



bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims

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From the Editor

Christian-Muslim relations are not going to go away. While awful atrocities being committed in some parts of the world by Muslims against Christians and by Christians against Muslims make building relations urgent, in the coming years the weight of global numbers will give added pressure.

Early this century, for the first time in world history, the number of Muslims in the world equalled the number of Catholics. According to the latest [Pew Research Center](#) projections, due largely to demographic growth:

- by the year 2050 the number of Muslims (2.8 billion, or 30% of the population) will nearly equal the number of Christians (2.9 billion, or 31%);
- by 2070 Muslims will outnumber Christians; and
- by 2100 Muslims will be 35% of the world's population and Christians 34%.

Already at the start of this century Muslims (23%) and Christians (33%) together made up over 55% of the world's population; by the end of the century, together we will be nearly 70% of the world's population. So if there is to be meaningful peace in the world, now and into the future, there must be mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims.

Building relations between Christians and Muslims is a much needed investment in present and future world peace and harmony. It is a challenge to both religious and civic leaders alike. We have to build awareness of the many shared truths that Christians and Muslims hold in common: belief in the one God who is Creator of all, who is Beneficent Provider for all, who communicates with all through nature, the prophets and the scriptures, who is Merciful Judge of all We need to act together on the many shared values that Christians and Muslims (and other believers and all people of good will) hold in common: justice, truth, respect for marriage, the family, for human life, care for creation We need to accept and respect each other across the doctrinal and other differences which shape our respective identities and distinguish us from each other. We must remember that what we hold in common is far greater than that which divides us; and that which divides us may in God's good time become the divinely ordained gifts that we have to offer each other. God does not need



Image: The Arab American News

us to defend God's past and present various dealings with different peoples, which are a sign of God's providential care for all. In the meantime, we live in the mystery of God's patience, living our different religions with integrity, journeying together towards God who is the fullness of Truth and Life.

In this issue of *Bridges* we model and report on how Christians and Muslims are building relations here in Australia and around the world. We remember the dangerous example of Muslims who risked their lives to save Jews in Albania in WWII (p.3). Catholic and Muslim scholars share a common platform in Wagga Wagga (p.2). A Catholic priest and a Muslim Imam together address a Catholic mission conference (p.2). Catholics and Muslims together condemn violence and terror (p.3).

The Feast of the Annunciation provides an opportunity for Catholics and Muslims to reflect on their similar/different appreciation of the role and identity of Jesus as the "Word of God" announced by the Angel Gabriel (p.4). *Youth PoWR* will bring together young Christians, young Muslims and young people of other faiths (p.7). Ron Rolheiser OMI offers some theological insights that widen our perspective to make it as inclusive and all-embracing as God (insert). I encourage all to participate in this important work of building relations between Christians and Muslims and imploring God's blessings to make the work bear the fruits of peace with justice for all.

Patrick McInerney
Editor



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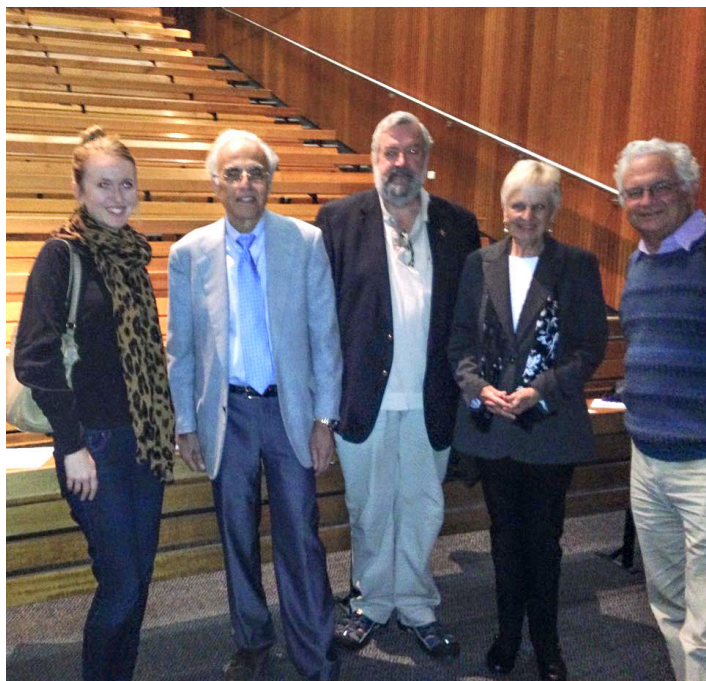
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News From the Centre

Staff meets John Esposito

On 9th April Fr Patrick McNerney, Fr Brian Vale and Ms Ashleigh Green attended a Sydney University sponsored *Sydney Ideas* lecture by Professor John Esposito entitled “*The Future of Islam, Democracy, and Political Islam after the Arab Spring*”. The lecture focused on the political scene in the Middle Eastern countries which could be associated with the Arab Spring and the various grievances against the different regimes. It was an exciting moment for the CMR staff to meet **Professor Esposito** and his wife, **Chantel** after the lecture and to introduce ourselves and our work. We thanked the professor and his wife for the permission to print our Centre’s booklet “*Ten Things Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*” because the content was derived from his book “*What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*”. We discovered the professor’s wife had encouraged him to write it.



Centre staff meet Professor John Esposito and his wife, Chantel Esposito.

Wagga Wagga

On 25th March Fr Patrick McNerney and Assoc Professor Mehmet Ozalp met with church and civic leaders in Wagga Wagga to review what was already happening in building Christian-Muslim relations and to share their experience. That evening they addressed a public gathering of over 100 people on the topic of “*Building Bridges*” between Christians and Muslims. The following day they were both interviewed on ABC Radio Riverina. The three events encouraged and enabled better communication and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in and around Wagga Wagga.



Group photo taken at the Marist Exchange Night on 12th April.

Image: Marist Youth Ministry

Marist Youth Ministry

On 12th April and 8th May, Fr Patrick McNerney and Ms Ashleigh Green delivered workshops for Marist youth groups in Eastwood. The first “*Connect Night*” was for young adults and the second “*Exchange Night*” was for Year 12 students from Marist schools across Sydney. The two evenings were a great opportunity to connect with a number of impressive, engaged young Catholics in Sydney and make interfaith dialogue more mainstream in the Church. We appreciate the invitation from Marist Youth Ministry and we look forward to working together again in the future!

Mission: One Heart Many Voices Conference

Since interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the evangelizing mission of the Church, it was appropriate that in a mission conference a priest and an imam co-presented a workshop on *Christians and Muslims: Building Relations in Challenging Times*. Fr Patrick McNerney proposed two principles: the 8th Commandment, “Don’t bear false witness against your (Muslim) neighbour”, and the New Commandment, “Love your (Muslim) neighbour”. Sheikh Wesam Charkawi spoke of his experience in living as a Muslim in Australia and mentoring young Muslims. The workshop was very well received, one participant describing it as “the highlight of the Conference”, another as “a “watershed experience”.



Fr Patrick McNerney and Sheikh Wesam Charkawi co-presenting at the Mission: One Heart Many Voices Conference



Image: Michael Fleshman, Flickr

News From the World

Muslims who saved Jews in WW2 Albania honoured at exhibition

An exhibition was launched in March 2015 at Melbourne's *Jewish Holocaust Centre* to remember how Albanian Muslims resisted the orders of Adolf Hitler and saved the lives of many Jewish people during World War II. Gigi Silk, writing in the *New Daily*, reported how the exhibition displayed photographs of the heroes and survivors of the Holocaust in Albania taken by American photographer, Norman Gershman, who said the aim of the exhibition is "to show the common humanity we all share and to counter the paranoia of Islam."

For more information see:
<http://goo.gl/Ym3q94>

Mimouna: Jews Trusting Their Muslim Neighbours

Rabbi Allen S Maller writes of the North African Jewish festival of Mimouna which begins right after the week of Passover: "For many centuries Moroccan Jewish homes were emptied of leavened bread and flour during the week of Passover. At the end of the week of Passover, Jews could eat leavened bread and pastry again, but they had no ordinary flour at all in their homes to bake with." The tradition of Arab neighbours bringing (or returning the previously donated) flour to Jewish homes developed into a time of welcome and sharing traditional Arabic blessings of good luck and success while awaiting the soon to be baked goodies. Rabbi Maller suggests this tradition should be revived so that Jewish and Muslim groups or individuals can invite each other to this "Celebration of Muslim-Jewish Amity."

For more information see:
<http://goo.gl/IXUYz2>

Catholics, Shi'ites join in condemning terrorism

At a March summit in Rome between Shi'ite Muslim and Catholic leaders there was strong condemnation of terrorist acts by radical Islamic groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Maytham Al-Salman, head of an interfaith centre in Bahrain said: "Religious leaders who legitimize violence are neither religious, nor are they being leaders...Those who promote diversity, acceptance of others, love and mercy, are the true religious leaders."

Hashim Al-Salman, rector of the theological seminary of Al-Hasa in Saudi Arabia, proposed an international day to celebrate the Prophet Abraham, who is honoured by the three traditional monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity), as a sign of interreligious understanding.

Cardinal Tauran, president of the Vatican's *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, said that "for Christians, Muslims, and other believers, God is a source of good that implies peace" and after citing the numbers of victims of wars in many countries affirmed: "We have an obligation to promote peace, especially in times of crisis like the present one."

Cardinal Tauran also said that the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* is studying a proposal made by Shi'ites to establish a permanent dialogue between the two religions.

For more information see:
<http://goo.gl/Jrtfr6>



Interfaith Gatherings for Feast of the Annunciation

By Brian Vale

Several hundred dignitaries and representatives of the Christian and Muslim faiths gathered on 24th March 2015, the evening before the Christian feast of the Annunciation, at St Charbel's Church Hall in Punchbowl, Sydney, to celebrate together this important feast of Our Lady. The event was hosted by His Excellency Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, the Maronite Bishop of Australia and presented in both English and Arabic. Fr Brian Vale from the *Columban Mission Institute* was the English speaking Master of Ceremonies. Included among the speakers were Maronite, Roman Catholic and Melkite bishops and Sunni and Shi'ite sheikhs. Politicians from several parties had also taken time from their busy schedules to attend. Various churches were represented by their choirs who chanted beautiful hymns to Our Lady and other prayers and hymns from both faiths were presented together on a large screen as well as a beautiful recital from the Qur'an.

Some speakers emphasised the affection for Mary (*Maryam* in Arabic) as a model of faith in both Islam and Christianity and invited us to become people who practise dialogue by choosing to become friends with people of other faiths. Muslim speakers emphasised our sharing of faith in the one God and related stories from their tradition about Jesus and Mary. They also emphasised that in our present troubled world much care is being taken by many Muslims in countries like Iraq to protect Christians and their churches. A whole chapter in the Qur'an is named after Maryam and in fact she is mentioned more often in the Qur'an than in the whole of the New Testament. Both Islam and Christianity recognise Jesus' virgin birth, that he is a word from God and that he is the Messiah.

The prayerful tone of the evening was enhanced by the various hymns, the reading aloud by all the participants of an inter-faith prayer and the lighting of candles which were placed together in veneration

before a statue of Our Lady. The harmonious atmosphere that this helped to create assisted the intermingling of the participants over refreshments after the ceremony.

Similar events were also celebrated in Beirut, Lebanon and in Paris and Lyon, France. Lebanon has developed this tradition since making the Annunciation a national holiday in 2010. French Catholics and Muslims planned it well and hope to celebrate it every year to promote peace and help people to get to know each other.

The two hour service at the *Notre Dame de Bonne Garde* (Our Lady of Safekeeping) basilica south of Paris took on added significance in promoting understanding following the Islamist killings of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists and Jewish shoppers in January. Sheikh Mohammed Nokkari, professor of law at the Islamic-Christian Institute at St. Joseph University in Beirut, spoke at the Basilica of Longpont (Essonne):

"The bond of love and veneration for the holy and pure Virgin who unites us does not carry any threat to the beliefs of Muslims or Christians...It does not invent a new religion, nor a new doctrine, or different rites....It shows that it is possible to achieve conviviality and a good understanding among all components of society, despite religious differences."

I would like to suggest that, with careful dialogue and planning, this initiative could be followed up in more churches in Australia. St Charbel's Church has led the way here and I am sure would offer practical advice for others who would like to follow their lead.

For more information see:
<http://goo.gl/G4OP47>
<http://goo.gl/ftkFrk>



As Ramadan approaches, we asked young people from Sydney's diverse religious traditions to reflect on the meaning and significance of food in their religion and culture.

Food: Interfaith Perspectives

"Similar to fasting and abstinence, communal meals play an important seasonal role in the life of the Melkite (Greek-Catholic) Church. As a practising Melkite, my church community often celebrates together with meals on the church grounds, particularly on feast days"... "Even though we're encouraged to focus more on the loving words that leave our mouths rather than the food that does or doesn't enter it, Melkite abstinence typically entails the avoidance of meats, fish, dairy products, eggs, and olive oil. So, you can only imagine the Middle-Eastern feast that awaits as soon as we stop fasting and abstaining... or if you've not yet had the chance to cook, I find a large Quarter Pounder meal from Maccas can do the trick! No matter what we eat or where we are, Melkites just care more about being together."

Mark Scotto Di Perta, Melkite Catholic

"Food and sharing food with others is a central part of Judaism and Jewish culture. Dietary laws and blessings over meals are part of the daily rituals of Judaism. During Passover, Jewish families welcome others into their home to partake in a feast, with each item of food symbolising part of the Passover story. On *Shavuot* (Pentecost), Jewish people traditionally eat dairy, on *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year), a range of foods such as pomegranates which are seen to be omens, and during *Chanukah*, the festival of lights, Jewish families share fried foods. Sharing food is an essential part of building bridges and understanding – only this month I attended a joint Sabbath dinner, attended by representatives of the Jewish and Indian communities. Together partaking in Shabbat bread and grape juice, it was an amazing opportunity to increase understanding of each other's cultures, diverse religious backgrounds and traditions."

Glen Falkenstein, Jewish

"Reflecting back to my experiences at the Gurudwara (Temple), there were many occasions where I helped cook to serve hundreds of people visiting the temple! *Langar* (free kitchen) was a core part of our congregation. It was designed to uphold equality between all people of the world regardless of religion, caste, colour, age or gender status. In addition, it expresses sharing, community, inclusiveness and oneness of all humankind. In a world where many barriers divide us, food can bring us together."

Satjit Singh, Sikh

"Food has a special place in Islam and significance for Muslims. Its vitality comes to fore in observance of the soon-to-come holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast during the day and eat only at other times. During Ramadan, Muslims arrange for an early breakfast before dawn, *suhoor* and for an *iftar* dinner at sunset every day to keep and break their fasts respectively. This abstinence from food among other things, during the daylight hours not only raises its temptation but also makes it a unique socially binding element for the Ramadan lifestyle. *Suhoor* and, especially, *iftar* involve gatherings of family and friends over assorted cultural meals. From full-of-carbs pakoras to healthy fruits, the *iftar* tables are full of yumminess. Due to being a common prophetic practice of beginning *iftars* with dates, this fruit has its own attraction for Muslims around the globe and becomes an indispensable ingredient during this month. The month of Ramadan culminates with the celebration of *Eid-ul-Fitr*, which again is known for its sweets, desserts and feasts."

Kamran Khalid, Muslim

Positive Offerings or Counter Terrorism?

By Brian Vale

After a couple of years of living and working with Japanese youth in a Tokyo Young Christian Worker's House I know a little of the highs and lows, the energy and challenges to my lifestyle that I needed to accompany and collaborate with them. From that experience I feel some empathy for many imams in Australia and beyond who feel an even stronger pressure of social and political forces to have to somehow be part of a movement to "de-radicalise" the tiny minority of youth in their Muslim communities who sense some attraction to extremist groups like the so-called "Islamic State". It would seem most of those who are showing interest in extremist groups are not active in religious communities so it seems unfair to put the burden on religious leaders to "rescue" people they do not know.

Sheikh Wesam Charkawi at Sydney's Auburn mosque can understand the youth in his community feeling one with their persecuted brothers and sisters in faith in other parts of the world and the sense of injustice which often accompanies that. He is aware that certain preachers on the internet and slick seductive social media propaganda can use those feelings to seduce vulnerable youth, especially those who have had little education or training in their faith. He calls upon his religious training in the Qur'an and his approachable style to guide those he does know are at risk to be part of the solution and not the problem.

In today's world we have been shocked into realising that most complex issues, such as climate change and peace building, require long term education and planning rather than quick fixes. After reading an insightful article by Scott Tran, which was adapted from his address in the UN Security Council's Ministerial Debate on "The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace", I have become more convinced that we need to address the "powerful cultural forces" that groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS and related groups are tapping into.

Scott Tran is an anthropologist and from observation, interviews and systematic studies in places like Kirkuk, Iraq, he presents us with the "dark side of globalization" in which young people in search of an identity have opted for horizontal peer-to-peer attachments which span the globe. He says we are not in a "clash of civilizations between Islam and the West" and "violent extremism represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures, but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance and glory."



Image: Interfaith Youth Core Facebook page

He proposes three conditions that he believes young people need and which each country needs to suit to its own conditions:

1. Offer youth something that makes them dream of a life of significance through struggle and sacrifice in comradeship.
2. Offer youth a positive personal dream, with a concrete chance of realization.
3. Offer youth the chance to create their own local initiatives.

Young people will not choose to sacrifice everything just for material rewards so we need to appeal to sacred values in our different faith traditions. Tran stresses that young people need opportunities for personal engagement where they can empathise with other youth to share their hopes, dreams and grievances. He says: "allow them to engage other youth in the search for meaningful ways to make sense of the issues on their personal agenda, whether that be about oppression and political marginalization, lack of economic opportunity, the trauma of exposure to violence, or problems of identity and social exclusion."

His suggestions and ideas certainly take me back to my days with the Young Christian Worker's movement and the value of such movements in providing constructive, healthy training in peer leadership. Our Christian-Muslim Relations Centre is hopeful that the Youth PowR event we are arranging in September this year is a good local response to these trends among youth today.

For more information see:

<http://goo.gl/tYddyr>

<http://goo.gl/btLLRH>



Graeme Lyall AM, R.I.P.

The many communities whom he had welcomed and served acknowledged his life-long contributions to the Buddhist and wider community, his smile, his quirky sense of humour and his gentlemanly ways. They accorded him the title, “the father of Australian Buddhism”.

Graeme Lyall became a Buddhist in 1953. He initiated Buddhist organisations at university, state and national levels, served them over many decades as President and Secretary and represented them at international gatherings. In these roles he contacted the incoming waves of migrants from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos to ensure their settlement in Australia and their engagement with civic authorities to secure facilities to meet their Buddhist requirements. He arranged for Buddhist monks and nuns to come to Australia as teachers. Graeme was also a pioneer in interfaith activities, representing the Buddhist communities and bringing leaders from other communities together for interfaith events locally and internationally. He served for many years as a prison chaplain. He died on 3 May 2015 at the age of 83. Frs Patrick McNerney and Brian Vale attended his memorial service on 10 May 2015.

Namo Amitabha. Be Happy.



**YOUTH
POWR**
PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

We are thrilled to invite young people from Sydney's diverse religious communities to Youth PoWR 2015. A team of young leaders from the Christian, Buddhist, Baha'i, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh communities is meeting monthly to plan for what we hope will be an engaging and entertaining evening that will inspire a new generation to be activists for a vibrant, mutually respectful, multi-religious society in multi-cultural NSW.

Thursday 17th September | 6.30pm for a 7pm start
The Sydney Baha'i Centre, 107 Derby Street, Silverwater
Who: Young Adults (age 17-35)



The Youth PoWR team meet for their monthly meeting in North Sydney

What's coming up

- 06 June:** **"The Promised Saviour"**, Interfaith Seminar at *Nabi Akram Islamic Centre* (NAIC), 30 Cowper Street, Granville.
- 18 June:** **Ramadan** begins (tbc depending on moon sighting)
- 20 June:** **World Refugee Day**
- 23 June:** **"Religion: Catalyst for Violence or Peace"**, BBI eConference
- 13 July:** **Lailat al-Qadr** (The Night of Destiny) Celebrating the descent of the Holy Qur'an
- 18 July:** **Eid al-Fitr** (The Feast of the Breaking [of the Fast])
- 23 July:** **Faith Ecology Network** (FEN) An interfaith forum on *"Growing Alternatives: Faith Responses to the Growth Economy"*. The forum will be held at the Mitchell Theatre, Sydney Mechanical School of Arts, 280 Pitt Street Sydney. For more information contact Hannah Cifuentes on hannahcifuentes@columban.org.au Phone: +612 9352 8031
- 02 August:** **Multicultural Eid Fair and Festival** (MEFF), Fairfield Showground, 494 Smithfield, Prairiewood.
- 05 August:** **RESPECT Forum**, Randwick



- 15 August:** **Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**
- 26 August:** **Abraham Conference 2015**, *"Respecting the other's Narrative"*, Uniting Church Hall, Parramatta. For more information contact Fr Brian Vale BVale@columban.org.au or +612 9352 8013
- 8 September:** **Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary**
- 17 September:** **Youth PoWR**
(Parliament of the World's Religions)
- 24 September:** **Eid al-Adha** (The Feast of the Sacrifice [by Abraham]) (tbc)



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Principles for Interfaith Dialogue and Interfaith Attitudes

By Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI

Image: Pace e Bene

Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI is a prominent figure in contemporary Catholic spirituality whose regular feature column in the Canadian newspaper, *The Western Catholic Reporter* is now carried by 100 newspapers worldwide.

In this reflection Fr Rolheiser draws on theology to offer ten principles to guide our exchanges with people from other religions.

We live inside a world and inside religions that are too given to disrespect and violence. Virtually every newscast today documents the prevalence of disrespect and violence done in the name of religion, disrespect done for the sake of God (strange as that expression may seem). Invariably those acting in this way see their actions as sacral, justified by sacred cause.

And, if history is to be believed, it has always been so. No religion, Christianity no less than any other, has been innocent. Every one of the great religions of the world has been, at various times, both persecuted and persecutor. So this begs the question: What are some fundamental principles we are asked to live out apposite our relationship to other faiths, irrespective our particular faith?

What's best in each of our traditions would suggest these ten principles:

1. All that is good, true, and beautiful comes from one and the same author, God. Nothing that is true, irrespective of its particular religious or secular cloak, may be seen as opposed to true faith and religion.
2. God wills the salvation of all people, equally, without discrimination. God has no favorites. All people have access to God and to God's Spirit, and the whole of humankind has never lacked for divine providence. Moreover each religion is to reject nothing that is true and holy in other religions.

3. No one religion or denomination has the full and whole truth. God is both infinite and ineffable. For this reason, by definition, God cannot be captured adequately in human concepts and human language. Thus, while our knowledge of God may be true, it is always only partial. God can be truly known, but God cannot be adequately thought.
4. All faiths and all religions are journeying towards the fullness of truth. No one religion or denomination may consider its truth complete, something to permanently rest within; rather it must see it as a starting point from which to journey. Moreover, as various religions (and denominations and sectarian groups within those religions) we need to feel secure enough within our own “home” so as to acknowledge the truth and beauty that is expressed in other “homes”. We need to accept (and, I suggest, be pleased) that there are other lives within which the faith is written in a different language.
5. Diversity within religions is a richness, willed by God. God does not just wish our unity; God also blesses our diversity which helps reveal the stunning over-abundance within God. Religious diversity is the cause of much tension, but that diversity and the struggle to overcome it will contribute strongly to the richness of our eventual unity.
6. God is “scattered” in world religions. Anything that is positive within a religion expresses something of God and contributes to divine revelation. Hence, seen from this aspect, the various religions of the world all help to make God known.
7. Each person must account for his or her faith on the basis of his or her own conscience. Each of us must take responsibility for our own faith and salvation.
8. Intentionally all the great world religions interpenetrate each other (and, for a Christian, that means that they interpenetrate the mystery of Christ). A genuine faith knows that God is solicitous for everyone and that God’s spirit blows freely and therefore it strives to relate itself to the intentionality of other religions and to other denominations and sectarian groups within its own religion.
9. A simple external, historical connection to any religion is less important than achieving a personal relationship, ideally of intimacy, with God. What God wants most deeply from us, irrespective of our religion, is not a religious practice but a personal relationship that transforms our lives so as to radiate God’s goodness, truth, and beauty more clearly.
10. Within our lives and within our relationship to other religions, respect, graciousness, and charity must trump all other considerations. This does not mean that all religions are equal and that faith can be reduced to its lowest common denominator, but it does mean that what lies deepest inside of every sincere faith are these fundamentals: respect, graciousness, and charity.

Throughout history, great thinkers have grappled with the problem of the one and the many. And, consciously or unconsciously, all of us also struggle with that tension between the one and the many, the relationship between unity and diversity; but perhaps this not so much a problem as it is a richness that reflects the over-abundance of God and our human struggle to grasp that over-abundance.

Perhaps the issue of religious diversity might be described in this way:

- Different peoples, one earth
- Different beliefs, one God
- Different languages, one heart
- Different failings, one law of gravity
- Different energies, one Spirit
- Different scriptures, one Word
- Different forms of worship, one desire
- Different histories, one destiny
- Different disciplines, one aim
- Different approaches, one road
- Different faiths – one Mother, one Father, one earth, one sky, one beginning, one end.

Source: <http://goo.gl/wddikM>