

SHARING WISDOM

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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We live in an age of great conflicts and petty hopes.

Take first our hopes. In the book *The Real American Dream*, Andrew Delbanco traced the history of the scope of American dreams—from the “holy God” of the Puritan founders, to the “great nation” of the nineteenth-century patriots, to the “satisfied self” of many today.¹ With some modifications, America may be in this regard indicative of trends in most societies that are highly integrated into the global market system. The idea of flourishing as a human being has shriveled to meaning no more than leading an experientially satisfying life. The sources of satisfaction may vary: power, possessions, love, religion, sex, food, drugs—whatever. What matters the most is not the *source* of satisfaction but the *experience* of it—*my* satisfaction. Our satisfied self is our best hope, and it is not petty. But a dark shadow of disappointment stubbornly follows this obsession with personal satisfaction. We are meant to live for something larger than our own satisfied selves. Petty hopes generate self-subverting, melancholy experiences.

Second, our world is caught in great conflicts (as well as in many small, even petty ones). Mostly these conflicts are fought along religious lines. Christians and Muslims are clashing; so are Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Christians, Buddhists and Muslims, and so on. Though for the most part religions per se are not the causes of these conflicts, often religions legitimize and fuel them by enveloping mundane causes—often our petty hopes—with an aura of the sacred.

Question 1:

How can our religions guide us beyond being self absorbed, and at the same time, foster a culture of peace?

Most religions see as one of their main goals the opening up of self-absorbed individuals to connect them with a broader community and, indeed, with the source and goal of all reality. Similarly, most religions claim to contain important, even indispensable resources for fostering a culture of peace. But these two functions of religions are sometimes at odds with one another. When religions connect people with the divine, bring people together, and offer them a hope larger than mere self-fulfillment, communities with differing religious beliefs sometimes clash. When religions try to avoid legitimizing and fueling clashes between people, they often retreat into some private sphere and at times even reinforce people's self-absorption.

Here is a central challenge for all religions in a pluralistic world: Help people grow out of their petty hopes so as to live meaningful lives, and help them resolve their grand conflicts and live in communion with others, and do both at the same time. That's where the importance of learning to share religious wisdom well comes in. If we as religious people fail to share wisdom well, we will fail both our many contemporaries who strive to live satisfied lives and yet remain deeply dissatisfied, and we will fail those who draw on their religious traditions to give meaning to their lives and yet remain mired in intractable and often deadly conflicts.

But how do we share religious wisdom well? As a Christian, I will address this question from a Christian perspective. But first let me say something about what, from that same perspective, wisdom is—and why share it.²

What is Wisdom?

Christians have traditionally understood their faith as an integrated way of life. Correspondingly, Christian wisdom in one sense is that faith itself—an overarching interpretation of reality, a set of convictions, attitudes, and practices that direct people in living their lives well. Here “living well” means living as God created human beings to live, rather than living against the grain of their own true reality as well as the reality of the world. Wisdom in this sense is an integrated *way of life* that enables the flourishing of persons, communities, and all creation. Human beings are wise if they walk in that way.

Christians have also understood wisdom as something far more particular than a whole way of life, namely, as concrete *pieces of advice* about to *how* to flourish. When we read in the Proverbs, “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding but only in expressing personal opinion” (18:2), when Jesus says, “Give and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38), when the Apostle Paul says, “Do not worry about anything” (Philippians 4:6), or when we read in the letter to the Ephesians, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32), we are presented with wise advice, with what one may call “nuggets” of wisdom. Properly understood, these nuggets are components of wisdom as a way of life. Human beings are wise in this sense if they follow wise advice.

There is yet a third and most basic way in which Christians understand wisdom—surprisingly, perhaps, wisdom as a *person*. In the book of Proverbs wisdom is personified. She is the very beginning of God’s creation, and she calls out to humans to listen to her and to flourish by obeying her (Proverbs 8). Christians have taken this “Lady Wisdom” to be the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ (John 1:1–14). The Apostle Paul also writes that Jesus Christ “has become for us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30). Here human beings are wise if they follow Christ and, even more fundamentally, if they allow that personified Wisdom dwell in them, conform them to itself, and act through them.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

John 1:1–5

Note: This immensely influential New Testament text contains echoes of both Jewish Wisdom tradition (Proverbs) and Greek philosophical tradition (Logos). It has been taken to underscore that “all truth is God’s truth.” Everything true, good, and beautiful found outside the bounds of the Christian tradition ought to be honored because it owes its origin not only to the one God but also to God’s Word, which dwelt among human beings in Jesus Christ.

In all three senses just described, wisdom in the Christian sense is not a matter of personal taste or preference (“This strikes me as wise—for the time being!”), as “wisdom” often is for many people in dynamic, late-industrial societies. Neither is wisdom a marker of a group identity, a kind of beneficent custom (“This is wisdom for us, though not necessarily for you”), as it might be for some more “ethnic” religions or cultures. For Christians, wisdom is truth that concerns all people—and concerns them in the deepest way. To reject wisdom as a way of life, or Christ as the embodiment of wisdom, is not like leaving the dessert untouched after a good meal; rather, it is like refusing the very nourishment without which human beings cannot truly flourish. This claim is controversial, of course. But the aspect of it that a Muslim, for instance, might call into question is not the assertion that the wisdom of a particular religion is deemed indispensable, but that this claim applies to the Christian faith rather than to Islam. Controversial though it is, the claim is for most Christians necessary. Jewish monotheism introduced the idea of truth into the world of Western religions.³ Christianity inherited that idea and radicalized it: The wisdom of faith is inextricably bound to the universal truth of faith.

For the sake of conciseness, when I explore on the following pages why and how to share wisdom I will usually simply lump these three senses of “wisdom” together. The disadvantage of doing so is obvious: when it comes to why and how to share wisdom, the differences among these three senses of wisdom matter a great deal. The reasons and manner of sharing wisdom understood as nuggets of advice, as a way of life, and as a Person only partly overlap. So I will point occasionally to differences in sharing wisdom in these three distinct senses, but I will have to leave it to my audience to fill in many blanks.

Why Share Wisdom?

Before I get to specifically Christian reasons for sharing wisdom, let me suggest in general terms two conditions under which sharing wisdom makes sense.

Conditions for Sharing Wisdom

First, as a *single humanity* we live in *one world*. Though there have always *been* only one humanity and one world, the processes of globalization, which have intensified during the last fifty years or so, have “shrunk” the world and made it possible concretely to *experience* (at least indirectly) humanity and the world as one. In this “shrunk” world we share religious wisdom just as we exchange millions of other things, from consumer goods to infectious diseases. One might even say that this planet-wide sharing of wisdom is part of the human condition in today’s world.

From Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa:

“Since truth is one and since it cannot fail to be grasped by every free intellect, all the diverse religions will be led unto one orthodox faith.” (De pace fidei, 8)

“Word: ‘Accordingly, all of you, although you are said to be of different religions, presuppose, in all such diversity, one thing that you call Wisdom.’” (De pace fidei, 12)

Second, our single humanity is nevertheless internally *differentiated*—it is made up of diverse people belonging to diverse cultures and embracing diverse religions. It makes sense to share wisdom across religious boundaries because we are culturally and religiously different. If “the light” of all major religions were the very same light, with only the lamps from which it shines being different, then sharing religious wisdom across religious divides would make sense only weakly; it would serve as a reminder of what all religious people already know but have somehow forgotten. And yet, though diversity is an important condition for sharing wisdom, that diversity cannot be complete difference, total “otherness.” If we were radically different from each other—if some of us were truly from Mars and others from Venus—we wouldn’t know what to do with each other’s wisdom when it was offered, or shared. We may not even recognize it *as* wisdom.

We can put the importance of both difference and sameness this way: If we were radically different, we wouldn’t have “hands” to receive the wisdom shared by others; conversely, if we were completely alike we wouldn’t have anything valuable to share. It is because we are both alike *and* different that it makes sense to share wisdom across religious dividing lines.

Reasons for Sharing Wisdom

Under these general conditions for sharing wisdom—humans being sharers, and their religions being sufficiently different so that each can benefit from sharing—Christians have specifically religious reasons for doing so.

First, they have an *obligation* to share wisdom. After his death and resurrection Jesus Christ said to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21)—with a mission to announce the Good News, and more broadly to share God’s wisdom with the world. Christians share wisdom because Jesus Christ commanded them to do so.

Second, the obligation to share wisdom is an expression of *love* for neighbors. Just as the Father’s sending of Jesus was rooted in God’s love for the world (John 3:16), so also is the Christian’s mission rooted in love for fellow

human beings. Christians share wisdom to help needy people find meaning in life, resolve conflicts in which they are deeply mired, get motivated to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and in general because they desire to prevent others from languishing or even perishing as a result of living “out of sync” with the way in which God created them to live.

Ultimately, however, Christians don’t share wisdom merely out of obedience to a command, and not even simply out of love for neighbors. In reality they share it—or at least should share it—primarily because the Wisdom dwelling in them *seeks to impart itself* through them to others. As the Apostle Paul puts it, the “love of Christ” urges them on.

Question 2:

Do all our traditions allow us to think of wisdom as the primary reality and of humans as its abode and instrument?

The Character of Faith

These religious motivations to share wisdom *fit the character of the Christian faith* as religion. Put rather generally, along with some other major world religions Christianity is a monotheistic faith of a prophetic type. Take first the significance of *monotheism* for sharing wisdom. When it comes to God’s relation to the world, there is a strict correlation between the divine “One” and the mundane “whole.” Since God is One, God is the God of reality as a whole. The wisdom of the one God is the wisdom for the whole of humanity, not just a segment of it. It should, therefore, be shared with all.

The thrust toward sharing generated by monotheism is reinforced by the prophetic character of the Christian faith. Religions of the prophetic type are structured by two basic movements: ascent to the realm of the divine (encounter with God, deep study of scriptures, and the like), and return with a

message for the world—a twofold movement illustrated well by the account in the Gospels according to which Jesus began his public ministry by fasting in the wilderness (or, to use an example from another major prophetic religion, by the story about how, after ascending to the highest heavens into the very presence of God, the Prophet Muhammad returned to continue his world-transforming mission⁴). In the ascent, religious persons acquire wisdom and are transformed; in the return, they share wisdom with fellow human beings in order to transform the world. The ascent doesn't happen simply so that the believer will benefit from the encounter with God (as in mystical religions); it happens for the purpose of the return, so that the world will be mended and brought into greater conformity with God's designs for it.

Question 3:

*Do our religions share wisdom differently?
To what extent does the typology of
prophetic / mystical help us appreciate the
differences between our religions?*

On Refraining from Sharing Wisdom

Christians have powerful reasons to share religious wisdom with others. And on the whole, throughout history they haven't shied from doing so (though in some periods their cross-cultural missionary impulse has been subdued, as in the case of Protestants from their inception in 1517 to about 1794, when William Carey started the modern Protestant missionary movement⁵). Yet there are situations in which it may be unwise to share religious wisdom. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ famously and harshly warned: "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you" (Matthew 7:6). These severe words are a reminder that relations between religions are sometimes very tense, even violent. In such circumstances—for example, of religious persecution, which has been historically and geographically widespread and in

certain places continues unabated today—attempts at sharing wisdom may elicit both angry incomprehension and further violence. Sometimes wisdom dictates not sharing it.

*Question 4:
when is it wise not to share wisdom?*

How Should One Share Wisdom?

When done well, sharing wisdom can be likened to the giving and receiving of gifts. Before we go into the specifics of how to give and receive wisdom and how not to do so, note one important feature of sharing wisdom: It is more like playing a musical piece for a friend than treating her to a meal. When I give food to a friend, what she eats I no longer have; in contrast, when I play music for her, she receives something that I continue to possess. When I share wisdom, I don't part with what I give; to the contrary, I may come to "possess" it in an even deeper way.

What does it mean to share wisdom well? How does one share it responsibly? I will explore these questions by examining how we should act both as givers and receivers of wisdom.

The Self as Giver

From the very inception of the church, Christians witnessed publicly about their faith. The church was born on the day of Pentecost, and on that occasion the disciples of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ spoke about him in many languages to people from many parts of the world. They actively shared the wisdom of their faith—its nuggets, its whole way of life, and the Wisdom incarnate.

For Christians, giving *witness* is a key way of sharing wisdom. But what does it mean to witness well? First, a witness is *not a tyrant* who imposes. True, throughout a long history Christians have sometimes sought to impose their faith by the sword, by the power of rhetorical manipulation, or with inducements of material gain. Yet imposition stands starkly at odds with the basic character of the Christian faith, which is at its heart about self-giving—God’s self-giving and human self-giving—and not about self-imposing. Karl Barth, great Protestant theologian of the past century, put it correctly: In relation to non-Christians (and to fellow Christians!), followers of Christ are in the position of John the Baptist as depicted in the famous painting of Matthias Grunewald, namely, at the foot of the cross with an outstretched hand simply pointing to the crucified Christ. Far from imposing the wisdom of faith, they don’t even offer it as something they themselves give—properly, they merely to point to the Wisdom. That Wisdom offers itself; some will partake, and others refuse.

Second, a witness is not a *merchant* who sells. Deeply enmeshed as we moderns are in economic exchanges, we live in cultures pervaded by the activity of buying and selling. Often we treat religions and their wisdom as commodities to be bought and sold. But though there are good reasons to remunerate priests, pastors, and other religious leaders, neither they nor unpaid lay people are not sellers of wisdom—certainly they are no more sellers of wisdom than good teachers are of knowledge or good doctors of cures. Wisdom is betrayed when it is sold and bought. Sellers are tempted to seduce buyers into making a purchase by tailoring the merchandise to fit the desires of buyer; the act of selling often distorts wisdom and leaves buyers with a festering suspicion that the seller has taken advantage of them. Buyers, on the other hand, pick and choose, and purchase as much or as little as they see fit. When bought and sold, wisdom doesn’t shape people’s lives but at best merely satisfies already existing desires—none of which the wisdom itself has crafted, and to all of which wisdom is subservient. Treated as a commodity, wisdom deteriorates into a technique of helping people live the way they please, even when the way they please to live is thoroughly unwise.

Question 5:

Is religious wisdom unduly commercialized today? Is this a problem in your tradition and how do you handle it?

In the Christian tradition at its best, wisdom is given freely. The prophet Isaiah writes, "Ho, everyone who thirsts come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1). Jesus echoed these words when he said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Christian wisdom is fundamentally about what God gives free of charge and must therefore be imparted free of charge.⁶ A good witness will resist the "commodification" of wisdom.

Third, as witnesses Christians are not *mere teachers* who instruct. A teacher can learn something that remains very much external to her own life and then pass it on as useful information to others (say in the way a math professor may teach trigonometry). Christians, in contrast, should witness as those who not only speak about Christ with their words but also imitate him in their behavior and entrust themselves to his care in their living and dying. When they witness, then, they are offering a way of life in which they themselves participate. Consequently, the more "indwelled" by Wisdom they are, the better sharers of wisdom they will be.

Fourth, a witness is not a mere *midwife*. The great Greek teacher of wisdom Socrates saw himself in the role of a midwife. His task was to help birth the wisdom with which every person was already pregnant. Not unlike Buddha in his view of enlightenment, Socrates saw himself as incidental to the process of acquiring wisdom. If a person is sufficiently self-aware, she can find her own way to wisdom, for wisdom resides within her. Not so with Christ, and not so with a witness to Christ. Christ does not help a person find the wisdom hidden in her own soul; Christ *is* the wisdom.⁷ Consequently a follower of Christ is a

witness to Christ, whose purpose is to direct the attention of a person away from herself to Christ, to the life, death, and resurrection of the Word incarnate, who lived in a specific time and place. Socrates helps a person discover something inside herself; in contrast, a witness to Christ tells a person about something that has occurred outside herself, something about which she must be told.⁸ So a witness points not only away from himself but also away from the person to whom he is giving witness; he points to Christ and the wisdom he embodied.

The Other as Receiver

Good givers will respect the integrity of receivers. There are limits to what others may be willing or able to receive, and givers should honor these limits. Christians should share wisdom in the way that the first letter of St. Peter instructs them to give an account of their hope—"with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15–16).

It is relatively easy to honor others' limits when it comes to sharing nuggets of wisdom. The receivers can integrate these bits of wise advice into their own overarching interpretations of life without much disruption. Often, though, what is received takes on a different flavor from what is given. Chicken in Tai food tastes different from the way it tastes in a mustard and mayonnaise sandwich. A nugget of wisdom in one "dish" of religion will taste different when served with a different set of ingredients. More prosaically put, receivers will often gratefully receive what is offered but tweak it to fit into their overarching interpretation of life.

Granting the right of others to receive what they want and do with it as they please is part of the respect that givers afford to recipients. There is some reason for concern, however, about sharing one's nuggets of wisdom in the fast-paced, media-saturated, salad-bar culture in which many of us live. First, givers themselves often dilute their wisdom to make it palatable to as many buyers as possible. Second, receivers often do not insert newly acquired nuggets of wisdom into an overarching interpretation of life. The nuggets

remain free-floating bits of advice that are used when convenient and discarded when not. This selective employment of wisdom-out-of-context then contributes to making an unwise way of life more acceptable—certainly not the goal of sharing wisdom!

Question 6:

Has your tradition gained or lost by having aspects (“nuggets”) of its wisdom taken up by others?

Things get more complicated when it comes to sharing wisdom as a way of life. The most significant limits to what others are able to receive are set by their fear of losing their identity. For if they take too much from the “outside,” their reception of wisdom may feel like an unwelcome undoing of their very selves. To receive Christ as Wisdom or to receive faith as an overarching interpretation of life may seem profoundly alienating to the would-be taker. But it goes without saying in a paper on sharing wisdom written from a Christian perspective that embracing a Christian way of life *can be*, and *mostly is*, experienced as an inner *coming to rest* of the restless soul.

The Christian tradition has always accounted for the real possibility that others may see the highest wisdom to which it points as mere foolishness. A way of life in which self-giving is praised and the exercise of power over others suspected appears to some as folly, not wisdom.⁹

“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”

1 Corinthians 1:22–25

Note: This text gives testimony to a keen awareness in the early Church that what the Christian tradition considers the very pinnacle of wisdom—Christ, and in particular Christ’s death on the cross as both the expression of God’s love for the ungodly and the inspiration for human beings to love and forgive their enemies—sometimes looks to non-Christians like the epitome of foolishness. The perception of something as wise is dependent on many factors—personal, communal, cultural, etc.

So also does the idea that Jesus Christ saves through his death on the cross. Wisdom may not appear wise at first. For people to recognize it *as* wisdom, they must have some affinity with it—they must have eyes to see and ears to hear, as the prophet Ezekiel put it (Ezekiel 12:1–2).¹⁰ That’s why some important strands in the Christian tradition suggest that people can receive Wisdom only when God’s Spirit creates in them the right conditions for its reception.

Notice that in two crucial regards—at the point of giving and at the point of receiving—it is not Christians themselves who do the most important work in sharing wisdom. Ultimately they cannot give it; for Christ must give wisdom. And ultimately they cannot force others to receive wisdom; God’s Spirit must open people’s eyes to see it. When Christians are at their very best in sharing wisdom, they are channels through which God imparts wisdom. The book of Acts expresses this basic idea clearly when reporting the first conversions to the

way of Christ: it wasn't the Apostles who converted people through their preaching—it was *God* who added people to the church (Acts 2:47).

The Self as Receiver

As we share the wisdom of our religious traditions, it is good to keep in mind that the person to whom we offer wisdom is also a giver, not just a passive receiver. As givers, we respect receivers by seeing ourselves as a potential receivers, too. Yet many religious people have found it difficult to think of themselves as receiving anything of substance from other religions, for they are already embracing what they likely believe is a—even *the*—true and salutary way of life. That perspective is certainly true of many Christians. Doesn't John's Gospel say that Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6)? Doesn't the Letter to the Colossians state that in Christ are "hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3)? How, then, can Christians receive any significant wisdom from others?

Question 7:

How has your tradition, during the course of history, made the wisdom of other traditions its own?

But notice what this question is in fact suggesting, namely, that something might not be possible that has indisputably taken place! It isn't at all difficult to demonstrate that Christians have received wisdom from others in the past and that they continue to do so. Let me give only two examples from the distant past. The first consists in Christianity's appropriation of the spiritual treasures of Judaism. With some minor modifications, for instance, the Christian Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible, made up of texts that by themselves comprised the sacred scriptures of the early Christians. Second, Christianity's early encounter with Greek language and culture meant inevitably (though for

the most part unintentionally) its receiving of Greek wisdom. A rich vocabulary of faith comes to the theology and everyday liturgical life of Christians from the Greek philosophical tradition (even if major philosophical terms have been partly transformed when appropriated). Indeed, more broadly than in Christianity's encounter with ancient Greek culture, the Christian faith has received wisdom every time the gospel has been translated into another language and taken root in a different cultural environment.

So how can Christians, who believe that all wisdom resides in and emanates from Jesus Christ, receive the wisdom of others? The answer, though not entirely obvious to all, is simple even if it is not easy to see all its implications clearly. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word—Wisdom!—through whom “all things came into being” and who is “the light of all people,” as one of the most influential texts of the New Testament, the Prologue to the Gospel of John, puts it (John 1:3–4). Echoing the text of John's Gospel, early church father Justin Martyr described the wisdom of Greek philosophers as “parts of the Word” and “seeds of truth.”¹¹ All light, wherever encountered, is Christ's light; all wisdom, whoever speaks it, is Christ's wisdom. It cannot be otherwise if all things exist through Christ. Granted, that's a big “if.” Accept the condition, though, and the consequence follows ineluctably.

From Justin Martyr:

“There seem to be seeds of truth among all men [First Apology, 44].

We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists [First Apology, 46].

For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves.” (Second Apology, 10)

Note: The texts from Justin Martyr (100–165 AD) all come from his apologetic writings. He strives to show not only the reasonableness but also the

superiority of the Christian faith. In the process, he addresses in a way that has proven seminal for a good deal of Christian history the issue of how it is that there is significant truth in other religions and philosophies so that Christians can indeed learn something from them. His solution to the problem is to claim that Christ is the Word but that non-Christians possess the “seeds of truth” and “parts” of the Word. This approach presupposes that the Word, which is incarnate in Jesus Christ, can make itself known even where the Christian faith is not embraced or even proclaimed.

Question 8:

What are the strategies that allow you to recognize wisdom in the teaching of other religions?

But Christians already have Christ, one could object. Why accept anything from others, even if one grants that they possess “seeds” of Wisdom? First, there is a depth and breadth to Christ, the Wisdom, that remains always unplumbed by his followers. Put somewhat more abstractly, the object of faith—God, who dwells in inapproachable light—is never fully present in the consciousness and practice of the faithful, not just because they are creatures and God is the creator but because they are shaped by the particular situations in which they live. Second, along with others Christians live in a stream of time that throws at human beings ever-new challenges. Often they find themselves disoriented and uncertain as to how to bring the Wisdom of Christ to bear upon new situations. That’s where the phenomenon that another twentieth-century Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, comes in, namely, the phenomenon called “reverse prophetism”: Christians can receive from the outside a prophetic challenge to alter their convictions and practices so as to address more adequately the problems of the day with the resources of the Wisdom they embrace.

As the relationship between “the Word” and “parts of the Word” suggests, any wisdom that Christians receive from others must resonate with the scriptural narratives about Christ as interpreted by the great teachers of the church. Compatibility with these narratives is for Christians the criterion that determines what is wisdom and what is not, what may come in and what must stay out. Of course, it is possible to give up on these narratives—indeed, one may come to believe that it would be foolish *not* to give up on them. But a person who comes to this conclusion has abandoned the Christian faith either in favor of another way of life (say Jainism or the philosophy of Nietzsche) or in favor of relating to all ways of life in the manner in which she approaches a salad-bar—picking and choosing what suits her, and disregarding the rest.

Sharing Wisdom—Love and Forgiveness

One way to describe what I have suggested in the main body of this paper is to say that the sharing of wisdom should be an enactment of neighborly love.

When we share wisdom, we give and receive, and giving and receiving should be an exercise in love. Jesus Christ, the Wisdom, is the embodiment of God’s love for humanity, and he summed up both “the law and the prophets” and the “love command” when he issued the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). “Everything” encompasses the sharing of wisdom. For neighborly love to define how wisdom should be shared means that the act of sharing wisdom should harmonize with the content of what is shared.

As mentioned earlier, however, over the centuries Christians have sometimes shared wisdom in ways diametrically opposed to the requirements of the very wisdom they have inherited—manipulatively, forcibly, even murderously. Similarly, Christians themselves have suffered greatly from the imposition of others’ wisdom on them; according to some statistics, more Christians were persecuted and killed on account of their faith in the past one hundred years than in the entire prior history of the church.

When human beings are wronged, as in such relations between Christians and non-Christians, forgiveness and repentance are called for. That's what Christian wisdom teaches. The injunction to forgive may seem like just one "nugget" of Christian wisdom. It is that, but also much more. It is the defining stance of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom personified, and a central pillar of the Christian way of life.

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' For if you forgive me when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 6:9–15

Let me briefly note some key elements of forgiveness and relate them to wronging that happens when Christians and adherents of other religions share wisdom poorly. Forgiveness itself is like a gift. And just as a gift must be received in order truly to be given, so also does forgiveness. We receive forgiveness by repenting—by naming our objectionable deeds as wrongs, by grieving over the injury inflicted, and by determining to mend our ways. It is crucial for Christians to examine honestly the way they have shared their wisdom in the past, see themselves in the proper light—purify their memory, as the late Pope John Paul II put it¹²—and, where appropriate, admit to wrongs and correct their ways. Of course, non-Christians would do well to do the same. Still, in cases of mutual wronging, Christian conviction dictates that one's repentance does not depend on that of the other party, If I have wronged you, I need to repent regardless of whether or not you do.

Question 9:

How does your tradition balance the drive for forgiveness with the need for justice?

More radically, Christian wisdom teaches that forgiveness doesn't even depend on the repentance of the wrongdoer—a notion that may press the limits of what from the Christian tradition is shareable with other traditions. Human beings were reconciled to God in Christ apart from their repentance. "Christ died for the ungodly"—*all* ungodly—writes the Apostle Paul with stunning radicalness. (Romans 5:6). So also, the followers of Christ must forgive apart from wrongdoers' repentance. The gift of forgiveness should be given not as a reward for repentance but in the hope that the gift itself will help the wrongdoer receive it by repenting. Forgiving and sharing wisdom are similar in this one important regard: they are forms of gift giving. One acts first by giving a gift—and then waits to see whether or not the other will freely receive it.

Why forgiveness first, and then repentance? Because the goal of forgiveness is not simply to lighten the forgiver's psychological burden, not even simply to diffuse conflict, but above all to return the offender to the good.

From Martin Luther:

Those who follow Christ, "grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to the evil-doers, preparing to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved. This is the Gospel and the example of Christ." (Two Kinds of Righteousness", Luther's Works, 31, 306) 13

Note: As Christ "exchanged" his own righteousness for the sin of humanity, so the followers of Christ who have been wronged should take off their own righteousness and put on the unrighteousness of those who wronged them; they should "bear" their sin – bless them, pray for them, do good to them, forgive them, take on their sin. Why should Christians do so? In order to return wrongdoers to the good from which they have fallen. And one mark of Christians is that when they are wronged, they worry less about themselves and their own injury than about the wrongdoer and the injury that person is inflicting on himself. Forgiving offenders flows directly from loving one's neighbor. Both together, claims Luther, sum up the Gospel. The essence of the Gospel is that human beings are loved and forgiven by Christ, so they should love and forgive each other accordingly.

When Christians are wronged in the process of sharing wisdom—or more broadly, in any encounters with other people—they ought to forgive. To forgive is to do two things at once. First, it is to name a suffered wrong *as* wrong. To forgive isn't to deny or even overlook the wrongdoing, rather, to condemn it. No forgiveness without condemnation. But if condemnation is a necessary presupposition of forgiveness, the heart of forgiveness is something else. For to forgive is, second, not to let the wrongdoing count against the wrongdoer. He deserves punishment, but he gets the opposite. He gets grace.

Since forgiveness lies at the heart of Christian wisdom, as the above quotation from Martin Luther aptly expresses, for Christians to refuse to forgive is not just to fail to repair a short circuit in the sharing of wisdom—it is to contradict wisdom itself. To forgive *is* to share wisdom—perhaps even among the most efficacious ways of doing so.

Sharing Wisdom: Grand Conflicts, Petty Hopes

In conclusion, let me return to grand conflicts and petty hopes. How should we share wisdom so as not to reinforce religious conflicts but instead

help sustain and promote peace? We need to resist the temptation to “help” wisdom gain a footing in people’s lives by manipulating or forcing others to embrace wisdom. Similarly, we need to resist the lure of pridefully perceiving ourselves as only givers of wisdom, rather than always also its receivers—and receivers from both expected and unexpected sources. If we give in to these tendencies, we will add to religious conflicts rather than preparing the soil in which religious faith can help resolve them. From a Christian perspective, all our efforts at sharing wisdom should focus on allowing wisdom to shape our own lives and show itself in all its attractiveness, reasonableness, and usefulness. We need to trust that it will make itself embraceable by others if it is going to be embraced at all. In that way, as sharers of wisdom we honor both the power of wisdom and the integrity of its potential recipients.

How should we share wisdom so as not to feed petty hopes but instead help persons connect meaningfully with communities—small and large—and with the source and goal of the universe? We need to resist the temptation to “package” religious wisdom in attractive and digestible “nuggets” that a person can take up and insert into some doomed project of striving to live a merely experientially satisfying life. If we were to do so, wisdom would serve folly. From a Christian perspective, sharing religious wisdom makes sense only if that wisdom is allowed to counter the multiple manifestations of self-absorption by givers and receivers and to connect them with what ultimately matters—God, whom we should love with all our being, and neighbors, whom we should love as ourselves.

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Notes:

- ¹ Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream. A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- ² For a recent and compelling book on Christian wisdom see David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- ³ See Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung. Oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Muenchen: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003).
- ⁴ In contrast, the great Sufi mystic Abdul Quddus of Gangoh, a representative of mystical religion, said of Muhammad's ascent and return: "Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned" (see Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/MI_RRTI/chapter_05.htm). On the distinction between prophetic and mystical religions see Miroslav Volf, "God and Human Flourishing: Countering the Great Malfunctions of the Church," [forthcoming]).
- ⁵ See William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).
- ⁶ See Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge. Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006).
- ⁷ See Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, transl. David F. Swenson and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 11-45.
- ⁸ On "hearing" as fundamental to faith see Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 90-92.
- ⁹ For a literary exploration of this theme, see Paer Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* (trans. Alan Blair; New York: Vintage International, 1989).
- ¹⁰ On the ability of disciples to perceive Christ, see a critical comment by Friedrich Nietzsche that presupposes the same conviction about the need for affinity between what is encountered and what is received (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* [trans. R. J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin Books, 1068], #31).
- ¹¹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, no. 46.
- ¹² See John Paul II, "Jubilee Characteristic: The Purification of Memory," *Origins* 29 (2000), 649-650.
- ¹³ Martin Luther, *Luther Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 306.