

The Rhode Island State Council of Churches
Faith & Order Commission
POSITION PAPER ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

*Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?*
—Proverbs 8:1

Introduction

The Rhode Island State Council of Churches is engaged increasingly in a religiously pluralistic world and collaborates extensively with people of many faiths on matters of peace and justice. To offer theological and experiential grounding for such interfaith work, the Council's Faith & Order Commission accepted as its challenge in 2013-2014 to craft a position paper. In so doing, the Council seeks to

- . encourage interfaith dialogue,
- . ease discomfort with differing world views,
- . recognize and acknowledge more than one pathway to Holy Mystery,
- . respect, appreciate and celebrate differing approaches, not judge them, and
- . provide an imperative for increased interfaith cooperation across Rhode Island.

A concept of God is bigger than any one religious expression or faith tradition, and the acknowledgment of this truth is necessary to interfaith dialogue. Karen Armstrong, in the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote, "Despite our scientific and technological brilliance, our understanding of God is often remarkably undeveloped—even primitive. In the past, many of the most influential Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers understood that what we call "God" is merely a symbol that points beyond itself to an indescribable transcendence, whose existence cannot be proved but **is only intuited** by means of spiritual exercises and a compassionate lifestyle that enable us to cultivate new capacities of mind and heart." Hence, we believe that faithfulness to God requires us to engage with others, not to convert them to our Christian persuasion but to develop an appreciation for their beliefs and practices, to learn from them, and to grow together in understanding.

We also recognize and value all the gifts of God, not only in religious expression but also in the arts and sciences. Exploration of the cosmos, the world beyond us, and the genetic makeup of life, the world within us, are both ways of deepening our relationship with Divine Mystery – even when such engagement calls for reimagining and reformulating tenants of our faith.

Finally, we recognize that in all religious traditions there are those who skew its core principles and values, including Christians, for personal and political aims. We regret our historic and current acts of oppression, acknowledge and atone for our Christian "privilege," and attempt, herewith, to express an authentic spirituality.

Therefore, to build understanding and promote harmony and reconciliation, we urge pastors to initiate conversations within their congregations and between their local churches and the various and divergent communities of faith represented in their communities.

We Are Not Alone

Rhode Island is home to people of many faiths. While Christianity is the largest faith community, Judaism is the second largest (2010 U.S. Religion Census by ASARB), followed by Buddhists and then Muslims. The Council already is working closely with the Jewish and Muslim communities and is in relationship with people of other traditions outside of the Abrahamic faiths.

At the same time, there is divergence in the Christian community, even as we claim to be the one “Body of Christ.” Today, people not only “switch” denominations for one that is convenient or meets their particular needs, they also switch their faith affiliations – or leave a church in search of spiritual truth outside the institution.

And, often, people of faith may feel more closely aligned with people of good will from *different* faith traditions than with those who share the *same* tradition. The Spirit is opening up a more generous theology and calling for charity between us, not judgment.

Rooted in the Hebrew Bible

To understand Jesus, we must understand the Hebrew scriptures. The Jewish Bible, the Tanakh (the Torah, Prophets, and Writings), shows the Jewish people – the Hebrews – as a nation among the nations who had a love-hate relationship with their neighbors, particularly with their neighbors’ gods. They not only understood God, Yahweh, as *their* God but also as the God of *all* the nations, the God of all the world.

Their myths and legends gave them a foundation for their early creeds that showed hospitality not only to the marginal in their midst (widows and other poor) but also to strangers, aliens, people of other nations (who had other gods). The prophets, over generations, sought to bring them back to these Yahwistic roots. The stories of Ruth and Jonah, for example, showcase the Jewish people coming to the truth of their multi-religious environment.

As People of the Book – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – we are “the descendants of a four-thousand year history of God’s seeking to form with humans an abiding and blessed relationship . . . that transcends all differences, the God who has promised to gather together a human community both for its own blessing and for the extension of that blessing to all peoples” (Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*).

For Christians, Jesus comes to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim

release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, reflecting Isaiah 61:1-2a). For Christians, however, Jesus is qualitatively different from the other prophets: Jesus is filled with the Spirit of God. He breaks open old ideas and offers persons the freedom to be open to the presence of God in everything and everyone. Hence, Christians are an incarnational people who see Jesus as the model for human life, as the teacher of how life is to be lived and cared for.

The Hidden Blessings of Dialogue

Not only can people of different faiths experience God in different ways but they also can gain insights from each other to enhance their own understanding. We need each other. Christians are not superior to other faith traditions or better than others, only different from them. To think that Christianity is the *only* way, is incompatible with a notion of a God who is "Holy Other," who defies human limitations, who is "...exalted ... above the heavens, [whose] glory [is] over all the earth" (Psalm 57:11); hence, interfaith dialogue guards us against the idolatry of our own position.

Each tradition has unique ways to the Holy Other. It may be true that aspects of the fullness of God's revelation can be perceived only through the contributions of *all* religions. And then, only dimly. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (I Cor. 13:12a). While the fullness of God can never be understood by the human mind, God can be better known through the contributions of many minds, especially when they draw from the broadest breadth and depth of the human experience.

While we may hold different philosophies from each other, we can draw on our mutual humanity in our engagement with each other. Our tendency to "box people in" to our preconceived ideas and our limited experiences works against our understanding them. None of us fit neatly into categories. Dialogue overcomes alienation.

Franciscans tell a story about St. Francis of Assisi and the Sultan Malek al-Kamil during the Crusades and the implications it had for Christian-Muslim relations in St. Francis' life and ministry:

"In 1219, the city of the Damietta, a large Muslim city in Egypt, became the focus of the Fifth Crusade. Bloodshed abounded in the city as the armies fought. St. Francis who had gone with the crusading army had a different idea. He crossed enemy lines and sought an audience with the sultan. Who knows why he wasn't killed, but when the encounter was over, the sultan allowed St. Francis to go home where St. Francis amended the Franciscan rules, showed appreciation for how Muslims pray, and encouraged a ministry of presence, living peacefully among Muslims. Neither converted the other and yet they met each other as men of God. If we follow St. Francis' example, this story tells us, we can see that mutual respect and living in peace do not betray the Faith but makes us disciples of it."

Thus, in interfaith dialogue we find that one gains greater understanding of and appreciation for one's *own* tradition which will be deepened and enhanced by the journey. While one's conviction toward his or her own faith may be the best expression for him or her, it may not be the right, best, or highest conviction for everyone.

As people of faith listen to each other, they develop a broader understanding of what it means to be fully human. This takes time and patience. This requires creating shared experiences and building relationships.

Finally, one must leave room for mystery, for God's "surprises." The human mind and the creation of religious structures cannot capture the mind of God or the divine impulse.

What Does the Lord Require of Us?

All faithful people are required to embark on their own journey of the soul, to develop their own expression of personal piety. Each person is required to explore his or her notion of who God is because one's image of God is foundational to one's way of being in the world. In the same way, one's world view is reflected in one's faith – and one's faith is reflected in one's world view.

Armstrong notes, in *The Case for God*, "Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle. We badly need to consider the nature of religion and discover where and how it goes wrong. ... Religious truth has always developed communally and orally; in the past, when two or three sat down together and reached out toward the 'other,' they experienced transcendence as a 'presence' among them."

Armstrong continues, "Today, when science itself is becoming less determinate, it is perhaps time to return to a theology that asserts less and is more open to silence and unknowing. Here, perhaps, dialogue with the more thoughtful Socratic forms of atheism can help to dismantle ideas that have become idolatrous."

Beyond dialogue, all faithful people are required to engage in the world, "... [W]hat does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8.) The hallmarks of a faithful life are merciful conversations and the relief of suffering – and we do this best when we do it together across faith traditions.

The Practice of Pluralism

We pledge ourselves, as a Council of Churches, to step outside our comfort zones, to learn from each other, to build sacred relationships across faith traditions, and to look for the "light of God" in others (George Fox). Or, as Catholic theologian Michael Moorwood proposes, "Jesus reveals the sacred in each of us," but the sacred is not limited to those who claim the name Christian. All of God's creation is sacred, regardless of faith and practices.

No religion promotes violence, and we abhor the violence and other forms of extremism carried out in the name of religion. Because ignorance and lack of understanding fuel fear, we call all people of good will to repent the harm caused by excluding others. We lament those who withdraw from the conversation, for they deprive us of their contributions to the collective truth.

We recognize that faithfulness to truth requires that we are always reforming, always giving up a little bit of ourselves to new understandings in the light of new revelation. T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* reminds us of the soul's journey with these words,

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

He also reminds us in that same work,

“For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.”

Thus, we offer this bold statement as a moral imperative and practical commission for pastors and their people, and indeed, we call upon those of all faiths – and those who espouse only the faith of “goodness” – to come together as one community to build understanding for the common good.