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INTERFAITH WORSHIP: How Should Christians Respond?

by Bernard James Mauser

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Interfaith Worship: How Should Christians Respond?

Terrorist attacks rocked America in 2001 and recently at the 2013 Boston Marathon. Many united at interfaith worship services across the country to express their grief and anguish. Interfaith events have grown as a result, and are said to help promote peace and unity between the diverse religions.¹

There are troubling questions that Christians need to answer about interfaith activities. How should Christians respond if invited to an interfaith event? Let us briefly explore the elements of interfaith activity before offering a Christian response.

The Principle of Cobelligerence. Consider the old proverb, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This proverb helps encapsulate the principle of cobelligerence. When a group finds itself at war with another group, this principle is used to form an alliance with the enemy of your enemy. Christians often use this principle to unite with others against immoral practices. For example, in opposing abortion, Christians often find themselves allied with those that are of different faith backgrounds. This should be expected, as there are pro-life Muslim and Jewish organizations.² These alliances are based on the principle of cobelligerence. This same principle has been invoked in the war on terror.

Those that use cobelligerence as a reason to join with interfaith groups to stand against terrorism often do so in the midst of tragedy to pay respects to the dead. Their approach includes (1) interfaith worship services, (2) inviting dialogue as to what the different faith traditions have in common, and (3) promoting religious pluralism.³ These three are said to contribute to a fourth element: a climate of religious tolerance. All four of these elements combine to advance interfaith cooperation.

The typical elements of an interfaith prayer are seen in that of the Rev. Liz Walker at the recent interfaith service in Boston in the wake of the marathon bombings. She declared, “We are members of one another. A community of resilience, hard-

pressed but not defeated, confounded but not consumed, we are gathered in community.” Then she prayed,

Creator God, in the beginning you said let there be light, and the light shone, piercing the darkness. Help us find our way through the darkness now. You taught us that we belong to each other. Help us hold each other now. We pray comfort for those who have lost loved ones, courage for those who are struggling through the trauma of physical and psychic pain, and tenderness to those for whom the world no longer makes sense. Lord, bless this broken-hearted city as she finds her balance, dusts herself off, and tilts her head back toward the sky. Open our eyes to your presence this morning, open our hearts to your grace, restore us so we can see and be the light once again. In all that we hold holy, for me that is Jesus Christ, let the people of God together say Amen.

Understanding Religious Pluralism. The element of religious pluralism is hard to define. The reason is that *religious pluralism* has many meanings. Some say this means there is a diversity of religions. More problematic meanings include the idea that no religion has adequate justification to evangelize others, as none can be true.⁴ Others say that not recognizing religious pluralism causes the oppression of those that want to “act in accordance with their religious beliefs.”⁵ Consider a parable about six blind Hindus used to illustrate religious pluralism (used as a basis to say no religion has the full truth about God, but each is partially true).⁶ Each Hindu argued that he had the correct view of what an elephant is. Each explored a different part of the elephant and concluded that he had the truth. The one felt the tusk, and thought the elephant a spear. Another touched the leg, which made him think it a tree. A third grabbed the tail, and of course this revealed it was like a rope. A fourth pressed the side, and said an elephant is like a wall. The fifth placed his hand on the trunk, and said it was as a snake. The sixth rubbed the ear, and said it is like a fan.⁷ The late philosopher of religion John Hick used this to illustrate “that Ultimate Reality is far beyond human conceptions.”⁸

The Limits of Cobelligence as It Relates to Worship. The principle of cobelligence is useful sometimes, but not in every situation. Everyone wants his or her cause to have support. However, if cooperation with another group leads to a greater evil, then it should be avoided. Consider some distinctions that will limit cobelligence.

There is a difference between uniting with others outside our religious group to stop terror and uniting with them to worship. In the first, the action is consonant with Christian principles. Christians may work with others to stop crime and injustice.

Christians can be educated about other views to help them understand differences between groups. This can help them build relationships, too. All people have many things in common (Acts 17: 22–34). These commonalities can be used as a foundation on which to build respect and empathy between all people.

Worship is categorically different from learning about other faiths. Worship is attributing worth to the one to whom it is due.⁹ A Christian is forbidden from worshipping with other religions, as it is both an injustice and is a violation of Scripture.

Justice is rendering to a person what is due him. Therefore, only worship of the true God is just (as He is the only one worthy), and worshiping another is unjust and wrong. It is evident that the one true God forbids worship of idols alongside His command to worship only Him (Exod. 20:3–6). We are to follow the example set by the apostles and the prophets when they were confronted with religious diversity.

In a passage that clearly condemns worshiping with unbelievers, Paul addresses idolatry in the Corinthian church. He writes:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." (2 Cor. 6:14–17)

Throughout Scripture the mark of a true believer is an absolute refusal to worship any god besides Yahweh (see, e.g., Dan. chaps. 3 and 6). No matter how great the evil that interfaith cooperation may be seeking to prevent, if Christians are to join in that cause it must never come at the cost of joining in idolatry. The advocates of interfaith worship substitute the peace that only comes from an encounter with the true God of Christianity with a superficial peace that comes from emphasizing our common humanity. Each religion differs about the nature of humanity's problem and what should be done about it. Christianity says the problem is sin and uniquely identifies the solution to this as Jesus' death and resurrection.

Responding to Religious Pluralism. Religious pluralism requires certain distinctions to be made. If religious pluralism simply says that there are many and varied religions, there is nothing to dispute. However, what does *not* follow from this is that no religion is correct and that all religious practices are equal. Some religious practices, such as female genital mutilation, are illegal despite the fact they are called religious, for they are clearly immoral. Due to contradictory truth claims that are central to each religious tradition, it is impossible for them all to be correct. As some religious practices are immoral, such as female genital mutilation, these religious practices should not be tolerated.

There is also an assumption about truth in religion. For example, Christianity says Jesus died and rose again according to Scripture (1 Cor. 15:3–8). Others, like Judaism and Islam, say Jesus did not. If He did, Christianity is right and the others are wrong on this point, and vice versa. One may explore the evidence to see which is correct (John 8:32).

What of the parable of the blind Hindus? There is a problematic assumption in this story. Insofar as all religions are like the blind men, they only grasp a part of the Ultimate at best. What is immediately evident is the one telling the story is not blind.

This shows the problem that the person telling the parable must be able to see reality as it is in order to say everyone else is wrong! Suppose I told you my mom was a long-haired pirate from Vienna. To criticize my claim you'd have to know the truth. The same goes for those taking a skeptical position regarding religious claims.

What about tolerance? Something assumed in the concept of tolerance is that someone is wrong. People only tolerate things they disagree with. This concept only makes sense if there is truth in religion. Also, the interfaith adherents' absolute value of tolerance (however they define it) is often not practiced when it comes to dealing with those who they label as intolerant (i.e., those that refuse to join with them in worship).

In Rev. Walker's prayer, it is evident that she embraces pluralism and is subject to the aforementioned criticisms. She ignores the tenets that make a person Christian (as well as distinctives of other religions) when emphasizing we belong to one another, we are all of light, we are all people of God, and we hold holy the same things. This is clearly incompatible with Christianity.

Purity in the Faith. All Christians, including those in political office, should avoid worship with those outside Christianity. We are to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's (Mark 12:17). Not all interfaith activity is wrong (e.g., it promotes peace between different faiths), but it advances ideas that oppose the distinctive claims and nature of Christianity and virtually all the other faiths as well. Religious pluralism as understood and embraced by many in the interfaith movement denies that Jesus is the only way. We are not to be unequally yoked, and we are to worship in spirit and truth. Interfaith efforts fail to address the real reason for lack of peace on earth, namely, the failure of humankind to seek peace with our Father who is in heaven through His son Jesus Christ. —*Bernard James Mauser*

Bernard James Mauser, Ph.D., has a bachelor's degree in science, an M.A. in Christian apologetics from Southern Evangelical Seminary, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from Marquette University. Currently he serves as a professor at San Diego Christian College's Rivendell Sanctuary.

NOTES

- 1 Eboo Patel, "3 Reasons Interfaith Efforts Matter More than Ever," *Huffington Post*, April 23, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eboo-patel/3-reasons-interfaith-efforts-mattermore-than-ever_b_3134795.html.
- 2 www.prolifemuslims.com; <http://jewishprolifefoundation.org>.
- 3 Eboo Patel, *Huffington Post*.
- 4 David Basinger, "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religiouspluralism/>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 John Hick, "Religious Pluralism," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 7 Original story related by John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887).
- 8 Chad Meister, "Philosophy of Religion," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002,

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/religion#H3>, accessed July 7, 2013.

- 9 E. F. Harrison, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, "Worship," ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 1192.