

The Freedom of a Christian case study

Loving Your Neighbor in a World of Religious Pluralism

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As a native of India, I grew up among neighbors of different religious traditions (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, etc.) and interacted with them daily. We played together, studied together, ate together and watched Bollywood movies together, but we never prayed together. I knew we belonged to different faith traditions, yet we shared so much together. The common bond we shared together, however, excluded our religious differences. How do I hold on to my own Christian identity and faith convictions, on the one hand, and how do I respectfully acknowledge the beliefs and faith claims of my neighbors of other faiths, is a question that I have wrestled with all through my life. As a Christian, I am privileged to receive God's grace and forgiveness in my life in and through Jesus Christ. But I am also aware that God's love, mercy and forgiveness are granted to *all* people whether they are aware of it or acknowledge it or not. Being born, having loving parents and family, food to eat, and the like, are all God's gift of grace! Observing the faith practices and beliefs of my friends and neighbors of other religious faiths convinced me that they are no less recipients of God's grace and mercy than I.

I would think that most Christians would acknowledge that God's grace and mercy are not a Christian monopoly and extend to *all* people on earth. God's grace is freely given and not something we earn by our efforts or beliefs. A cursory reading of the Bible indicates that God's love is *extensive* and includes *all* people, irrespective of race, culture or beliefs, yet God's love is *intensively* manifested in and through Jesus Christ. God's promises to save and rescue *all* people is abiding, yet God's disclosure of that love in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is equally profound. This is the Christian conviction. How can that be? It should be one or the other. There is a profound tension between the two assertions. We are tempted to resolve that tension, but we cannot. We must live our life in it!

As Western societies gain more exposure to the reality of religious diversity and pluralism in our midst, as we get to know neighbors of other religious faiths living in our neighborhood and places of work, many Christians find themselves challenged by the reality of religious pluralism. Many are left to wonder how to relate one's faith with those of others who differ from us. While some may opt to convert or proselytize others to the Christian faith, following the biblical mandate, others may be diffident out of respect for the faith claims of others. What "love your neighbor as yourself" means in the context of religious plurality is a question worth pondering. Does it mean that others become like us and share our religious convictions or that we acknowledge and respect the religious claims of others as valid beliefs? It seems our reality of religious plurality implicitly or explicitly challenges any claims of religious superiority or exclusivism in society. Such claims are often based on cultural, racial superiority or certain theological convictions, such as, we are the chosen ones and all others are damned to hell!

It is the nature of religious plurality that it challenges *all* faith claims. Religious faiths make claims of superiority based on their scriptural warrants and doctrines or the traditional or inherited beliefs of the community. This is true of all religious traditions, Christianity included, but how one adjudicates these divergent claims in a pluralistic society is a challenge. Of course, we all know that we cannot wish away the reality of pluralism or pretend that we are right and all others are wrong. Some may opt to take the attitude of “tolerance” that grudgingly recognizes this reality. The language of “tolerance,” however, is also a form of condescension, a posture of superiority. It is also a form of apathy, that is, “I don’t care what you believe” but “I let you believe what you want.”

Awareness of religious diversity in our midst may often provoke religious insecurity or identity crisis. It may seem that our faith claims are challenged and our inherited assumptions of religious superiority or privileged status in the eyes of God are questioned. Religious insecurity breeds apathy, fear, contempt or even hatred or hostility toward others. Sometimes, it may lead to religious fanaticism and violence against those who are religiously other.

What then is an appropriate Christian posture in a religious plurality? Following Luther’s dialectic of the freedom of the Christian, as a “lord of all and subject to none and a servant and subject to all,” we are to love, respect and serve all our neighbors of other faiths without hatred and condescension, with the firm conviction that God is gracious to *all* people in spite of our habits of hostility and prejudice against the faith claims of others. We may certainly disagree with the faith claims of our neighbors, but we must be careful not to fall into the trap of self-righteousness. It is the radical nature of God’s grace that we cannot erect any fences around it. It is the freedom of Christians to love, respect and accept others who differ from us, but it also calls us to be faithful witnesses to the love of God in Christ Jesus, without hesitation or judgment about the beliefs of others. God’s grace frees us to love and serve others and not to impose our will upon others.

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