

Too Small a Thing: *or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the World* | BY RYAN BELL

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The following is adapted from a presentation given at the 2013 Adventist Forum Conference at the Sheraton Read House Hotel in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on September 7, 2013. The conference's theme was interfaith dialogue.

It might be cliché to say so, but it is absolutely true: the day I was shaken from my slumber—the day the world, and my heart, broke open—was September 11, 2001. I realize this is probably true for thousands of people, but that doesn't make it less true for me.

On that fateful autumn day I was headed to Manhattan with my wife and one-year-old daughter to work with my friend and pastor, Samir Selmanovic, on a conference we were calling *Loving Babylon*. We left our home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania quite early that morning and were driving along the New Jersey turnpike when Samir called and said that a plane had hit one of the buildings in lower Manhattan. He suggested taking the George Washington Bridge rather than one of the tunnels since traffic around Battery Park would be terrible. We naturally had no idea at that point that the plane was an enormous passenger jet loaded with beautiful people. Within minutes Samir called back, audibly shaken, saying another plane—both now confirmed to be commercial airliners—had hit the World Trade Center. I needed to turn around and head home immediately, he said. We did just that, narrowly avoiding the gridlocked traffic that resulted from the island being shut down completely.

Learning to Love the World

The *Loving Babylon* conference took place just under a year later, in August of 2002. We welcomed dozens of courageous urban explorers to the Big Apple and invited them to see the city with new eyes—to love the city in a new way.

That event was way over my head. We were inviting people to engage with things that were way beyond my expertise. Samir and his members had much more experience living in New York City, but for me, I was running the event on faith. It was like inviting your friends over for dinner and then cooking a meal you've never made before (which, come to think of it, I do all the time!).

Together, we pressed into our fears. And we pressed others—those 75 brave souls who journeyed to Manhattan for three days—we pressed them into their fears too. That event remains one of my favorite things I've done in my ministry. It was the new world that broke open on 9/11, and it was my involvement in planning and running the *Loving Babylon* conference that helped me “stop worrying and love the world.”

It was in the months following the horrible 9/11 atrocity that I discovered the Middle East and Muslims. I came face to face with Americanism, which had been disguised as Christianity. It was in that season that I learned to pray for my enemies. It was also when I discovered my church had an American flag in the sanctuary—which was the only bit of symbolism in the entire worship space. In that sea-



**"Branches", pastel, 30" x 40"
by Heather Langley**

son I learned about idolatry as I attempted to move that flag into the foyer of our church.

Those were intense months, and they changed me. My wife and I had also just had our first baby. Zoë was 11 months old when the planes hit the buildings. Think of the world she is growing up in! She never knew a pre-9/11 world. It was in those early days after 9/11 that I knew we would not send our children to parochial schools. I wanted them to learn to love the world and we felt they could do that best in public school, where they would be exposed more completely to the diversity of people.

As a result of these life events, I've used the last eight years to become intensely involved in creating interfaith relationships with a focus on loving and caring for our world. I now teach a course in Intercultural Communication to undergraduates at Asuza Pacific University. We spend several days talking about race and white privilege, and I watch as my students wrestle with the same issues I struggled through over a decade ago. They are so far ahead of me. I was a year out of graduate school and nearly thirty years old when I learned these lessons. I now find myself in a position where I am able to work at this full time, helping groups of people get out of their own way, stop worrying, and love the world.

The Challenge of Religious Identity

I have a visceral reaction these days whenever anyone brings up questions of religious identity, especially Christians. I want to say three words and change the subject: Get over it. It's a brave new world out there. Christians find themselves blinking in the bright light of pluralism, awakening to the harsh truth that we must share power. It's not easy, but we can and must learn to do it.

The challenges to our involvement in interfaith relationships as it relates to our Christian identity are primarily inside our heads. As such, the work at hand is to get out of our heads. As a hardcore "over-thinker," I understand the difficulty. There are real fears about

what it means to step outside of our comfort zones and into another person's world. I want to name these fears as I've encountered them. There are also fantasies. Once we get past some of our fears it is easy to romanticize about interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

Fears

Fear #1: *The religious other is dangerous.* The fear of Muslims, or Islamophobia, has become grist for the right-wing paranoia mill. Sadly, Christians are caught in this. The reality is that there is an industry of Islamaphobia in America, as a recent Center for American Progress Report reveals.¹ In some ways, Muslims are the new Communists, a point the recent comedy documentary *The Muslims Are Coming* makes in a humorous way.²

The reality is that there are extremists in every religion. I actually call them minimalists. The vast majority of Muslims are not violent. For those that are, religion is just a front, just as a minority of Christians are violent and we would not claim their version of Christianity as our own. The reality is that there are secular and nationalist extremists just as there are religious extremists.

There are plenty of things to be afraid of in our world. The question is whether we are going to run and hide from that fear, escalate the fear by playing into it, or whether we will defuse the fear by choosing love and grace. After all, somewhere it is said that "perfect love casts out fear."

Fear #2: *Interfaith relationships distract us from the main thing we're called to do, such as proclaiming the gospel, the three angels' messages, etc.* The reality, however, is that God has been universalizing the message of redemption from the beginning of salvation history.

From the story of the Tower of Babel, in which God creates diversity as a means to his good purposes; to the call of Abram, in which God tells him that he is specially blessed, but blessed instrumentally, to be a blessing to the nations; to the prophets, who kept insisting

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that the blessings Israel had received were not exclusively for themselves; to Jesus, who, to the consternation of the religious elite, consistently welcomed and blessed Gentiles, Centurions, lepers, women and other outcasts—the scripture is a story of God universalizing the scope of God's salvation to include all peoples.

Take for example this brief but poignant oracle found in Isaiah 49:5–6:

*And now the Lord says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord
and my God has been my strength—
he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."*

Notice the Lord says it is "too small a thing" for God's people to simply gather up the tribes of Jacob that have been scattered. That is important, but it is not enough. It is not enough to bring back those of Israel who have been taken into exile and to restore the fortunes of Jerusalem. These are important promises and God will do these things, but God has much bigger plans. And so God, through the prophet Isaiah, says, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Our narrow, parochial concerns that consume so much of our attention are, says the Lord, too small, too shortsighted. We want a proprietary message, complete with intellectual property rights. But this is too small a thing to be worthy of our God. It's not that we have a completely faulty vision. It's just near-sighted, whereas God's dream for creation is vast and inclusive, unlimited by the bounds of our religious tribes and narrow denominationalism.

The ultimate example of this kind of proprietary attitude is found in Jonah. His biggest

fear is that God would extend his mercy and grace beyond the chosen community and be merciful to those damn Assyrians in Nineveh. This is exactly what God does, and instead of being in awe of God's generosity, Jonah wants to die.

Fear #3: *We'll lose our identity.* Some feel that openness to interfaith relationships necessarily comes at the expense of our own identities. Indeed, I have at times worried that opening my life to the religious other must make me less committed to my own beliefs. That fear is sometimes articulated as if other people's religion is like a contagious, airborne disease; that we will somehow catch it just by being in the same space with someone.

I'll never forget the first time I prayed with my Muslim brothers at the mosque near my house. I experienced that familiar fear rise up in me. It was an inarticulate fear, but if I were forced to articulate it, it would have sounded something like an argument with myself. It went something like this:

What if this is wrong?

What could be so wrong about praying?

Well, maybe they're praying to a different God.

But they're not.

I know, but still, it's different, right? Maybe I'll express that I believe things I really don't believe.

You've never done that before?

Like what?

Oh, I dunno, like, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America."

I see your point.

So what's the worst that could happen?

I stand when I'm supposed to kneel?

Right.

We are understandably afraid that we will lose our identity if we spend time deeply engaging with people of other religions, but *the irony is that we will lose our identity if we don't.* Without interfaith relationships we run the risk of being hopelessly self-referential, choosing only to talk about

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things that are of interest to us without noticing that people today aren't asking the same questions we are. If we do not get outside our safe, secure religious bubble, we can easily lose the very identity we are so concerned to preserve.

Reclaiming Our Religious Identity

It is also true that we will have our identity shaped by relationships with the religious other. It is not true that our identity will be *lost*, but neither is it true that we will escape with our old identity intact. We will be changed in the most important ways.

I was recently searching for something I had written a while ago on the internet, and so I Googled my name with some other search parameters. Instead of the article I was looking for, I found a blog that was talking about me. Unable to resist, I went to the site and started reading the blog comments.

There are three kinds of comments on blogs. The first kind is congratulatory and fun to read. There were none of these. The second kind is intelligently critical. Those are the hardest to read because they reveal blind spots in your arguments and ideas and force you to reconsider things. I couldn't find any of these, either. The third kind is so irrationally critical that it doesn't bother me much. In fact, those comments are sometimes amusing. This comment was one of those.

The person said something like, "What do you expect when he went to non-Adventist universities? He clearly didn't go there to witness to them. He accepted all their ideas." First of all, I would never blame my predicament on Fuller Theological Seminary (hardly a bastion of liberal theology, by the way). Secondly, and more importantly, the comment assumes what I find so often in the church: *we are here to teach others. There is nothing for us to learn.* This ideology is espoused in the Adventist church from the most humble Sabbath school to the Office of the General Conference President.

My main claim is this: interfaith relationships threaten our identity in the ways it needs

to be threatened, and strengthens our identity in the strong but compassionate way that Brian McLaren writes about in his book, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*.⁴

Engaging only with people of one's own religious tribe is the equivalent of religious incest. Without that diversity, the DNA of our religious life is corrupted and our faith is malformed. Interfaith relationships have the potential to save us from ourselves. We have gifts to offer people of other faiths, but only if we are willing to receive the gifts others have to offer, and be changed by that encounter.

If we are unwilling to be changed, we will still lose our identity. Remember the teaching of Jesus?

*Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.*⁵

Fantasies

Once I got over some of these fears, I found it was easy to romanticize about interfaith relationships, too. I believe three fantasies are common among those who have gotten past their fears and wish to engage with the religious other.

Fantasy #1: *We're all talking about the same thing anyway.* On the opposite end of the spectrum from the fear of losing our identity is the fantasy that all religions are basically the same; that we are all seeking the same thing in more or less similar ways. We just have different names for God and different ritual pathways to that same goal. The reality is that all religions are not the same, though there are some common elements. The great world religions are, in fact, attempting to answer different questions.

For a number of years I was a board member of the Interreligious Council of Southern California. We had remarkable conversations, not only about what we had in common—our commitment to compassion, the dignity of every person, and service—but also the things that were different about our faiths. Buddhists are pursuing nirvana—perfect happiness

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through the death of our desires. Christians are seeking salvation from a world of pain and brokenness. Judaism is committed to *tikkun olam*—healing the world. The focus of Islam—indeed, the meaning of the word—is submission to God. We can see each of these themes present in most religions, but the emphasis and end goals are often different.

The Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, describes the irreducible otherness that exists between every person. He points out how we do violence to one another when we try to collapse that distance. When I try to make you into me (usually to reduce the anxiety caused by genuine difference and make myself feel better) I am not affirming the humanity of the other person, but in fact denying it.

Authentic interfaith relationships do not attempt to minimize these differences by saying, “Aren’t we all basically the same, anyway?” Which brings me to the second fantasy I had to overcome.

Fantasy #2: *We’ll all get along.* The reality is that we will not always get along. The differences between us often cause intense debates and conflicts.

The motivation within some interfaith circles to claim that we’re basically the same and the fantasy that we will easily “get along” is almost always well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided. It usually flows from the dominant religion to those in the minority and comes across as one more effort at colonization. For a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim to hear, in predominantly Christian America, that we’re basically all the same is to hear, “Why can’t you just be more Christian so I will feel better about your otherness?”

The mostly unintended consequence of forcing a desire to “get along” is that we end up with only surface-level relationships and conversations—what Eboo Patel calls “inter-faithing”—or worse, we do real violence to the important differences between our religions.

I will never forget the conversation we had

in the Abrahamic Faiths Peacemaking Initiative group here in Los Angeles in January 2010, in the midst of Operation Cast Lead. Israel was aggressively shelling the Gaza Strip from land and air in response to the rocket attacks from Gaza. I had just returned from visiting Israel for the first time just weeks before the fighting escalated into a full-scale war—albeit a very one-sided war. Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders met in Los Angeles to discuss what, if anything, we might say to the public about this violence. The best we could do is to say with one voice, “Violence is not the answer.” Beyond that, we could not agree. The Muslims in the room were outraged at the imbalance of power on display and the inhumane aggression being carried out upon the citizens of Gaza, to say nothing of the daily conditions resulting from the blockade of the Gaza Strip. The Jews present, though they decried the war, emphasized the legitimate security needs of Israelis. I sat quietly hoping no one would ask me my opinion.

Fantasy #3: *It will be easy.* This fantasy is closely related to the second. The reality is that interfaith relationships can be fun, but they aren’t always easy. They stretch you out of your comfort zone.

A couple of years ago, a few of us from the Abrahamic Faiths Peacemaking Initiative conducted a fishbowl conversation for the students at Pepperdine University. There were two Jews, two Muslims and I was one of two Christians. It sounds like the beginning of a joke but we were not joking. We were modeling for the one hundred or so students that gathered what real interfaith relationships look and sound like. I had my doubts about how authentic this conversation could be, sitting in front of a hundred students.

After introducing ourselves and declaring our undying friendship, we launched into a conversation about the tension in the Middle East. We talked about the wall that separates Israel from the West Bank. We talked about bombings and

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the prospect of peace. We talked about human rights violations and the overreach of the military. It was intense. The other Christian pastor Paige and I sat in the middle of the half circle of interlocutors turning our heads back and forth like we were watching a tennis match. Finally, our moderator Joshua said something like, “The Christians have been pretty quiet. What do you have to say?”

Paige started. “I feel stuck,” she said. “My church members want to speak out about the injustice being done to the Palestinians. But we have dear friends in the Jewish community for whom that is a conversation stopper. We don’t know what to do.” I don’t remember what I said but I think I probably mumbled my agreement with Paige and expressed my frustration that we couldn’t more frequently drop the heated rhetoric and hear each other more deeply.

When we really get into these conversations they are very difficult. In my experience the glue has been the friendships we have cultivated over the years. We really like each other. More than that, we trust each other. We are able to hear the other person say things we disagree with because behind that disagreement is a human being we love and respect.

This, it seems to me, is the only way forward. It is not easy. Sometimes it’s not even fun. But our love for the world and our respect for each other compel us to stay in the conversation.

Mutually Transformative Experiences

Over the years I discovered that my ministry was too small—that it was too small a thing for me to concern myself with helping my church members be good Seventh-day Adventists. We had to help each other become good Christians and good human beings in a pluralistic and sometimes dangerous world. How could we, like Daniel in Babylon, train ourselves to be faithful to our story under the pressure of pluralism?

Can we be Christians even when the empire is no longer propping up our faith for us? Can we hold to our principles and not sur-

render to our basest fears under the staggering pressure of, say, a terrorist attack?

This is why we need interfaith relationships. These mutually transformative relationships and experiences help us to stop focusing so exclusively on our own, sometimes petty concerns, and take a wider look at the world that God loves and longs to see healed.

The religious other can save us from the paralyzing worry about our own identity. Interfaith relationships help us broaden our horizons. They help us learn to hold difference in tension while deepening our understanding.

Interfaith relationships aren’t a panacea. They won’t fix everything—we need the steady pattern of other formative experiences as well. Yet honestly, if I were to name two of the most important Christian practices, I would say that loving our “enemies” and giving and receiving hospitality to and from strangers rank at the top of the list. Interfaith relationships give us the opportunity to do both. ■

Ryan Bell lives with his family in Hollywood, California, where



he is the pastor of the Hollywood Adventist Church. The church is home to a growing community of fine artists, photographers, filmmakers, musicians, actors, graphic designers, interior designers, writers and architects. Together they are finding God in some unexpected places.

References

1. Wajahat, Ali, Eli Clifton, Matthew Duss, Lee Fang, Scott Keyes, and Faiz Shakir, “Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America,” *Center for American Progress* (August 2011), accessed November 6, 2013 <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/report/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/>.
2. See <http://themuslimsarecoming.com>.
3. See 1 John 4:18.
4. See McLaren, Brian D., *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2012).
5. See Matthew 16:25 (NIV).