

Interfaith Dialogue in the Pulpit—Proclaiming an Emerging Gospel: A 21st Century Imperative

By Denise Yarbrough

Abstract

In this article the author reviews the context of contemporary American Christian experience, which is a thoroughly multi-religious, pluralistic context. The article argues for an approach to Christian preaching which would at all times interpret Christian texts in a way that is radically hospitable to and respectful of other religious traditions, avoiding supercessionism, triumphalism or any sense of superiority. This pluralist preaching model would seek to proclaim an emerging gospel that is formed and proclaimed in conversation with the wisdom and insights of many world religious traditions. Such preaching is presented as a spiritual imperative for 21st century Christian formation.

Interfaith dialogue has exploded in the United States since 9/11, as more and more ordinary citizens seek to understand people of different world religious traditions. Many mainline Christian denominations are actively engaged in interfaith dialogue as believers seek to learn about the many different faith traditions that are now a part of the American cultural landscape. In cities and villages across the land, interfaith dialogue groups are engaging in all kinds of interfaith activity, including educational programming, community service and advocacy work. As interfaith dialogue becomes increasingly prevalent, the task of preaching Christian texts with sensitivity to the pluralistic context in which such preaching happens becomes critical.

A Christian preacher today enters the pulpit with Christian texts that must somehow be broken open for a congregation comprised of people whose neighbors, colleagues, and family members may be of a different religious tradition. How is a Christian to relate to her Muslim co-workers or his children's Hindu friends? What do the claims of our Christian tradition mean in the face of the religious diversity that surrounds us? How can we preach the gospel without appearing to condemn our interfaith neighbors or to suggest that while their religion is interesting, only ours is "true" or "valid" or offers "salvation?"

The religious landscape of twenty-first century America differs radically from that of fifty years ago. Christians in North America today are living in a culture in which their mainline faith is assumed to be the religion of the majority when in reality the Christian faith has lost adherents in significant numbers. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports "the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country" (Pew Forum 2008, 5). Religious diversity (and pervasive secularism) has transformed our culture in dramatic ways. Theologian Douglas John Hall writes:

We do our theology from now on in the midst of many others "who are not (but decidedly not!) of this fold." Our own *faith*, if only we are aware of it, is a constantly renewed decision, taken in the knowledge that other faiths are readily available to us (Hall 1991, 208-203).

This enormous change in the religious landscape has profound implications for how we preach the Christian gospel in this multi-religious context. Diana Eck writes:

[M]ake no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth.... The issue of living in a pluralist society and thinking theologically about the questions it poses is important today for every community of faith. How do we think about our own faith as we come into deeper relationship with people of other faiths and as we gain a clearer understanding of their religious lives? (Eck 2001, 4).

Theologian Paul Knitter explains the emerging theologies of the religions within the Christian tradition. He sees the pluralistic nature of our modern world as something that poses problems for Christians but also holds much promise. He says:

But today, the presence, power, and richness of other religious traditions have vigorously entered Christian awareness. Our contemporary intercommunicating and interdependent planet has made us aware, more clearly but also more painfully than ever before, of the multiplicity of religions and of the many different ultimate answers (Knitter 2002, 1).

Theologians like Knitter have been wrestling with the significance of other world religions for Christian theology for many years. At the professional level, interreligious dialogue has been ongoing since the early twentieth century. The laity, however, has been less involved in this interreligious enterprise. And parish clergy, if they have studied the theologies of religious pluralism at all, rarely, if ever, apply that theology when they are preparing sermons,

particularly if their theological position leans toward a pluralistic perspective. Given the current cultural realities the time has come for pluralist preachers to claim their voice and pronounce their pluralistic theology from the pulpit. As more and more Christians have friends and neighbors who practice a different religion, the time has come for Christians to understand those religions and the people who live them. The preacher has a significant role in bridging the gaps in theological understanding and in addressing the questions lay Christians have about other world religions, with a weekly opportunity to engage the texts of the Christian tradition in conversation with the multi-religious reality of our modern society.

In the post modern context, philosophers and theologians no longer speak about one absolute truth, having come to accept as a given that there may well be a variety of “truths” in the world. Post modern thinkers tend to favor “both/and” rather than “either/or” when reflecting on questions of ultimate existential importance. Homiletical texts now encourage preachers to consider the “other” when preaching Christian texts, with “other” usually defined as those traditionally excluded from Christian proclamation like women, people of color, different ethnic groups within the Christian tradition, sexual minorities and the like (See McClure 2001 and Webb 1998). With the exception of those who have taken on the Christian tradition’s sad history of anti-Judaism and the rampant anti-Semitism that followed from it (See Salmon 2006), few Christian preachers have wrestled with the challenge of preaching Christian texts with the “religious other” in mind, particularly from a perspective that would treat those of other world religions with respect. Christian preachers need to be catalysts for interreligious dialogue and lay the foundation for Christians to engage in relationship with the “religious other” in a welcoming and radically hospitable way.

Interfaith dialogue is a crucial component of Christian spiritual formation in the 21st century. Christians must learn about the deep wisdom of their own faith in conversation with the wisdom of their neighbors’ faiths. James L. Fredericks, Roman Catholic theologian, puts it well:

Christianity will be transformed only through the transformation of Christian believers themselves. Here I am talking about a real deepening in our religious vision, a spiritual transformation generated by the encounter between the truths of Christianity and the truths of non-Christian religions. In this transformation, Christian believers will find a way to deal with religious diversity in a way that is responsible and creative, responsible to the demands of their own religious tradition and creative in looking on the greatness of other religious traditions as a way to plunge more deeply into the greatness of their own (Fredericks 1999, 179).

Fredericks argues for an approach to interfaith dialogue that he calls “comparative theology.” He says:

Comparative theology is the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition. Doing Christian theology comparatively means that Christians look upon the truths of non-Christian traditions as resources for understanding their own faith (Ibid. 140).

Fredericks envisions this process as one aimed at more than achieving mere tolerance between people of different religious traditions. The task of comparative theology is one that pluralist preachers must embrace and model in the pulpit as they interpret Christian texts.

The need for interfaith dialogue that is genuine and honest is crucial. In our post 9/11 world, religious conflicts and differences are affecting all of us in ways we had never imagined possible. No longer can we ignore our neighbors of other religious faiths because they are right here in our own neighborhood, workplace and community. We are all aware of the extent to which religion is often used as a way to oppress others, or as the root of all kinds of violence and degradation between and among human beings. Knitter points out:

To have our own mother tongue and yet to be able to understand and converse in other cultural or religious languages is to feel the wonder and necessity of becoming what we might call ‘world citizens.’ ...In this sense, all of us today are being called toward some degree of world citizenship. Two of the great threats facing the community of nations and cultures are the nationalism and fanaticism that grow among those who have never left their village and who think it is superior to all others (Knitter 2002, 12).

Preachers have a significant role in creating a climate in contemporary Christian churches that will encourage and affirm the kind of dialogical approach to other world religions that Knitter and Fredericks advocate. Given the important role that the sermon has in the formation of Christians today, it is all the more imperative for preachers who embrace a pluralist theological position to have the courage to preach it, no matter how uncomfortable it might seem to do so. In fact, the pluralist position is one that carries theological integrity within the

Christian tradition, so no preacher need feel apologetic about preaching pluralistically. Pluralist preaching fosters Christian formation.

Moreover, spiritual and religious people in our contemporary culture are interested in interfaith dialogue and intrigued by the beliefs and practices of the religious “other” with whom they live and work. To engage the multi-religious reality that contemporary Christians are living is to embark on a journey of spiritual formation that is life giving and energizing and that lessens the impression that “traditional” Christianity is narrow minded, outdated, judgmental and out of touch with our post modern world. The sermon is an important place to begin the exercise of comparative theology and to invite Christians into an exciting journey of interfaith discovery.

Christian theologians have long wrestled with the tension between the exclusive claims of Christianity in light of the multi-religious diversity of the world. A variety of Christian theological approaches have been articulated, some more accepting of other world religious traditions than others. Those theologians who have articulated various forms of pluralist theology, such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, Raimon Pannikar and S. Mark Heim and many others are sources for pluralist preachers to draw upon as they break open the Christian texts every week. Contemporary pluralist theology and contextual understanding of sacred texts provide the tools for a more generous and radically hospitable way of presenting the Christian gospel in a multi-religious context.

Pluralist theologians have tended to fall into three categories of religious pluralism: philosophical/historical (John Hick), religious/mystical (Raimon Pannikar) and ethical/cultural (Paul Knitter) (Knitter 2002, 112-113). Each of these schools of pluralist theologians approach pluralism from a different angle, and each provides a preacher with ways to embrace pluralism in the pulpit. The Hick tradition would drive a preacher to focus more on God than on Jesus in preaching Christian texts, with “really Real” acting as the glue that binds us to all other world religious traditions. Pannikar and other mystical pluralists draw upon the immense similarities between religious mystical experiences across religious traditions, giving preachers a way to lift up Christian mystical experience as a category of world religious mystical experiences. Theologians like Knitter have rested their pluralism upon the common concerns of humanity for a just and peaceful world, and for common efforts to create a sustainable existence on the planet. Pluralist preachers schooled in the thinking of these theologians will interpret Christian texts with considerably more openness to the religious “other” than has historically been true of Christian preaching.

S. Mark Heim has articulated a form of pluralism that is truly post-modern in its approach, positing a theology that accepts that all religious traditions are designed to help their followers achieve different religious ends (Heim 1995). Those different religious ends are, he believes, all good in their own way, but their differences are real and to be respected. Heim’s theology allows a pluralist preacher to approach Christian texts in a way that does not require demeaning or diminishing the richness and wisdom of other world religious traditions even while celebrating the benefits of the Christian tradition.

Some Christian teachers of preaching have pointed out the atrocious history of Christian anti-Judaism that has lent power and legitimacy to all kinds of anti-Semitism for many centuries. Marilyn Salmon thoroughly examines the New Testament texts that have been used to denigrate Jews and Judaism throughout Christian history (Salmon 2006). She calls preachers to task to unpack the gospels and epistles in radically different ways to avoid unintended anti-Judaism and the supercessionism that is embedded in many Christian texts and overt in much Christian preaching. Much of her criticism of Christian preaching with respect to Judaism can also be said of Christian preaching with respect to other world religions. Thus a new approach to preaching Christian texts in a multi-religious context must be developed.

We preach in a world marred by violence and conflict, often overlaid with religious language and bigotry. “Islamic extremists” has become a synonym for “terrorist” and unfairly characterizes a rich and wise religious tradition followed by millions of faithful people. Preachers of the gospel today must articulate a gospel of love and reconciliation that extends to people of all world religious traditions, not just other Christians. Forming Christians for the twenty-first century means proclaiming a gospel that brings hope in a conflicted world and encourages respect and delight in the religious other.

Pluralist preaching is an adventure. The preacher is challenged to find new meanings in old texts and to participate in defining what is “gospel” in the twenty-first century. The successful pluralist preacher will be one who will delight in the deep wisdom that other religious traditions offer about the divine mystery Christians call God. A pluralist preacher will discover that there is nowhere in the world where God is not, whether in a Sikh *gurdwara*, a Hindu temple, a mosque or an Orthodox divine liturgy. The pluralist preacher will lead his congregation into the gospel and send it out into the world with a hunger to see the face of Christ in the religious other without expecting those people to become like us. The image of the “body of Christ” will become more expansive and multi-valent, reaching beyond the confines of the Christian churches to include all the many children of God who worship in different ways

and know God through different stories. The Christian scriptures reveal God in all God's mysterious diversity, and the pluralist preacher can skillfully open her listeners to the immense complexity and beauty of the divine mystery as revealed in those scriptures with hearts and minds ready to find God in and beyond those texts.

Christians are quick to critique moderate Muslims for their perceived failure to articulate moderate and peaceful interpretations of the Qur'an and to condemn extremists who interpret it violently. The same critique can be directed to Christian preachers who may not believe the exclusivistic language of the Christian tradition but who fail to interpret that tradition in a more hospitable way when standing in the pulpit. Christian preachers need to reframe and proclaim in a radically new way the many texts of the Christian tradition that have formed the basis for contempt of other religions, boastful pride in our own, and all too often, violence against those who do not share our Christian commitments. For example, John 14:6ⁱ has often been used to "prove" that only those who follow Jesus will be saved. That text appears in the Revised Common Lectionary in Year A on Easter 5. A pluralist preacher will confront the exclusivism of that text, explaining the conflicted religious context in which John's gospel was written. The pluralist preacher may also point out that Jesus says in verse two, "In my father's house there are many mansions." The possibility of "salvation" for others among those many mansions can be lifted up as a counterweight to the exclusive language of verse six.ⁱⁱ Theologian Paul Knitter has preached on that text affirming "Jesus is the Way that is open to other ways."ⁱⁱⁱ

Pluralist preachers will lift up the beliefs and practices of other world religious traditions, referring to the Muslim fast during Ramadan and comparing it to the Lenten season of fasting, or comparing Christian contemplative prayer practices to Buddhist meditation. By making favorable references to other traditions, the preacher creates a pluralistic and inclusive gospel. Comparing texts of other world religious traditions to gospel texts helps to create an attitude of respect while offering a dialogical opportunity to grow in understanding. Referring to the holidays of other traditions in the course of weekly preaching normalizes those religions for a congregation and invites a hospitable attitude to them.

Pluralism is about how we engage the multi-religious diversity of our culture. We can either retreat into our own corners and speak only to those who are like us, confining our knowledge and understanding and even experience of the divine to the boundaries of our own tradition, or we can embrace the wisdom and color and infinite variety of ways of knowing and engaging the divine being we Christians call God in all the other religious traditions that share our neighborhoods and towns and villages. Pluralist preaching can open up not only the Christian gospel but the immense wealth of wisdom and experience held in the many religious traditions of the world, inviting believers on a journey of discovery that will enrich their Christian faith and life in unexpected and delightful ways.

Pluralist preachers learn that engaging the gospel in conversation with the wisdom of the many other religions of the world creates exciting moments of epiphany, when the scriptures come alive in unexpected and delightful ways, bringing deeper meaning and richness to texts that have been broken open and proclaimed for these two thousand years in so many different ways. As Joseph Webb suggests, the gospel itself is pluralistic and "emerging" (Webb 1998, 104). He writes:

It is not so much that our sermons must "preach the gospel"; it is now that our sermons have to be part of discovering gospel—not necessarily "the" gospel, but "gospel." ... Christianity must come to terms with its own relativity. This is not a value statement; it is an axiomatic statement (Ibid. 104, 106).

John McClure describes an approach to preaching that he terms "other-wise" preaching (McClure 2001). McClure's "other-wise" preaching is a model for pluralist preachers to use as they embark on interpreting Christian texts in a multi-religious world. McClure explains:

Otherwise homiletics is homiletics that is, in every aspect, other-inspired and other-directed... a form of preaching that is constantly interrupted by the proximity of the other, by an obligation to the other, and by what Levinas calls the 'glory of the Infinite' given in the face of the other (Ibid., 9).

The twenty-first century preacher's challenge is to participate with integrity in shaping and articulating the gospel as it develops its distinctive meaning in the multi-religious context of contemporary Christian life. The "other" that the pluralist preacher must bring into the pulpit is all of humankind in its rich religious diversity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is "good news" for a hurting world, torn by violence and poverty and environmental degradation. The "good news" does not come at the expense of all those children of God who worship in different languages and traditions, rather that good news embraces all of the wisdom and insight and spiritual generosity of the world's religious tapestry. Pluralist preaching is the tool to make interfaith dialogue a staple of Christian formation, opening the hearts and spirits of Christians to the religious neighbor. Such preaching is a spiritual imperative in our multi-religious world.

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