

Introduction

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Today many of us Christians live in intimate relations with persons who belong to other religious communities. Many of these people draw forth our respect. Sadly, some Christians think that they are betraying or watering down their own faith when they feel admiration for other forms of faith. This book argues quite the contrary. Faithfulness to Christ leads us to such admiration. The question for us is how Christians are called to rethink our faith in light of the challenges posed to us by other traditions.

The authors are “progressive” Christians. This is the label that has been adopted by many Christians who, like us, seek both to continue and to modify our “liberal” heritage, which adjusted Christian thinking to the discoveries of the sciences and the growing understanding of history. We are heirs of the “Social Gospel,” a movement that was widespread early in the twentieth century, which understood Jesus’ central proclamation of the “Kingdom of God” to direct his followers today to work for peace and justice. We have internalized the criticisms of this movement by Reinhold Niebuhr and the theologians of liberation to such an extent that we need a new name by which to call ourselves. We have also expanded our understanding of God’s purposes for the world by appropriating the concerns of the ecological movement.¹

The authors of this book have found our own commitment to Christianity deepened by our interfaith involvements. Some Christians who seek a new relation to other religious traditions want to emphasize what all religious traditions have in common and to deemphasize, or even abandon, what is distinctive in the Christian tradition. We reject this approach. We do not

serve humanity best by abandoning the distinctive wisdom and truth that has been entrusted to us. We do not ask such a sacrifice of any other community. We enrich one another through our differences.

As Christians we approach other communities from our Christocentric commitment. It is our effort to be faithful to Jesus that leads us to repent of our sins against other religious communities and to open ourselves to learning from them. In this learning our faith is changed. We believe that through this change we become more faithful.

We are convinced that it is not enough to develop a new stance toward “other religions” in general. They vary greatly, and our relation to each requires separate consideration. We need to understand the teachings and practices of other traditions and also the often ugly history of our relation to them. Only then can we rethink our own teachings and reshape our relations with them. Accordingly, much of the book deals with the past.

If by “religious pluralism” we mean only the recognition that there is a diversity of religious traditions and communities, then Christians have always lived in the context of religious pluralism. There have always been other forms of religious life and community in the world inhabited by Christians. The existence of these others has always been important to the Christian imagination.

Indeed, this experience was most vivid in the first centuries of Christian history. It became an important topic for theologians in the nineteenth century and for Christians, on a wide scale, in the twentieth century. Only in this period did the contemporary meaning of religious pluralism emerge: a multiplicity of religious movements through which people find authentic meaning and valuable truth. It is out of the nineteenth and twentieth century reflection on this topic that our own views have been shaped.

The positive appreciation of others has roots in the early centuries. Christians were appreciatively aware of the religious philosophies of the Greeks. These they did not dismiss or view with contempt. Sometimes they claimed that Greek philosophy was inspired by ancient Hebrew wisdom, but even when they recognized its separate origins, they admired its insight. The New Testament itself is influenced by it, especially by Stoicism. Early Christian thinkers adopted and adapted Platonic and, later, Neoplatonic thinking. What emerged as official Christian theology in both East and West was a synthesis of biblical and Greek philosophical insights.

However, the general attitude to the religious practices of others was negative. Jews and Christians saw the surrounding religious culture as idolatrous and polytheistic. Christians followed Jews in rejecting this culture and insisting that there is only one God, a God who cannot be depicted in a statue.

The most difficult problem was the demand of the Roman Empire for worship of the Emperor. Jews refused so stubbornly that the empire gave them special dispensation, although they were not free from persecution. During the period of Paul's missionary travels, the Jews were expelled from Rome. Christians gained some protection from persecution by claiming to share in the Jewish exemption from worship of the emperor. But persecution of Christians was, from time to time, quite severe.

The remaining issue was how to understand Judaism. This was the most difficult question. For a couple of centuries, Christians understood themselves in sibling rivalry with Jews. Initially, the Christians had no scriptures other than the Jewish ones. The new movement was a Jewish sect, with its distinctive interpretation of these writings.

Sadly, this closeness did not lead to harmonious or even friendly relations in many instances. Sometimes Jewish leaders punished those Jews who joined the new sect. This led to bitterness on the part of Christians. The extremely harsh statements about Jews in the Gospel of John may have been in response to such treatment. All the Gospels shift much of the blame for the crucifixion from the Roman authorities to the Jews. These distortions often poisoned Christian thinking about Jews and continue to do so even today. Increasingly, Christians defined themselves over against Jews, claiming the divine covenant for themselves and accusing the Jews of the terrible crime of killing their messiah.

The medieval period added Islam to this list of "others." The Muslims, like the Jews, were called "infidels" because they did not believe that Jesus was a divine being. There were occasional examples of good relations between Christians and Muslims, but these were more likely to be in contexts where Muslims were in control, especially in southern Spain. The dominant history was one of warfare. Christians fought Muslims for the Holy Land, and Muslims conquered much of Spain and the Balkans. Few kind words were spoken about the military enemy! At the same time, Christians drew heavily on Muslim scholarship for their knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy and science.

During the era of exploration and colonization, Western Christians encountered in Africa and the Western Hemisphere indigenous people with religious practices that the Christians regarded as “heathen.” The response was to enslave and convert them. Centuries passed before Christians began to appreciate the spiritual wisdom in those cultures.

In South and East Asia, on the other hand, they encountered civilizations whose religious and philosophical ideas they could not so easily dismiss. Although these encounters affected the experience of most Christians only marginally, they did raise important theoretical issues for a few. The most important, historically speaking, was the status of Confucianism.

Christian theology was formulated in such an exclusivist way that if Confucianism was understood to be “a religion,” then a convert to Christianity must reject it altogether. However, although Confucianism certainly had a religious tinge, its primary role in China was social, ethical, and political. Chinese society and government was Confucian through and through. Really to reject Confucian practices and teachings would be to separate oneself quite radically from Chinese life and society.

The Jesuits saw that asking the Chinese to abandon Confucianism in accepting Christianity made the acceptance of Christianity extremely difficult. In the seventeenth century the papacy recognized the need of adapting to local cultures in East Asia, and the Jesuits gained great influence in the Chinese court. However, the Dominicans objected strongly to what they saw as heathen practices allowed to Christians, and they persuaded the Pope in the early eighteenth century to forbid Christians to participate in basic Chinese ceremonies. This led the Chinese emperor to withdraw support of Christianity. If the popes had followed the Jesuit lead, the Chinese court might well have become Christian, and many of the people might have followed.

In general, however, the Catholic missions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Protestant missions of the nineteenth century assumed that to become a Christian required abandonment of previous religious commitments. Catholics were more willing than Protestants to include existing practices of converts in the new churches. But the assumption was that salvation was only through Christ. Only in the twentieth century was serious consideration given to the saving power of traditions other than Christianity.

Despite the long-held assumption that universal conversion to Christianity is the one goal in relating to those who are not already Christian, these

brief comments show that Christians have always dealt with diverse “others” in different ways. These differences came strongly into view again in the twentieth century. In that century the study of world religions or the history of religions became a standard part of Western college education. Within theology the “theology of religions” gained increasing attention. This book is a contribution to this new discipline.

With regard to the theological issue of how Christians should understand others, however, there continues to be a tendency to ask the question in quite general ways. How should Christians view “other religions?” Some leading scholars in the field of theology of religions tell us that we should choose our answer from among such options as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism means that we continue the view that however interesting other religious traditions may be, they cannot offer salvation. Only Christians can be saved. Inclusivism is the doctrine that Christ has been savingly at work not only among Christians but in other religious communities as well. In this context “pluralism” usually means that Christianity is one of several paths up the mountain of salvation. These options are often discussed in some abstraction from the detailed study of the other religious traditions.

Fortunately, alongside this abstract discussion of the Christian response to religious diversity there is a large amount of literature dealing with the relation of Christianity and specific other traditions. The most extensive literature has dealt with Judaism. Probably Buddhism comes next. Today Islam has become a topic of special interest. Hans Küng has produced a series of excellent volumes that deal with these relations one by one.

This book is a contribution to the task Küng has pioneered so richly. It makes no pretense of exhaustiveness. We are asking a quite limited question. What can we, as progressive Christians, learn from our study of the history of the relations of Christianity with other traditions and from their unique wisdom? How can we help to reformulate the Christian faith in light of what we learn?

The first chapter opens the discussion by reflecting on our current situation, especially where the authors live, in southern California, where the experience of religious diversity is part of everyday life. The chapter calls for mutual appreciation and openness, and it argues that this is faithful to Christ. It offers biblical interpretations supportive of this view. And it points out that our task is to think through our relations to each of the other religious traditions in their distinctive terms. So many persons were involved in its writing that we have not listed an author.

Although there are many traditions, and each poses different challenges, we believe that carefully chosen examples will suffice to indicate the sorts of changes progressive Christians need to make and to commend to Christians generally. For example, there are indigenous cultures around the world—each of which has its distinctive insights and experience with Christianity. Of these, we deal only with Native Americans. This is not at all to say that we do not have much to learn elsewhere, from the indigenous traditions of Africa, for example, or from Korean shamanism, or from Japanese Shinto. We encourage continuation of studies and encounters with all of these and others. Still we think our example suggests the kinds of challenges that are posed.

We have dealt similarly with the great religious traditions of South and East Asia. We have chosen Buddhism and focused on just one of its many forms. Clearly much additional interaction with these traditions is desirable and enriching. But we think that Buddhism serves to indicate something of the nature of the challenges they pose.

Our treatments of these two traditions are themselves quite different. This is partly a matter of chance due to the perspectives of the authors of the two chapters. But it also expresses our sense of the profound difference in the current relation of Christianity to Buddhism and to Native American traditions. Buddhism is now a strong missionary movement in the United States. There are many dialogues going on between Christians and Buddhists. Dickson Yagi, the author of the chapter on Buddhism, has lived in the midst of this situation. He is a Christian who grew up in a Buddhist family in Hawaii, spent much of his life as a Baptist missionary in Japan, practices Zen meditation, and engages in extensive dialogue with Buddhist thinkers. He shares his experience and reflection in the midst of this internal and external dialogue. The reader is invited into this thoughtful and richly informed conversation.

Ward McAfee has written the chapter on the Native American challenge in close relation to Jack Jackson, a Christian Native American. We thought initially that we needed to retell the story of the genocidal treatment of Native Americans and their culture by our Christian ancestors. But Jackson thought that would serve little purpose. It would challenge us to express shame and regret but little more. Jackson believes that Native Americans understand at a deep level what is lacking in Western Christianity. He wanted us to learn from Native Americans, some of whom are Christian and some of whom

have rejected Christianity. They challenge us to reimagine and rethink the world in ways that we can now, at last, recognize as urgent.

Our chapters on the other Abrahamic traditions seemed to require a very different treatment, focusing on the history of our relations. It is our current awareness of how our teachings have contributed to the horrors of this history that primarily challenges us to change. Further, we did not feel that we could select just one of these siblings to represent them both. The historical relation of Christianity to Islam is profoundly different from its relation to Judaism. This leads to important differences also at the present time.

Eva Fleischner, the author of the chapter on Judaism, has devoted much of her professional life to spreading and deepening an appreciative understanding of Judaism, especially in her Catholic context. Her work has been recognized and affirmed by the Vatican. She was one of three Catholics appointed along with three Jews to study the record of papal actions in relation to Jews during the Nazi period.

The author of the chapter on Islam, Ward McAfee, has been mentioned above in connection with his work with Jack Jackson to make the challenge of the Native American thought come alive in the Christian sensibility. He has recently retired from a career as a historian, especially of the United States, but also of world religions. Currently he works as a United Methodist lay person in relating his congregation to local Muslims and issues involving Islam.

The very different character of the treatments of other traditions serves to emphasize our opposition to the one-size-fits-all approach to a theology of religions. Further, we are saying less about our theological understanding of other traditions and more about how we need to change and rethink ourselves in light of our encounters with them. This topic appears, at least implicitly, in the four chapters that follow the more general one. However, since we consider this to be the primary focus of the book as a whole, it is the single topic of the concluding chapter.

The senior editor of this volume and the writer of the concluding chapter is John B. Cobb Jr., a retired professor of theology from the Claremont School of Theology. He has been active in interreligious dialogue with Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims. Among his previous books, two are particularly relevant to this one. They are *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* and *Beyond Dialogue: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and Christianity*.

These chapters were written by members of the Reflection Committee of Progressive Christians Uniting. They have all been extensively discussed in the Committee and rewritten several times. This has been a rich learning experience for the members of the Committee, who no doubt are those who profit most from the work on these topics. When the Committee is ready, the papers are sent for approval to the Board of Progressive Christians Uniting, a primarily activist organization that works closely with churches. It takes stands on issues and engages in programs that official church bodies have difficulty in treating. When the Board is satisfied, these essays become position papers of the organization. They, and the books that contain them, belong to Progressive Christians Uniting.

Two other volumes of the work of the Reflection Committee have been published. The first, *Progressive Christians Speak*, is a collection of position papers on current issues. The second book, *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians*, is a more integrated volume that undertakes to redefine the relation of progressive Christians to American culture. The present volume locates progressive Christianity in relation to other religious traditions. We hope that it advances this discussion in ways that will prove helpful to many Christians.