

When Christians Get It Wrong: Relating to Other Religions

John 4:7-15

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Mark S. Bollwinkel

For centuries Arabic traders plied the waters of south Asia selling spices, metals and spreading their language. Arabic vocabulary can be found in the languages of India, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. When Christian missionaries came to those nations after World War II to translate the Bible into their indigenous languages they relied on local vocabulary, which in a number of cases used the word “Allah”, the Arabic word for “God”.

Among the Iban people of Northern Borneo living in Sarawak, a state in the Federation of Malaysia, who did not have written language until after World War II, the use of “Allah Taala” for the Supreme Being was quite common in their vocabulary and went directly into their translations of the Old and New Testaments.

During the last decade, the Malaysian government has attempted to outlaw the use of the word “Allah” by Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians in that country, insisting that the word belongs to Muslims only. Government officials insisted that Christians use the word “Tuhan” instead, which is literally translated as “Lord”. But along with references to God the word “tuhan” was also a title confirmed upon British and European colonizers in interaction with the indigenous peoples, at times derogatorily.

On December 31st last year a justice on the equivalent of the Malaysian Supreme Court ruled against the government’s legislation to restrict the use of the word “Allah” for “God” by any other religion than Islam. (Asia Sentinel, 01.03.10) Christians, a minority in the predominately Sunni Muslim Southeast Asian country, are now free to use their traditional word for God based on the Arabic “Allah”.

Isn’t Shakespeare who asks, “What’s in a name?” But there is a lot more going on in this conflict that semantics. Power, politics and social intimidation are all at play. It leaves us asking “who owns the language for God?”

The media has reported that in August last year a neighbor to Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan on base at Ft. Hood, Texas was charged with criminal mischief for tearing off a bumper sticker reading "Allah is Love" and scratching the paint job with a key on the Major’s car. What role this incident played in Maj. Hasan’s killing 13 people and wounded 38 others in November's massacre at Fort Hood Army Post in Texas is a mystery and incidental to the Major’s insane act of violence. (CNNNews 11.07.09) We can only imagine what motivated the inappropriate anger of the neighbor when seeing the Arabic word for God inserted into one of the most beloved Christian scripture verses “God is love” (I John 4:8). Again, it leaves us asking “who owns “G-o-d”?”

There are as many names for “God” as there are languages; in 32,000 years of recorded human history no culture has ever been discovered without an expression for divinity or spirituality in some form, from cave paintings to sacred books. When Moses asks for God’s name at the burning bush (Exodus 3) the answer is “Yahweh”. When translated into German, Yahweh became “Jehovah” because German doesn’t have a “y”

in its alphabet. In Hinduism the supreme deity is named “Brahma” but in its pantheism form and name are given to hundreds of its attributes as if separate deities.

A brilliant college student in our congregation a few weeks ago stopped me cold with the question, “Where did “God” come from?” Confused by the implications of that question I really didn’t know where to begin. He went on to explain that he was really asking for the etymology of the word ... the history of the origins of the English word... “G-o-d”.

“God” has Indo-European roots, Old English *god*; related to Old Norse *goth*, Old High German *got*, Old Irish *guth* (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company)

This is fascinating information but not very helpful to our main concern!

In their book *unchristian*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons report that 55 million Americans are considered “outsiders” to the Christian faith; for the generation now between 16-29 years old, 40% no longer see the Christian faith as relevant to their spirituality. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 18) Despite that alienation most young outsiders say that Christianity has good values and principles (79%). (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 69) What turns them off from our faith is the disconnect they perceive between our definition of God and how we live as individual Christians and as a church, especially when it comes to how we relate judgmentally to people without faith, questioning faith itself and/or people of other religions.

All too often Christians have approached others as if we own exclusive rights to the Almighty and unless the other accepts our definitions, dogmas, institutions and rituals the other stands outside of God’s embrace.

I still cringe when I remember the graveside funeral I attended as a chaplain to the Clovis Police Department 16 years ago. It was for an infant who died in his crib of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Although I had been with the family the night of his death, other members of the family asked another preacher to officiate. The preacher said prayers, read scriptures and took the opportunity to deliver a sermon at the grave during which he urged all in attendance to convert “or they too would end up in hell just like the little baby boy” who was too young to be baptized and join his church. Although the preacher had every right to believe whatever he chose to believe, I can assure you that far more of the 100 people gathered there for the funeral that day would reject Christianity itself because of the preacher’s message than ever consider converting to it. I still pray that that the woundedness of those two parents has been healed and that they somehow found a way to forgive him.

Such an encounter is just about the opposite of our scripture lesson today. Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. Hebrews and Samaritans, two essentially distinct religions as well as ethnic groups, traditionally would have nothing to do with each other, avoiding contact at all costs. It was the same for a pious Hebrew rabbi such as Jesus as well in relationship to unaccompanied women. That Jesus offers this woman, who we will learn lives in great moral sin, who has been ostracized by her community, who is a Samaritan untouchable...that Jesus offers this woman living water teaches us much about how we are to relate to outsiders and people of other religions; always with grace, patience and love not judgment, argument and criticism (note 2 Timothy 2:24-25).

The transforming love of God that we learn about in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is offered to all people, regardless of religion, rank, gender or age. As Paul puts it:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.... But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6,8)

In other words, God loves us and acts to save us before we think the right thoughts, believe the right doctrines, practice the right rituals, and join the right church. Its not what we do or don't do that earns us God's love rather it is what God has done for us that makes sense of this broken world.

That's why we take Holy Communion. A symbolic reminder of many things, including the extent to which divinity seeks us out to love and guide us on this journey of life no matter whom we are or where we are on that journey.

There is One God, known by many names, owned by no one, belonging to all. For United Methodists we understand it this way:

“...we have entered into serious interfaith encounters and explorations between Christians and adherents of other living faiths of the world. Scripture calls us to be both neighbors and witnesses to all peoples. Such encounters require us to reflect anew on our faith and to seek guidance for our witness among neighbors of others faiths. We then rediscover that the God who has acted in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the whole world is also the Creator of all humankind, the One who is ‘above all and through all and in all’ (Ephesians 4:6)” (2008 United Methodist Book of Discipline, “Our Theological Task: Ecumenical Commitment”, para. 104, pp. 84-85)

If God is love, shouldn't we who believe act like it?

Amen.