

Exploring Biblical Approaches to Inter-religious Dialog

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1 Abstract

The question of how Christians can and should approach our interaction with believers from other faith traditions is an important theological, if not tactical issue which, having often been left unaddressed, has led to many unpleasant and counterproductive engagements with the Christian gospel with those whom we intend to reach. In this paper, I explore five areas that we must consider when approaching those of other faiths. First, the *benefits* of seeking inter-religious dialog (IRD) can motivate us to desire IRD for many reasons beyond “mere” gospel mission. Second, Paul Knitter’s five approaches to our theology of other religions are explored, helping us choose a way to view Christianity with respect to other faiths. These approaches range from paternalizing and exclusionary to quite postmodern and syncretistic (a middle position is recommended). Third, the *positioning of our heart* and self concerning others is reviewed, including such concepts as learning *from* v. *about*, and *exchanging gifts*, v. *a one-way value proposition*. Fourth, principles and methods for IRD are suggested. Lastly, some examples of what Christians might learn from other faiths are presented.

2 What good comes from IRD?

Certainly, IRD will challenge our assumptions about faith, and hard questions will need thoughtful and defensible answers. But when people of goodwill match wits, iron can sharpen iron productively (Pr. 27:17). There are at least four possible positive outcomes that come out of IRD. The first is *confirmation* of our own viewpoints. Nothing can give us confidence in our perspective as when the best perspective of an opposing or different view seems vastly inferior upon closer inspection. A well-tested view should stand up to both superficial and deep scrutiny, and our confidence grows as true and good ideas demonstrate their logic and value when confronted with incomplete or less true ideas. The second possible benefit of IRD is that of

broadening our understanding and theological models. In our attempts to understand the world aright, in both science and philosophy, we develop models that must incorporate existing data and experience, and be a good predictor of future findings (Pluta et al., 2008). An incomplete or bad model will not anticipate certain objections or realities, and often, our IRD partners will have exposure to those ideas which we have not. Our model may need revising to answer new questions. However, if our model is inaccurate, we may need to change or even discard it!

This leads us to the third possibility, which is *agnosticism* or *conversion*! This may not seem like a positive outcome, but it is if what we believed was actually a lie. Finding and deeply imbibing truth is a key to happy healthy living, and bad ideas lead us to misery. However, as an immediate outcome of IRD, conversion is unlikely for both emotional and intellectual reasons. The former because we don't easily abandon faith commitments, no matter how tentative they may be, and secondly because we have hopefully entered into dialogue *after* having studied our own faith, including apologetics. A fourth and primary good that comes out of IRD is that we build bridges for both mission and peacemaking.¹

The primary motivator, however, besides the good that it will do us, is Jesus' imperative to love our neighbor (Mk. 12:31). Genuine love requires a relationship that involves more than just compassion for distant, unknown people. As Eric Fromm put in his classic book *The Art of Loving*:

“The active character of love always implies certain basic elements, common to all forms of love. These are care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. (1989, p. 24)

¹ The priority and art of Christian peacemaking is largely lost in modern, politicized evangelicalism, but has been well elucidated as a Christian ethic by those such as Gushee (2017), Stassen (2004), Cole (2009), Lederach (2014), and those from the African continent where armed conflict and the need for peace are not merely theoretical (Ngaruiya & Reed, 2020).

Dialog done properly develops relationships of love that can inform and bless both sides. But this begs the question, what is a proper Christian approach to such dialog?

3 How should we view other religions?

Having understood the benefits of IRD and its inclusion as a primary method of knowing and loving our non-Christian neighbor, we proceed to our intellectual view, which turns out to be more important than we might have imagined, in that it helps determine both our attitudes and tactics in dialog. Paul Knitter has provided a wonderful model for the various ways that one religion may view others, and we should each try to find our position Knitter's spectrum of five views (Knitter, 2002). The two main attributes that define these views are their understanding of the presence or absence of two types of knowledge in these other systems – *general* and *salvific* revelation. A summary of the views concerning these attributes is shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Knitter's Theologies of Religion

VIEW	General Rev	Specific Rev	Salvation
Total Replacement	NO	NO	NO
Partial Replacement	YES	NO	NO
Fulfillment	YES	PARTIAL	POSSIBLY
Mutuality	YES	PARTIAL	YES
Acceptance	YES	YES	YES

3.1 Total Replacement (TR)

In this austere view, there is neither *general revelation* nor *salvation* in other religions - they must be replaced. Not only is there nothing to learn from them, their contents are largely created as half-truths, lies, and deceptions to lead men away from Christ. Often considered to have demonic origins, they are like a stained blanket that cannot be cleaned but must be discarded, no matter how much comfort and warmth they have provided. This view is often held by those labeled “fundamentalists,” though not exclusively.

3.2 Partial Replacement (PR)

While seen as a possible subset of the first view, this view deserves its own place in that it is probably where most evangelicals will land and still feel safe about the verity and exclusivism of the person and teachings of Christ. In fact, both Catholics and Protestants have officially moved towards this position (though there is no central authority in Protestantism) in such publications as the official report from the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry led by Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking in the 1930's, and in the concessions of salvation outside of the Catholic Church in Vatican II (Vatican, 2009; Wogaman, 2014, pp. 5–8).

In the PR view, there is general revelation in other faiths but no salvation or even partial salvific possibility. We can learn common wisdom from them, but nothing about the life to come or other revealed truths. Other faiths can provide spiritual wisdom on the level of the wisdom books of the Bible, but no more. The good thing about this view is that it puts us on a footing to learn from others, and in so doing not only grow in our own wisdom but provide the opportunity and blessing to others in the mutuality of giving something of value.

Regarding salvation, however, the best other religions provide for their adherents is “a negative preparation [for the gospel]: they provide questions or indicate directions which only Jesus can answer and guide. The religions, therefore, can serve as a base from which to start because Jesus fulfills the truth which the religions have sought in vain” (Knitter, 2002, p. 41).

3.3 Fulfillment

This view allows for an increased work of the Spirit in other cultures and religions. That is, God is said to be providing both *general* and *specific* revelation of himself as a *preparatio evangelica*. This gray zone allows that God may be revealing specifics about his nature and plan of salvation, and there is a possibility that those who are dedicated to the “light that they have” may avoid damnation. This view, which strays into the thorny question of the eternal state of

those who have never heard the gospel, is based mainly on three scriptures. The first, Romans 1:20 intimates that much can be known about God through creation:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:20, NIV)

While it is unclear if any more than general revelation is implied here, a moral understanding is implied, and this might include not just the knowledge of guilt, but the need for pardon which God may be gracious enough to answer, even if the gospel is not present (although Paul himself intones that individuals need to hear the gospel to be saved, cf. Romans 10:14).

The second passage which may imply that salvation is possible outside of the gospel, and therefore perhaps aided by other faith systems, is Romans 2:

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger....All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law...Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. (Romans 2:7,12,14)

Again, it is arguable whether or not this passage indicates the possibility of salvation outside of Christ, but that is one legitimate possibility, especially coupled with the next passage, in which Jesus is describing the Spirit's work in regeneration to the curious Nicodemus:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

In context, this may apply only to the invisible and ineffable work of the spirit in the hearts of men, but proponents of the view also apply it to the fact that God may be working in the world's religions to prepare their hearts for the gospel, or even giving them glimpses of his salvific plan, even to the extent that they are saved in the same way the patriarchs were – by trust in a salvation they have not yet seen, but believe.²

3.4 Mutuality

This view may be characterized as “many true religions that need one another.” Not only does it admit that both general and salvific revelation are present in other religions, it assumes that no one has the full picture, and we need to learn from one another like blind men examining an elephant. Knitter nicely differentiates this view from fulfillment by defining fulfillment's content this way: “While the Spirit certainly reaches beyond Jesus in *extent*, it cannot go beyond him in *content*” (2002, p. 89).

3.5 Acceptance

This most inclusive view may be stated as “many true religions that do not need one another, and can disagree.” This view is very postmodern and is predicated on the view that we don't comprehend God, or the “Real” directly, but can only interpret the numinous in a secondary fashion. Since this is subjective, differences in theology are explained as differences in subjective understanding, not in differing objective realities.

² Other solutions to the problem of the unevangelized are nicely listed by Knitter, including *the last minute solution*, *after-death solution (post mortem repentance)*, *election solution*, *exception solution*, *universalism*, and the *wider mercy solution*. (2002, pp. 46–47). The election solution is Molinist, being based upon the counterfactual of God knowing who would respond positively to the gospel. I have also offered a solution called *generational justice* as a possibility, and address the problems with the election solution (Sinclair, 2013a, 2013b).

3.6 Choosing a Theology of Religions

Choosing one of these will impact how we approach IRD. If we feel we have nothing to learn from other faiths (replacement), we can not in honesty enter into a relationship of mutual, beneficial sharing of truth, not even common wisdom. However, if we adopt any of the other positions, we are set up to do more than dispassionately learn *about* others, but enter into a relationship of mutual benevolence and learning.

4 What heart attitudes should we develop before attempting IRD?

A brief charge must be given regarding preparing the heart for IRD, in that its primary purpose is not *informational*, nor *missional/evangelistic*, but personally *transformative*. Like a trip to a foreign country, we are immersing ourselves first in another's view to gain perspective, and if done rightly, we allow ourselves to be transformed by this new experience and information. In short, we should prepare to be changed by God! As philosopher Hans Gadamer has well said, "All understanding is first self-understanding" (2013). There are situations for being a paternalistic savior, teacher, or preacher, but IRD is not one of them, at least not primarily. It may, of course, provide opportunity for such functions, but without first building upon a two-way exchange of care, knowledge, respect, and gifts of truth, we will miss the deep, foundational, and lasting value of IRD.

5 What methods can be used for IRD?

There are many possible rules and tactical methods for engaging in IRD, but first, a warning about traps to avoid.³

³ Summarized from (Largen, 1979)

5.1 Traps to Avoid in IRD

1. **Cavalier or Aggressive Attitudes:** Matters of faith are *close to the heart*, and as such, can injure the heart if handled without care and respect. As much as we would like to discuss such issues dispassionately and objectively, their proximity to our individual identities and meaning-generating narratives makes such ideals difficult. Couching our professions and critiques in generous, tentative, and non-superlative language will go a long way towards avoiding sabotaging the IRD process.
2. **Monologuing:** A dialogue can quickly become a *monologue*. In our zeal to be heard, we often forget the admonition to *seek first to understand* (a powerful habit of success in more than just IRD, cf. the 5th of Steven Covey's habits (Covey, 2020)), as well as the biblical counsel that we ought to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (James 1:19).
3. **Patronization:** The desire to show our position as *superior* and *convert* the others should be replaced by the desire to understand, and share our tentative understanding, as well as our *candid experience* in seeking truth, with its uncertainties and foibles.
4. **Excessive Accommodation:** The opposite risk of seeking to *convert* is to seek *similitude* to the point of *abandoning core commitments* of our faith. For example, we may build rapport over the idea that Jesus was a great teacher, but should we therefore abandon our commitment to his divinity to maintain that rapport? Such temptations lead away from honest dialog and show us to not understand the necessity and value of holding to essential doctrines in a genuine faith commitment.

5.2 Largen's Three-Step Approach

This simple approach relies on the important step of wrestling with the challenges our IRD partner's views pose to our own worldview, and not immediately rejecting them, but rather,

considering how our own view might be modified or adapted to incorporate their view. (Largen, 1979, pp. 16–17)

1. Seek first to understand in *their* context.
2. Seek to *integrate* this new knowledge (successfully or not) into one's own tradition.
3. Where this is difficult, allow this to *challenge* our limited understanding of even our own tradition.

5.3 Swidler's Deep Dialog

Leonard Swidler, Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University and founder of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies suggests this simple four-step approach to achieve what he calls "deep dialog" (L. Swidler, 2021; L. J. Swidler, 2021):

1. Reach out in openness to the "other" in the search for truth and goodness.
2. Learn that there are ways of understanding and embracing the world other than our own.
3. Learn to recognize our commonalities and differences—and value both.
4. Learn to move between different worlds and integrate them in caring, cooperative actions.

Swidler has also penned a *Dialog Decalogue* which expands upon and gives instructions for implementation, excerpted below in **Appendix 8.1 below**.

6 What can Christians learn from other religions?

With these attitudes and methods, we may be assured that we have the right approach to IRD. However, this spiritual discipline, perhaps considered a sub-discipline of evangelism, is not meant as a foundational means of grace for new Christians, such as prayer, Bible meditation, fasting, and study (to name a few). This is a helpful discipline for more established Christians

who have begun to partake in the ideological mission of the church.⁴ Below are a few sample items that Christians might have the opportunity to learn and consider in IRD:

6.1 Islam

From Islam, we may first consider their dedication to fixed prayer, that is, fixed times for daily prayer. Despite the risk of a possible works-based motivation, many Christians are rediscovering this discipline, often practiced by Christian monks and other historical Christian communities. Second, most Christians fast from sunup to sunup (one full day), but many do not fast at all because they find this “minimal” requirement too difficult. The primary Muslim practice of daytime fasting, however, may be an accessible and fruitful alternative. Lastly, the graphic, if not cruel depiction of the eternal torment of the wicked under Islam may prick the intuition of many Christians that such “eternal torture” may not be congruent with the mercy, or even the holiness of God, and may be led to consider, such as this author has, the validity of such biblical alternatives as *conditional immortality* (Fudge, 2011).

6.2 Hinduism

One emphasis that arises from Hindu practice is that of hatha yoga, which involves engagement and care of the body as a spiritual discipline. Christianity lacks a clear and present theology or practice of physical care and discipline as part of spirituality, and such things ought to be considered, and are by a growing number of Christian authors.⁵

⁴ In his influential book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren describes five successive stages in the maturation of a Christian, in which being about one’s *mission* in life (integrated into God’s mission) must be preceded by the stages of developing *worship*, *fellowship*, *discipleship*, and *ministry*.

⁵ For three representative theological cases for, against, and agnostic on the topic of yoga and Christianity, see the following (respectively): (CSP & Vanier, 2001; Sculley, 2012; Toon, 1991)

6.3 Buddhism

One of Buddhism's strengths is the basic practice of non-judgmental self-observation, a.k.a. mindfulness meditation. This useful tool for self-knowledge and mastery may not be salvific, but its benefits are undeniable and congruent with Christian faith according to many, including the aforementioned Paul Knitter, who has penned the provocatively titled book *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian* (Knitter, 2013).

6.4 Sikhism

Sikhism, though founded as a pacifist and monotheistic response to the shortcomings of both Hinduism and Islam, suffered much severe persecution and had to develop a doctrine of self-defense as part of spiritual practice. Although Christian pacifism has the just-war alternative, self-defense skills have not been incorporated into the Christian disciplines, and are assumed to be part of a just governmental function. Sikhism might suggest that our spiritual disciplines are incomplete if we fail to incorporate this into more than a theory of government.

6.5 Zoroastrianism

It is now widely accepted that the Magi of the nativity story were likely Zoroastrian priests who were using the combination of the Hebrew prophecies brought to Persia by Daniel and the other Jews in the Babylonian captivity as well as the Zoroastrian use of astronomy/astrology to find the infant Jesus. While Evangelicalism is generally against the use of astrology and other types of divination or natural determinism, not only should the nativity story give us pause in this regard, we might also come to recognize the demoted but real validity of seeing God's plan reflected in the zodiac and the movement of the heavenly bodies. The many Christian titles that can be found by searching for "The gospel in the stars" reveal supportive materials from even some Christian luminaries as D. James Kennedy and the ultra-dispensationalist E. W. Bullinger. Even Carl Jung wrote an entire book charting the thousand-

year parallel between the bible and astronomical symbols (Jung, 1979). A particularly convincing and influential Christian documentary treatment of astrology and the star of Bethlehem and the possible signs in the heavens regarding the return of Jesus was recently published. It demonstrates that Christian avoidance of astronomy and astrology may be inconsistent with God's providence over all creation how God's plan may be revealed in astronomy (*The Star of Bethlehem*, 2015; Vidano, 2009).

7 Conclusion

Inter-religious dialogue is an advanced but rewarding, if not a necessary spiritual discipline for mature Christians. It can not only provide fodder for developing our faith but may build bridges of friendship for mission and fruitful evangelization of the lost, all the while promoting peace and understanding. There is much we can learn through being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

8 Appendices

8.1 Swidler's Dialog Decalogue (L. Swidler, 2014)

1. The primary purpose of dialogue is to **learn**, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly
2. Interreligious, interideological dialogue must be a **two-sided** project—within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities
3. Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete **honesty** and sincerity.
4. In interreligious, interideological dialogue we must not compare our **ideals** with our partner's practice
5. Each **participant** must define himself.
6. Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast **assumptions** as to where the points of disagreement are.
7. Dialogue can take place only between **equals**—both coming to learn
8. Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual **trust**: approach first those issues most likely to provide common ground, thereby establishing human trust
9. Persons entering into interreligious, interideological dialogue must be at least minimally **self-critical** of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.
10. Each participant eventually must attempt to **experience** the partner's religion or ideology "from within"

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