

AFFIRMATION

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Walking fully in the Path of Jesus without
denying the legitimacy of other paths
that God may provide for humanity

AS CHRISTIANS, WE FIND spiritual awakening, challenge, growth, and fulfillment in Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection. While we have accepted the Path of Jesus as *our* path, we do not deny the legitimacy of other paths God may provide humanity. Where possible, we seek lively dialogue with those of other faiths for mutual benefit and fellowship.

WE AFFIRM that the Path of Jesus is found wherever love of God, neighbor, and self are practiced together. Whether or not the path bears the name of Jesus, such paths bear the identity of Christ.

WE CONFESS that we have stepped away from Christ's Path whenever we have failed to practice love of God, neighbor, and self or have claimed Christianity is the *only* way, even as we claim it to be *our* way.

Whoever is not against us is for us.

—JESUS (MARK 9:40)



Don is a Christian conservative who showed up at my office one day wanting to discuss his daughter Carrie's salvation. On her eighteenth birthday, Carrie up and announced she had converted to Buddhism. Needless to say, this had a rather chilling effect on the celebration. The whole family, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles, was thrown into a panic. After numerous attempts to convince Carrie to return to the Christian faith, each of which led to a greater rift between them, Don decided to seek the advice of the senior pastor of his Bible church. After listening to all the ways in which the family had attempted to lead Carrie back to the fold, the pastor advised Don and his family to disown their daughter.

"You can't allow Carrie to have an influence on your other children," he said. Don had two other children—a fifteen-year-old boy and a twelve-year-old girl. "They're younger than Carrie," the pastor reminded. "A bad apple can spoil the whole barrel if you're not careful. How would you feel if one or both of your remaining children were to suffer in hell as a result of Carrie's mistakes? You need to cut her loose. Besides, showing Carrie tough love like this might just create a big enough crack in Carrie's heart to allow Jesus to slip back in."

Don didn't know what to do. His fatherly compassion for Carrie made him want to keep her close and show her love and acceptance no matter what her beliefs. Yet compassion for his

other two children made him want to do as the pastor advised. His conflicting sense of compassion was tearing him apart!

A year earlier, Don had heard, from a friend who attends my church, that we had spent eight weeks exploring the relationship between Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and certain Zen Buddhist stories (*koans*). Back then, he had been put off by our openness to other faiths. Now he was curious.

"Your church seems to have a different attitude toward the other religions," he told me in a challenging tone. "I'd like to hear your justification for it." Then, lowering his eyes and voice slightly, he continued, "Right now, I've got a very personal reason for hearing you out. Do you believe that all religions are just as legitimate as Christianity?"

After asking a few questions to assess where he was coming from, I answered, "As a Christian, I've always been an appreciator of the major religions of the world. I draw insight from them and sometimes learn more about my own religion through studying what others believe. However, since I've never been a practitioner of any of these other religions, I'm in no better position to judge the legitimacy of, say, Buddhism than a Buddhist would be to assess the legitimacy of Christianity. What I can tell you is that there is a strong and coherent strand in both the Christian and Jewish faiths that acknowledges that God has created other legitimate paths that we have no business condemning."

"But didn't Jesus say something about him being 'the way, the truth, and the life' and that 'no one comes to the Father except through me'?" Don countered.

“Yes, he says that in John 14:6,” I said.

“Then how can you say that there may be other paths?”

“First, you have to understand the context in which Jesus is speaking. He’s having a conversation with *his disciples*. He’s not talking to Buddhists or Taoists or Zoroastrians. He’s saying that *his disciples* find God through him. There is no compelling reason to believe that Jesus is making a blanket statement about all the followers of all the other religions.”

“But how can you be so sure that people of other faiths can be saved?”

“I believe this because Jesus himself says so,” I responded.

“What?” John exclaimed in disbelief. “I’ve never heard anything of the sort.”

I took a Bible off the shelf, and we explored Scripture together. We had a lengthy conversation that afternoon about heaven, hell, and salvation, some of which I’ll relate under Affirmation 9. Mostly we explored what Jesus had to say that might have some bearing on other religions.

One of the passages Don found most suggestive is John 10:4–16, where Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.* I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Some believe that Jesus is calling here for the conversion of those of other faiths to Christianity. Yet Jesus refers to adherents of other faiths (“other sheep that do not belong to this fold”)

who *already* belong to him (“I have . . .”), who *already* know him (“I know my own and my own know me”), and therefore can be expected to respond to him when he calls, as sheep respond to the familiar voice of their shepherd (“they will listen to my voice”). Jesus is not calling for sheep of different folds to change shepherds. Jesus is simply asking his disciples to recognize that the God they know in Christ is also the God of others. Ultimately, the human family is one flock, with one shepherd.

It is important to understand what Jesus is *not* saying here as well as what he *is* saying. What he’s decidedly not saying is, “Different strokes for different folks.” Nor is he saying, “Anyone can worship the god of one’s choice, and it’s all good, no matter whom or what one worships.” Rather, Jesus is asserting that a number of faiths ultimately worship the same God. Which faiths? They aren’t identified. We may surmise, however, that faiths that truly follow the “one shepherd” actively promote the love of God, neighbor, and self, as Jesus did. Jesus does not seem to think people walking in the path he reveals should be spending all their time worrying about which other paths are watched over by the same shepherd and which are not. He demonstrates much more enthusiasm throughout the Gospels for his disciples to concentrate on walking their own path and offering hospitality to those they meet along the way.

In 2004, I took a pastoral sabbatical sponsored by the Lilly Endowment, traveling to two places—India and Ethiopia—where Christianity has been around since ancient times but has grown up outside the limelight of Western Christianity. Few Westerners realize that Christianity in India goes back at least to

the second century and perhaps all the way to the apostle Thomas, who Indians claim made his way to southern India and started seven churches before being martyred in Chennai (Madras) in the late fifties of the first century. My object in India was to study Christian worship and spiritual practices, looking for what is distinctive about them and what commonalities are shared with Western Christians. I was also very interested to observe how Christianity related with the other religions of India.

One of the most fascinating stops in my journey was at a Christian ashram (learning community) called Shantivanam about a hundred miles inland from Chennai in southeastern India. The ashram, which houses a couple of dozen Benedictine monks and nuns, was once the home of Father Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine whose life project was studying the relationship between Christianity and the religions of India, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Shantivanam is a beautiful place in which residents practice a very simple lifestyle of prayer and worship, study and manual labor, and service to the community. There are few luxuries at Shantivanam—especially luxuries that Westerners have grown to believe are necessities, such as air conditioners on hot summer days, washers and dryers, and sit-down toilets. Simple vegetarian meals are consumed as a community in silence so as to maintain an attitude of “mindfulness” about the bounty placed before each person.

One of the highly distinctive aspects of Shantivanam is the commitment to integrating Christian faith with Indian culture in a way that preserves the integrity of both. Monks and nuns dress in Indian attire, iconography depicts Christian saints

dressed in Indian garb, and worship . . . ah, worship! Worship is joyfully and unapologetically Christian (sound familiar?) yet integrates complementary insights and aesthetic forms from Hindu worship.

The spiritual director of Shantivanam, Father John Martin, is one of those people who just seem to radiate holiness. Father Martin is in his mid to late forties. His short black hair, toned muscles from manual labor, and warm, cinnamon-bark complexion make him a strikingly handsome leader. He is also strikingly humble, with a confident though welcoming demeanor, a quick smile, and eyes that burn bright with warmth and passion when he speaks.

My family and I spent several days at Shantivanam worshipping, studying, and speaking with the community. On the last full day of our sojourn, I sat down with Father Martin in a small building reserved for prayer, meditation, and instruction, and we talked about the relationship between the world religions.

Father Martin asserts that the major world religions can be likened to hikers climbing up different sides of a mountain. Each tradition has discovered a unique route for reaching the top. While they are climbing the mountain, the traditions cannot necessarily see one another. Individuals within the climbing parties may not even be aware that others are ascending the mountain. They think they alone are making the ascent. Yet when they reach the top, the climbers are surprised to find one another. Each party has reached the same goal by a different route.

I find Father Martin's characterization of the relationship between the faiths helpful for a number of reasons. First, it provides

a concrete way of understanding and articulating how different faiths may ultimately lead to the same place. Second, the analogy helps us understand that God may allow for different paths, each with its own integrity. A Hindu may find a way to the top through withdrawal from the world, while a Christian may find it through immersion in the world on behalf of justice. Sometimes Christian liberals are overly quick to claim the unity between the world religions and get rather sloppy about it. They say things like “They’re all just saying the same things. They’re really no different.” Well, they really *are* different. Their routes up the mountain engage different terrain, with different obstacles and challenges, different vistas, and different places of rest. On the other hand, sometimes Christian conservatives take the differences between the faiths to be signs that all religions but Christianity are following the wrong path. The mountain analogy helps us see how differences between faiths may be celebrated instead of either minimized (by liberals) or condemned (by conservatives). It also illustrates the fact that God’s plan for the world is larger than our human minds can comprehend. Despite significant differences of approach to God, and regardless of where, to whom, or when we happen to be born, we are all included in God’s love, which exceeds our wildest imagination.

What I especially like about Father Martin’s characterization is that it sheds light on what Jesus was saying when he spoke of the sheep who are not of the same fold but who have the same shepherd. Jesus does not simply say “all paths are legitimate” or

“anything goes.” Rather, he calls from the mountaintop to his sheep, who are making their way up the paths provided for them. He encourages us all as we traverse obstacle and vista alike, assuring us that other flocks are on their way up as well, on other sides of the mountain. When we finally reach the top, we can expect to live not only with the Good Shepherd but with the whole human family as one flock.

Affirmation 1 stands solidly within this theological worldview. While it acknowledges that Christians walk a path God has created up the mountain and further claims an awareness that God may provide other paths leading to the summit, it does not go so far as to claim to know with absolute certainty which paths are authentic and which are rabbit trails. How could we? It would be like a climber on one side of the mountain trying to speak with authority about paths on another side of the mountain that the climber has never been on. The climber may read about these paths in books. The climber may even have spoken with people on another side of the mountain. All this may lead the climber to believe that the paths seem to be heading to the same place. But any serious climber knows that only those who have climbed the path can speak with authority about where it leads and how it gets there.

In this respect, Affirmation 1 no more claims “different strokes for different folks” than Jesus does. It does not say “all paths are legitimate.” Rather it simply acknowledges that Jesus, as the first one to climb our particular path to the top, assures us there are other ways up the mountain.



WALKING THE TALK

The first and perhaps most important implication of Affirmation 1 is for the Dons of the world, who worry about the fate of those they love who may be or become practitioners of other faiths. For some, the Christian path is not the one they are best suited to climb. It may be necessary to explore other paths until one is found that fits and elevates the soul. Often if Christians do not get overly distraught about the fact that someone they love has “left the fold” and they continue to offer authentic love and acceptance of that person, the person ultimately decides that the path he or she was on before wasn’t so bad after all and gladly returns. And if not, then the person may very well be led by God to a more suitable path. The point is that our relationship with God is at the center of the quest, not simply our relationship with a particular path.

Second, it is unfortunate and naive for a practitioner of any faith to claim that theirs is the only “true” path. However, it is perfectly appropriate for a person of a particular faith to claim that hers is the “best” path. So long as that claim is made on the individual level, one would hope that all travelers who are making their way up the mountain have searched around enough to be convinced that they have found the best path for them. A person should feel neither ashamed about this belief nor angered to hear that others feel that their path is better *for them*. It is far more rewarding and also more faithful to swap stories from the journey with earnestness and conviction. If the people of other faiths with whom we are in dialogue decide to convert to

our faith as a result of this sharing, fine. However, conversion is not the ultimate purpose of interfaith dialogue. Sharing the joy and wisdom gleaned from our climbing experience is.

Third, particularly when we are in conflict with other countries whose dominant faiths may be different from our own, it is also critically important to examine our underlying assumptions about their religions. In wartime, each side endeavors to dehumanize the enemy so that citizens will more readily support the war effort. Often religion gets drawn into the dehumanization process (it is both easy and effective). When this happens, the consequences generally outlast the immediate conflict.

Whether or not one believes that going to war in Iraq was a good idea, for instance, it may be reasonably argued that our willingness to allow religion to be used in the dehumanization process in other conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian situation, made us much more willing to go to war than would have been the case otherwise. As persons of faith, we should actively resist forces that use religion for the purposes of dehumanizing the enemy lest we throw obstacles in paths God has created for humanity's good and lest we throw an obstacle in our own path by failing to properly show the love and respect for God and God's people that Jesus himself commands.

