P A U L  D.  N U M R I C H

*Christian Sensitivity in Interreligious Relations*

Abstract

This essay reflects on the implications of my mandate to guide seminary students "to think creatively and responsibly about how to proclaim the Christian gospel in multi-cultural contexts with a sensitivity to interfaith perspectives." I ask the question, What does it mean for Christian seminarians—and Christians generally—to engage adherents of other faiths with sensitivity to their perspectives? I offer a general definition of "sensitivity" and distinguish Christian sensitivity from other kinds, in that it is informed by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith. I set forth three obligations in interreligious relations: (1) Christians must understand other religions as they are; (2) Christians must recognize "the good things" in other religions; and (3) Christians must be prepared to receive critiques from other religions. I also discuss whether Christians might learn something new from other religions, something not contained in the Christian heritage. I conclude with an application of 1 Corinthians 13 to interreligious relations.

Key Words: Christian sensitivity, proclaiming the gospel, interreligious relations, 1 Corinthians 13

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My Mandate

With my hiring in 2004, the Theological Consortium of Greater Columbus, a cooperative venture in seminary education by Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Pontifical College Josephinum, Trinity Luthern Seminary, and affiliate member Bexley Hall Seminary, established the Program in World Religions and Interreligious Dialogue. I was given a mandate to “guide our students to think creatively and responsibly about how to proclaim the Christian gospel in multi-cultural contexts with a sensitivity to interfaith perspectives.”

In this essay, I will drill down into the implications of one suggestive word here—sensitivity. I do not know how this word came to be included in my mandate but I am pleased that it was. Consider some alternatives: “. . . to proclaim the Christian gospel in multi-cultural contexts with insensitivity or indifference or antagonism or disdain or contempt toward interfaith perspectives.”

Sensitivity is clearly preferable to such attitudes which unfortunately can be found in the Christian community today. So the question before us is this: What does it mean for Christian seminarians—and Christians generally—to engage adherents of other faiths with sensitivity to their perspectives?

But before moving too quickly to that question, I would like to underscore some language in my mandate that should not be overlooked.

I am charged with guiding seminary students “to think creatively and responsibly about how to proclaim the Christian gospel in multi-cultural contexts with a sensitivity to interfaith perspectives.” I appreciate both the pointedness and the open-endedness of this phrasing. Our engagement with adherents of other faiths must include proclaiming the Christian gospel—otherwise we do not bring our Christian identity to the encounter. But the mandate allows us to be creative, responsible, and sensitive in our proclamation.

I submit that many if not most adherents of other faiths want to hear our testimony as followers of Jesus Christ. Muslims, for instance, revere Jesus as a Prophet and consider Christians fellow People of the Book. In their sacred book, the Qur’an, these words appear, God speaking in the majestic plural: “. . . We sent Jesus, son of Mary: We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy into the hearts of his followers” (57:27). The Quranic word for “the Gospel” is al-Injil, the Arabic equivalent of the original New Testament Greek, probably by way of Ethiopian. As is sometimes the case, Muslims and Christians use the same vocabulary but consult different dictionaries. We do not mean the same thing when we speak of the gospel of Jesus—which is worthy of serious conversation and even testimony. Another serious conversation should arise out of this
Qur'anic verse: Many Muslims would like to ask us whether we, the followers of Jesus today, have compassion and mercy in our hearts toward them.

**Sensitivity**

First, we must consider the nature of sensitivity. What does it mean to be sensitive?

These words and their English stem, “sense,” are rich in meaning and nuance. The Latin root, *sensus*, means perception or feeling. The English noun “sense” carries a variety of connotations ranging from the bodily senses that perceive both external stimuli and internal changes (such as comfort and discomfort), to the mental or aesthetic grasping of some fact or quality, to an ethical appreciation of what constitutes appropriate conduct or judgment, to the “[emotional consciousness of something; a glad or sorrowful, grateful or resentful recognition of (another person’s conduct, an event, a fact or a condition of things).”

This last, emotional connotation is complicated. We value a sensitive person who is empathetic and caring toward others. Sensitivity training seeks to cultivate other-directed concern along with an awareness of one’s own “behaviour, feelings, and motives.” But we also know that sensitivity can be exaggerated, as when a person becomes overly sensitive, too “easily touched [by] emotion, impressionable; easily wounded by unkindness; . . . [even] ready to take offense, ‘touchy’.” In medical terms, hypersensitivity to certain substances causes an adverse reaction, as in an allergy. In psychological terms, the “highly sensitive person” has “an awareness of subtleties in stimuli as well as a potential to be overwhelmed by too much stimuli.” This notion of hypersensitivity has been extended to technology, though without the deleterious effects humans can suffer. A sensitive instrument of measurement can detect slight changes in whatever condition it is built to monitor, such as water temperature or radioactivity. A sensitive radio is capable of receiving or responding to weak signals.

Taking all this into consideration, what does it mean to be a properly sensitive person, that is, a person with a healthy sensitivity? A properly sensitive person is wholesomely attuned to other individuals, groups, and perspectives, and to how they affect oneself both positively and negatively. Beyond the ability to perceive merely what is, a properly sensitive person is capable of determining what is appropriate or good, what is laudable about others and what should be expected of oneself. One definition of “sense” not included above has to do with “[t]he mental faculties in their normal condition of sanity,” as in the phrase to be in “one’s right mind” or “right senses.”

A properly sensitive person is thus one who rightly senses the situation, the people involved, and what must be done.
Christian Sensitivity

If this is proper sensitivity per se, then what is proper Christian sensitivity? To put it another way, if all properly sensitive people show sensitivity in the way I just described, how can we distinguish the sensitive Christian from other sensitive individuals?

Actually, we may not be able to identify a sensitive individual as a Christian by behavior alone. A sensitive act can be expressed by a Christian, an adherent of another faith, or a person of no faith. Consider sensitive care of the ill. In describing a good Buddhist nurse, the Sinhalese scholar Lily de Silva writes that “He should be benevolent and kind-hearted, he should perform his duties out of a sense of service and not just for the sake of remuneration (metacitto gilanam upathathi no amisantar). He should not feel repulsion towards saliva, phlegm, urine, stools, sores, etc.” A good Buddhist nurse should follow the compassionate example of the Buddha, who on two occasions tended personally to desperately ill monks abandoned by their monastic brothers. “Thus the Buddha not only advocated the importance of looking after the sick,” comments de Silva, “he also set a noble example by himself ministering to those who were so ill that they were even considered repulsive by others.”12 The ancient text has the Buddha saying to his followers on one of these occasions, “Whoever would tend to me, should tend to the sick.”13

Of course, this calls to mind Matthew 25 where Jesus says that compassion shown to the sick and other unfortunates is shown to him. Our sacred text tells of our compassionate Master who also set a noble example of ministering to others. Benevolent, kind-hearted, and selfless care looks the same no matter who gives it and feels the same to those who receive it.

But the meaning attached to such care differs from one context to the next. The Buddhist caregiver understands suffering in light of the Buddha’s Dhamma (Pali) or Dharma (Sanskrit, “Teaching”) about the human predicament and its solution (more on this later). Thus de Silva notes that, beyond providing physical care, a good Buddhist nurse “should be capable of exhorting and stimulating the patient with noble ideas, with Dhamma talk.”14 I would expect a good Christian nurse to be capable of giving a gospel talk and a good secular nurse to be capable of giving a talk about the hope for “a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences,” to quote the Humanist Manifesto III as one example of secular ethics.15 It must be added that sensitivity in all these cases includes knowing when it is appropriate for a nurse to share such personal testimonies with a patient and when not. As the Buddha said, a Dhamma talk should be given “at the proper occasions.”16

Now we can see how Christian sensitivity differs from other kinds, in that it is informed by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing
presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith. The Christian looks to that revelation and that continuing presence to understand why sensitivity is necessary, why a person should be properly sensitive, that is, wholesomely attuned to other individuals, groups, and perspectives; capable of determining what is appropriate or good, what is laudable about others, and what should be expected of oneself; and rightly sensing the situation, the people involved, and what must be done.

The Christian also looks to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith to discern the markers of sensitive behavior. As we saw in the description of a good Buddhist nurse, other religious people draw upon their own heritages to understand why sensitivity is necessary and to discern the markers of sensitive behavior. There is usually broad agreement across religions about such markers, like benevolent, kind-hearted, and selfless care of the afflicted.

But when there is disagreement, when religions or religious people differ about the markers of sensitive behavior, the Christian must appeal to the touchstone of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith.

I do not wish to suggest simplistic categories here. The living heritage of any religion is vast, diverse, fluid, and subject to internal debate about the acceptable contours of identity. Granting that, I am suggesting that we must maintain an identifiably “Christian” authenticity as we engage others with sensitivity to their perspectives. Even such a one as the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter, whose interreligious agenda has been questioned by some Catholics, can write the following in his preface to the book Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian, in answer to the question, “Am I Still a Christian?”: “My central concern is that the theological genes I’m passing on are still Christian, that my reinterpretation of Christian belief, though really different, is not totally different from what went before.”

**Christian Sensitivity in Interreligious Relations**

So, what does it mean for Christian seminarians—and Christians generally—to engage adherents of other faiths with sensitivity to their perspectives? At least three obligations seem crucial to me: In interreligious relations, (1) Christians must understand other religions as they are; (2) Christians must recognize “the good things” in other religions; and (3) Christians must be prepared to receive critiques from other religions without hypersensitivity or undue touchiness.
Obligation #1: Understanding other religions as they are

Sensitivity begins with perceiving what is. There are civic, intellectual, and theological reasons for Christians to understand other religions as they are. 

Civically, the atmosphere today is rife with innuendos, half-truths, and outright falsehoods about religions. Christians recognize misrepresentations of our own faith, for instance the notion that Christianity is an unmitigated force for evil, or at least bad for the world on balance. When Christopher Hitchens answers the question “Is Christianity good for the world?” with “I have complete confidence in replying in the negative,” we know we are in the realm of mischievous hyperbole or worse. This is not new, of course. In 1930, Bertrand Russell answered the question “Has religion made useful contributions to civilization?” with “it is clear that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity demand a great deal of ethical perversion before they can be accepted.” Christians rightly challenge such untenable and insensitive misrepresentations of their faith.

But Christians must also be vigilant in investigating potential misrepresentations of other faiths as part of their civic duty. When a Hindu temple was proposed in my home town, rumors spread that it would feature rat infestation, drug abuse, and animal sacrifice. A local United Methodist minister and university professor, born into a Hindu family that was brought to Christianity by Presbyterian missionaries in India, came forward to debunk these untruths. He made it clear that he wished to win Hindu souls for Christ but not by means of unfair depictions of Hinduism or curtailing Hindu Americans’ constitutional rights.

In a 2010 statement titled “Beyond Park 51,” representatives of the parent denominations of my Consortium seminaries and other religious leaders responded to the public turmoil surrounding the proposed Islamic center in Lower Manhattan: “We stand by the principle that to attack any religion in the United States is to do violence to the religious freedom of all Americans. . . . Leaders of local congregations have a special responsibility to teach with accuracy, fairness and respect about other faith traditions.” Misrepresentations often lead to disdain for adherents of other faiths. Accurate representations can curtail this tendency.

In addition to civic reasons for demanding that Christians understand other religions as they are, we can point to intellectual reasons as well. Here, the academic study of religion provides a useful perspective.

Also called comparative religion or religious studies, the discipline of the academic study of religion dates back only to the nineteenth century. Its founders considered it “scientific” in taking an objective rather than a confessional approach to religion. Although this early exuberance was tempered over time with the acknowledgment that academic endeavors can claim only relative objectivity, the hallmark of the discipline remains a kind of
impartial empathy that attempts to understand the various dimensions of religious traditions as an insider might while bracketing out the question of their validity or value. Russell McCutcheon of the University of Alabama's Department of Religious Studies calls the academic study of religion an "anthropological enterprise," that is, the study of a certain kind of human activity, contrasting its focus on "the descriptive 'is' of human behavior" with theology's interest in "the prescriptive 'ought'. . .".

The evangelical Protestant Terry Muck of Asbury Theological Seminary wrote a book that introduces Christian students to the academic study of religion. At one point he likens this enterprise to a reporter's job: "[The scholar's] goal is always to describe religion in terms that would be acceptable to others interested in 'the facts of the case,' whether they are members of that religious community or not." If scholars do not report "the facts" of a religion as stated by its representatives, they have gotten the story wrong.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), the influential comparative religion scholar and Christian thinker of a previous generation, suggested in his collection of essays titled *On Understanding Islam* that we can test a hypothesis about another religion like we test other hypotheses about the social world. A hypothesis may sound "meaningful and even persuasive and acceptable" to us, Smith wrote, but unless it sounds likewise to adherents of that other faith, it is invalid. I recall holding my breath when I gave a similarly titled talk at a local church and noticed some Muslim acquaintances in the audience. The fact that I did not hear from them later makes me hope that my hypotheses about Islam rang true to their understanding and experience.

My seminary program was designed to draw upon the latest methods and findings of the humanities and the sciences in understanding other religions. (By the way, other programs and departments in my seminaries take the same approach to understanding Christianity.) Consortium-related seminaries like mine are about twice as likely as stand-alone seminaries to approach other religions in this way, which we think is indispensable to seminary education in the twenty-first century. Which brings us to the third reason for demanding that Christians understand other religions as they are. Civic and intellectual reasons are not sufficient. Seminaries require theological reasons.

Why should we understand the other religions theologically? Because, like our own religion, they are part of the human experience. Sensitive Christians are obliged to explore the full range of human experience and not to presume that our own perspective on it is universally valid.

Late in life, the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) engaged in a deep "encounter" with other religions, particularly Buddhism. Krister Stendahl reports that "After his visit to Japan in 1960, Tillich often said that
he felt he should start his theological work all over again,” a provocative thought given his impressive body of work.30

Even so, it is unlikely that Tillich would have become a Buddhist had he encountered Buddhism more fully. His own assessment of his visit to Japan is more ambiguous than Stendahl’s, and he states that “there was no question of my being ‘converted’ to Zen or any other form of Buddhism.”31 Tillich’s theological project of drawing the correlation between the human predicament and its religious solution would most certainly have retained its grounding in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. “It is clear that Tillich was willing to encounter other religions as well as determined to remain an authentic Christian,” wrote Joseph M. Kitagawa (1915-1992), the well-known historian of religions (and an Episcopal priest).32 A Christian can be both authentic to one’s own heritage and sensitive to the perspectives of other heritages.

In his last public lecture, Tillich explained how the insights of the academic study of religion can inform the work of Christian systematic theologians. “[W]e can use religious symbolism as a language of the doctrine of man, ... man in his true nature,” Tillich said. “The religious symbols say something to us about the way in which men have understood themselves in their very nature.”33

Christian theology describes the human experience with its own “symbols,” to use Tillich’s term, like the breath of God, the Imago Dei, and sin. Other religions might find such symbols meaningless. I recall the Thai Buddhist monk who asked me to take him to a Christian church so he could understand this “God idea” that made no sense to him. How could the derivative idea that human beings, including Thai Buddhist monks, are created by God’s breath and in God’s image make any more sense to him? (By the way, the monk returned to Thailand before I could take him to a church; I have often wondered which church I might have chosen for the visit.) Even when another religion shares a symbol with Christianity, the symbolic content can differ significantly—again, same vocabulary, different dictionaries. Sin is a part of the human experience in Islamic understanding yet Muslims assign it lesser weight than Christians. “Sin is not original, hereditary, or inevitable,” writes a Kenyan Muslim in response to his dialogue partner’s explanation of the Christian view. “It is acquirable through choice, but also avoidable through knowledge and true guidance from God.”34 In the Muslim view, this does not require the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

Religions must answer two basic questions: (1) What is the human predicament? If nothing were wrong with us, we would have no need for religion. (2) How do we rectify the human predicament? If a religion cannot offer a viable solution to the existential problem, it will not survive long. Beyond this very basic similarity, religions differ widely in their perspectives
on the human predicament and its solution, as expressed in their respective heritages.

Christians can benefit from a sensitive pondering of the existential testimonies of other religions even when they differ from our own. I once toured a neonatal intensive care unit with its medical director, a Hindu physician. He described the condition of the infants with severe or life-threatening congenital disorders. I asked him whether his Hindu beliefs in karma and reincarnation helped him to explain such cases. I knew that, according to Hinduism, a person’s current life situation is affected by his/her deeds or actions (the literal meaning of “karma”) in previous lifetimes. I expected the physician to give a straightforward answer about karmic balance sheets, as if karma’s ways could be distilled in a “Spiritual Accounting for Dummies” handbook. Instead, he told me that his Hindu beliefs could not fully explain the plight of these newborns. Later I discovered this verse in the Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most beloved Hindu sacred text: “... the meaning of action [karma] is inscrutable [Sanskrit gābānd]” (4:17).

I found this exchange with a Hindu revealing at a deep human level. Any religion’s explanation of the human predicament and its solution allows room for mystery or unknowing, acknowledging the “limits of human knowledge, where at some point both conceptualization and language inevitably fail us.” In his remarkable sermon titled “Mystery and Meaning,” Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) said, “The Christian faith does not pretend to resolve all perplexities. It confesses the darkness of human sight and the perplexities of faith. It escapes despair nevertheless because it holds fast to the essential goodness of God as revealed in Christ...” When sensitive Christians consider how other religious people find meaning amidst the mystery of life, so that they too might be “perplexed but not unto despair,” we discover grist for our theological mill in accounting for the breadth of human experience.

Obligation #2: Recognizing “the good things” in other religions

The second obligation for sensitive Christians engaged in interreligious relations requires us to recognize “the good things” in other religions. This alludes to language in one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Nostra Aetate (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), which is cited by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue as its primary conciliar mandate. The pertinent portion of Nostra Aetate (section 2) reads as follows:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true [Latin vera] and holy [sane] in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that
Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things [illa bona], spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

Other Vatican II documents employ similar language in referencing "the good things" in other religions. Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) speaks of "Whatever good or truth" (Quidquid enim boni et veri) that can be found among people outside of the Church (section 16). Ad Gentiles (On the Missionary Activity of the Church) mentions "whatever truth and grace [Quidquid autem veritatis et gratiae] are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God" and "whatever good [quidquid boni] is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples . . ." (section 9).42

In recent years, Vatican authorities and other Catholic voices have addressed perceived excesses in post-Vatican II enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue. The 2000 declaration, Dominus Jesus, from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith headed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), put it this way: "The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism," leading to "certain theological proposals . . . in which Christian revelation and the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church lose their character of absolute truth and salvific universality, or at least shadows of doubt and uncertainty are cast upon them" (section 4). The significant volume edited by Karl Becker and Ilaria Morali, Catholic Engagement with World Religions, reminds Catholics involved in interreligious dialogue of the importance of soteriology and the dangers of pluralism, indifferentism, syncretism, and relativism.43

If, as Nostra Aetate correctly taught, Christians should recognize, preserve, and promote "the good things" in other religions, our first task is to determine what qualifies as a good thing. Remember, a properly sensitive person is capable of ascertaining what is laudable about others, and a properly sensitive Christian ascertains what is laudable about others by drawing upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith. I will leave aside the derivative tasks of preservation and promotion to focus on recognizing what is good—and not good—in other religions.
The New Testament notion of discernment is helpful here, if used circumspectly. A number of Greek terms connoting “testing, approving, learning, dividing” are used in a variety of contexts in the New Testament, from a spiritual gift bestowed on some—“the discernment [Greek diakriseis] of spirits” (1 Corinthians 12:10, NRSV)—to every Christian’s duty to discern God’s will for their lives: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern [dokimazein] what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2); “Try to find out [dokimazontes] what is pleasing to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10).

The criteria for what is good and pleasing to the Lord include a moral component: “If we live by the Spirit,” writes the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5, “let us also be guided by the Spirit” (25), as evidenced by the “fruit of the Spirit” in one’s life: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (22). In contrast, Paul lists “the works of the flesh”: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealous, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (19-21a). We can appeal to these ethical criteria in determining what is good and not good in other religions.45

I have listened to many khutbas (Arabic, “sermons”) and other public talks by Muslim leaders touting the virtues of Muhammad (ca. 570-632/11 AH). According to Islam, Muhammad was the last or “seal” of the prophets sent by God (Allah). Muhammad’s words and deeds became normative for the Muslim community, second in authority only to the Qur’an. His “example” (sunnah) is recorded in the voluminous collection called the Hadith, to which Muslims turn for guidance in all aspects of life. “Both during his lifetime and throughout the following centuries, Muhammad has served as the ideal model for Muslim life, providing the pattern that all believers are to emulate. He is, as some Muslims say, the ‘living Quran’—the witness whose behavior and words reveal God’s will.” This explains why denigrating Muhammad is a serious offense to Muslims, as we saw in the Danish cartoons affair some years ago.

What did Muhammad have to say about anger, for instance? Following is a sampling from the Hadith:47

“The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger” (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 8, Book 73, Number 135).

“When one of you becomes angry while standing, he should sit down. If the anger leaves him, well and good; otherwise he should lie down” (Sunan Abu-Dawud, Book 41, Number 4764).
The story is told about two men who had an altercation in Muhammad’s presence. One was so angry that “his face became swollen and changed.” Muhammad later offered a saying that would calm the man’s anger if he would only recite it: “Seek refuge with Allah from Satan.” When someone relayed this advice to him, the angry man blurted out: “Do you find anything wrong with me? Am I insane? Go away!” (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 8, Book 73, Number 74). Apparently, the man’s anger escalated rather than abated. The story implies that anger has a demonic provenance.

Another story is told about a man who objected to the way Muhammad had portioned out something to his followers. “This distribution has not been done (with justice) seeking Allah’s Countenance,” he complained. Another person informed Muhammad about this complaint and later reported, “He [Muhammad] became so angry that I saw the signs of anger on his face. Then he said, ‘May Allah bestow His Mercy on Moses, for he was harmed more (in a worse manner) than this; yet he endured patiently’” (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 4, Book 55, Number 617). The implication is clear: Muhammad emulated the patience of Moses who had been even more aggrieved. The lesson for Muslims is also clear: If Moses and Muhammad could control their righteous anger, we too can control our angry emotions.

These Hadiths echo passages in the Qur’an where anger is eschewed and forgiveness encouraged (3:134; 24:22). If that sounds surprising, it only reinforces my earlier point about understanding other religions as they are, not as they are caricatured by the uninformed or underhanded.

It is easy to discern the offending “work of the flesh” here—anger. We know it well in our individual and corporate lives as Christians. It is also easy to recognize “the good things” here—patience, kindness, and self-control—because we have seen these manifested as “fruit of the Spirit” in the Christian community. Some Christians go so far as to claim that the Holy Spirit is directly at work when these latter attributes manifest outside of the Christian community. “Wherever the fruits [sic] of the Spirit are to be found,” proclaimed the India-born Protestant theologian Stanley Samartha (1920-2001), “whether in the lives of Christians or neighbours of other faiths, is not the Spirit of God present? These are visible and readily recognizable signs which do not need elaborate theological investigations.”46 For another example, we can cite two Catholic missionaries who appraise the Eightfold Path and “the Buddhist way of life” generally according to the criteria of the fruit of the Spirit, concluding that “God is at work in the Buddhist tradition,” indeed that God had planted this “good tree” of Buddhism which bears “good fruit.”47

But I must pause here. I am not readily convinced by such easy applications. The question of whether the Holy Spirit is or is not active in such contexts certainly needs more “elaborate theological investigations” than this.
Returning to the case of Muhammad, some Christians make similarly easy applications in discerning his place in God’s work. Albert Sundaranaj Walters is an Anglican minister and former lecturer at a Christian seminary in Malaysia. In his book, *Knowing Our Neighbour*, written from the perspective of a minority religious group in a predominantly Muslim country, Walters contends that Christians should accept “Muhammad as a religious leader through whom God has worked, and that is tantamount to holding that he is in some sense a prophet. Such a view does not contradict any central Christian belief.”\(^50\) Perhaps not, but does it not presume too much about our discernment? Muhammad is a prophet in Islamic theology, but in what sense could he be one in Christian theology?

Developing a theology of the Holy Spirit’s presence in other religions, a so-called “pneumatological theology” has gained traction in recent decades. The Malaysia-born Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong traces this activity back to the 1970s with the work of the Orthodox Metropolitan Georges Khodr (b. 1923) of Lebanon, the Belgian Jesuit Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004), and the aforementioned Indian Protestant Stanley Samartha.\(^51\) Khodr wrote in 1971, “The Spirit operates and applies His energies in accordance with His own economy and we could, from this angle, regard the non-Christian religions as points where His inspiration is at work. All who are visited by the Spirit are the people of God.”\(^52\)

The World Council of Churches has adopted a pneumatological theology. “We affirm unequivocally,” it pronounced in the 1990 “Baar Statement: Theological Perspectives on Plurality,” “that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths.”\(^53\) Commenting on the debate within the WCC leading up to the Baar Statement, the Nigerian theologian Justin Ukpong framed the key question thusly: “[D]oes God operate in non-Christian religions and through non-Christian persons?” His answer: “Examples like the pagan prophet Balaam prophesying under God’s influence (Num. 22:24), the Gentile Cornelius receiving a divine revelation (Acts 10:1-8), and others would force us to give an affirmative answer.”\(^54\)

In an address given in 1998, the Vatican’s Year of the Holy Spirit, Pope John Paul II asserted that “every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Moreover, he said, many of the founders of the world’s religions, “with the help of God’s Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience.” This does not make Muhammad a prophet, but it does attribute any maturation of his religious experience to the Holy Spirit. The pope continued: “[E]very authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.”\(^55\) This is consistent with Catholic teaching that distinguishes the adherents of religions from the religions themselves: “God may bestow grace on individuals; God may bestow special insights on the
founders or on individuals. All of these persons live in a religion. But God does not bestow grace and salvation through these religions, since he imparts these only through Jesus Christ.65

Long before these efforts, John Wesley (1703-1791) "suggested that God may have taught some heathens [the standard term of his day] all the essentials of true religion (i.e., holiness) by an 'inward voice.'"65 In Wesley’s view, the Holy Spirit is at work in all people through prevenient grace, though with varying degrees, expectations, and rewards depending on whether or not one is a Christian.66 In a gracious turn, Wesley believed that the holiness achieved by others "may fall short of Christian standards for final salvation, but the lack would be supplied by divine indulgence."67 Anyone can be a "candidate for heaven," so it is best left to God to make the final judgment on a case-by-case basis.68

My position is similarly restrained. Rather than declaring that the Holy Spirit is present here or there in the world’s religions, Christians do better to make the lesser claim that the Holy Spirit may be present. I say this for biblical, theological, and relational reasons.

The Bible does not question God’s sovereignty. God moves individuals and nations beyond the boundaries of the special people of God. “Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus [the Persian king],” we read in Isaiah 45:1, “whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him...” “Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,” God asks through the prophet Amos, “and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (9:7). Of course the answer is yes, but that answer came through the biblical prophet. I cringe when I hear categorical identifications of God’s sovereign acts in contemporary geopolitics, whether intoned by conservatives or liberals.69

More specific to our pneumatological inquiry, the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit is never portrayed pantheistically in the Bible. The divine breath of life is given to all creatures but the divine Spirit is more judicious in its activity. As the biblical scholar Eduard Schweizer points out, “there is no passage [in the New Testament] where the Spirit of God appears as working in the entire creation (and hence in all human beings).”70 Schweizer notes further that in the New Testament, “the Spirit is narrated as an event—as happening. What is the special point in all these narratives? Everywhere the Spirit is linked with Jesus.”71 This Christological linkage challenges any exegesis of New Testament narratives about the Holy Spirit that ignores the meta-narrative of Jesus’ role in leading people Godward.

The story of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Acts 10 is a favorite of pneumatological theologians.72 True, the Holy Spirit sends envos from Cornelius to Peter (vss. 19-20) and the “gift of the Holy Spirit” is poured out on the Gentiles who listened to Peter’s sermon (vs. 45), but the story
does not stop there. It moves toward the denouement of everyone being “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (vs. 48). In other places in Acts, this sequence is reversed—baptism in the name of Jesus Christ comes first, followed by the onset of the Holy Spirit (2:38, 8:14-17, 19:1-7)—but the Christological linkage remains. As one biblical scholar explained to me, the New Testament “gives no warrant for the notion of a free-ranging Spirit that is ultimately unrelated to God’s work through Christ.”

John Wesley would agree that prevenient grace is linked to Jesus’ atoning death on the Cross. Theologically, even those engaged in framing a pneumatology of other religions recognize its limitations. Amos Yong asserts flatly, “The goal of a pneumatological theology of religions can never be to state dogmatically or precisely. This is where the Spirit of God is!” Yong answers the pointed question of “Is the Holy Spirit present and active in Buddhism?” with “maybe yes, maybe not . . . maybe yes in this situation or context, maybe not in that.” Stanley Samartha strikes the right tone at one point: “[Christians] may have to be far more sensitive than before to what may be signs of the Spirit in the lives of neighbours of other faiths outside the visible boundaries of the church in the world.”

Christian sensitivity to the possibility of the Spirit’s presence in other religions stops at dogmatic claims about it. Dogmatism seems acutely out of place given Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus in John 3:8, a favorite passage for those who sometimes pronounce the presence of the Holy Spirit in various and sundry places: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Commenting on this verse, C. K. Barrett says: “The Spirit, like the wind, is entirely beyond both the control and the comprehension of man.” We should be wary of making claims about something that is entirely beyond our comprehension.

Relationally, the claim that the Holy Spirit is present here or there in the world’s religions unnecessarily co-opts those religions for Christian purposes. This is a more complicated issue than it appears, and I will return to it below. Here I am merely suggesting that Christians need not demand that the Holy Spirit is responsible for “the good things” in other religions. That is imperialistic, demeaning, and insensitive. To assert that God planted the good tree of Buddhism diminishes the Buddha’s own genius and ignores his non-theistic solution to the human predicament. This approach can subvert interreligious dialogue if it seeks “to collect evidence to prove that the Christian way of salvation is superior to and inclusive of all other ways.”

We can avoid all of this by discerning how other religions are consistent—or not—with the workings of the Holy Spirit as we know them from our Christian heritage, leaving aside the question of whether the Holy Spirit is
present and working in those religions or not. Of course, this means that we must know our Christian heritage well in order to determine what is consistent—or not—with it. This also means that we must confess the limitations of our discernment, both within and outside of the Christian community. As Amos Yong reminds us, we attempt discernment amidst “the fallibility and finitude that accompanies all human knowledge,” in a world where “the full manifestation of Word and Spirit . . . has been distorted, muted, and even effaced by sin.” Here the Lutherans helpfully remind us of the importance of the doctrine of original sin, which captures a reality of the human experience that persists even after justification by grace through faith.

Obligation #3: Receiving critiques from other religions

To engage adherents of other religions with sensitivity to their perspectives, Christians must be prepared to receive critiques of Christianity without hypersensitivity or undue touchiness. Christians can be very comfortable critiquing other religions. Christians must become equally comfortable in receiving critiques from other religions. This is one of Paul Tillich’s great contributions to interreligious dialogue. With others, Joseph Kitagawa pointed out Tillich’s limited ability to dialogue with Buddhists, but his assessment of Tillich’s larger value is worth noting: “Nevertheless, Tillich’s openness to engage in serious conversations with adherents of other religions opened new possibilities for Christianity to judge itself in the light of its encounter with the world religions.” This, of course, is a prerequisite for a meaningful dialogue.

In his Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions, Tillich explained how the “dynamic life” of Christianity “was nourished by the tension between judging the encountered religions in the strength of its foundation, and accepting judgment from them in the freedom its foundation gives.” Tillich offered examples of this “rhythm of criticism, countercriticism and self-criticism throughout the history of Christianity,” such as Christianity’s critique of the non-personal nature of mysticism, which called forth the mystical counter-critique that Christianity’s personalism was inadequate, which then led Christian theology to take seriously the importance of “an experience of the immediate presence of the divine,” as Christian mystics themselves had claimed.

Tillich did not include Buddhism in his examples of the dynamic of mutual critique but we can note the transformations in adherents of both religions as they have encountered each other in the modern period. The charge leveled by Western Christians that Buddhism lacks a developed social ethic was countered in the nineteenth century by a Buddhist revival that laid the foundations for what is today called the socially engaged Buddhism.
movement. The Buddhist counter-criticism of a socially active but spiritually deficient Christianity has led to greater awareness that Christians must work for the kingdom of God out of a personal experience of it. As Judith Simmer-Brown, a religious studies professor at Naropa University and a senior dharma teacher of Shambhala Buddhism, puts it: “No fundamental transformation can take place anywhere without the joining of inner change and outer change.” Whereas Christians challenge Buddhists with “Don’t just sit there (meditating), do something,” Buddhists challenge Christians with “Don’t just do something, sit there and meditate on what you’re doing.”

Tillich devoted a mere five sentences to mutual critique between Christianity and Islam, including a statement about the “possibilities for Christian self-judgment . . . in the solution of the racial problem in Islam . . . " We know more than did Tillich about the realities of race relations in Islam, from Arab complicity in the global African slave trade to ongoing tensions within the American Muslim community. It seems to me that a healthy and contrite mutual dialogue could be conducted around the racism found within both of these multiracial religions.

Ethical critiques are the most piercing ones, in my mind. I was asked to speak about Jesus for a panel on religious founders sponsored by a local mosque. A rabbi spoke about Moses and the mosque’s imam spoke about Muhammad. I gave an inspired talk about Jesus as the epitome of love, indeed the incarnation of the God who is Love. I cited Jesus’ words that vocalized love, including “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44), and his deeds that embodied love, culminating in his willingness to die on a cross out of love for humanity. I must have used the word “love” dozens of times in that talk. I was truly inspired.

The first question from the floor was, “If Jesus (peace be upon him) was all about love, why aren’t the Christians we know more loving?” Perhaps that Muslim was thinking of the passage from the Qur’an about God putting compassion and mercy into the hearts of Jesus’ followers (57:27; see earlier). I fumbled around for an answer. I confessed the tendency of the Christian community to fall short of the example of our Lord. I pointed out that most Christians do not take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. Then I politely turned the tables on my audience by asking whether every Muslim follows the sunnah (“example”) of Muhammad. That seemed to resonate with them and offered the possibility of opening a door to mutual sensitivity to the shortcomings of our respective religious heritages.

Unless Christians exhibit a willingness to hear critiques from others, our critiques of others will not be granted a hearing. If judgment flows only in one direction, dialogue becomes monologue or diatribe. Our religious neighbors can do us the great service of removing the log in our own eye
so that we can see their religions more clearly. I remind you that Jesus places a “log” in our eye and only a “speck” in our neighbor’s eye (Matthew 7:3-5).

“Christ has taught us humility,” wrote Cantwell Smith, “[b]ut we approach others with arrogance. He has taught us to be aware of the beam in our own eye, we have argued that it is not there, that it is not arrogance that shapes us but fidelity or the like.”

Trust me, adherents of other religions can tell the difference between arrogance and fidelity to some laudable notion.

Hermeneutical critiques may not pierce quite as deeply as ethical ones but they also call for Christian sensitivity. Muslims refer to Jews and Christians as fellow People of the Book because they too received written revelations from Allah through messengers (Arabic sing. nabi), particularly the Torah of Moses and al-Injila (the Gospel) of Jesus (see Qur'an 3:3, 5:68). According to Islam, the Bible we have today contains vestiges of these earlier books but also many editorial changes and additions. The only uncorrupted written revelation is the Qur’an, given through the messenger Muhammad, which at times corrects, interprets, or supplements the biblical text. This provides Muslims with a method for reading the Bible that can challenge Christian sensitivity.

Two examples that never fail to exercise my students are identifying Muhammad as both the prophet “like Moses” whom God will raise up (Deuteronomy 18) and the promised Paraclete (John 14-16). These identifications are convincing within the interpretive circle of the Islamic heritage but of course not within the interpretive circles of the Christian and Jewish heritages. Christian sensitivity calls upon us to understand how Muslims arrive at such conclusions without becoming reactionary even though we do not agree with them.

Equally important to me, being on the receiving end of such a (re)reading of scripture can make Christians more sensitive to Jewish responses to our (re)reading of the Hebrew Bible, such as identifying Jesus as the prophet “like Moses.” I recall presenting an overview of Christianity to a Jewish confirmation class, one of the most difficult assignments I have ever been given. For every Christian interpretation of passages in the Hebrew Bible I offered, their response was, “How could anyone with any sense believe that? That’s not what the text says!” Seminary students may react the same way to Islamic (re)readings of the Bible.

We can add theological critiques to ethical and hermeneutical ones, and these also require a sensitive Christian response. Sometimes Christians are unaware of the implications of their theologizing about other religions. Take the example of the so-called inclusivist approach to other religions, most associated with the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984).

Rahner wrote that “Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian.
It would be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched in any way by God's grace and truth. Moreover, said Rahner, "the Church is not the communion of those who possess God's grace as opposed to those who lack it, but is the communion of those who can explicitly confess what they and the others hope to be."

This has been called Christian inclusivism because it attempts to include adherents of other religions in God's economy of salvation, retaining an emphasis on the salvific work of Jesus Christ while also acknowledging the availability of divine grace beyond the Christian Church. Rahner influenced Vatican II to a degree that should not be overstated, but Rahner and the Council agreed in principle that those who do not know Christ can nevertheless be saved through Christ. We have seen how inclusivist sentiments might offend an adherent of another faith, for instance in the statement that "every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit" or the claim that it was God who planted the good tree of Buddhism. As the scholar of religions (and United Methodist) Diana Eck says, despite inclusivism's well-meaning intention to include rather than exclude others, "There is still something unsettling here. While it preserves the integrity of my own self-understanding, inclusivism often dodges the question of real difference by reducing everything finally to my own terms... For those on the receiving end of the inclusivist's zeal, it often feels like a form of theological imperialism to have their beliefs or prayers swept into the interpretive schema of another tradition."

Rahner relates an interesting exchange with the well-known Japanese Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990). Nishitani asked, "What would you say to my treating you as an anonymous Zen Buddhist?" Rahner replied: "[C]ertainly you may and should do so from your point of view; I feel myself honoured by such an interpretation, even if I am obliged to regard you as being in error."

How many of us would feel honored by such an interpretation of our faith, especially if we thought it erroneous? I recall overhearing the respected Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreyi (1896-1998) relating his recent past lives to a group of Buddhists at an American temple: Two lifetimes ago he was a Roman Catholic priest in France, last lifetime a Hindu Brahmin priest in India, this lifetime a Sinhalese Buddhist monk. The purported spiritual progression from Christian to Hindu to Buddhist was obvious. When I ask Buddhists to explain why I am a Christian in this lifetime, they sometimes assure me—with a twinkle in their eyes—that I have plenty of lifetimes ahead of me to become a Buddhist. That twinkle cannot mask their Buddhological imperialism.

To their credit, those Catholic missionaries who claim that God planted the good tree of Buddhism conclude their essay with the following acknowledgment:
It is important to say immediately that this way of looking at Buddhism will not satisfy the self-understanding of Buddhists! On the other hand, their view of Christianity will certainly be the complete reverse, looking at Christianity, perhaps, as a sort of “expedient means” (Sanskrit upāya, Japanese hokke), a temporary, imperfect practice that the Buddha in his wisdom and goodness allows as a stepping-stone toward a deeper understanding of the reality of things, an intermediary stage that will finally be transcended in the fullness of Buddhist awakening and nirvana.91

In such acknowledgments, Christian inclusivists become sensitized to how it feels to be “included” in another religion’s economy of salvation or liberation. Paul Knitter suggests that we should simply admit that we are all inclusivists and agree “to be included by the inclusivism of our partners” in interreligious dialogue.92 Those Catholic missionaries concur: “[T]rue and constructive dialogue begins only when we can explain to each other how one sees the other within one’s own self-understanding and there finds a true and lasting interest for the other.”93

Again, this is my third obligation: Christians must be prepared to receive critiques of Christianity without hypersensitivity or undue touchiness. To recall the earlier pneumatological discussion, whether Christians claim that the Holy Spirit is present here or there in the world’s religions or merely that the Holy Spirit may be present, they must own up to the theological imperialism involved. Such theologizing is perhaps best kept in-house, “meant only for Christian consumption,” as Karl Rahner seems to have thought about his notion of “anonymous Christians.”94

Learning Something New from Other Religions

Much of what I have been advocating falls under the category of what Christians can learn about our own faith from others. As one author puts it, “[T]he other religion might be able to unleash a reminder in us of something that has been present in our faith but which has somehow been pushed to the periphery or undeveloped because of historical or cultural circumstances.”95 I agree with the view that other religions cannot “say something to us [about the revelation in Jesus Christ] that Christ and our faith in him have not, or cannot, give to us Christians. . .”96 But beyond that, I ask, with Paul Knitter, “[I]s there the possibility for Christians to learn something they really did not know before, something that was not contained in Jesus’ revelation?”97 In other words, can other religions fill in our gaps and teach us something we should know? My answer is yes, of course, as long as what we learn from other religions is consistent with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith.
For instance, I have learned from Buddhism some valuable strategies for living in the present moment. True, Jesus taught me not to be anxious about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34), but Buddhists have taught me about living an anxious-free life through moment-by-moment mindfulness. I hasten to add that I am a very poor student of both my Christian and Buddhist teachers.

Mindfulness is embedded in a constellation of distinctively Buddhist doctrines about the human predicament and its solution, such as the three marks of existence (Pali *tilakkhana*)—*anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (no self, soul, or unchanging substance), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness or suffering)—and the liberation of enlightenment or Nirvāṇa (Pali Nibbāna), when one comes to understand reality "as it really is," a favorite Buddhist expression. As esoteric—and non-Christian—as this might sound, it leads to very practical life applications that are consistent with Christianity.

When we live in the present moment, write the Buddhists Bernard Tetsugen Glassman and Rick Fields, "we don't waste energy by worrying about all the things we should have done in the past or all the things we might do in the future." If we are doing our work, whatever that may be, "We're simply working, fully present in the moment. . . . When we work in this way, instead of making us tired, our work actually gives us energy and peace of mind."98

We must properly understand the Buddhist insight here. Living in the present moment does not mean oblivion to the past or future. Rather, as the American monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu says, it means "skillful use" of them. Do not let the past or future control your present. "[L]earn to recognize when your mind is referring you to the past or the future. What are the skillful ways of bringing in the past or the future, and what are the unskillful ways?" Thanissaro Bhikkhu gives an example of a skillful way of bringing the future to bear on your present: "Death could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If you're not—well, what are you doing right now to prepare yourself?"99

Without revealing where I got this insight, I advise my fellow liturgists to be fully present in Christian worship, to clear their minds of anything other than what they are about to do in leading the congregation in its "work" of worship or liturgy (Greek *leitourgia*, "work of the people"). I have also reminded myself many times that if my calling is to be a minister of Christ to all people and in all circumstances, then I cannot be interrupted by anyone or anything that comes my way. The student who stops by my office in crisis while I am working on my lesson plans for the next class session is the person in my present moment, not the students who may or may not show up in class later.

Zen Buddhists ask us to recover our "original face," that is, to experience things and people as they are without the conceptual filters we usually place
on them. When “we try to understand experience through previously learned categories,” explains the Buddhist scholar Thomas Kasulis, we allow “these categories to color our present experience and restrict our immediacy.”

We meet a “woman,” an “African American,” an “LGBT,” not the actual person in front of us. We approach the person with pre-conceptions, that is, conceptions formed “prior to actual knowledge” of that person; in other words, prejudice. This is why I do not want to know anything about students before I meet them in person, even though I cannot avoid it when reading admissions packets. I have to engage in too much remedial work to undo the conceptual filters that I placed on them. How often have you said to yourself about someone after your first meeting, “I thought he/she would be different?” That simply means the reality of the person did not match your preconception. You did not meet that person with your original face but instead with your conceptual mask.

Some of these Buddhist insights about life and relationships can also be found in the Christian heritage. I think immediately of the lesson of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) regarding the person in my present moment. Such affinities explain why so much fruitful dialogue has taken place between Buddhist and Christian monastics in recent decades. But the goals of that dialogue include learning something new from each other, not merely reinforcing what each side was already thinking and doing. As explained by the organization of Benedictines and Trappists who call themselves Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, “Spiritual exchanges and interreligious prayer with contemplatives of other religions provide Christian monastics with the possibility of becoming familiar with and adopting certain of their methods of prayer and meditation (for example, Vipassana, Zazen, Yoga), provided they are integrated into the Christian faith.” That last proviso is crucial in order to maintain authentic Christian identity while being sensitive to the beliefs and practices of others. Sensitivity entails learning from the other without becoming the other.

The Love Chapter: Epitome of Christian Sensitivity

I am increasingly intrigued by the applicability of the Love Chapter to interreligious relations. More hymn than prose, 1 Corinthians 13 has been called “one of the noblest eulogies of Christian love that has ever been penned.” It is ubiquitous at weddings and on wall plaques, and has found its way into the movies, Princess Diana’s funeral, and President Barack Obama’s inaugural address. Verse 11—“When I was a child…”—opens the music video “Dead and Gone” by the rapper T.I. featuring Justin Timberlake.

Love epitomizes the properly sensitive Christian, that is, one who rightly senses the situation, the people involved, and what must be done. Note the markers of sensitive behavior: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not
envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful...” (vss. 4-5). Love is always consistent with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—indeed, love is the revelation, as I explained to that Muslim audience—and love is always consistent with the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith. Christians with these attributes—who are patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, not insistent on their own way, not irritable or resentful—would be welcome in any interreligious encounter.

It should come as no surprise when non-Christians cite the Love Chapter approvingly, for here again there is broad agreement across religions about the markers of sensitive behavior. For example, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, the author of the momentous 2007 open letter to Christian leaders titled “A Common Word between Us and You,” lays out the Islamic view of interreligious dialogue in his correspondence with the Vatican, “happily” noting “a similar general attitude” in 1 Corinthians 13:1-6. In like manner, a follower of the Turkish spiritual leader Fethullah Gülen offers an “Attempt at Inter-Faith Dialogue” by drawing a connection between the Sufi notion of himmah (“spiritual or mystical quest for the divine”) and the “centrality of love or charity in Christianity,” citing the Apostle Paul’s “[most famous ... ode to love” in 1 Corinthians 13.

Verses 9 and 12 of the Love Chapter imply a sensitive humility in interreligious relations: “For now we know only in part, ... we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” This expresses “a deep epistemological humility and fallibility,” writes the Southern Baptist theologian Dan Stiver. “In other words, we recognize that our words and concepts are always human, finite, and also sinful, and, while revealing, may also be concealing.” Thus our Christian claims to and about others must be both humble and provisional. Citing 1 Corinthians 13:12-13 in its “Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions,” the World Council of Churches states boldly, “We are convinced that we have been called to witness in the world to God’s healing and reconciling work in Christ,” yet immediately clarifies, “We do this humbly acknowledging that we are not fully aware of the ways in which God’s redeeming work will be brought to its completion.” In his 1998 encyclical, Fides et Ratio (On the Relationship between Faith and Reason), Pope John Paul II likewise juxtaposes a bold declaration about the Church’s obligation “to proclaim the certitudes” it possesses in Christ with the caveat, citing 1 Corinthians 13:12, “albeit with a sense that every truth attained is but a step towards that fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God.” Tony Richie’s provocative essay, “A Pentecostal in Sheep’s Clothing: An Unlikely Participant but Hopeful Partner in Interreligious Dialogue,” lays out “five significant values that can
help guide Pentecostal interaction with religious others: charity (love), hospitality, availability, certainty, and humility.” Note that certainty is followed immediately by humility, as Richie explains, “Humility works hard at not coming across arrogantly as if we feel we have the final word on all divine truth; we can confess we only ‘know in part’ (1 Co 13:9).”

Christians can learn a lesson from the scientific method here. When my wife and I go out for dinner with our closest friends, we always have Roger calculate the tip since he is a nuclear engineer. Recently he made an error, which he quickly caught. Of course I chided him since I thought nuclear engineers shouldn’t make mathematical errors. His response: “You don’t understand what we do. When we conduct a computer simulation or an experiment of any kind, we and our referees assume from the start that we are wrong, perhaps due to input error, poor choice of input parameters, and the like. Only after we fail to prove ourselves wrong through exhaustive effort do we safely claim to be right and publish our results. So there is a certain modesty invoked in the process.”

A similar kind of modesty should be invoked in the interreligious process. Christians should acknowledge the possibility that we may be wrong from the start and safely claim to be right only after exhaustive interaction with our referees from other faiths. If such modesty is not acceptable to others, even to some Christians who may object that this is overly sensitive or perhaps compromising in some way, we must maintain our modesty because it is consistent with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the living heritage of the Christian faith.

Some might object that my emphasis on love, humility, and provisional claims goes too far, that I am being overly sensitive to others by soft-peddling the importance of Christian truth claims. “[L]ove is not enough,” writes a member of a reform movement within the Southern Baptist Convention who is concerned that today’s missionary zeal is being wrongly sustained by compromising the truth. “In reality there can be no such zeal, nor genuine love, without a commitment to the truth. [After all,] Paul says that ‘love rejoices in the truth’ (1 Corinthians 13:6) . . . Love and truth make for a spiritually potent combination.”

For some of my students, truth claims are their first concern, in the sense that Christianity must first be true before anything else can be said about it. For other students, Christian truth claims fall lower on their list of priorities, after concern for the oppressed for instance. The same can be said of Christians in interreligious relations—the issue of competing truth claims takes priority for some but barely registers for others.

So what about verse 6 of the Love Chapter, which the NRSV translates as “[love] does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth”? The key Greek word here, ἀλήθεια, appears more than 100 times in the New
Testament with many nuances. It appears most often in the Johannine literature where it is tied to divine revelation, particularly in Jesus Christ, including John 14:6 where Jesus says “I am the way, and the truth \( \alpha \varepsilon \theta \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \alpha \), and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Elsewhere in the New Testament, \( \alpha \varepsilon \theta \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \alpha \) is used in reference to the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:2-3, 6:7) and the Christian faith (1 Peter 1:22, 2 Peter 1:12) in the sense of being “true teaching or faith.”

But Paul uses \( \alpha \varepsilon \theta \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \alpha \) in the Love Chapter with a specifically ethical connotation. The NRSV obscures this meaning by rendering 1 Corinthians 13:6 as “[love] does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” The contrast Paul had in mind is better served by the RSV: “[love] does not rejoice at wrong [Greek \( \alpha \delta \kappa \iota \kappa \alpha \)], but rejoices in the right [\( \alpha \varepsilon \theta \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \alpha \)]” (see also Romans 1:18, 2:8). Here \( \alpha \varepsilon \theta \varepsilon \beta \varepsilon \alpha \) means “uprightness,” “what is right,” “what is good and honorable.” There is nothing abstract about 1 Corinthians 13:6, nor does this verse refer to the truth claims of the gospel or the Christian faith. Love rejoices in concrete acts of justice and right, when goodness prevails among people. An old commentary puts it nicely: “Love sympathizes with all that is really good in others.”

So, how shall I respond to the possible criticism that I am being overly sensitive to others in emphasizing love, humility, and provisional claims while soft-pedaling the importance of Christian truth claims in my application of the Love Chapter to interreligious relations? My response is that the Love Chapter itself emphasizes love, humility, and provisional claims while sidestepping—which is different from soft-pedaling—the importance of Christian truth claims. How shall Christians approach adherents of other faiths, at least initially? Take a cue from the way the Love Chapter ends: “And now faith [\( \pi \varepsilon \theta \iota \sigma \tau \alpha \)], hope [\( \alpha \phi \tau \iota \)], and love [\( \alpha \gamma \gamma \varepsilon \alpha \)] abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (vs. 13). In interreligious relations, always lead with love. When, or if, the question of truth claims comes up in an interreligious encounter, lead with love in your conversation. And when, or if, you evangelize in the traditional sense, lead with love. The appropriately named evangelical Rick Love, whose interreligious resume includes advising the Vineyard USA on Christian-Muslim relations, has it right: “Without love, evangelical witness is like a ‘noisy gong or a clanging cymbal’ (1 Cor 13:1ff.).” I would broaden that: Without love in engaging adherents of other faiths in any context, Christians are annoying and off-putting at best.

I alert my students to the fact that adherents of other faiths are watching them, to see what they are like as Christians. What do you want them to see? Unloving Christians? That is, impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, irritable, resentful, pretentiously know-it-all Christians? Do you want them to see the very antithesis of the Love Chapter in the flesh—insensitive Christians? Recall that question from
them, to see what they are like as Christians. What do you want them to see? Unloving Christians? That is, impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, irritable, resentful, pretentiously know-it-all Christians? Do you want them to see the very antithesis of the Love Chapter in the flesh—insensitive Christians? Recall that question from the Muslim audience: “Why aren’t the Christians we know more loving?”

When I bring representatives of other faiths into my classroom, I often ask them to describe a “good Christian” they know, someone they would like my students to emulate. Their portraits are always consistent with the Love Chapter, and always sensitive.

Endnotes

1 Consortium correspondence to the Teagle Foundation, the initial funder of the program, October 1, 2003; this statement also appeared in the published job posting. Although my mandate remains the same, the program was reconfigured in 2008 to comprise a joint appointment at Methodist Theological School in Ohio and Trinity Lutheran Seminary.


6 Ibid., “sensitivity.”

7 Ibid., “sensitive.”

8 Ibid., “hypersensitive.”


11 Ibid., “sense.”
16 de Silva, “Ministering to the Sick and the Terminally Ill.”
18 Kuczivikara-vatthu. My point about the commensurability of compassionate care is supported by a report on what Christian nurses find distinctive about their nursing, all having to do with Christian beliefs and practices that inform their caregiving; see Kris Haldeman, “What’s Unique in Christian Caring?” Journal of Christian Nursing 23.3 (Summer 2006): 20-21.
29 Paul Tillich, Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).
32 Joseph M. Kitagawa, “Tillich, Kraemer, and the Encounter of Religions,”

32 Tillich, _Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions_, 78.


34 Smith, _On Understanding Islam_, 236, judges “the supposition that the different religions give differing answers to essentially the same questions” to be “[o]ne of the facile fallacies that students of comparative religion must early learn to outgrow.” I do not think Smith’s critique was aimed at the meta-questions I identify here. For an approach similar to mine, see Stephen Prothero, _God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—And Why Their Differences Matter_ (New York: HarperOne, 2010).


38 Ibid., 169.


45 Amos Yong addresses a possible objection to applying ethical criteria in this way, namely, that “the good things” (to use _Nostra Aetate’s_ phrase) might have a demonic provenance. Referring to the example of Buddhist exorcisms, Yong cites Jesus’ words, “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?” See Yong, _The Holy Spirit and the World Religions: On the


57 Randy L. Maddox, "Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions," **Wesleyan Theological Journal** 27.1-2 (Spring-Fall 1992): 15.


59 Maddox, "Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions," 18.

60 Meadows, "'Candidates for Heaven'," 117-119.

64 Ibid., 413; emphasis in original.
65 For more on the so-called “holy pagans” or “pagan saints,” see Cornelius in the Bible, see Yong, Beyond the Impasse, 113; Ukpong, “Pluralism and the Problem of the Incarnation of Spirits,” 420-421.
66 My thanks to Steven Aherne-Kroll, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, for these insights on Acts.
67 Clayton Croy, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, personal communication.
68 See Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions,” 18; Meadows, “Candidates for Heaven,” 121.
69 Yong, Beyond the Impasse, 166.
70 Amos Yong, “The Holy Spirit and the World Religions,” 205.
71 Samantha, “The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths,” 258; emphasis in original.
73 In the same volume where Sottocornola and De Giorgi make their assertion about the good tree of Buddhism, Karl Becker clarifies that Catholic teaching does not see everything “good and true...in human beings, their religions, or their cultures” as necessarily stemming from the Holy Spirit (“Theology of the Christian Economy of Salvation,” 373).
75 Yong, Beyond the Impasse, 166.
77 Kitagawa, “Tillich, Kraemer, and the Encounter of Religions,” 213; the internal quote is from the title of one of Tillich’s chapters. For a detailed criticism of Tillich’s ability to dialogue with Buddhists, see Carl Olson, “Tillich’s Dialogue with Buddhism,” Buddhist-Christian Studies 7 (1987): 183-195.
78 Tillich, Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions, 53.
79 Ibid., 56.


81 Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, 55.


Ibid.


See *Oxford English Dictionary*, “preconception.”


My thanks to Matthew Plummer, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, for researching the interreligious implications of 1 Corinthians 13. In his estimation, the scholarly and confessional literatures lack systematic exploration of these implications.

The *Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 166.


Dan R. Stiver, “Baptists: Modern or Postmodern?” *Review and Expositor* 100.4 (Fall 2003): 537.

“Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions,”
NUMERIC: CHRISTIAN SENSITIVITY IN INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS


113 Cf. the concluding chapter of my The Faith Next Door, 155-168.


116 Ibid., 242.


118 From the commentary on 1 Corinthians by Theodoret of Cyr (ca. 393-458), cited in Gerald Bray, ed., 1-2 Corinthians: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 132.

