

Contemplation and Interfaith Relations: Exploring the Eastern Christian Contemplative Tradition as a Foundation for Interfaith Living

Richard Valantasis and Doug Bleyle

Introduction

It is a great honor and privilege for us as co-directors of the Institute for Contemplative Living in Santa Fe to be invited by the Abrahamic Initiative to explore a different dimension of interfaith relationships with you this evening.

The Institute for Contemplative Living is a newly founded organization whose primary mission is to promulgate Eastern Christian contemplative practice in our Western Christian context. Our main work is to provide for our associates a weekly contemplative reflection on the Revised Common Lectionary as well as a weekly contemplative thought of the week based on a fresh translation of an eastern Christian contemplative text. The Institute conducts workshops, retreats, and study sessions in various parishes across the nation. We have a one-page information sheet available with more information about the Institute.

Our experience and study of the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition leads us to reconsider the basis of interfaith dialogue, and that reconsideration is what we will be presenting to you this evening.

We begin with some general observations. The academic study of the New Testament and Early Christianity projects the question of interfaith relationships to the fore. And since we are both historians, we cannot pass up the opportunity for making some historical points first.

The religious environment of the first centuries of our era, during which the NT was written, includes not only Christians of a wide variety (and many of whom would not recognize other Christians), but also Jews of a wide variety, and practitioners of Roman religion as well. The world of the NT is a world setting forth the complex and often very fluid interaction of faiths and practices in a deeply religious society.

The respect for religious traditions foreign to my own came home dramatically to me at graduate school. We were studying the newly found Nag Hammadi Library of mostly Gnostic literature, at a time when these documents still seemed odd, strange, and peculiar. Some of my student colleagues were mocking some of the ways these documents portrayed God and described their religious myths. George MacRae, a Jesuit and my doctoral mentor, stopped the conversation. He said, "Those texts and those ideas were the serious religious expressions of people. They must be honored, even if we don't understand them or agree with them." This statement has guided me ever since. Religious

expressions, even very different and offensive ones, must be honored as the religious experience of other people.

The academic study of religion in antiquity is also important for another reason that might surprise you. A few years ago Pamela Eisenbaum and Richard Valantasis conducted a seminar on Jewish and Christian Identity in the first and second centuries CE. What we discovered, as others have now also documented, is that there was never a very clear and decisive difference between Christian and Jew at the time. It was virtually impossible to draw a line and say "this is definitely Christian" and "this is definitely Jewish." The wide varieties of both Christians and Jews prohibited a clear demarcation of one religion from the other. This unclear demarcation led the famous John Chrysostom to rail against Christians who were going to synagogue on Saturday and to church on Sunday. So unclear was the demarcation between the two religions.

Now project a few generations further into the fourth through the seventh centuries when the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, human and divine, were being debated in church councils. The far eastern Roman and Byzantine empires were moving toward a more radical single nature in Christ, which we call monophysites, one nature people. Many Eastern Christian Churches adopted a theology that protected the singularity and unity of God. For many scholars of Late Antiquity, the logical theological conclusion to that debate was the radical monotheism of Islam. In other words, the theological debates within the Christian Church found their most radical and clearest expression in what was to become another religion, Islam. The lines of demarcation historically are very much unclear. Enough history for the moment. These are topics for later discussion and later sessions.

Fast forwarding now to the interfaith situation today. We might characterize the current state of interfaith dialogue as a process of discovery and appreciation for the various traditions and practices of the various religions of the world. This is important work, and the foundation of good relationships between various people of faith. Let us say a little more about it.

My experience of interfaith dialogue actually began with Jewish-Christian relationships in biblical studies in Boston. Professor Krister Stendahl, a leading New Testament scholar, gathered a group of Jewish and Christian scholars and community leaders to read common sacred scriptures to one another and to interpret them in the presence of the other. It was a fascinating time. The goal was to read together, to see the different contexts and lenses through which we interpreted the scriptures, to learn the other religious tradition's way of reading, and, in the end, to find common ground in interpretation. This process involved marking difference, and appreciating that

difference.

The Interfaith Alliance here in Denver employed the same approach: to learn about the different religious traditions represented in our Denver community and to appreciate the difference. Here the spectrum of religious traditions expanded to include Islam, Hinduism, Shambala meditation, Buddhism, as well as many, diverse Christian denominations.

The Institute for Contemplative Living, of which we are co-directors, has been engaged with Diné (Navajo) and Lakota Native American traditions for many years now. We have been striving to do two things. First, we are working to redress the wrongs that the American government has perpetrated against native religions. For over a hundred years or more, the American government used Christian denominations to subjugate the Native American people by Christianizing them. The government's goal was to make the natives civilized, that is exclusively Christian and no longer practicing their indigenous religion. Second, we aim to assist Native Americans in developing their own, indigenous form of Christianity based on a distinctive Diné or Lakota reading of the Christian message. This is an applied interfaith dialogue based upon the mutual revelation of God in various traditions, Christian, Diné, and Lakota.

The assumption behind these kinds of communication between religious traditions is that education and knowledge about other religious traditions will generate acceptance and support for them even in their difference. And this is a very important factor, given the central role of religion in politics and world conflict. If there is to be peace, there must be peace between religious traditions first, and this religious peace is based upon mutual understanding and appreciation.

What has yet to be explored is yet another path, already well-established at least among the Abrahamic religions. That path is the role of contemplative teaching and practice among the various Christian, Jewish, and Muslim contemplatives. We have observed over the years that there is a great deal of common ground among practitioners of Jewish Kabbalah and Muslim Sufis. There seems to be a common understanding of the world, of the role of religious meditation and contemplation, and of the goal of human existence. The contemplative tradition holds potential for inaugurating a different path toward interreligious dialogue and toward interfaith living. It is this path that we would like to explore with you this evening, laying out in particular the role of Eastern Christian contemplative teaching and practice as a starting point.

Let us state our thesis so that you will know where we are going. Interfaith dialogue to this point has focused on a postmodern concept that there can be many truths that operate at the same time in different contexts. But there has not yet been promulgated a means of avoiding the conflict of

religious truths, especially when each religion claims the status of authoritative truth in relationship to all other religions. The question of truth, then, leaves us with many, unresolved issues. Through the contemplative traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, we think the conversation may shift from the question of truth to the issue of revelation. What does each of the three religious traditions reveal to us about God. In other words, it is not the question "which religion is true?" that animates the contemplative but rather the question "how is God revealed in these different ways of believing and praying?" This orientation toward revelation shifts the conversation significantly and opens possibilities for new forms of interreligious dialogue and communion.

We will not presume to speak for Kabbalist or Sufi practitioners this evening, and not even for all Christian contemplatives. We will lay out an Eastern Christian contemplative basis for conversation to see where it might lead us.

There is a caveat, however. None of the texts or theologies we present were intended to address the question of interfaith relationships. Many of these Eastern Christians had a very complex, and often hostile, relationships to the Jews and Muslims living around them, and even to other Eastern Christians living near them. At various times in history these contemplatives could reach out to one another, but unfortunately the Eastern Christians were not necessarily the best at interfaith relationships. So what we are presenting actually goes against the grain of the contemplative tradition as it has been practiced. But nonetheless, the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition holds promise for opening new avenues for religious dialogue and appreciation.

First a little information about Eastern Christian contemplation. The Greek word for contemplation in the Eastern Christian tradition is theoria, a word that had deep connection to the process of seeing. Theoria describes both a seeing with the physical eyes, as well as a kind of mental seeing using the mind. Contemplation in the Eastern Christian tradition describes a process of mental seeing, or, as it would be called in the tradition, noetic seeing.

The meaning of theoria in the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition is simply the process of turning the mind to God, of training the mind to see God both with the physical eyes and with the nous, the mind. In contrast to the Western bifurcation of experience and intellect, the Greek notion of nous emphasizes the intimate connection between experience and thinking. The nous leads to a knowledge that is tactile, experiential, interpenetrative, and unitive. "This kind of knowledge is contemplation: simple regarding, beholding, without the necessity of seeking to control or manipulate. And such contemplation entails transformation of the one who contemplates: what the

tradition calls perfection, union or deification."

This sounds more simple than it actually is, because God is not far distant and transcendent alone, but is also at the same time revealed in the physical universe, which God created. So God is also immanent in creation as well as transcendent and outside the creation.

When we turn our minds to God, then, that is, when we contemplate, we look to the material world as well as to the Scriptures and revelation of God. We turn our minds to the God who is at once immanent and transcendent, known and unknowable.

Contemplation is the training of the mind and the senses to perceive the divine presence in all that God created. That means that, since God dwells in everything in creation, we must train the mind to see and experience God in every person, every situation, and every created thing in the universe.

The contemplative tradition says that there are three degrees of contemplation. One degree is in striving to live the virtuous life. This is the most basic level of contemplation that emerges from the asceticism of living out the virtues in our daily and bodily existence. The traditional Christian virtues are chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, humility, and justice. By living these virtues, and reforming our bodies so that these virtues are manifest in our physical lives, we attain the first degree of contemplation

The second degree is in contemplating the divine presence in the material world. In the tradition, this is called natural contemplation, in which the person looks under the surface of things to find the origin and source of all being in God who created them. We'll take this up more fully later, but the process is simply called the investigation of the traces of God in creation.

The third degree is theological contemplation in which the contemplative leaves aside the material world and contemplates the inner, divine principle directly. Here the contemplative peers at the divine reality, revealed as the Trinity for Christians, without benefit of the physical revelation of God in the material and physical world. The contemplative peers into the mystery of God directly.

All three degrees of contemplation are performed together. One cannot dismiss any part of them as lesser, because each one functions to train the mind in different ways to contemplate God. The virtuous life is as important to contemplation as the grandeur of the physical world that God created. And both virtues and the material world are as significant as contemplating God in the mystery of the Trinity.

Now with that very brief introduction to Eastern Christian contemplation, we begin to explore the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition as a basis for interfaith living. We will present five topics. I'll outline them quickly here so

that you can know where we're going.

The first is the unknowability of God. The reality that God so transcends human knowledge that we cannot in the end know God. This establishes the limits of human knowledge with respect to knowing the divine mind.

The second topic explores the relationship of God to the created world, of which other religions are a part.

The third topic is the method of investigating difference and diversity in the creation as a way of knowing God, of tracing the revelation of God through the material and physical world.

The fourth topic explores the basis of the contemplative tradition in love and hospitality.

Then, to ground our theorizing in Scripture, we turn to Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John as a means of exploring how this contemplative tradition works on the ground.

We will apply each of these to the question of interfaith dialogue and living as we go along. So let's begin.

The unknowability of God. The first topic.

The Eastern Christian mystical tradition affirms that God is not known in God's essence. This is an important point. We do not know God in God's essence, or being, as God knows God's own self. Humans cannot fathom God's reality because God's essence or being so far surpasses the human capacity to know or understand.

Our way of knowing God relates to a process of kataphasis and apophasis. Kataphasis, "speaking according to the expression," builds up human categories for understanding God as God is revealed in the world and in the Scriptures. We can say that God is good, because God declares the goodness of creation. We can say that God is just, wise, eternal, long-suffering, and holy. These categories are, however, human descriptions of God.

The next step is called apophasis, speaking against the expression, when we say that God's goodness so surpasses our mind's capacity to understand goodness that we must say that God is NOT good. The same applies to the other attributes and categories for God. God's justice so far surpasses our understanding of justice that we must say that God is not just, not wise, not eternal, not long-suffering, and not holy because we can understand these categories only through our human conceptions, which cannot really know God in God's essence.

As St. Thalassios the Libyan writes: "God, whose essence is without origin or consummation, is also impenetrable in His wisdom." [Century I, # 60] We create the category, the kataphasis, in order to negate them, apophasis, so that we might experience a kind of naked union with God, and experience of

God beyond the categories.

This kataphatic and apophatic tradition teaches that there are definite limits to human knowledge of God. Our limited human abilities prevent us from knowing God fully, in God's essence. As humans we can only approximate knowledge of God, and that approximation is through negation of the very thoughts we have about God, because God is so far outside our experience and ability to know.

The ultimate unknowability of God has important implications for interfaith dialogue and living with people of other religious traditions.

The fact that we cannot know God completely, that we cannot fathom the way God is, means that we must recognize the limitations of our own knowledge and categories as they apply to other religions. We simply do not know if other religious traditions, at least from a contemplative perspective, are part of God's plan and hold a unique truth about God that we should be taking seriously.

If we think we do know the reality of God, then we deceive ourselves. This is ultimate humility before the mystery of God. We cannot know the mystery of God as God knows God's own self, and so we must speak very hesitantly and haltingly about God and God's intention with respect to everything that exists in creation. So we cannot know what God had in mind as God allowed various religious experiences to come into the creation. We can only contemplate the mystery, recognizing that we will never fully know in our human state.

Knowing God in Creation, the second point.

The unknowability of God, however, has a counter-point. This is our second topic. We know God by searching for God in the created universe. This seems contradictory to the unknowability of God, but it isn't.

God is known through God's energies as they are expressed in the material world created by God and that participates in God. In the creation of the material world, God implanted God's logos, God's ruling principle, in all creation. The created elements in the physical universe participate in God by virtue of their implanted logos or ruling principle, which carefully provides for connection between everything and everyone that God created and the Creator.

Maximos the Confessor writes: "We do not know God from his essence. We know him rather from the grandeur of his creation and from his providential care for all creatures. For through these, as though they were mirrors, we may attain insight into his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power." [Love I, # 96]

There is a divine economy of presence. The economy of God is the relationship of God to the creation, a relationship marked by a deep connection between creation and Creator. We know God, that is, through attending to the

divine economy, by carefully investigating the connection between the created thing and person and God who created them.

This divine economy means that everything and everyone in creation are connected. Thalassios the Libyan writes: "God, who gave being to all that is, at the same time united all things together in His providence." [Century I, # 95] By virtue of our creation by God, everything and everyone coheres in the divine economy. There is nothing in creation that is separated from God. There is nothing in creation that does not reflect the divine presence and energies operating within them. Everything coheres in the Creator of the universe.

For Christians this is particularly important. The doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus, when Jesus took on human flesh from Mary, the Mother of God, functioned as a kind of new creation. The Fall of Adam and Eve clouded the ability of humans to see God in the creation, in the material and physical world. Jesus, by his incarnation, rectified this situation and made it possible once again to have deep communion with God through the material world. Jesus cleared the cloud and made the creation again resplendent with the divine presence. The Logos of God, incarnate in Jesus, showed the deep connection of all things in the Godhead. Thalassios the Libyan writes: "God the Logos, in becoming incarnate while remaining unchanged, was united through his flesh with the whole of creation." [Century I, # 97] The visible sign of the divine economy was the union of all things and people in creation with God through the incarnation of Jesus. The God-human Jesus, that is, made visible the deep connection in God of everything in creation.

The divine economy has serious implications for interfaith dialogue and living.

We must assume that everything in creation participates in the divine economy. In other words, whatever exists in the world reflects its deep connection and dependence upon divine Providence.

Other religions, as well as other languages and cultures, participate in that divine economy. This means that they are not separated from God, but deeply connected to God, even if we do not understand the culture, language, or religion of the other.

This also means that we cannot assume that our tradition or religion is the only one that is part of the divine economy. That would be violating the ultimate unknowability of God. All we can do is to affirm that everything in creation, including other religions, participates in God, and, therefore, they are part of the divine plan and providence for all creation.

Diversity in Creation

Our third topic helps us to understand how we are to approach the diversity in creation. Let's move now to the way we are to relate to the divine economy. Given that all creation is connected by the Logos to God, how do we

begin to analyze and understand elements of the creation. The Eastern Christian contemplative tradition calls this method, the investigation of the intelligibles.

In creating the world, God bestowed upon the human being a capacity to think and to reflect. The instrument of this gift is the nous, what we might call the mind. In contrast to the Western bifurcation of experience and intellect, the Greek notion of nous emphasizes the intimate connection between experience and thinking. The nous leads to a knowledge that is tactile, experiential, interpenetrative, and unitive. The mind is capable of analyzing the things presented to it, those things are the intelligibles, those things capable of being apprehended by the mind. It is the nature of the mind to think and to analyze. That's part of the gift of God to humans.

We investigate the intelligibles, that is, we analyze the traces of God's presence in everyone and everything, when we seek to discover the divine energies in everything created. Maximos the Confessor describes the process: "When the intellect is engaged in the contemplation of things visible, it searches out either the natural principles of these things, or the spiritual principles that they reflect, or else it seeks their original cause." [Love I, #98] We do our work as human beings when we begin to look beneath the surface of things to discover the evidence of God's presence as creator. When we seek the spiritual dimension of material and human creations, we find their spiritual principles, the Logos planted within them. And this is what we are to seek in everyone and everything.

The practical effect of this kind of contemplation is that we train our minds to see the holiness of all creation. The training of the mind is important because, given our natural inclination not informed by supernatural presence, we are prone to be suspicious or wary of a hidden divine presence in the material world.

Maximos the Confessor writes: "A person keeps the soul undefiled before God if he compels his mind to meditate only on God and his supreme goodness, makes his thought a true interpreter and exponent of this goodness, and teaches his senses to form holy images of the visible world and all the things in it, and to convey to the soul the magnificence of the inner principles lying within all things." [Theology I, # 14]

By investigating the intelligibles of creation, we train our minds to find the divine holiness in everyone and everything around us. We train our senses to experience not the surface, where God may not be visible, but the underlying and inner principles of divine energy present in everything, in every event, and in everyone, no matter how different things and people are from ourselves.

The diversity of the world is very important. God did not create the world as uniform. The creation is full of diversity and difference. We must teach ourselves to trace the connection from the diversity to the unity of all creation

in God. Maximus writes: "In the multiplicity of beings there is diversity, dissimilarity, and difference. But in God, who is in an absolute sense one and alone, there is only identity, simplicity, and similarity. It is therefore not safe to devote oneself to the contemplation of God before one has advanced beyond the multiplicity of beings." [Maximos, Theology I, #83] We must first contemplate the presence of God in the multiplicity of things, before we are able to contemplate the unity of God. Difference, diversity, dissimilarity are the starting point to the true knowledge of God.

Again, there are serious implications of this way of thinking for interfaith dialogue and living.

If other religions exist in the world, as part of the creation of God, then the issue for Christians is to investigate what those religions teach us about God. As part of the creation, even of the creation of the human mind, these other religions participate in the divine energies and therefore they become points of revelation for us.

The question is not "Is this religion true?" but rather, what does this religion tell me about God. What does this way of living and understanding God tell us about how we might experience and know God through the diversity, difference, and dissimilarity.

Ultimately, as Maximus says, we cannot contemplate God before we deal with the multiplicity in creation. For us, that means that we cannot understand the God of our tradition, before we have explored the revelations of God in others. This means that other religious traditions are central to our contemplation of God.

Difference and diversity reveal God's energies that ultimately point to a kind of knowledge of God. And the contemplative task is to investigate the diversity to find the underlying divine energies present in them. That is to say, diversity reveals God.

Part Four: Love and Hospitality

Our fourth point is about love and hospitality. The heart of the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition is love for God, for all of God's creation, and for all people. Thalassios the Libyan writes that "Love alone harmoniously joins all created beings with God and with each other." [Century I, # 5] It is love that expresses the implanting of the divine Logos, the divine presence, in all creation. It is love that joins all creation to all the rest of creation and to God.

Love is the glue of the universe, and the love of God connects every element of creation. Thalassios writes: "An all-embracing and intense longing for God binds those who experience it both to God and to one another." [Century I, # 1] We connect to one another as we love God, and as we love God, we find ourselves connected to all others and to everything in creation.

For Christians this love is the fruit of participation in the Eucharist. After describing all the levels of contemplation in the mystagogy, the mystical interpretation, of the Eucharist, Maximos the Confessor describes the end-result of our eucharistic participation in this way: "The clear proof of this [eucharistic] grace is the voluntary disposition of good will toward those akin to us whereby the person who needs our help in any way becomes as much as possible our friend as God is and we do not leave him abandoned and forsaken but rather that with fitting zeal we show him in action the disposition which is alive in us with respect to God and our neighbor. For a work is a proof of a disposition." [Mystagogy, p. 211] After experiencing the grace of God in the Eucharist, we turn our minds to service and ministry to others, treating them as we ourselves are treated by God.

This human providential care for others reveals the fact that we have received within ourselves the divine presence in the Body and Blood of Jesus. Having been united to God, we enflesh God in the world just as Jesus did. Maximos writes: "And if the poor person is God, it is because of God's condescension in becoming poor for us and taking upon himself by his own suffering the suffering of each one and until the end of time, always suffering mystically out of goodness in proportion to each one's suffering. All the more reason, then, will that one be God who by loving humans in imitation of God heals by himself in divine fashion the hurts of those who suffer and who shows that he has in his disposition, safeguarding all proportion, the same power of saving providence that God has." [Mystagogy, p. 212]

Love is the expression of the contemplative for all others. Maximos the Confessor writes in another place: "Perfect love does not split up the single human nature, common to all, according to the diverse characteristics of individuals; but, fixing attention always on this single nature, it loves all people equally." [Love I, #71] Maximos enjoins us to attend to the commonality of all human beings, and in seeing the commonality of us all, we learn to love all others equally. This equality of love for everyone and everything in creation imitates and replicates the love of God for all creation and for all people. As contemplative people, then, we must train ourselves to love with the same indiscriminate love as God.

And if we find ourselves suspicious of others, and if we find ourselves taking offense at the way others live and think, then we reveal that we have in fact not incarnated and enfleshed the love of God. Maximos writes: "Shun all suspicions and all persons that cause you to take offence. If you are offended by anything, whether intended or unintended, you do not know the way of peace, which through love brings the lovers of divine knowledge to the knowledge of God." [Love I, #69]

There is in love a kind of hospitable relationship to other people and to the created universe. The contemplative love of the Eastern Christian tradition

embraces everyone even if they do not share our religious traditions.

The example is of the Patriarch Abraham whose love knew no bounds. Theodorus the Great Ascetic describes this hospitality in this way: "When we receive visits from our brethren, we should not consider this an irksome interruption of our stillness, lest we cut ourselves off from the law of love. Nor should we receive them as if we were doing them a favor, but rather as if it is we ourselves who are receiving a favor; and because we are indebted to them, we should beg them cheerfully to enjoy our hospitality, as the Patriarch Abraham has shown us. This is why St. John, too, says: 'My children, let us love not in word or tongue, but in action and truth. And by this we know that we belong to the truth.' (1 John 3:18-19) Accepting the task of hospitality, the Patriarch used to sit at the entrance to his tent, inviting all who passed by, and his table was laden for all comers including the impious and barbarians, without distinction. Hence he was found worthy of that wonderful banquet when he received angels and the Master of All as his guests. We too, then, should actively and eagerly cultivate hospitality, so that we may receive not only angels, but also God himself." [A Century of Spiritual Texts, #84-85]

Again, the implications for interfaith dialogue and living are clear. We do not normally think of love when we think of dialogue with other religious traditions. But our stance in relationship to other religious people must first, like the Patriarch Abraham, to be one of hospitable reception, then of searching for that point at which we may love the other.

The differences between us as religious people becomes an opportunity for the expression of love and service first of all, especially as we look for the revelations of God in the divine economy. It is not that we sweep the differences under the carpet and homogenize our religious traditions, but rather that we trace the difference to the common point in their creation by God, the source and origin of all that is in creation. In tracing the difference, we move ourselves to hospitality, and from hospitality to love in the face of the enormity of the mystery of God.

Five: The Samaritan woman

Our fifth topic takes us into the New Testament. The Eastern Christian contemplative tradition is solidly based on the Gospel of John. And here we are shamelessly promoting our own book, *The Gospels and Christian Life in History and Practice*. If what we say intrigues you, buy the book!

Two elements of the Gospel of John determine the direction of Eastern Christian contemplation. The Gospel of John is the only gospel that underscores the role of the Logos, the divine Word, in Christian revelation. The prologue to the gospel says: "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was in God's presence, and the Logos was God." Logos, here, could mean a number of different things. We frequently translate it as "conversation or

discourse," which is appropriate to the Gospel of John because Jesus in John speaks in long discourses and conversations as in no other gospel. The ancient Eastern Christian contemplatives, however, interpreted the Logos of the Prologue as meaning the divine logos, the inner principles of divine being that God planted in the material world and through which the contemplative may ascend to God.

The second Johannine theological principle essential to the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition is that God reveals God's presence in the course of revelatory conversation. Every conversation in the Gospel of John reveals something new and distinct about how God operates in the world and how God's people are to relate to God. Those to whom revelations come in John's gospel are numerous. It is not simply the twelve, close disciples, but many people who enter the conversation: Nicodemus, the man born blind and his family, Lazarus, Mary and Martha of Bethany, the Samaritan woman, the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda, to name just a few. Anyone who enters the conversation receives a revelation of the divine Logos. These revelations are central to the gospel and even more central to Eastern Christian contemplation.

The story of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's well is the only story in Scripture that models and honors interfaith dialogue. The conversation, occurring in the fourth chapter of the gospel, intentionally engages interfaith dialogue in the beginning of the gospel and as part of the foundation for the rest of the gospel.

The story is a simple one. Jesus stops at Jacob's well to rest and there he meets a Samaritan woman who has come to draw water. A conversation ensues, albeit an unusual conversation between people of religious faiths that are enemies of each other: the woman says "'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria.' For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."

The Samaritan woman brings forth in the conversation all that she knows about her tradition. This focuses on the significance of Jacob's well. She says, "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" The Samaritan woman stands firmly in her tradition and speaks clearly and distinctly to her conversation partner, who also speaks from within the new revelation that is occurring in the conversation. Jesus responds with a new revelation by saying, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him shall become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The Samaritan woman stands firmly in her tradition, and Jesus brings a new revelation to bear in the conversation.

The discussion quickly turns to the theological question of the proper

place to worship God, places divergent in the two religious traditions in conversation. The Samaritan woman says, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem men ought to worship." Again, Jesus brings forth a new revelation: "Neither in Jerusalem nor on this mountain will you worship the Father." The differences came to the fore quickly, and were addressed directly by both parties. There was no attempt to denigrate either religious tradition, but rather to raise them to a higher level of revelation where worship will be "in Spirit and in Truth."

When the disciples arrive from going into the village to find food for them all, they question the hospitality of Jesus to the Samaritan woman. Again, here we find the contemplative tradition working. Hospitality, like that of the Patriarch Abraham, takes precedence over custom and belief. Jesus as well as the Samaritan woman both display a deep and appreciative hospitality for the other. And the hospitality was extended to Jesus from the Samaritan community to which the woman spoke.

The Johannine community highlights the conversion of the Samaritans, a topic most controversial in formative Christianity. John's gospel is the only one that takes up the question, and, of course, the writers of the gospel would have Jesus win the argument. It is not the conclusion of the argument that we emphasize, but the process that displays clearly the foundation for Eastern Christian contemplation based on the indwelling of the Logos, the inner spiritual principles, in the material world. Conversations open this Logos to disclosure and new revelation.

What this story tells us about interfaith dialogue and living is very important.

First of all, it is important that we engage in hospitable conversation with each other. Hospitality does not mean that our conversations will not confront us, nor does it mean sweeping problems under the table. It does mean entering into conversation with one another in a spirit of discovering the revelation of God in the discourse.

Second, it means that, like the Samaritan woman, we bring everything we know to the conversation. We do not hold anything back. All our knowledge and our experience becomes the place where the revelation of God in difference will occur.

Third, it means that we await the revelation as we engage in living with others. We expect God to be revealed. We watch for the revelation. We train our minds to see and to experience the revelation.

Fourth, it means that God continually surprises us with where and when revelation will come to us. Neither Jesus, nor the woman, nor the disciples, nor even the Samaritan villagers, were preparing for revelation. When it came to them, they were prepared to see it. They had trained their minds sufficiently

to look at the surprising way God is revealed, at the surprising people who become revealers, and at the unexpected places where God chooses to be revealed.

And finally, the story warns to take seriously the revelation of God coming through these surprising people and unexpected circumstances. We do not pass up the moment of revelation because of the circumstances or the revealers, we fully accept the visions of God as they emerge and display themselves before our physical and mental eyes.

Conclusions

Through these five topics that we have presented this evening, we have attempted to move the conversation about interfaith dialogue and living from the problem of truth to the question of revelation.

The shift from truth to revelation is an important one. The unknowability of God prevents us from making truth claims about God. There is a real limit to the knowledge of God in God's essence, and so contemplatives of many ages and temperaments have stood before the mystery of God and simply turned their hearts and minds to song. Others, of a less contemplative bent, presume to know the mind of God and insist that others follow their presumption. But contemplatives know better.

The shift from truth to revelation also places us before the wonder of God as expressed and worshiped and considered in so many different ways through the various religious traditions. With the Abrahamic branches, we have a common base from which to begin to explore the wonder of God in diversity, difference, and alternative perspectives. This discovery of the revelations within this branch mutually fulfills the other. In other words, we are part of a branch of God's revelation that must hang together. Contemplatives have understood this, often referring to God simply as the One, the Source, the Ground of Existence. We come to know God revealed in difference and we wonder at God's capacity to stifle and amaze and confound and humble the human heart and spirit.

The shift from truth to revelation also allows us to live hospitably and lovingly with others. If we are not constantly looking over our shoulder to find error and abuse of truth, we are able to embrace others and to treat them with respect and care, for they are, after all, revealers of the divine presence in the material world. It also means that we treat the physical world with care—not bombing and destroying it, and trying to milk it for its resources, but with love and care, because God's divine energy is in all material and physical creation and we must respect and honor God in it.