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Theodore J. Wardlaw

#### Reading Sacred Texts

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### Required Reading

Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies, written by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, reviewed by Kristin Saldine; The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains, written by Nicholas Carr, reviewed by Timothy Lincoln

### Christianity and Culture

Peace is Systemic

David Lee Jones
This issue of *Insights* was being prepared, coincidentally, against the backdrop of national ruminations leading up to and lingering after the ninth anniversary of the horrific events of September 11, 2001; “9/11,” we call it, often remembering the way in which this shorthand makes us think of an emergency phone call, a 9-1-1 call. On this ninth anniversary, just past as I write these words, so many of us wished for an emergency number we could call as we watched the televised rantings of the pastor of a tiny Pentecostal church in Florida promising to mark the date by burning a pile of Qur’ans. Across the world, Muslims and Christians and people of other faiths hoped and prayed that something or someone would persuade the man to relent; and we feared the conflagration—far larger and more deadly than his promised bonfire—if he went through with it.

 Thankfully, a cooler wind prevailed and the bonfire didn’t happen.

 Now in these days, people of faith need more than ever to ponder how appropriately to assert, and to respect, our various faith claims in a world that is ever smaller, in which we are apt to encounter these claims not just on Fox News or CNN but also in the meat section of the neighborhood grocery. Help for this discipline is offered in this *Insights*. Austin Seminary is so blessed by the presence on our faculty of Dr. Whitney Bodman, Associate Professor of Comparative Religion, who, since 9/11, has logged untold miles answering the invitations of churches, academic institutions, and international conferences seeking his wisdom in interfaith conversations. His lead article on the beauty and complexity of reading scripture—ours and others’—brings a new gravitas to the notion of what we often glibly think of as “Bible study.” Read it, and the way you read your own scripture, not to mention somebody else’s, may change forever.

 We are pleased to welcome other contributors to this issue of *Insights*. Professor Martha Newman, Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Texas, reflects on the moments in her teaching when a sense of religious kinship settles upon her classes—composed as they are of students from all three Abrahamic traditions, not to mention others—and a sense of newfound respect ensues. Eboo Patel, a Muslim interfaith leader of youth, celebrates our country’s religious diversity as an opportunity for mutual understanding. Professor John Thatamanil of Vanderbilt Divinity School joyfully lifts up what is providential about religious diversity, and roots such diversity in the very doctrine of creation. Professor Michael Kogan of Montclair State University encourages us to mine the common truth claims that might lurk beneath ecclesiolatry, scriptolatry, or ethnolatry.

 We also welcome this issue’s Pastor’s Panel—alumna Jennifer Rogers-Cooper, Imam Islam Mossaad, and a constituent parish pastor Stephen C. Hancock. Not to be missed is Dr. David Lee Jones’ culture piece on the systemic work of peace.

 I hope you will agree that there is something profoundly timely about this issue of *Insights*, and I offer it proudly for your thoughtful consideration!

 Theodore J. Wardlaw  
 *President, Austin Seminary*
In our front hall sits the family Bible. It weighs in at fifteen pounds. Between the Old Testament and the New Testament are several pages recording births, marriages, and deaths, going back to my great, great uncle, to whom the Bible was originally given in 1879 by his grandmother.

Christians, especially Protestants, live within the pages of scripture. It is for us our guide, our story, our prayer book, our inspiration, and often, rightly or wrongly applied, the final court of appeal for the questions with which we wrestle.

That situation is not unique to Christians.

Though not all religions have something that could be called a “scripture” (Shinto, for instance), holy books—read, recited, memorized, interpreted, inscribed, and revered—abound. In each case, the nature of the scripture and its place within the religious community that holds it to be holy is unique, but in each case their scripture is a ceaseless well of wisdom, guidance, and transformation.

Whitney Bodman is associate professor of comparative religion at Austin Seminary. He earned a BA from the University of North Carolina, an MDiv from Duke University, and the ThD from Harvard Divinity School. His current research focuses on the Qur’an, modern Islam in the Middle East, and rituals of sacred space and pilgrimage. He is currently chair of the Texas Conference of Churches Muslim-Christian Forum and serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Texas Impact.
In this increasingly globally aware world, we have more contact with people of other religious traditions, and more contact with, and awareness of, their scriptures. It is more likely now that people in our congregations and in our pulpits have read something of the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, the Analects of Confucius, or the Lotus Sutra. Though defining what is or is not a scripture can be a dizzying endeavor, not worth time and space here, it is clear that these and other texts occupy places and roles in their respective communities of faith similar to that of the Bible in ours. Time and testimony have proven them to be texts of wisdom, power, and enlightenment. Like our Bible.

Are they sacred apart from the community that declares them to be sacred? In other words, when I sit down to read the Lotus Sutra, do I read it as a “Sacred Scripture,” or do I read it as a religious artifact useful for understanding Buddhism, or as one of the “Hundred Most Worthwhile Books of World Literature,” or as personally, spiritually edifying? How do I treat a text that others hold as world-defining, perhaps even the very Presence of the Divine on earth? Embedded in this is the corresponding question, one we have not space to address, How would I want someone of another tradition to read my Bible?

Carol Zaleski, a columnist for *The Christian Century*, reads the Gita once or twice a year. She writes:

Like all great reading, but with particular intensity, reading the Gita takes me into another world, enabling me to see our common world through other eyes. In the Gita I encounter a devotional and philosophical tradition, tested in experience and crafted in song and dialectic that is intrinsically worth studying. If life is, as John Keats wrote, a “vale of soul-making,” then the Gita has taught me a great deal about how souls are made. The Gita is of “another world,” a Hindu world. To read the Gita as scripture requires entry into its Gita-world, in order to be taught by those eyes to see the common world we share.

THE TORAH

I am writing these words on the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Twice. Jewish tradition records that God had intended to give it to the Israelites immediately after the exodus from Egypt, but God would not give the Torah, which is without blemish, to the people until they, too, were without blemish. Therefore God healed their physical maladies, and waited until their bickerings had ceased and they had repented for their sins.

Israel accepted the Torah and the covenant with God. The Torah was and is meant for them, and for them only. It is an insider book, a holiness shared uniquely between the God of Israel and the Israel of God. Others need not apply. The Talmud even issues a dire warning about non-Israelites and the Torah:

R. Johanan said: A heathen who studies the Torah deserves death, for it is written, Moses commanded us a law for an inheritance; it is our inheritance, not theirs … R. Jose b. Hanina said: Every precept which was given to the sons of Noah and repeated at Sinai was meant for both; that which was given to the
sons of Noah but not repeated at Sinai was meant for the Israelites, but not for the heathens.

—Sanhedrin 59a

Though the seven laws of Noah are given to all of humanity and should be studied by all, the Torah, as a whole, is given only to Israel and others are forbidden to study it.4 While modern Jews may welcome Christian study of the Pentateuch, that is something different from studying Torah. Same text, but different context.

There is, of course, a complication here. We Christians are not simply heathen, at least in our own eyes. We are descendents of Moses through Jesus so that what Jews call Torah is bound into our Bible as our own and called the Old Testament.5 We do read it as an inheritance, as scripture—in our own eyes. But we do not read it as Jewish scripture.

Every January a few students from Austin Seminary and I go on a retreat with Christians from other Texas seminaries, with Jewish seminarians from Los Angeles, and, this year, with Muslim seminarians. The subject this past year was the story of Abraham and the three visitors (Gen. 18:1-15). In our introductory presentations, a Rabbi presented Jewish interpretations and comments on the story. Later, I presented Christian commentary, using Rublev’s famous icon of the Trinity around the table of Abraham.6 This Trinitarian interpretation goes back to the early church.

The rabbi present responded angrily to my interpretation, and all the Jewish students felt uncomfortable. We had stolen their story, their scripture, and soiled it with our Christian theology.

The issue here is not one of Jewish-Christian polemic, either ancient or modern. At issue is the nature of scripture. Prohibitions such as the above from the Talmud are designed to protect that which is sacred from the abuses of outsiders. The Torah is not simply a sacred book. It is the personified wisdom of God as described in Proverbs 8:22-31 and the Beloved of God of the Song of Songs. It is the blueprint of creation and that which sustains and renews it (Ben Sira, 24, Genesis Rabbah 1.1). According to the Pirke Aboth, “By ten Sayings was the world created.”7 A later speculative work, the Sepher Yesirah, describes creation has emerging from different permutations of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.8 One does not simply study the Torah; one lives it.

VEDA, GITA, SUTRA, AND QUR’AN

This dynamic is not unique to the Torah. As Barbara Holdredge describes in great detail, the Hindu Vedas are understood in much the same way.9 For the Vedas, it is not writing but recitation that must be precise. Vedic recitation re-aligns the universe, correcting its inevitable tendency towards decay and disorder. “The theurgic practices associated with Veda and Torah are focused on conservation and maintenance—not only maintenance of the cosmic order and of the divine realm, but maintenance of the social order as well.”10

Only Brahmin priests are allowed to recite the Vedas. They memorize the text literally backwards and forwards so that every syllable is precise in order and pronunciation. The hearing of Vedic recitation is limited to the upper three castes, those who
wear the sacred thread. Holdridge points out that while Vedic recitation is limited to the upper three castes, the obligation to hear Torah and to study it is incumbent on all Jews. This is true, but as the Talmudic passage quoted above makes clear, non-Jews, like the lower castes in Hinduism, are excluded from participation in what we might call scriptural performance: reading, hearing, writing, studying—and consequently enacting—in one’s life.

That which bears so much power must be handled with knowledge and skill, and restricted to those authorized by lineage and training.

The Hindu tradition has a profusion of sacred texts. While the Vedas are foundational, there are many other texts that are more commonly read, heard and even performed, but in modern times it is the Bhagavad Gita that is the most appreciated. Unlike the Vedas, there are no historic prescriptions as to how it is recited, by whom or for whom. But in the text itself we find a surprise at the end: “Never must you tell this word to one whose life is not austere, to one devoid of love-and-loyalty, to one who refuses to obey, or to one who envies Me.”

Clearly we have a problem here. I, a Gentile, should not study Torah, but I do. I should not be hearing the Vedas, being outside the Hindu caste system, yet I do listen to them, having been sent a free CD of Vedic recitation by a Hindu organization. As to the Gita, my life falls somewhat short of the austere. I am not obedient to Krishna. By the declaration of the Gita itself, I should not be reading it. I do note that this warning comes at the end, not the beginning of the text, and also that this warning is directed at the teller, not the told. Nevertheless, I have burgled my way into Torah, Veda, and Gita.

Some scriptures have a more complicated message for alien readers. They are both missionary texts directed to the world and restricted texts for the benefit of the wise. The Lotus Sutra was originally composed perhaps three centuries before Christ in India or Central Asia, and translated into many languages. The sutra makes clear that its teaching is intended for the liberation of all humanity: “The Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to allow them to attain purity. That is why they appear in the world.”

However, we read in the next chapter,

Also, Shariputra, to persons who are arrogant or lazy or taken up with views of the self, do not preach this sutra. Those with the shallow understanding of ordinary persons, who are deeply attached to the five desires, cannot comprehend it when they hear it. Do not preach it to them. If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in the world.

The Sutra goes on to describe, in some lurid detail, the penalties that await those who hear the preaching of the Lotus Sutra without a certain developed piety. One must already be a little Buddhist, or Budd-lish, before hearing this profound teaching.

So should I be reading the Lotus Sutra? The text says that it is preached “for those with profound wisdom.” Do I dare place myself in that category?

The case is a little different with the Muslim scripture, the Qur’an. The Qur’an addresses itself not only to believers, not only to the hypocrites who pretend to believe
but do not, not only to craven polytheists, but also to “you people” and “you Children of Adam” (7:26)—inclusive terms that mean everybody. Like the Lotus Sutra, it is “wisdom for all living beings.”

Yet the text also says “it is a noble recitation in a guarded scripture which only the pure touch” (56:77-9).\(^{15}\) When I studied Qur’an in Egypt, my teacher required that I perform ablutions, ritual washing, before every lesson. The eminent scholar al-Nawawi (d. 1277) says:

Is it permissible to teach him (a non-Muslim) the Qur’an? Our Shafi’i companions said that if his entering Islam is not expected, teaching him is impermissible; and if his entering Islam is expected, there are two opinions: the sounder is that it is permissible out of hope for his entering Islam, and the second is that it is not permissible, just like it is not permissible to sell him a mushaf [bound text of the Qur’an] even if it is expected that he will enter Islam.\(^{16}\)

The Qur’an and the Lotus Sutra are addressed to the world, but, like plane tickets, “some restrictions apply.”

Such restrictions and warnings do not generally keep academics from studying these texts. We read the Vedas and Gita, the various sutras, the Torah and the Qur’an in translations and the original languages, generally without ablutions. Likewise these holy texts are available at your local bookstore for larger audiences of inquisitive people. Anyone can read them.

Furthermore, and more significantly, we are now commonly encouraged to do so by adherents of these scriptural traditions. Muslims will sell Qur’ans eagerly, even give them out for free—not only English translations but the Arabic text as well, whether we intend to convert or not (though hope springs eternal). Buddhist organizations publish sutras for general distribution. I show a movie of Vedic recitation to non-caste Austin Seminary students every fall and we are welcomed to recitation at the Hindu Temple. Jews still do not want us handling the Torah scroll, but we may certainly study the text and Jewish commentaries upon it.

**READING RELIGIOUSLY**

The warnings against exposing the alien, the unfaithful, the stranger, or the unwise to the teachings of these scriptures tell us that these texts are dangerous. Improperly used, they may endanger the outsider who dabbles. They are alchemical, subversive, invasive—words of power. Holy texts, holy words, are not given to entertain, nor to inform. They are given to turn the world of the reader upside down. *Caveat lector*, let the reader beware!

As Frank Clooney, scholar of Hindu texts describes:

Texts are sites wherein intentional, integral transformation is plotted and promoted in a coherent way. Skilled authors compose in such a way as to transform their intended, attentive readers, to bring their lives into conformity with the realities and values their texts describe. Step by step, such texts draw the well-disposed person into a religious reading that is richly multidimensional and productive of affects irreducible to reasons offered in justification.\(^{17}\)
But what does it mean to be a “well-disposed” reader?

Clooney refers to the work of Paul Griffiths, who distinguishes between religious reading and what he calls “consumerist” reading.

Most reading is consumerist. Even as scholars of sacred texts, we want to understand, know, and master the material—and then produce papers, teach classes, be well-read and therefore well-respected and tenured. The texts are objects of study. It is not that we are not fascinated. It is that our fascination is then bent to a larger purpose, an industry. Readers outside the academy may not be so inclined to such focused productivity, but the text still remains an object, something to be comprehended and summarized.

The religious text may be read no differently than any other classic of literature, say Augustine, Calvin, Austen, or Updike.

Griffiths contrasts this with religious reading, “as a lover reads, with a tensile attentiveness that wishes to linger, to prolong, to savor, and has no interest at all in the quick orgasm of consumption.” Religious reading involves a particular, sustained relationship with the text. Parts, or all, are memorized. The text may be read daily, being an endless source of wisdom, consolation, and insight, but it is not read for these purposes. Indeed, religious reading is not specifically purposeful. While we may read scripture for a purpose—to produce a sermon, to answer a question, or to analyze its theology, religious reading in Griffiths’ sense is *lectio divina*, divine reading. It is cohabitation.

It is also complex. The text is not simple, and so the reading cannot be simple. In Christian tradition we speak of the four-fold sense of scripture, described in a popular ditty:

The literal sense teaches events,
The allegorical what you should believe.
The moral what you should do,
The anagogical where you should aim.

Likewise the Jewish tradition speaks of four levels of textual meaning—*peshat* (literal), *Remez* (allegorical), *Derash* (homiletical), and *Sod* (mystical). Muslims refer to the zahiri (evident) and multiple *batini* (hidden) meanings of the Qur’an. The first invites exoteric commentary, *tafsir*, the second requires esoteric commentary, *ta’wil*. In Hinduism and Buddhism one has not only multiple traditions of interpretation, but a profusion of texts as well. Scriptural reading—religious reading—is multileveled. The warnings we have reviewed earlier caution us against simplistic apprehensions of sacred texts. We not only come to a scripture seeking wisdom; we must bring wisdom to the very act of reading.

Religious reading is not simply the requirement of the community. It is the requirement of the text itself.

The very nature of the text, apart from what the community says about it, demands a certain reading, a certain relationship with the text. That is why the warnings against consumerist reading are often contained within the text itself. The Qur’an says of itself, “When the Qur’an is recited, listen to it intently” (7:204). The Gita demands total surrender (18:57).
If this is the standard of reading required not only by the scriptural community but by the text itself, we readers have two choices. We can read as consumers, which violates the intention of the scripture itself, or we can read religiously in the way the text asks to be read. It is only reading in the second way, religiously, that leads to understanding of scripture. We cannot visit it; we must “stand under” it. That is what the text demands, and the only way that it can begin to yield its secrets to us.

TO WHAT COMMUNITY DO WE BELONG?

There remains one large problem to be resolved. Even though we come to these texts with sincerity and patience, they are still not our texts. They belong to a community of which we are not a part. The Torah is given to the tribes of Israel. Though we claim descent, we are not Torah-people. Likewise, the Qur’an belongs to the community of Muslims, and the Gita, to the Hindus.

Scriptures come with a community attached, a community that shares a tradition or traditions of interpretation. That community has developed a theological system, a regula fidei, to which and of which that text speaks, and according to which it should be interpreted. Scripture does not stand alone. The Written Torah cannot be read apart from the Oral Torah. The Vedas make little sense apart from both the rituals in which they were recited, and the long lineage of subsequent texts, all of which are in some ways commentary. The various sutras depend on the wider traditions of the teaching of the Buddha and the Dharma. We outsiders are not part of those communities of interpretation, and we cannot go far with the texts without engaging these more experienced readers.

Yet we do, also, read alone. Even those within the community of faith read alone, each in the silence of her communion with the text. Every reading is its own affair. In that sense we become, no longer outsiders, but members of the holy readership. We are not Muslim, but we are part of that community to which the Qur’an is addressed, not the community of Muslims but the community of the religious. We read as Christians—that is what initiates and frames our belief—but our faith is not fully defined in terms of the Christian religion. We seek God, wherever God may be found.

The Bhagavad Gita is not written for Hindus. It is written for those who know the pull of love-and-loyalty, who practice a certain austerity, an intentional and focused spirituality, and who are not tainted with envy.

The Qur’an addresses itself to “you People,” meaning all who are willing to listen intently to its teachings, not only at the zabiri level of understanding, but in the battini way, seeking the hidden teachings which, by the very fact that they are hidden, require a patient attentiveness.

Reading the scripture of another with gentleness makes us both insider and outsider.

We are outside the community of interpretation—that community that has preserved the scripture over centuries and millennia and probed the possibilities of the text most fully. We have much to learn from them about reading the text.

We are also insiders in that, in reading religiously, we have willingly allowed our-
selves to be enthralled, to be one in the congregation of readers. We marry into the family, becoming part of the community of the other, but not by abandoning the family of our own birth, our Christianity, our Christ, our Bible. We bring our faithfulness to our reading of the other's text, not as the authority that directs the reading, but as the assurance that has shaped the reader.

I leave with a question, raised at the beginning but not addressed: How do we want others to read our Bible? When we share the work of religious reading, not only our own scriptures but each others,’ what sylvan “vale of soul-making” will we enter?

NOTES


4 Jews study the chumash, a bound Pentateuch meant for that purpose, but the same text in a scroll is a liturgical text, with rules for its use and handling. The Talmudic warning here, however, is against studying Torah.

5 There is a great deal of discussion as to what we Christians should call the first part of the Bible—“Hebrew Scriptures” or “First Testament” or “Jewish Scriptures.” There is no good solution here, but it should be kept in mind that whatever we call it, we do not read it in the same way that Jews do. We do not even order the books in the same way, since the ordering itself expresses a theological theme. Our Old Testament ends with Malachi’s messianic promise. The Jewish Bible ends with the restoration of Israel to Jerusalem under Cyrus in Chronicles.


10 Holdredge, 390.


13 Ibid 73-4.

14 Ibid 73.


16 Imam Abu Zakariyya Yahya al-Nawawi, Etiquette with the Quran, Trans. by Musa Furber, (Baltimore: Starlatch Press, 2003) 103. Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Shafi‘i (d. 820) is the founder of an important school of Islamic law.

17 Francis X. Clooney, “Passionate Comparison: The Intensification of Affect in Interreli-


20 An example of the lack of attention to this dimension is *On Searching the Scriptures—Your Own or Someone Else’s: A Reader’s Guide to Sacred Writings and Methods of Studying Them*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992). The book explicitly presents itself as describing methods of studying other scriptures, but neglects any consideration of the importance of belief, or instructions intrinsic to the text itself for its own reception.
Why should Christians read the texts of other religious traditions?

There are some very practical reasons. We live in a globalized world, so we’re in more contact with these traditions. But I think the more essential reason is captured in a narrative in the Islamic tradition: “Seek wisdom wherever you find it, even if you have to go as far as China.”

I think what we are doing is seeking wisdom. We’re seeking to have our souls stirred in new ways. I think the consequence of that is that we become more spiritually mature. Our horizons are broadened. But even more, we learn to see our own theology with new eyes, to ask new questions.

What is the biggest challenge your students face when they read texts of other religious faiths?

What they have greatest difficulty doing is displacing themselves from their Christian context provisionally in order to try to understand a different way of thinking. If you can’t do that, then you don’t get the benefit of the new questions a different text raises. But that requires some disorientation first.

So for instance, Buddhists question the very concept of a soul. Now, in my reading of Christian theology we argue a lot about what the soul is, but we don’t question that it exists, at least not that I’m aware of. Buddhists do, so that raises some questions of anthropology, of what a human being is and how we experience things. Once I can convince our students that the concept of the soul is highly questionable, then we can start thinking about how Buddhists’ understanding of no-soul fits into Christian understandings of ourselves. Then we can ask, for example, how it affects our understanding of loving another as yourself—self-denying or “selfless” love. Now a Buddhist would read that word “selfless” in a very different way than we would. How can their different way of understanding enrich our thinking about what it means to be “selfless”?

In your essay you talk about the prohibitions some religious traditions have against their texts being read by those of other faiths. Do you think Christians have a similar protective relationship to their Bibles?

Actually, this is one area where Christians are fairly exceptional in that we don’t have prohibitions. Unlike many other traditions, we translate our Bible into every language we can find, and we love to send it out and to share it with people. But one of the issues that comes with that is—and this relates to another question—how much could someone understand of the Christian tradition by just reading the Bible?
Why should people of other religious traditions read the Bible?

Well, I think the obvious reason is that the same wisdom and beauty that we find in the Sermon on the Mount or Romans or the Psalms can be found by anyone else. Any text that has been so important to so many people for so long must—and does—have endless and fathomless wisdom. So just as I pick up the Lotus Sutra and I find deep wisdom, so may anyone else pick up the Bible and find that.

A second reason is that it should hopefully bring one into conversation with others; an avenue into interfaith dialogue. It’s hard, in fact, for the text to stand apart from interfaith dialogue. You lose a great deal and there are significant dangers there. I think that’s one of the reasons for the prohibitions in some of these texts—that reading them without the proper context may give you the wrong idea. I might even say that reading the Qur’an in the wrong context might give you an Osama bin Laden.

In the case of the Bible, because this is the tradition that most of us have grown up in, we, our culture, certainly our church, are shaped by particular understandings of these texts. And we have a hierarchy of importance that is part of our oral tradition. For instance, we know that the Psalms or the Sermon on the Mount are more important than the 14th chapter of Deuteronomy or Joshua in the construction of our tradition. Even within our tradition there are different communities that privilege different texts, so you get some who feel that the heart of the New Testament is in the Sermon on the Mount and others who see the heart of the New Testament in Romans.

So how to approach the text, how this text fits into the larger community, how various parts of it fit together in a hierarchy of importance—all are critical whether one is reading the Bible or the Qur’an or any other text that is important to a tradition.
How will reading religious texts of multiple religious traditions facilitate more productive inter-religious dialogue and ultimately a more peaceful, diverse world?

I would say it’s not the immediate goal, but it is perhaps the ultimate goal. For one thing, when I go and talk with Muslims and I have read Qur’an, they are already very impressed that I have taken the time to do that. Even if my questions are a bit challenging, as they sometimes are, the very fact that I’m engaging in this conversation is much more valuable and admirable in their eyes than reading the Qur’an without that engagement and drawing my own conclusions as to what it means. And, I must add that it’s in fact very easy to read the Qur’an or other texts, the Gita, for instance, and come away with a very distorted idea as to what it’s communicating.

Do you read the Qur’an and other religious texts in the same way you read the Bible?

I think part of what led to the writing of this article is not only the question, How do we read other people’s texts? But, How are these texts fundamentally different?

The Qur’an and the Bible are two different kinds of books. They’re constructed differently; they have different roles in their respective communities. So the Bible isn’t just a Christian Qur’an, and the Qur’an isn’t just a Muslim Bible.

Here’s an example. There are violent texts in the Qur’an and there are violent texts in the Bible. When we read the Bible, we read it as a narrative. It essentially is one long story that begins at the beginning with Genesis and it ends with the Revelation. What’s in between has lots of different kinds of literature, but essentially all of it is threaded together by a narrative. So when we read the Book of Joshua and the extraordinarily violent entry into Canaan and the slaughter that is there, we know what happens afterward. We know that that was fairly exceptional in the life of Israel. There were other battles, but nothing quite like that.

The Qur’an is not structured as a narrative. It is like the Psalms in that sense; a lot of separate texts that are collected together. So you read this violent text in the ninth chapter, for instance, and it has no context. You don’t know what happens after; you don’t know what happens before. You don’t even know what’s going on in the life of the community when this verse was revealed. There’s no hint in the Qur’an. Outside of the Qur’an there’s a lot of Muslim commentary that explains what was going on at the time and what happened before and after and so on, but you can’t get that from reading the Qur’an itself.

What difference does this make to an outsider approaching the Qur’an?

What I’m noticing nowadays is how everybody is quoting these isolated verses from the Qur’an, and it bothers me because I know they’re taking it out of context. The Qur’an exists along with other texts, so it doesn’t stand isolated, just as our Bible stands alongside other texts—creeds, confessions, historical documents, and the writings of people like Augustine and Calvin and Luther and so on.

There are lots of parts of the Qur’an—beautiful parts—that never get quoted. Those are not the popular verses that appear on websites. So sitting down with a Qur’an gives you an opportunity to see these other parts and to interact with them and ponder them. That helps one to avoid reducing the Qur’an and Islam to the particular verses that are particularly inflammatory or, shall I say, useful for certain political or antagonistic purposes.
How is your preaching influenced by reading religious texts other than the Bible?

One of the ideas that emerges in the Qur’an is that Jesus is the breath of God. Because words are articulated breath, God breathes the world into existence, and Jesus is that breath.

So Jesus healed by breathing on people because that’s the breath of life. And when God breathed into Adam, what God was breathing into Adam was Jesus, because Jesus is the breath of God.

Now, I have never thought of that act of God breathing the spirit into Adam as God breathing Jesus into Adam; that was a really novel idea. But as I began to think of it further, if God’s creation of the world is through Jesus, which the prologue to John says, and if all breath really in its essence is the breath of life, which is Jesus, then when I’m standing in the pulpit and I am speaking, which is articulated breath, the process of preaching is breathing out Christ.

I think it also says something about not only the act of preaching but the act of conversation. That just what we’re doing here is a sharing of Christ, and if you think about it, as I was led to, our words bear Christ because they are borne on this breath of life. That’s a whole different way of thinking about Christ and Christ’s activity in our lives. And I didn’t come to it through reading Calvin. I came to it from reading Qur’an and Sufis, so that’s kind of remarkable.

If our readers want to begin to explore sacred texts, where should they start?

It doesn’t matter what you pick up. I could recommend the Qur’an, but I would start in the middle, not at the beginning.

Why is that?

Because the Qur’an, as I said, is a hodgepodge. Most of the earlier verses were revealed toward the end of the life of Muhammad when he was very much about the practical issues of setting up the community, whereas the later parts generally were revealed earlier and have to do with building a relationship with God and building a spiritual community. So I would start maybe with the 50th chapter.

I think the Bhagavad Gita is very accessible. You kind of have to read it with a commentary, though. Commentaries are important when you’re reading somebody else’s scripture because they set it within the understanding of the community. So I would say find a copy of the Radhakrishnan commentary, but then find a copy of the Gita that’s just the text itself, and, with this understanding in the background, try to just read through the text in a slow, lingering way.

The other advice I would give is to read generously. These have been life-saving and life-generating texts for millions of people. Sometimes when we approach a particular text, we might come away feeling this is a bunch of nonsense.

It isn’t nonsense. It only doesn’t make sense to us yet. So reading generously we read with an understanding that this is a fountain of wisdom. It may be inaccessible to us at this moment, but with some work and some effort it will become accessible and it will be worthwhile.
“Reading Sacred Texts”

Online conversation featuring Professor Whit Bodman and other authors in this issue

November 18, 2010 at 4:00 p.m. CST

Submit your own questions on the topic in advance to:

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Then on November 18, log onto the Austin Seminary Web site:

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to participate in the conversation.
This fall, I will teach for the fourth time an introductory course at the University of Texas, Austin, on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As I prepare for the first class, I do what I have done three times in the past: I despair at the impossibility of the subject matter, I revise the syllabus in an attempt to repair the previous year’s mistakes, and I wonder at the nearly one hundred students who fill the class. The course satisfies no basic requirements, but the students nonetheless come from across the university. There are engineers who choose this class for one of their rare electives, math majors, business students, students in nursing and elementary education, communications majors, and majors from all the departments across the Liberal Arts.

Occasionally, students will tell me explicitly why they have chosen this class. “My brother married a Muslim and I want to understand her religion,” one young woman explained. More often, their reasons emerge in their papers: they recognize how little they know about one, or two, or even all of these religious traditions, and they hope that their knowledge might help them make sense of current events, or that knowledge might help bring people together. “I want to know the different ways we all worship the same God,” one young man told me.

This is the source of both my wonder and my despair. I love the students’ optimism that knowledge will lead to understanding, but I despair because I doubt the course will meet their expectations. My subject matter is the academic study of religion; I do not teach ecumenical understanding. As a professor at a public, secular university, I cannot begin with the question of whether Jews, Muslims, and Christians worship the same God, for I do not presuppose either the existence, or the non-existence, of God.
Nor do I ask how they should read the Bible or the Qur’an, as that promotes a particular religious position. Rather, I start by asking what different Jews, Christians, and Muslims do, say, and believe when they worship, and what these actions and statements suggest about their beliefs in a God. I ask how these ideas and behaviors have changed over time, and show how sacred texts—often held as timeless—also have a history.

As we explore these histories, we see moments of religious kinship. We explore the common ideas that emerged from the Ancient Near East where all three of these religions had their origins; we study interactions between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars who sought to create theologies using Aristotelian logic and natural science; we examine similar expressions of mystical thought and union with God. But we also see moments of extreme conflict both between and within religions. We observe the ways that adherents of particular religions or sects tried to distinguish themselves from one another, made exclusive claims, and combined their economic and political resentments with their religious beliefs. Understanding religious history shows the possibility of tolerance but it certainly doesn’t create it.

Yet my students’ hope that learning will bring understanding and tolerance is not completely in vain. My students themselves come from a multiplicity of backgrounds. This reflects both the diversity of Texas and the religious fluidity that is characteristic of their age group. I start the semester by asking them to tell me, in anonymous comments on index cards, what religious tradition, if any, they were born into, and what they consider themselves now. In past years, about two-thirds of the class are Christians, broadly defined, and this group divides fairly evenly between Protestants and Catholics, with occasional members of Eastern Orthodox churches and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

The class usually has a few Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists and, most years, there will be a pagan or a Wiccan. There is always a group of vocal atheists, another large group comprising the “spiritual, not religious,” and a few people who come from a mixed religious heritage.

Even more striking are the number of students whose adherence has changed. Many have moved from Protestant denominations and now call themselves simply “Christian.” Cards that say “I once was Baptist but now I’m Christian” are common. A few Protestants have become Catholic; a few Catholics now consider themselves “Christian.” This year, for the first time, I have two students who converted to Islam. Episcopalians become Wiccans, and many students—at this age, at least—become agnostic. We spend a class period putting their responses into categories, talking about the difficulty in creating surveys of religious affiliation, and trying to tease out the multiple meanings of the word “Christian.”

As a result of this exercise, the students become aware of the class’s diversity. Their comments and questions throughout the semester reflect this knowledge. It is difficult, for instance, for a student to repeat the common assertion that veiling erases a woman’s identity and individuality when a classmate nearby is wearing a carefully arranged head-scarf whose colors coordinate with the rest of her outfit. And similarly, it is difficult for skeptical students to assume that religion necessarily makes people closed minded when their religious classmates are sitting next to them, ready and willing to learn.
I have been trained to teach my students content and skills, rather than to teach them tolerance or help them find meaning in their lives. I want them to read carefully and critically, to analyze biases and silences, to recognize the problems with generalizations that start “Jews (or Christians, or Muslims) believe …” But each time I teach the course, my students remind me that they want to recognize themselves in the course material and that they want to find in its content something relevant to their lives. A Mormon student listens carefully to see if I’ll list the Latter Day Saints as Christians. A Sufi student wants to make sure that I will teach about varieties in Islamic practice. An Ismaili woman, after hearing a lecture on Jewish observances, notes: “Judaism sounds a lot like Islam; what are we fighting about?” A Christian student, reading about mystical yearning for divine contact, discovers that he is not alone in his worries about God’s seeming silence. A Muslim student told me I helped him see the roots of his conflict with his family: I don’t know what I said or did, but I’m glad I could help.

Each year, when I revise the course, I bring these issues of relevance a bit closer to the surface. Last year, I asked the students to visit a religious service from a religion that was not their own, an assignment I will retain and expand this year. This year, I am also adding a series of lectures to show Jews, Christians, and Muslims in contact with one another, at times in conflict while at other times undertaking common intellectual endeavors. My course remains a work in progress, simultaneously exhilarating and frustrating, always challenging, and always a reminder of our hope that knowledge can lead to understanding.
One of the questions I get asked most frequently when I speak on the subject of young people and interfaith cooperation is when is too young to start. Don’t youth have to know their own tradition first before engaging with people from other traditions? I’ve started responding to these questions with stories from my family life.

A few months back, my wife called me at work to report that she had overheard our Columbian Catholic nanny teaching our three-year-old son Zayd the Lord’s Prayer in Spanish. Earlier this summer, we took Zayd to the birthday party of his Jewish friend Micah and he left asking what ‘Mazel Tov’ meant. Last week, he asked if his friend from next door, Tarun, could come to Muslim prayers with us. Tarun is more than welcome to come, I told Zayd, but he’s from a Hindu family, so he may look at our prayers differently than we do. “Hmmm,” said Zayd.

Hmmm, indeed.

Even for someone who does interfaith work professionally, these questions took me by surprise. Not my wife, though. Ever-wise, her comment was, “Welcome to child-rearing in the 21st century!”

Of course, she’s right.

We live in the most religiously diverse country in human history and the most religiously devout nation in the West. It’s simply par for the course that children are going to come into contact with people from other religious backgrounds and ask questions, and that it’s going to happen early. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested over fifty years ago, faith formation is now done amidst the reality of religious diversity. Children and young people grow into Christianity or Islam or Judaism knowing full well that there are people out there—maybe some of their closest friends or neighbors—who do not share their faith.

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Faith communities, in my opinion, ought to view this as an opportunity. Just as the civil rights movement and increased black-white interaction in the mid-twentieth century caused faith communities to articulate a theology of race relations, just as globalization spurred faith communities to articulate a theology of “the world church” or “the global ummah,” just as climate change has catalyzed articulation of theologies of environmentalism and “creation care,” the dynamic of increased interaction between people of different faith backgrounds should encourage religious communities to articulate theologies of interfaith cooperation.

By theology, I mean a coherent narrative that references key scripture, stories, history, heroes, poetry, etc., from the cumulative historical tradition of the faith community. By highlighting the word “articulate” in the above paragraph, I mean to say that I believe all of our faith traditions already contain key scripture, stories, history, heroes, poetry, and so forth, that speak to positive relations with the religious other. Our challenge is to make those pieces salient, interpret and apply them to the contemporary dynamic of religious diversity, and string them together in a coherent narrative. The result should be that young people, in their faith formation, get a clear sense that “As a Christian/Muslim/Jew/Hindu, my faith teaches me to engage with people from other religions in ways that advance equal dignity and mutual loyalty.”

Take the life of Martin Luther King Jr, for example. Christians can use his life story in many types of theological narratives, the most common are narratives of freedom relating to race and narratives of social justice relating to poverty. But, by highlighting oft-overlooked dimensions of King’s life—his admiration for the Hindu leader Gandhi, his marching in Selma with the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, his correspondence with the Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hanh—we can view him as an example of an interfaith leader as well. This is especially the case when we recognize that King himself had something of a theology of interfaith cooperation, referencing the Christian tradition in his comments about how important it is to find shared values between different traditions.

As a Muslim interfaith leader, I have been doing this with my tradition for years. There are ample quotes from the Qur’an that support a positive engagement with religious diversity. For example, from Sura 49 of the Holy Qur’an: “God made us different nations and tribes that we may come to know one another.” There are important times in history where Muslim rulers have encouraged interfaith cooperation, from 10th century Andalusia to the time of Akbar the Great, the Mughal Ruler of India in the late 16th century. Muslim poets such as Rumi and Hafez wrote about love for God across traditions. And there are many stories of the Prophet Muhammad that show his respect and positive relations with people from other faiths as well. For example, the Prophet once hosted a Christian delegation in his compound.

The Muslims and Christians had a heated debate on the differences between their respective traditions. At one point, the Christians asked to leave the city so they could perform their prayers. The Prophet surprised them by inviting them to pray in his mosque, saying that just because their traditions had differences did not mean that they should not respect and show hospitality to the others’ practices.

This story of the Prophet highlights an important distinction. Namely, a theology
of interfaith cooperation, as I describe it here, is not about religions being the same, or everyone going to heaven. It is about what our traditions say with regard to how we get along on earth. After all, in the story above, the Muslim hosts (led by the Prophet) were arguing with the Christian delegation about religion—perhaps about the different Muslim and Christian views of Jesus, perhaps about how Muslims viewed the Christian Bible (holy but incomplete). Theirs was not a facile “you wash your hands before you pray, I wash mine, we’re all going to heaven” exchange. Instead, the story shows that, despite important differences, the Muslims and Christians showed each other kindness, respect, and hospitality. In other words, the theologies of interfaith cooperation I am personally most interested in are about building bridges between people of different faith perspectives on earth, not about the various religious bridges that lead to heaven.

I believe this is an urgent challenge, and not just because I need to come up with something to tell my three year old. Given the intensity and frequency of interfaith encounter today, people are yearning for answers to questions like, How am I as a Muslim meant to relate to Jews, Christians, humanists, Buddhists, etc? Religious extremists are all too ready to answer that question. My own belief is that an awful lot of the religious violence and tension we see in the world today is a result of a woeful absence of a theology of the bridge, a gap that is too readily filled by nefarious forces advancing theologies of the bomb.
Elementary school teachers will often write on the report cards of unruly students, “Does not play well with others.” That notation could be applied to the evaluations of many of the world’s religions. Some of them proclaim themselves to be the sole possessor of revealed, divine “truth.” Others go so far as to forbid their followers to enter another sect’s house of worship or to read the holy texts of any other religious tradition. One contemporary pastor proclaims Islam to be “of Satan” and plans a public burning of hundreds of copies of the Quran. For such people, their particular religious sect has exhausted all divine truth and their scripture contains the “fullness” of revelation.

But how can this be? God is infinite and eternal, while all specific religious traditions, no matter how rich and insightful, are, by their very nature, finite and limited. Everything taught by a particular faith community may be “true,” but, since the finite cannot contain the infinite, no one faith can say all there is to say about God. Thus, each tradition, while proclaiming its own truth, must logically open itself to the possibility that other faiths may express additional aspects of the divine totality that it may have missed.

To view things in this matter is to break open the boundaries of egocentric self-satisfaction that is so often the dark side of the light of faith, obscuring all insights not originating in one’s own tradition. Do we—can we finite beings—know everything about the infinite God? If we are right in what we believe, does that mean everyone else is wrong? The higher religions in practice require self-transcendence as well as self-affirmation. At their best, they should call their adherents to see their doctrines as transparent rather than opaque.

Religion, seen as opaque, identifies its symbols as one with ultimate truth. The
symbols, metaphors, and myths with which it expresses its convictions are literalized and absolutized. The symbol becomes one with what it symbolizes. Thus they reject the symbols and stories of all other traditions. This is a form of idolatry in which human thoughts are confused with divine truth and venerated as ultimate reality.

Each of the three western faiths, when misunderstood in this way, generates its own particular form of idolatry. Distorted Catholicism becomes “ecclesiolatry” (worship of the Church rather than God); distorted Protestantism becomes “Scriptolatry” (worship of the literal text of the Bible rather than God); distorted Judaism becomes “ethnolatry” (worship of the Jewish people rather than God). This is the road to religious wars and persecution of the religious other.

But there is another way to view one’s religious tradition which avoids corporate egocentricity and idolatry. For religious pluralists the symbolic language of religion becomes transparent, allowing believers to see through the images to the infinite and eternal which lie beyond all symbols. Our traditions’ stories and images point past themselves to a reality which cannot be reduced to the conceptions of any one system. Moses asks to know the name of God. The divine response is “I shall be what I shall be.” God is the endlessly self-transcendent—and so are we, since we humans are the earthly images of God. Like God we are unnamable, indefinable, irreducible to any opaque identity. We are in the image of God—and yet God remains imageless (“You shall not see my face”). Thus we are in the image of an imageless God who is always more—infinitely more—than any finite definitions we can offer.

And so we must fashion self-transcending religious traditions to reflect the self-transcending human reality reaching out to the divine transcendence. Understood in this way, all religions see themselves in a global, indeed a cosmic, context. All narrow self-ghettoization is disallowed as we seek ultimacy.

These themes have been part of our Western religious traditions since their beginning with Abraham. The patriarch was called to be father of a “great nation,” and to go to a specific land that God would show him. Israel’s greatness was not a matter of size or earthly power but the result of the great message it was to bear into the world; the oneness of God and the universal moral law. The ultimate purpose of Israel’s witness was a universal one; “In you shall all the peoples of the world be blessed.” Israel does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the redemption of all humanity. Israel is a self-transcending people with a world-wide mission to build the kingdom of peace and justice for all.

If all the higher religions echo such universal themes, then all must strive to learn as much as possible from and about each other. They must develop positive attitudes toward other faiths, reject the teaching of contempt for the other which has long plagued religious traditions, maximize opportunities for social interaction and shared worship and, crucially, study the sacred texts of other faiths.

The holy writings of the world’s religions contain the stored wisdom of the ages, the thoughts of the leading thinkers and seekers of many lands and peoples and faiths. All contain insights into humanity’s search for meaning and purpose which can enrich readers of all faiths. Our own faith’s calls for self-transcendence leads us beyond the walls of our community to explore the words of others. Having delved into the writ-
ings of “the other,” we return home, permanently enriched and refreshed to discover aspects of our own tradition we may have overlooked. Stimulated by the creative thinking of other faiths, we renew our own while incorporating new dimensions of thoughts previously undiscovered. Finally we may conclude that the “other” is not as different from us as we once thought.

All this openness to other faith traditions and to their wisdom hangs on our willingness to adopt a new definition of truth in the field of religion. If we do not do this, we will never be willing to venture beyond the texts and teaching of our own faith to seek out wider horizons in the scriptures of others.

The usual theory of truth with which people approach sacred texts is the same that most of us use in everyday life. Truth equals factual accuracy. This is often called the correspondence theory of truth. If my words correspond to an external, factual reality, those words are “true.” I state that it is raining outside. To test the truth of my statement, I go to the window and look outside. Or I might open the window and stretch out my hand. If I see rain and feel it falling on my hand, I conclude that my words correspond to the external weather and are therefore “true.”

But in the area of religious “truth,” how can I test the words I speak or read or write? The Jew declares that God is one—radically one—and that there is no oneness like unto God’s oneness. The Christian says God is one, but three persons in one being, a less radical form of oneness. But how do we test these statements for “truth?” There is no window looking out on the divine reality. The statement about the rain involves only finite elements limited to time and space. But the religious affirmation involves what T. S. Eliot calls “the intersection of the timeless with time,” a finite proclamation regarding an infinite reality. Since we cannot evaluate the truth claims of religious statements in terms of the correspondence theory, let us dispense with this definition of truth when dealing with religious affirmations. This means, of course, that we will have to relinquish the claim that my particular religion’s text describes God as God really is. Such a claim stands revealed as being intellectually arbitrary, a result of deep feeling but non-demonstrable.

Is all talk of “religious truth” then to be disallowed? No, not if we find an alternative to the correspondence theory. First of all, from inside the religious experience, no proof or test is needed by the believer to demonstrate the “truth” of his faith. At its most intense, faith is comparable to love. The believer is in love with God. The lover needs no reason to love. All he knows is “this is my beloved.” That is true in an earthly love affair or in the love between the human person and God. But the lover’s friend may observe the relationship from outside and evaluate it in terms of its outcome. Does this love relationship bring out the best in the lover? Does it lead him to be more compassionate and kind? Does it make him happy? If it does, his friend may conclude that this love is “true;” it is real, it is a good and useful relationship which elevates the spiritual and ethical life of the lover.

By the same standards we can evaluate the “truth” of religion. A faith that produces virtuous human beings, sensitive to others, to all living things, to Being itself, is a “true” faith. One that degrades its followers, that teaches them to denigrate or even persecute others, to despoil the world, is a false faith. This understanding of truth might be called
the “performative theory.” In the field of religion, “by their fruits you shall know them.” Arbitrary application of the correspondence theory of truth might lead one to conclude that one’s own texts correspond to God’s truth and to refuse to read any others. The performative theory of truth sees all religious scriptures as true if they inspire their readers to be good citizens of the human community. And, since the texts of all the higher religions do that, all are “true.” In search of such truths, followers of one faith will eagerly seek out the teachers and the teachings of others to deepen and broaden their understanding of the universal human condition. Seen in this way, interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism are today’s high roads to truth—a summons to all of us, in this global age, to reach out to each other and each other’s scriptures to discover ever more of the truth God has revealed to all.
Why should Christians read the scriptures of a tradition other than their own? The impulse to ask the question as such is no sign of small-mindedness or lack of curiosity. The anxieties that lie behind the query are real for those whose regular responsibilities require immersion in Christian scriptures. Ministers who preach week in and week out know all too well that learning enough about the lectionary readings for any given Sunday can prove to be a tall order. Moreover, because I am painfully aware of the limits in my knowledge of my own texts, I am wary not just about the limits of my time but also the limits of my capacity to acquire a responsible knowledge of another scripture. Might I do more harm than good by acquiring a superficial acquaintance with the Quran or the Bhagavad Gita?

These concerns are legitimate. But should they carry the day? They must not. However earnest and well meant, such arguments can justify abiding in ignorance. Still more, these worries can prevent us from living out core elements of the Christian vocation. Simply put, it is impossible to live a faithful Christian life in a time of religious diversity without committing some time to learning about and from our neighbors of other faiths. It is impossible to love our neighbors while we remain ignorant about their most cherished convictions and their living relationship with their own sacred texts. Moreover, we need our neighbors’ wisdom if we are to know and love God more truly. Other scriptures are vital if we are to deepen love of neighbor and love of God.

True enough, the obstacles that impede mastery of even one’s own scriptures let alone those of another are daunting. But we would never permit ourselves to settle for relative ignorance because mastery of the New Testament is impossible. The impossibility of maximal knowledge is never grounds for bypassing increased knowledge.

But there is a more compelling reason to avoid this line of argumentation: we are

morally accountable for what we do not know because we are sure to misrepresent the
most cherished convictions of coworkers and neighbors if we elect to abide in igno-
rance. When Christians refuse to engage in patient truth-seeking study of other tradi-
tions, we fail to perform the work that love requires. By remaining in ignorance, we
leave ourselves prone to easy manipulation by unscrupulous politicians and dema-
gogues who spread misinformation and foment fearmongering. When we do not know
much about our neighbors’ traditions, we place ourselves in a position of moral vul-
nerability. Should we speak about traditions we do not know, we are sure to get it
wrong. And when such speech is driven by anxiety and fear, it is a safe bet that we shall
bear false witness and in so doing compromise a core obligation of faithful Christian
living.

“I did not know” has never been an acceptable response for Christians when such
not knowing leads to failure in fulfilling our responsibilities. This is a lesson that our
own scriptures teach. In Jesus’ famous parable on the Last Judgment, the goats who are
dammed plead ignorance when Jesus says to them, “I was hungry and you gave me no
food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not
welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did
not visit me.” (Matt 25:42-43). Their “we did not know” plea does not help them. We
are not excused for our failure to welcome the stranger and thereby to care for the
Christ because we failed to see him in the stranger’s face.

It’s worth noting that the sheep, too, do not know that they ministered to the Lord
unaware. They just were the kinds of persons who spontaneously gave themselves in
love to those in need. They were too busy caring for the least of these to entertain the
pious notion that in doing so, they were caring for the Christ. But theirs was not an
ignorance caused by obliviousness. They knew what was needed for effective care.
Effective care requires more than good intentions; it requires informed intelligence. No
doctor will get far in her care for patients on the steam of kindheartedness alone.

But does giving ourselves in love to our neighbors require that we know something
about their religious traditions and even their scriptures? This question is best answered
with another: Can we know and love our neighbors without knowing something about
their traditions?

Perhaps we can tackle this second question by turning the tables. How important
might it be for your neighbor to know about your Christian faith if she seeks to be in
deep and substantive relationship with you? Can your neighbor know what is vital and
life giving to you without having an appreciation of your Christian faith? If she does
not know that you daily install the Lord’s Prayer on your lips and in your heart, if she
does not know that Psalm 23 brings you great solace, and if she does not know that just
hearing the words “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy …” (Luke 2:10) cre-
ates in you a Christmas flutter, she does not know what “makes you tick.” Her capac-
ity to care, to console, and to delight in your deepest joy is limited. There may well be
warmth and kindness, but there is likely no deep hospitality let alone spiritual friend-
ship.

But more is it at stake than interpersonal relationships. When some of our Chris-
tian co-religionists insist, as they now do with some frequency, that the Qur’an is an

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evil book and we are in no position to argue otherwise because we have read none of it, our capacity to live out our Christian vocation is impaired in a way that can cause serious social and even geopolitical harm. When demagogues claim that the Qur’an is hostile to religious diversity and we simply do not know enough to dispute the matter, we lack the capacity to redirect the conversation toward loving reconciliation.

Consider just how much there is to learn from just one verse from the Qur’an:

O people, we created you from the same male and female, and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes, that you may know one another. The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous … (49:13)

This provocative verse teaches readers that social diversity and even religious diversity are part of divine providence. All human communities are kin; they are born from “the same male and female,” but nonetheless, God has created “distinct peoples and tribes.” Social homogeneity is not the will of God; diversity is. Why? “So that you may know one another.” Difference is created because it makes richer communion possible. Difference is also the ground for holy competition: “The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous.” The best among you is apparently not the community that can lay claim to the most compelling theological arguments but the one that can bring about justice!

Christian communities have long appealed to the doctrine of creation to celebrate natural diversity. We have no trouble asserting that nature which teems with infinite variation is God’s own; such riotous, wild variety is God’s will. But I am hard-pressed to think of a comparable Christian scripture that celebrates social and religious variety as part of God’s own good intention for the world. Here, the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition exceed our own. Of course, the tradition also contends that the revelation of Muhammad is final and, as such, corrects and trumps other traditions, no matter the presence of revelation in the religions of the book. But it is hard to overestimate how remarkable and promising this single Qur’anic verse is for interreligious dialogue.

The verse poses for Christian readers a profound challenge: what prevents Christians from celebrating social and religious variety in the way that we have learned to celebrate natural diversity? Can we expand the doctrine of creation to these spheres as well? Might we also imagine shifting the competition between religious traditions from the sphere of apologetics to ethics?

This set of reflections and these concrete questions richly demonstrate yet another reason for reading other scriptures: genuine theological learning! We are sure to learn more, not just about our own tradition in the light of others, but also more about God by encountering God’s self-giving to other faithful pilgrims. When Christians dwell and abide with other scriptures, it is our experience that we are enriched; we discover in them novel treasures that are not identical to the wisdom found in our own, but as in this brief example, a wisdom that oftentimes presses us to go beyond what we understood to be true from internal Christian resources alone. This moving forward need in no way be a leaving behind. Rather when we receive with open minds and hearts wisdom that is not already our own, we discover that we cannot move more fully into the divine life without moving into greater and learned intimacy with our neighbors.
We asked religious leaders to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of religious pluralism. Here is what they told us:

What questions are members of your congregation asking you about interfaith issues?

CHAPLAIN (CAPTAIN) JENNIFER ROGERS-COOPER, 102ND SIGNAL BATTALION, WIESBADEN ARMY AIRFIELD, GERMANY

Parishioners, for an army chaplain, are a little different from those served by a local pastor. We serve a group of women and men, soldiers, who all have different faith experiences. The most important concerns my “parishioners” bring me are those wondering how my faith intersects with their faith. Currently we have a Shiite Muslim, a Jew, a Wiccan and a Druid in my battalion. Those of minority faith groups often worry about how they are seen by other members of the unit and society. They hope that I can be a voice of sanity among the ever-present prejudices of human beings. My watchwords for all persons of faith are from Micah 6:8, “He has shown you O mortal what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” I could pontificate for hours on Christian apologetics when asked about my faith or I can love people as Christ loved them. Brow-beatings never changed anyone, but love will wrangle many a sinner out of the depths of hell.

Another reason that soldiers approach their chaplain is that they are struggling with theodicy. When in combat, soldiers are acutely aware of the constant possibility the next mission may be their last; or perhaps worse, that they might come back less than whole. When a soldier begins to struggle with his or her own mortality, or the fact that bad things happen in the world to those who are trying (against the odds) to make a difference, they want to know that there is someone who is in control even though their world seems to spin out of control on a regular basis. We pastors, who are called to be chaplains, serve as guideposts along the way pointing to the One who has spoken to the storms of life, “Be still!” Regardless of a person’s faith, those two words are very powerful. That God is big enough and powerful enough to speak calm out of chaos is very important to those who are riding life’s waves.

ISLAM MOSSAAD, IMAM, NORTH AUSTIN MUSLIM COMMUNITY CENTER, AUSTIN, TEXAS

Islam is the youngest of the three Monotheistic Faiths, and Muslims have much commentary, guidance, and belief that clarifies the Islamic position vis a vis the People of the Book (Jews and Christians). Most Muslims not only have deep knowledge of but also all certain belief in Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed (Peace be upon them all), and the divine revelation sent directly by God (Allah) to these respective messengers, among many others, equally, as one brotherhood calling man to his Creator.
Most Muslims see interfaith dialogue as an opportunity for others to see Islam in a whole other light than the pervasive negative boogy-man image commonly depicted and unfortunately believed by many fellow Americans. Furthermore, Muslims are very wary and sensitive to emotionally based proselytizing under the guise of friendship and dialogue. Muslims prefer either discussions on how to respect each other, based on factual knowledge, how to cooperate on matters universal to all faith communities, and/or a logical source-based theological discussion and even debate that respectfully appeals to the mind.

STEPHEN C. HANCOCK, PASTOR, SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

We have offered a number of classes and forums intended to help members of our congregation better understand and appreciate Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Some of the questions folks seem most interested in discussing are: When, where, and how did the religion begin? What are the main sub-groups within the religion? What is the religion’s sacred text, and how is it studied and used? How is leadership understood and exercised? How is the nature of God understood? What are the primary rituals and practices? What does the religion teach about how women and men should treat each other? What is the relationship between the religion and politics? Between the religion and science?

Have you ever served as clergy in an interfaith context? Reflect on that experience.

STEPHEN HANCOCK

The most powerful interfaith experience in which I have participated took place in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1996. I was pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, and had developed a good friendship with Stephen Fuchs, rabbi of The Temple. Stephen and I both played college tennis. After we met in Nashville, we began playing every Wednesday. Our friendship developed out of those very competitive tennis matches.

One day I asked Stephen to preach at our Good Friday worship service and was very pleased when he said yes. Over the centuries, Good Friday has been a day that Jews have dreaded. Traditionally, Christians listened to Good Friday sermons in which the “perfidious Jews” demanded that Pilate set a murderer free and kill their savior. Down through the ages, stirred by such sermons, many individuals have committed acts of violence and destruction against Jews.

The night of the service the church was filled to overflowing with members of The Temple, members of Second Presbyterian Church, and visitors attracted by reports in the local press. This event was the lead story on all three local news telecasts that night.

The service included a specific act of repentance by Christians for anti-Semitism. Such an act by Christians gathered for worship, with a rabbi and many of his congregants present, was a significant step toward reconciliation. This was especially appropriate on a day that has historically been an occasion for expressions of anti-Semitism.

In an article about the service in The Christian Ministry, Rabbi Fuchs was quoted as saying: “When I moved away from Nashville, one of my great sadnesses was leaving those weekly tennis games with Steve and the wonderful discussions we shared. Understanding between representatives of different faith traditions is never automatic. It comes through hard work, mutual respect and affirmation and appreciation of the tra-
dation of the other as equally valid to our own.”

JENNIFER ROGERS-COOPER
Since entering active duty with the U.S. Army in April of 2004, all of my ministry experience has been in an interfaith context. The necessity for asking about a person’s faith preference has become an everyday experience for me. But the faith of another does not intimidate me, my role, or who God has called me to be. When someone asks for a chaplain they are asking for something a social worker, a psychologist, or a psychiatrist can’t give them.

When you invite a man or woman who wears a cross, a Christian chaplain, into the conversations of life, you want them to make a statement about faith. I do not assume that they want Jesus, but I do know that soldiers, more often than not, want us to be the subject matter experts on not only our own faith but on theirs as well.

While in the hospitals associated with medical ministry in Fort Gordon, Georgia, I met retired soldiers who were taking their last breath after a long-lived life. I met a soldier who had lost his buddy in the same explosion that took his arm. I met soldiers who were scared to have their appendix removed. Nearly every one of them wanted the comfort of prayer. Sometimes they were happy with a generic prayer, sometimes they wanted to hear Christ’s peace in the words I was saying for us both. I generally offer to do one of three things, and let the individual choose what is best for them: 1. I can pray with you right now, 2. I can pray for you on my own, or 3. I can do both! Ninety percent or more choose number 3, but one way or the other the person gets prayer. Regardless of an individual’s faith, no one has ever turned down all three.

ISLAM MOSSAAD
I have conducted several interfaith marriages and funerals where family members are not Muslim. There is enough in common between Islam and Christianity that allowed for me to appeal to universal principles such as forgiveness, accountability before God, etc. What is needed is clear planning and communication before the service so that it meets the guidelines and details of practice established in Islam and still embraces shared elements.

Do you think Christians or Muslims should read the sacred texts of other faiths?

ISLAM MOSSAAD
I think an individual should start by studying and knowing the foundations of their own faith and also seek to know and understand the books of other faiths. In fact, Muslim scholars writing exegesis frequently use details from Christian and Jewish sources to explain stories of the Qur’an. Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) said that which is corroborated by the Bible in the Qur’an, we accept as Muslims; that which contradicts the Qur’an, we refute; and that which is mentioned in the Bible and not contradicted by the Qur’an, we remain silent about.

STEPHEN HANCOCK
Reading the sacred texts of other faiths can be interesting and edifying, but I would suggest some cautions. While formal application of modern literary and historical methods to the reading of such texts may not be appropriate, I do think learning as
much as one can about the text background and context is helpful to understanding and interpretation. This is especially true if it helps the reader see features of the text like irony, word play, metaphorical writing, multi-level symbols, or other more subtle features of communication. Also, reading the text in conversation with others is usually better than reading it alone.

JENNIFER ROGERS-COOPER

It never hurts to be as informed as we can be about the environment in which we work. What I have read about the Muslim faith earned me great credibility when conversing with Iraqi Army leaders in Iraq. We were told in seminary that the most well-read person in the congregation must be the pastor. The same is true for army chaplains. Not only are we called upon to preach in our own ecumenical congregations, but we are also called upon to engage local religious leaders in foreign lands. And not only that, we are the subject matter experts on religion for our army’s leaders; having a basic understanding of the religious climate in a particular area might not be enough. Knowing the general tenets of another faith group may not make us knowledgeable. However, reading whatever we can get our hands on, especially sacred texts, helps us understand our ministerial operating environment and can solidify our own faith as well. Some Christians might be fearful that reading sacred texts from other faith groups could corrupt their own faith, but one thing has remained true for me: nothing I ever read about other faith groups altered my conviction that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.
I have a cartoon posted on my office door. The scene: a man and a woman are sitting in a café. One says to the other, “No really, I love it when you talk in sentences. Maybe you should like do it more, now that you like started seminary.” As someone who cares about preaching, I try to teach people to speak in complete sentences. This may seem obvious, but it’s not easy. We live in a culture, McEntyre argues, that is witnessing the disintegration of language. In a world of hype and language abuse, we have found ourselves more and more unable to say what we mean and say it well. As a frequent user of hyperbole and exclamatory sound bites myself (what McEntyre calls “habitual verbal promiscuity”), I admit that after reading Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies I found myself held accountable for a higher standard of language born out of love for the Word and for words. We are stewards of words, she writes, and being a steward of words is a high calling (54).

The book originated from the 2004 Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. I was fortunate to be present for her lectures and even more fortunate to read the ideas she presents in this extended, published format. She writes with the language she hopes to encourage: gracious, precise, and inventive. Written for a Christian audience, she is concerned with “how to read scripture and how to take responsibility for the stories Christians hold in trust as heirs of that tradition” (xi-xii). At the same time, her ideas are graciously extended beyond religion to all who care about language.

The first chapter “Why Worry about Words?” surveys the ominous state of contemporary language among people who speak English. She notes worrisome statistics about functional illiteracy and argues that a market-driven economy has produced a market language that has become the dominant idiom of our culture (16), reducing our language to a commodity awash in thoughtless “overstatement and blather” (11). We’ve become so accustomed to this language abuse that we are no longer offended by it (11). The problem arises when this kind of language becomes normative in the church and in the academy. The church loses its confessional nature to speak about God. We lose the ability “to call people to something so radically different from the terms and paradigms of this world that it can be spoken of only in the variegated, complex, much-translated, much-pondered, prayerfully interpreted language of texts that have kept generations of people of faith kneeling at the threshold of unspeakable mystery and love beyond telling” (16).

Using an ecological analogy, McEntyre argues that our language, like food, has been “industrialized.” We are depleting a precious resource and our practices are unsustainable (17). We have become careless stewards of the “treasures that have been put into our keeping” (20).

In the chapters that follow, McEntyre proposes twelve stewardship strategies to love words, each one a little gem of an essay: love words, tell the truth, don’t tolerate lies, read well, stay in conversation, share stories, love the long sentence, practice poetry, attend to translation, play, pray, and silence. All twelve have something to say to people of faith and to the church. Two strategies are particularly powerful for me. Strategy #3, “Don’t Tolerate Lies,” speaks of the stewardship of words as a moral issue and our responsibility to confront words of deception, abuse, insults, and violence. Her strategy includes this challenge: “if we do not speak about hard things in the classroom and from the pulpit, where will the
leadership come from to help each other distinguish truth from lies?” (63).

Strategy #5, “Stay in Conversation,” is about the pleasure of honest, thoughtful discourse that enables us to live together. Such conversation requires deliberation, honesty, and courtesy, but the rewards are nourishment, affirmation, and empowerment (89).

McEntyre writes, “Caring for one another is not entirely separable from caring for words” (1-2).

McEntyre encourages us to hunger for words that satisfy and nourish—beautiful, clear, sensitive and curious words that can bear, even just a little bit, the glory of the Word and words we are called to speak. She writes, God “has put a measure of God’s own power into our hands and on our tongues” (21). In the compelling words of worship, in the studied imagination of the sermon, in the intimate prayers at bedside and table, in the daily courtesy of conversation, we Christians hold that charge in our hands and on our tongues, even if our words can only speak “to the threshold of unspeakable mystery and love beyond telling” (21).

This is an enchanting book that invites us to dwell within that mystery, to cherish it, and to speak graciously and thoughtfully about it. Reading Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies is a rich experience. The book deserves a place at the top of your reading list.

THE SHALLOWS: WHAT THE INTERNET IS DOING TO OUR BRAINS, Nicholas Carr.


For many Americans, being online takes up large amounts of time in our work and private lives. My children, who are young adults, send text messages because e-mail is too slow. They watch television shows through online streaming. Such behavior is more than a little baffling to some of us middle-aged people, who have trouble getting the hang of pushing tiny buttons on a Blackberry or using the TV remote controls. But this doesn’t stop us from buying most of our books online or downloading the music we like.

In The Shallows, Carr presents a nuanced argument about what sustained use of browser-mediated hypertext does to users. Unlike reading printed books, reading through a browser (Firefox, Chrome, Internet Explorer, etc.) always presents us with tempting options: do I continue to the next paragraph, or do I click on a link? If my e-mail announces a new message, do I stop to check it? In practice, many people (of whatever age) do not read for extended periods of time online. Carr presents the results of recent brain research about reading and human memory to explain our behavior. Research shows that Internet usage changes our brains (physically) and our minds (i.e., our mental likes and attention spans). The highly stimulating online environment pushes us towards clicking on links rather than continuing to follow a complex argument.

If we take the long view, according to Carr, our ability to sit quietly reading books is both a recent novelty and, perhaps, a mere hiccup in human culture. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors needed to shift attention constantly to avoid dangers and find food. The kind of sustained silent reading that we may take for granted was unknown until people moved from scrolls to codex books (the kind with individual pages), and writing evolved to have discrete words with spaces between them. These innovations made reading easier for everyone. Carr quotes a passage from Augustine’s Confessions in which Augustine is amazed that Ambrose could make sense of a text simply by reading silently, rather than sounding the words aloud. By 1200, however, scribes had shifted to writing individual words and a revolution in widespread silent reading was underway.

Other technologies, Carr notes, have also altered our brains. Maps, clocks, television, the word processor, and the pocket calculator all influenced how our brains arranged themselves to deal with particular kinds of tasks. Carr
suggests that “digital natives,” to use Prensky’s term, may have difficulty in reading deeply and following certain kinds of complex arguments because their brain/minds have developed to perform the quick shifts of attention and analysis of snippets of information that the Internet delivers so well. Heavy Internet usage reinforces certain skills and literally changes one’s brain.

In one brief chapter, Carr documents the value of slowing down. Studies show that our brains need more time to process many kinds of emotional content (e.g., facial expressions) from others than it takes to learn a new fact. Speed is the enemy of empathy and compassion. Carr does not argue that what the Internet is doing to us is an unalloyed gain or total loss. There are trade-offs, just as there were when our culture decided that the benefits of the town clock and the factory whistle outweighed estimating the time of day by the position of the sun.

Christians are constantly faced with the challenge of living out faith in cultures that slough off old habits and acquire new ones without thinking through the consequences. Carr is a little frightened at some of the publicly stated aspirations of Google that treat human beings more like carbon-based computers than flesh and bone people. Carr takes pains to report research findings that indicate that our brains are profoundly unlike computers. As a Christian who values the messy, face-to-face relationships that are part of being a Christian with others, I worry that many of us are eager to embrace the next device from Apple without counting the cost. Carr does not think that using the Internet is making us stupid. But he makes a convincing case that using the Internet is changing how we think, and how we like to think. I encourage you to read The Shallows. It’s now available as a printed book. That’s how I read it. You can also download it to your Kindle reading device. You might even read it both ways.
The Outdoor Life Network documentary, “The Case of the Missing Salmon,” chronicles the plight of the Oweekeno Village in northern British Columbia, Canada. The Oweekeno Tribe inhabits the village of Rivers Inlet, which, prior to the fall of 1999, saw over three million salmon make their annual spawning run through their inlet. In the fall of 1999, however, only 3500 salmon came—three million fewer than usual.

The villagers were first alerted that something was terribly wrong when the local...
grizzly bears, who lived in relative harmony with the natives, presented a serious problem. The bears, which made their annual pre-hibernation trek to the streams to gorge themselves on the fall run of salmon, altered the peace of the village by threatening to break into houses for food. The bears were starving.

That fall, the villagers shot fourteen bears—mostly mothers and their cubs. What began as a “bear problem” soon revealed itself to be a salmon problem which ultimately pointed to a massive—possibly global—environmental problem. Scientists and environmentalists searched for clues to unlock the mystery of what happened to the missing salmon. The documentary suggests that there was “a perfect storm” of related issues which contributed to the salmon’s disappearance.

First, Rivers Inlet has endured longstanding commercial fishing. Secondly, since the 1960s the tribe engaged in mass lumbering of its old growth forests. Removing trees near the banks of rivers increases silt runoff and depletes necessary shade. The increase of silt and the loss of shade caused water temperatures to rise and salmon are very susceptible to thermal change.

Additionally, the warming of the river opened the door for a nasty and unnatural predator of salmon eggs and young salmon—the mackerel—to come into Rivers Inlet. Since the Oweekeno depend on the salmon for their livelihood, they increased logging to make-up for the loss of fishing income, and now the local trees are now at risk because they get about 75% of their nitrogen from the decaying salmon carcasses that the bears eat and discard. Fewer salmon means less nitrogen.

When human beings feel anxious and threatened, they often acquiesce to primitive impulses connected to the least developed part of the brain. So it is understandable that anxious villagers turned to deadly violence when the bears ransacked their village. But violence is not a solution to complex systemic problems. Peeling back the many layers of this story, we see that shooting the bears eliminated a symptom—not the underlying systemic causes.

When one hears that fourteen bears went on a rampage in a small Canadian village it is easy to assume that the bears perpetrated the violence and deserved to be shot. But when you learn they were starving and were just trying to survive, you instead conclude they were actually the “symptom bearers” crying out for help in a sick system.

Bowenian family systems theory (in concert with Paul’s theology of the church being the Body of Christ) invites us to question our initial assumptions about peace and conflict. First, family system theory suggests that as soon as we blame one part of a system for a system’s problems, we have lost the appropriate focus. Rather, systems theory rightly focuses on how anxiety affects the interconnectedness of all the parts. Anxiety increases any system’s capacity to become volatile and reactive. Family systems expert Edwin H. Friedman often noted “that there can be no disease process without a host cell.”

Systems get sick because their self-regulating “antibodies” have been compromised, or because there is an absence of mature leadership (or the presence of immature leadership) at the top of the system. Every healthy body, organization, or nation has a healthy “head” which monitors and regulates the body’s health and actions.

In his book, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, theologian and systems
expert Peter Steinke notes that the family systems concept of self-differentiation has four salient constructs. These four constructs offer fresh and practical applications for peace-making.

First, self-differentiation means articulating a clear statement of self: “This is where I end and you begin.” Differentiation is always about maintaining appropriate boundaries with others. It means taking the log out of our own eye before noticing the speck in others. Self-differentiation requires individuals first to ask themselves how they are functioning in the system—it focuses on assessing oneself and not diagnosing others.

Second, differentiation depends on a mature commitment to staying appropriately connected to the larger system. In systems theory, a clear articulation of self is always married to remaining connected to the larger system. There can be no “Lone Ranger” mentality in a maturely self-differentiated person or system—one always weighs how one’s behavior will affect the larger system.

Third, differentiated persons and systems possess the capacity to remain non-reactive even in anxious situations. The Oweekeno people had other options to solve their “bear problem.” The bears could have been fed with the hope that they would peacefully hibernate, or they could have been tranquilized and relocated elsewhere. Differentiated persons and systems always “look before they leap.” Remaining non-reactive is essential.

Fourth, differentiated persons and systems have the capacity to make decisions based on time-tested principles rather than capricious whims, rumors, unsubstantiated threats, or fear. Well differentiated persons and systems take time to pause and ponder a situation and base decisions, not on highly charged emotion or inadequate data, but on a thoughtful process of information gathering that patiently questions and probes. For Christians, examples of such time-tested spiritual principles are: “If you live by the sword you’ll die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52), “Turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:39), and “beat swords into plowshares” (Isa. 2:4).

The 9/11 attacks on America were unthinkable—but had America responded to 9/11 from a maturely differentiated sense of self rather than out of raw reactivity we might be in a vastly different place today. Had we listened more openly to the world community and attempted to stay connected with it, had we gathered better information on supposed weapons of mass destruction, had we remained more calm and taken the time to consider more peaceful rather than rushing solely to military interventions, had we considered the global spiritual ripple effects of our “shock and awe” campaign, and had we based our decisions more on time-tested spiritual principles—we might still be in good favor with the world who showed our nation an unprecedented outpouring of goodwill, empathy, understanding, and sympathy. At this juncture, it is simply hard to measure the long-term spiritual and systemic damage our response has done both to ourselves and God’s good earth.

We had an opportunity to model to the world a vastly different response to unspeakable terror—and we dropped the ball.

In October 2006, the Amish in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, responded to unspeakable terror and violence in their community with commendable spiritual
aplomb, for I suspect they understand both the human condition and Christian humility and meekness far better than our political leaders. They masterfully applied all four features of self-differentiation as noted above.

First, they showed great self-differentiation.

They never wavered from their communal understanding that they are a pacifist community. They showed remarkable clarity amidst an incident where many people of faith would have lost spiritual focus, compromised or jettisoned spiritual values, or acquiesced to retaliation or vengeance.

Second, that they immediately prayed for and started a fund for the family of the man who terrorized and killed their innocent children is nothing short of a remarkable commitment to staying magnanimously connected to the larger community and their values.

Third, the Amish’s behavior epitomizes non-reactivity. Their response remains a powerful witness to the world that violence does not have to beget violence, and acts of terror do not have to beget hatred. Remarkably, the Amish found a way, as a spiritual community, collectively to tap their faith and non-violent values instead of their most base and primitive human instincts.

Fourth, the Amish immediately applied the time-tested spiritual principles of their cherished Anabaptist tradition by reminding themselves that harboring hatred, fanning the flames of revenge, or refusing to forgive is toxic to any system—but especially spiritual systems. They wisely chose the higher ground.

Because from a systems perspective, healthy systems must be self-correcting, a Peace-Church cannot just “tell the world a story” about peace. Unfortunately, preaching peace just isn’t enough. A Peace-Church must ultimately understand, remember, embrace, live, and model the hard truth that peace and violence are always systemic—and only systemic assessments and interventions ultimately work. A Peace-Church must not just tell the story but must, like the Amish, live the story because in systems thinking, abiding change only happens when spiritual principles take on concrete behaviors.

Paul sums up the systemic nature of peace and violence best when he said: “For if one member suffers, the whole body suffers, but if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (I Corinthians 12:26).

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