

Encounters for Change

Interreligious Cooperation in the Care of Individuals and Communities

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6

Tending to Our Souls

Interreligious Spiritual Care

STEVE IS A HOSPITAL chaplain in oncology. As he makes his afternoon rounds, the charge nurse waves at him and tells him about a patient in room 407 who is on the verge of dying. He is a Chinese man in his seventies. His wife and adult children are in the room. The family is Buddhist.

Steve knocks at the door and peeks into the room. The curtains are drawn and dim light comes from the lamp above the bed. The patient labors to breathe; his wife sits by his side and holds his hand. Steve approaches a man who might be in his late forties and could be the son.

"My name is Steve. I am a chaplain—like a priest or pastor. I work for the hospital and support people of all traditions."

The man nods. Steve continues: "The nurse told me that Mr. Yu is dying." Nodding. "Are you his son?"

"Yes, this is my wife, my younger brother and his wife, my sister, and my mother," he says, motioning in turn to each person in the room.

Most likely the family is not familiar with the role of an interfaith chaplain, so Steve tries to be unobtrusive. He wants to offer help but also to allow the family to feel comfortable to decline his services. Steve shakes everyone's hand:

"I am sorry—this is a very difficult and also very important time. Is there something I can do for you? I can check in with you every once in a while or leave you in privacy—whatever you prefer. I also can try to contact someone from your tradition. Our census tells me that your father is Buddhist?"

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The son nods, his face lights up a little, he motions toward the door. In the hallway he says that the family sometimes has visited a Buddhist temple in the neighboring city. His father would appreciate hearing familiar chanting. Steve writes the name of the temple in his note pad and offers to return with some more information.

He contacts the temple, and finds out that a priest will not be available right away. He will do his best but cannot promise. Steve begins to get nervous at the prospect of having to move into unfamiliar territory on his own. What if the priest won't be there in time? Can he even try to fill in the gap? He heard from a colleague that it is important to many Buddhists that the dying process be as peaceful as possible. The state of the mind at death is considered to have an important influence on the rebirth process. Chanting certain sutras is believed to have a calming effect on the mind of the dying person.¹ Therefore, burning incense and chanting accompany the dying process and continue for hours after the death. Steve looks in the office for incense—with success. Now the next hurdle: according to safety regulations, there is no way Steve can burn incense in the patient's room. He approaches the charge nurse again.

"I would like to open the patio door in the patient room and burn the incense outside on the patio. It might be helpful to the family."

The nurse thinks for a moment:

"Ok, but all our nurses are very busy. You have to make sure to check in with the family regularly."

Steve walks back to the older son in 407.

"The priest from the temple will try his best, but he could not make a promise. I was wondering whether burning incense is something that might be of comfort to you? If you would like that, we could open the patio door and burn the incense right there on the patio. Unfortunately we can't do it inside because of safety regulations."

"Thank you, it is very kind to bring the incense, we would like that."

"I will stay with you for a while. Will that be all right?"

"Yes, we appreciate all your help."

Steve then walks over to the wife and the patient, holding their hands in each of his and asks the son to translate:

"Mr. Yu, my name is Steve, I work for the hospital as a chaplain and will be here with you and your family for a while. Mrs. Yu, I'm here to support you and to help you if you need anything."

The wife nods approvingly. Steve lights the incense where Mrs. Yu can see it from where she sits. After a while, its aroma wafts into the room. Steve gets a chair and quietly sits down. The young Mr. Yu shares a little about his father and mother, about how they have come to the United States, and about what their life has been like.

After about two hours a nurse enters and waves to Steve, saying, "The monk has arrived." Steve thanks him for coming and leads him into the room.

The Buddhist priest greets the family members, talks to them for a little and begins chanting.

Steve is present as Mr. Yu breathes his last breath. The family members are visibly sad, expressing their emotions quietly. Culturally, a display of strong feelings is considered to get in the way of a peaceful transition. The chanting continues and fills the room. The wake and meditation continue for some hours. Steve walks back and forth between the nursing station and the patient room, ensuring that the family has the time it needs to be with the body and yet also that the older son knows they will have to leave in a while. After the family says their final goodbyes, Steve leads the priest out, helps the family fill out some forms, and accompanies them out of the hospital.

Steve walks to his office with a mix of emotions. He feels honored that the family allowed him to be part of this sacred moment. He is exhausted from sitting in the midst of grief without being able to do anything to take the pain away. He feels uncertain about having had to improvise for most of the encounter with the Yu family. He had some rudimentary knowledge of how to respond to the needs of a Buddhist family but he had to learn as he went along to support them in this sad and sacred moment in their lives. The Buddhist priest could respond directly to the family thanks to his role and their shared cultural and religious language. Nonetheless, through his presence and quiet advocacy behind the scenes, Steve had facilitated a holding space for emotions and for the ritual. He created a space to honor the dying person and the dying process. He helped create memories that would support the family's grieving process. Steve also feels grateful and enriched for having been a part of this transitional moment. As a protestant chaplain he could experience the power of a ritual in a different tradition, was part of the ritual, and still feels wrapped in the unfamiliar smells and sounds.

1. Truittner, "Death and Dying in Buddhism," 130.

This encounter with chaplain Steve and the Yu family demonstrates the close connection of intercultural and interreligious care, and it offers insights into the challenges and opportunities of interfaith spiritual care. Steve meets a family of a culture and religious tradition different from his own. Within a short time of his arrival, questions begin rushing through his mind: How can he connect in brief moments? The family's Eastern culture is not only foreign to Steve but also to the hospital culture of Western medicine. How can he advocate for the support of the family's practices? How does the experience and care relationship affect Steve?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions. We will define interreligious spiritual care and explore aspects of interdenominational and intercultural spiritual care. Prayer between a caregiver and careseeker of different faiths exposes the tensions and possibilities of interreligious spiritual care as if with a magnifying glass. Therefore, we will develop a model of interreligious spiritual care and counseling via an analysis of interreligious prayer. But first we will clarify what we mean by interreligious spiritual care as we explore the use of the term, distinguishing it from interdenominational and intercultural spiritual care.

A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

In many public health care settings the word "pastoral" is replaced with "spiritual." What used to be "Pastoral Care Departments" or "Pastoral Care Consults" are now "Spiritual Care Departments" and "Spiritual Care Consults." The term "pastoral" has roots in the biblical image of the shepherd and describes the concern of the religious community for the person in crisis.² Just as "pastoral care" has connotations with the Christian tradition, "spiritual care" describes more appropriately the helping relationship between persons of different faiths.³ This change of terminology reflects a growing demand for spiritual care from an interfaith stance because of an increasingly culturally diverse population of patients, families, and staff.

When a chaplain enters a patient's room to introduce herself for the first time, many patients and families most likely will assume that she is a Christian clergy. However, the percentage of chaplains from non-Christian traditions is growing. For example, the website of the Islamic Society of North America hosts a section on Muslim chaplaincy,

2. Mills, "Pastoral Care," 836.

3. Friedman, *Jewish Pastoral Care*, xvi.

the professional guild for Jewish chaplains is the National Association of Jewish Chaplains, and the number of Buddhist chaplains is increasing as well.⁴ The understanding of the profession "chaplain" is undergoing a change and is inclusive of religious workers from diverse traditions.

The word "spiritual" also pops up more often in case discussions, research, and teaching in the world of medicine. Health-care workers, from mental health professionals to physicians and nurses, give more attention to the spirituality of patients and families. In this context the word "spiritual" is not so much juxtaposed to "pastoral" but is used to complement the dimensions of body and mind as a way of considering the human person more holistically. Medical research has established that spiritual beliefs and practices help people cope with illness and suffering as well as affect positive health outcomes.⁵ The Joint Commission for the accreditation of health-care organizations requires that hospitals address and provide for the spiritual needs of patients.⁶ While chaplains have long been recognized as primary spiritual care providers, today more and more medical students are being taught to take a brief "spiritual history" in order to assess the importance of spirituality in patients' ways of coping with an illness.⁷

Spirituality is difficult to define and is associated with the dimension of the soul, of values, meaning-making, beliefs, community, and religious connections. Pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey points to the root of the term "spirituality" in spirit or breath as the "enlivening force of a person." Thus, rather than delineating only the nonphysical, inner dimension, spirituality involves a person's relationship to self, others, the world, and transcendence. It is the integrating center for a person and for a community.⁸

To sum up, the use of the term "spirituality" in health-care setting reflects two trends: (1) Spirituality is taken increasingly seriously in the world of health care. (2) The assessment of spiritual needs and the provision of spiritual care includes persons from diverse cultural backgrounds. Those who seek spiritual support and those who provide spiritual care

4. Islamic Society of North America; National Association of Jewish Chaplains.

5. Mueller et al., "Religious Involvement," 1232.

6. Joint Commission, Standard RI.2.10 (14).

7. Maugans, "The Spiritual History," 11–16; Puchalski and Romer, "Taking a Spiritual History," 129–37; Puchalski and Ferrell, *Making Healthcare Whole*, 74ff.

8. Lartey, *In Living Color*, 141.

increasingly come from diverse religious traditions. Spiritual care happens in a web of interreligious relationships.

In response to the growing diversity in our society, professionals in health care and counseling are attending far more to cultural competency. Many hospitals have departments of culture and diversity that provide translation and interpretation of different languages as well as assistance in understanding the needs of patients and clients from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Literature addressing counseling in multicultural contexts has grown for health-care professionals, psychologists, social workers, and pastoral counselors. For chaplains, interdenominational spiritual care has been a long-standing practice. While the reflection on interreligious spiritual care is in a beginning stage, chaplains and counselors can already find numerous helpful concepts for intercultural spiritual care. *Interdenominational*, *intercultural*, and *interreligious spiritual care* are closely connected, yet each has a distinct focus. We examine them more carefully in the following paragraphs.

INTERDENOMINATIONAL SPIRITUAL CARE

Even within one's own faith tradition chaplains of Christian denominations have to negotiate theological beliefs and the needs of the spiritual care situation. The diverse spiritual practices they encounter in patients and families may stretch their comfort zones. For example, the Baptist tradition values the conscious decision of a person for baptism, called believer's baptism. In their careers, Baptist chaplains quite often encounter situations where they are called to officiate an emergency baptism for an infant who is about to undergo a serious surgery. Or a chaplain may be faced with the request of Roman Catholic parents to baptize their baby who died in the womb. A conversation and spiritual assessment quickly establish that a blessing would just not have the same meaning for the family that the baptism has. For the chaplain, such a baptism may make no sense theologically. Yet, many chaplains facilitate the ritual because it has the power to comfort and support the parents' grieving process. A core objective in crisis intervention is stabilization by assisting persons in crisis to tap into their resources and to empower them to use practices that make sense within their belief systems. When choosing the appropriate spiritual care intervention, theological considerations are important but must be balanced by the needs of the patient or family whom it seeks to support.

Crisis situations call for decisions and interventions on the spur of the moment. They do not leave time for much theological reflection. Therefore chaplains are well advised to engage in ongoing theological reflection about their beliefs and what guides them as they work with persons with different value systems. In chapter 8 I delineate theological values rooted in my faith tradition that impel me to reach out to persons in crisis, regardless of their faith tradition, and that guide me in providing unconditional spiritual support. Most chaplains expect that the context of spiritual care in public institutions requires them to be flexible. Compared to congregational clergy, chaplains work with persons of very diverse backgrounds in manifold life situations and support the practices of those they serve who are in vulnerable positions. It is part of the chaplain's role to embrace a diversity of theological convictions and to respect and empower the spiritual beliefs that—in careful assessment—seem beneficial to the patient and family.

The professional code of ethics for professional chaplains expresses respect for religious diversity by asking chaplains to "affirm the religious and spiritual freedom of all persons and to refrain from imposing doctrinal positions or spiritual practices on persons whom they encounter in their professional roles as chaplain."⁹ Going a step further, in order to effectively support patients, chaplains need not only to abstain from imposing their values and practices but should strive to actively engage those of the patients. When I encounter spiritual practices that are foreign to me, I try to enter what is meaningful to the patient so I can be fully present and assist the patient to draw support from what helps him or her to cope. I may be stretched beyond my comfort zone because I not only tolerate but advocate for a practice that is foreign to me but meaningful for the patient and family.¹⁰ Setting aside personal theological views and responding in advocacy for the spiritual values of the care-seeker is integral to the role of the chaplain.

INTERCULTURAL SPIRITUAL CARE

Openness and advocacy for the values of the careseeker are integral not only to *interdenominational* but also to *intercultural* spiritual care. The term "intercultural" spiritual care and counseling increasingly replaces "cross-cultural" or "multicultural" pastoral counseling since these terms

9. Association of Professional Chaplains, "Code of Ethics"; see also Standard 101.4 in Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, "Standard 100 Code."

10. See also Buckert, "Stepping into the Borderlands," 48.

seem to suggest a rather static understanding of culture.¹¹ *Intercultural* spiritual care is congruent with the understanding of culture that has been put forth in the first chapter.¹² In chapter 1 the notion of culture as “human software” has been suggested as a helpful metaphor because it expresses that beliefs and behaviors are learned and shared. The idea of “software” implies that culture is not necessarily bound by space or time but is open to change, is dynamic and fluid.¹³ The term “intercultural” also expresses that the interaction between the spiritual caregiver and careseeker is a mutual exchange. Three attitudes help chaplains and counselors develop cultural competency and engage in the caring relationship with those who come from different social, cultural, and religious contexts: self-awareness, respect for difference, and empowerment.

Self-Awareness

When I am providing spiritual care to a person of a different culture, my effectiveness is directly related to my awareness of my personal feelings and assumptions.

Chaplain Steve knows viscerally that he encounters difference in the Yu family by his rising anxiety level when he phones the Chinese temple and finds out there is a chance that the Buddhist priest might not be able to come. He collects the rudimentary knowledge about possible needs of Buddhist patients that he has attained in informal conversation with his colleague. He feels fearful that he might make mistakes when interacting with the Yu family. It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of otherness in a patient or family who need our assistance: After all, cultural differences include not only language but how we think, feel, behave, organize our family and social relationships, and approach transitions in life, as well as what gives meaning to us and how we see the Transcendent. In chapter 2 we learned that social psychologists use the term *intercultural anxiety* to capture these fearful feelings related to unfamiliarity with another culture.

Such intercultural anxiety can be managed in different ways. One way is to avoid it. As it is complicated to work with an interpreter or to understand different traditions, health-care workers may—consciously

and unconsciously—avoid contact, pass by a particular patient’s room, or interact as little as possible. A Christian chaplain may look through the census in the morning and—somehow—the Muslim or Jewish Orthodox family ends up at the bottom of his priority list. One can avoid contact with those who are different or one can avoid feelings of fear and incompetence by pretending there is no difference. Steve could have chosen to behave as if he were talking to a Caucasian family, offer his help in a general way, and move on. He would have missed the needs of the Yu family.

In contrast, Steve uses his anxiety in constructive ways. He asks the family what might be helpful to them. He has some ideas of what might be supportive and explores his ideas with the oldest son of the Yu family. Approaching a person with respectful curiosity entails acknowledging our differences as well as our fears of difference. It requires from spiritual counselors the openness to explore their fears and use them constructively by inviting input from the careseeker.

Awareness of one’s feeling toward a culturally different counselee is the foundation for an open and respectful encounter, as is attentiveness to one’s own assumptions and bias.

Respect for Difference

Self-awareness about personal values is an important component of cultural competency because chaplains may encounter spiritual beliefs and practices that are not only different but in conflict with their own. For example, immigrants may draw upon the support of indigenous healers, such as curanderos among Mexican Americans, and shamans among some Asian cultures, along with or instead of Western medicine and clergy. The belief in good and bad spirits that intervene in persons’ lives, and notions of demon possession may be meaningful for persons from different cultures, but may rub against the values of health-care professionals and spiritual caregivers from Western cultures. In order not to impose one’s own values on patients from a different culture, chaplains need to be aware of their reactions to other cultural beliefs and practices and remain open to educating themselves about different cultures. In intercultural spiritual care chaplains not only move into the terrain of diverse beliefs, they also may be challenged to learn new spiritual practices in order to support patients. In a hospital with a large Latino/a Catholic population, for example, Caucasian Protestant chaplains cannot rely on

11. For example, see Augsburg, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures* and *Conflict Mediation across Cultures*; van Beek, *Cross-Cultural Counseling: Law, The Wolf Shall Dwell*.
12. Lartey, *In Living Color*, 31ff.
13. Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture*, 78, 46.

Empowerment

Power dynamics are present in every helping relationship. They are more pronounced—if not always obvious—in intercultural relationships. As pastoral theologian James Poling points out, when professional counselors are identified with the dominating power they easily underestimate the level of injustice that influences the life of their clients.¹⁶ Caucasian health-care professionals may not be aware of how persons from racial and ethnic minorities feel when they seek assistance or medical treatment from those who represent the majority culture. Most North American health-care settings function on the basis of Western values. *Cultural normativity* often is unconscious, denies minorities their cultural identity, and silences their spiritual identity.¹⁷

One strategy of addressing power imbalance is the counselors' awareness of inherent power dynamics in caring relationships. This does not mean that counselors have to deny their own values. Differences are best approached with transparency, exploring together different beliefs so they can be respected without one being taken over by the other. Spiritual counselors can bring to the surface cultural differences at play in the pastoral relationship. They can share their perceptions and interventions and invite counselees to reflect on the pastoral relationship together.¹⁸

Actions of *empowerment* address cultural normativity and the inherent power imbalance in many intercultural helping relationships. Throughout the history of pastoral care and counseling five classical functions of spiritual care and counseling have developed: healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and nurturing.¹⁹ For intercultural spiritual care the Ghanaian pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey adds two additional functions: liberating and empowering.²⁰ *Liberating* involves consciousness-raising about structures that keep persons from living to their full potential. Liberating in the form of consciousness-raising can help them to uncover the predominant assumptions about health and illness and make a more conscious choice of who they are and what they are able to do.

16. Poling, "Wahrnehmung kultureller Differenz," 74.

17. Ibid.

18. Riedel-Pfäfflin and Strecker, *Flügel Trotz Allen*, 33.

19. William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jackle, leaning on S. Hilner, outlined the first four functions. Howard Clinchbell adds the fifth function, nurturing. See Clinchbell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care*, 42f., 432.

20. Lartey, *In Living Color*, 67f.

interventions that are meaningful within their own framework. They have to familiarize themselves with devotion to the Lady of Guadalupe, an indigenous symbol of Mary, and integrate images, such as holy cards and statues of saints, into their spiritual care. Chaplains from Western mainline Protestant traditions are most familiar with counseling interventions that are verbal and focus on the mind. In order to work effectively with a Latino/a Catholic patient population they need to integrate nonverbal actions and gestures, such as ritualized forms of prayer and blessing with holy water, touching the patient on head, hands, and feet. Respect for different cultural and spiritual practices involves an awareness of the caregiver's willingness to move into new territory.

German CPE supervisor Helmut Weiß summarizes this attitude of respectful curiosity as follows: "This person is different from me and I don't know anything about her or him."¹⁴ A number of pastoral theologians go back to a simple and memorable formula that can help health-care workers and counselors to approach difference with curiosity and respect.¹⁵ Every person in certain respects is (1) like all others, (2) like some others, (3) like no other. There are some experiences that we share with other human beings no matter what our background is. We may approach birth, suffering, and death differently, but to a certain degree these experiences are universal. There are some experiences that we have in common with those who also share our cultural, social, political context. Finally, each person is a unique individual and we cannot assume that just because someone comes from a particular culture they hold beliefs or practice customs that are typical for that culture. Especially for persons whose culture represents a minority, it is important that differences are not minimized but acknowledged. We learned in chapter 4 that social psychologists use the term mutual differentiation to point out that respectful encounters between people of different social groups include an awareness of what they have in common *and* where they are different. Persons live on a continuum of universality and particularity. Besides the stances of respect and self-awareness, spiritual caregivers honor their patients from minority cultures with interventions that seek to empower them.

14. Weiß, "Die Entdeckung interkultureller Seelsorge," 17–31; Weiß, "Seelsorgeausbildung," 266.

15. It has been developed by Kluckhohn and Murray, *Personality in Nature*, and is referred to by Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures*, 49–67, and Lartey, *In Living Color*, 171–75.

Empowering involves assisting persons to move beyond enforced and internalized helplessness and help them discover resources in themselves, use community support, and become advocates for themselves and others.²¹ Counselors who take the stance of empowerment shift their perspectives in relationship to counselees from persons who have deficits to persons with challenges and the resources to cope with those challenges.²²

The members of the Yu family faced challenges because they were in a state of crisis and grief. Mrs. Yu spoke little English. The hospital team was unfamiliar with Buddhist end-of-life practices and the family likewise was unfamiliar with hospital protocols and with death itself. The hospital's usual practice is to move a body to the morgue after two or at most three hours after death. Chaplain Steve made the needs of the family known to the health-care team, thereby giving them a voice. Once their needs were known, the nurses were open to attend to them as much as possible.

Cultural competency for spiritual caregivers and counselors involves listening to culturally different voices and advocating for them. At times it entails assisting minorities whose values are silenced to listen to their own voices.

So far we have explored attitudes in spiritual caregivers and counselors that assist interdenominational and intercultural pastoral relationships: flexibility, respectful curiosity, self-awareness, and empowerment of careseekers to validate their cultural values. These stances are fundamental to interreligious spiritual care as well. In addition, spiritual support of persons from other religious traditions has unique characteristics, which we will now explore.

CONNECTING: A FUNCTION OF INTERRELIGIOUS SPIRITUAL CARE

Just as Lartey adds *liberating* and *empowering* to the classical pastoral care functions in the context of intercultural spiritual care, I propose an eighth function for interreligious care: *connecting*.

Spiritual care involves linking persons in crisis to their spiritual resources, helping them to tap into what will help them cope. Chaplain Steve obtained incense for the Yu family to enable a familiar ritual, and

21. Ibid.

22. Empowerment as a resource orientation in work with counselees has been outlined by feminist orientation in spiritual care and counseling. Riedel-Pfiffilin and Strecker, *Flügel Trotz Allen*, 34.

he called a Buddhist priest. An interfaith chaplain's spiritual support can go a long way, but at times her or his role may be that of a *resource agent* who connects patients with faith specific resources. A religious leader or member from a patient's faith community can often more effectively help the patient to tap into spiritual resources for coping with a crisis through specific rituals, or through chanting or reciting sacred scriptures in the original language. Interreligious spiritual care does not mean that an interfaith chaplain has to be "everything to everybody" but that the chaplain should know when to make the appropriate referral.

Interfaith spiritual care includes the function of connecting persons to their spiritual resource and community. In order to adequately fulfill this function, spiritual caregivers and counselors do well to invest time and energy to develop connections with religious resources within the local community. Such relationships need to be nurtured and supported. Many chaplains have active relationships with diverse Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, Buddhist, Hindu, and Native American communities and religious leaders. They meet representatives of these communities personally and call upon them when patients need support. Thus, effective interfaith chaplains and counselors are resource agents and know how to connect persons in crisis to their faith communities.

Still, the reality is that, in many spiritual care emergencies during the night and on weekends, faith specific community resources may not be available. As the example of chaplain Steve demonstrates, there are many things a chaplain can and needs to provide. A Christian chaplain might feel tempted to call the local mosque right away before making a thorough assessment and fully exhausting all the possibilities she may have in working with a Muslim family. Perhaps this is so because calling the local imam is more convenient than getting involved with another tradition. Or perhaps it is because the situation leaves the chaplain feeling ill prepared, overwhelmed, or fearful of the difference the other belief represents. Connecting persons of other religious traditions to their resources has its important place but cannot replace the involvement of the chaplain.

In sum, the following are spiritual care functions in the context of interdenominational, intercultural, and interreligious spiritual care:²³

23. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care*, 42; Lartey, *In Living Color*, 67f.

INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER: A PRIME EXAMPLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS SPIRITUAL CARE

Spiritual support of persons from diverse religious traditions includes reflective listening, spiritual counseling, as well as facilitating rituals from the spiritual practice of careseekers. Besides listening and exploration, blessings and prayer are perhaps the most common spiritual resources and rituals chaplains use in providing spiritual care. They may be offered at the bedside as well as in public contexts such as interfaith worship services. The observance of diverse religious holidays in hospitals and prisons provides opportunities for communal prayer, for example the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah or the celebration of Eid al Fitr, the end of Ramadan. Interfaith services took place in local communities and numerous hospital chapels and meditation rooms during national crises, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina. World Aids Day, memorial services for patients who have died, and transitions in the institutional life, such as the opening of a new wing or building—all are opportunities and contexts for interfaith services. The liturgies and rituals in such services need to be sensitive to the many religious traditions represented in public institutions.

How can chaplains understand such services and relationships with persons of other faiths in these settings? Several scenarios of interreligious prayer can be distinguished:²⁴ (1) *Multi-faith prayers* are often used during interreligious gatherings. This respects and maintains the various religious traditions of participants. (2) *Interreligious prayer services* are designed with a shared representation of resources from different traditions.²⁵ For example, they may consist of an opening prayer from the Christian tradition, a song from the Jewish tradition, a reflection by a Buddhist, and a reading from the Qur'ān. *Interreligious prayers* between a pastoral caregiver and careseeker from different religious traditions are shared as part of a counseling session or at the bedside in a health-care setting. Familiar words from specific prayers can powerfully connect to someone's soul and offer comfort. For example, a non-Jewish chaplain may pray with a Jewish

24. These scenarios are partly inspired by and lean on five types of interreligious prayer as distinguished by Arminjah, *Not without My Neighbor*, 32–34. I have complemented and modified the types described by Arminjah for the context of pastoral care.

25. For resources see Heckman and Picker Neiss, *Interactive Faith*. For reflections on working with persons of different religious traditions in the hospital context, see Kirkwood, *A Hospital Handbook*.

1. Healing—supporting persons to move past the suffering they experience
2. Sustaining—helping persons to endure and cope with illness and suffering
3. Guiding—assisting persons in sorting through difficult decisions they may have to make and opening up alternative choices
4. Reconciling—restoring fragmented and hurt relationships with self, others, and the Transcendent
5. Nurturing—assisting persons to develop their potential and facilitating their growth
6. Liberating—consciousness-raising of dominant values and how they may be internalized and prevent persons from living to their fullest potential
7. Empowering—assisting persons in moving beyond a sense of internalized helplessness.
8. Connecting—linking persons to their particular spiritual resources, to their spiritual practices and communities.

Setting aside personal theological views while advocating for spiritual practices of careseekers is a common denominator in interdenominational, intercultural, and interreligious spiritual care. To many chaplains, offering spiritual support to a person of a different faith tradition seems to be more convoluted than providing care to persons of different denominations within the same faith tradition. A spiritual encounter with someone of a different faith can bring about fears and questions of identity. Speaking in the terminology of social psychology, beliefs and practices of another can represent a *symbolic threat*. This may be the case both in the careseeker and caregiver. Many spiritual practices such as prayer and ritual come from the core of one's belief system. Can a chaplain of a different faith enter such practices with authenticity? Interreligious ritual and prayer present more of a challenge to many chaplains than spiritual support through reflective listening, for example. Thus, like a prism, prayer focuses the issues, concerns, and opportunities that are raised when it comes to interreligious spiritual care. In the following paragraphs we will examine interreligious prayer closely. We will untangle what might be behind the hesitancy to encounter careseekers of other faiths as well as discover the potential in such encounters.

patient the Mišheberach, a prayer for healing. The prayer can comfort in a more meaningful way when recited in Hebrew.²⁶

(3) *Generic prayers* use a language that is not unique to any faith tradition and is intended to be inclusive and available to all. They may be used in public worship as well as in the hospital room. The caring presence of a chaplain before surgery who facilitates an inclusive prayer before the procedure can be a powerful source of support at a time of heightened anxiety. Whether a generic prayer or a faith specific prayer is used depends on the situation and persons involved.²⁷

Concerns about Interreligious Prayer

Religious language and symbols are expressions of culture. Religious communities celebrate worship and liturgy in a space set apart from the everyday world where they encounter a plurality of beliefs. Cultural customs as well as particular religious rites can be powerful sources of social identity. Persons from other traditions often have difficulty understanding them and experience them as foreign. Most Christians would not know how to act when entering a Sikh temple or attending the funeral of the mother of our Buddhist co-worker. Sometimes the fear of making a mistake may keep us from reaching out. Religions can separate as well as connect. The isolation of different communities in the religious realm can consolidate ignorance and stereotype. Besides a lack of knowledge, theological concerns about syncretism are sometimes roadblocks to interreligious prayer. For example, some Christian clergy express reservations about praying with Muslims. They feel they cannot pray to Allah, because they understand this as a prayer to a different God rather than simply a prayer to "God," which is the English translation of the Arabic word Allah. They are concerned that they might gloss over theological differences and might lose their integrity by praying in a different prayer language. The Christian understanding of God is trinitarian, while Muslims understand Jesus not as divine but as a human prophet equal to Abraham, Moses, and Mohammed.

Chaplains need to respect the integrity of their faith in order to be authentically present in a caring relationship. However, a one-sided emphasis on integrity and boundaries of each faith tradition excludes

26. Weintraub, "Mi Sheberakh."

27. The following resources provide prayers from different religious traditions as well as generic prayers: Christian Education Movement, *Praying Their Faith*; Levy, *Talking to God*; Roberts and Amidon, *Life Prayers*.

the possibility of shared expression of faith and spirituality. Based on the diversity of prayer language and images of God in the Bible, especially in the Book of Psalms, it can be argued that prayer is not a doctrinal description of the belief of a community but an opening to God's mystery from very different perspectives. When Christian and Muslim theologians meet in dialogue and consultation about their traditions, precise theological definitions and doctrinal clarity are important. The concerns in a pastoral care situation, however, when a family is grieving the death of a loved one are comfort, support, and guidance, some of the functions of spiritual care outlined in the preceding text.

In the context of the hospital, the patients' preferences need to be respected. A patient or counselee may be hesitant to engage in a prayer with a chaplain or counselor from a different faith tradition. But if a patient finds support in shared prayer, does the idea of the theological impossibility of interreligious prayer hold up?

Not only Christian chaplains voice concerns about the possibility of interfaith prayer. A CPE supervisor told me about his Buddhist student who felt that she could not authentically pray with patients because her practice was not based on a belief in God. Buddhist chaplain Mike Monnett, however, describes his practice of spiritual support, which may include reading from the Bible and prayer in support of a patient. He understands such an intervention as an expression of Buddhaharma, Buddha's teachings, originating from his identity as a Buddhist interfaith chaplain.²⁸

Opportunities of Interreligious Prayer

Many chaplains can share stories of amazing openness and connection with patients and families of other faiths. Once I visited with a retired Jewish rabbi who was hospitalized. As our conversation came to an end, I offered a generic blessing for his recovery. In response the rabbi offered to bless me. He placed a paper napkin from his nightstand on my head – perhaps to function as a kippah, an expression of humility before the Divine. If he was Orthodox, perhaps the napkin made it possible for him to touch me. After he placed the napkin on my head he laid his hand on me and blessed me. I was deeply touched and honored to receive his blessing. That the rabbi did not share my belief in a triune God never crossed my mind. The connection to this rabbi as well as his gift was an authentic religious experience and a sacred moment for me. His laying on of hands as well as the use of the paper napkin left a deep

28. Monnett, "Developing a Buddhist Approach," 57–62.

impression with me. The rabbi created a sacred space in the hospital room and ritualized the blessing with his gestures, which enriched and deepened my understanding of blessing and has encouraged me to use more expressive gestures in my spiritual care.

Pastoral care offers care for the soul. A young patient's mother stops by our spiritual care office to express appreciation for the chaplain who supported her. She mentions that she is not religious. As she found herself trying to understand the complicated medical condition and treatments of her boy and spent much time calling her insurance company, the chaplain stopped by and asked her how she was doing. She says: "The fact that someone showed up and cared about my soul and spoke to me as a person was so helpful to me. The simple prayer was calming in this extremely stressful time." To her, the chaplain represented a humanizing aspect in a high-tech, bureaucratic health-care machine. Although prayer is not part of her personal practice, she appreciated it.

For others, chaplains represent the religious community or the Divine in a critical time in their life. Some prefer a representative from their religion; for many others, interfaith chaplains fulfill that function just fine and are appreciated.

Prayer focuses the potential of interreligious interaction as well as the question of how spiritual counselors can theologically understand their spiritual care relationship with persons of other faiths. To this end, I now introduce a model that conceptualizes interreligious spiritual care along a continuum of three concentric circles. This model considers the particular and the universal, boundaries as well as possibilities of interreligious care.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF INTERRELIGIOUS SPIRITUAL CARE²⁹

The outer of the three circles is the realm of *common human experience*. The interfaith movement is based on the fact that we are brought together by global problems that concern of all us: environmental problems, poverty, and human rights. In spiritual care with individuals and families these human conditions are birth, death, suffering, illness, and injury. While different cultures and religions have different rituals and

29. Aratairajah, *Not without My Neighbor*, 49–53. The Sri Lankan ecumenical theologian Wesley Ariyaratne has conceptualized interfaith worship, which represents a public form of interreligious prayer. When reflecting on the possibility of interfaith worship, he envisions three concentric circles, which inspires the notion of the three concentric circles in the context of interreligious spiritual care.

conceptualizations to approach these issues, we connect to others in these universal experiences. We use our shared common humanity as a connecting point.

The second circle is characterized by *interconnected spiritual practice*. Throughout history religions have been interconnected and influenced each other.³⁰ For example, beads as means of meditation, concentration, and prayer are common in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Roman Catholic Christianity. They are being rediscovered by contemporary Protestant Christians as well. Although they are used differently in the different traditions, the similarity of the symbols indicates some interconnections.

The most inner circle of *particular spiritual practice* represents the core identity of a religious community. Interfaith spiritual care finds its boundaries and limits in this circle. Spiritual care in this circle most often includes the employment of particular spiritual resources, such as working with specific rituals and representatives of the religious communities involved. The inner circle speaks to our experience of particularity.

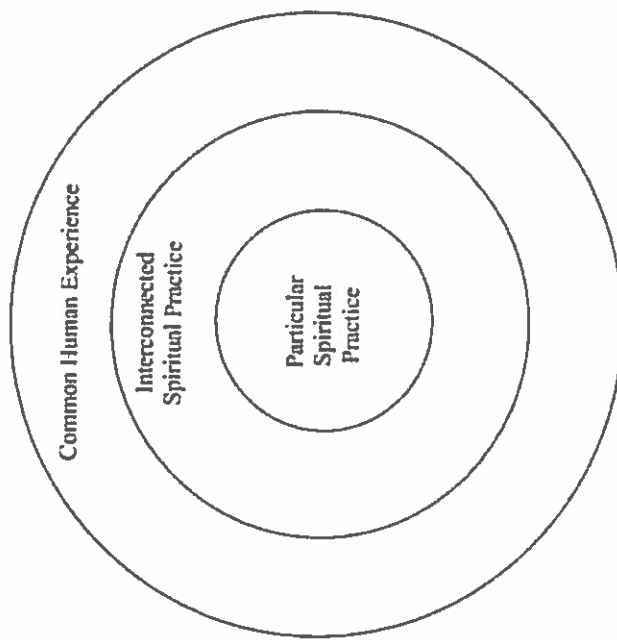


Figure 6.1.
Three Concentric Circles of Spiritual Care

30. Smith, *Toward a World Theology*, 38, 48. See also the concept of hybridization as described in chapter 1.

The three circles are distinct and represent different ways of engaging spiritual practice. Even so, they do not represent separate worlds but are distinguished through boundaries that are somewhat permeable, sharing one center. Interconnections between members of different religious traditions are possible in all three areas. The two outer circles represent areas where interconnections with other religious traditions are most easily possible. The inner circle of particular practice is important as well, as it maintains the need for nurture and preservation of our unique faith identity.

The Circle of Common Human Experience

The outer circle represents spiritual practice in the context of our shared humanity. When I am offering spiritual support to a person from another religious tradition on their terms, I am not moving away from my own spiritual center and tradition. For example, tending to those who are hungry, in prison, and sick is a core practice of the Christian faith. Shared human experiences represent areas where the spiritual center of the careseeker and my own can meet. The outer circle speaks to our experience of universality.

But a word of caution is in order. Within the context of interreligious spiritual care, not only cultural normativity but also *Christian normativity* is often unconscious, as we see in the following example.

Mark, a Christian chaplain, plans a service for the hospital patients, families, and staff in his community hospital during the winter holidays. The hospital population has a considerable percentage of Jewish patients. Because the Christmas season and Chanukah holidays overlap in the calendar, Mark calls a local rabbi to invite him to facilitate together an interfaith holiday service with a generic theme of light. The rabbi explains to Mark that he prefers to offer a separate celebration, because this Jewish holiday and its particular significance get diluted in a context where the majority culture is Christian. Mark realizes that his well-meaning attempt to be inclusive is misdirected. Considering that Christianity is predominant and normative in the larger society and the hospital community, inclusiveness in the form of a generic service would diminish the distinctiveness of this Jewish holiday. This vignette illustrates that the emphasis of supposed "universals" from the perspective of the majority faith tradition can actually deny the spirituality of those in a minority. On the surface it may appear inclusive, but as power

structures remain unconscious, it upholds the very structures that minimize traditions that are different from the mainstream.

Nonetheless, our shared humanity can be a common ground for interreligious spiritual support: Barbara, a Jewish CPE student, supports a Roman Catholic family in the Intensive Care Unit whose child is being disconnected from life support after a long illness. Before she offers a prayer, Barbara invites the family members to say words of prayer, thus making room for the religious identity of the family. Barbara moves into unfamiliar ground, as spontaneous prayer is not as common within the Jewish tradition as within the Christian tradition. The prayer she offers is informed by images and metaphors of her own tradition. In her reflection with her peers she expresses how connected she felt to the persons in the room because "there was just something so human about the experience. The pain, the grief, the comfort, the mystery of death. The prayers flowed out of me when I could connect to the most humanizing aspects of the experience." In this chapter's opening vignette, chaplain Steve provides spiritual care through his presence by making sure that the patient could die in a dignified way that is meaningful to him and his family. The chaplain's cooperation and communication with the nursing team about expanding the time the family can spend with the body, his presence, and advocacy—all are spiritual care interventions on this outer circle. Other interventions include empathic listening, exploration, empowering, affirming, consciousness raising, reframing. Some rituals, such as blessing and generic prayer focused on the shared and common experience of humanity and suffering, are possible as well. The primary role of the spiritual counselor in the circle of our common humanity is that of the *companion*.

The Circle of Interconnected Spiritual Practice

Shared spiritual practice is possible because religious history is a web of relationships. We meet in areas where our spiritual traditions interconnect. We will experience difference, but in our experiences and the ways we interpret them we can connect. Both Jews and Christians read and pray the psalms. They understand many psalms through a different lens. When those differences are not overlooked, psalms can form a common ground for interreligious spiritual care. My hospital has a large percentage of Latino Catholic patients. Our CPE program trains numerous rabbinical interns. Frequently they use the psalms to connect

to the spiritual practice of our families. They begin the prayer by reading a psalm, pray, and invite the families to close with their own prayer—if they wish. When discussing these experiences in case conferences the peer groups discover that the limitations presented with different faiths are also opportunities. The Jewish chaplain invites patients who often are being “prayed for” by a priest, to say their own prayer, thus empowering them to express their struggles and needs on their own terms. Thus, interreligious spiritual care can at times introduce new practices that enrich the coping mechanisms and spiritual life of careseekers.

Both the Christian and the Muslim traditions have similar traditions of intercessory prayer. In Islam a *du'a* is a prayer that is not based in the Qu'ran but formulated for special concerns. A non-Muslim chaplain can offer a *du'a*, an intercessory prayer, as an expression of care and spiritual support for a Muslim patient, as long as it is directed to God and no mention is made of Jesus or Mary. A patient may be better helped through a person who shares their faith and can recite the Qu'ran and share a deeper spiritual connection, yet a *du'a* is a general intercessory prayer where Muslims and non-Muslims can connect. On the circle of interconnected spiritual practice, participants have an opportunity to acknowledge their differences and express their beliefs. At the same time, they find commonalities in their practices, and the pastoral encounter encourages mutuality.³¹ Spiritual care interventions include some faith specific rituals, the use of sacred texts, and meditation. The primary role of the interfaith chaplain is that of *representative of the sacred*.

The Circle of Particular Spiritual Practice

This inner circle represents the core of the identity of a faith community, its formative symbols, rituals, and beliefs, such as baptism and communion for the Christian community. This circle is important because it nurtures and shapes the particular identity. Even these boundaries are not necessarily written in stone and persons who are not members of a particular community are often invited to participate. Often the most familiar ritual can offer the strongest support in a crisis. In our opening vignette, a Buddhist priest is called to offer particular chants that may connect powerfully with the family as they share the religious language and may be deeply familiar with its sounds. The spiritual care interven-

tions offered in this circle of particular spiritual practice are faith specific rites that involve initiation into the community (such as baptism), rites of reconciliation (confession, Vidui), sacraments, as well as prayers and chants in the original language of the tradition, such as citations from sacred Hebrew texts or Qu'ran passages in Arabic.

The sacrament of the sick in the Roman Catholic tradition may only be administered by a Catholic priest. The Vidui, the final confession, a Jewish end-of-life ritual, most often is facilitated by a rabbi. Baptism is a spiritual practice at the core of Christian identity. Jewish chaplain Phyllis Brooks Toback expresses an additional concern a Jewish chaplain may experience with regard to baptism: “As a Jew I carry with me the history of centuries of persecution and attempts by Christians to get Jews to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus and to verbalize acceptance of Christianity.”³² She describes emergency situations when a Christian chaplain is not available and she may work together with Christian staff or when she as a Jewish chaplain can respond to the pastoral need for baptism and blessing by *declaring on behalf of* the parents that they desire to have their child baptized in the name of the triune God. Toback’s reflections are very personal, and different chaplains may keep different boundaries when it comes to the participation in the particular spiritual practices of another tradition. At times, in situations of suffering and crisis, pastoral care givers may move into the terrain of a particular tradition, motivated by their care for the other persons as well as their faith in the presence of God in these moments.³³

As mentioned previously, an interfaith chaplain’s spiritual support can go a long way, but the primary role on the circle of particular spiritual practice is that of a *resource agent* who connects patients and families with their spiritual communities and resources. The spiritual care function is “*connecting*.” In order to fulfill this function, interfaith chaplains need to develop relationships with diverse local religious communities, invite representatives to their setting for mutual education, set up procedures regarding how to notify them, and nurture such relationships.

32. Toback, “Theological Reflection on Baptism,” 315–17.

33. Ibid., 317.

31. See also Griffith, “A Chaplain Reflects,” 86.

SUMMARY

Increasingly chaplains of diverse religious traditions offer spiritual care and counseling to persons of different cultures and faiths. It is part of the role and ethos of chaplains and spiritual counselors not to impose their own values but to assist counselees in tapping into their resources for coping and healing. Intercultural competency in spiritual care and counseling involves self-awareness, respect for difference, and empowerment. The same is true for interreligious spiritual care. A spiritual care function that is particularly pronounced in interreligious care is *connecting*: linking counselees to their faith specific resources and communities. Interfaith chaplains and counselors take on the role of resource agents who develop and nurture relationships to faith specific resources in their local communities.

Interreligious relationships of care can be envisioned along a continuum of three concentric circles: particular spiritual practice, interconnected spiritual practice, and common human experience. Each circle represents primary ways of interacting and primary spiritual care interventions. Together they signify a range of possibilities of interreligious interaction. This model of interreligious spiritual care takes into account boundaries and the particularity of religious practices. At the same time it reveals an encouraging potential for persons whose faiths differ to connect and be supported in times of crisis.

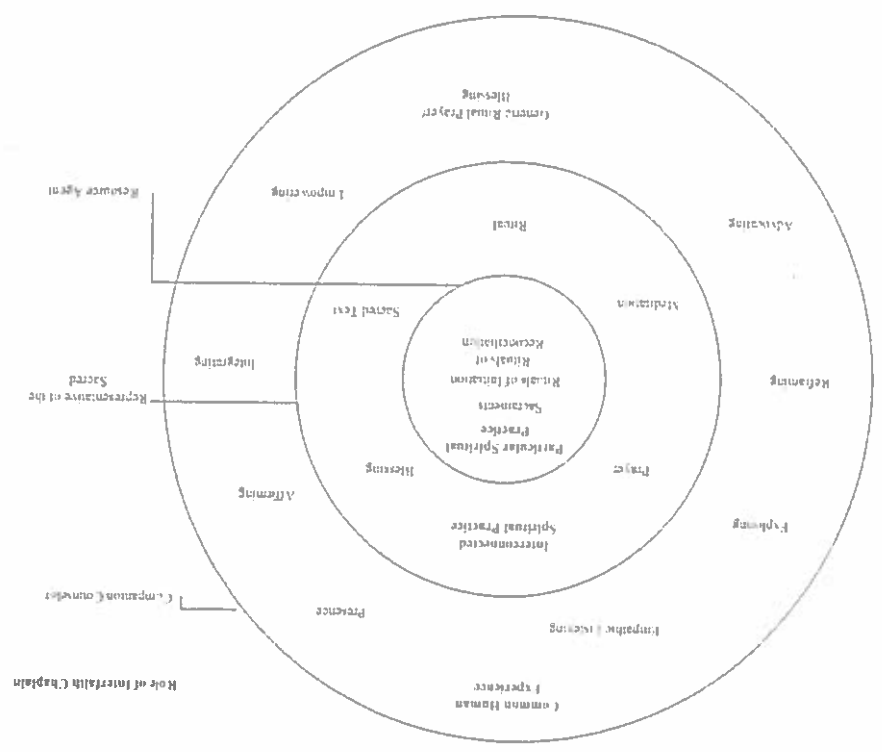


Figure 6.2. Examples of Interfaith Spiritual Care Interventions

Religious diversity adds new layers to the work of clinical supervision. It challenges us to rethink curriculum, group dynamics, and the supervisory relationship. The theories of intergroup relations employed in this book provide us with concepts and tools that equip us to facilitate increasingly religiously diverse learning groups. They help us to use the potential of these groups to become milieus for interreligious learning.

8

Why Engage Religious Diversity?

Interreligious Encounters through a Theological Lens

IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS we have met spiritual counselors and chaplains in public settings who work with people from all walks of life and religious persuasions. We have heard voices of community leaders who engage interfaith youth in shared service, organize interfaith travel to Israel and Palestine, take parishioners on bus tours to houses of worship of different faiths, and develop interfaith community partnerships. However, we have learned that many religious communities exist in isolation and keep contact with each other at a minimum. We introduced tools that help persons to overcome fears of the other, reduce bias, and facilitate interreligious connections. In this last chapter I address the role of theology in interreligious encounters. What are the beliefs that motivate some to engage religious diversity and others to avoid or resist it?

Religious leaders, chaplains, counselors, and theological educators have to sort out what the new pluralist context means for their faith and their work. They need a vision, a compass, to guide their work. This compass is different for people of diverse faith traditions, and, as we shall see, looks very different even within Christianity. In this chapter I share my own compass and guiding vision, which is clearly shaped by my own faith and social location. I write as an ordained Christian female minister living in the United States and working as a chaplain in a secular public health-care organization. My reflections tell the reader why I believe that interreligious work is important, why I devote so many pages to understanding social and interpersonal dynamics in interreli-

gious relations, and why these dynamics matter theologically. My reflections account for my hope that we can create an alternative to pervasive divisive and ignorant voices that may discourage us from engaging the religiously other. It is my hope that this final chapter will spark ideas and thoughts that take readers on their own theological journeys. My compass developed in conversation with different theological approaches to religious pluralism, and so I begin by providing a brief overview of this conversation and some issues that it raises.

DIFFERENT PATHS

Religions have been compared with different paths that lead up the same mountain. "It is possible to climb life's mountain from any side, but when the top is reached the trails converge. At base, in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organizational structure, the religions are distinct. Differences in culture, history, geography, and collective temperament all make for diverse starting points. . . . But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons."¹ This metaphor developed by religious studies scholar Huston Smith has become a popular way to describe the relationships of the religions, but it is not without controversy. Most recently, professor of religion Stephen Prothero has taken issue with Smith's view. He represents a growing group of scholars who look for a new approach in understanding the diversity of religious paths. In his book *God Is Not One* Prothero challenges: "For more than a generation we have followed scholars and sages down the rabbit hole into a fantasy world in which all gods are one."² He warns that the idea of religious unity is naïve and unrealistic because it obscures the dangerous clashes of religions worldwide. It is important to look not only at religion's "awe-inspiring architecture and gentle mystics but also their bigots and suicide bombers,"³ he reminds us.

Smith and Prothero represent two poles of a spectrum, one emphasizing the universality of religions, the other their particularities. Different theological approaches can be placed somewhere along this spectrum. Paul Knitter's book *Introducing Theologies of Religion* lays out the major theological positions on the relation of Christianity to other

religious ways. He sorts through the diversity and controversy of numerous Christian approaches to religious pluralism and distinguishes four models, within which there is much variety. Relying heavily on Knitter's description and analysis, I present a rough sketch of major positions for a brief orientation. For a detailed overview of theological approaches to religious pluralism I refer the reader to Knitter's introduction.

Replacement Model

This approach to other religions has also been called exclusivist and has been the primary way Christianity has understood other religious traditions throughout much of history. Today the majority of fundamentalists, evangelicals, and Pentecostals hold this view.⁴ Its core concern is salvation understood as a gift from God through Jesus Christ. Because salvation is not a human achievement but a gift, followers of this approach want to share this gift with others with the goal of conversion.⁵ Some hold that while there is no salvation outside of Christ, God is revealed in other traditions. They seek collaboration with other religionists in service and social concerns. The dialogue with other traditions is done with respect but coming from the conviction of the supremacy of Christ, that Christianity is meant to replace other traditions.⁶ I suspect evangelicals might hold the view that the only path that leads to the mountaintop is a personal relationship with Christ.

Fulfillment Model

This model is also known as an inclusivist approach and represented in many mainline Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches.⁷ The document *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1964) has prepared the ground for this approach. While the document affirms Christ as the way, the truth, and the life in whom all find the fullness of religious life, it discovers in other religious beliefs and practices rays of truth and enlightenment. It goes on to "exhort" church members to dialogue and collaboration to witness to the Christian faith while pro-

1. Smith, *World's Religions*, 73.
2. Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 3, 7.

4. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 19–21.
5. *Ibid.*, 28, 22.
6. *Ibid.*, 36, 40f., 21.
7. *Ibid.*, 63.

moting the good in other religious and cultural expressions.⁸ Vatican II laid the groundwork for the kind of dialogue and cooperation that the Roman Catholic Church in Los Angeles and elsewhere engages in, as described in chapter 5.

The thinking of the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner particularly influenced the Second Vatican Council's understanding of the church's relationship to other faiths.⁹ He argues that God's grace must be active in the religions because God's grace penetrates our very beings.¹⁰ God has given the assurance of God's grace most clearly in Christ, in whom all religious paths find their final fulfillment. Those who do not know Jesus can still experience the saving power of God; they just do not fully realize it yet. Rahner coined the term "anonymous Christians" for those who follow other religious paths.¹¹ According to this model, different paths lead up the same mountain and find their final destination in Christ.

Mutuality Model

In the 1970s and early 1980s new viewpoints emerged that have been summarized as pluralist approaches. They avoid claims that one religion surpasses others. While they envision the relationship between religions from different perspectives, they are unified in the attempt to create a real and mutual dialogue situation where partners are equal. They assume that the conversation partners from the different religions need to listen to each other and learn from each other.¹² Therefore Paul Knitter summarizes these approaches under the term *Mutuality Model*. Proponents of this model feel that dialogue is not possible if there is no common basis for it, and so without brushing over differences among the religions they seek to formulate some common ground between them, without which no conversation can take place.¹³ This common ground, which forms a bridge on which Christians can cross over into the new terrain of interreligious dialogue, is situated differently. Knitter distinguishes

three bridges: a philosophical-historical bridge, a religious-mystical bridge, and an ethical-practical bridge.¹⁴

A pronounced proponent of the philosophical-historical bridge is John Hick. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant forms the basis of his approach: We can never experience an object as it is but only as an image that has gone through the process of our perception. Our experience is shaped by our cognitive categories, our particular psychological and historical situations. Hick calls the object of religious experience the *Real-in-itself*, which we cannot perceive directly. The *Real-in-itself* is one, but the symbols through which it is expressed are different. The different religious traditions represent human responses to this ultimate transcendent Reality. Thus, human religious experience always involves some projection.¹⁵ Hick claims that the great world religions have a core concern in common: in different ways the religious traditions call human beings to transform their ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, promoting love and compassion. From the Greek word *soteria* for salvation or deliverance, this soteriological central concern in all world religions is called salvation, liberation, enlightenment, or awakening, depending on the particular tradition.¹⁶ Because Hick wants to avoid the absolutism of any particular religion, he turns his eyes—like Huston Smith—to the mountaintop. He seeks a global interpretation, a comprehensive view of religions.¹⁷ This approach has been critiqued as just another form of inclusivism, only with a Western Enlightenment philosophical viewpoint rather than Christianity encompassing and appropriating the different religions under one roof.

Would Hick say that all religious paths lead to the same mountaintop? According to Knitter's assessment, Hick does not deny real differences among the religions. History is witness to religions' helpful and destructive forces and documents that not all religious practices and beliefs are of equal value. Not all religious paths are equal and lead up the mountain. The religious paths can be evaluated by concern they all have in common, promoting Reality-centeredness instead of self-centeredness.¹⁸

8. Vatican, "Declaration."

9. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 75.

10. *Ibid.*, 69, 70.

11. *Ibid.*, 72–74.

12. *Ibid.*, 110.

13. *Ibid.*, 111.

14. See *ibid.*, 112f.

15. Hick, *Christian Theology*, 28.

16. *Ibid.*, 17f., 76.

17. *Ibid.*, 47f.

18. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 118.

In the perspective of the historian the common ground among religions does not lie in a shared core concern but in their interconnectedness. Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that throughout history, people have traded, traveled, and migrated. Religions have been historically interconnected and have influenced each other. We are connected through a common history of religious processes, our own as well as those of our neighboring communities.¹⁹ Our common ground for interreligious interaction is situated in our interconnected history and solidarity as human beings, which "precedes our particularity."²⁰

Raimundo Panikkar, son of a Spanish Roman Catholic mother and a Hindu Indian father, has been nurtured by both traditions. He was a Roman Catholic priest and an accredited scholar of Hinduism and perhaps personified the mutual influence of religions that W. C. Smith talks about. He represents the religious-mystical bridge and seeks to hold the tension of both the universal and the particular in his approach to interreligious dialogue. Having lived in Asia, he is critical of a comprehensive or comparative theory of religion that imposes its own frame of reference on the relationship of different religions. Instead he proposes a "dialogical theology" the agenda of which is developed in the dialogue itself.²¹

For Panikkar Christian identity means living a personal religiousness rather than merely belonging to an institutionalized religion or defending a particular culture. This Christianness or Christlike attitude represents the mystical core. The universal that makes interreligious dialogue possible is mystical-spiritual. Panikkar introduces a new metaphor to describe the relationship of Christianity to other religions, that of the rivers of the earth, which are distinct from each other. Christianity began at the Jordan where Jesus was baptized. Spiritually, it cannot be understood apart from Judaism. Intellectually it was fed by the Tiber, by Greek-Roman-Gothic elements, the mentality of the West. Today, the question is whether these two rivers define the boundary of Christianity or whether it can peacefully meet the Ganges, a metaphor for the many non-Abrahamic traditions of the world.²² Panikkar suggests that the rivers of the earth, symbolizing the religions, do not meet as water on earth but in the sky in the form of clouds having "transformed into vapor,

19. Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 38, 42, 44.

20. *Ibid.*, 79.

21. Panikkar, "Jordan, Tiber, and Ganges," 102.

22. *Ibid.*, 89f.

metamorphized into Spirit, which then is poured down in innumerable tongues."²³ No religious tradition has a "monopoly on the living waters of the rivers (salvation)."²⁴ At the same time we should not "water down" particular religious beliefs for the sake of reaching agreement.²⁵ In order to engage other religions we do not have to move outside our particular tradition to a quasi-neutral standpoint, but we do have to be at home in our own tradition, which includes an openness to learn from other traditions.²⁶

Panikkar draws on the teaching of the Trinity to hold the tension of the universal and the particular or concrete. The Divine is incredibly diverse and cannot be boxed in or reduced to one thing.²⁷ In the Trinitarian vision there is unity between the divine-human-cosmic reality. "There is no absolute center."²⁸ Reality is concentric, and different traditions complement, correct, and challenge each other. The human dimension of religion includes the possibility of mutual conflict, of common as well as irreconcilable views.²⁹

The concepts within the mutuality model do not negate differences between the religions but put more emphasis on the universal. Proponents of the mutuality model see two major driving forces as creating a new way of relating to other religious paths. First, the world has become a global village and we are more aware of our neighbors of different cultural and religious traditions. Second, the environmental, social, and political problems on a global scale call for collaboration of people from all over the world and from many traditions.³⁰ For some the social and ecological problems that threaten our survival press themselves on us with such urgency that ethical-practical concerns are the pillars of the bridge to the religiously other.³¹ These ethical issues

23. *Ibid.*, 92.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 97.

27. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 129.

28. Panikkar, "Jordan, Tiber, and Ganges," 109.

29. *Ibid.*, 109, 112.

30. Hick speaks to globalization as a factor in how Christians experience plurality of religions today (*Christian Theology*, 12f.). Smith and Panikkar talk about the need to collaborate in facing global social and ecological problems (Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 193; Panikkar, "Jordan, Tiber, and Ganges," 102).

31. Knitter, *One Earth*, 22, 57.

form a common context of cooperation and of interreligious exchange, such as in the work of the Parliament of the World's Religions, which was described in chapter 5. Liberation and feminist theologians choose this bridge, which has been articulated by Paul Knitter as a "globally responsible, correlational dialogue among religions" that is concerned with the well-being of human beings and the earth.³² Knitter's model addresses concerns that I have summarized in the first chapter under the term "glocal responsibility." Glocal responsibility means an attitude that allows people to be committed to their cultural, religious identity while living in connection with the earth and the global community. This sense of interdependence is expressed in concrete actions of responsibility to the earth and fellow human beings. This correlational dialogue is first and foremost collaborative action, followed by a dialogue of belief. While action is a primary and first step, Knitter points out that it needs to be accompanied by study and prayer in order to survive.³³

The reality of suffering we all face forms a common context and starting point for collaboration. Knitter describes the challenge of suffering more concretely in four ways:³⁴ First, there is physical suffering rooted in poverty. The gap between poor and rich in the North and the South as well as increasingly within wealthier nations is ever widening. Second, the earth is suffering abuse. Rosemary Radford Ruether provides a sobering assessment of how many religious traditions, valuing the spiritual over material, male over female, individual salvation over communal salvation, have contributed to the exploitation of the earth. She sees the potential in these same religious traditions to retrieve ecological values that cultivate reverence for the nonhuman world. Religious communities can use their moral authority and their constituencies to promote an individual and communal lifestyle of ecological sustainability.³⁵

Third, victimization harms the spirit. Throughout the world people are underprivileged and shut out from political and social processes because they are poor or because of their race and gender. Maura O'Neill underlines that for women, similar to minorities and the poor, concerns

for justice already form a common starting point for action and dialogue, as religion is not apart from practical social aspects of life.³⁶

Fourth, there is "suffering due to violence."³⁷ The threat to survival due to armed conflict is unprecedented given the vast and destructive potential of the weaponry we have created.³⁸

As these forms of suffering form a challenge and common context, the reign of God represents the guiding symbol for Christians for interreligious collaboration. Jesus lived and died for the reign, the vision, and the presence of a God of justice and compassion. Christians pray and work for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.³⁹

The ethical-practical approach has been criticized as introducing a new inclusivism of the all-encompassing value of justice and social action at its core. Critics point out that what is "just" is defined differently in different communities. Are tolerance, justice, and eco-human well-being really universal concerns or do they reflect Western values? In considering the warnings of his critics, Knitter points out that the search for eco-human well-being is not a common essence of religions but a common agenda that needs to be continuously discussed and re-examined in the dialogue.⁴⁰ Knitter feels that if we cannot find any common agenda or commitment to what is true or right, we open ourselves up to a dangerous ethical relativism and leave the pursuit of truth up to those who have power—meaning the power of weaponry or money.⁴¹ The world as it is does not give us another moral choice than to seek collaboration in addressing its problems. For Knitter the experience of suffering urges the involvement of religions, and makes new interreligious encounters both necessary and possible.

How does the metaphor of the religious paths play out in the ethical-practical approach? This approach turns our attention away from the mountaintop to the mountain terrain. Here, traveling is a struggle, and the terrain itself is endangered. I imagine it looks like the scene Jesus depicted in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Like a man who was robbed,

36. O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening*, 54.

37. Knitter, *One Earth*, 65.

38. *Ibid.*, 66.

39. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 143.

40. Knitter, *One Earth*, 76.

41. *Ibid.*, 56.

32. *Ibid.*, 15.

33. *Ibid.*, 154.

34. *Ibid.*, 58–67.

35. Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism*, 47ff., 81.

beaten, and left to die on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, there are many people in the foothills who are hurting and suffering. The ethical-practical bridge calls on travelers to cross purity laws and boundaries between the paths and act as neighbors. The mountaintop is not irrelevant, the paths are indeed different, but the primary concern is the threatened terrain and the hurting neighbor by the roadside.

Acceptance Model

Coming from a postmodern perspective, proponents of this approach point out that it is impossible to find a common value system or perspective on truth, or better truths. For them the mutuality model emphasizes the universal at the cost of the particular, and they seek to accept the real differences between religious paths. The acceptance model contributes to the debate a healthy skepticism. Proponents of this model are suspicious of grand narratives that encompass the different religions in a neat package that thus miss their unique differences. Some propose more modest steps in interreligious dialogue; others emphasize differences and boundaries to a degree that mutual respect but not mutual engagement is encouraged.

Theologian Mark Heim critiques pluralist approaches for not taking differences seriously enough, in other words, for not being pluralist enough.⁴² Heim does not only suggest that the religions understand reality differently. He proposes the existence of a real diversity of salvations, of actual religious ends.⁴³ Based on the doctrine of the Trinity, which conceptualizes differences in communion with each other within God, he imagines multiple salvations as ends for different religious ways.⁴⁴ Holding both the "finality of Christ and the independent validity of other ways," he sees different religious paths leading up different mountains, yet linked to the Christian mountain, reflecting the diversity fully manifested in Christ.⁴⁵ Postliberal theologians understand religion as a cultural and linguistic framework that shapes the way we experience the world.⁴⁶ We can see the world only within one particular viewpoint. Therefore it

is very difficult or even impossible to have a single universal experience or common ground among the different religions.⁴⁷ Postliberal theology accentuates the differences of the various religious traditions and wants to protect the integrity of the Christian community and its teachings. It underscores the boundaries within a dialogue situation.

Another approach to religious diversity is represented in comparative theology, as developed by Catholic theologian James Fredericks. It is not to be confused with comparative religion because it does not study religion from an outside perspective.⁴⁸ It is also not to be confused with a theology of religions where Christian theologians talk amongst themselves about how to understand other traditions. It begins in concrete and practical dialogue situations, like the Buddhist-Catholic dialogue described in chapter 5. Comparative theology is committed to the Christian tradition *and* open to the truth that may lie beyond our particular understanding. It studies other religious traditions on their own terms and resists the temptation to domesticate the other and fit the tradition neatly into Christian presuppositions.⁴⁹ Why engage in dialogue? Because the other is my neighbor. Comparative theology is a critical reflection of the engaged dialogue with others.⁵⁰

Comparative theologians do not want to reflect in abstraction about the other. Therefore, they don't speculate about the mountaintop and do not find it helpful to develop a topography of the mountain terrain. Instead, they propose that travelers of the different paths walk together for a bit, learn from each other, and in the process learn about themselves.

DIFFERENT TRAVELERS

So far, we have looked at different ways in which Christian theologians conceptualize the relationship of the religious paths. Voices from minorities and women have brought to our attention that we cannot understand the paths aside from the travelers. We cannot make sense of religious difference without attention to difference of social location, gender, and historical and present power relationships.

47. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 181. For more details about the postliberal approach see Knitter's analysis, 173ff.

48. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, 97.

49. *Ibid.*, 98.

50. *Ibid.*, 103.

42. Heim, *Salvations*, 7.

43. *Ibid.*, 6.

44. *Ibid.*, 158ff.

45. *Ibid.*, 3; Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 202.

46. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

The history of Christian imperialism and anti-Judaism present a special obligation for Christians to rethink our relationship to other faiths. Historically, Christianity has come to countries in the southern hemisphere in connection with secular colonial control and the exploitation of other cultures. In recent decades many Christians have initiated dialogue with people of other faiths. Yet members of other faiths approach Christian invitations to dialogue with caution and suspicion because these dialogue situations are shaped by this history.⁵¹ Participants in interreligious dialogue bring a complex history to the conversation. Historical relations may be shaped by oppression, hurt, and suffering caused by believers of one path toward those of another. These histories need to be faced for the dialogue to be authentic.

Until the present day, the North and West, nominally primarily Christian, has represented economic power. Malaysian theologian Kenneth Surin urges a discourse that is not so much focused on doctrinal issues but carried out with an understanding of the social locations of those who participate in the dialogue. He warns that a global theology of religions is blind to the dominance of the West and makes invisible the local situation of persons in the southern hemisphere who struggle with poverty.⁵²

Maura O'Neill's book *Women Speaking, Women Listening* responds to the void of the female voice in interreligious dialogue. She sees the pluralistic approaches to interreligious dialogue as insufficiently plural when the difference and particularity of gender goes unacknowledged.⁵³ Ways of knowing and thinking as well as ethical deliberations are different, not only among religions, but also among men and women; these differences need to receive conscious attention in interreligious dialogue.⁵⁴

These voices mentioned so far point out that sociocultural, gender, and power differences shape relationships between people. Their analysis parallels that of social psychologists mentioned in chapter 2. Realistic conflict theory states that many intergroup conflicts, aside from differ-

51. Samartha provides a few glimpses of how these dialogues are experienced by members of other faith traditions as well as initiatives of dialogue in other religious traditions. See Samartha, *One Christ*, 22-31.

52. Surin, "A Politics of Speech," 196, 200.

53. O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening*, ix.

54. *Ibid.*, 29.

ences in values and beliefs, are rooted in real differences in access to power, land, or money. Doctrinal differences today are less divisive than the social inequalities that cut across religious divisions. Therefore, feminist and liberation theologians call attention from particularities of religious traditions to particularities of gender and social context. Religious paths differ. Sociocultural differences can heighten the conflicts between religious paths. At the same time, the shared living situation and social context provides links and bridges between persons of different faiths. Christians, Hindus, and Muslims in Asia, for example, join hands to address their common social problems. Women across religious traditions collaborate in the struggle for women's rights in their societies and religious traditions. We miss an important dimension of the dialogue situation if we leave out the consideration of the participants, their social locations, and their historical and present relationships. Therefore, it is important to integrate theology with the social-psychological considerations that have played such an important role in this book so far.

A RELATIONAL-ETHICAL APPROACH TO INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS

The ecumenical movement has been dealing for a long time with issues of dialogue, community, and difference in the search to realize the unity of the church. In the twentieth century the issues of unity were shaped anew by the growing relationships between churches from different continents, social and cultural locations, and an increasing awareness of our global interdependence. In his 1972 publication *And Yet It Moves: Dream and Reality of the Ecumenical Movement*, German theologian Ernst Lange claims that the church needs to be involved in today's urgent need for peace. Ecumenism is an expression of peace and the only way for the church to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.⁵⁵ Lange notes that ecumenical consultation has been often conducted without attention to factors such as group dynamics, participants' intercultural anxieties, and prejudice levels.⁵⁶ But these "non-theological" sociocultural, and psychological factors permeate even development of doctrine and statements of faith. Not only the content of beliefs but also deeply rooted

55. Lange, *And Yet It Moves*, 148.

56. *Ibid.*, 125f.

attitudes and patterns of behaviors need attention.⁵⁷ Not only doctrinal differences, but also sociocultural psychological factors cause divisions in the life of the churches. Lange argues that ecumenical theology needs to be interdisciplinary. "If theology is concerned with the truth about reality, then all man's [sic] knowledge and experience of reality must be brought into the reflection process and exposed to the test of truth."⁵⁸ He proposes the development of a social ecumenical didactic. Such a didactic is a theory and method that assists persons to develop an ecumenical and universal commitment, meaning an ability to connect with others near and far while maintaining their commitments to their denominational, cultural, and social context.⁵⁹ Churches and their members need to overcome their provincialism and understand themselves as having a sense of responsibility to the whole world, or as we might paraphrase, to develop a global responsibility.⁶⁰ They need assistance in the process to help them to enter conscientiously into these new levels of engagement without being "automatically shut out from them for fear of losing their own integrity and identity."⁶¹

The relationships with other religious traditions were not at the forefront of his reflection in 1972. Since then, our social context has become more globalized and pluralistic. Lange argued that is an essential task of the church to work as an agent for peace in the world. Today the fulfillment of that role involves the active and open engagement of our neighbors of different religious traditions. Lange's suggestion to give attention to theological and nontheological factors in ecumenical theology rings true for this broader context as well. I see my own attempts to integrate theological considerations of interreligious dialogue with insights from intergroup relations theory as one aspect of this broader interdisciplinary enterprise. If we want to help religious communities, their members, and their leaders to constructively engage the pluralistic context, we need to develop ways to understand and nurture relationships, not just to exchange beliefs. As Lange notes, even the development of our beliefs is shaped by social context, cultural location, and intergroup relationships. My own theological perspective is shaped primarily

57. *Ibid.*, 75.

58. *Ibid.*, 127.

59. Becker, "Ecumenical Learning," 342.

60. Lange, *And Yet It Moves*, 135.

61. *Ibid.*, 139.

by Paul Knitter's approach and integrates social psychological aspects. Therefore I call my approach to interreligious encounters a relational-ethical bridge. I delineate this approach with the help of three theses: (1) Religion does not equal God. (2) Christian commitments lead to the religiously other. (3) We are social animals.

Religion does not equal God.

I arrive at this statement that "Religion does not equal God" from two directions: first, from an understanding of the process of human cognition, and second, from a theological perspective.

Religious symbols, beliefs, and practices, such as worship or meditation, embody and convey intangible encounters with the Sacred. In that sense religion enables experience of what we call God. Religions give concrete form to human understandings and experiences of God. Religious communities nurture and interpret these experiences over time and give their members a sense of belonging and identity. Because religious expression is embodied, it is always limited by our language, our culture, and our historical context. John Hick underscores that we cannot access reality unfiltered but that everything we perceive passes through the lens of our human cognition. Religious experience seeks to express something that cannot be seen. It points and responds to an ultimate reality, which we cannot access directly and which is incomparable to what we know. Religion, while pointing and responding to the Sacred, is deeply human with all its limitations.

The story of Moses at the burning bush illustrates the theological perspective.⁶² While herding sheep one day Moses finds himself in front of a bush that burns but is not consumed by the fire. He hears a voice asking him to take off his sandals, as he stands on holy ground. Moses is afraid to look at God, who speaks to him from the fire. God identifies God's self in concrete historical terms as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and as a God of compassion for the suffering of the Israelites. But when Moses asks God's name, the response is: "I am who I am." God makes God's self known while at the same time eluding our attempts to know God. As the ground of being, God is always Mystery that cannot be grasped. Religions exist in this tension between the embodied experience of the Divine and the inaccessibility and transcendence of God. If

62. Exod 3:1-12.

we wanted to confine God to our concepts, we would limit the freedom of God. Our understanding of God cannot be absolute and objective but emerges in the context of faith. A religious community that claims to have an exclusive or ultimate knowledge of God seeks to capture God and escape the Mystery.

Our expressions of religious experience are human, conditioned, and limited. They can become self-serving and distort the Sacred. Therefore, prophets, reformers, and often heretics provide critical correctives for religious traditions. A faith that is alive needs critical evaluation of its religious expression and continuous reform. Religion, while pointing to God, is not to be confused with God.

In our postmodern, postenlightenment time, religion continues to be a powerful force in personal and social lives. At the same time, many feel ambivalent toward institutional religion. The most extreme and divisive religious voices seem to be heard the most, either because fundamentalist religious organizations are media savvy or because extreme positions attract media reports more easily than voices of moderation and reconciliation. Over the years as a chaplain I have met many people who have told me, "I am not religious but spiritual." In so doing, some communicate to me that they are not attached to a religious community but still feel a strong connection to their faith and spirituality. Others communicate their disillusionment with religion. They may have had disappointing experiences of religion or belonging to a religious community does not seem meaningful to them. Some see institutional religion as too concerned with its own self-preservation or too entangled with the question of which religious path is the right one. To them it seems that leaving religion and its quarrels behind and focusing on the spiritual—however nebulous that may be—is a more sensible approach to find meaning in their lives. At the bedside it is my role to listen and explore with them how their personal spirituality can support them in what they are going through. Often I can empathize and sympathize with many of the critical statements I hear about organized religion.

Yet I feel that it is impossible to move beyond my particular religious tradition, however flawed it may be. Just as I cannot crawl into a time capsule that would transport me out of my historical, cultural, or social context, so also I cannot move beyond my particular faith and practice spirituality void of concrete expression. My particular religious tradition and community nurtures and shapes my relationship with the

Divine. I could not live a life of faith without the community of others. The best I can do is to be at home in my religious tradition while giving it its right place. Being part of a community involves commitment and a willingness to struggle with its shadows. Moving beyond a particular faith is also not a viable option that would enable me to more easily embrace religious pluralism. A comprehensive bird's-eye view of religion is impossible. I believe that we are not better off in our relationship to other religious faiths by leaving particular beliefs out of the conversation. I can start the conversation by realizing that my understanding of God is always limited. I can be open to the experiences of other co-religionists so I might be enriched in my understanding and learn something new.

Religion does not equal God. If we claim absoluteness for our own faith community, we turn God into a tribal God. If we confuse religion with the Sacred itself, we run into the danger of idolatry: we cling to our own image of God rather than letting the spirit of the living and indescribable God guide us. The best approach to our own faith and the faith of our neighbor is a stance of realistic humility. The stance is realistic because we recognize the limitations of our human mind and cognition. It is a stance of humility because this is the only appropriate response to the mystery of God.

Christian commitments lead to the religiously other.

This section does not answer the question of when and how we bring core Christian beliefs to the conversation table in our dialogue with Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu friends. It also is not an attempt to fit other religious traditions into a Christian worldview. Instead, in this section I ask how as a Christian I understand reality and what my faith tells me about how to relate to this reality, the Divine, the world, and my fellow human beings. I ask what implications this Christian worldview has for my encounters with those who have different worldviews. In a very rough sketch I explore Christian teachings about Jesus' ministry, Christology, and the Trinity in how they might guide my encounter with the religiously other.

Jesus' life in his words and actions was centered on the reign of God. His ministry realized the reign of God and he invited everyone to join. Its shape and form is that of a radically inclusive community where there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is

no longer male or female; for all are one in Christ.⁶³ Jesus tended to the suffering, reaching out and welcoming those whom society expelled to the margins—the dispossessed and poor, the sick, women and children. Not the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of ancient society, but solidarity and compassion shape relationships in God's reign.

The Christian community prays for the coming of this reign and is called to express its reality by living in the patterns Jesus has provided, as an inclusive community of compassion and solidarity. Christian life is primarily concerned not with the right belief (orthodoxy) but right living, following in Jesus' footsteps (orthopraxis), although it would be problematic to separate belief and praxis from each other.

With Knitter I see the concern for the well-being of humans and the earth as a faithful response to Jesus' ministry. With him I also see in this ethical bridge connection points to believers of other religious paths. Tending to the suffering and working for personal, social, and ecological healing are values shared by many other traditions. While they do not represent a catalogue of consensus, they provide modest goals and can be places of collaboration, entry points of interreligious connection. While the religious traditions have real differences, our common ground is in our common humanity and the shared problems we face as human beings.

The experience of suffering is universal. We may interpret it differently, we may disagree on how to alleviate suffering, but it does lay a claim on us with immediacy to engage in repair work. As Knitter puts it: "Suffering has a universality and immediacy that makes it the most suitable, and necessary, site for establishing common ground for interreligious encounter."⁶⁴

When as a chaplain I am with persons from a different tradition who are sick or in crisis, I have to find ways to reach out and enter their world. I am not so naïve to think that I can fully understand their spiritual beliefs and practices, but I have to do all I can to support them in their faith as it helps them through the crisis. This may mean reaching out to someone else from that tradition for help, but often I do not have that luxury. As I have demonstrated in chapter 6, it is possible for spiritual caregivers to be meaningfully present with persons of a different

religious tradition. Interreligious spiritual care and counseling addresses human suffering, such as illness, crisis, and death, on a personal level.

When as a parish pastor I hear that the mosque in my part of town has been vandalized, my congregation can visit the mosque to express support, write a letter to the local newspaper, and organize a vigil. We respond to the hurt. We can repair and heal suffering in interreligious relations.

The poor in my neighborhood or in a country far away, the destruction of plant and animal species, and the danger of the survival of the earth call for a response from the Christian church. In the first chapter I pointed out that many problems in the global village are so vast that we need to join hands with other co-religionists to respond effectively and address suffering on a broader social and global level. Collaborating with people of all walks of life and different religious paths in the work for healing is living a life patterned by Jesus' ministry and the reign of God.

The central Christian belief that distinguishes us from our co-religionists of other religious paths is the belief that Christ is both human and divine. In the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, God has become human, joined our plight even unto death, and brings new life to us. While believers of other traditions can affirm Jesus as a prophet or the founder of a religion, the confession of Christ as God incarnate is unique to Christianity. Is this Christian commitment an obstacle in the dialogue with other faiths?

Confessing Christ has been used in a way that suggests the supremacy of Christianity over other religious paths. Throughout history it has often been connected with the political powers of imperialism. It has robbed others of their religious freedom and shut the door to a conversation open to the truth in other traditions. We need to face and transform this abuse of Christian teachings. But it does not mean that we have to abandon central Christian commitments altogether.

The new context of religious pluralism poses for us the question of how we understand Christ in relationship to other religious paths. In order to develop a Christology in this new context, Indian theologian Stanley Samartha returns to the context of the first Christian communities and looks anew at their expressions of faith. He notes that statements about Christ in the Second Testament have a confessional character, which need to be understood in the life of the worship of the

63. Gal 3:28.

64. Knitter, *One Earth*, 89.

Christian community. Creeds are not statements about other faith traditions but affirmations of the community's faith in Christ and should be understood within the boundaries of the community.⁶⁵ Samartha also emphasizes that the biblical testimonies of the crucified and risen Christ reveal the meaning of these events but the "being [emphasis by author] (or truth) of Jesus behind them remains unknown to us."⁶⁶ If we truly believe that Christ is human *and* divine, we will realize that we never fully understand Christ. The gospels and other accounts of Jesus' person and ministry in the New Testament are diverse. They elude a definitive understanding, and the mystery of the living Christ remains. That Jesus evades the full comprehension of those who encounter him forms a thread through the Gospel of Mark. Those who listen to Jesus' parables are often confused. The closing scene of that Gospel depicts an empty tomb and some women and men who lack understanding, who are scared and asked to go back to Galilee where their journey with Jesus had begun. The ending of the Gospel leaves the early Christian community with a call to discipleship, understanding themselves as being on the way rather than having already arrived.⁶⁷ Creeds and stories about Christ are to be read in the context of discipleship. They are not objective definitions but testimonies that call for a response and want to be interpreted through our lives.

What is the content of these testimonies and what do we mean when we understand the historical person Jesus of Nazareth as Christ, the Word of God incarnate?

In his book *Ethics* German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulates that in Christ God enters human life to the fullest and affirms the human person in compassion.⁶⁸ The Christ event means that God's love to the world is not a general idea but "really *lived* love of God in Jesus Christ." The human and suffering Christ is the affirmation that God loves humanity and the world, not in an ideal state but as they are. As we try to grow beyond our humanity, as we leave humanity behind us, God becomes a human being and wishes us to be real human beings: "what we shrink back from with pain and hostility . . . is for God the

65. Samartha, *One Christ*, 133.

66. *Ibid.*, 140.

67. Note that it is widely considered that Mark 16:9ff are later additions to the original text.

68. For the following, see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 9f.

ground of unfathomable love." God loves the real human being without distinction. God's outgoing love is not based on sameness or likeness but God unites God's self with that which is different and unlovable in our eyes. This means we cannot put boundaries on the dignity and worth of any human person. Dignity does not depend on race, ethnicity, age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, or social location. It does not depend on what persons believe. Respecting a person's dignity involves regard for the other's freedom and striving to understand them not in our image but as they understand themselves.

The notion of God as outgoing love has been further developed in the symbol of the Trinity. For feminist theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna the doctrine of the Trinity preserves the notion of a relational God that the biblical Jewish and Christian traditions convey.⁶⁹ The understanding of God as triune, as one in three persons, is also uniquely different from other religious paths. In the fourth century the Cappadocian Christian philosophers developed the first complete trinitarian doctrine of God.⁷⁰ They conceptualized oneness in three persons because they thought of God primarily not in terms of a substance, a thing, but in terms of relationship. The three persons of the Trinity relate to each other in a mutual and reciprocal relationship. The ultimate originating principle of reality is understood as being-in-relation-to-another.⁷¹ Not self-containment and autonomy but mutuality and relationship are the basic principles of life.⁷² Because Christian theology understands the human being as created in the image of God, LaCugna underscores that the teaching of the Trinity conceptualizes God as essentially related, the human person as relational, and our being in and with the world as interdependent.⁷³ When we understand our being and our world primarily in terms of substance, we tend to see beings as self-contained and reality as static. Unity means being of the same substance. However, comprehending reality as relatedness is dynamic. Uniqueness and difference are appreciated and unity is not sameness or conformity but community. On the one hand, this dynamic understanding of reality corresponds to the understanding of culture put forth in the first chapter: hybrid culture

69. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 289.

70. LaCugna, "God in Communion with Us," 86.

71. *Ibid.*, 86f.

72. *Ibid.*, 86.

73. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 289.

is in flux and interconnected, not separate from other cultures. On the other hand, understanding life first in terms of relatedness has parallels in contemporary psychological concepts.

We are social animals.

In his book *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, the psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell observes that relational-model theories have dominated contemporary psychoanalytic thinking for the last decades. They share the notion that relations with others are "the basic stuff of mental life."⁷⁴ While we experience ourselves as having an identity that is somewhat constant, we partially construct ourselves depending on the interpersonal context we find ourselves in. We are not self-contained and separate entities that engage others or the world as external self-contained entities, putting parts together like a jigsaw puzzle. A relational view is dynamic and sees the person in a field with the world it relates to and the space between the two. The person is multiple, in flux.⁷⁵ Mitchell suggests: "The most useful way to view psychological reality is as operating within a relational matrix which encompasses both intrapsychic and interpersonal realms."⁷⁶

We are social animals. Our bodies and their physiological processes fundamentally shape us. A relational understanding of the person allows for interdependence. We realize our reliance and connection not just with other people but our physical environment. It thus forms a strong basis for ecological ethics. Physiological processes are core to our being, but our mind interprets them and gives them meaning through our relational patterns.⁷⁷ In other words: We are wired for relationship. We seek to connect to others in attachment, love, and friendship. We seek resonance with others and are formed by our interactions with other persons. We find joy in our connections, and are angered and saddened by them. Our conflicts and disconnections can cause great pain. Even our animosities are expressions of our fundamental connectedness.

Throughout this book, intergroup relations theory plays an important role in understanding our relationships to others, especially other

religious groups. Intergroup relations theory differs from relational psychoanalysis in its focus on relationships between social groups. When it comes to the importance of relatedness for our identity, both schools of thought seem to be compatible. Especially social identity theory explains how much we are influenced by others. We not only construct a sense of personal identity, our identity has social aspects that are connected to our membership in social groups. We desire to belong to groups that enjoy distinct and positive identities. Our membership in social groups has a powerful influence on our sense of self and worth.

"COOPERATE!" INTEGRATING A RELATIONAL AND ETHICAL APPROACH TO INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS

To sum up, Christian beliefs about the reign of God, Christ, and the triune God emphasize Christian identity as a journey. We are underway in this faith journey, following the path Jesus has patterned and finding ourselves embraced by God's unconditional love. We are created in God's image, are not separate but exist within an interdependent web of life. Our personal, social, and religious identities are not self-contained static entities that get lost in contact with the other. They are shaped by our relationships. Healthy relationships need boundaries. We need articulated beliefs that guide and shape us. Yet our faith is not a static possession but in flux and in relationship. I see myself not as "having" a religion but as a participant, a disciple, who needs spiritual practices and beliefs to grow. My faith is affected by my community and grows in my encounters with those on other religious paths.

Uniquely Christian beliefs define our faith. I believe their very content moves us to reach out to our neighbor. In Christ God has revealed God's unconditional love, uniting those who are unlike each other. This good news impels us to reach out to the others independently of their social, cultural, or religious group. The mystery of God keeps us humble and aware that we cannot understand God. God's unconditional love lived out in Christ gives us confidence and trust to engage the other.

Jesus lived this love in his actions and his words, which were centered on the reign of God: an inclusive community of those who are not alike but united through God's love. The hurt of persons we meet in the hospital bed, prison, or on campus; the poverty of our neighbors close and far away; the suffering of the earth—all have an immediacy that impels a response of healing and repair. The more we cooperate with

74. Mitchell, *Relational Concepts*, 2.

75. *Ibid.*, 3, 33.

76. *Ibid.*, 9.

77. *Ibid.*, 4.

people from different nations and religious traditions, the more effective we can be in tending to the suffering. We do not have to find a single grand approach in our understanding of the different religions; modest and flexible points of collaboration will suffice. The suffering we experience is indeed a starting point for the interreligious encounter and place of dialogue about shared and differing beliefs.

Aside from this ethical bridge, the relation to the other itself is the pathway. Relationship as a unifying agent can hold both—commonality and distinctiveness.

An inclusive community of those who are different and unlike each other is not a harmonious community. It is conflict-laden and involves differences and disagreements. Unity is not sameness but community. More important than agreements are resonance and mutual understanding between people.

The bumper sticker "COEXIST," consisting of letters shaped by diverse religious symbols, has become a popular statement calling for tolerance in our religiously plural society. We are facing urgent social and ecological problems locally and globally. The relationships between religious groups are fragile and conflicted. Our Christian faith provides us with the vision of a God who is outgoing love and of God's reign as ruled by solidarity and compassion. Our faith impels us to go beyond tolerant coexistence. It moves us to reach out beyond our particular community and engage the problems we face together. It calls us to cooperate.

9

Conclusion

THROUGHOUT THE BOOK I have spelled out the spiritual practice of developing relationships between communities and individuals of different religious groups. I have done so in an interdisciplinary exploration, weaving together ideas from social psychology and theology, because it is not belief systems but people with different beliefs and identities who meet in interfaith encounters.

People of different faiths face urgent problems together, globally as well as in their local communities. These problems call for cooperation. In the global village, the local place is less significant for our sense of identity and belonging than it used to be. I have suggested that persons' cultural and religious identities are becoming more important in providing a sense of belonging. Social identity theory assists in understanding the significance of our membership in social groups for our sense of self. It also aids in understanding why relationships between different groups are often conflictual.

While there are many examples of peaceful and constructive relations between different religious groups, religious difference can contribute to isolation and division. Just like other social groups, religious communities are vulnerable to the dynamics of intergroup relations. Rather than actively engaging the increasing religious diversity in our society, many religious communities keep contact with other religious traditions at a minimum. Interreligious relationships remain strained and distant, with some religious groups asserting their own particular identity over others. It is not just different beliefs but also social inequalities and power imbalances, as well as fears, stereotypes, and prejudices that divide and isolate persons of different faiths from each other. Intergroup relations theory has developed tools that assist in the repair

of relationships. Especially if we want to move interfaith work beyond academia and religious leadership to grassroots levels, we need to take relational factors seriously. In order to empower different religious communities to constructively engage each other, we need to understand and nurture relational dynamics.

Bringing people of different religious communities together in cooperation has promise for the development of constructive relationships between them. When these religious communities have intergroup contact, enjoy authority support, and experience equal status in their group encounter, when they work together toward shared goals and can develop friendships, there is a potential that bias is reduced. I have introduced strategies for the facilitation of such cooperative interfaith projects that can change how people perceive, feel about, and act toward each other.

Social psychologists have developed and tested strategies of de-categorization, cross-categorization, mutual differentiation, and recategorization. Together they acknowledge both what people of different groups have in common as well as their particularities and differences. Cooperation does not aim for agreement and sameness but for resonance and openness toward the other. It has been noted that theories of intergroup relations focus heavily on cognitive processes of perception and that future research needs to give stronger attention to the role of emotions in intergroup relations.¹ I have explored the role of two emotions in interreligious encounters: anxiety and empathy. Yet, a further investigation of the dynamic interplay between perceptions, feelings, and behavior will deepen our understanding of the relationships between religious communities. An additional area that is beyond the scope of this book is the role of social structures and media in fostering or reducing bias between different religious groups.

Not only community religious leaders but also chaplains and counselors encounter religious diversity in their work. In spiritual care and its supervision, cooperation means actively engaging the spiritual beliefs and practices of those who seek care and connecting them with spiritual resources that are meaningful to them. Caregivers and careseekers of different religious traditions can connect along a continuum of common human experiences, interconnected and particular spiritual practice. In

1. Pettigrew, "Intergroup Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered," 192.

spiritual care and its clinical supervision, attention to what we have in common needs to be balanced by a respect for where we differ.

We hear religious leaders who are engaged in interfaith work. They generally do not feel they have to abandon core beliefs that are important to them. Moreover, interreligious dialogue requires that partners can be authentic and committed to their faith to credibly enter the dialogue. They speak with deep appreciation about the friendships they have developed with people of other religious paths.

The religious diversity we encounter globally and locally—in our neighborhoods, in the hospital room, or in the counseling office—calls us to care for individuals and communities by working together. Speaking from the context of my own Christian faith, cooperating with persons across religious traditions in the work of healing is a spiritual practice rooted in core Christian beliefs. Collaborative action provides modest goals, entry points, and a low threshold where participants do not feel threatened in their religious identity. Cooperation starts with a common ground but does not intend to dissolve differences. As we work together and get to know each other, we are changed in the process. Interfaith cooperation involves head, heart, and hands. We begin to feel differently and perceive the religiously other more realistically. In the process of caring for our community and each other, we can repair strained and distant interreligious relationships.

Interfaith work is not without struggles, and challenges us to ongoing learning. I share the experiences of other religious workers whose voices are heard in the book: interreligious encounters can expand and deepen the understanding not only of another faith but of our own tradition. Moreover, the discovery of connections and development of friendships encourage and nurture our work. I hope I have been able to demonstrate throughout this book that cooperation makes sense, theologically and psychologically.