

# Sharing the light of Jesus in a multifaith world

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## I am the light of the world

“I am the light of the world!” Jesus proclaimed (John 8:12; 9:5).

Light? What did he mean? His hearers would have recognized the reference to the Prophets’ writings found in their scriptures (our Old Testament). In the Old Testament, salvation and light mean much the same thing: the offer of complete well-being, as intended by the Creator. Light is the antitheses of darkness, disorder, and chaos, and salvation is the antithesis of oppression, exploitation, and despair.<sup>1</sup> God says, “It is



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too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light of the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6, NRSV).

In the New Testament, Simeon blesses Jesus, the infant messiah, as he is being presented in the temple. Simeon prays, “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:30–32). This servant/messiah is for the Gentiles and for Israel—for everybody, including our neighbours of various faiths.

So how did Jesus go about being the light in the diverse world of first-century Palestine? The Gospels tell us that he healed the sick, whether their ailments were physical or spiritual. Jesus literally brought people back to life; he raised the dead. He confronted corruption in the politico-religious establishment and spoke out against religious fanati-

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

cism. He called people back to the spirit of their faith. He told parables using images familiar to common folks, and the heroes of his stories were often people at the margins. He taught his followers how to live according to upside-down kingdom values that stretched them to think and act outside the expectations of the status quo. He engaged seekers and kept them scrambling to catch what he was saying. He even earned a reputation as one who partied, who associated with tax collectors, sinners, publicans, and prostitutes.

What is the common thread in the various ways Jesus related to people? Interestingly, he didn't tell everyone about the kingdom of God. Nor did he reveal his identity and purpose to most people. To me, it seems that the constant in everything Jesus did was that what he offered was life-giving in some way. As Jesus's followers, everything we do should share his life-giving light with others.

### **You are the light of the world**

So now Jesus addresses us: “*You* are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16). To live in this way means that we acknowledge God as the source of the life transformation happening in and around us, as we are becoming that human agent (servant) spoken of in Isaiah.

### **A posture of humility**

As a basis for how to connect with others in a multifaith world, let's start by remembering our problematic history with the Indigenous peoples of North America. It is abundantly clear that European settlers' engagement with native peoples was not life-giving but literally life-destroying. This interaction devastated the culture and identity of Indigenous peoples by suppressing their languages and the practice of their powerful spiritual rituals. We were also deeply mistaken in thinking that compelling assimilation is an effective way of doing mission work.

I am grateful that the church in North America has been humbled before the Indigenous community, because we now know what terrible harm we cause when we act out of a sense of religious and cultural superiority. Humility is the only appropriate stance for us to take in relation to people of other faiths. Though we as individuals and as a faith com-

munity can readily testify to Jesus's powerful transformation in our lives, we should absolutely avoid imposing our faith on others or compelling their conversion.

Only when we support others' identity and culture can we share the light of Jesus with them. Honoring their traditions as a source of strength is a way of enhancing the well-being the Creator intends for all humankind. At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Canada, I heard many stories of Indigenous people who overcame addictions only when they returned to their traditional rituals and practices.

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They reclaimed their identity. And religious practice was often a key aspect, a critical marker of identity. If North American Mennonites of European descent reflect on our experience, we will realize that we have also thrived when our faith and our ethnic identity have strengthened each other.

### **Lessons learned during years in Burkina Faso**

What does calling people to a deeper relationship with God mean when the people addressed are those of another faith community? How can our impact

in a person's life be truly life-giving? My experiences with these questions have most often been in a Muslim context. I trust that as I recount some of them, you will see ways of making broader applications.

As Mennonite workers, our family lived in a village among people of a small Muslim ethnic group. Even after we had been there for twenty years, there were no other Christians in the village, and there was no church building. But we had shared stories from the Old and New Testaments and wisdom from Proverbs and poetry from the Psalms, and the villagers loved these offerings. The impact of the Bible message was strong, and it transformed individual lives. One man's bitterness was taken away, and another learned to be a stronger leader with deeper integrity. Another result was change in religious practice in the village, from a more pluralist African religion to a clearer monotheism. As a result, we were often seen as a renewal movement within Islam.

In no way could the people of this small Muslim village think of becoming Christian, because that would have felt like giving up their whole identity. I respect their choice in this matter, so we put much effort into preserving the proverbs, songs, fables, and stories of their very fragile language. As our lives were enriched by immersing ourselves in a new cultural environment, we slowly developed a style of relating as Christians to Muslims that sought to be respectful and life-giving.

Meanwhile, just down the trail, our Wycliffe colleagues lived in a neighbouring village of the same ethnicity. There a small group of linguists who were Bible translation workers became followers of Jesus, and a church was established. Their personalities were transformed by the work of Jesus in their life, and the Holy Spirit inspired them to compose songs for worship. Some family conflicts arose at the time of their “conversions,” but those eventually resolved. These believers have a new identity “in Christ,” but they constantly reaffirm that they belong to their ethnic group, and they are accepted because of their contributions to the village’s language and music.

### **Creating spaces of diversity**

In the English as a second language (ESL) program that I coordinate now with a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), our main aim is teaching English. But to better help newer immigrants integrate into Canadian culture, I encourage formation of deep ties between the volunteers (long-time Canadians) and the newcomers. Many English language learning programs stay away from religious content. I prefer instead to set an example of mutual respect between the faith communities. In fall 2016, I used a Divali story from the Hindu tradition.<sup>2</sup> A shy Hindu student with multiple sclerosis suddenly found she could contribute meaningfully in class. Then when the beginning of Advent and Mohammed’s birthday fell close together on the calendar, we focused on both. I was moved to see the pride on Muslim students’ faces that day. I believe that the integration of newcomers occurs more easily and more fully when people of the dominant culture celebrate others’ religious identities and validate them in doing so. As Mennonite old-timers with strong religious identity, we have a role in welcoming newcomers, many of whom also have strong religious identities.

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2 Divali is a Hindu festival of lights.

## Encouraging faith of whatever kind

A young couple with a plot in our community garden came to Canada from Colombia. Before immigrating to Canada they converted from weak Christian background to Shia Islam. They were struggling here with identity issues and with the negative media attention given

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to Muslims and Islam. Spanish is not a language spoken by others in their Edmonton mosque, and they felt that they had no place to belong. A year ago I challenged the father of the family to get involved in his faith community. More recently, I participated in an event at their mosque, and I saw how they and their children were at ease with the place and its people. The youngest, a girl four years old, carefully rolled out her cloth in preparation for

the women's prayer, and at the end she rolled it all up and put it in its proper place. They had an increased sense of well-being, and I felt such joy in witnessing it. Might it be our calling as followers of Jesus to help people grow closer to God in such ways? Am I increasing their well-being when I encourage these Muslims to be a better Muslims?

A friend who is a Muslim military chaplain told me of a serviceman who came to him and said he wanted to become a Muslim. The chaplain asked him what his current faith was. The man said he had grown up Christian but wasn't practising. The chaplain told that man to go and learn all he could about Christianity. If after he had done that he still wanted to become Muslim, they could start talking again. That is a response that has integrity, in my view.

## Interfaith dialogue

I sought interfaith dialogue as a means to break down stereotypes between peoples, especially with Muslims who feel they are misrepresented in the media in the US and Canada. As I've helped plan and participated in Christian-Muslim dialogues for the past four years, I have come to see this conversation as a valid and respectful way to give witness to important aspects of my Christian faith.

At one dialogue the speaker told the parable of the Prodigal Son. That was all he did, yet it clearly set many listeners thinking. In other

years, Christian speakers have told stories of how Jesus related to people: he often shocked them but always gave life. This kind of verbal testimony arising from engagement with Christian scriptures seems to me to be one way to be faithful in witness. More recently, we were able to realize a longstanding goal to spend more time in facilitated table discussion than in listening to speakers. We hope this discussion will be a way of helping people get used to talking about their faith with those of another faith.

### **Spiritual friendships**

In my view, these conversations are only really successful when people begin to develop spiritual friendships at their own initiative. It seems evident that the most effective way for people to lose their prejudices against those of other faiths is to develop personal relationships across these religious differences.

In reaction to faith-sharing techniques we do not endorse, many Anabaptists feel that verbal witness is disrespectful of others, so we stay away from spiritual content in our interactions with those of other faiths. To me, that reticence doesn't seem faithful to how Jesus inter-

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acted with those he encountered, and it deprives us of some rich experiences. I feel sad when Muslim friends have told me about how disappointed they are when Christians do not reveal their faith; they long for us to be real and open about our spiritual identity and practice. These friends have shown me, by pulling me into their lives, that reciprocity in spiritual sharing is enriching

for all of us. We know friendships grow deep when our conversation is genuine. If I am a person of faith, authentic sharing needs to include spiritual sharing.

To deepen our ties as Christians and Muslims in Edmonton, we meet as book clubs and also to study the Bible and the Quran together in a process called Scriptural Reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Regular meetings increase our mutual understanding and deepen our friendships. One member of the book club is a leader in the Bosnian community. About a year

<sup>3</sup> For more on Scriptural Reasoning, see <http://www.snetwork.org/sr-basics/>.

ago, I spent an afternoon with her. During the Bosnian War (1992–95), her husband and father were killed, and she was finally forced her to leave home with her four-month-old baby. [IN THE SUBSEQUENT FLIGHT, LASTING ## MONTHS, ] she hid in a series of more than sixty basements as she sought to save her son's life. No wonder she now suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder. As she talked about those times of fearing that her child's death was imminent and told me of the angels who had intervened to save his life, I remembered that I too had several times lived with fear that the life of a child of mine was in peril. Our common experiences as mothers bonded us in a shared humanity. I long for this woman to find healing from her trauma. I believe that Jesus could transform her life in some way.

My cousin Telita Janzen lived in northern Alberta and volunteered in a thrift store. Also living there, working on contract, was a Canadian engineer who had married a Muslim woman from Indonesia. When he was at work, she was alone all day in a motel room. She didn't know anyone in town. Finally, she prayed to Allah to help her meet a friend. As it happened, that day she left the motel, and she ended up at the thrift store. As Telita was finishing an exchange with another customer, she felt a strong urge to greet this new customer. In their encounter, the woman saw how Allah had answered her prayer. At the time of Telita's funeral this past January, her husband, Peter, reported how this woman expressed appreciation for Telita's kind, continued, and supportive friendship. This story should remind us to pay attention when the Holy Spirit nudges us to engage others.

I have been privileged to find close friends within the Shia Muslim community, which has a strong sense of martyrdom and suffering, something they have in common with Mennonites. Some Shia friends joined us at a Mennonite church for a Good Friday service, and together we focused on the suffering of Jesus. A Shia friend stopped in Jerusalem after her pilgrimage to Mecca. She told me how she cried as she walked the Via Dolorosa that Jesus himself had walked in suffering. On another occasion, I was asked to do a presentation on Karen Armstrong's *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* for a group of forward-thinking Shia women.<sup>4</sup> As I met with them that evening, I soon realized that these were deeply spiritual, mature women. I felt as close to them as if they were

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4 See Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011).

Christian sisters. I learned that we share a common commitment to live nonviolently in all areas of our life. Because such friendships emerge somewhat unexpectedly and feel like a special gift from God, I treasure the way they bridge our two faiths.

### Thoughts on conversion and proselytism

In the Edmonton Muslim community, I have heard, firsthand and second hand, stories of people who converted to Islam. I have heard people talk about feeling closely connected to God for the first time. But worldwide, we are witnessing for the first time unprecedented major movements of Muslims embracing Jesus openly and forming communities of Jesus followers.<sup>5</sup> In fact, many Christians have been praying that Jesus will reveal himself to Muslims, and many Muslims have had dreams of Jesus. Now that the Bible is available in many languages spoken by peo-

ple in Islamic societies, people are being nourished in small groups that meet to study the Bible and pray together.

As a young adult, I underwent a life transformation. It changed how I related to people, gave me a deep relationship with Jesus, and led me to years of service. But I feel a tension on these issues. I have been told that if someone in the Muslim community would convert to Christianity because of me, my interfaith efforts would not continue. That is frustrating and a real challenge.



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Muslims have tried to convert me, and other Muslims have said that they do so only because they love me so much. My response is that that is precisely why I long for my close friends to know Jesus.

In Edmonton, I recently heard that many Syrian immigrants are now converting to Christianity. Mennonite church people have also told me that young people among newly arrived Syrians are interested in Christianity because of all the evil they have encountered in Syria at the hands of Muslims. Is it proselyting when sponsors (who simply want

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5 V. David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014), <http://windinthehouse.org/>.

to show Jesus's love) invite vulnerable newcomers to follow Jesus? Or is it the height of true friendship and caring?

The director of a Christian-sponsored English program here has said that although the program curriculum is not openly Christian, the testimony of love is strong, and a few East Africans have become followers of Jesus. But he added that the church has not supported them, and they are not doing well today. Identity and belonging seem to be the issues, and perhaps the cultural gap has been too great for true friendships to emerge. In all of this, we need the Holy Spirit's guidance, if we are to avoid creating generation gaps as we seek first of all the well-being of newcomers, as we learn from and are enriched by our encounters with them, and as we share our lives and our faith.

### **Our commission**

Our chastened awareness of practices that have discredited Christianity may now put us at risk of being so respectful of other faiths that we fail to offer the power and love that following Jesus brings and which people long for. We can go beyond that. After all, we are charged with being the light of Jesus in this needy world, with sharing his love and bringing

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people to know his life-enhancing presence. Of course we refrain from judgment and reject bigotry. Of course we are respectful and seek to understand the faith traditions of others. Of course we acknowledge the problematic history of Christian engagement with people of other faiths and cultures. Of course we seek to be self-aware about our own flaws and limitations.

On the other hand, we need to be open to the nudging of the Holy Spirit to engage the other. We need to live out our faith to the full and stop being

reticent about giving an account of the hope that is in us. We need to share easily and openly how Jesus has helped us or called us or spoken to us. We need to draw alongside people in need, with compassion and respect. We need to join with those who pray for Jesus to reveal himself to seekers. We need to support our new brothers and sisters in Christ, even across cultures. We need Jesus's patience, bravery, and grace as we

encounter strangers and learn from them. A tall order, but with Jesus's Spirit empowering us, a realm of exciting possibilities opens before us: we can be vessels through which Christ's light reaches others!

**About the author**

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