

Response to Eugene March's Article

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Eugene March's article "Sharing the gospel in a religiously diverse world" is as experiential as it is academic and hence resonates a lot with me. As someone who comes from an interfaith family background, with Muslims, Christians, and Traditional African practitioners living together as relations, and as someone who has been involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue at various levels, I find Professor March's point on the paralysis of the fear of causing offence a very timely reminder. Many Christians who stay away from engaging with people of other faiths mostly do so out of ignorance and/or fear of the other as the other. For many others engaged in interfaith dialogue, the fear is about causing offence. This latter fear feeds on the new gospel of political correctness as the former feeds on media headlines and xenophobic rhetoric. The greatest casualty in the fear of causing offence is an honest self-identification and self-expression.

A prominent Swiss theologian, Hans Kung, made the following well cited submission: "No peace among the people of the world without *peace* among the religions. No peace among the religions, without *dialogue* between the religions, and there is no dialogue between the religions without *accurate knowledge* of one another (my emphasis)."¹

Kung is making the point that *dialogue* between people of different religions is crucial for world peace. Dialogue, however, can only be productive and sustainable if founded on accurate knowledge of one another. Honest self-identification and self expression is critical for accurate knowledge of one another. Christians who are interested or involved in interfaith conversations need to start treating people of other faiths as adults capable of a reasonable conversation. The fear of causing offence which predominates and defines a large section of contemporary Western Christian scholarship can come across in the eyes of thoughtful adherents of other faiths as condescending and counter-productive.

Professor March makes a great point that preachers have enormous new responsibilities because the world around us has changed and is changing rapidly. Our sermons have much greater reach and diverse audiences than they did a few decades ago. People of other faiths are listening in to what used to be our in-house conversations. On any given Sunday, a preacher cannot be sure who is sitting in the pew or where the sermon of the day may end up on the worldwide web. One area Christians need to be mindful of therefore is the words/labels from inherited traditions and Scripture we use to depict the other. Words not only describe, but also define and shape attitudes.² The new shrinking world brings with it new responsibilities on preachers who are at the forefront or shaping attitudes.

I couldn't agree more with Professor March that people of other faiths find our response to the instruction in James 2:14-17 more important than our official theology. Foundational Christian beliefs and truth claims have been subjected to withering criticism, revision, and rejection all in the name of interfaith dialogue. The impression is created that the only two options before Christians in a religiously diverse world are

to impose or surrender our beliefs. This may well be true in light of Western Christian experience, but it is not necessarily the experience of Majority World Christians. As Lamin Sanneh observes,

World Christianity offers a laboratory of pluralism and diversity where instead of faith and trust being missing or compromised, they remain intrinsic. You could not recognize world Christianity without the myriad tongues of praise and hope that also echo humanity's hopes and dreams. It shows that you don't have to be a religious agnostic in order to be a devout pluralist!³

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a leading Muslim scholar of our time, makes the point that when various religious questions are discussed in a dialogical situation, it is often forgotten that the Christian position is not one of a St. Augustine or St. Bernard or even Martin Luther or John Wesley. Many ideas and practices which are now defended as Christian are the result of antireligious and secularist forces of modernism before which certain thinkers have retreated or which they have joined during the past few centuries.⁴

In other words, Nasr and many thinking people of other faiths are frustrated by the post-modernist rationalistic and relativistic approach to Christianity in the name of reaching out to people of other faiths. Many are not sure what, if anything, the Christians they are in dialogue with believe. Nasr speaks for the vast majority of Muslims engaged in dialogue with Christians who are wondering whether there is anything sacred and enduring about the Christian tradition. One would have thought that we need roots in order to branch to others. What constitutes these roots in the Christian tradition may vary in different contexts.

I wish Professor March had qualified his statement that "Christians for too many years approached the 'unchurched' as God's enemies in need of conversion or eradication," by saying "Western Christians." The mindset that "everyone needed to be a Christian *just like us*" is a Christendom imperialist mindset, the mindset that seeks to extend rather than expend the self. This is not an attitude that Christians from the Global South will identify with.

Professor March makes a critical point on diversity and the need for Christians to find ways of celebrating it in our societies. There is an African proverb that "if you cannot leave someone you are travelling with behind, you have to wait for them," i.e. walk at their pace. While in the West many still view people of other faiths as synonymous with "aliens" or even illegal aliens, these folks are here to stay, and we all have to learn to share the common space. Having said that, talk of "rich diversity" and "tapestry," while very well intended, runs the risk of being simplistic if not naïve. For it is not everything that is out there that can be put into the categories of "diversity." To use biblical imagery, there is "wheat" and there are "weeds" in our world and in all religions. There are serious irreconcilable differences, distortions, and disagreements. Thus, not all "threads" necessarily belong within "God's tapestry," and not all diversity is necessarily rich. And on that note, may I humbly suggest that Professor March does not have to go all the way to Africa to find "Christians" whom he will have "serious disagreement" with!

In my experience with people of other faiths, the vast majority are very dubious

about the use of language such as “God’s tapestry,” especially when it is ensuing from the West. After all, if we are honest with ourselves and with God, only God knows what belongs in God’s tapestry. As Prof. March himself has helpfully pointed out, while official theology, including contemporary theologies of other religions, may be very useful for in-house Christian conversations, they hardly resonate with people of other faiths. All they care about is to be known, understood, and accepted with their distinctive values and norms. If only we can talk and work more on change of attitudes and less on formulation of new theologies, the world will be a better place for us all. For it is not only how one thinks that affects how one lives, but how one lives that affects how one thinks.

Notes

- 1 Hans Küng, “Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam,” in L. Swidler (ed.), *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987).
- 2 John Azumah, “The Integrity of Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2002), 169-80.
- 3 Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).
- 4 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Comments on a Few Theological Issues in Islamic-Christian Dialogue,” in Yvonne Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, University of Florida Press, 1995, 457-467.