

A Journey in Interfaith Dialogue: God Between the Lines

Fr. Carl Chudy, SX | December 30, 2016

Introduction

“God between the lines” is something I borrowed from a study of our confreres for our *Asian Study Center*.¹ The essays collected in this little volume are selected literature from four Asian countries where there was an effort to survey, marveling at the lived out universal human experience of God across the pluralism of their cultural milieus.² It also speaks well of my own journey with the divine, transcendent Lord “between” faiths and cultures across three continents and in the extraordinary diversity of the American scene.

My sabbatical this year is to reflect on this journey in search of God “between the lines,” and to consider what shape my future contribution to the congregation takes. Why dialogue and how I understand my place as a missionary, and indeed the ongoing challenges for our religious missionary institute in the world today are issues I consider here in a schematic way through my personal experience, and some of initial studies.

I begin with three pivotal experiences that has greatly shaped my present trajectory in dialogue. The first was a significant experience I had while working in the Philippines. The second is how I continue to deepen the evolving Catholic tradition on dialogue through interaction with others. Third, in the last almost five years we have been expanding the dynamics of interfaith dialogue beyond traditional faiths to also include atheism, secular humanism, and the unaffiliated.

The Necessity of Dialogue

My initial encounters with Islam began while I was studying theology at [Catholic Theological Union](#) in Chicago. The ecumenical and interfaith possibilities were abundant there. During my internship as a theology student I worked for two years in Sierra Leone, West Africa. There it is predominately Muslim. Most Sierra Leoneans are adherent to Malikite Sunni Islam. Significant portions of Sierra Leonean Muslims are Ahmadis, Shia, and Non-denominational Muslims. Most mosques in Sierra Leone are non-denominational.³ It was there I learned much of our common love of God and the prophets, the extraordinary generosity, simplicity, and respect that speaks much for African peoples, and the deep passion for justice and peace that rises out of their Islamic faith. To this day there is strong friendship and collaboration between us.

However, while working 13 years in the Philippines, with little exposure to Islam there, I began to understand with surprising depth, the centrality of interfaith dialogue in my future work. One of the areas where we were working was assistance to landless farmers who were trying to dialogue with the government about land titles promised them 20 years prior and never delivered. During this work, clandestine, para-military soldiers, probably from someone in the government, began a systematic campaign to assassinate the leaders of these farmers structured

¹ I belong to a religious order in the Catholic Church called the [Xaverian Missionaries](#). We work in 21 countries worldwide in what we call the first proclamation, reaching out across faith and cultural boundaries in dialogue and collaboration.

² Tosolini, Tiziano ed, *God Between the Lines*. Asian Study Center, Xaverian Missionaries. Japan, 2016.

³ Wikimedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Sierra_Leone

through various organizations, and funded by an NGO in Belgium. In the early 2000's, more than 200 were killed nationwide. One of the targets of this campaign was a village in an island in the south in Negros where many men were killed. Their wives and mothers responded by traveling to Metro-Mania (*center for the seat of government*) and holding a hunger strike in front of the Department of Agriculture, close to our center. Fifteen days into the hunger strike, weak and lying on cots under a plastic canopy alongside the highway, a local Muslim chaplain and I were called to join them. We were asked to provide some spiritual consolation to this religiously mixed group of women who did not know what the future would hold.

Both he and I agreed that it would be simple. We would both read from our sacred texts, pray to God (Allah) for protection, and then visit each woman by their cots and have a quiet conversation with them. I began with a letter from St. Paul, he from the Qur'an. After our respective prayers, we spent the rest of the afternoon talking individually with each in quiet whispers, hunched over these frail, brave women who shaved their heads in protest. I realized in that interfaith worship, that our common prayer to God to bring justice to the poor and consolation to the grieved hit at the belief and passion of us all, Christian and Muslim. Furthermore, it was a balm of healing we could only carry together to this valiant community. I knew from that time forward, my energies would be about gathering that same kind of collaborative spiritual healing and revitalization in front of the great challenges and cancers that afflict our communities and world in the name of justice and peace, the Kingdom of God. "The world has grown sufficiently small, the problems that we share across the globe sufficiently large and common.... While plural in so many wonderful ways, morally the human family is one."⁴

Our mutual desire to come together is encouraging. Yet it is tapping into this deep longing among us all to bridge the divides between us. We naturally seek to dialogue through our common Creator who wills this so. Pope Paul VI, in his first encyclical at the end of Vatican II, *Ecclesiam Suam*, after the Catholic Church began to look anew at its relationship with those of other faiths (*Nostra Aetate*), and with ever-changing culture (*Guadium et Spes*), wrote this: "God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. "He hath first loved us." We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men (others), without waiting to be summoned to it..." (72)

An important discovery for me in the last few years is the particular perspective of our Muslim friends, beginning with my partner at the hunger strike some years ago. "The Prophet did not hesitate to listen to others, be they idolaters, People of the Book, or fellow Muslims."⁵ I saw this too in my interaction with the *Islamic Society of North America*, *Islamic Network Group*, *Interfaith Youth Core*, and Muslim centers in our area. We worked with [Groundwell](#) to bring letters of support to local Muslim centers during this distressing time of *Islamaphobia*, particularly within this volatile election cycle in the United States. In those we visited, the outpouring of gratitude and a resolve to work together with their non-Muslim neighbors to overcome religious hate was a prominent feature. Discovering our mutual desire to connect with each other in meaningful ways is heartening. Between Catholics and Muslims, we

⁴ Hadshell, Heidi, "Interfaith Dialogue in Christian Theological Education in North America: Opportunities and Challenges", in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, D. Werner, D. Esterlien, N. Kang, and J. Raja, eds., p. 213, 216.

⁵ Shawakat M. Toorawa, "Islam." Chapter one of *Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith*, Roger M.A. Allen and Shawkat M. Toorawa, eds, p. 3.

share much in our hope in the dialogue of life, action and works, theological exchange, and religious experience.⁶

Where Dialogue Can Lead

The effort to come together to share of each other's spiritual journeys, to begin to re-fashion the distorted narratives we have of each other and *those we have of ourselves*, the possibility to expand and enliven our own sense of faithfulness through the faithfulness of others, to accept the places where we cannot have common ground which is hallowed ground, and to bring the fruits of dialogue back to our faith traditions is indeed my greatest faith journey to date. It is truly an interfaith community that is able to "identify and expose the social, economic, and political forces that manipulate and abuse our religious sentiments."⁷

The extraordinary effort to begin somewhere, in some specific place in interfaith dialogue with our neighbors and others is one of the most crucial efforts of our times I believe. In reaching out to others whose faith we do not share, we are inevitably "pushed back" to our own faith to re-define our religious identity in this new interfaith relationship, and to search within our own tradition the signs of openness and mercy. It has led me to a personal transformation, a renewed understanding what it means, for example, to be a Catholic Christian in a diverse and pluralistic world.⁸ It is truly a work in progress.

On a larger scale, the implications of a global web of interfaith communities engaged with each other and their environment has enormous implications for the future of humanity. My religious order is international in scope. There is a strong sense of global identity to faith and how it works itself out in the lives of so many. Dialogue in Asia, Africa and the Americas are all part of one hopeful dream of many religious and non-religious, and this is played out continually throughout the world. We are one small part of a much larger reality, and our consciousness of this is extremely important. In the world today, this is played out in an international metaphor of Christian mission called *reconciliation*.⁹ The connect between interfaith dialogue globally, and its effects nationally cannot be underestimated and shapes much of how we proceed in this dialogue on a local level.

Understanding & Valuing Religious Plurality

While taking a break from studies in the library one day, I took a leisurely stroll over to the *Mark Twain Museum* on Farmingdale Avenue. Scanning across the wall downstairs were various famous sayings of the whimsical author etched into the wall panel. One in particular drew me closer: "*Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.*"

Valuing religious plurality began with me not in religion as such, but in my formative years as a seminarian and beyond. If I needed an analogy which defined this long period it would be *transcultural journey*. As a seminarian I worked in the African American community, the Chinese community, and West Africa. As a religious priest, I remained in the African American community for some years and then spent fifteen years in the Philippines. I never ministered in

⁶ Ibid, pp. 27-32. This corresponds literally with the Catholic commitment to interfaith dialogue.

⁷ Ariarajah, Wesley, *Not Without My Neighbor*, Chapter 2, p. 21, 24

⁸ Ibid, Chapter 1, p. 7-8

⁹ Schreiter CPPS, Fr. Robert, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1998.

my own cultural and racial community. My theological studies, which had a cross-cultural specialization, allowed me to reflect on this experience, and more through theology, cultural anthropology, and missiology which stressed the value of inculturation and enculturation. Laying aside my agenda, language, and symbolic meaning making in order to observe and learn what was for me a new agenda, language, and meaning has been a constant in my life. In doing so, my own identity continues to be shaped by the experience of being a “stranger and foreigner.”¹⁰ My heart has had the chance to expand beyond the borders of my own cultural world and its influence on my sense of being part of a multi-religious world is unmistakable.

Honoring our religious diversity requires some key experiences I found. The first is *trust*. Trust is built in a sustained conversation that is free of judgements, but not free of questions. It is driven by a *curiosity* and an attitude that the belief of others is important, that there is much to learn and that there is a *confidence that common ground is possible*. I like the way Jonathan Sacks says it: “The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine.”¹¹ It leads to an *enduring ability to live with some ambivalence*. Dr. Avery, in a lecture called it a “suspension of judgement through practice.” This experience of ambivalence is not about having mixed feelings, but allowing the needed space to learn in a relationship that I may not comprehend fully but want to. The final is the need of *time*. Fruits in dialogue takes time, like any friendship, and sustained conversation is required.

I tap into that same dynamic to some extent in my experiences with those of other faiths, or of no faith at all. This has been particularly significant in our work in the last few years in the context of religious hate and *islamaphobia* which pervades many places today. My first experiential opportunity was a visit to the *Islamic Association of Greater Hartford* in Berlin, Connecticut. It was my first time to *Jumma Prayers*. I sat in the back of the prayer space, while watching the men line up with each other in front of us, shoulder to shoulder, slowly filling the room. The solemnity of the prayer struck me in their attention, body movement, recollection, the singing of the prayers as inspirational as a hymn, and it encouraged me to pray with them in my own fashion. My first observation was a profound sense that a common ground was our devotion to the same God and how important that truly is. The encouragement and hospitality of the people there further encouraged that sentiment.

Interfaith Literacy

Interfaith dialogue should obviously lead to a deepened understanding of the faiths we follow and wish to share in. For me there are two levels in which this happens. The first is in the many opportunities available to study, if one takes this pursuit seriously. We encourage this in various ways in the Catholic communities we intersect with. The study in the values of dialogue in the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish scriptures underlined this point. One on line program we suggest is a wonderful program through *Harvard University* and others called, [World Religions Through their Sacred Scriptures](#). We have links available at our own [website](#). [Social media](#) (*#interfaith*) streams are also an important way to share interfaith literacy. Hartford Seminary is extraordinary example of opportunities for interfaith literacy on a formal level that prepares those of various faiths to share this urgent need of dialogue across faith lines. The study of Islam

¹⁰ Gittens, Fr. Anthony, *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation*. Paulist Press, December 1989.

¹¹ Sacks, Jonathan, *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, London, p. 201.

here and its history of dialogue among the Abrahamic faiths is extraordinarily important in the times we live today.¹²

There is another level where interfaith literacy takes place and that is in the informal dialogue of life and religious experience, as well as social action together, valued between “non-professionals,” ordinary people who tend to hold our faiths in very imperfect ways. The knowledge of faith here may be more limited, and very much influenced by cultural factors. Certainly many Christians have a partial understanding of their own faith, one that emphasizes what is most important to them, in the world they live in. As our communities become more and more diverse culturally and religiously, this type of interfaith learning is crucial to creating a culture of multi-religious acceptance from the grassroots. It is most often lived in the “informal classrooms” of picnics, neighborhood gatherings, parent teacher’s association, work places and many more.

Dialogue beyond the Religious

Since 2012, together with our Province of the United Kingdom, we created a fledgling project called *Common Ground*. Its purpose is to bridge secular and religious voices, particularly in the northern hemisphere (Europe & the USA), and exhibits a new form of the *missio ad gentes*. Dialogue with atheists, secular humanists, and the religiously unaffiliated takes on the similar dynamics of interfaith dialogue, and includes a growing population of the non-religious who are expected to be the third largest group globally, under Christianity and Islam.¹³ If interfaith dialogue is about creating a diverse global exchange for sharing and collaboration, it must also include secular voices. This is particularly important because of the interplay of religions and secularism that affect all of us greatly. At the same time, non-religious people are interested in connecting with religious believers, especially the millennial generation.¹⁴

We held two conferences in this regard; one in [Coatbridge, Scotland \(2013\)](#), and the other at [Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey \(2015\)](#) entitled: *Common Ground: Conversations Among Atheist, Humanists, and Religious Believers*. Our collaboration with the [British Humanist Association](#), the [Scottish Humanist Association](#), and the [American Humanist Association](#) has been crucial to both of these conferences. We run two meetup groups in [New Jersey](#) and [Massachusetts](#) where religious and non-religious people gather for dialogue on a monthly basis. Along with this I blog for an atheist blog on patheos.com called [Secular Spectrum](#). We recently produced [a short video for YouTube](#).

At first glance this may seem rather odd for some religious believers. Many have determined in their minds that atheists and humanists, agnostics, skeptics, and the unaffiliated are rather anti-religion. However, this distorted thinking, without the aid of dialogue, is rather far from the truth for most. Although it is true there is a smaller group called the “new atheists” who are anti-religious, with such published names as *Sam Harris*, *Richard Dawkins*, and others. The new generation of secular humanists and atheists, however, are very open to connecting to religious

¹² Hadsell, Heidi, “Interfaith Dialogue in Christian Theological Education in North America: Opportunities and Challenges,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, D. Werner, D. Esterlien, N. Kang, and J. Raja, eds., p. 217.

¹³ Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2015*. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

¹⁴ Stedman, Chris, *The Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*. Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2012.

believers through names as *Christ Stedman* and *Greg Epstein*, or as Greg says, allies of secularists.¹ One of the important national associations to strengthen this dialogue is [Interfaith Youth Core](#). Our common ground search involves ethics, community, justice, peace, and hope. I hope to explore this more in my studies at Hartford Seminary.

The “Catholic tradition” of dialogue with non-believers began with the institution of the *Secretariat for Non-Believers* by Pope Paul VI in April, 1965, one of three new secretariats to address our dialogue with the world that is not Catholic, nor Christian, including the Secretariats for Christian Unity and with other religions.² In 1968 an important, but often overlooked document of the secretariat was published by Franziskus Card. Konig, President, Secretariat for Non-Believers, entitled *Dialogue with Non-Believers*.³ It outlined both a theology and practical guidelines for this dialogue. St. Pope John Paul II brought this important work into the *Pontifical Council of Culture* to re-look at the evangelization of culture with renewed interest in secularity. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI instituted the *Courtyard of the Gentiles* to gather believers and non-believers in conferences around the world, beginning in 2005 and continuing to this day.⁴

Finally, Pope Francis reminds us in the *Joy of the Gospel*, that this dialogue is key to our partnership and collaboration with all the world for peace and reconciliation. He states:

“As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation. A special place of encounter is offered by new *Areopagi* such as the Court of the Gentiles, where “believers and non-believers are able to engage in dialogue about fundamental issues of ethics, art and science, and about the search for transcendence”. This too is a path to peace in our troubled world.”

¹ Chris Stedman. *The Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*. Beacon Press, 2012 & Greg Epstein. *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.

² Catholic Culture: <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=36362>

³ Dialogue with Non-Believers: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCIDNONB.HTM>

⁴ Pontifical Council for Culture: <http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/dipartimenti/ateismo-e-non-credenza/che-cos-e-il-cortile-dei-gentili--.html>