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Footnotes: Faith of Our Neighbors

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Footnotes¹

¹Curated Resources for Ministers



Sometimes it is good to think about where we live, why we live there, and who else lives there.

I live in Memphis, Tennessee, which geographically and culturally situates me in a few different stories. Memphis is just north of the Mississippi Delta, where the soil testifies to violent division and oppression: land owners over slaves; wealthy over impoverished; Europeans over Africans; whites over blacks. Memphis has its own story, too, exemplified during the era of Jim Crow, which saw public lynchings, unnecessary deaths of sanitation workers, and ultimately the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. Yet today's Memphis is not the one of 1968. There is a linguistic story now, too. A brief commute down Winchester Road or Summer Avenue testifies to the significant presence of a Latino/a population. This is how Memphians, like me, usually describe diversity: skin color and language.

But then on a Saturday morning you drive to Kroger in East Memphis and see a family of four pedestrians in dark pants and white shirts crossing White Station at Sanderlin. They are Jewish. *Shabbat*. During a trip to the zoo in the middle of a brutal July afternoon you see a mother of five wearing a heavy scarf over her head and shoulders. They are Muslim. *Hijab*. In April, a Cambodian neighbor invites you to celebrate a holiday with Southeast Asian friends. They are Buddhist. *New Year's*. **At this point we remember that diversity is not simply a matter of skin color and language, but also a matter of faith, belief, ritual, and worldview.** It affects architecture, city planning, wardrobes, calendars, schedules, and diets. And these religions pre-date most of our national borders and many of our languages.

I'll be honest: I think we have a lot of work to do if we are going to meaningfully engage these diverse communities—particularly given their shifting demographics. **Within a generation or two, the United States will have over five million Buddhists.** That is the combined current population of Chicago and Houston. Many of us are lucky to name more than three from among our acquaintances. That's not all. Nearly 40% of Hindus **hold graduate degrees**, and they run 30% of Silicon Valley startups. Simply, we should no longer assume that if our co-workers and neighbors are religious then they are probably Christian. This is not something we should fear, but instead an opportunity we must engage. The world has changed. How will we respond to the changes?

Today I'd like to spend some time reflecting on how we can better understand, love, appreciate, and serve our religious neighbors. As our own contexts become more religiously-diverse it is imperative that we increase our own religious literacy. I think this issue (and the next) will be a good start to that process.

Thanks as always for reading *Footnotes*.



Footnotes Roundtable: John Barton

John Barton is the Director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Pepperdine University.

***Next issue will feature an interview on this same topic with Monte Cox of Harding University.

BT: I remember watching **Stephen Prothero's** documentary *God in America* and hearing him make the case that while America might not be a Christian nation, it was a very religious nation. Evidence of this might be Jewish populations in LA/NYC, Hindu communities around Silicon Valley, or pockets of Vietnamese Buddhists in Houston. Does this line up with your assessment of America. Are we religious?

JB: Religion still plays an important role in the U.S., although it looks different than it used to. There is a sense in which traditional American Christianity is declining, but other forms of Christianity and other kinds of religiosity are growing. Even the NONEs -- an increasing number of Americans who don't formerly affiliate with any religion or religious community -- often still claim to believe in God, pray, and/or regularly participate in religious practices. For some NONEs, that means "alternative" practices such as neo-paganism or various humanistic or pluralistic mixes. Others NONEs have surprisingly orthodox beliefs and practices even while they refuse to formerly affiliate with institutions. In short, however we respond to all this, it seems we can say about Americans today what Paul said in Athens: "I see that you are very religious in every way."

BT: One barrier in relating to people of other faiths is the temptation to think that all of us share the same religious categories (sin, salvation, worship, etc), when in fact we do not. What resources/advice might you give Christians whose neighbors who might be asking different questions than Christians are prepared to answer?

JB: One great resource is **Monte's book** and the videos that go along with it

BT: You wrote a review of *Significant Others for Missio Dei*.

JB: He helps us understand other religions, while modeling Christian charity, respect, and love for our global neighbors. I would also recommend Stephen Prothero's book, *God Is Not One*. Prothero does not write from a Christian point of view (he describes himself as "religiously confused"), but he provides valuable insights on the details and differences between religions, and he challenges the common academic assumption that all religions are really just "different paths going up the same mountain."

BT: If one's only exposure to Islam came exclusively through TV news and social media, they might equate Islam with terrorism. How would you respond to this?

JB: We need to trust the Golden Rule more than the media. This is not always easy, but here is what I mean. **I don't want Muslims equating Christianity with horrific things Christians have done in the name of Jesus** (eg. hundreds of years of Christians enslaving Africans; Christian support and participation in the holocaust; Christian leadership in modern genocides in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda). While we can't deny those things happen, I don't want Muslims to equate them with our faith. I want them to grant us the benefit of the doubt and allow us to provide a different picture. If that is what I want, then the Golden Rule forbids me from quick and fearful conclusions about Islam based on media reports, and commands me to grant them the same benefit of the doubt whether or not the favor is returned or whether or not I find their explanations convincing. The Golden Rule is a command, not a suggestion, so we should obey, and trust God with the rest.

BT: Suppose I spend most of my time with Christians (and those Christians are within my own small tradition within Christianity). What would you recommend I might do to expand my reach?

JB: All of us can pray for and find creative ways to form connections and friendships with those outside of our smaller circles. It may take some creativity, some thinking outside the box, even some risk taking, but anyone can do it, and God desires it. I also think it is important to be able to be a good guest in other people's homes and contexts. **In other words, hospitality does not only mean being a gracious host, sometimes it means being a gracious guest.**

BT: Finish this sentence: A church who wants to get serious about their religious neighbors will **stop** _____.

JB: Thinking of them as the competition.

BT: Okay, let's try this one: A church who wants to get serious about their religious neighbors will **start** _____.

JB: Thinking of them as "neighbors" and humans created in God's image, for whom Christ died, and thus allowing faith and love to overcome fear and suspicion.



Quick Picks

Book Suggestions for People in a Hurry

This time I'll use a few recommendations from **Mani**^{*}. Mani splits his time in India as doctor in a free clinic and as a preacher. He somehow also finds time to be a student in the **doctoral program** at HST. Here are a few titles on Hinduism and India that Mani recommends:

Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. IVP Academic, 2012.

Terry Muck and Frances Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century*. Baker Academic, 2009.

H. L. Richard, *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context*. William Carey Library, 1998.

_____, ed. *Rethinking Hindu Ministry: Papers from the Rethinking Forum*. William Carey Library, 2011.

Timothy Shultz, *Disciple Making Among Hindus: Making Authentic Relations Grow*. William Carey Library, 2016.

Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000.

^{*}The last name was redacted after publication.



A Few More Footnotes

1. Nice thoughts by Princeton Seminary's Craig Barnes on why **he misses funerals**.
2. Michael Hobbes on **Obesity and the war on fat people**.
3. Clergy sex scandal accentuates **divides in Catholic church on gay clergy**.
4. Children of religious parents are less likely **to have suicidal thoughts**.
5. Stop telling people to be more civil and start telling them **to go to the library**.



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UPCOMING

October 8
Faith of Our Neighbors, Part 2

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