

Is. 42:1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;

3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to
those who walk in it:

6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I
have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

Rev. 21:22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the
city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.
²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will
never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honor
of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but
only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of
God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of
life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the
healing of the nations. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the
Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their
foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be
their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

We Believe: Christians and Other Religions

Isaiah 42:1-6

Revelation 21:22-22:5

When I was interviewing with the pastor search committee of the first church I served after graduating from seminary, they asked me what I thought of interfaith marriages. They were talking about Catholic-Protestant marriages! A lot has changed in the last four decades.

Never have Christians had the experience we have of having a Sikh temple down the street, a Hindu doctor, or a Buddhist next door neighbor, even here in Southern towns and cities. We cannot think of non-Christians as people in distant countries, the objects of our mission dollars, if they live next door and work in the next cubicle.

And, never have we Christians needed to be more clear about how we relate to those neighbors, friends, co-workers, and the rest of the world, who belong to other faiths, because our track record isn't good. The one group of non-Christians our predecessors did live close to were Jewish, and, for centuries, Jews were called Christ-killers, suspected of spreading the plague, and, even accused of killing Christian children for use in Jewish rituals. There were times when Jews were not to appear in public during Holy Week, and Christians were allowed to kidnap Jewish children in order to raise them as Christians. We sometimes think Adolf Hitler originated anti-Semitic atrocities, but he only took it to a new level; he didn't come up with the idea.

How do we see and relate those who are not Christian? And, in respecting and honoring other religions, how do we also maintain the core conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of the world?

I would be dishonest if I were to tell you there are clear and simple answers to these questions, because we Presbyterians, along with most other western Christians don't have clearly defined answers. The answers we do have are not perfect. They are generally divided into three categories labeled *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and, *pluralism*.

Exclusivism is the view that if you do not believe in Jesus, you are not saved, and when you die, you will go to hell. There simply is no hope for those who are not Christ-followers when their days in this world are over.

This view has often led to one of two attitudes toward non-believers: either they are to be dismissed or evangelized. Either we treat them as heathen who are undeserving of our respect, or we try to convert them in an attempt to keep them out of hell. This certainly maintains our conviction that Jesus is Lord and Savior, but it doesn't necessarily cause us to treat people of other faiths with respect and dignity. It does tend to cause more distance and alienation. Just try telling your Buddhist backyard neighbors they are going to hell if they don't become Christians.

Inclusivism is not the opposite of exclusivism. Inclusivism is the idea that heaven may well have non-Christians in residence, but that, somehow, they got there through Christ. Maybe they lived Christ-like lives; maybe they encountered Christ at the moment of death and were converted in that instant. Our Presbyterian heritage has maintained that the True Church, the true company of saints is made up of some in the visible church, and some in the invisible church. In other words, the membership roll of heaven does not equal the combined membership rolls of all earthly churches.

Pluralism would be the opposite of exclusivism. Pluralism says that there is more than one way to attain "salvation" – whatever that may mean in each religion. As William Placher puts it, pluralism says that Hindus or Buddhists or Muslims can achieve salvation or some equivalent goal, not by turning out to be anonymous Christians, but simply by being good Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims.¹ Pluralism most easily lends itself to the respect of other religions, but it would be difficult to say that it maintains the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of the world.

So, how do we understand and relate to folks who follow Moses' law, or Mohamed's Koran, or Buddha's Eightfold Path, or Confucianism or Daoism or Hinduism? The question matters, and its answer matters even more. In the words of Hans Kung, "There will be no peace among nations unless there is peace among religions." I offer these guidelines:

First, the traditional understanding of the Hippocratic Oath doctors take applies: *first, do no harm*. If the way we view and relate to people of other faiths does harm to them or our relationships with them, we

¹ William C. Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2003, p. 302.

need to be highly suspicious of those views and actions. Ours is a Lord of love, and we embody Christ when we embody love. When Jesus called followers, he didn't force them or threaten them, he simply invited them to follow him. When Paul began to share the Gospel of Christ, he didn't put down non-believers, he sought to reason respectfully with them. The Christian Church has a tragic history of persecution, pogroms, and crusades against people of other faiths, and, whatever we do, we cannot continue that history. First, do no harm.

Second, learn about other faiths. The first thing you will learn is that they are not all created equal. They don't think of salvation or heaven or morality the same way. Some don't even see themselves as a religion. So, one thing you learn is that it is extremely hard to say that all religions provide a legitimate way to heaven. Some don't even believe in heaven. While learning about them, be sure to learn the similarities and the differences to what we believe, because there are similarities...and there are often some very significant differences. If you have the privilege of knowing someone of another faith, *ask* them what they believe – sincerely and respectfully.

Third, do not generalize to an entire religion the actions of extreme views within that religion. Remember, we Christians have our extremists, too, and we don't want the world to judge us by the actions of, say, the congregation that holds hate marches at the funerals of police officers and members of the military.

Fourth, and, in my opinion, most important, do not give up the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of the world in order to make Christianity look like other religions, or to find common ground in some vague homogenized conglomeration of beliefs that fails to give due respect to any of them.

One of the saddest and most troubling experiences I've had was at the final meeting of the presbytery I belonged to in South Carolina before coming here. A presbytery is a local group of Presbyterian churches and one of the things presbyteries do is examine seminary graduates to be ordained as ministers. One young man was being examined for ordination and he was asked a pretty standard question: do you believe Jesus is the Lord and Savior of the world? His answer was vague enough to raise a few eyebrows. He said, "I believe Jesus is my Lord and Savior." He was asked, "Yes, but do you believe he is Lord and Savior of the world?" Again he answered, "Jesus is *my* Lord and Savior." The examiner then asked, "How do you understand John 3:16, that God so loved *the world* that he gave his only son?" Again, the words, "Jesus is *my* Lord and Savior." So the examiner asked, "How to you understand Second Corinthians 5:19, 'in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself...?'" The candidate for ordination refused to affirm that Jesus was anyone else's Lord but his: "Jesus is *my* Lord and Savior." The presbytery did not approve him for ordination, and, after that, I left to come here, so I never heard if he changed his view.

It is a central conviction of our faith: "in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself," and that we who believe in this triune God are to be a light to the nations, and that, at the end of time when the new Jerusalem is established, the nations will walk by its light and will be healed by its tree of life. Until then, we are to be peacemakers, bridge builders, mirrors reflecting his light and love into the darkest corners of war and poverty and injustice.

Mahatma Ghandi voiced one of the most convicting observations about the Christian faith: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." On the other hand, John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, said that we ought to pray for all "who dwell on earth. For what God has determined concerning them is beyond our knowing except that it is no less godly than humane to wish and hope the best for them."

May we love and respect those of other religions in just that way, understanding that what God has determined concerning them is beyond our knowing, and so that nothing in our behavior would cause them to say, "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians because they are so unlike your Christ."