

Chapter 3

Common Ground and Enemy Territory: How Should We Approach Adherents of Other Faiths?

David John Hesselgrave

Retired Professor of Mission, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, IL, USA

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“Dear God, I bet it’s very hard for you to love everybody in the world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it.” Nan.

“For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (Ps. 96:5).

Prologue

One heirloom already passed on to my oldest son is a small shell-cover purse. It was a prize possession of my paternal grandfather, David Hesselgrave. Grandfather was said to have been an avid student of the Scriptures and became an ordained minister in the Universalist Church. When the first Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Chicago in 1893, grandfather was probably one of its most enthusiastic attendees. It was there that he purchased the purse bearing the Parliament inscription. It was there that he listened to the likes of the Jainist “chosen one,” Virchand Gandhi, and the prominent Hindu philosopher, Swami Vivekananda.

Most historians credit the 1893 Parliament with opening America to religions foreign to both our continent and our culture. And therefore by the time the Second Parliament of the World’s Religions was celebrated in Chicago’s Palmer House in 1993, the situation was completely different. Not only were almost all major (and many “minor”) world faiths represented—most of them had found a home in America. This time organizers attempted to build on Swami Vivekananda’s pronouncement of one hundred years before: “We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true.”

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Discussions relating to religion and the particular religions often encounter roadblocks early on. Few subjects are fraught with a higher degree of passion on the one hand, and a greater diversity of opinions on the other. Open discussions, therefore, often generate more heat than light. Scholarly dialogues easily become mired in minutiae and often yield little that is conclusive or helpful.

As for the Christian mission to people of other religions, in the public arena the very idea of mission is challenged by a pervasive relativism and loss of absolutes, a general

misunderstanding of what it means to be “tolerant” of other faiths, and repeated appeals to be appreciative of religious diversity. In the theological arena mission is challenged by a diversity of views as to the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. In the missions themselves, there are various opinions on how to go about the task of relating to adherents of other religions and communicating the gospel to them.

Where, then, should we begin and how should we proceed? Since the nature and meaning of mission is discussed in various places in this book we will proceed here by briefly reviewing the history referred to above and by discussing the meaning and significance of “religion” and “religions.” Then we will look to Scripture and consider various aspects of the missionary encounter with other faiths in its light.

Two Parliaments of the World’s Religions and their Aftermaths.

The religious context of the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries did not auger well for solid, scriptural answers to questions having to do with the encounter between Christians and adherents of other religions. The rise of the Social Gospel movement; the inroads of Higher Criticism; and the Parliament of World Religions at the end of the nineteenth century were followed by the significant but inclusive Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, the Modernist-Fundamentalist debates, the formation of various alliances including the International Missionary Council, serious discussions on the Christian mission to non-Christian religions in I.M.C. in the 1920s and 1930s, and the inauguration of a Laymen’s Missionary Inquiry After 100 Years (of missions from North America). Primary promoters of the Inquiry were Rufus M. Jones of Haverford College and William Ernest Hocking of Harvard. It put forward a “reconceptualized mission” that idealized religion and depicted particular religions as ways of thinking about a final truth to which all aspired. The aim of Christian missions was to contribute to that goal.

We desire the triumph of that final truth: we need not prescribe the route. . . He [the Christian missionary, ed.] will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued co-existence with Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth. (Hocking 1932:44)

The Inquiry was undertaken by the initiative of certain individuals. It was not inaugurated by any ecclesiastical body as such and its findings were subscribed to by only one denomination. But it reflected disenchantment with traditional missions on the part of more than a few. Indeed some liberals went so far as to say that, so extensive and pervasive are the truth and good of other religions, Christian missions are no longer necessary.

Unequivocal answers to these and similar ideas were not long in coming from within the I.M.C. itself. The most definitive and exhaustive response emanated from the voice and pen of the Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Leiden, (often spoken of as “brilliant”) Hendrik Kraemer. At the behest of the I.M.C., Kraemer prepared a

response to the Inquiry for the World Missionary Conference at Tambaram, Madras, India in 1938 and published it in his justly famous book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Kraemer 1938). Though Kraemer's very formidable arguments were debated in Madras, and though the arguments of that book and other works (see Kraemer 1958, 1962 et al.) resonated with some readers over subsequent years (Edmund Perry to whom we will shortly refer being one such), they were largely eclipsed by considerations growing out of the Second World War and its aftermath. The formation of World Council of Churches in 1948; the incorporation of the I.M.C. into the World Council in 1961; and important ecumenical gatherings in 1947, 1952, 1954 (cf. Brown 1957:35-46)—all of these meetings were more or less occupied with war and peace and a renewed and overriding concern for church unity. As a result, Kraemer's arguments for Christian uniqueness and exclusivism never received the degree of attention they so richly deserved.

Unlike their ecumenical counterparts, post-World War II evangelicals were primarily concerned with reaching new peoples and planting new churches. The "common ground" of their central concern had more to do with available means of communicating the gospel to adherents of other faiths. For half a century and more, macro- and micro-strategies for world evangelization found their way from the headquarters of evangelical missions and the halls of evangelical schools to the mission fields of the world. In fact, a case could be made for saying that evangelicals were better prepared to encounter other faiths on their own turf than they were to meet representatives of those faiths at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions.

When 6000 delegates met in the centennial Parliament, the common ground they pursued was a unifying statement on global ethics. An intermediate goal was a "mystical experience of pluralism." Delegates were admonished to "ditch their doctrines." They united in singing "Leaning on the everlasting arms," but only after excising Jesus' name and changing the lyrics to "Oh, what fellowship. Oh, what joy divine. I can feel the fellowship all around." As the nine-page global ethic statement evolved it was carefully crafted so as to avoid even one mention of the word "god" lest Buddhists and others be offended by its inclusion (cf. Hirsley 1993 and Jones 1993).

With plenty of time to prepare, conservative evangelicals might have done well to schedule a simultaneous consultation devoted to the uniqueness of Christ and his gospel. As it was, some of them opposed any identification with the Parliament; others attended as observers; and most settled for the fact that Charles Colson was invited to address and audience at a peripheral event midway through the Parliament proceedings. Without settling longstanding and irritating issues having to do with establishing common cause with each other, evangelicals continued various efforts to exploit "common ground" strategies for evangelizing adherents of other religions.

Without minimizing the importance of issues having to do with intra-faith cooperation, it is the latter quest with which we concern ourselves here. But to do so in a hopeful and helpful fashion we should "begin at the beginning" lest we trip over unstated pre-understandings and assumptions later on.

The Source and Significance of Religion and Particular Religions

Thinking in generic terms, and because the Bible does not use the word “religion” (we inherited it from Cicero), we will opt here for Lactantius’ and Augustine’s understanding of religion in terms of the linking or binding idea inherent in the Latin word *religare*. In the broad sense, religion has to do with binding, linking, or re-connecting people to the Divine, supernatural or transcendent, however conceived. Particular religions, then, can be thought of as the various systems of faith and worship that attempt to make this linkage or reconnection possible.

What, then, is the source of religion in general and the various religions in particular? As one might expect, philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists come up with very different answers and explanations. Logically, however, there are only four possible answers to the source question: the source of religion must be God, man, Satan or some combination of these three. The position that seems to be in accordance with Scripture is that God is the author of religion in the sense that he has created human beings as *worshipping* beings and sought fellowship with man. In terms of the particular religions, however, he is author of *true* religion only. All other religions find their source in man or Satan, or man and Satan acting in collaboration with each other.

Of course, to say this opens up a Pandora’s box, particularly in our contemporary world. We are immediately confronted with additional questions having to do the distinction between true and false religions, the presence or absence of truth in the various religions, and why God would allow false religions to exist in the first place. Exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists will clash on such questions. Exclusivists believe that only one religion is true (or, at the very least, superior). Inclusivists believe that truth is to be found in all religions. Pluralists subsume all religions under an overarching truth or reality of which all are reflections and to which all aspire.

The position taken here is that of Christian exclusivism and that basically of the kind espoused by Edmund Perry when he writes,

Since from the viewpoint of Gospel faith the one only True and Living God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and since the Gospel alone brings men to this God, all other faith claims and systems lead men away from him. Religion is therefore, first of all, the *generic* term comprehending the universal phenomenon of men individually and collectively being led away from God in manifold ways by divers claims and systems. Religion in this generic sense exists of course only in the *specific* religions, each of which is a concrete manifestation or actualization of a particular people being led away from God in a particular way by a particular schema, but as a descriptive term “religion” expresses the unity of human life being oriented and organized away from the God of Gospel faith through the diversity of creeds, codes, myths, cults and ways of worship. (Perry 1956:88)

No doubt Perry’s lines will raise the eyebrows of most and the temperatures of many. But they accord well with the words of the Psalmist above and, as we shall see, with the general tenor of Scripture. In agreeing with Perry at this point, the words of C. S. Lewis come to mind: “. . . I was not writing to expound something I could call ‘my religion,’ but

to expound ‘mere’ Christianity, which is what it is and was what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not” (Lewis 1960:viii).

We will not pause here to quibble about the precise definitions of Perry’s “Gospel faith” and Lewis’s “mere Christianity.” Perry delineates the gospel in terms of the “. . . biblical story of a *promise* [to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3], a *person* [Jesus Christ as in Acts 13:32-33] and a *people* [the family of Christ, the Church in Ephesians 5:25] (Perry 1958:26; italics his, interpolations mine). As is well known, Lewis gives considerable space to “myth” in the early history of mankind. In both cases we might have hoped for a more extended discussion of the authority of the biblical text itself.

As for Perry’s definitions of “religion” and “particular religions” they also entail a semantic problem because, according to his understanding, Christianity itself does not really qualify as a “religion.” But if that is a problem when it comes to general usage, it is no problem at all for Perry because in his view it is Christ himself and not Christianity that actually provides the linkage or restored relationship with God that religions as such only purport to provide. And with that proposition we find ourselves in complete agreement.

The Theology of Man and His Religions—A Brief Introduction

If Genesis and Exodus are crucial to the *story* of the “religious man,” the first three chapters of Romans are crucial to his *theology*. In writing to the Romans, Paul introduces his letter by testifying to a central theme informed by both divine inspiration and personal experience. He says, “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believes . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed . . . as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom. 1:16-17). In the chapters that follow he lays out God’s revelation concerning sin, justification, sanctification, glorification, mission and Christian living—the major doctrines with which religion is concerned. At this point, we will primarily consider Paul’s doctrine of sin (i.e., hamartiology) dealt with in Romans 1:18-3:31. These chapters translate the stories of Genesis and Exodus into a basic theology of mankind’s relationship with the God who made him and also with gods of his own making.

First, Paul writes about what is variously called primal religion, tribal religion, animism, dynamism and, sometimes, folk religion (each of which has its own nuances but all of which are at least similar). He says that from the very beginning the Creator God’s eternal power and divine nature were made known to mankind by virtue of the things he made, but people did not glorify him nor did they thank him. Instead, they deliberately set of in a direction which caused them to become deranged in their thinking, darkened in their affections, derelict in their worship, and depraved in their behavior (cf. Rom. 1:18:32).

Now it is imperative that we understand Paul’s teaching here. Though the word is not used (we will take a closer look at it later in this book), Paul’s words furnish us with a perfect demonstration of the significance of grace (Gr. *charis*). Grace is usually defined in terms of the “unmerited favor” of God, but that is only the half of it. Etymologically and theologically grace is *both* God’s goodness and gifts extended to man (unmerited to

be sure) *and also man's recognition of God's goodness and thankful reception of his gifts*. To be full-orbed and complete, grace must have both elements. What Paul is saying is that, from the very first, God graciously made his power and Godhead known to people, but instead of responding by giving him glory and gratitude, people chose to make idols and worship or "link up" with those idols instead of with their Creator God.

Second, Paul goes on to deal with peoples that are thought of (and think of themselves) as being more "civilized" and as practicing religions that are more "developed" and sophisticated (cf. Rom. 2:1-11). Romans and Greeks, for example, celebrated those proud philosophies expounded on Mars Hill in Athens and in the Roman Forum. Of course, Paul knows about them. And he also knows about the degraded worship of Delphi and the unconscionable atrocities of the Coliseum. Actually, the religions of Greece and Rome could not survive philosophical reflection. Brahmanism (subsequently elaborated into Hinduism), Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam ". . . are the only religions that have produced great systems of thought, exhibiting their content in a speculative and rational form" (T. Rees 1939:1250).

In this regard, Paul says that, no matter how sophisticated their philosophies and embellished their religions, those who look down their noses and judge the "degraded" worship of primals and tribals need only look within to their own nature (Gr., *physis* or essence, disposition, natural instinct), heart (Gr., *kardia* or thoughts, mind, feelings), and conscience (Gr., *suneideisis* or "co-perception," moral consciousness) to find a law by which their own actions will be judged and judged to be unworthy.

Third, Paul looks at his own people and their religion (Rom. 2:12-29). Jews boast of the Covenant extended to Abraham and the circumcision that sealed it. Jews boast of the Law given through Moses and the injunctions that forbid the worship of any god but Yahweh. But their proud boasting is not attended by proper behavior and as a result the name of God is blasphemed among Gentiles (2:24). True circumcision is an affair of the heart, and divine Law is a matter, not only of the letter, but also of the Spirit.

Paul's conclusion to the beginning section of Romans in chapter 3 is that all persons of whatever faith, face or race are abject sinners. And they are so despite the fact that the only true God has revealed his *person, attributes and goodness* at so many times and in so many ways. His conclusion can be expected to be highly disconcerting to everyone. Look at his propositions in Romans 3:10-12, for example:

No one is righteous, no not one.
No one understands.
All have turned aside and become worthless.
No one does good, not even one.

By nature all of us proudly resist the notion that these propositions apply to us. But, of course, they do. Moreover, we even resist the idea that they apply to all adherents of all religions on the face of the earth. Certainly there must be some people somewhere who seek God and do so of their own accord. Can't we at least categorize them as "seekers" if not "saints"? As "good" if not "perfect"? As anything but abject "sinners"?

No. As kind and courteous as such an inclination may seem to be, it actually is *unkind* as well as being unscriptural. It is unscriptural not only because it denies what God says but also what he is. He is the merciful “Seeking God” who always seeks out sinners (and, in his grace, transforms sinners into seekers before transforming them into sons!). Man’s first inclination is to hide from him as did our first parents, not seek him. Less obviously, however, this approach is *unkind* because it thwarts his saving purpose. God “has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all,” says the apostle Paul (Rom. 11:32). All are sinners by nature, by choice and by decree of God. “That’s bad,” we say. Well, Yes. But also, No. Why No? *Because in his mercy God saves sinners. And that’s the only kind of people he saves!* C. S. Lewis somewhere says that, if he had not become a Christian, he probably would have become a Zoroastrian because that’s the only other religion that takes evil seriously. Indeed it does. But, of course, as Lewis understood and understood well, the problem with Zoroastrianism is that it is devoid of the Savior!

For the history of mankind, religion and religions, look first at Genesis. It all begins there. But for a biblical theology of what happened back there in the beginning—a theology of man and his religion and religions—look at Romans. The basics are all there.

Interreligious Encounters as Invasions of Enemy Territory

In a day of pluralism, inclusivism and relativism, to say nothing of a twisted understanding of religious “tolerance,” the idea that the various religions constitute enemy territory seems both hopelessly biased and insanely bigoted. As delegates suspected at the first Parliament of the World’s Religions, and seem to have been completely assured of at the second, religion should bring people together, not tear them apart. And what about the good that is evident in all religions? When a Buddhist says, “Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do to you” is that not another way of expressing the Golden Rule? When a Muslim recites the words “God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate” is he not speaking the truth about God? Are teachings such as these the teachings of *enemies*?

In this connection it is important to understand that, as Hendrik Kraemer says, “. . . even those parts of another religion which might appear to be lofty and uplifting prove to be parts of a whole that is under the judgment of God” (Kraemer 1962:136). Also, we must remember that when Edmund Perry speaks of the various religions as leading men and women *away* from God, he is thinking of religions as indivisible wholes, as *systems* that Satan, disguised as an “angel of light,” employs to predispose adherents to *disbelieve* in the Christ of the biblical gospel. That, after all, is the crux of their problem because the first concern of biblical faith has to do with re-connecting people to God, and Christ is the only “connection.” Missionaries almost invariably find themselves confronting “good” people predisposed to misunderstand or, even misrepresent, Jesus Christ. In this profound sense missionaries easily find themselves frustrated and located in “enemy territory.”

We will more or less confine this part of our discussion to anecdotal materials relating to those religions systems identified by Rees and referred to above. But as we proceed we must remember that Christianity itself is by no means monolithic. Throughout church history and still today some great churches and throngs of so-called Christians have yielded to the wiles of Satan and given ground to him. This being so, “Christian lands” themselves often constitute “enemy territory” in the senses that Kraemer and Perry indicate, and therefore call out for missionary witness.

Primal religions as enemy territory.

It goes without saying that primal religion (tribalism, animism, dynamism, etc.) exists not as one religious system but as many, each with its own deities, intermediaries, remedies and rituals. In many ways, tribal peoples and areas such as those of sub-Saharan Africa and the islands of the South Pacific have proved to be fertile soil for missionary endeavor. But they have also proved to be resistant. Would-be Christian converts often find themselves repairing to local medicine men under the cover of darkness. In many areas, syncretism of this type is more the norm than an exception.

Part and parcel of primal or animistic religions is the notion that there is a “high god” but that he is too far away to “connect” with people in the round of daily affairs. Lesser gods, good and evil spirits, ancestral spirits, and various sources of power, on the other hand, are near at hand. So are the shamans, medicine men, sorcerers and workers of magic who, in some measure at least, understand and manipulate those lesser gods and spirits. In tribal religion it is of the essence that these intermediaries be enlisted in an unending effort to appease the spirits and fend off evil by means of prescribed rituals, medicines, amulets, verbal formulae, and the like.

Primal religionists are “easily reached” but “hard to win.” The very categories that we use—Creator God, Redeemer, Savior, sin, salvation, faith (and even missionary!), are either lacking or misconstrued. Primal religionists are predisposed to think of the Creator God of Genesis as far removed; the Christ of the Gospels as a miracle-working medicine man or shaman; prayers and the ordinances as powerful words and rituals; and missionaries as something other than just bearers of a divine message. Indeed, the very system often conspires to re-make missionaries into something other than—perhaps more than—the humble heralds and disciples they are basically called to be.

Brahmanism and Hinduism as enemy territory.

Indian syncretism is of another sort. A well-known Christian apologist proposed that we confront Hinduism head-on. His idea was that all religions had to face up to the principle of non-contradiction. He understood monism, but only philosophically and not existentially as it is so widely encountered in India. And it is at the existential level that we are really challenged by Brahmanism as it has evolved into the Hinduism we know today. Intellectually we can understand that, if Brahman is the Absolute and the only “real Reality,” all else must be complementary and not “really” contradictory. Even Ego

(the *Atman* or individual Self or Soul) *is* Brahman. The farther one goes with this commitment to monism the more frustrating it tends to become, however. To carry on serious conversations in a context where “contradictory” philosophies (there are six main *darshana* or divergent schools in Hinduism) accommodate each other and evidence not only compatibility but complementarity takes a good deal of mental gymnastics. And to actually visit the temples and crematoria, and walk the streets and slums of Bombay or New Dehli, with the realization that Hinduism not only allows for, but countenances these rituals and inequities, is almost more than any sensitive soul can bear.

To me it all seemed most incredulous until, during the course of doing some research on Hinduism, I happened upon a Hindu apologetic prepared for Westerners by one of India’s modern presidents most eminent philosophers, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. In light of the new awareness of Indian religion that followed the First Parliament of the World’s Religions and in the wake of philosophical and doctrinal controversies that plagued Protestantism and paved the way for the Laymen’s Inquiry, Radhakrishnan explained Hinduism in a way that not only made it plausible for India but almost appealing to the West. His work *The Hindu View of Life* was first published in 1927 but was followed by several similar works and has had numerous printings since its initial publication.

By the time Radhakrishnan has worked his philosophical and semantic alchemies, all gods however low or high, all spirits however numerous, all idols however crass, all mediators however diverse—all can be not only accommodated but also celebrated. All worship, whether the grossest expressions of *bhakti* (devotion) or the strictest expressions of *dharma* (law) are not only to be validated but appreciated. In his Hindu view, even caste (and the *varna* or segregation on the basis of color that was its original basis) is not only tolerated but necessitated if society is to progress. Brahman, Karma, *adhikara* (degrees of spiritual understanding or perception)—principles such as these explain it all.

One of Radhakrishnan’s most arresting statements, and one that cuts against the grain of popular wisdom, reads as follows:

In a sense, Hinduism may be regarded as the first example in the world of a missionary religion. Only its missionary spirit is different from that associated with the proselytizing creeds. It did not regard it as its mission to convert humanity to any one opinion. For what counts is conduct and not belief. Worshippers of different gods and followers of different rites were taken into the Hindu fold. (Radhakrishnan 1927:28)

Indeed, they were. Radhakrishnan may have been more than a historian at this point. He may have been something of a prophet. Hinduism not only maintains a tight grip on its own, it also attracts outsiders in this post-modern world. It is like a giant web that, when seen in the right light repels, but when shaded and shielded attracts and retains. The true God is “swallowed up” in a false “Reality.” Christ may be counted along with Rama, Krishna, Gautama et.al. as one of even the ten most prominent *avatara* or incarnations. Sin, on the other hand, is not so much “defiance of God” as it is “denial of self.” And, given a right understanding of Karma, prayer is both superstitious and futile—like asking God to abrogate his own law (cf. Radhakrishnan 1927:53).

The one who masquerades as an “angel of light” must have labored diligently to devise this system. And he must have worked overtime to predispose its adherents to accept and disseminate it.

Buddhism as enemy territory

If tradition is to be trusted, Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha about six centuries before the Christian Era. “Gautama” (or Gotama) was the name of his particular subset of the Sakya clan. “Buddha” means “Enlightened One” or “Awakened One” and it is in that name that the essence of Buddhism is to be found. After years of arduous and unrewarded searching, Gautama sat down under a pipal tree to meditate one day. It was there that he awakened to the truth. And it was from there that he went forth to preach the true *dharma* (law).

Buddha’s message was one of the most radical ever conceived by man. It reflected the basic worldview and the fundamental concepts of Gautama’s native India such as *karma* and rebirth, but Buddha replaced Brahman with Nirvana and the doctrine of the soul (*atman*) with “no-soul” (*an-atman*). Without elaborating details, the Buddha’s worldview was that nothing is permanent but all is in flux (*annica*); that people have no personal or individual identity; and that life is inevitably characterized by the kind of suffering (*dukkha*) that accrues to “attachment” to anything else, anybody else, or any contrary notion. The human problem is ignorance. The good news is that this kind of “suffering” can be overcome by treading an eight-fold path that leads to various levels of “enlightenment” (*moksha*) including, eventually, Nirvana. Nirvana is the “other shore” where there is no “suffering” because all “desire” has ceased—not really “extinguished” as one might blow out a candle but more as the flame of the candle ceases to burn because there is no more “fuel.”

As the “Buddha” Gautama took issue with the religiosity of India expressed in much of its worship and social arrangements—and, especially, in the necessity to conform. If he could not accommodate Hinduism it is also true that Hinduism could not accommodate him. His was a different message and mission. Buddhism was destined to develop and grow in other lands and in two primary forms: Hinayana and Mahayana. Though Buddhists may take exception to this usual way of distinguishing these major schools, it is nevertheless descriptive. Hinayana means “small boat or raft” and is the kind of Buddhism where enlightenment and Nirvana (sometimes erroneously thought of as “salvation” and “heaven”) are arrived at by means of individual effort. Mahayana means “large boat or raft” and is the kind of Buddhism where enlightenment and Nirvana are arrived at by means of the mercy and merits of another.

Ultimately, Buddhism purports to provide a path to enlightenment and Nirvana. But whether by self-effort or the mercy of one or another bodhisattva or buddha, that path invariably leads away from Christ who alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Judaism as enemy territory.

“Judaism” as a term dates to Hellenistic times. It is used in only one passage in Scripture. In Galatians 1:14 Paul says that he was so zealous for the “traditions of his

fathers” that he was advancing in Judaism above others of a similar age. The word “Judaism” (Gr., *Ioudaismos*) was comparatively new, but the “traditions” were old and the “faith” was even older than that!

As Christians we owe entirely too much to our Jewish friends to even contemplate the idea that the Jewish faith constitutes “enemy territory.” It smacks entirely too much of anti-semitism and there is not the slightest bit of room for that in biblical Christianity. Far from it. As a follower of Christ, Paul points to his kinsmen and says that they are “Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever” (Rom. 9:4-5).

But that is precisely where we part company. Later in that same chapter (vss. 32-33) Paul quotes Isaiah and says that the Jews “stumbled over the stumbling stone (i.e. Christ). Judaism clung tenaciously to the law and summarily rejected Jesus as either Christ or Lord. Judaism has changed markedly throughout the past two centuries. Today’s Jews can be Reform, Orthodox or Conservative, faithful to Jewish rites and rituals, uncommitted agnostics or outspoken atheists. Yet all will be recognized as Jews. Only those who believe in Christ as their Messiah and Lord are likely to be excluded from the Jewish community.

Why? For many reasons, but chiefly because from time immemorial the vast majority of Jews have been implacably opposed to receiving Christ as their promised Messiah. This opposition is, of course, made crystal clear in the crucifixion of Christ. Soon after that Paul faced it in the form of what he called the “traditions” (Gal. 1:14) by which he probably meant the additions to, and interpretations of the Old Testament law such as those afterwards embodied in the Mishna. After the destruction of Jerusalem opposition reached a certain peak in the teachings and conspiracy of one Rabbi ben Zakkai at his school in Yavne. But it is still evident today in opposition to Jews for Jesus and other missions to Jews, in efforts to reconstruct early Christian history, in coverups of the Yavne conspiracy; and in similar attempts to dispel the claims of Christ from serious consideration on the part of Jewish people (cf. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan 1976 and Philip Moore 1996: esp. 307-91).

Never will I forget the response of an otherwise affable Jewish rabbi from New York as we conversed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem in 1968. When the discussion developed to a consideration of the messiahship of Jesus, he suddenly became irritated and, as he walked away, said, “We Jews will never consider that man!”

Missions to Jews invade enemy territory! Jesus said so when he faced Jewish leaders who laid claim to being Abraham’s children while rejecting Jesus himself. In one of his “hard sayings,” he said, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44). Paul said so when writing to the Romans. He wrote, “As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake” (Rom. 11:28; emphasis mine). That’s bad news! But there is good news too. The unbelief of the Jews resulted

in the gospel being preached to the Gentiles. And the acceptance of the gospel by Gentiles will someday eventuate in the salvation of the Jews (Rom. 11:11-12).

Islam as Enemy Territory

In the sixth century of the Christian Era a young member of the Quryash tribe of Mecca named Ubu'l Kassim joined the caravans that for centuries had traveled from Egypt in the south to Damascus in the north. At 25 he was employed as chief merchant by a rich widow named Khadija and in that capacity became even more familiar with the religions of Palestine. The Judaism and Christianity with which he became acquainted was for the most part aberrant, but Ubu'l Kassim was captivated by a desire to cleanse the shrine in Mecca of its idolatry and superstition. After marrying Khadija his devotion to prayer and meditation culminated in a series of visions and revelations from the angel Gabriel. Encouraged by Khadija, he began writing these messages down on pieces of wood, stone, leather or whatever was available. In time he came to be accepted as the "final prophet" Muhammad (i.e. "the Praised One"). His revelations in the Koran (Arabic, *Qur'an*, i.e. "Reading" or "Recitation") were the final and most authoritative of all previous revelations including the *Injil* or Gospels, the Psalms and the Pentateuch (all said to exist in corrupted form). The religion Muhammad founded was of course, Islam (i.e. "submit" or "submission").

But, in a profound sense, Islam did not begin with Muhammad because Muhammad himself dated it to a line stretching from Adam to Noah to Moses to Abraham. It is at that point that he deliberately made a choice that was destined to rival the decision of the Jews to reject their Messiah in terms of its impact upon world history. Muhammad opted for Abraham's line but through the Egyptian concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael rather than through his wife Sarah and their "son of the promise," Isaac. In doing so he also aligned himself with Isaac's firstborn Esau who sold his birthright to his younger brother Jacob for some red pottage. Jacob's name was changed to "Israel" (i.e. "strength with God"), Esau's name was changed to "Edom" (i.e. "red"). Like Ishmael before him, Esau the hunter gathered up his belongings and journeyed east to the biblical Mt. Seir, part of a mountain range extending 120 miles from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Akabah. The Egyptians called it "The Red Land" and "Edom" is the Hebrew or Canaanitish translation.

In addition to their blood and territorial relationships, Ishmaelites and Edomites became related by marriage when, along with Hittite and Horite wives, Esau married Ishmael's daughter Mahalath. Subsequently both intermarried with Temanites, Kadmonites, Nabatheans, Midianites, Yemenites and others tribal groups in the general area. In accord with God's promises to Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael many of these peoples prospered, largely as a result of the caravan traffic intersecting Egypt, Petra, Palmyra, Damascus and other great cities. Only gradually and over the centuries as the caravan traffic gradually gave way to shipping did this change. Then those hardy Arabic peoples came upon harder times. Finally, many of them were forced to abandon their cities and wander over barren lands while fending for themselves as best they could.

The Bible is replete with references to these peoples, especially to Esau and the Edomites who became more or less representative (perhaps because Esau personally chose to sell his birthright). According to the Old Testament account, Joseph was sold to Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt. Edomites refused passage to the Israelites when they came out of Egypt and often took sides with Israel's enemies during the conquest of Canaan. Obadiah prophesied that the house of Joseph will prevail over the house of Esau. Malachi quoted Yahweh as saying, "I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert" (Mal. 1:2-3).

Immediately upon opening the New Testament we are introduced to a genealogy that traces the lineage of the Christchild to Abraham through Isaac and Jacob (Matt. 1:2). And then to one Herod the Great who was the last independent king to reign in Jerusalem and an Edomite (Gr., Idumean; Matt. 2:1). Herod set out to destroy the baby Jesus, and failing in that, ordered the slaughter of the innocents. It was one of his sons, Herod Antipas; who reigned in Jesus' home area, mocked Jesus and returned him to Pilate during Jesus' trial; and who had appointed the priests who plotted to crucify Christ. The writer of Hebrews warns believers not to be sexually immoral (Gr., *porne*) and unholy (Gr., *bebelos*) like Esau who "sold his birthright for a single meal" and was turned down when he "desired to inherit a blessing" later on (Heb. 12:16-17). Paul quotes Malachi 1:2-3 in Romans 10:13 and, when writing to the Galatians, urges them not to return to the slavery of the law and dependence on the flesh represented by Hagar and her son, but to embrace the freedom proffered by God's grace as symbolized by Sarah and Isaac (Gal. 4:21-31).

Currently, cases are made for concluding that Muhammad was a great and good man; that "Allah" is a totally fitting name for the God of the Bible; that the Koran contains high praise for Jesus; that Shi'ite and Wahhabi fundamentalists are not representative; that the *jihad* actually refers to inter-faith dialogue; that Islam is a religion of peace; and so on. But better cases can be made for concluding that Muhammad was as merciless as he was clever; that the Allah of the Koran is very different from the Triune God of the Bible; that the Jesus of Islam is not the crucified and resurrected Christ of the New Testament; that the Koran invokes the persecution of Jews, Christians and all "unbelievers"; and that, until the *shari'a* is the law of any land, that land is part of the "world of war," not the "world of peace."

None of the foregoing is insignificant. It is impossible to understand Islam without taking into account this biblical background and the bad choices of Abraham, Esau and, of course, Muhammad himself. A key to understanding Islam is that little Greek word *bebelos* in Hebrews 12:16. The primary meaning of *bebelos* is "accessible" or "available to be trodden on." By extension it means unhallowed, profane or irreligious as opposed to *hieros* or sacred (Vine 1982). In the final analysis, Islam is promoted by the sword, prophesies a judgment of works, and promises a heaven of fleshly delights (for men). Far from being "spiritual" in the biblical sense, it is the archetype of what may be termed "secular religion." It enfolds countless millions of upstanding and peace-loving adherents and other millions of nominals and folk religionists. But whatever their status,

the vast majority of Muslims convert to the God of the Bible and his crucified, risen Son only with great difficulty and often at a tremendous price.

The Missionary Quest for Common Ground

Throughout the history of the missionary movement and, in America, especially since the early years of the twentieth century, missiologists and missionaries have concerned themselves with finding the best ways to approach adherents of the foregoing and still other non-Christian faiths. Obviously there must be *some* common ground or communication would be impossible. But where is it? What is its nature? How can we discover it? What are its boundaries? These are not easy questions. But they must have answers.

Numerous proposals have contributed to discussions of common ground. Discovering points of contact, building bridges of understanding, finding redemptive analogies and “eye openers,” establishing identification with respondents, engaging non-Christians in dialogue—all have their advocates. All are characterized by certain assumptions and applications. Most can be understood rhetorically, philosophically, sociologically, anthropologically, and psychologically as well as religiously. Many of them have at least some validity—some more and some less. Our primary interest here has to do with the possibility of establishing common ground on spiritual and religious bases.

Problematic approaches to establishing common ground

1. A “common search.”

At first blush understanding the missionary quest for common ground might seem to be a rather simple matter. It would seem to grow out of the notion that religion itself represents a search for God or truth or salvation as the case might be while particular religions represent various ways of going about that search and varying degrees of success in its achievement. William Ernest. Hocking’s fulfillment approach to common ground is an early example of this. Contemporary examples can be found in the proposals of people like Leonard Swidler, John Hick, Willard Oxtoby and Hasan Askari. If I understand him correctly, Swidler, for example, thinks of humans as evolving a kind of utopia in which freedom of thought and action is somehow guided by mutual love and respect. Religion serves both as the expression of, and the vehicle for, achieving that kind of culture and society. In Swidler’s words,

Human nature is directed at an open-ended, endless, in-finite [sic.] all-embracing, comprehensive knowing and loving and knowing freely acting. That total knowing and loving and knowing freely acting that humans, both individually and communally have created over the centuries is Religion, and the Culture that matches it. (Swidler 1992:115)

Swidler’s rather cryptic lines suggest that he believes that Religion with a capital “R” somehow enlists adherents of all religions old and new, and involves them in this common effort to create a “Global Culture” based on knowledge, love and freedom.

As interpreted by John Hick, the common search takes on something of an “evangelical flavor.” He believes that, though the teachings of religions are different, they are also complementary because they represent a variety of ways in which mankind can achieve salvation. He writes,

These resources [i.e., various religions, ed.] have at their heart, I want to suggest, an awareness that the great purpose of religion is salvation, or liberation, as an actual transformation of human existence; and a recognition that this is taking place (though in conjunction with quite different systems of belief) within other ‘houses of faith’ as well as one’s own. (Hick 1985:5)

From a human perspective Hick’s understanding certainly seems to merit consideration. Did not Augustine say that man is restless until he finds rest in God? Did not Pascal talk about a void in the human heart that can only be filled by God himself? Did not the prophet Jeremiah say, “You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you declares the Lord” (Jer. 19:13-14)? Did not Jesus speak to the Samaritan woman about a thirst that could be quenched only by the “living water” that he gives (John 4:14)? Did not Peter’s hearers on Pentecost seek a way to right the wrong they had done when they inquired, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). And was not Paul’s invitation on Mars Hill based on the intense desire of Athenian philosophers to know about his “new teaching” (Acts 17:19)? Surely lost men and women have been engaged in a quest for God or for something that he alone can give from time immemorial. The missionary quest for common ground should be an easy one. The common ground is the almost universal involvement in another and larger quest whether for God and truth, or hope and salvation.

Perhaps so. But then, perhaps not.

Who was it that did the searching after the Fall? Not Adam and Eve. They were not “seekers”; they were “hidiers.” And that is in line with Paul’s words: “No one seeks for God. All have turned aside” (Rom. 3:11-12)? God is the “Seeker.” Jesus said as much when he said, “The Son of Man is come to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Seeming exceptions to this understanding may, in fact, support it. Jeremiah, after all, was speaking on God’s behalf to a covenant people whom he already called and blessed. And the response of repentant Jews on Pentecost did not represent so much man reaching out for God as it did a loving God reaching out to his erring children.

The Lord Jesus speaks very directly to this issue. Far from endorsing the notion that people are engaged in a common search for God and his gifts of grace is Jesus’ dictum: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 5:44). By nature people seek for substitutes but not for him. Perry is right. The various religions represent ways in which humankind is being led *away* from him, not *toward* him. It is right that missionaries pray that they might be led to people in whose hearts and minds there has been a providential working of God’s Spirit. But it is wrong to assume that the search for God (or for that which he alone can supply) is common. That idea is in stark contrast to biblical teachings which indicates that it is God who searches and God who draws men and women to himself. Ever since Eden people have been running *away* from

God. We have been hiding; he has been seeking. We are the rebellious sinners; he is the loving God.

2. *“Religious similarities.”*

The “similarity approach” to establishing common ground is both very popular and very problematic. Its proponents seek out teachings and practices in the various religions that appear to be the same or similar to presumed counterparts in Christianity hoping to build bridges of understanding thereby. But it is extremely difficult to compare the various religions, and especially so when the Christian faith is involved. For that very reason, comparative religions as a discipline of study has tended to give way to the history of religions. Nevertheless, out of differing motives and with varying degrees of success, comparisons continue to be made..

In an oft-referenced smaller work Eric Sharpe attempts to define and explain some fifty words that have special and correlative meanings in the world’s religions. His objective is to promote understanding of comparative religion in general and the several religions in particular (Sharp 1971:115).

Leonard Swidler takes a quite different tack. He selects seven words (redemption, liberation, enlightenment, nirvana, heaven, communism, salvation) that he believes to be descriptive of the “goal of religion” and proceeds to explain how these words are used and what they mean within the contexts of the various religions (Swidler 1992:12-17). As we have seen, Swidler’s objective is to bring to light commonalities and complementary aspects of religion and religions so as to promote unity and a new society.

In works that have already become evangelical mission classics, Don Richardson emphasizes the importance of discovering “redemptive analogies” and “eye openers” (e.g., the Peace Child idea and ritual among the Sawi) that will enable non-Christian peoples to understand the gospel (cf. Richardson 1981). Richardson’s goal is to make the gospel understandable and facilitate conversion.

It seems fair to say that all three authors are of the opinion that that there are similarities between Christian and the non-Christian faiths that, properly understood and exploited, will facilitate both understanding and the fulfillment of “mission” as they understand mission. But, even though there may be some truth to this, this approach is problematic in any case and especially so if one holds to the absolute uniqueness of the “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Both philosophically and theologically, a communication approach that is over-dependent upon the discovery and utilization of similarities is open to question.

Here again, Hendrik Kraemer is helpful. He points out that the attempt to catalogue similarities “. . . on such subjects as the idea of God and of man, the conception of the soul or of redemption, the expectation of an eternal life or the precedence of the community over the individual, etc., is an impossible thing” (Kraemer 1963:134). In the first place, no religion is an assortment of spiritual commodities that can be “. . . compared as shoes or neckties” (Kraemer 1962:135). On the contrary, every religion is a unity or individual

whole in which each teaching, myth, or ritual must be understood in relationship to all else. In the second place, when exposed to the light of God's revelation in Christ and the Scriptures even those parts of another religion which might appear to be lofty and uplifting prove to be parts of a whole that is under the judgment of God (Kraemer 1963:136).

Kraemer's words are in accord with Perry's understandings of religion and particular religions stipulated earlier in this chapter. Moreover, what he says is quite easily demonstrated by the kind of holistic examination advocated by both authors. Though conceived of as a "high god" in Chinese religion, for example, Shang-ti hardly qualifies as being analogous to the God of the Bible if one takes all of Chinese religion into account. Similarly, the "three bodies of Buddha," the mercy of Amida, and the faith displayed in Mahayana—all such so dimly reflect supposed counterparts in Christianity as to be entirely misleading if taken to be anything approaching mirror images. Even if we were to agree that the Allah of the Koran has been divested of the qualities of the pre-Islamic Moon God of Muhammad's Quryash tribal people and therefore the same or similar to the God of the Bible (quite a stretch in itself), Allah's very nature (and not just Muhammad's misunderstandings of the Trinity) would make the deity of Christ impossible.

Readers will have to judge the validity of redemptive analogies such as Richardson's well-known Peace Child analogy for themselves. That that particular analogy functioned well early on in the communication of the gospel to the Sawi seems to be beyond question. However, the Peace Child of Sawi tribalism is light years removed from the Prince of Peace of biblical revelation. Sooner or later—and the sooner the better—the difference must become as crystal clear to Sawi believers as it is to the missionaries themselves. To the degree that it does not Sawis will inevitably be more syncretistic, less Christian.

Dissimilarities may in fact prove to be more useful than similarities in communicating Christ and the gospel. As often as not, this is the way that new knowledge and understandings are attained. After all, the Christian faith (not as practiced, but as revealed) is absolutely unique. There is no other faith *like* it. No other God; no other Christ; no other Calvary; no other empty tomb; no other redemption; no other salvation; no other heaven; and so on, on and on. That being the case, and especially when the objective is to convert and disciple people, communication will often be enhanced by pointing out differences. People need to know that sin in Scripture and *tsumi* in Shinto, grace in the gospel and *karuna* in Mahayana, Trinity in Christian faith and *Trimurti* in Hinduism, biblical inspiration and both *wahy* and *ilham* in Islam—not one of these pairs is really the same or, *in the final reckoning*, even similar. From the outset pairs such as these may be more clearly communicated by means of comparison and contrast.

Plausible approaches to the search for common ground

1. "Points of contact."

It is customary for missiologists to speak in terms of finding "points of contact" between missionaries and their hearers. Rhetoricians often speak of establishing "identification" with one's audience.

It is not difficult to find examples of this kind of approach in the New Testament. Since the Lord Jesus “came to his own” (i.e. his own people; John 1:12), he did not have many encounters with those of other religions. But we do have the well-known example of his use of a water metaphor when speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well as recorded in the fourth chapter of John.

Examples are more readily found in the ministry of the apostle Paul. Perhaps those most often pointed out are his statement to the effect that he became “all things to all men in order to save some” (1 Cor. 9:22) and his approach to Athenians on Mars Hill. In his speech to the Athenians he drew attention to their religiosity by noting that they had erected an altar with the inscription “To the unknown god” (Acts 17:22-23). He also quoted their own poets (probably Epimenides and Aratus) to the effect that while God is the source of life he is also near at hand (Acts 17:27-28). It would be easy to read too much into these references to Greek religion and philosophy, however. Since the “unknown god” was unknown, Paul did not obligate himself to empty the Greek concept of false notions. And Paul readily moved from the general idea of Greek writers to the specifics of special revelation and Christ’s incarnation. Far more significant was Paul’s declaration that the gods Athenians did worship were idols and that their vaunted philosophy grew out of ignorance (Acts 17:29:30).

While significant, points of contact such as the foregoing do have definite limitations that must be taken into account. Even acts of generosity and kindness designed to overcome animosity and suspicion in making initial contacts can be misinterpreted as the case of the Auca martyrs and numerous similar incidents demonstrate. In the final analysis, Kraemer’s assessment of points of contact is worthy of consideration. He writes,

. . . there is only one point of contact, and if that one point exists, then there are many points of contact. This one point of contact is the disposition and attitude of the missionary . . . Such is the golden rule, or, if one prefers, the iron law in this whole matter. The way to live up to this rule is to have an untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, the institutions—in short, in the whole range of life of the people among whom one works, *for Christ’s sake and for the sake of those people*. (Kraemer 1963:140 emphasis his)

2. “*Interreligious dialogue.*”

Generally speaking, missionaries are most comfortable with monological communication and much less comfortable with dialogical communication. In a chapter on dialogical communication of the gospel, however, John R. W. Stott reminds us that the Lord Jesus “. . . seldom if ever spoke in a declamatory, take-it-or-leave-it style. Instead, whether explicitly or implicitly, he was constantly addressing questions to his hearers’ minds and consciences” (Stott 1975:61).

Whereas among liberals interreligious dialogue is often proposed as a means of discovering common ground with nonChristians, among conservatives it should be regarded more as a means of disseminating the gospel among them. Whereas among liberals interreligious is often proposed as a means of establishing commonality, among

conservatives it should be recognized that it is quite possible that dialogue will end in controversy and even disputation.

Let's explore that a bit. Bypassing Old Testament examples such as Elijah's famous contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs. 18), let us focus briefly on dialogue in the New Testament. In the New Testament the word appears almost exclusively in its verb forms (*dialegomai* and *dialogizomai*). Though the Gospels make it clear that Jesus never hesitated to enter into the give-and-take of two-way conversation as John Stott says, there is no clear indication that Christ employed interreligious dialogue in the sense we are using the word here even though the cognate verb *dialogizomai* ("to converse or discuss with" but with emphasis on the discussion aspect) is used in the case of one confrontation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Luke 5:21-24).

Dialegomai and *dialogizomai* are used much more prominently in the case of the apostle Paul. He engaged in dialogue in the synagogues (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19), in the market place (Acts 17:17), in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), and in the church at Troas (Acts 20:7, 9). In all of these cases it is apparent that Paul's intention was to establish the truth of the gospel, not establish common ground with them. In at least one context—Paul's defense before Felix—dialogue is put in a negative frame of reference. On that occasion Paul made special note of the fact that his Jerusalem accusers did not find him "dialoguing" or *causing riots* in Jerusalem or in its temple and synagogues (Acts 24:12).

We are safe in concluding that interreligious dialogue is questionable as a means of establishing common ground. To the contrary, it aims at communicating the gospel and convincing hearers of gospel truth at the risk of inviting debate and culminating in dissension. Careful inquiry supports the conclusion of Gottlob Schrenk when he writes,

In the New Testament there is no instance of the classical use of *dialegomai* in the philosophical sense. In the sphere of revelation there is no question of reaching the idea through dialectic. What is at issue is the obedient and percipient acceptance of the Word spoken by God, which is not an idea, but the comprehensive declaration of the divine will which sets all life in the light of divine truth. (Schrenk 1964 vol 2:95)

Positive approaches to establishing common ground

In bringing this chapter to a conclusion we will focus on some approaches to establishing common ground that, when properly understood, would seem to be almost entirely positive.

1. "Christian rational presuppositionalism."

Though it is not uncommon for missiologists to think of the differences between Hindu-Buddhistic and Judeo-Christian worldviews and ways of thinking as being so great as to constitute an almost unbridgeable philosophical gulf between them, Carl F. H. Henry begs to differ. He recognizes, for example, that within the "Brahma-all" [i.e. Brahman, ed.] and "Buddha-all" worldview there is only room for incompleteness and ignorance, never for a law of noncontradiction or the biblical notion of sin. This would seem to nullify both

(“Western”) rationalism and (Christian) revelationism as bases for common ground. But Henry says that is not so.

There is, in fact, no perspective, oriental or occidental, that would not be assisted by a good course in logic, or that does not soon sacrifice universal validity if it neglects the law of contradiction. The laws of logic are not a speculative prejudice imposed at a given moment of history as a transient philosophical development. Neither do they involve a Western way of thinking even if Aristotle may have stated them in an orderly way. The laws of valid inference are universal; they are elements of the *imago Dei*. In the Bible, reason has ontological significance. God is himself truth and the source of truth. Biblical Christianity honors the *Logos* of Gpd as the source of all meaning and considers the laws of thought an aspect of the *imago*. (Henry 1990:109-10)

Though I would be among the first to say that the missionary to Hindus and Buddhists must be able to understand and reason from “within” their all-encompassing monistic worldview, nevertheless there is a profound sense in which Henry must be correct. There are, indeed, differing worldviews and ways of thinking. There are even different types of “Western logic”—classical, modern, propositional, symbolic, and so on. But more fundamentally there is but one truth and one logic—both grounded in the person and nature of the Creator God. He is both Truth and the Source of truth. He is also the basis of logical validity and the “law of noncontradiction” because he *cannot* deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). He is also the basis of propositional truth and the “law of correspondence” or agreement with what actually is the case because it is *impossible* for him to lie (Heb. 6:18).

“Christian rational presuppositionalism” is neither racial nor cultural as Henry observes. It is philosophical and theological. Insofar as the missionary is truly Christian, the foundation of anything that he or she might be, think, understand, do or say can and should be the unshakable but humble conviction that the God of the Bible is truly God. Only to the degree that persons of any race or culture come to know him will they be able to think his thoughts after him and only to the degree that think his thoughts after him will they be able to think rightly about God’s creation, man’s religions and their own condition.

2. *Biblical theology.*

The concept of biblical theology developed because of the need to distinguish between Reformation period scholastic and church tradition theologies on the one hand, and theologies developed on the basis of Scripture on the other. However, in the process of time, the meaning of “biblical theology” has tended to take on the complexions of whatever church, school or group might employ the term. In this book the term is almost invariably used to refer to theology that is not only based on the Bible itself but also on the unfolding revelation of the Bible story as it proceeds from Genesis to Revelation. In various contexts we have emphasized the importance of communicating *that larger story* and not just fragments of it or lessons growing out of it. Here I would emphasize the importance of using the approach of that kind of biblical theology as a basis for establishing common ground.

Gregory Beale, whom we have mentioned above, writes as follows:

The New Testament writers typically do not make reference to specific pagan religions, philosophies, and their belief systems. Some of the exceptions to this, as is well-known, are 1 Corinthians 15:53; Titus 1:12; Acts 14:11-18; and, above all, Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17:16-34. (Beales forthcoming: p.75?)

Once again I invite readers to consider Beale's treatment of Paul's Athenian address but with the distinct purpose of noticing the unique way in which Paul's approach qualifies as that of "biblical theology." Notice how Paul excerpted basic teachings from the Old Testament account and utilized them in a way that appears to be grounded in general or natural revelation but upon closer examination is actually grounded in Scripture:

"God who made the world" (vs. 24)—Gen. 1:1, Ex. 20:1.
"He himself gives to mankind life and breath" (vs. 25)—Gen. 2:7, Isa. 42:5.
"He made from one man" (vs. 26)—Gen. 1:28.
"Having determined . . . the boundaries of their dwelling place" (vs. 26)—Deut. 32:8.
"That they should seek God" (vs. 27)—Isa. 55:6.

The point being made by Beale and other scholars whom he cites is that Old Testament teachings and events basic to redemptive history lie behind Paul's statements in his Athenian address {as well as in other New Testament cases having to do with the communication of the gospel to adherents of other religions}. As a means of establishing common ground that is extremely important in and of itself. But an additional needs to be made here. Though for obvious reasons the apostle Paul did not call attention to specific references in the Septuagint on the occasion reported in Acts 17, if and when on a later occasion that kind of referencing would have been possible his initial proclamation would have served as preparation for it. That too is important because biblical theology in the sense we use the term here is essential to discipling the *ethne*.

3. "Missional theology."

Paul Hiebert has suggested that what he calls "missional theology" is especially important when presenting the gospel to those of other religions and cultures. While systematic theology is needful to an understanding of Christian concepts such as God, man, sin, salvation and the like, it is missional theology that enables missionaries to understand the beliefs and practices of non-Christian respondents with regard to these and similar concepts. And, after all, it is what *they* believe and practice that plays such a large part in whether or not they will be converted to Christ and mature in the Christian faith (cf. Hiebert and Tienou 2000).

Heibert speaks of theology here, but as an anthropologist. He is calling upon missionaries to do what Kraemer says is so necessary—namely, to take an "untiring and genuine interest in the religion, the ideas, the sentiments, the institutions" of the people among whom they work. It is that kind of "close-up" indigenous understandings and practices that the missionary must take into consideration if the gospel is to be contextualized effectively. In fact, in knowing not only what respondent think about God, man, sin and salvation but also why they think as they do and behave as they do, they missionary is

sometimes enabled to instruct them as to their own misguided faith even as he or she instructs them concerning biblical faith.

Take, by way of example, the annual *Obon* festival widely celebrated in Japan. It is a time in mid-summer when many Japanese invite the spirits of departed ancestors back into their homes for a brief time of celebration and respite before accompanying them back to their burial places from where they will depart for another year of suffering in the netherworld. What is involved here, of course, are entirely different (Buddhist) notions of the world, the “Divine,” man, evil, judgment, salvation and so on. Japanese celebrants, however, may take little notice of much of this. Indeed, many if not most of them may not even know the underlying story of how Mokuren prevailed upon the Buddha to lift the veil so that he could get a glimpse of his mother in the netherworld. The reluctance of the Buddha to do so is understandable when one realizes that in that momentary parting of the veil Mokuren saw his mother being crucified in one of the ten hells (*obon* means to be crucified upside down). Brought to a level of awareness, the story of *Obon* furnishes a vivid backdrop for relating the meaning of Christ’s cross.

Understood this way, missional theology enables us to stand wherever they may be standing (whoever “they” may be and wherever they may be standing), thus temporarily making *their ground* to be common ground for the dissemination of the gospel.

4. “Missionary self-exposure.”

Finally, we repair yet once more to the wisdom of Henrick Kraemer when he says, “. . . there is only one point of contact, and if that one point exists, then there are many points of contact. This one point of contact is the disposition and attitude of the missionary” (Kraemer 1963:140). Do we sometimes despair in our quest for common ground? Does it sometime seem that *all* attempts are bound to fail if not because of *their* obduracy then because of *our* inability? No. Look again at what Jesus and Paul and all writers of Sacred Writ have to say about humankind in their natural state. Review Paul’s assessment in Romans 1-3 yet one more time. *Clearly, what is common to all of us is our sinful state before a holy God. That is the common ground on which both Christian missionaries and their non-Christian hearers stand. We must not only admit it; we must insist upon it. If there is any one key that unlocks what in some cases at least may seem to be an impenetrable door to common ground, that key might be called “missionary self-exposure.”*

Why so?

First, because part of the attraction of most religion systems is the part played by very human persons who somehow have attained the status of “saints” or “sainthood.” True adherents emulate or even worship them without ever having seen either those men and women, or themselves for that matter, as “sinners” in the biblical sense of the word! Now if the missionary comes as another “saint” how can those adherents be expected to know what a “sinner” is? After all, the truth is that Christ Jesus saves only sinners. So sin and “sinnerhood” can and must be explained. But how much easier to understand if they are permitted actually to *see* one!

Second, because, as was true in of Christ himself, skeptics are constantly on the lookout for the foibles and failings of anyone who lays claim to being “good” or possessing “truth.” Christ’s contemporaries could find no fault in him. But the same is not true of us. Our auditors experience little difficulty in discovering our inability to live up to either their standards or our own, much less God’s. Unless and until we sincerely and humbly confess that we too are subject to temptations and failings, and in need of divine forgiveness, we deny them the privilege of witnessing the operations of divine grace.

Finally, because we have Paul’s own example of “self exposure.” He always made it clear that he preached Christ and not himself; that he himself was weak and unworthy of being Christ’s ambassador; and that he was, in fact, foremost among sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Invariably, the common ground between Paul and his auditors whether in Athens, Berea, Corinth, or Ephesus was this: all alike were sinners and, once saved, all alike were sinners saved by grace.

Sooner or later the whole world must discover that its sickness is sin and the remedy is Christ. We missionaries should be able to identify with that. We are—or, at least were--part of that world.

Conclusion

The search for common ground has engaged many brilliant minds and dedicated hearts over an extended a period of time. That fact alone argues for its careful consideration as well as its validity and value. But, however that search might progress and whatever turns it might yet take, we must always remember that it is the gospel of Christ alone that has the power to both divide and unite. That gospel says that we are all sinners and alienated from the one true God. In the final analysis we need not search for common ground with those of other races and cultures, traditions and religions. We already stand together with them on common ground before a holy God. The question for us is, “How do we proceed from that point so that they might understand the gospel?” The question for them is, “What will they do with that gospel?”

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Epilogue

According to family records, which admittedly may be somewhat biased, Grandfather Hesselgrave was physically impressive and extremely bright. He was not beyond making serious mistakes, however. As a young man he assayed the future possibilities of two developing centers of commerce and communication—Chicago in Illinois and Lodi in Wisconsin—and decided to homestead in the latter area! He was qualified to practice law and actually practiced it but amidst other pursuits he never bothered to take the examination necessary for recognition by the state.

His greatest mistakes, however, were theological and religious. Grandfather was so impressed by the love of God that he found no place for his righteous wrath. When a Universalist Church was established in Lodi in 1875, the names of Grandfather and

Grandmother Hesselgrave were at the top of the membership roster! Grandfather was an active Universalist lay preacher as well. And then there was the problem of that deep and positive impression that he carried away from the First Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893.

After a time the Universalist congregation in Lodi dispersed. Later the church building was sold to a fledgling Evangelical Free Church congregation and, when the Free Church constructed a large and attractive sanctuary on the edge of town, the old church became the museum that it is today. Grandfather's son Albertus Leroy and his wife became born again Christians. And his namesake grandson with his family were called as missionaries to Japan. There they were privileged to preach the gospel, win some away from the Shintoist and Buddhist religions—and some from irreligion!—to Christ, and have a small part in establishing the thriving Evangelical Free Church of Japan.

I believe that Grandfather Hesselgrave was certainly sincere. But I also believe that he was sincerely wrong.

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