

“Inter-Faith Dialogue—Nothing to Lose, Everything to Gain”

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I am a novice in inter-religious dialogue, who is highly motivated to learn from active members of other religions what no pastor, Christian professor, or academic book has been able to teach me thus far in my life. Driven by my own curiosity, my theological questions, and angst over deteriorating world conditions, I have intentionally set out to meet, listen to, and learn from Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. So far, over the past several years, my experience has been marked by a number of forays into dialogue with Muslims and Buddhists, with only limited conversation with followers of Judaism or Hinduism.

I am not a professor of world religions, nor an expert in Buddhism, Islam or in any other religion other than Christianity. Rather, I am a New Testament scholar, who has migrated to Practical Theology through praxis, writing on spirituality and leadership, and increasing participation in cross-cultural teaching, ministry, and dialogue.

Beginning in the summer of 2006, I've travelled numerous times to Africa, Europe, and Asia, soaking up different cultures, asking questions, observing, listening and learning. My family walked 500 miles across northern Spain on pilgrimage. My wife, Jill, and I spent 6 weeks at the Bossey Institute, an education site outside of Geneva, Switzerland, run by the World Council of Churches. Bossey hosts young leaders from all over the world, who come for 6-9 months to study and discuss ecumenism. In addition, I have been leading Pastoral Leadership Workshops, teaching courses in New Testament, and lecturing on spiritual formation and Christian leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Myanmar, as well as in the United States.

I've debated religious truth claims with Muslim fundamentalists at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, London. I've developed ongoing friendships with Pakistani Muslims in Chartres, France. I've interviewed Buddhist monks in Yangon, Myanmar and in Bangkok, Thailand. I've discussed purposes and methods of inter-faith dialogue with a Buddhist professor of Christianity in Bangkok, and with Asian Christian theologians in Myanmar and peace workers in Chiang Mai, Thailand who are actively involved in working for community development across religious lines.

After 9/11, I, along with many other Americans, suddenly began to pay more attention to Islam in particular. The sudden destruction of the World Trade Center awoke a complacent America with horror to the very real dangers of unresolved political, economic, and cultural conflicts affecting billions of people on our planet. I

was motivated as never before to understand how religious fundamentalists (or those using religion as a mask) could commit such ghastly violence.

Without a doubt, most of us need to do a better job seeking understanding and promoting peace among adherents of various religions. Even more, most of us need to learn how to resolve conflicts more peaceably. Inter-faith dialogue seems to me to be a good place to start, especially for those of us who are theologians.

This essay, then, is a work in progress. I am writing from the perspective of one Western, New Testament/practical theologian who is on a very personal journey, as well as a professional one. I offer it not as a definitive, academic analysis, by any means. Rather, here are a collection of impressions that are informing my own faith development and ability to think, communicate and teach with greater awareness and sensitivity to multi-religious issues. The insights I have gained have also been very helpful to me in building bridges to others from different religious backgrounds, including those who do not have faith in God at all.

Purposes of Inter-Faith Dialogue

There seem to be three or four especially valuable reasons to engage in inter-faith dialogue:

- to learn from more about other religions from real adherents of those religions, and to give others a better understanding of our own religion
- to promote peace and harmony among different peoples
- to work together to address common societal problems, such as poverty or hunger.
- in some settings, to seek a special experience of God in the midst of the interaction and dialogue as well.

Not every purpose needs to be in place for a meaningful dialogue to take place, and those engaged in dialogue may only be interested in one or two of these goals.

Evangelism, on the other hand, has a different purpose from inter-faith dialogue. Each has its place, but it's important to know what your goal is when talking to others. Evangelism is designed to recruit new adherents, usually involving a conversion from one way of thinking and believing to faith in Christ. As indicated above, inter-faith dialogue has different goals and should not be undermined by any subtle or not so subtle evangelistic efforts to convert one's dialogue partner.

I am in now way rejecting the validity of evangelism under other circumstances. Most of who are Christians today would not be if someone hadn't had the courage and willingness to share their faith with someone outside of their own culture with the goal of making converts. I, for one, am very grateful for missionaries who brought the Gospel to Europe. What I am saying here, is that in order to create a

mutually respectful, trusting atmosphere in dialogue, secret evangelistic agendas must be excluded.

When I visited Thailand, for example, my goal was not to win converts, but to learn and grow myself. Thus, I focused on listening rather than talking, except when asked a question. At times I had an opportunity to express my own faith in Jesus Christ and appreciation for my personal relationship with God, which I gladly and freely did. I also had a number of opportunities to express my deep appreciation for Jesus' role as Savior, because, in contrast, Theravada Buddhists officially rely entirely on themselves for their hope of reaching Nirvana. Most of the time, though, I just listened and tried to let God speak to me through the encounter, since that is why I went. I hoped for more interaction, but few of those I interviewed seemed interested in what I believed or might say.

Troubling Theological Issues

Interfaith dialogue also raises some very important questions that all Christians need to address. Just what is God's involvement in the 4 billion plus people in the world who do not place their faith in Jesus Christ, and what is their ultimate fate? These are not new questions, but they have taken on new urgency as our world has gotten so much smaller, with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims living next door to Christians; the internet connecting us nearly everywhere in the world; and better information about the values and practices of other religions available. We simply cannot ignore the question of how Christianity fits in with all the other major religions, unless we want to render ourselves irrelevant in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. If we do not think through our theological beliefs, vis-à-vis real neighbors, allies, and enemies alike, we may stunt our own growth and limit our ability to build bridges to others and work well fellow world-citizens.

But there are no easy answers here. Along with points of connection, which are more numerous than many acknowledge, there clearly seem to be irreconcilable differences, at least on an intellectual level. For example, is God relevant or irrelevant in life? (Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus say yes; Buddhists officially say no.) Do we need a savior or is our ultimate hope (liberation perhaps) entirely dependent on our own efforts? (Christians say we need and already have a savior; some Jews are still looking for a messiah; Muslims focus on fulfilling the five pillars of Islam, but expect to still need to throw themselves on the mercy of God at the Judgment day; and Buddhists seek merit by their own efforts to overcome the negative affects of bad deeds/karma.) Is Jesus the only way to forgiveness and eternal life, or are other prophets/saviors/teachers equally reliable?

If you're an "exclusivist" Christian the answer is easy: Jesus is the right way, and everyone else is wrong. Tough luck for all those who never heard about Jesus. If that position feels uncomfortable or seems untenable, since it leaves about 4 billion people in deep trouble, you might prefer believing that Christ is actually saving nonChristians in some mysterious, hidden way (the "inclusive" view). Or popular among those who prefer to acknowledge the independence and integrity of each

religion is to assume that somehow all religions represent different paths to more or less the same end—heaven/Nirvana/paradise/bliss (the “pluralistic” view).

The issue, of course, if those who conceive of Christianity in exclusive terms are right, is how could a loving God pass over two thirds of the world? Is God truly just and loving if so many are bound for eternal damnation, since they have so little hope of hearing the Gospel message in terms they can understand and receive? However, according to traditional scriptural interpretation, there are numerous passages to suggest just such a dismal scenario.

Pluralism, on the other extreme, seems to offer the best hope for promoting peace among religions/peoples and affirming the relative goodness (or lack thereof) in all human beings (including Christians). It also seems more plausible to many that if God is truly a God of love and justice, this God would be at work throughout the world and not just among one third of its population. Yet, as attractive as an open-minded, generous, constructive pluralist theology may be, where is the basis for believing that all (or most) roads all lead to the same eternal destination, other than in our wishful thinking? There are biblical verses that can be found to support the possibility of universal salvation in one form or another, but what do we make of the general theological positions of the various biblical writers that suggest otherwise? Meanwhile, *no* other major religion suggests there is universal salvation/liberation outside of their own belief system either.

Philosopher-theologian John Hick has been working for decades to create a meta-religious view to incorporate all religions under one big umbrella.¹ Basically, he starts with his conclusion: there must be a way for all religions that promote true transformation and social concern to be authentic responses to God/Reality. He then sets out to show how there is indeed this common thread in all religions and to dispense with assertions about Christian uniqueness. Where exclusive teaching is found in any religion (which turns out to be nearly every religion), according to Hick, it is to be rejected in favor of his hypothesis—yet his reasoning, as it appears to me, seems to be that he is committed to his conclusion from the onset.

However, before you dismiss his position too readily, take up his challenge: find an alternative explanation for why 2/3 of the world pursues God/Reality more or less as urgently as Christians do and why they have more or less the same moral code and the same level of morality!²

¹ See particularly, John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*.

² Hick's books are valuable for anyone who is seriously grappling with theological issues arising from the existence of many different major religions, all of which emphasize moral living. Countless books and articles have been written challenging his views and arguments, and you can find many references to these in Hick's footnotes.

For me, I am in process on these issues. I recognize the validity of the theological questions and practical concerns, while I am also increasingly influenced by the power of the Christian faith and a personal relationship with a loving God that is simply not found in the same way among the people I have been in dialogue with.

My main concerns are these:

- If God is a God of love, justice, and grace, and Jesus is the Savior of those who confess his name, what is the plan for the majority of the world who doesn't know God this way?
- Why do so many who hear the Gospel, still prefer to stick with their own religion? There are obvious social, political, and cultural barriers, not to mention a lot of misinformation about Christianity, but why doesn't the Holy Spirit seem to get through to more people, if Jesus is the only way of salvation?
- Are Christians truly more spiritual, moral, or "transformed" than those of other religions? Most of the true believers from various Christian sects, so-called cults, and other religions, with whom I have discussed spirituality and morality, seem quite similar to people I've met in traditional Christian churches. Some are even more devout, more moral, more generous, more kind—almost, more "Christ-like" than some Christians. Surely, as is often quoted from the pulpit, "Christians are not perfect, just forgiven." Yet, Paul's understanding of Christian living goes much further: he expects Christians to be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led in dynamic, life-changing ways. Perhaps the problem is not the Christian faith, but in Christian believers' understanding and practice of Spirit-led living.³

There are reasonable answers to each of these questions, but my encounters with others is leading me to stay open to broader possibilities than I would have once considered.

I have other issues, but too many to address here. My main point is that there are many valid questions for the exclusivist position that demand thoughtful answers. The inclusivist and pluralist positions are not theological panaceas, though. We are dealing with very challenging questions for those who both take Scripture seriously and who also are willing to face the truth about reality all around us. I don't think our goal should be to try to come up with easy answers as much as it is to learn how to listen better to others and to talk about what is real in our lives, not just what we might believe in our heads.

³ I seek to address this apparent lack of integration and vitality in the lives of ordinary Christians as well as Christian leaders in my two most recent books: *The Spirit-Led Leader: Nine Leadership Practices and Soul Principles* (Alban Institute, 2005) and *One Step at a Time: A Pilgrim's Guide to Spirit-Led Living* (Alban, 2008).Ye

I propose that we Christian scholars, ministers and followers of Jesus Christ simply start by being honest about what we're seeing, feeling, and believing out of our own faith life. Let's be authentic and open about our own experience, our convictions, our reasoning behind our faith, and our questions. Let's commit ourselves to genuinely engage in inter-faith dialogue, not as evangelists (unless that is our explicit mission), but as loving, gracious, and kind representatives of Christ. Let's first seek to listen and learn, humbly recognizing that we do not have all the answers to our own questions about God/Ultimate Reality, let alone the questions of others. If the Christian God is all that we Christians claim Yahweh to be, we have no need to fear genuine questions, meeting people who are different, and engaging in sincere conversations and dialogue with them—for all the reasons listed above.

As we have opportunity to share our own faith with others, the most sincere dialogue partners will want to hear about our Christian beliefs, practices and experience. In fact, as Pum Parichart, a Buddhist scholar of Christianity in Bangkok, affirmed, those who engage in inter-faith dialogue want to talk to “real believers,” who can passionately and articulately talk about their faith.⁴ Dialogue partners from other faiths don't want mealy-mouthed, smiley theologians who gloss over differences and too quickly look for points of commonality. Humility and openness in dialogue does not mean assuming that all religions are basically the same, or that we will offend others by holding fast to our own faith.

As I continue on my journey, I'm going to keep asking my questions, seeking answers, and engaging others who believe differently than I do, while staying close to the God I already know along the way. I am not afraid of the quest or the encounter with “others”, and am, in fact, eager to see how God might use me as a light and bridge builder to others who also value peace, understanding, and linking arms to address the world's serious problems. I am also eager to see how God may want to change me through the process of outreach and dialogue.

A Modest Experiment—What I learned from the Buddhists

Early in 2007, I spent four weeks in Myanmar and Thailand interviewing Buddhist monks, Christian and Buddhist professors of religion, directors of inter-faith dialogue programs, and peace workers. My experiences then, along with what I have learned since, and what I am learning now during my two month stay in Yangon, are giving me a much better understanding of Buddhism. I realize that many Christians have underestimated or misunderstood Buddhism's insights and contributions to those who follow its practices. In terms of actual religious discipline, many of us could take a lesson or two from the barefoot men and women in shaved heads and simple robes.

⁴ Professor Pum Parichart Suwanbubbha, Ph.D., is Chairperson of the Comparative Religion Program Working Committee, Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand. My wife, Jill, and I interviewed her at length on February 1, 2007 in Bangkok.

Toward a Better Understanding

There is no historic connection between the origins of Christianity and Buddhism—neither one was influenced by the other as far as anyone can tell. Buddhism arose out of the soil of Hinduism in the sixth century B.C., in Nepal; and Christianity out of Judaism in the first century A.D., in Palestine. But in spite of the mutual independence of the two great traditions, there are many important parallel lines of thought. When there are differences, the contrasts are very interesting and worth contemplating.

Buddhist teaching (Dharma) and Christian teaching (grounded in Scripture) have much in common in several respects. For example, both more or less emphasize putting one's faith/beliefs into action, love and compassion, personal transformation/liberation, and seeking inner peace. Definitions, methods and priorities differ significantly at crucial points, but, at the same time, Buddhism and Christianity share similar core values, especially in the realm of ethics and personal morality.

Differences between the religions are trickier to identify. First, much ignorance and misunderstanding exist between those who practice Buddhism and those who practice Christianity. Consequently, apparent differences are sometimes exaggerated or invented by one group that truly doesn't understand the other. For example, Buddhists often charge Christians with being satisfied with just belief without actions (practice), while Christians counter that Buddhists are all about action without faith in God. While it is true that Buddhism emphasizes self-reliance and Christians rely on grace from God, Buddhists also have a type of faith in the truth and wisdom of the Reality behind their teaching, and Christians also emphasize the importance of good works as an outgrowth of grace and companion of faith. I'm not saying the two religions are essentially the same. In my opinion, they are not. I'm saying that they may be more alike and have more in common than many often realize.

Second, as is true among Christian theologians, clergy and parishioners, there is a big gap between what Buddhist monks and the average Buddhist believe and practice. This means that it may seem easy to identify differences between doctrines written in the Buddhist Scriptures (Dharma) and the Bible. However, in real life, beliefs and practice widely vary. Official teaching is often quite different from what the man and woman on the street actually believe and do.

As examples:

- Many Theravada Buddhist monks (principally from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos) either do not believe in God or consider God irrelevant to Buddhist practice. However, at the same time, the vast majority of ordinary Buddhists from the same countries are very concerned about spirits, gods and angels.

- Both monks and laypeople believe in Karma (the good or evil you do now will come back to you in the next life in one form or another—i.e., “what goes around comes around”). However, the typical monk is eager to escape the cycle of reincarnation, while the average Buddhist is mostly concerned about enjoying this life and avoiding making the next one worse.
- The monks we spoke with seem to truly want to achieve enlightenment and Nirvana, total liberation from human existence. Yet, the person on the street has been taught to be content with his or her life as is, and seems to be content hoping that his or her next life won't be worse than the current one, and may even be a little better.

As opposed to Theravada Buddhists, Mahayana (major way) Buddhism is practiced in China especially. Mahayana Buddhists are likely to view Buddha as a spirit to whom they can pray and who can come to help them. Like Hindus, Chinese Buddhists are likely to believe “in all the gods” (as one Chinese Buddhist informed me). Perhaps the closest parallel to Christians’ belief in a loving, gracious God who sent his Son for the redemption of humanity may be found among those Mahayana Buddhists who see Buddha as a benevolent, accessible spirit. When we were in China this past summer, we found Buddhists who regularly pray to Buddha for help, though I was not sure if they hoped he would come to them with help or somehow helped them in ways akin to Christians’ belief in the Holy Spirit.

For Mahayana Buddhists, the most enlightened Buddhists, called Bodhisattvas, may refuse to enter Nirvana out of social concern. Instead, Bodhisattvas choose to return to human incarnation to serve humanity until all reach enlightenment.

Thus, in dialoguing with Buddhists, we need to identify which form of Buddhism we are encountering—for there are many—and differentiate between official teaching of the monks and the life and practice of the millions of adherents. We also need to know what our goal is in dialogue. We can examine ideas with the educated; we can compare religious practices of the person in the pew to the person at the pagoda; or we can join with like-hearted fellow human beings of different religious backgrounds to work to solve common problems and promote world peace. We can even seek a special spiritual experience in the midst of the encounter, which I have had on occasion. Each goal has its place.

Definitively defining Buddhism remains challenging, because emphases, perspectives, teachings and application vary according to region, exposure to traditional religions, personal conviction of various monks, and other factors I have yet to learn or fully understand. Yet the bottom line seems pretty clear—Buddhists are pre-eminently concerned with detaching themselves from illusions about self and their attachments that produce suffering in their life; with earning merit (by offerings or acts of love) to overcome their bad Karma; and ultimately with escaping this life to enter Nirvana, an existence (not a place) of eternal bliss.

Ironically, in spite of the West's penchant for focusing on the individual, and the Asian cultural emphasis on family and community, Buddhism is a religion designed above all to transform the individual in the here and now. Concern for others is a secondary matter in Theravada Buddhism, while in Mahayana Buddhism love and social concern are of primary importance in reaching enlightenment. In spite of how Buddhist monks may hope to reach Nirvana one day, in practice, they are focused on how to train their mind in order to change their life for the better in the here and now. However, many would also like to change the world, too.

While Christians may resonate with some of the ideals and practices espoused by Buddhists, key differences exist between what Christ taught and what Buddhists teach. For example:

- The transformation Buddhists seek is not the “abundant life” Jesus promised to his followers (John 10:10), those who fully embrace this life as lovers of God, themselves and others. Rather, the change they seek is to escape from human existence as we know it to a state of bliss, disconnected from human life and relationships as we know them.
- Buddhists value compassion and love, but have no need or interest in God, as a Creator figure, an inspiration for love, or a source of power to live compassionately. They must look to themselves to defeat the power of what Christians call sin, and look forward to state of bliss without the presence of a God or relationships with others. Christ was explicitly theo-centric in his beliefs, personal life, and teaching. Further, he commanded his disciples to make love of God and neighbor their top priorities (Matthew 22:37-40). After Christ's death and resurrection, believers came to view him as their Savior and Christ's Spirit (the Holy Spirit) as God's presence within believers enabling them to know God and live out the life Christ intended for them to experience.
- While Buddhists seek eternal bliss, detached from any sense of self or others, the kingdom of God is a social phenomenon, under the reign of a living, personal God. Christians look forward to spending eternity as unique, re-created beings through resurrection, living in conscious awareness of their identities, in fellowship with a loving God and others who love God.

What I appreciate the most in Buddhism

My multiple encounters with Buddhists in Asia over the past several years have been very valuable to me, and even inspiring at times. I have gained a greater understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist practice. I have greater clarity about what I most appreciate about my own faith, while the teachings and practices of Buddhism are actually helping me to become a better Christian. I say this not because Buddhists are teaching me about Christianity, but because their faith, convictions and way of being in the world are helping me to think through my own faith and life in a fresh way, and have spurred me on to greater levels of intentionality in my practice.

On the top of my list for most appreciated insights are the following:

- Buddhists emphasize the tragic consequences of greed and the misguided nature of materialism—money not only does not buy happiness, the western obsession with it is causing grief and anxiety all over the globe.
- Buddhism offers many insights into the human tendency to attach ourselves to desires and impulses that bring us and others suffering.
- Buddhists are often gentle, giving, friendly and respectful of all life, exposing dangerous ideologies that separate human beings from nature and other human beings.
- Buddhist monks focus on daily meditation, living simply, and cultivating purity, wisdom and compassion—thinking and doing good is more important than anything else.
- Buddhists live in the here and now. They highly value what Christians would call personal transformation, and even have specific practices that “work” to help them reduce anxiety and to detach from the drives that bring humans so much grief and misery.

The goal of devout Buddhists is to reach Nirvana. But Nirvana is not a place in space and time; it's a state of mind that actually frees a person from all attachment to this world. They call it liberation—being free from all selfish drives, impulses, reactions, desires, consciousness, perceptions and feelings. In order to reach Nirvana, they practice meditation to eliminate ignorance, to train their minds, and to let go of their mental and emotional attachments to every thought and desire that leads to suffering. Their highest goals are purity, wisdom and compassion (selfless love for others). When they truly experience this right perspective and actions, they will be enlightened. Enlightenment eventually culminates in Nirvana—total happiness (bliss).

There is much in Buddhism that resonates with Jesus' teaching and some that is at odds with it, as already outlined above. Overall, though, the Buddhist monks have helped me to understand a very important principle of Christian spirituality in a clearer way: Those who truly believe in the teaching and ideals of a religion will show it by their level of devotion, faith, and practical actions.

What this all means for my Christian faith and spiritual practice

Dialoguing with and observing dedicated Buddhists has encouraged me in many ways. First, as a Christian, I appreciate discovering another religious tradition that also so highly values love, compassion, and personal transformation. Buddhism's high ethical standards and values encourage me to continue to pursue inter-faith dialogue, and gives me hope that there may be millions of Buddhist allies in humankind's pursuit of world peace and addressing common, global concerns.

On a more personal level, observing the beliefs and practices of Buddhist monks has challenged me to be more serious about my own religious practice. I feel inspired to become more intentional, dedicated and consistent in pursuing greater spiritual maturity and personal transformation. I have a new set of questions that I'm exploring: How can I learn to focus my mind better? How can I practice "letting go" of judgments, obsessions, concerns, and other emotionally charged distractions that keep me from focusing on Christ and serving Christ? How can I simplify my life to better utilize my time, energy and resources to fulfill my purpose in life? How can I more consistently and clearly communicate my values and devotion to Christ to others without words?

Surely fruit comes from putting our minds, hearts and efforts wholeheartedly into what we most value. The goal of Christian spirituality, as commonly understood, is to become more and more like Christ, in an ever-deepening relationship with God (Romans 8:22-29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). However, this growth doesn't just happen. Like it or not, change requires disciplined practice. And as far as I can tell, many Buddhist monks are way ahead of many Christians in walking (and sitting) their talk. While Buddhists meditate to focus their own thoughts and energy, Christians can benefit from meditating on Scripture and praying to let go of sinful impulses. As we seek to connect better to the Holy Spirit on a moment by moment basis, Christians may find power to experience greater inner change.

I also realized something else by reflecting on the Buddhists' example: what I devote myself to now may very well have benefit for the next life as well. As Buddhists practice training their minds in order to reach full enlightenment, Christians could seek personal and spiritual growth so that at death we would be that much closer to the goal that God has in mind for us. I am not talking about trying to earn our salvation, but "working out our salvation" so that we may present ourselves to God as "pure and blameless" when Christ returns, as Paul urged the Philippian Christians to do with the help of God.⁵

In relational terms, serious devotion to spiritual growth means seeking to know Christ more and more, and to experience power and change through our relationship with him. The Apostle Paul described his intense commitment to his own relationship with Christ and spiritual growth this way:

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and

⁵ See Philippians 1:6; 2:12-16; and Galatians 5:22-25 as examples of biblical teaching where writers affirm human dependence on God's grace for salvation and transformation, while simultaneously urging believers to do their part to "keep in step with the Spirit."

is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers [and Sisters], I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:9-14, NIV)

So much of what I learned, observed and most appreciated from my time with the Buddhists is already in my own scriptures or can be found in the history of Christian devotion and practice. The real contribution to me was not in discovering something new, but in seeing a type of faith in practice. The monks I met—those who focused on learning more, those who spent hours in meditation daily, those who were mostly concerned with helping HIV/AIDS victims, widows and orphans, along with those who devote themselves to alleviating human suffering—these individuals truly live what they believe.

I want to be that kind of Christian.

Conclusions

Inter-faith dialogue offers many potential benefits to Christians, as well as to others. We will learn much through the encounter and we will likely be changed for the better through the process. When sincere, authentic, humble, open-minded Christians engage in dialogue with nonChristians, those with whom we talk will have an opportunity to experience the love of Christ in real people, in time and space, as opposed to reading about Christian love as an abstract concept. Further such dialogue may be the best way we have to fruitfully address significant community and global issues.

Inter-faith dialogue is not a panacea for the world's problems, or necessarily a means to resolving key theological issues. In fact, at times, I have found dialoguing with nonChristians frustrating and difficult. On occasion, I have left conversations feeling empty and dissatisfied. Sometimes, I even left feeling angry and discouraged, because of sharp disagreements that arose over ideology, political issues, or the best way to solve global problems. Indeed, there are many variables in dialoguing even with our own family or church members, let alone with someone from a different culture or religion. Sometimes the dialogue seems fruitful, and sometimes it does not. Usually, it is hard work, with uncertain fruit.

However, to date, I have found the effort to reach out to nonChristians in dialogue to be generally worthwhile—if for no one else, for me personally. Then, my experiences and new insights about religion and faith have, in turn, helped other Christians. Increasingly, we are all grappling with the theological and practical issues arising from living in a pluralistic world, full of competing belief systems held

by diverse people, who nonetheless share many common needs, hopes and dreams with everyone else.

In short, inter-faith dialogue is needed today, offering great potential benefits both for those who engage in it and for others who will be affected by the greater understanding, stimulation, and cooperative efforts that flow from it. We have nothing to lose from trying, and everything to gain.

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