

The Many Faces of God

An Interfaith Encounter for Youth & Adults



by Denise Yarbrough



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This chapter introduces the topic of interfaith dialogue and reviews the current state of the religious landscape in 21st century America. The text argues for increased education on the part of Christians, both about their own tradition and those of their non-Christian neighbors. The chapter poses the issue of the Christian tradition's rather prominent claims to exclusivity and of the difficulty that poses for Christians in a pluralistic culture. The chapter then provides a brief introduction to the history of the Nicene Creed as the foundational ecumenical creedal statement of Christendom. It then summarizes contemporary theological understandings of God as Trinity.

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Exercise in Comparative Theology –

Excerpt from *My Neighbor’s Faith and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1986.

This chapter poses some questions for reflection as it provides two exercises in comparative theology for participants to do in small groups in the session.

Getting Started

Site Visits

Welcome to “The Many Faces of God: An Interfaith Encounter!” You are about to embark on an exciting journey of interfaith discovery and spiritual growth as you lead your group through this course of theological reflection and interfaith dialogue. As the leader of this course, you need to do some advance planning so that you can market the course effectively. About two to three months prior to when you would like to begin the course, contact local representatives of the various world religions that you would like your group to study to arrange a site visit. **The site visits are the most important and significant part of the learning in this course, so take the time to make the arrangements so that your participants are able to benefit fully from the experience of encountering the “other.”**

There are several ways to arrange the site visits. You might want to contact your diocesan or judicatorial ecumenical and interfaith officer. These folks usually know what religious congregations of various faith traditions are interested in and cooperative with interfaith initiatives and can direct you to the local contact. They may even intercede for you to introduce you to the interfaith dialogue partners and facilitate your arrangements. One very important on-line resource is the website for the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, www.pluralism.org. As you navigate this website, click on the Resources tab and you will find a directory of religious sites. You can search by state and by religion so that you can locate all Islamic Centers in New Jersey or all Sikh Gurwara’s in California. When you find the listing for sites close to you, you can then make contact with the people at those sites. Another useful site is Beliefnet.com which also lists religious sites for each religious tradition once you click on that tradition.

Generally, e-mail works well, although you may also want to send a letter, introducing yourself and explaining the nature of this course and that you would like to arrange to bring a group of Christian laypeople to their site to observe worship and to have an opportunity to visit with representatives from their congregations. Allow time for this part of the preparation phase. Some sites will respond to you immediately, and with some you will have to follow up several times to firm up dates and times. Many of these world religions actually meet on Sunday morning, simply as an accommodation to the norm in this country, so if you prefer to have your site visits on Saturday or weekday evenings, you need to be specific about that. Generally, Islam and Judaism are easy to observe on Saturdays. Buddhists are often willing to meet you and show you their meditation center, talk about their tradition and lead you through a sample meditation even if there is nothing official going on that day. Hindu temples are often open at least six days a week and have activities going on much of the day. Sikhs meet on Sundays. You will have to check the meeting times out with each site.

Once you have a schedule for the site visits you can then plan your group sessions. The Christian theological piece of each group session is set forth for you here, with session agendas and suggested activities. A part of each evening session is devoted to a basic primer on the world religion you will be visiting after that session including some time to come up with questions you wish to ask at

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the site visit. When you prepare the schedule for the course, schedule the six local sessions at a convenient time for the group, and with the site visit schedule in hand, plug in the world religion you will be covering at each session in accordance with that schedule.

A sample syllabus and schedule follows:

Many Faces of God

Syllabus

September 14 – Introduction and World Religion – Islam

Read Chapter One
Visit websites on Islam

October 12 – Christian Theology: Exclusivism, World Religion – Judaism

Read Chapter Two
Visit websites for Judaism

November 9 – Christian Theology: Inclusivism, World Religion – Hinduism

Read Chapter Three
Visit websites for Hinduism

March 16 – Christian Theology: Pluralism, World Religion – Buddhism

Read Chapter Four
Visit websites for Buddhism

April 20 – Christian Theology: Pluralism 2, World Religion – Sikhism

Read Chapter Five
Visit websites for Sikhism

May 18 – Exercise in Comparative Theology

Read Chapter Six in Notebook including the exercises in comparative theology

(This sample assumes that the site visits would follow each evening session, either on a Saturday or Sunday. For some groups a weekday evening visit might also be possible.)

Two excellent books that you can recommend to the group are Jacob Neusner's *World Religions in America* and Diana Eck's *A New Religious America*. Both are available in paperback. Neusner's text has chapters on many world religions in America. The chapters are short enough to be accessible and manageable but thorough enough to provide a solid introduction to the religion. Eck's book contains a chapter each on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in America that are excellent and particularly helpful in documenting how those world religions came to the United States and how they have accommodated to this culture. Her writing style is breezy and conversational even as her material is thorough and lengthy.

Evening Group Sessions

This guide offers sample group agendas for each of the six evening sessions in the course. The sessions are usually divided into some time for

reflection and discussion of the experience of the last site visit, a segment covering the Christian theological material, and then an introductory session on the world religion being visited next. A wonderful additional resource for your use, if you can afford to purchase it, is a set of DVDs entitled “*Religions of the World*”, narrated by Ben Kingsley and available from PBS.org. This set of videos was produced by Schlessinger Media and originally aired on PBS television. The DVDs are fifty minutes long and provide an excellent basic introduction to the major world religions, including Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestant Christianity and Catholicism. There is an additional DVD available from PBS.org entitled “Muslims: An In Depth Look at What it Means to Be Muslim in the 21st Century.” This program originally aired on the PBS program “Frontline.” It is a superb introduction to Islam as it is lived out all over the world. The 30 minute segment on Islam in America is particularly relevant for this course. At many of the world religions’ websites, there are streaming videos about that particular religion which can also be used in group sessions if you have wireless connectivity and PowerPoint capability.

In piloting this program we found that scheduling one class and one site visit per month seemed to work best for most participants. You could schedule the sessions closer together but then the course becomes fairly intense especially for busy people with hectic schedules. Having experienced both models, we recommend the once a month approach.

Etiquette for Site Visits

Before your group visits the various religious sites, ask your hosts what are the protocols for visitors. Will women need headcoverings in the mosque or Gurdwara? Will the group be required to remove their shoes in the holy place? (Important so people know to wear warm socks!!) Do women need to dress “modestly” i.e. skirts not pants?

Before the site visit, remind the group about the basics of interfaith dialogue. You are there to listen, to ask questions and respectfully hear what your hosts are saying. This is not a time to challenge or be provocative. Be careful not to impose Christian values or Christian theological concerns on other world religions. Listen carefully and watch respectfully so that you can begin to feel the religion as its adherents practice it. Go over the World Council of Churches Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue included in the introductory PowerPoint presentation included in these materials.

Many Faces of God - Session One

I. ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS (10 minutes)

1. **Introduction** – Briefly introduce yourself, your own experience with interfaith encounter, why you are choosing to offer this course.
2. **Course Materials** – Review reading assignments and layout of participant materials.
3. **Site Visits** – Go over instructions for site visits. Give out a list of where you will be going and when, with directions and times for arrival. It is also useful to arrange carpooling if participants are going to share rides.
4. **E-Mail** – get everyone's e-mail for group mailings. If site visit arrangements get changed it can be very helpful to have an easy way to contact everyone.

II. INTRODUCTIONS (25 minutes – brief personal intros)

For this section use your judgment and base how you work this part on how many participants you have in the group. If it is a small group, ten or fewer people, you can go around the room having each person introduce themselves and asking them to briefly answer the following questions. If your group is large, you should break them up into smaller groupings of six or so for this part and then have someone take notes and report back to the larger group.

Describe your own religious background, briefly. What denomination are you? Have you always been the same or did you switch somewhere along the way? Were you ever not a Christian? Have you ever been exposed to people who practice a different world religion – i.e. Judaism or Islam or Hindu? If so, did the existence of these “others” raise any questions for you with respect to your own Christian faith?

III. Christians in the Modern Pluralistic World – Intro Lecture (30 -45 minutes)

See PowerPoint presentation on Introductory Lecture. Use the slides as lecture notes. You can use the PowerPoint during the lecture if you wish. The Introductory Lecture presentation lays out the historical development of interfaith dialogue and a brief history of the interfaith movement. This presentation also includes the World Council of Churches guidelines for interfaith dialogue, which your group can review and discuss in preparation for the upcoming site visits.

Invite questions on the first chapter of the Participant Guide, which is also introductory material. You might wish to pull out the Nicene Creed material and go over it aloud to reinforce it and entertain questions. You could also invite comments on the journal questions at the end of chapter one.

- Could you relate to the quotes from Diana Eck about our pluralistic culture, from Douglas John Hall about the fact that as Christians we now choose our faith every week, of James Fredericks that Christians will be enriched by studying their own religion in light of others?

- What of Fredericks claim that Christianity will be transformed only when Christian believers are transformed which he argues can happen when they do comparative theology?
- How might we draw upon the truths of other religions to inform our understanding of our own?
- What of Knitter's point that we are all being called today to become "world citizens" with the need to be able to converse in our own tongue as well as understand others' language? Do you agree? Did this resonate with you?
- The Issue for Christians – who is Jesus, how to deal with exclusive claims about Jesus and salvation through him.
- Sources of authority in Christianity – we will see that different branches of Christianity have different sources of authority – Sola Scriptura, the three legged stool of Anglicanism, tradition and the dogmas and doctrines of "The Church" for Roman Catholics. Depending upon where we look for authority, our approach to other religions will differ.
- Go over Nicene Creed and Trinity. Questions? Confusions?
- Do you think the doctrine of the Trinity can be a bridge between polytheism and monotheism? How might it provide wisdom to those other traditions? How might we learn from the positions of those who are differently monotheistic and from polytheistic religions?

QUESTIONS FOR SITE VISITS (20 MINUTES)

Brainstorm questions to ask at the various site visits. Get a list of general questions that the group would like to ask. Then you can encourage the group to list questions specific to the particular religious traditions that you will be visiting at each subsequent session, after they have perused the webpages for that particular religious tradition. Below is a list of questions one of the pilot groups in this course compiled. This list was added to and modified according to the particulars of the various world religions being studied.

Possible Questions for Site Visits

1. Did you come to your faith through family/culture or did you choose it yourself?
2. What do you believe about death and its finality?
3. Who/what do you believe we humans are?
4. Have you studied/explored other religions?
5. Do you have a belief in an afterlife and if so, what is it?
6. Tell us about significance of items in worship setting.
7. What is important about corporate worship?
8. How does being in America affect how you practice your religion?
9. Tell us about the role of music in your faith.
10. What emphasis does your faith put on materialism?
11. Do you have “sacraments” i.e. marriage, communion etc in your religion?
12. What are your initiation and/or coming of age rites?
13. “Rites of passage”
14. What is your view of the nature of man?
15. Gender roles in your religion?
16. Role of children?
17. Does your faith come easy or is it a constant struggle?
18. Role of “sacrifice” in your religion?
19. Effect of secularism on religion?
20. Has “organized religion”: done more good or more harm?
21. How important is the social aspect of your religion?
22. What is your understanding of “stewardship”?
23. Universal theology?
24. How do you view “relationships”?
25. In your religion, is there room for questioning?
26. What are the most common religious or spiritual practices in your religious tradition?
27. When and how often do you pray?
28. When and how often do you engage in corporate worship?
29. Are there dietary or other lifestyle restrictions in your religion?
30. Do you have ordained leadership in your religion?

These are just sample questions, but should give you some ideas to get your group started. It is a good idea to have the group compile these questions after they have had a chance to view a website about the religion, or to read an introductory text so that they can tailor some questions to the particular tradition they will be visiting.

IV. WORLD RELIGION (30-60 minutes)

At this point you turn your attention to discussing the world religion you will next visit. As Christians, we are not qualified to teach about another world religion, so in this portion of the session it is best to either view a video about the religion, or to ask the group to share what they learned from reading material on the religion's websites. What struck them? What surprised them? What confuses them? This discussion will also feed back to the site visit question exercise. It can help raise questions to ask at the site visit.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The religious landscape of 21st century America differs radically from that of fifty years ago and presents challenges to mainline Christian churches that are significant. The decline of mainline Protestantism in both Europe and the North American continent has been documented and written about extensively in the past several decades and church growth seminars and literature abound in a frantic attempt to shore up the ever declining numbers in mainline Protestant churches. A factor that is rarely considered in the prolific church growth literature is the very obvious reality that Christians in North America today (and Europe as well for that matter) are living in a culture in which their mainline Protestant faith is assumed to be the “norm”, the religion of the majority, when in fact, it is not. There is a monumental “disconnect” between tacitly held assumptions on the part of mainline Protestants about their religion and its place in their culture, and the reality of the culture in which they are living out their faith. Religious diversity (not to mention pervasive secularism) has transformed our culture in dramatic ways, but the average Christian has been largely unaware of that transformation. Theologian Douglas John Hall writes:

The change is to be seen statistically and in the variety of religious traditions represented in our cities, towns, and even hamlets. The more significant aspect of the change, however, is qualitative: there is a new *mentality* with respect to religion and religious decision-making. Indeed, the very fact that religious belief *has become a matter of decision and choice among alternatives* is itself indicative of the transformation in question. ... The significance of this phenomenon for our present purposes is its critical meaning for Christian theology. At a very obvious, though still frequently ignored, level it means that everything we think, say, write, sing, and pray as Christians must now be done in the lived recognition that ours is a particular religious tradition, a choice we have made and (if we are to continue Christians) must continually reaffirm. We do our theology from now on in the midst of many others “who are not (but decidedly not!) of this fold.” Our own *faith*, if only we are aware of it, is a constantly renewed decision, taken in the knowledge that other faiths are readily available to us.¹

Hall states unequivocally that Christendom as we thought we knew it, is dead. He says: What we are witnessing (and to some degree participating in) is nothing less than a radical re-formation/purification of Christianity, comparable in magnitude only to the alteration which occurred at the other end of this same process, when the church moved into Caesar’s court. We are living at the end of the Constantinian era.²

Diana Eck in her most recent work *A New Religious America*, observes: I sense in some of the most strident Christian communities little awareness of this new religious America, the one Christians now share with Muslims, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. They display a confident, unselfconscious assumption that *religion* basically means Christianity, with

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 208-209.

² *Ibid.*, p. 204.

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traditional space made for the Jews. But make no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth.³

This enormous change in the religious landscape has profound implications for how we as Christians live out our faith and do our ministry in our congregations and communities. Diana Eck observes:

The issue of living in a pluralist society and thinking theologically about the questions it poses is important today for every community of faith. How do we think about our own faith as we come into deeper relationship with people of other faiths and as we gain a clearer understanding of their religious lives?⁴

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

In a sense, the problem is not new. From the clouded origins of the human species, as the spark of consciousness broadened and gave rise to the driving concern for the meaning of life, there have always been many religions, each with its own “ultimate” answers. But today, the presence, power, and richness of other religious traditions have vigorously entered Christian awareness. Our contemporary intercommunicating and interdependent planet has made us aware, more clearly but also more painfully than ever before, of the multiplicity of religions and of the many different ultimate answers.⁵

Professional Christian theologians have been wrestling with the significance of other world religions for Christian theology for many years. At the professional level, interreligious dialogue has been ongoing for most of the twentieth century. The laity, however, have been less involved in this interreligious enterprise. Given the current cultural realities the time has come for the interfaith dialogue to move out of the professional arena and into the everyday lives of practicing Christians. As more and more Christians have friends and neighbors who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, Jain or any of a number of other world religions, the time has come for Christians to understand those religions and the people who live them. In order to do that with integrity, Christians need to become considerably more theologically trained about their own tradition as well as about those other traditions in their neighborhoods. Douglas John Hall says,

If most Christians are abysmally uninformed in relation to Biblical scholarship the situation is even more unfortunate when it comes to knowledge of the postbiblical Christian tradition, including both the evolution of doctrine and the concerns of professional theology.⁶

³ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, (San Francisco:HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, (Maryknoll, NY:Orbis Books, 2002), p.1

⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 9.

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Among the questions that many Christians now find themselves asking are the following:

- Why are there so many different religions?
- Do people in other religions worship the same God that I do?
- If God is one, why are there so many different religions?
- Are all the religions valid in God's eyes – all equally effective in putting people in contact with the Divine?
- Are their differences more a matter of different outward expression than of conflicting content? How should the religions relate to one another?
- How should my religion relate to others particularly as it makes claims to exclusivity of revelation and salvation?
- If I study other religions will I “lose” my own Christian faith?
- If I enter into dialogue with people of other faith traditions, am I supposed to “convert” them to Christianity?
- Might I learn more from other religions than what I have learned from my own? Why do I belong to one religion rather than another?⁷

The Dialogical Approach to Theology of the Religions

As time has marched relentlessly forward, philosophers seeking to understand the meaning of life and creation have moved from believing in some form of absolute reality to understanding the world and universe, both natural and spiritual, as a dynamic process of becoming rather than “being.” As Paul Knitter explains it:

[I]f everything is becoming rather than being, the becoming takes place through interrelating. In that context, we can be only by becoming, and we can become only in relating. Nothing, whether an electron or a human being, can be ‘an island unto itself.’ ‘Every-thing’ and ‘every-body’ are profoundly and dynamically interrelated, to the point that what a ‘thing’ or ‘body’ is, is constituted by its relationships. ‘We are our relationships’ has become almost cliché. It is difficult to grasp this as literally true, for we still look upon things as substances rather than events; we deem ourselves primarily individuals rather than partners.⁸

Understanding the unfolding of the universe as a continual process of becoming means that our life as religious individuals is one marked by relationship, with the divine reality we call God and with other human beings and nature. Other human beings include all those folks who practice different religions than ours. Dialogue and relationship become crucial for living in the world.

Interfaith dialogue is an important avenue for Christian education and spiritual formation, where Christians can learn about their own faith tradition and the deep meaning of the Christian faith as they learn about the other religious traditions that they encounter in the surrounding culture. James L. Fredericks, Roman Catholic theologian puts it well:

Christianity will be transformed only through the transformation of Christian believers themselves. Here I am talking about a real deepening in our religious vision, a spiritual transformation generated by the encounter between the truths of Christianity and the truths of non-Christian religions. In this transformation, Christian believers will find a way to deal with religious diversity in a way that is responsible and

⁷ Knitter, p. 1. Some of these questions were posed by Knitter, others by the author and her students.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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creative, responsible to the demands of their own religious tradition and creative in looking on the greatness of other religious traditions as a way to plunge more deeply into the greatness of their own.⁹

Fredericks argues for an approach to interfaith dialogue that he calls “comparative theology.” Instead of studying other religions in order to find out how they are similar to Christianity, Fredericks argues that the interfaith endeavor should be one in which each party studies the other’s religion in some depth and then compares what that religion has to say on a given subject with what Christianity has to say with an eye toward reforming and reframing one’s own theology in light of the wisdom and insights of the other religious tradition. Fredericks believes that it is in studying and understanding the real differences between world religions that the deepest understanding can be forged and that the faith of the persons engaged in the encounter can be transformed and enriched. He says:

Comparative theology is the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition. Doing Christian theology comparatively means that Christians look upon the truths of non-Christian traditions as resources for understanding their own faith.¹⁰

Fredericks envisions this process as one aimed at more than achieving mere tolerance between people of different religious traditions. While increased tolerance and improved ability to live side by side with neighbors of different religious traditions are certainly laudable goals for interfaith dialogue, Fredericks believes that the transformation that can occur through a comparative theological approach can actually result in deeper understanding and a more truly mutual relationship between and across traditions, and that Christianity itself can be transformed and revived when Christians engage in this kind of intense study. He believes that this comparative theology approach can actually serve to enliven and deepen a Christian’s commitment to his or her own tradition, while educating them about others.

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

To know the truth we must be engaged in the practice of communication with others; that means really talking with and listening to people who are significantly different from us. If we’re talking just with ourselves or with our own kind, or if there are some people whom we simply exclude from the conversation and can’t imagine ourselves talking to, then we are possibly cutting ourselves off from the opportunity to learn something we haven’t yet discovered.

To have our own mother tongue and yet to be able to understand and converse in other cultural or religious languages is to feel the wonder and

⁹ James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 179.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

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necessity of becoming what we might call ‘world citizens.’ ...In this sense, all of us today are being called toward some degree of world citizenship. Two of the great threats facing the community of nations and cultures are the nationalism and fanaticism that grow among those who have never left their village and who think it is superior to all others.¹¹

Brief History of Interfaith Dialogue

In 1893 in Chicago, the first Parliament of World Religions convened. This parliament was the first formal gathering of representatives of eastern and western spiritual traditions. Today it is recognized as the occasion of the birth of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide. Thousands of representatives of western and eastern religions gathered in Chicago for discussion and dialogue on issues of common concern. Then in 1910, at the World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh. This was an ecumenical Christian organization of missionaries. Oddly enough, although thrust of this conference was evangelization, there was recognition of the fact that Christians had to reckon with the existence of other world religions and perhaps begin to rethink their approach which had heretofore been to convert non-Christian peoples and to impose upon them Western European ways of worshipping. When the World Missionary Conference met again in Jerusalem in 1928, the secularism of the “roaring twenties” was affecting both North American and European Christianity. The Conference called upon Christians to join hands with all those who were combating secularism in the world, including those of religious traditions other than Christianity. At this 1928 conference Christians were beginning to have heated discussions about what theological approach should be taken towards other religious traditions. There was fear of “syncretism” and “secularism” pervading much of the discussion. After this 1928 conference the issue of how to articulate a Christian theology of the religions became a hot topic. Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missiologist wrote a book entitled “the Christian Message in a Non Christian World” which followed an exclusivist model of theological thought.

In 1938 the WMC held its conference in Tambaran, India. Christian theologians began to separate themselves into various theological camps comprised of those who espoused an “exclusivist” theology and those who were trying to articulate a more inclusive attitude to other world religions. Then World War II brought a halt to all ecumenical conferences for the duration of the war.

After the war, the World Council of Churches was formed in 1948 in Amsterdam. The International Missionary Conference and the WCC continued the theological debates about the place of other world religions and how Christians should respond to them. In 1961 the IMC and the WCC merged into the WCC, which still exists today. At the WCC Conference in Sri Lanka 1963 there was more serious discussion of interfaith dialogue and at this time the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions became involved in the discussions extending the Christian participation to the Roman Catholic Christians. Then in 1965, the Vatican released its ground breaking document entitled, *Nostra Aetate*, The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non Christian Religions. This was a major step forward in interfaith dialogue. It is more inclusive than certain liberal Catholic theologians of the time, whom we shall study in more depth later. It called upon Catholics to respect people of other religions, declared that those religions contained truth and wisdom and declared that anyone serious about their Christian faith must be in dialogue with those of other faiths. In 1970, in Aljaltoun

¹¹ Ibid. p. 12.

Lebanon, the WCC met again and inaugurated Multifaith Dialogue under its auspices. In 1971 it formed a sub-unit entitled, "Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies." At the same time, the WCC Central Committee authorized its theological consultation to draw up guidelines for interfaith dialogue. This group met in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 1977. In 1979 the WCC issued its formal "Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue." Those guidelines included the following main points:

- Churches should seek ways to enter into dialogue with neighbors of different faiths.
- Dialogues should be planned together.
- Partners in dialogue should take into account the religious, cultural and ideological diversity of their local situation
- Partners in dialogue must be free to "define themselves."
- Dialogue should generate educational efforts in the community.
- Dialogue is most vital when participants actually share their lives together.
- Dialogue should be pursued through sharing common enterprises in the community.
- Partners in dialogue need to be aware of their own ideological commitments.
- Partners in dialogue need to be aware of cultural commitments/loyalties on each side.
- Dialogue will raise questions of sharing in celebrations, rituals, worship and meditation.
- Dialogue should be planned and undertaken ecumenically whenever possible.
- Planning for dialogue will necessitate local and regional guidelines.
- Dialogue can be helped by participation in world interreligious meetings and organizations.

The next WCC conference took place in Vancouver in 1983. At this conference fifteen non-Christian religions sent representatives to the WCC conference, an important step in Christian dialogue with non-Christian religions. In 1986 the WCC produced a Study Guide for use in parishes entitled "My Neighbor's Faith and Mine" hoping to encourage local efforts at interfaith dialogue. At the WCC conference in Canberra in 1991 discussion of Christian theologies of the religions became a hot and important topic. We will be examining these various theological positions in more depth in the next few weeks of this study.

The Parliament of World religions, which had initially met in 1893, met again for a centennial celebration in 1983. This Parliament had by then gained great momentum given all the interest in interfaith dialogue that had been building throughout the 20th century, and subsequent Parliaments were held in 1997 and the summer of 2004. The most recent Parliament, in 2004 in Barcelona, Spain was attended by over 8000 representatives of all the religions of the world.

In the Episcopal Church, the Presiding Bishop's Advisory Committee on Interfaith Relations issued a document entitled, "Principles for Interfaith Dialogue" in 1993. This document followed the guidelines of the WCC and encouraged Episcopalians to engage in interfaith dialogue. The document stated, "Among the places where such educational efforts can be focused are schools, universities, seminaries, church schools and other institutions for adult education." Prior to the distribution of this document, the Episcopal Church USA had been engaged in interfaith dialogue and had begun to pass resolutions at General Convention dealing with issues of interfaith dialogue.

A brief summary of those resolutions is as follows:

- 1979 – A044 – Calls upon ECUSA to deepen commitment to Episcopal/Jewish dialogue.

- 1979 – D133 – Calls upon ECUSA to identify existing dialogues with Islam.
- 1982 – A046 – Devise and formulate means for instituting dialogue with Islam on a formal level involving ECUSA.
- 1991 – A150 – Encourages dioceses to engage in Christian Muslim dialogue
- 1994 – A102 – Urges congregations to enter into Christian Muslim dialogue.
- 1997 – A022 – All dioceses are urged to identify “faith groups” within their geographic boundaries and to initiate dialogue with them.
- 1997 – D069 – Endorses Christian Muslim dialogue that maintains theological integrity of both communities and respects human rights and religious freedom.
- 2000 – D069 – Reiterates commitment to dialogue with Muslim community and to address patterns of discrimination against minorities.
- 2003 – D020 – Because certain aspects of *Sharia* law violate fundamental human rights when imposed by the state, “[ECUSA opposes] the imposition or continuation in any country of those aspects of *Sharia* law providing for subjugation of women, denial of full rights of citizenship to Christians, Jews and to members of other non-Islamic faiths while imposing blasphemy laws on non-Muslims, prohibition of peaceful evangelism and voluntary Muslim conversion to other faiths.”
- 2003 – A090 – Reiterates commitment to dialogue, in company of other Christian denominations and founded on “general human rights and religious freedom” as embodied in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights.
- 2003 – C031 – ECUSA speaks for an end to all forms of religious persecution and war by instituting, recognizing and supporting the yearly celebration of interfaith worship services in communities across America and around the world.

Theologies of Religions

Professional theologians have been developing theologies of the religions for most of the past century as mentioned above. Those different theological approaches have evolved over time into several identifiable categories. They have been given a variety of names, but we will use here the categories as denominated by Paul Knitter. The first type of theology Knitter calls “The Replacement Model.” This is the model which sees Christianity as the only way to salvation and as the one true religion in the world. This type of theology has also been called “exclusivist” because it emphasizes the exclusive claims of Christianity to ultimate truth. It has also been described as “ecclesiocentric” (“church centered”) meaning that it does not see salvation as available outside “The Church.”

The second model is called the “Fulfillment Model” in which the theologian believes that Christianity is the one true religion but allows that people outside the Christian faith may, unwittingly, also be saved through Christ even if they are unaware of that reality. This type of theology has also been known as “inclusivist” theology with its emphasis on salvation for all through Christ. The emphasis in this strand of theology has been described as “christocentric” meaning it is rooted in the salvific nature of Christ.

The third model is called “The Mutuality Model” in which the position is that all religions possess some part of the truth and all have something to offer the others.

These theologians have also been described as “pluralists” and their emphasis seen as “theocentric”, i.e. centered in the unity of God, the ultimate divine being. These pluralist theologians have often been criticized for emphasizing the similarities between religious traditions while not taking careful account of significant differences. The metaphor pluralists most often use is that all religions are pathways leading to the same ultimate destination. We’re all going the same way, but by different routes.

The fourth model is also a version of pluralist theology, but tries to take account of the significant and real differences between religious traditions. This model is called “The Acceptance Model.” This model acknowledges that there are different truths that each religion understands and articulates and that no one truth exists for all human communities. These theologians see the existence of these different truths as part of the divine plan and therefore not ultimately a problem. The emphasis for many of these theologians is on dialogue and understanding between religious traditions so that mutual human concerns, like environmental issues, poverty, hunger, world peace can be worked on together to better life on this planet. This model is also described as “soteriocentric” meaning it is concerned with “salvation” although not in the narrow sense that Christians understand that word. The concern here is to make a better world for everyone by acknowledging that there are many different truths for the different and varied communities that exist on the earth and the goal of interfaith dialogue is to come to understanding and respect between and among the diverse peoples of the earth while working together to preserve the environment and better the lot of the poor and oppressed of the world community.

CHRISTIANITY: CLAIMS TO EXCLUSIVITY

The issue of the existence of many different world religions is particularly important to Christians because our faith tradition makes very exclusive claims about truth and salvation and God. The statements in many of our foundational doctrines and prayers about salvation being available only through belief in Jesus Christ and about Jesus Christ being “the only Son of God” present challenges for us when we encounter people of different world faiths who appear to be leading morally, religiously and spiritually wholesome lives without benefit of “salvation through Christ.” Despite the history of the Christian missionary movement, it remains the fact that many of the world’s great religions have been impervious to Christian attempts at converting people to the Christian religion.

We have to contend with sacred texts which also have the exclusivist tone. The great commission at the end of Matthew’s gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20) is one example of our exclusivist tone. The gospel of John presents us with a few difficult texts in this context: “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life....Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the Son of God.” (John 3: 16,18) “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14: 6) In Acts 4:12 we read, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Our liturgical language is also exclusivist. Many of us recite the Nicene Creed every week in our Eucharistic liturgy. The Eucharistic prayers present the story of salvation history culminating in the event of Jesus and his death and resurrection in ways that convey the exclusivist tone. For thinking Christians there is much in the tradition that poses difficulty when confronted with the reality of other world religions that

appear to possess wisdom and insight and “truth” of some kind or other. How do we reconcile these difficult exclusivist pieces of our religious tradition with the existence of other world religions that do seem to possess integrity and truth?

Part of the answer to that question lies in becoming educated about our own tradition, its history, theology and sacred texts. No biblical text should be taken at face value and even the classical statements of our faith such as that found in the Nicene Creed need to be studied and understood in historical context.

As we begin this interfaith journey, we will examine and study the Nicene Creed as one of the foundational creedal statements of our own religious tradition. The Nicene Creed is difficult and complex, having been written over a period of several centuries and being composed in reaction to various theological movements that were prevalent in the 4th century. It is an important piece of our theological tradition, however, and it is an integral part of the weekly liturgy in many branches of the Christian traditions. As such it forms much of our individual theologies whether or not we are aware of it. As we continue our interfaith study and learn about how Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Bahai’s understand God and “salvation” it will be important to be grounded in our own faith tradition’s understanding of God and salvation. The Nicene Creed states one of the most foundational understandings that Christians have about God, viz. God as Trinity – three divine persons in one godhead.

THE NICENE CREED – AN INTRODUCTION

The Nicene Creed: Why does it say what it says?

The Nicene Creed was formulated at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and revised to final form at Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. The Nicene Creed was carefully crafted to address and renounce a number of heresies that were rampant in the early church at the time it was written. Emperors Constantine and Theodosius called the Eastern bishops together in the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople in order to deal with the heated controversy raging at the time about various theological issues addressed in the creed. This creed was the subject of intense public debate – it was not only debated by the theologians in attendance at the councils – every man and woman on the streets of Alexandria was talking about portions of it and hotly debating various forms of language being considered. The meaning of the language used in the creed was so important to everyone that violence even erupted in places where folks fought over these issues.

At the Council of Nicea in 325 AD the gathered bishops worked carefully on the language about Christ - the second person of the Trinity. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD they refined the language concerning the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Since the belief in the God as Trinity is unique to Christianity, it is an important belief for Christians to understand when entering into dialogue with other religious traditions. The Nicene Creed is the definitive statement of the ecumenical church's doctrinal beliefs about the Trinitarian God. The Nicene Creed differs from Apostle's Creed in that it was formulated by church ecumenical councils. The Apostle's creed is very early, and legend says that each of the Apostles were responsible for one line of that creed. That is the creed used at Baptisms and which was used even in the very early church at Baptism.

It is important to make a note of an issue of vocabulary when studying the Nicene Creed. The term "Christ" refers to the second person of the Trinity, co-eternal and always existing in the godhead. The name Jesus refers to the human being who was born in the early first century of the Common Era (CE), lived for 33 years and died on the cross. Jesus' last name is not Christ. He was known as "Jesus of Nazareth" or "Jesus, son of Joseph." Christians believe that he was the earthly incarnation of the Christ, Who had always existed.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God -

It was over this section of the creed that most of the debates roiled. At stake was the very substance of belief about Jesus and who, exactly, he was. The resolution of this very contentious debate is found in the Chalcedonian Formula about the nature of Christ, which was produced at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. This formula is found in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer on page 864. The Chalcedonian formula asserts that Jesus was 100% human and 100% divine, the two natures coming together to form one Person, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." The reason the Council of Chalcedon was so careful to articulate the formula in the way it did was because it wanted to address the theological beliefs of a person named Arius, who espoused a belief that was to be deemed "heretical" at the councils.

Arius believed that while Christ/Logos/Jesus was divine in some way, he was not always there, at the beginning with God but was in some way created by God at some

point. The problem with that idea is that then Jesus becomes not “true God” but a creation of God, a creature of God. This puts Jesus, possibly, on a par with us, or maybe some higher level, like an angel, but makes him less than God. God, as a being, can’t create Godself. Those who disagreed with Arius, chief among them Athanasius, believed that Christ and God were co-eternal - both always existed. Athanasius believed that only God can save humanity and therefore for Jesus to be Savior, Jesus had to be God. There was never a time when “He was not”, HE being the Christ (**not** the earthly person Jesus of Nazareth.) Arius argued that to say the Divine Logos or Christ was always there with God was to essentially posit two deities. In order to preserve what he perceived to be a unity, he claimed that the Christ/Logos was created by God.

Begotten, Not Made –

Again this language was inserted in order to counteract the teaching of Arius that God the Father made God the Son or created the Divine Logos/Christ. To say that the Christ was “begotten not made” suggests that Christ was always there as God was always there - God didn’t make the Logos - the Logos was, is and always will be. Something which is begotten of you – like your biological children, are more of the substance of you than, say, a painting you create, or a piece of music you write, or a piece of clay which you mold into something.

The language as we now have it was finalized at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD but the Arian controversy continued for several hundred years more. There was a schism in the church after this council and there were times when more of Christendom agreed with Arius than with those who won over him at Nicea. During the fourth century, as the creedal language was being debated and hammered out there were a couple of other famous “heretics” who were ultimately beaten out by “orthodox” theologians. One was Apollinaris who wrestled with how Christ was both human and divine. He said Jesus was fully human with respect to his body and his “animal soul” but that his mind was the mind of God. He was declared a heretic in Constantinople in 381 because this meant that Jesus was only 2/3 human, not fully human. The issue for those who disagreed with Apollinaris was our salvation – Jesus could only save that which he actually was himself – if he was not fully human, then we who are fully human could not have been completely saved. That which Jesus did not assume, he could not redeem, was the argument.

Eutyches was another theologian deemed heretical by the Council of Chalcedon. He wrestled with how Jesus had two natures – one divine and one human, and basically decided that he really had one nature which was a combination of human and divine. The Chalcedonian formula addressed this and dismissed it by stating that Jesus was one divine person in which two natures, one human and one divine, come together “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”

Modern Critique of the Christological Debate

These fourth century theological arguments seem very esoteric and rather irrelevant to the modern mind. We don’t believe in “human nature” as a discrete entity that can be isolated like an ingredient in a cake, nor do we believe that a divine nature can be so isolated. We are dealing here with words which were important to the thinkers in their time but have less relevance for us today.

We also do not share completely the Greek mindset that produced these words. The God presented here is a very static, Greek kind of God, somewhat different from the Hebraic God we know from scripture who leads the Israelites across the Red Sea,

speaks to Moses on Mt. Sinai, walks in the garden with Adam and Eve etc. Our perspective on God is broader, perhaps than that presented here, but that is to be expected in a writing which is intentionally an intellectual statement of faith, and the product of heavily debated and carefully crafted wordsmithing. Nonetheless, the Nicene Creed is a fundamental statement of Christian belief and as such, Christians need to understand its origins and insights in order to deal intelligently with the doctrines of God and salvation that they will encounter in other world religions. An important thing for Christians to remember when wrestling with this difficult creedal statement is that it is the historic statement of the faith of the Christian religion as expressed in the early 4th century. It is an important piece of our theological history and at this time remains an important ecumenical statement of Christian faith. While individual Christians may struggle to understand it, it still remains a central statement of belief for the Christian religion.

In order to keep the Nicene Creed in mind as we continue our interfaith studies, what follows is the text of the Nicene Creed with notes explaining what “heresies” the various portions of the creed were crafted to refute. This is a way to illustrate some of the key controversies that gave rise to the creed as we have it.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

DOCTRINE OF GOD

CHRISTOLOGY

COUNCIL OF NICEA – 325 A.D;
COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE – 381 AD.

HERESIES: COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON – 451 AD

Arius – Arius taught that the Christ, the divine Logos, was created by God. This would mean that the Christ/Logos was not always there, not eternally present with God. Also, it would make the Christ somewhat less than God, because God would have come first.

“Begotten” suggests created out of or made from the very same stuff.

Apollinaris – Jesus fully human with respect to body and “animal soul” but had a divine mind. Makes him only 2/3 human.

Nestorius – Mary was not “*theotokos*”, rather “*christotokos*”. She bore the Messiah, the Christ, but not God. Again, subordinates the Christ under God.

Eutyches – Said Jesus was one Person, with one Nature, which was a mixture of human and divine. Not two separate natures in one Person, but a sort of mixed nature.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets

We believe in on holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Adopted at Council of Constantinople – 381 AD

BAPTISM, RESURRECTION, THE CHURCH –ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC

ONE — At the Council of Jerusalem in first Century church decrees that to be Christian one does not have to be circumcised. Gentiles invited to be fully part of the Church. Unity is not the same as uniformity. “Diversity-in-communion.”

HOLY — Called to be saints (St. Paul). Called to walk in love. Called to sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit.

CATHOLIC — universal. Means what all Christians have believed, at all times, everywhere, i.e. orthodox faith. The faith set out in the Nicene Creed. See also, Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (BCP p. 876-877) for the four essentials of “Catholic” faith.

APOSTOLIC — “Apostle” is one who is sent. Anglican/Roman Catholic/ Orthodox churches see succession of bishops as sign of apostolic continuity. Protestants say *apostolicity* means continuity with preaching and teaching of the church in its apostolic mission to the world as well as or instead of succession of bishops.

The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is a complex and confusing doctrine in Christian theology, and yet it is one of the most fundamental and essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Christians believe in the One God of the Abrahamic faiths, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Ishmael, but we believe that God is not a monad, a single being in itself, but a community of three divine persons, co-eternal and co-equal. This means that all three persons of the godhead have always existed, have always been working in the world because God is eternal. The names we use for the three persons of the Trinity are, most often, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The second person of the trinity, the Son is also called The Christ, the anointed one. It is this second person of the Trinity that Christians believe became incarnate in human life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The doctrine of the Trinity finds support in the Bible in various places and ways. In the creation story in Genesis there is the reference to the spirit of God that breathed over creation as God was creating all that is. In the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures are many references to a divine entity referred to as Woman Wisdom, or Sophia, who is described as being present with God from the dawn of time and active with God in the process of creating the world. Many scholars believe that this figure of Woman Wisdom is the divine person whom Jesus of Nazareth incarnated. Woman Wisdom is the Old Testament version of the Christ. References to the spirit of God abound in both the Old and New Testaments. In the gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that an Advocate, a Spirit of Truth will be sent to them upon his departure to guide them and be with them always. Jesus also breathes the Holy Spirit upon them when he appears after the resurrection.

One way of understanding the trinity is to think of how we experience God in our lives. The God of creation is the one we see when we look at the created world, at the wonders of the natural world. The Christ is the God we experience in interpersonal relationships, when we look for the divine spark in all people. Christians are called to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” The Holy Spirit is the source of all passion, compassion, desire, creativity, eros in the world. It is the person of the godhead that breathes life and energy into human beings and the world.

The doctrine of the trinity is important because we believe that we are created in the image of God. If our image of God is that of trinity, a godhead which is a divine community of distinct, diverse persons who are eternally connected in what scholars describe as a “divine dance of intimacy” then we humans are called to live in community also, to strive to create and be part of loving community which embraces diversity and difference. The Unity of the godhead does not mean uniformity, and so uniformity is not expected in human life either. Rather, diversity and difference are embraced as part of the way God is and the way we are created. Love between these diverse and distinct persons is the driving force for all life activity. For Christians involved in interfaith dialogue a question to ponder is how our Trinitarian belief in God differs from the polytheistic monotheism of the Hindu religion about and how we are similar to yet so different from our monotheistic brethren in the Jewish and Islamic traditions. In a sense, we attempt to bridge the polytheistic/monotheistic divide with our complicated and unique doctrine of the Trinity. What spiritual wisdom does this doctrine afford us and how can we share that with other traditions that find it so confusing?

Journal Questions for Chapter One

The following journal questions are designed to help you reflect on what you are learning and track your own development as you go through the interfaith experience. While journaling is not mandatory, it comes “highly recommended!”

- *If you had to name your core beliefs, or central statements of faith that are foundational to your own sense of who you are as a Christian, what would those be? Briefly describe your own Christian beliefs in whatever way is important or meaningful to you. (You do not have to recite a catechism or established creed!) Be creative and try to articulate what it is about being Christian that is important to you. Who is God for you? Who is Jesus Christ? Why be a Christian?*
- *Describe how you believe the other religions of the world and their practitioners fit into the human/divine relationship or God’s “grand scheme of things.” How do you as a Christian reconcile the existence of other major world religions and their differing beliefs about God, salvation, humankind etc? What do these other religions say to you about your Christian faith, if anything?*
- *What do you hope to learn as you engage in this interfaith encounter?*
- *Is there anything you fear as you begin to explore other religious faiths?*
- *What most intrigues you about other world religions?*
- *What most confuses you in your own Christian tradition as you have lived it up to now?*