

# Rolheiser: Standing on new borders

A particularly powerful Gospel story recounts Jesus meeting with a Syro-Phoenician woman. Central to that story is where their encounter takes place. It takes place on the borders of Samaria. For Jesus, Samaria was a foreign territory, both in terms of ethnicity and religion. In his encounter with this woman, he is standing at the edges, the borders, of how he then understood himself religiously.

I believe that this is where we are standing today as Christians, on new borders in terms of relating to other religions, not least to our Islamic brothers and sisters. The single most important agenda item for our churches for the next fifty years will be the issue of relating to other religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Indigenous Religions in the Americas and Africa, and various forms, old and new, of Paganism and New Age. Simply stated, if all the violence stemming from religious extremism hasn't woken us yet then we are dangerously asleep. We have no choice. The world has become one village, one community, one family, and unless we begin to understand and accept each other more deeply we will never be a world at peace.

Moreover for us, as Christians, the threat of hatred and violence coming from other religions isn't the main reason we are called to understand non-Christian believers more compassionately. The deeper reason is that the God we honor calls us to do that. Our God calls us to recognize and welcome all sincere believers into our hearts as brothers and sisters in faith. Jesus makes this abundantly clear most everywhere in his message, and at times makes it uncomfortably explicit: *Who are my brothers and sisters? It is those who hear the word of God and keep it. ... It is not necessarily those who say Lord, Lord, who enter the Kingdom of Heaven but those who do the will of God on earth.* Who can deny that many non-Christians do the will of God here on earth?

But what about the extremism, violence, and perverse expressions of religion we frequently see in other religions? Can we really consider these religions as true, given the awful things done in their name?

All religions are to be judged, as Huston Smith submits, by their highest expressions and their saints, not by their perversions. This is true too for Christianity. We hope that others will judge us not by our darkest moments or by the worst acts ever done by Christians in the name of religion, but rather by all the good Christians have done in history and by our saints. We owe that same understanding to other religions, and all of them in their essence and in their best expressions call us to what's one, good, true, and beautiful – and all of them have produced great saints.

But what of Christ's uniqueness? What about Christ's claim that he is the (only) way, truth, and life and that nobody can come to God except through him?

Throughout its 2000-year history, Christian theology has never backed away from the truth and exclusivity of that claim, save for a number of individual theologians whose views have not been accepted by the churches. So how can we view the truth of other religions in the light of Christ's claim that he is the *only* way to the Father?

Christian theology (certainly this is true for Roman Catholic theology) has always accepted and proactively taught that the Mystery of Christ is much larger than what can be observed in the visible, historical unfolding of Christianity and the Christian churches in history. Christ is larger than our churches and operates too outside of our churches. He is still telling the church what Jesus once told his mother: "I must be about my Father's business."

Formerly we expressed this by affirming that the Body of Christ, the full body of believers, has both a visible and invisible element. In explicit, baptized believers we see the visible Body of Christ. However at the same time we acknowledge that there are countless others who for all kinds of inculpable reasons have not been explicitly baptized and do not profess an explicit faith in Christ, but who by the goodness of their hearts and actions must be considered as kin to us in the faith.

This may come as a surprise to some but, in fact, the dogmatic teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that sincere persons in other religions can be saved without becoming Christians, and to teach the contrary is heresy. This is predicated on an understanding of the God whom we worship as Christians. The God whom Jesus incarnated wills the salvation of all people and is not indifferent to the sincere faith of billions of people throughout thousands of years. We dishonor our faith when we teach anything different. All of us are God's children.

There is in the end only one God and that God is the Father of all of us – and that means *all of us*, irrespective of religion.