

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Christians relating to other religions

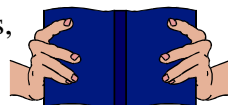


At Christmas more than at any other time of year, we're confronted with questions about Christian displays in public places. Should nativity scenes be on the lawns of government buildings? Should public schools observe the religious aspects of Christmas? Many Christians answer, "Of course!", but others aren't so sure. What about Santa Claus, and Christmas trees, parties, and gift exchanges, in groups that include non-Christians? These practices aren't explicitly religious, but they celebrate a Christian holiday.



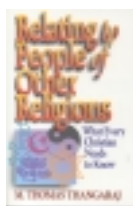
Now that recent terrorist attacks have made U.S. citizens more aware of non-Christian religions and of the increasing religious diversity within the U.S., we may see the question of Christmas observances as part of a larger question: what role should Christian practices play in official government and school activities, and in other nonreligious events?

Like many other U.S. citizens, since September 11 I've been trying to become better informed about the world's major non-Christian religions. This effort, along with reading the daily news, has made me reconsider not only questions about Christianity's role in secular public activities, but also the more basic question of whether Christianity is the only true religion or merely one among many.



A Christian who changed his attitude

While I was reading and thinking about all this, a *Connections* reader sent me a book that I've found especially helpful. It's *Relating to People of Other Religions: What Every Chris-*



Living with religious diversity

In his classic book *The World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco 1986), Christian author Huston Smith suggests three categories of questions that we need to ask when we look at the world's religions.



- First, what is these religions' relationship to each other? Some people say that one is superior. Others say they are all basically alike despite incidental differences. Still others compare them to a stained glass window whose sections divide the sun's light into different colors.

- Second, do the religions speak with a concerted voice on any important matters? What wisdom do they offer? In ethics, Smith finds the Ten Commandments mostly telling the cross-cultural story. Widely accepted as virtues are humility, charity, and veracity. As the nature of reality, he sees the religions acknowledging the unity, inestimable worth, and mystery of things. He finds that at the center of the religious life, the major religions see joy and the prospect of a happy ending.



- Third, and maybe most important for us right now, how should we comport ourselves in a world that is religiously pluralistic where it is religious at all? Smith's answer? We listen. If one religion claims us, we begin by listening to it, critically but expectantly. Then we must listen to the faith of others, Smith assures us. Today's annihilation of distance and urgent need for peace require listening. And the understanding and respect that listening brings can lead to the compassion that the great religions advocate.



Smith warns that we'll never quite understand religions that aren't our own, but he urges us to try anyway. We won't totally fail, he assures us, if we take the religions seriously. That requires, first, seeing their adherents as men and women who face problems much like our own, and second, ridding our minds of preconceptions that can dull us to fresh insight. Doing those two things seems especially important when religious diversity is as great as it now is in the U.S.



tian Needs to Know (Abingdon Press, 1997), by M. Thomas Thangaraj, who teaches World Christianity at Candler School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary.

Thangaraj is a Christian who grew up in India among Hindus. He tells how as he got older he remained devoted to Christianity but changed his attitude toward followers of other religions. I disagree with some of his views but I found his presentation of the most common Christian positions helpful. Written in a clear, easy-to-read, nonacademic style, his book could be very useful for church groups.

God created variety

Thangaraj reminds readers of the many scriptures that refer to the variety God has created, in languages, creatures, and cultures and civilizations. "The whole creative act of God," Thangaraj points out, "is a celebration of the many." He shows us, too, how the celebration of plurality recurs throughout the Bible. "The teachings of Jesus clearly reflect God's appreciation of variety and difference. ... The reign of God is like a banquet that is open and inclusive." We also

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]."
—Acts 10:34

see Jesus's appreciation for plurality in his treatment of those who don't belong to his own community of friends and relatives. In addition, we can find acceptance of plurality in Peter's and Paul's teaching.

How do we regard other religions?

Here's how Thangaraj describes the most common ways in which Christians regard other religions.

■ We know, but they don't know.

This view, which several scriptures seem to support, sees Christianity as the one and only possessor of the truth about God, and as the only route to salvation.

"... There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."
—Acts 4:12

Christians with this view see Jesus Christ as God's unique and final revelation. They therefore feel strongly motivated to try to convert people to Christianity.

Thangaraj feels that this view disparages the followers of other religions by saying they must be destroyed and supplanted. It often uses military metaphors, portraying the church's mission as a war in which other religions are captured, conquered, and destroyed. Although few Christians with this view are literally killers, over the centuries it has led some Christians to kill non-Christians and to believe they were doing it for God's glory.



Many Christians with this "only we know" approach acknowledge that Christianity as we practice it isn't the true religion. However, these Christians say that Christianity as God means it to be is the only true religion. Thangaraj observes that they see no points of contact between Christianity and other religions with regard to the question of truth.

Thangaraj believes that if we use John 14:6 as the basis for claiming that Jesus is the only route to God, we may be misinterpreting that scripture. He warns that putting it into today's multireligious setting changes its context and can thus lead to unjustified conclusions. In his view, the verses that surround John 14:6 indicate that "the way" Jesus is talking about is the way of willing self-sacrifice and suffering, not about himself as the only route to God.

Jesus said to [Thomas], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
—John 14:6

I'm not convinced by that explanation, but for other reasons I can't believe that for everyone Jesus is the only way to the true God. I see Jesus as *my* way to God, but that seems to be mainly because of where I was born and where I've spent my life. I find considerable validity in the reasons that Thangaraj mentions, that keep most Christians today from seeing Christianity as the only way to God.

√ Christians who have close relationships with people of other religions don't see this claim borne out in their experience. They see non-Christians who show goodness, grace, and mercy and are deeply committed to God.



√ Christians who reject the claim of uniqueness see that history and culture have shaped all religions. These Christians also recognize that other religions

have scriptures that they consider authoritative just as Christians consider the Bible authoritative. They feel that similarities between the Bible and other religions' sacred texts make it hard to attribute unique authority to the Bible.



√ Christians who reject the “we know but they don't” position see that in today's world our problems are global and call for global solutions, and that the exclusivist position doesn't help us converse or cooperate with adherents of other religions.



■ **Maybe we know, maybe they know.**

Who knows? Some Christians hold this view, Thomas Thangaraj finds, because they see science as the only reliable source of knowledge. They don't believe religion can lead to truth. Others are skeptical of every religion's claims because of the cruel and demonic acts that have been done in the name of religion throughout history.



Thangaraj rejects this position for two main reasons. First, he says, our confidence in the Christian faith, and our commitment to it, show its truth. I believe religion can and often does lead to truth, but the mere fact that we believe something doesn't necessarily mean it's correct, so I don't find this reason convincing.



Second, Thangaraj reminds us, life demands commitments and confident action. To make the decisions and choices we need to make, Thangaraj believes, we must feel sure that our beliefs are correct. I question this, however. I think we can be confident enough to act in accordance with what we believe, yet also be open for new God-given insight and recognize that if such insight comes it may require us to revise some of our beliefs.

■ **Our religion is good for us, and theirs is good for them.**

Thangaraj sees this view becoming predominant today, partly because “What do I want?” has become such an important question in our society. People also hold this view, he observes, because they feel that an invitation to religious conversion would infringe on others' integrity and freedom. Many Christians thus prefer simply to agree to disagree, and to be civil about it. Thangaraj believes, however, that taking this position leads merely to a benevolent indifference rather than to the understanding that we need.



Some Christians and ex-Christians, Thangaraj finds, feel that Christianity isn't even good for us. Some women find Christianity sexist and oppressive, and some African-Americans feel that it is practiced in racist ways that can't meet African-Americans' spiritual needs.




The “good for us, good for them” approach has another shortcoming, too, says Thangaraj. “We live today in such an interconnected and interdependent world that ‘good for us’ and ‘good for them’ are not two separate categories. ... We cannot afford to exist on our own.” Instead, he finds, we need to interact with each other and help each other toward a common vision of what is good for us all.

■ **They know in part, but we know in full.**

Thangaraj sees this approach in Paul's speech at Athens. Paul acknowl-

“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ... “
—Acts 17:22

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

edged that the Athenians' religion was not all false, but that it showed a desire for more than they had found. He presented Jesus Christ as what they sought.



■ **We know that we know, but they know and don't realize that they know.** What we mean by Christ, some Christians say (and I tend to agree with them), is more than the man Jesus. Christ is the meeting point where the divine and the human encounter each other. Christ is the aspect of God that is true light and enlightens everyone. Christ is divine justice and love. And these aspects of God are

recognized by adherents of other religions, although not exclusively in Jesus or by the name "Christ."

■ **We all need to know more.** Thangaraj recommends this approach because at best our knowledge of the truth can only be partial. To get further toward the whole truth, we need each other. Thangaraj thus urges us to commit to our respective faiths but stay open to others' insights. "We need to fine tune our hearts," he concludes, "in order to gently and reverently recognize the Spirit of God in Christ at work in the world and among the people of other religions." I suspect he's right about that.

Barbara

Coming in *Connections* . . .

Interfaith groups. Are they important for Christians to be part of? What should their purpose be?

Traditional Christian beliefs about war—the crusade approach, the pacifist viewpoint, the just-war tradition.



Pluralism. Is it the Christian way to relate to other religions? Or is it a melting pot in which truth gets lost, an unprincipled relativism that leads to moral decay?

Martyrs and misfits. Is this what God wants all Christians to be? How does today's church treat them?

**Glory to God
in the
highest
heaven,
and on earth
peace, good will
among people!** Luke 2:14

