the Jehovah’s Witnesses

¹ Christian Century, May 8-15, 2002

How do we respond, considering that there are several passages in the New Testament that claim a central role for Jesus? Is it possible for Christians to take other religions seriously and still believe Jesus' saying, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" [John 14:6]? It is this question that I want to address in my presentation tonight.

In a real sense we cannot answer this question yet. That is, most of us do not know enough about other religions to understand them from the inside. We may have read about them, visited their houses of worship and even attended religious services, but most of us are still on the outside looking in. We are no more able to describe how our understanding of Jesus fits into their religious architecture than we are able to redecorate their living rooms while standing out in the street.

I start in this discouraging way because I have experienced exactly this frustration when talking with other Christians about their beliefs. Some of you know that I served for several years as the Lutheran co-chair of the Roman Catholic–Lutheran dialogue in this country. The dialogue had been going on for over fifteen years when I joined it, and we were still learning new things about each other every time we met. Words that sounded the same to each group proved to have different nuances—sometimes even different meanings! If it took scholars—all of whom claimed to be Christian—all those years just to discover that the same words functioned differently in our respective doctrinal systems, how long will it take for representatives from different world religions really to understand one another?

It's kind of like learning a language. You can study the vocabulary and know the words, but until you learn the rhythm and pace of a spoken language you won't understand it. You may have heard about the American who was going to Spain on a business trip, so he asked a friend how he was going to be understood in a foreign land. "It's easy," the friend said, "just talk loud and slow." So when our traveler arrived he went up to the hotel counter and said, "I'M FROM CHICAGO AND I'D LIKE TO RENT A ROOM." The man behind the desk replied, "I'M FROM CHICAGO TOO, WHAT KIND OF A ROOM DO YOU WANT?" And so the conversation continued for a few minutes. Suddenly the businessman paused and said, "WAIT A MINUTE. IF I'M FROM CHICAGO AND YOU'RE FROM CHICAGO, WHY ARE WE BOTH SPEAKING SPANISH?"

Islam is much in the news today, and the word "jihad" immediately evokes the image of suicide bombings. Of course the word has been used in this way, but it has a much broader meaning, just as the word "crusade" has with us. But mention "crusade" to a Muslim and you get the same scowl that "jihad" produces in our culture. In both cases the most militant meaning dominates our interaction. So it is with language. We need to stop shouting at one another and listen for the reality behind the slogans.

A recent article in the New York Times Magazine² has given us a glimpse into the thought-world behind much of what we badly label “Islamic fundamentalism”. Paul Berman describes the work of Sayyid Qutb, a widely-read commentator on the Koran who was executed in Egypt in 1966. Qutb’s basic thesis is that Christianity is responsible for the terrible “schizophrenia” between religion and science, the sacred and the secular. He contrasts the pious Islamic scientists of the middle ages with the later division of culture in the West, and he sees the role of Islam today as being the destruction of that fatal division and the restoration of that harmonious life of humanity in nature that the Koran prescribes.

I give this example to remind us that the roots of religion go much deeper than vocabulary; they embody the heart of a culture, and they shape it. We in the West are so quick to take sentences and make propositions out of them, losing the larger context, both cultural and literary, out of which they have grown. This caveat is even more important when we deal with religions like Buddhism, which speaks within a completely non-Western world-view.

The other thing to recognize from the outset is that the great religions of the world are themselves pluralistic—that is, they have many subsets—dialects, if you will—that may not express their faith in the same way. The Christian tradition is certainly familiar with this phenomenon. Evangelicals would not be comfortable having Catholics speak for them, and I know from personal experience that some Lutherans would not even like other Lutherans to speak for them. Recent news from Iraq has made us aware of the Shiites and Sunnis among Islamic groups; we are well aware of the main branches of Judaism in this country, and similar divisions exist in Eastern religions as well.

Thus, rather than beginning with a solution to the question, “How do Christians who believe that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” relate to other faiths?” I would like to suggest that we first have some homework to do. We need to learn a lot more about these other faiths and the people who practice them. Then, perhaps, the answer to our question will reveal itself. I say this on the basis of my experience with inter-Christian dialogue. True dialogue does not have a predetermined result. All sides enter the discussion with only two assumptions: One, the other party is worth listening to because God has spoken to them as well. And two, we must present our own belief in as clear and honest a manner as possible. Differences are not to be avoided, they are to be investigated. In the case of inter-Christian dialogue, this process has always led to a larger understanding of God’s work; I believe it will work the same way in inter-religious dialogue. Rather than beginning our encounter with a preconceived outcome in mind, we trust that the truth will be with us all along the way. It’s the difference between trying to follow a road map and finding your way by global positioning satellite. The first path to truth is marked simply, “Hit the road!”

²Paul Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror” in The New York Times Magazine, March 23, 2003, pp. 26ff.

But I am not simply a process person. There are some possible outcomes that we can imagine—all of them based on Biblical material. The one thing I cannot tell you from this place and point in time is which one will prove to be right. So let's take a look at three other "road" maps.³

We might call the first path "**One Way**": Henry Fielding's Parson Thwackum: "When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England."

This path would say that the Christian understanding of Jesus is the only way. We recall passages like, Matthew 11:27:

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Or Acts 4: 12:

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

[Also, John 14:6, I John 5:12]

These passages have sent missionaries around the world during the last two centuries, and have been responsible for the establishment of Christian churches in many lands. Their goal is conversion, that is, that persons will leave the religions of their ancestors and will accept baptism into Christianity. Persons who do not do this will not be saved.

Of course the question always comes up—"What about those who never have a chance to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ?" When I was growing up the answer was, "Then you, who knew Jesus and didn't become a missionary, will be judged unfaithful. As Scripture says, *"And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"* That always shut me up.

But even this "One Way" path can lead world religions to heaven, if the possibility of salvation is not sealed by death. There are passages in the New Testament, notably Ephesians 4:9 and I Peter 3:18-20, that hint at a "second chance" for those who did not accept Christ in their life on earth. I Peter says of Jesus that *"He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey. . ."* In other words, Jesus himself will do what his lazy followers on earth failed to do, and so all will have a chance to hear—whether they all accept or not, they at least will have the chance.

³The opening illustrations in each of the following sections are based on material in Carl E. Braaten, "Lutheran Theology and Religious Pluralism" in Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology, ed. Paul Rajashekar, LWF Report 23/24, 1988]

A second path may be called **“When You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take It”**. In his story of “Nathan the Wise” the 18th Century philosopher Lessing “. . .tells. . . about a certain father in ancient times who had three sons. It was then the custom for the father to give his son a special ring for his inheritance. The ring possessed a kind of magic power to make the one who owned it beloved of God and humanity. But this father loved all three of his sons equally. In order to hurt none of them, he made two perfect imitations of the true ring, and before he died gave each son his blessing with one of the rings. Each of the sons thought he had the true ring and considered the others false. The three sons went to the wise judge Nathan. And Nathan offered his counsel: ‘Let each one of you think his own ring is without doubt the real ring’ and trust that perhaps in a thousand thousand years the true ring will prove itself by the ‘proof of the spirit and power.’ Meanwhile, let each son show forth a spirit of tolerance and gentleness to the others.”

I believe this is the attitude of many Christians today. When asked to compare a statement saying Christians should convert people of other faiths to Christianity to one saying they should be tolerant of people of other faiths and “leave them alone,” 71 percent said the latter statement is closer to their own views and 22 percent approved of conversion goals. In a similar vein, 78 percent said a statement declaring “all religions have elements of truth” is closer to their views, compared to 17 percent who identified with a statement saying that their religion is “the only true religion.” Similarly a Pew poll released in March found only 18 percent said their own religion is “the one true faith.”

Robert Wuthnow reflected on the results of these polls taken last year “For many, many centuries, Christians have thought they had the truth, and that other people did not have the truth in the same way,” Wuthnow said. “And now Christians are not quite so sure of that. They are more likely to say, ‘This is true for me’ And that radically changes the meaning of truth, when it’s just true for you and not necessarily true for somebody else.”⁴

It is possible, of course, to see this as a complete relativizing of Christianity. Jesus no longer has a key role in salvation. But I can also imagine that some Christians hold this view in the sense of Lessing’s original story—that is, they believe that in the “thousand thousand years” Lessing mentions, the truth of the Christian religion will eventually prove itself by the “proof of the spirit and power.” And so, by a happy marriage of Christian truth and the survival of the fittest, “. . . *at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*” [Philippians 2:1011]

A third path can be labeled, **“All Roads Lead to Christ”** At the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Joseph Sittler talked about the “Cosmic Christ”. He took as his biblical text the passage from Colossians 1:15-17;

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created. . . All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

⁴The Christian Century, May 8-15, 2002

Sittler argued that we did not need to “bring Christ to the Nations”; Christ was already there. Our task was to discern the presence and work of Christ in creating and holding all things together. This mission of discovery would expand our understanding of God’s great work in nature and history, and would ultimately lead to a more exalted view of Christ.

Evidence for the power of this approach can be found in precisely the passage that Sittler quoted from Colossians. It is clear that this passage is a product of the intersection of the preaching about Jesus with the Gnostic religious climate of that day.

Pluralism, after all, is not a new issue for the Christian Church. The church was born in a religiously pluralistic environment and it had to make its way by engaging itself with that religious zoo. Art historians know that the early images of Jesus are adaptations of images of the sun god, or of Apollo, or other religious figures of the time. Passages like the one from Colossians use the “fullness” and “visible/invisible” vocabulary of Gnosticism. As this vocabulary was adopted, the role of Jesus expanded—not simply in a “my god is better than your god” way, but as the result of Christian reflection on how Jesus’ life and ministry could be described in a new philosophical framework.

And of course this re-conceptualization went on for centuries. The creeds are products of such encounters—terms like *hypostasis* and *homoousia* were borrowed to answer questions about Jesus that didn’t exist in Semitic cultures. The great work of Thomas Aquinas represents the culmination of the encounter between Christianity and Aristotelian philosophy—once considered bitter enemies. We could go on with reference to Schliermacher, Kierkegaard, Niebuhr and Douglas John Hall—each of whom enriched our understanding of Jesus precisely because they took the religious climate of their own day seriously. So the encounter with other religions should not be seen as a threat; it may in fact be the stimulus to another creative phase in Christian theology.

The fourth and last path I want to explore could be called “**Finding the Way**”. This plays on the double meaning of “finding”, both in the tentative sense of finding ones way through the fog and in the ultimate sense of choosing the right path.

It takes its point of departure from Paul’s words to the Athenians:

“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’. What therefore you worship as ‘unknown’, this I proclaim to you.” [Acts 17:22-3]

It is clear in this encounter with another religion that Paul suggests that he has the answer to their unspoken question. He knows who this “unknown God” is. He also knows that their puzzlement is itself God-given. God has left traces in their religion, he tells them, “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed He is not far from each one of us. [Acts 17:27] That picks up the double sense of “groping for” and “finding” that I mentioned above.

And note how Paul comes to this point. He tells the Athenians that he has “looked carefully” at their objects of worship. That is, he has applied himself to the task of getting to know their religious beliefs. In the process he has discovered an unanswered question, a religious puzzle as yet unsolved. This pattern can also be applied to our present situation. Through careful dialogue and research, as we come to understand other traditions better “from the inside”, we may find those points of contact that will provide opportunities for mutual exploration and discovery. It may not be that the best place to start is always “What think ye of Jesus?” The positions on that question may be solidly fortified by generations of theological entrenchment.

It may be time for us to stop asking the question and instead listen carefully to the questions they raise—not about our faith but the questions that are generated by their own. This was the method that Paul Tillich, for example, applied to the secular culture of his day. He called it “correlation”, because it tried to frame the Christian message in terms that responded to the yearnings and anxieties of his contemporaries.

I can’t predict what this process of listening and responding might produce. It certainly must be built on honest dialogue. The danger is always that we are so sure that we know the answer that we really don’t give the question its due. And what about our own questions? What about the schizophrenia in Western culture that Sayyid Qutb put his finger on? Can we admit that Christianity also has unresolved issues? Are we willing to submit ourselves to the same sort of self-scrutiny that we expect of other religions? Perhaps the only place we can really do this is in dialogue with them. Self-justification is so easy; we need the “mutual affirmation and admonition” that we are only beginning to offer one another within the Christian family.

Pope John Paul II has reminded Christendom that ecumenical progress begins with repentance. He has put that into practice through recent apologies for Christian actions, including the Crusades. If we accept the challenge that other religions pose to our faith, we will have to repent. But that admission of our own blindness may bring the miracle of sight that will show us all how to find the way.