

# Missionary Encounters with Other Faiths

## A Point of Contact

### Review

- Resist temptation to view beliefs as opinions or a matter of taste
- Understand that religion isn't simply an aspect of life, but a comprehensive system that will shape everything.
- Respect that their convictions are a claim of truth over against your claim of truth and avoid being caught up in mushy relativism
- "A missionary encounter involves a clash of ultimate and comprehensive religious commitments and ways of life." Michael Goheen

\*Because religion is comprehensive and because a missionary encounter will mean a clash of every part of life, can we even have a discussion or will it always be a conflict?

### Surprised by Common Ground

**IF** the Bible is correct that we are all totally depraved, all humanity is sinful from birth...

**AND** we are only able to do good because the gospel is starting to work in our life putting to death the old man and bringing to life the new (a process called sanctification)...

**THEN** why does it seem that people of other faiths seem to be much more pious, wise, morally upright or even generally do more good than us (regenerate Christians!)?

John Murray writes:

*How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless exhibit so many qualities, gifts and accomplishments that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and of others? How is it that races and peoples that have been apparently untouched by the redemptive and regenerative influences of the gospel contribute so much to what we call human civilization?<sup>1</sup>*

This fact alone can **paralyze our witness**. But it is actually **the best in-road** for a missionary encounter. First, though, we must lay the theological groundwork.

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, "Common Grace" *Collected Writings* 2:93

## Theological Basis for Our Common Ground

### 1. Remnants of Creation:

- **Image of God** (Genesis 1:26, 9:6)
- **General Revelation** (Romans 1, Psalm 19)

*[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*  
(Romans 1:18-23 ESV)

What does every human know already? What are the implications?

### **Distinction between general and special revelation**

*“Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.”* (Westminster Confession of Faith I.1)

However much we should appreciate and benefit from the truth that all people are created in the image of God and are recipients of general revelation, these two advantages are not sufficient to save. In fact, because of our sinful response to this knowledge, these two actually condemn us.

### 2. Common Grace:

*“As God is everywhere present in the material world, guiding its operations according to the laws of nature; so He is everywhere present with the minds of men, as the Spirit of truth and goodness, operating on them according to the*

*laws of their free moral agency, inclining them to good and restraining them from evil.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **A. Restraint**

*“It is not, of course, to be supposed that the restraint God places upon sin and its effects is complete, nor is it uniform. Complete restraint would imply eradication, for even though restraint in itself does not mean eradication, yet a restraint that would be complete would involve the removal of the exercise of sinful affection and impulse and removal of the very primary consequences of sin.”<sup>3</sup>*

#### **Restraint upon Sin**

*[6] Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.  
(Genesis 20:6 ESV)*

#### **Restraint upon Divine Wrath**

*[20] because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. (1 Peter 3:20 ESV)*

#### **Restraint upon Evil**

“He brings to bear upon this world in all its spheres correcting and preserving influences so that the ravages of sin might not be allowed to work out the full measure of their destructive power.”<sup>4</sup>

*[17] And to Adam he said,  
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
and have eaten of the tree  
of which I commanded you,  
‘You shall not eat of it,’  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
(Genesis 3:17 ESV)*

Yet the ground still brings forth enough to sustain life!

### **B. Conferring Good and Inducing to Good**

Common grace is more than just the negative and preventative; it is also positive. God bestows “good” to all people. He also endows men with gifts, talents, and virtues and stimulates them to use them for worthy tasks.

Arts, sciences, government institutions are given by God to benefit the human race!

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge *Systematic Theology* II: 668

<sup>3</sup> Murray 98

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 101

*[16] In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.  
[17] Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”*  
(Acts 14:16-17 ESV)

**All truth is God’s truth:** so we shouldn’t fear truth coming from other faiths  
*[17] Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*  
(James 1:17 ESV)

A healthy understanding of common grace will lead us to celebrate biblical truth and godly wisdom wherever it is found.

### **Our Inconsistency and Overlap**

*“Every human culture is an extremely complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth.”<sup>5</sup>*

*“First, though unbelievers do reject God’s revelation of Himself, they cannot be thoroughly consistent in that rejection. The reason for the inconsistency which is present in every fallen man to some degree is that even sinful men are in the image of God and retain many of man’s original abilities (cf. Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). Man still thinks and reasons; he still perceives the world. Because God’s common grace restrains the principle of sin and depravity, non-Christians are actually able to think and act according to the remaining effects of their being in God’s image without acknowledging Him as their Creator.”<sup>6</sup>*

### **In the same way the Christian is inconsistent with her beliefs.**

*“The life of the Christian is not without fault. Though he has been restored to the original state, this restoration is not complete until the second advent of Christ. The Christian is involved in a raging battle between righteousness and sin...As a result, there are two principles at work in the believer, one toward obedience and the other toward disobedience. Though the Christian seeks to be dependent on God by looking to His revelation for knowledge and morality, he fails to carry out that desire consistently.”<sup>7</sup>*

*“He is inconsistent with his principles of total dependence on God and thereby maintains falsehoods in his thoughts and actions.”<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller *Center Church*, 109

<sup>6</sup> Richard Pratt *Every Thought Captive*, 32-33

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2

## Throbbing Core

### Sympathetic insider view of religion

D.T. Niles *"Before you can really understand any religion you have to be tempted by it"*

If you want to understand a religion, you must try to feel and sense what questions they are asking. What are the fundamental longings?

Michael Goheen calls it the "throbbing core" of every religion. Do we hear the cry to Allah as the longing for the creator of all things and the judge, the groping for moral order, the longing for community...needs to be heard but each has been misdirected by sin?

*"The first task of contextualization is to immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions. When Paul began to speak to the philosophers in Athens, he began by saying he had carefully studied their objects of worship (Acts 17:23). We should do the same."<sup>9</sup>*

We need to spend time finding those points of contact. It could be a shared frustration at relativism. It could be how we raise our kids or a desire for ultimate meaning.

Qualification: Not every Muslim falls into the same categories. There may be that same throbbing but it comes out in different ways, so listening is important!...Maybe they don't believe everything about their faith but the longing is the same.

### Critical Outsiders View

Our task is to hear the cry of the heart and say, we believe your religious beliefs will never answer this but Christ is the answer.

## A and B: Engaging in Conversation

*"When we enter a culture, we should be looking for two kinds of beliefs. The first are what I call 'A' beliefs, which are beliefs people already hold that, because of God's common grace, roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching..."*

*"However, we will also find 'B' beliefs—what may be called 'defeater' beliefs—beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive. 'B' beliefs contradict Christian truth directly at points we may call 'B' doctrines..."*

*"in Manhattan, what the Bible says about turning the other cheek is welcome (an 'A' belief), but what it says about sexuality is resisted (a 'B' belief). In the Middle East, we*

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<sup>9</sup> Keller 121

*see the opposite—turning the other cheek seems unjust and impractical, but biblical prohibitions on sexuality make sense.”<sup>10</sup>*

We enter the culture by pointing people to the overlapping beliefs they can easily affirm: Do you see this in your culture? Do you see this well-known belief? The Bible says the same thing—even more strongly, even more clearly!

Our criticism of other religions will have no power to persuade unless it is based on something that we can affirm in the beliefs and values of that culture.

Beginning with the common heart longings, will enable you to invite them further into a discussion about Christianity. If you believe ‘A’ about God—and you are right—how can you believe in ‘B’?

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 123