

Observations on Inter-faith Dialogue

V. Bruce Rigdon
Chicago, Illinois

I have very much appreciated the opportunity to read W. Eugene Marsh's essay entitled "Sharing the Gospel in a Religiously Diverse World." Gene is a friend of many years for whom I continue to have both affection and deep respect. I think that his essay is a very good beginning for talking about the reasons for taking inter-faith dialogue seriously and some of the disciplines which it requires. If I have any criticism to offer, it would simply be that I do not think that the essay goes far enough.

In these brief remarks I would like to concentrate on two things. First, that inter-faith dialogue and relations are more important than ever before precisely because so much of the violence and terror in our time claims to be grounded in religious faith and ideology and reflects the bitter and long-standing conflicts among the world's religions. Second, that the search to resolve such conflicts through dialogue and cooperation will inevitably require profound changes in each of these religious traditions and that includes our own Christian tradition as well.

In his essay Gene doesn't write about the fact that religion has been the cause and the source of incredible violence in human history. For all of the benefits that religions have sought to foster in and for their adherents, the violence which they have espoused and the amount of pain and suffering which they have often caused are incalculable. And there is considerable evidence to suggest that Christianity and its churches have historically been among the most aggressive and violent of all of the world's religions. It is not necessary at this point to draw up a list of the churches' involvement in acts of terror, violence, and injustice. From the Crusades to the Inquisition, from the Salem witch trials to the forced conversion of native peoples, one could make the case that violence and Christianity go together like hand and glove.

What is it in Christian faith and church practice, one could well ask, what is it in the ethos of Christianity itself that has led the religion of Jesus to become such a source of violence? The world of the twenty-first century is a very dangerous place. Its first decade seems to suggest that it may become an even more violent century than the one that preceded it. What appears to be somewhat different is the prominence of the world's religions as the causes and excuses for much of this violence. Whether Islamic terrorists, radical Jewish Zionists, Christian fundamentalists, or extremists in any of the other world religious communities, there appear to be growing numbers of presumably religious groups which interpret their holy texts and traditions in such narrow and literal terms that they are led to make an inevitable connection with violence as necessary religious acts. Many of those involved in the spread of this violence claim legitimacy for what they do on the basis of the teachings of one or another of the world religions. So whether or not our religious communities are in fact responsible for violence and destruction, we are all of us involved, whether as cause or as excuse for violence and death.

In light of all of this, we can no longer afford to view inter-faith dialogue as simply a special interest or hobby for church elites or people with time on their hands. As Gene has so rightly pointed out, it is now for us and our children quite literally a matter of life and death. If we once viewed inter-religious dialogue as a conversa-

tion in which we compared and discussed what we do and don't believe, it is such no longer. What is at stake is whether religion will become a blessing or a curse for human life in our time. We can seek together to build a lasting peace for the whole human family, or we can allow others to continue to build walls of separation and to plant and nurture seeds of suspicion, fear, hatred, and misunderstanding which will do untold damage to the efforts to foster and work for the transformation of this world which God loves.

Let me say it quite bluntly. If we once believed that the mission of the church(es) was the evangelization of the world, that is, the conversion of every man, woman, and child on earth to a form of faith and life similar to our own, it is now evident, it seems to me, that the love of Christ constrains us to work with brothers and sisters of all religious communities to end violence, most especially religiously motivated violence and to struggle together to make every nation a place that is safe, a place of peace and well-being. This must begin with transforming the way that we understand and treat one another. At the very least it means that we must get to know "the others" by learning to listen to them, not for the purpose of besting them or converting them, but rather to come to understand something of who they really are and what experiences have powerfully shaped them. Our children will never learn the important skills and disciplines of dialogue, so necessary for peacemaking, if they do not experience us as people who are good listeners, even when we may not like what we hear.

Gene does well to remind us that with our rapidly changing demographics, it is no longer necessary to cross oceans in order to share in a life of dialogue with people of other faiths. They are already becoming our neighbors and our fellow citizens. Our children and their children are already going to school and growing up together. The behaviors of our congregations will speak powerfully to our children about whether the meaning of life is to be discovered in confrontation and conflict or in dialogue and cooperation. They will see soon enough whether our religious talk about such things as "the Covenant" is in fact code for keeping people out who are not like us or gathering all of us into a blessed vision of diversity in community, the reign of God. A life of dialogue is in the end a profoundly theological and spiritual matter. Dialogue requires a special quality, a spirit of openness, of love toward the other. Theologically it affirms that God, who truly loves us all, may have something of importance to say to Christians and to our churches, something to teach us precisely through people of other faiths and through the gifts that God has given them. Among these gifts is that each of us as human beings is created in the image of God and that we are all of infinite value precisely because we are infinitely loved by God.

This is, it seems to me, so important that I want to say a little more about it. As an undergraduate student many years ago, I spent my junior year abroad at the University of Hong Kong and Chung Chi College. This was the result of a special program of the Presbyterian Church designed to enable American students to study for a year in colleges and universities in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

For that year I was part of an almost entirely Chinese environment. I lived in a student hostel in which I was the only non-Chinese resident. My friends and classmates were all Chinese, my food and drink were Chinese, my studies were about things Chinese, and even the congregation where I worshipped prayed in Mandarin. It was one of the most significant experiences of my life. I learned many fascinating things about what it meant to be Chinese in the middle of the twentieth century. But perhaps

one of the most important things that I learned was that I myself would never be Chinese! I could appreciate many things about Chinese history and culture. I learned to enjoy Chinese cooking and to admire Chinese calligraphy and art. But what my Chinese friends had taught me precisely through their hospitality and welcome was to know and understand myself in quite a new way, a way that only our differences could have made clear to me. My appreciation of them became permanently part of my own identity. The differences between us continue to remind me of who I am.

These new friends made me aware that much about who I am has to do with things over which I have little or no control, save how I respond to them. Yet these things have significantly shaped my life. That I am white, male, middle class, American, Protestant, and a member of the Rigdon family are all elements that have made me who and what I am. As a matter of fact, in the years after I returned to the U.S., many of these elements became issues of social revolution as well as matters of my personal identity. If the Chinese had given me a radically new perspective on what it meant to be an American, so African Americans forced me to begin to understand what it means to be white in America. They did that precisely by allowing me to see what it meant to be black in America. They did that by forcing me to understand who they were and what they were going through as the victims of massive injustice and discrimination in America. And so it also was with my identity as a male. It was women, including my own wife and daughter, who made me come to terms with my identity as a male by teaching me something of what it is like to live as women in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. More recently I have had to come to terms with the issues of sexual orientation as friends who are gay and lesbian have made me aware of their painful experiences of exclusion, rejection, and discrimination, especially by the church.

My point is a very simple one. We inevitably learn who we are from others, especially those who in significant ways are different from ourselves. It is through coming to know and understand them, an experience which involves both pain and delight, that we learn not only who we are, but also what possibilities we have to change or transform the complex elements that together form our identities. Integral to this process is the discovery that we did not by ourselves create *de novo* all of these elements but rather received them as the result of our own histories, cultures, ethnic and racial backgrounds, countries of origin, families, and the religious communities into which we may have been born.

We appropriately respond to some of these things with profound gratitude as gifts that we did not earn. These are realities which we want to affirm and preserve. They come from the generations before us. At the same time we have inherited things which are dark, ugly, and destructive. If we do not see them for what they are, if we do not call them by their right names, we are destined to become their victims. Our task and that of our generation is to find ways to reject them and transform them in the light of what is good, true, and beautiful.

In inter-faith dialogue and active cooperation, the same sorts of things are demanded of us. We need to listen to each other critically, carefully, and compassionately. We must take the risk of speaking the truth to one another in love. In coming to know those of other religious communities and traditions, we have the possibility to come to know and understand ourselves in new ways. In some situations we will learn new gratitude and reaffirm what we have received, while in others we will be forced to

make critical judgments that call for us to find ways to change who we are and what we understand our faith to mean. The fact is that none of us remains the same when we experience real dialogue. We continue to be as distinct as when we entered the encounter. Christians remain Christians, Moslems remain Moslems, Jews remain Jews. But we are not the same Christians and the same Moslems and the same Jews as we were before. And thus we come to understand something about the meaning of unity in diversity!

All of this has some very serious theological implications. It begins, as we have said, with the recognition that every person is created in God's image and is valued and loved by God. That extends to the recognition that God has not chosen to be absent from the life and history of those who are neither Christians nor Jews. And that is why we need to listen to their stories and hear their testimonies. It is why we need to experience their cultures, their customs, and their rituals. We will certainly discover some common ground as human beings and as people of faith, but it is our differences which may well prove the most instructive. We will not end up with some syncretistic blending of our spiritual insights. But we may very well inspire one another to be more faithful Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, etc. whose understanding of God has become deeper because of our encounters with one another.

I suppose that for many of us Christians the issue about dialogue with people of other faiths turns on how we understand who Jesus is. For some of us Jesus represents certainty and unchanging permanence. He is the builder and sustainer of the high walls of a fortress that offers the church safety, security, and an unchanging faith. But for others Jesus is the bridge-builder who encourages us to take the risk and cross to the other side where we may discover and encounter the other flocks about which the Lord spoke and who also belong to God.

It will not be easy to challenge the religious communities and institutions in our world to be transformed into agents of non-violence, justice, reconciliation, and peace. But that is what we as Christians are called to be about in the coming months and years. Our severely weakened national church structures and what is left of the ecumenical movement seem at this point hardly up to the task. But the great new opportunity and blessing is that this is a challenge that can be taken up by every congregation in every community across our land. May God give us the courage, imagination, and wisdom to undertake this urgent mission, and to do it together.