

Can Knowing Other Faiths Deepen Our Own?

Understanding friends from other faiths can enrich our own lives as Christians.

Vern Barnet

It's an affair of the heart. You meet these compassionate people doing good things. You want to know them, to understand the faiths that give their lives meaning. They are not Christian. You remember what Jesus told us about a Good Samaritan who worshipped in a tradition other than His own.

Such people are the best answer to the question, "Can I learn about other religions without watering down my own Christian beliefs?"

I'm old enough to remember the days when folks were warned, and even prohibited, from worshipping with others. We've come a long way toward tolerance, but we have a long way to go before we see religious pluralism as a gift, not a problem, a blessing, not a threat. The political use of religious prejudice darkens the world and demeans the religious urges in every human being, and deprives us of many of God's gifts.

"He who knows one religion knows none" declared Max Mueller, a 19th Century scholar of comparative religion. To make the same point, I slightly paraphrase Rudyard Kipling: "What knows he of England who only England knows?" We understand our own country better by traveling abroad. We know our own town better by having visited other places. We grasp our faith more securely by encountering and learning from others.

Anglican T. S. Eliot wrote what many regard as the most profound Christian poem of the last century, "The Four Quartets." Eliot read several languages, including Sanskrit. His poem draws upon not only Christian mysticism but explicit Hindu teachings to illumine both.

I thought I knew what church bells meant. Bells routinely say, "The service is about to begin." I heard them here; I heard the cathedral bells in Europe. In fact, I had the job of ringing a chapel bell when I was a student.

But as a young man visiting Japan, at a Shinto shrine, I saw a child swinging a rope with a striker at the high end to hit a gong. I learned that the noise was intended to awaken kami, the divine, so that kami would pay attention to the devotee. Paradoxically the noise awakens the devotee to the presence of kami. What seemed like a silly, even superstitious, act of waking kami was in fact how kami awakened the devotee.

In a fresh way, I saw that the church bell does not merely call us to church,

but also can awaken the presence of the sacred in us; the bell is not just an external ringing but also an internal resonance. It is not a Pavlovian alarm compelling us to go somewhere; it is rather a signal awakening us from self-centered slumber.

Let me move from that childish awakening to three examples of how my Episcopalian faith has been enriched by knowing something of other traditions.

1. Christianity and Buddhism

Perhaps one of the most important sustained interfaith dialogues of our time was begun between Christian and Buddhist monastics. What two religions could be more unlike? Christianity proclaims a Creator God while Buddhism instead speaks of Emptiness, the Void, with no beginning, no Creator, only ongoing, interrelated processes, none of which rules without being ruled. Even more strange is how the two faiths understand personhood. Christianity assumes we are individual souls, each with one's own eternal destiny. Buddhism denies the soul as a separate and everlasting personal existence.

With such striking contractions, what's there to talk about? The monastics discovered they could talk about their experiences. From such conversations, the Christian practice of Centering Prayer has been rediscovered.

While the language and images differ in each tradition, the differences themselves illumine the similarities. When Meister Eckhart (1260-c1328) said, "I pray God to make me free of God," was he pointing to the Buddhist experience of the Void? Is the Void a way of being alert to the dangers of defining and limiting God by our own conceptions? Does this bring us back to that enigmatic answer when Moses asked for God's name, and God said something like, "I will be what I will be"? Can we look at our own scriptures in a new light?

As for the Buddhist teaching that the self is empty, consider Philippians 2:7: "Jesus emptied Himself" that he might reveal God's glory. If Jesus is our model, then must we not also empty ourselves? Can we use Buddhist skepticism about selfhood to advise us to look at our tendencies toward self-centeredness?



Photograph: Matt Bishop

Church Bell Tower, Pyrgos, Santorini, Greece

2. Christianity and Confucianism

I like to think that the Anglican style is a Confucian form of Christianity. Both traditions lay importance on education and emphasize the unifying beauty of ritual as a way of honoring and experiencing the sacred.

Some years ago, I was in San Francisco during a Chinese New Year parade. Large inflated plastic sages bowed endlessly from pulled strings like giant puppets atop the floats. That's the problem with Confucianism, I thought: insincere show, people being polite even when they despise each other.

But I've come to see that sometimes acting with courtesy can arouse a more generous attitude toward others. Even if we are

moody, observing the forms of etiquette guards against offending others and thereby protects us from others reacting against us. We don't want to infect our friends with disease; why infect them with the vagaries of our emotions? (Of course, those closest to us deserve to know how we are doing, but we don't have to tweet it to everyone we've ever met and hope to meet.)

Social and liturgical rituals do not depend upon transient feelings. Rituals remind us that feelings are for feeling, but we need not make decisions based on them. Rituals enable us to practice the way we really want to be. The sharing of God's abundance with others in the Eucharist is a model for how we want to live our lives, beyond our momentary failures to perceive God's constant grace.

Confucianism became rigid and unable to adapt to changing environments. It is an object lesson for us to be sure that our rituals remain living expressions of Christ's love, and not dead letters and futile forms, monuments which have lost meaning. Yet the impulse of Confucianism remains salutary.

3. Christianity and Islam

Our Christian indebtedness to Islam is untold. Here I can only hint of why it can help us renew our own faith.

In today's culture, Christianity has often become a form of narcissism, sometimes expressed as "I believe in God, but I don't need a church for me to know Jesus." But we also believe that the Church is the Body of Christ. United as one body,

our life together forms us into the life of Christ to do God's will.

We together create or destroy the social conditions for the kind of life God wants for us. No major religion today is clearer than Islam that we as individuals affect each other. Sharia, so terribly misrepresented in the media, is really the directions for a society of justice and peace. Islam's teachings about how we best relate to each other can enable us to recover insights within our own tradition that strengthen our faith and witness.

By making friends with those of other faiths, we also refresh the wisdom and the heart of our own. +

Vern Barnet's latest book is *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*. He previously wrote for *The Kansas City Star*.