

What Christians Can Learn from Other Religions

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Preface

People in various religious traditions have often been insulated from those perceived to be different. But in a world of instantaneous communication and rapid travel, contacts and competitions among religions are no longer avoidable. Historically, such contacts have often led to bloody conflicts and brutal repression, including genocide. The growing interreligious contacts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have not lessened the brutalities; in some respects they have increased. That is despite the goodwill proclaimed and practiced by many people, perhaps a large majority of people, in all religions.

Some of the causes of the friction are political and economic; some are the legacy of old grievances and inherited cultural patterns not based on the religions themselves. But there remain unresolved conflicts of basic beliefs and values. That is particularly the case when adherents consider their own faith to be absolutely true and other religions altogether false and misleading. By contrast, universal faiths are generally taken to apply to all people everywhere, regardless of their own beliefs and values.

Even people who are not religious fanatics may find it difficult to see anything particularly attractive in faiths other than their own. As the nineteenth-century English writer George Grote wrote in *The History of Greece*, “It is of course impossible for anyone to sympathize fully with the feelings of a religion not his own.” And yet there is bound to be some truth and goodness in all the faith traditions that have claimed people’s allegiance over long periods of time. There are religious traditions that have nurtured hundreds of millions or even billions of people over thousands of years. How are we to understand that basic point? Can better understanding of other faith traditions lead to better understanding of our own? Can positive appreciation of other faiths contribute to peace, both in local communities and in the wider world?

I believe so. It seems to me that one helpful exercise is to search for aspects of other faith traditions that expand or clarify or reinforce meanings in one's own.

Undertaking that task, I have sought in this book to ask what I, as a Christian, can learn from several of the other world religions. In some cases, this may be to expand the meaning of Christian faith as held and practiced in the early twenty-first century. At other points, it may be to clarify misunderstandings of Christian faith by people of other religious views and even by Christians themselves. Occasionally it can help us to ferret out the points where time-bound cultural biases and misconceptions have clouded the true nature of our faith.

It is beyond the scope of this small book to deal with all the world's religions or to provide a complete exposition of any of them. In the main, I've stuck to the largest and oldest ones, but the reader should remember that there are other religions embraced by appreciable numbers of people. Perhaps this book will lead others to explore the values of faith traditions that I did not examine here.

Readers may be surprised to discover that I have included atheism as a religion to be mined for its contributions to Christian believers. That may annoy any atheists who happen upon this book! One atheist consultant, after reading an early draft of my chapter on atheism, made that point emphatically. But, as I have defined religion in the first chapter, atheism often qualifies. Apart from occasional opinion surveys, we cannot know how many atheists there are, nor, for that matter, how many different versions of atheism exist. We do know that atheism has become a significant force in the modern world, especially in North America and Europe. So it is included here.

Readers should note that this book does not attempt to provide a full account of the religions I have considered. A full understanding of each of these religions would require many more pages. But that is not the point of this book. What I have sought to offer here is a better sense of what we can learn from other faiths, which is a much more selective look at the different religious traditions. This is a venture of interpretation: not only interpreting selected aspects of the religions from which we can learn but also interpreting important aspects of the Christian faith itself. Not everybody will agree with the interpretations offered here, but I hope this venture will lead to deeper thought and conversation about what we can all learn from one another.

While the book is intended primarily for Christians, I am encouraged by contacts with adherents of other faiths to hope that others may find this helpful as well. No doubt my Hindu or Muslim friends will feel that their traditions

have been presented too incompletely and that, indeed, one almost has to be a Hindu or a Muslim to treat those religions adequately. I am reminded of a conversation with a Buddhist friend more than a decade ago when I shared my sermon “What Christians Can Learn from Buddhism.” His response: “That was all right—for a Christian.” While I’ve learned a good deal more about Buddhism since that day, he might say the same thing now. Still, the adherents of the religions explored here may find this an intriguing invitation to deepen their own understandings. I would be delighted to see non-Christians write books like this about what their traditions can learn from others.

I offer some preliminary observations in the first chapter. The chapters that follow successively examine what Christians can learn from primal religion, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions, and atheism. Chapter 8 will deal with the somewhat less prominent religions of Jainism, Sikhism, Baha’i, and Zoroastrianism.

In writing this book, I wish to thank the congregation of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, for patiently enduring a preliminary version of this volume in a series of sermons more than a decade ago. Later I taught a course on Christian ethics and world religions at the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, and I found the diverse groups of students and visiting lecturers from different faiths helpful. As a member of the founding board of the Interfaith Alliance and the board of InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, DC, I learned much from colleagues of different religions, including some religious traditions I had known scarcely anything about. More recently, I am indebted to the people of the Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California, for the stimulation and contacts afforded by the school’s exciting new Claremont Lincoln University project in cooperation with Jewish and Muslim institutions (anticipating participation by still other faith groups).

I have, additionally, made presentations to and received helpful suggestions from individuals and groups, including the Colesville Presbyterian Church of Silver Spring, Maryland; the Dumbarton and Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Churches of Washington, DC; the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Alexandria, Virginia; the retired clergy group of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church; the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute of American University; social studies and world religions teachers of the Fairfax County, Virginia, high schools; the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington; the Interreligious Council of American University; and a study group in the Adirondack village of Long Lake, New York. The people who have participated in these conversations are too numerous to list here, but I want to express particular thanks

to several people, representing my own and other faith traditions, who have read all or part of this book, thereby significantly improving the end product. None of these readers are to be held responsible for remaining problems and misunderstandings, but they can be thanked for helping me to make this a better book. So, my special thanks to Sayyid Syeed, Dan Sackett, Pamela Theimann, Roger Gilkeson, Aaron Kiely, D. C. Rao, Bill Aiken, Neal Christie, Jihad Turk, Sathianathan Clarke, Clark Lobenstine, Charles A. Kimball, Barbara Brown Zikmund, and my Westminster John Knox Press editor, Dan Braden.

These experiences and contacts have taught me that while we must learn much from one another at an intellectual level, in the end our personal contacts and friendships may prove even more important. Still, the intellectual level remains important. Understanding what other faiths can teach us can help us forge friendships with persons whose religions are different from ours, and I believe that greater understanding of other faiths contributes to better understanding of our own.

A special word of thanks, once again, to my wife, Carolyn, who, for more than half a century, has taught me important lessons about openness and compassion.

I have dedicated this book to the Rev. Clark Lobenstine, with appreciation for his friendship and for his more than thirty years as Executive Director of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. Through these years of creative leadership, he has inspired people of very different religious traditions to learn from one another.

Chapter 1

Learning from Other Religions

Pitfalls and Possibilities

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

—John 14:6

Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

—Mark 10:18

Before addressing what Christians can learn from other religions, we must ask whether that is even a legitimate topic. Any number of Christians doubt that there is anything to be learned from people who have not accepted Christ and become a part of his church. A favorite scriptural quotation comes readily to mind: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). If Jesus is *the* way, what could there be in other religions for people who follow the way of Jesus? Don’t people of other religions have to be brought to this light? Isn’t the really important question the reverse of the title of this book, that is, what can people of other religions learn from Christians? And isn’t the basic answer to that question the fundamental one: how they can learn about and come to accept Christ? But not so fast!

There are two reasons why Christians cannot take that passage from the Fourth Gospel as a sufficient basis for rejecting everything about other faiths. The first is that there is more than a little doubt whether Jesus himself ever uttered those words. The Gospel of John was the last of the four Gospels in the New Testament to be written. Most New Testament scholars date the writing to sometime during the 90s CE, at least sixty years after Jesus’ crucifixion. The earlier Gospels and the writings of Paul convey a very high

conception of Christ, but they do not offer a view of Christ as the only way to God. Most New Testament scholars doubt whether the apostle John, or anyone else who actually knew Jesus, wrote the Gospel of John. That is not to say that the Fourth Gospel is without merit, but it must be taken for what it is: a theological interpretation of the meaning of Christ. In some respects, the writing is brilliant, but, in common with most theological writings, it must be studied with care.

The other reason for not considering this a basis for rejecting everything about other faiths is that even those who take the words at face value must then ask themselves, what is it *about* Christ that makes him the most important way to God? For instance, one could interpret the passage to mean that it is the love of Jesus that shows the way. The John 14 passage continues, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” To experience Jesus, especially the love of Jesus, is to see what God is like. If God is God of love, then the way to God is through love, the kind of love displayed by Jesus himself. That leads to further questions: Is it possible that something of that love can be discovered in adherents of other religions? And is it possible that one can discover in those other settings insights that might illuminate even the way of Jesus?

John Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace could help here. Wesley considered grace to be, in many respects, the most basic of all Christian doctrines. Grace is the boundless love of God, illustrated most fully in the person of Christ. Those who have encountered and accepted this grace in Christ have experienced what Wesley called justifying grace. Even those who have experienced justification by faith in this grace must continue on a journey of being perfected in love. Wesley called this sanctifying grace. Prior to justification and sanctification, there is prevenient grace, meaning the grace that comes *before* encountering and accepting Christ. Prevenient grace is a recognition that the God of love is already at work everywhere, not just among Christians.

Christians can ask whether they might learn more about this prevenient grace as it is manifested in other religions—and, taking that a step further, whether a deeper understanding of other religions can contribute to a richer, truer perspective on Christ himself.

Pitfalls in Comparing Religions

Is it even possible to compare religions? In a sense, it obviously is possible—and in this book it is necessary. But there is one immediate problem. How

can the adherents of one faith know enough about other religions to arrive at accurate comparisons? Isn't religious knowledge possible only from the inside? That may be so, at least up to a point. People of one religion seeking to characterize another cannot know what it is like to *experience* the other faith. Will the criteria of judgment be drawn from one's own faith experience? Does that distort the lens?

If religions are offered as universal, then some understanding of faiths other than one's own cannot be entirely excluded. One should be able to locate points of agreement and disagreement that are not entirely off the mark. As in this book, it should be possible to explore the points at which one can learn from other traditions, even while retaining commitment to one's own.

There is another hazard to be avoided. Sometimes, when criticizing other religions, we compare the *best* in our own faith with the *worst* in others. If we compare "our" ideals with "their" practices, we will have unfairly judged the other faith tradition. In his insightful portrait of Muhammad, Omid Safi states this point emphatically: "One of the most common mistakes made in cross-religious conversations is that people end up comparing the loftiest and noblest aspects of their own tradition with the most hideous aspects of others." He asks how Christians would feel if their faith tradition were defined by the closing words of Psalm 137, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock," or the reference in Numbers 15:36 to a man who was stoned to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath, or the lines in Ephesians 5 and elsewhere requiring women to be subservient to men. Most Christians would say that such passages are taken out of context or that they do not represent what the faith is really about. But couldn't representatives of other faiths make the same point about similarly objectionable quotations from their scriptures?

Every one of the world's religions has enough truth and goodness in it to have been attractive to large numbers of followers. Every one of them has also had a dark side, fueled by fanaticism and, sometimes, by self-interest. We must not compare the bright side of our faith with the dark side of others.

Or the other way around. In the emerging interreligious dialogues of our time, some participants have thought that to sustain the dialogue they must be entirely negative about their own faith traditions to demonstrate their tolerance in conversation with others. But openness toward others does not require rejection of one's own tradition. Real dialogue is from strength of conviction, combined with respect for and openness toward the convictions of others.

Then there is the pitfall of out-and-out syncretism, the notion that it is possible to blend all religions and emerge with something better than any of them taken singly. Such efforts are often so bland that the end product

is somewhat *less* than what the various religions, taken on their own terms, have to offer. A case in point is the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That idea, with some variations, can be found in most of the great world religions, and that point of convergence is to be celebrated. Still, there is more to the various religions than that, including the differing theological contexts. We can welcome common values and beliefs while remaining skeptical that complete synthesis of different religions will ever be possible. Certainly the present volume does not anticipate such an outcome. Perhaps even more to the point, the differences *within* each of the major religions frustrate efforts at synthesis beyond one's own faith.

Further, as we seek to learn from other religions, we must remember that some beliefs and practices that we associate with another tradition are often an expression of social customs and political forces having little or nothing to do with the religion itself. Attitudes toward women in a number of Muslim countries and the caste system in India may illustrate this problem, as would the medieval Inquisition in predominantly Christian lands. It can be difficult to assess the interplay between religious views and political and cultural commitments.

Such issues were discussed vigorously in the early to mid-twentieth century. A robust Christian missionary movement had developed during the nineteenth century, with thousands of missionaries going from Europe and North America to countries such as China and Japan and the largely colonial territories of Asia and Africa. The intent was to convert the millions of Asians and Africans from other religious backgrounds. The Student Volunteer Movement, inspired by John R. Mott, motivated large numbers of college students to set aside other career objectives and enlist as missionaries determined to evangelize the world in one generation. An ecumenical missionary movement gave rise to world missionary conferences in 1928 (Jerusalem) and 1938 (Tambaram, India) at which there were serious reappraisals of Christian missions and their relationship to other world religions.

The discussions and writings of this period prior to the Second World War anticipate, to a striking degree, today's debates. The major difference between that time and today is the transformation of former colonial territories of Africa and Asia, with more than a billion people changing their status from colonial subjects to citizens of new nations. Major non-Christian religions that had been on the defensive gained new self-confidence. Christian missions continued, but now there were also representatives of Hinduism and Buddhism establishing a presence in North America and Europe and spreading their influence in so-called first-world settings.

Changing Perspectives on the Christian Mission

The earlier twentieth-century discussions about the relationship between Christianity and other world religions remain strikingly relevant as representatives of different religions face one another on a more equal footing, although not many Christians today are familiar with those discussions.

The Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry of the late 1920s and early 1930s, headed by Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking, attempted a sweeping review of the Christian missionary enterprise to non-Christian parts of the world. Its conclusions, published in 1932, were not hostile to missions, but they did break new ground in their positive attitude toward other religions. The report by the inquiry's Commission of Appraisal concluded that all the world's religions have values that should not be rejected, even though Christianity remains unique. God is present everywhere, so we must not disregard that presence in religions other than our own. The report called for a renewal of Christian life as a living faith and a relative de-emphasis of abstract doctrine and exclusive conceptions of the institutional church.

The inquiry stated the attitude of Christians toward other faiths in a new way: "The mission of today should make a positive effort, first of all to know and understand the religions around it, then to recognize and associate itself with whatever kindred elements there are. . . . It is clearly not the duty of the Christian missionary to attack the non-Christian systems of religion—it is his primary duty to present in positive form his conception of the way of life and let it speak for itself." Far from denying what is essential to Christianity, however, the Laymen's Inquiry sought "with people of other lands a true knowledge and love of God, expressing in life and word what we have learned through Jesus Christ, and endeavoring to give effect to his spirit in the life of the world."

The conclusions of the Laymen's Inquiry were not accepted by everybody, of course, and they would remain controversial today. The Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer illustrates the negative reaction during the mid-twentieth century with his sharp contrast between Christian faith and all other religions. According to Kraemer, the various religions represent human striving. They are a human achievement, often very impressive, even noble. But, like ventures in philosophical thinking, they ultimately fall short because they do not provide an answer to the deepest human problem. The fundamental problem is that we are sinners; in our darkness, in our despair, we cannot create our own way out of the pit. In Kraemer's view, Christian faith alone promises real hope in our hopelessness. It is faith not in our ability to think or create or

act, but in the revelation that God has initiated our salvation through Christ. God's action, not ours, is our only hope.

These contrasting points of view about non-Christian religions are still present in twenty-first-century Christianity. The main purpose of this book is to test whether other religions have anything to offer Christians. Clearly, the way we view this question has important implications for Christian missionary activity. Should the primary effort of missions be to proselytize, or are there other purposes?

I was briefly involved in the Methodist missionary movement in the early 1960s. That was a time of rapid, even revolutionary, change in parts of the world where most of the missionary activity was located. In 1960, my wife and I had accepted the invitation to serve as missionaries in Cuba, where I was to be a seminary professor. Because of the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro, we weren't able to take up that post. Instead, we returned to New York, where I assisted in the development of a program of long-range planning for our Board of Missions. Thus, I had a front-row seat on the possibilities and dilemmas of missionary thinking during an unusually turbulent era.

In a few short years, a billion people had changed their political status from colonial domination to independence. Sometimes independence movements emphasized indigenous non-Christian religions. Often missionaries were rejected as tools of colonial domination. Some missionaries were able to adjust creatively; others were not. When one of our executives returned from an extended visit to missions in Africa, he asserted that half of the missionaries there were doing more harm than good; fortunately, he believed, the other half more than made up for the others. The church, however, was already planted almost everywhere. So the missionary task was less one of making new converts and more one of providing assistance to existing churches. In non-Christian settings that could mean participating in inter-religious forms of cooperation. I do not recall that any of us felt particularly threatened by that.

This situation of a half century ago has been reinforced by developments in subsequent years, particularly as the mainline denominations and ecumenical movements have continued to reassess the missionary task and the possibilities of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. No longer do these churches and ecumenical bodies think of the central missionary task as gaining converts from other faiths. That is not exactly the view of more evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Indeed, one of the most striking evidences of this is the growth of such churches at the expense of Roman Catholicism in Latin America.

Another new phenomenon is the increasing number of missionaries from other countries at work in North America and Europe, establishing something of a two-way street. Representatives of non-Christian religions, especially

from Asia, are gaining converts and establishing communities of faith in North America and Europe.

What Is Religion?

Basic to the current differences of opinion among Christians is the very definition of religion itself. Should we, following Hendrik Kraemer, sharply contrast religion with Christian faith? The problem here, as any student of world religions will recognize, is that claims of revelation are not unique to Christians, although the forms of revelation claims vary from one religion to another. For example, Muslims emphasize God's direct revelation to humanity through the transmission of the Qur'an (literally word by word) to Muhammad, and Buddhists speak of the Buddha's moment of enlightenment.

If unique revelation claims are the basis of comparison among religions, how are we to know which claims are true and which are misleading? Christians can appeal to God's ultimate disclosure in God's own time or to the Romans passage that says, "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15b–16). We are left then with spiritual discernment, which may indeed be the decisive evidence in support of any faith. But the role of the mind in sorting out the differences among revelation claims cannot so easily be dismissed. Any number of conflicting religious traditions—some of which cannot stand the test of time or moral adequacy—have been deeply satisfying to their adherents' spiritually.

Paul Tillich defined religion as our "ultimate concern," and that is not a bad way to frame a definition. Religion is what concerns us ultimately; it is what we care about most deeply; it is what matters most to us. In a similar vein, partly derived from Hebrew tradition, we can define our religion in terms of what we value most, which is to say, what we worship. By such definitions, it is evident that to be human is to have some form of religion. So religion cannot be defined by any particular conception of God or of gods, and, as we have suggested above, even atheism can be described as a religion. Indeed, a person's *professed* religion may not even be his or her *real* religion! A person could profess belief in God (as expressed in the Bible or other sacred scripture) while actually being more devoted to nationalism or even crass materialism. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli offered the cynical advice that a ruler must, above everything else, *appear* to be religious. But it is clear that the real religion of the aspiring ruler would be gaining and holding power. Are there people of our time whose passion in life is the gaining and holding of great wealth? Or status? Or power?

Another important twentieth-century theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, explores how all of us have a “center of value” that defines all our lesser values. The highest value, to him, is “radical monotheism,” in which our center of value is also the source of all being. But he notes that many people are activated by what he calls henotheism, which is worship of one’s own group. That could be one’s family, one’s nation, one’s racial or ethnic group, and so on. It could even be one’s church, if that is a group to which one is devoted while excluding all others.

The point here is that what we profess as our religion may not be what we value most. Some of the most murderous interreligious conflicts of our time illustrate this henotheism a good deal more than the faith that is held formally by the people involved.

It follows that not everything we call religion really *is* religion. If what we value most is not the same thing as what we profess, then the profession is not religious. It is only appearance. And, of course, many of our values, while sincerely held, are not religious either, for we do not center our lives on them. I may value a beautiful painting or musical composition without worshipping it. A friendship can be very important to us, but not the center of our lives. Almost anything imaginable could become all-important to us, but most things do not rise to that level. Chapter 9 on atheism will raise the question of definition in a somewhat different way.

Which leaves us where we started in approaching all religions, including our own, both respectfully and critically. Religion, thus understood, truly is a spiritual concern. But that does not mean that it cannot be discussed in intellectual as well as spiritual terms. The point expressed in the title of this book remains both legitimate and urgent.

Confronting the Great Unknown

If religion is conceived, following Tillich, as our ultimate concern, we will never have enough external evidence to validate its claims. An atheist friend challenged me with a serious question: “If there is a God, why couldn’t he just once make that unmistakably clear by writing a message in the sky, or something like that?” I responded that if that were to happen, my friend, as the scientist that he was, would immediately think of explanations for such a strange phenomenon—perhaps a skywriting airplane or an unusual configuration of clouds.

My friend also had to confront the limits of his own knowledge. The problem is underscored by a scientific view of the unknown. It is not simply

that what is unknown will in due course become known through the relentless progress of science. Indeed, science will doubtless continue to explore uncharted areas that are currently beyond its understanding, and many explorations will doubtless be successful. The problem is that the more we come to know, the more we know that we don't know! In a provocative book, astrophysicist Edward Harrison concludes that

as knowledge grows, new facts and fresh ideas cast shadows of uncertainty over old facts and ideas. Previous knowledge must repeatedly be revised and reinterpreted. In time the new knowledge inevitably reaps the harvest of further doubt. Uncertainty becomes one's constant companion. Learned ignorance—awareness of ignorance—like entropy seems never to decrease but always increase. It urges us to seek certainty by acquiring greater knowledge, which when attained, unfailingly creates further uncertainty. Solve one problem and you create many more. . . .

The more we enlarge knowledge the more aware we become of our ignorance. . . .

Beyond all systems stands the Universe in a cloud of unknowing.

The astrophysicist who wrote those words was thinking primarily about our knowledge of phenomena—that is, what we can know about the nature and source of things. What is matter, ultimately? What is energy? What about the origins of life? What about the big bang? It is the proper business of science to keep probing these questions. But we also confront the unknown in more directly human terms. What is the meaning of our lives? Is our experience of moral freedom only an illusion? How are we to understand our relationships? Most of all, what are we to think of the truly ultimate question: does the universe reflect a divine purpose? While Harrison does not probe those issues, here, too, we confront the cloud of unknowing, if by knowledge we mean what we know for sure.

Does this leave us in a cloud of pessimism? I don't think so. I would prefer to frame it like this: Think of everything we know as being contained within a circle. Beyond the circle is the great unknown. As we add to our knowledge, the circle expands. That does not deny the knowledge we have within the expanding circle. But it means that the outer circumference of the circle has greater contact with the unknown.

What Is Revelation?

More than that, we are led to conclude, with the New Testament book of Hebrews, that our religious relationship with this vast unknown must

indeed depend on faith of some kind; as its author asserts, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (Heb. 11:1, 3). We grasp the unknown through some form of revelation. That does not have to mean a thundering voice from beyond or the flawless words of a sacred writing. It certainly does not have to set aside the factual knowledge we already have, including the dependable conclusions of rigorous science and what commonsense experience may tell us. We will consider some aspect or aspects of actual experience to disclose this “ultimate” that lies beyond all experience.

Revelation is, in that sense, metaphorical. It always points beyond itself. Even natural theology (such as that expressed by ancient Stoics and later philosophies) cannot claim to have certain knowledge. We never have access to the whole of reality. Put in a different way, we are all dependent on those aspects of experience that bring all life into focus. Claims that are inconsistent with observed experience or self-contradictory are open to criticism. While I was writing this book, an elderly participant in a discussion group I was conducting came up with a direct way to characterize this view of revelation. It is an “aha” moment, she said. It’s what helps make sense of everything else.

This understanding of the meaning and necessity of revelation underscores the importance of interreligious dialogue as we probe understandings of revealed truth that are different from our own. The task is not only legitimate; it is necessary. What “makes sense” can be different to different people, even within the same religion, and much more so among people of different religious backgrounds. I am convinced that those of us who are Christian can indeed learn from other religions, even though our openness does not require us to accept beliefs and practices that are contrary to our own experience or to the best in our own tradition. Our attitude toward other faiths cannot be either wholesale agreement or total rejection.

We turn, then, to the task of identifying particular points of non-Christian religions from which we can learn. This task is not only legitimate and necessary; in our time it has become urgent.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does openness to learning from other religions strengthen or weaken Christian faith?

2. Should Christian churches send missionaries to non-Christian lands? Should missionaries from non-Christian religions be welcomed in predominantly Christian countries?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the author's definitions of religion and revelation?
4. If what we value most is central to who we are, what are we to make of the relationship between materialism and religious faith in American culture?
5. Can you think of persons or groups whose actual religion is not the same as what they profess?
6. Can you think of illustrations of persons or groups who compare the best of their own faith tradition with the worst of others?