

MISSION AS RECONCILIATION AMIDST RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM An Indonesian Christian Perspective¹

Paulus S. Widjaja

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

When I am thinking of Christian mission, I like to ponder about two questions, and I hope every Christian who is involved in mission also does the same thing as a sort of self-evaluation practice. First, where in the world are churches growing most quickly? Then, the second question, where in the world do most brutal and bloody civil wars take place? When the answer to both questions is the same, then we are in a very serious situation. There is something wrong with that picture. This is what the very well respected missionary John Stott repeatedly reminds us about: the danger of *growth without depth*, that is, the churches grow in quantity, but not in quality; in numbers, but not in faith maturity.

Such a situation happens, in my opinion, when Christian mission is understood in terms of reconciliation between God and human beings only. It does not include reconciliation between human beings, as individuals and as groups of people. In this case, Christian mission has to do simply and, quite often, only with the matter of forgiveness of sin and a highway to heaven, but not so much with the embrace of others, especially the different others. As such, Christian mission is entrapped in *verticalism*.

With that in mind, I want to propose that we include reconciliation between human beings as an integral part of Christian mission. And one such relationship that we need to seriously take into consideration in Christian mission nowadays is the relationship between people of different religions,² that is, how Christian mission can become a means of reconciliation between people of different religions; how Christian mission can bring redemption to the world torn apart by religion-inspired conflicts, rather than the conquest of it.

It is, however, not as easy as it sounds. One of the biggest challenges in interreligious relationship that has blocked any reconciliation process between people of different religions is *religious extremism*. We therefore need to understand the dynamics that have driven such extremism before we can even think about how to get ourselves reconciled with those people engaged in religious extremism. So my intention in this paper is to try to elaborate the problem we have to deal with in Christian mission related to religious extremism, while assuming that we will later, in this conference, discuss the appropriate and right response to that problem.

¹ Paper presented in the Mission Conference, Edinburgh 2010 Study Process for ASEAN countries plus Sri Lanka, under the theme *Mission as Reconciliation in the Pluralistic Contexts*, Kuala Lumpur – Malaysia, June 8-11, 2009.

² I intentionally use the term “religion” in order to distinguish it from “faith” or “spirituality.” While different faiths or spiritualities may not necessarily create tensions between people of different faiths/spiritualities, religion is something else. Religion is institutionalized faith/spirituality. As such it almost always creates tension between people of different religions; because when people speak about institution they will inevitably speak about who has the authority to determine which is the right interpretation of a sacred text. They speak about who can be in and who should be out, that is, about membership. They also speak about budget, fund raising, and so forth, that is, about money. All these tend to create tension between people of different religions.

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Before we talk specifically about religious extremism, it is worth noting what Erich Fromm has pointed out, that human aggression has its source in the condition of *alienation*, that is, the feeling of loneliness, exclusion, or rejection.³ This alienation, based on my observation of Indonesian society, is not related merely to social alienation where a group of people are socially excluded by the majority of society. It may well include political alienation where a group of people feel that their ideology has been marginalized and even excluded from the political life of the nation and the world, or economic alienation where a group of people feel that they have been unfairly defeated in economic competition due to the very crude capitalistic system, or cultural alienation where a group of people feel that their valued culture has been replaced by a dominating hegemonic culture of the West.

This alienation brings about two results, simultaneously. On the one hand, it encourages the alienated to avenge the sense of loneliness and impotence by destroying other people through godlike acts of violence. On the other hand, it motivates the alienated to gain the sense of connection by joining people who have the same hatred toward common enemies, that is, people whom they blame as having made them alienated.⁴

Let us take a closer look at the combination one at a time. The second part of this dynamic, namely the tight connection and solidarity among the alienated, is well supported by the findings of Max Abrahms.⁵ Based on his research among the considered terrorist groups Abrahms came to a very interesting conclusion,

“There is comparatively strong theoretical and empirical evidence that people become terrorists not to achieve their organization’s declared political agenda, but to develop strong affective ties with other terrorist members. In other words, the preponderance of evidence is that people participate in terrorist organizations for the social solidarity, not for their political return.”⁶

Thus, at the individual level, the main motivation for people to join in the terrorist group is to develop strong affective ties with other terrorist members. At the organizational level, terrorist groups work hard to preserve their social unit, even when their actions impede their stated political goal. The terrorists are therefore more social solidarity seekers than political utilizers.

Abrahms further shows some facts that he found in his research to support his conclusion. First of all, terrorist groups do not randomly recruit people to join them. They tend to recruit certain psychological types of people, namely, people who are alienated. This may include unmarried young people or widows who have no jobs prior to joining the terrorist group, people who are

³ As mentioned in Seyom Brown, *The Causes and Prevention of War*, second edition (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Max Abrahms, “What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008): 78-105, © 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

⁶ Ibid., 94.

dislocated and are not assimilated in the host society they are attempting to join, and many other alienated people. It is obvious that recruitment is targeted toward these kinds of people, not primarily people who show commitment to the political goals of the group. For such people, the social tie to a particular group is more important than their ideological commitment. During interviews with members of terrorist groups Abrahms found that most of them join the terrorist group because they have some friends or relatives in the group, or they want to maintain and develop social relations with other members in the group, or reduce their sense of alienation or both.

Secondly, terrorist groups have become attractive outlets for people seeking solidarity. The longing for solidarity matches quite well with the very strong affective ties between members of terrorist groups, which are more tight-knit than other voluntary associations precisely because the extreme degree of dangers and costs of participation as well as the tendency of terrorist groups to violate societal norms. This explains why terrorist groups are still able to recruit new members, boost the morale of their members, and strengthen their social unit through their acts of terrorism even in the midst of their political failure.

Thirdly, terrorist groups which are most conducive to the development of strong affective social ties among their members become the ones which are most attractive. On the contrary, a terrorist group collapses by itself when it ceases to be perceived as desirable social group worth joining.

What Abrahms has found is very crucial in understanding religious extremism. As I have mentioned before, the alienation experienced by a group of people brings about two results simultaneously, namely, the motivation to seek *solidarity* among people with the same feeling of alienation, and the *aggression* to avenge their feeling of loneliness by destroying the perceived enemies. The aggression aspect will be more present and intense when religion comes into play. While there are many proposed reasons to explain the birth of religious extremism such as the hermeneutical problem of misinterpretation of the sacred texts, the economic problem,⁷ the problem with the existence of religion itself,⁸ and so forth, I will mention only some which are relevant in understanding the relation between alienation and religious violence.

First of all, when religious people are disillusioned and frustrated by the reality of the world they live in, they tend to look backward instead of forward. In this process, they try to find and imitate what had happened in the perceived golden era of the past history of their group because they believe that it is where they can find moral perfection. Even when these people talk about eschatology, what they mean is actually the reliving of the historical past. The new age to come is none other than the remaking of the old golden age. This dynamic creates a sort of *romanticism*. The perceived radical Moslems in Indonesia who often engage in violent acts in the name of religion, for instance, dress in the same style as they believe the people in the age of the prophet Mohammed did. They imitate not only the dress code of the historical past, but also the physical appearance, lifestyle, and social ruling or governance. So the men keep their beard, some put a dot sign on their forehead, some practice polygamy. They also adore and give

⁷ Laurence R. Iannaccone and Eli Berman, "Religious Extremism: The good, the bad, and the deadly," *Public Choice* (2006) 128:109-129.

⁸ Hector Avalos, "Previous Theories of Religious Violence," in *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 75-86.

absolute authority to persons who are believed to have a blood tie with the prophet Mohammed. In regard to national politics, they strive for the implementation of Islamic shari'ah (law) and the Islamic shari'ah economic system and so forth.

The danger of such romanticism comes when these disillusioned people become convinced that all the problems in the world will vanish, should they be able to relive the golden era again. Violence naturally lurks at the door because the history of the birth of all religions has always been a history of acceptance and resentment, that is, a history about how a religious group tried to stand for and defend their new identity, criticize the immorality of the society at large, and convert as many people as possible into their group because this was perceived not only as a matter of saving the society from the problem of immorality but also of saving it for heaven. Thus when such a history is to be relived, the respected religious group will have to point their fingers at other groups of people as the representations of the immoral people their ancestors tried to defeat and convert. The struggle soon turns into a struggle between the morals and the immorals, indeed between the Almighty God and the devil itself.

The violence of religious romanticism is further enhanced by the idea of *cosmic war*.⁹ In this matter, religious people learn to believe that there are two antagonistic forces in the universe, the good ones and the evil ones, that are inherently in opposition against each other.

There are three crucial points that we have to take into consideration related to this issue: (1) Religious people believe that the war is cosmic in nature. Therefore the war determines the identity of each human being who lives in the world. Faced with that war everybody has to choose which force s/he belongs to; the good or the evil one. The war, in turn, determines one's dignity, and, as such, it is directly related to her/his basic need. It is for this reason that one is willing to die and to kill in order to win the war, because winning is the ultimate sign that one is on the right side. (2) In the cosmic war it is believed that what is at stake is one's own eternal life. Therefore people are willing to do just about anything to win the war. The bet is way too expensive to be taken lightly. (3) The war is also believed to finish completely only at the end of time. Thus as long as the world still moves on, all human beings still have to engage in that war.

When religious people buy into this cosmic war idea, they will naturally see themselves as belonging to the good force that God himself leads. And it is just a matter of time before they point their finger arbitrarily to other group(s) of people as belonging to the evil force that they have to fight against and even abolish. Violence naturally follows. Moreover, the more religious people see that the war will not be over soon, the stronger the drive within them will be to believe that they are indeed living in a cosmic war that has to be won.

Unfortunately, such a cosmic war idea is being preached over and over again in religious precincts. This idea has helped religious people one way or the other to keep the tension between different religious groups. The cosmic war idea can easily motivate any religious group to believe that their group is the representation of the good force on earth that has to terminate other religious groups. The tension becomes more problematic when the religious group believes that God is on their side and therefore they see other religious groups as God's enemies.

⁹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in The Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 2000), 145-163.

The problem of religious extremism is further enhanced when religious people choose a *violent sacred narrative* to guide their lives. We need to understand that one's life is always correlative to a decisive story that displays the virtues by which one lives, which is found in a community that claims one's life in a more fundamental fashion than any other institution and profession can claim.¹⁰ Thus the difference between Confucian ethics or Islamic ethics and Christian ethics is not primarily that each prescribes different precepts, but each is based upon different narratives.¹¹ "One could change the story and thereby change the rule."¹²

In this light, any religious group plays an important role as a hermeneutic community within which members of the group are helped to discover the "central metaphors"¹³ through which they see reality and upon which moral precepts, religious and non-religious alike, are arranged, explicated, analyzed, and interpreted. Such a narrative shows the true nature of God, human existence, and the world. Its intrinsic values necessarily connect one to the transcendent and show how morality should be shaped for the human life project because they indicate what really counts for human life.¹⁴ Any religious injunction in this sense is not only information about a religious value. In a fundamental way, it also tells about what counts for that respected value.¹⁵ It provides basic convictions that are decisive, normative, and ultimate since they help one to see reality "under the mode of the divine."¹⁶

The problem emerges when the central metaphors through which a group of people see, understand, and interpret reality are violent ones. Such metaphors will provide justification for these religious people to use violence to terminate other groups of people.

CHRISTIAN MISSION AS RECONCILIATION

We have seen that human aggression is often rooted in the condition of alienation. This alienation brings a twofold dynamic: the longing for solidarity with those who experience the same fate and aggression toward those whom are perceived to have alienated them. This condition of alienation becomes very dangerous when it is experienced by people who are entrapped in religious extremism. It can be very destructive indeed, especially when the respective religious group is so influenced by religious romanticism, the religious cosmic war idea, and a violent, religious narrative. It is in the midst of such a problem that Christian mission

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) p. 125-127, 151; Harry Huebner, "A Community of Virtues," in Harry Huebner and David Schroeder (ed.), *Church As Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 1993), 177.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1974), 71-72; see also James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics Volume I* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), 171-172.

¹² Hauerwas, *Vision*, 88.

¹³ The term "central metaphors" comes from *ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴ Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (ed.), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, First California paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), ix; Hauerwas, *Vision*, 1, 27-29, 30-31; *Community*, 91.

¹⁵ Hauerwas, *Vision*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

has to be done as reconciliation that includes both reconciliation between God and human beings, as well as reconciliation between people of different religions. But how can we do that?

In my article “Recognizing the Other’s Insecurity: Experiences of Christian-Moslem Relations in Indonesia” that was published in *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross*, I pointed out that it is very important for Christians to validate the other’s interest in order to understand why some people behave the way they do.¹⁷ This is the first step toward peace and reconciliation between Christians and other religious groups, especially in the midst of the problem of religious extremism elaborated above.

Let us take an example. Suppose we are Moslems who live in Indonesia. We compose the majority religious group in Indonesia. Our number is even bigger than the number of all Moslems in the Middle East combined. Yet, the data from the Department of Religion about the increase of the number of religious buildings, shows that the number of mosques only increased by 64% in the last 27 years, compared to 131% for Protestant churches and 152% for Catholic churches in the same period.

Religion	1977	2004	% Increase
Islam	392,044	643,834	64.22
Christianity	18,977	43,909	131.38
Catholicism	4,934	12,473	152.80
Hinduism	4,247	24,431	475.25
Buddhism	1,523	7,129	368.09
T o t a l	421,725	731,776	238.35

Sources: The Jogjakarta Regional Office of the Department of Religion. The data have been verified by Director General of Islamic Society Guidance and the Hajj ... (penyelenggaraan), Director General of Christian Society Guidance, Director General of Catholic Society Guidance, and Director General of Hindus and Buddhist Society Guidance (March 1 and 7, 2005; April 18, 2006).

How do we feel when we see such figure? Are we not feeling threatened? Are we not anxious and thinking that there is a danger that one day we will be marginalized? That one day we will become minority? Is it not troublesome when we see the number of churches, both of Protestant and Catholic ones, in our city has more than doubled in the last three decades? It is true that the total number of mosques still far exceeds the total number of all other religious buildings combined, but the popping up of churches almost everywhere in Indonesia certainly creates great anxiety among Moslems. It is therefore very important to validate their interest and anxiety. Unless we take such anxiety into account when we talk about and engage in Christian mission, we will never establish peaceful relationships with Moslems.

¹⁷ For a complete elaboration of this issue, see Paulus S. Widjaja, “Recognizing the Other’s Insecurity: Experiences of Christian-Moslem Relations in Indonesia,” in *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross*, ed. Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2005), 261-274.

Doing such a mission, however, requires certain presupposed qualities. Three of those qualities are worth mentioning here, namely, vulnerability, humility, and hope.¹⁸

Vulnerability is a virtue that I define as the willingness to be open and wounded. We have to realize that every human relationship is an open one. As such, there is always a possibility of conflict in that relationship, even in a very intimate one. No one can guarantee that any given relationship will end happily. We may end up by being happy. But we may also end up by being hurt and wounded. The crucial question in human relationships is not whether we can avoid conflict. No one can do that. The real issue that we have to deal with is how we can solve and transform conflict when it comes in the way, and whether we are willing to take risks with one another when we do get hurt.¹⁹ That is the nature of human relationship and that is why we need the virtue of vulnerability.

Now if religious extremism is a combination of a longing for intimacy and religion-based violence, then Christian mission has to aim toward the creation of peaceful, affectionate and empathetic relationships with those alienated people. In such mission we need to show our sincerity to embrace and befriend them; to redeem their feeling of loneliness; that we are not in any way posing a threat to them. But in order to embrace the alienated, we have to make ourselves vulnerable. We have to first open our arms so that we can make space for these people. Yet it is precisely because we open our arms that we become vulnerable. Without vulnerability we will never be able to embrace people of other faiths, let alone those alienated people disillusioned by religious romanticism, distorted by the cosmic war idea, and motivated by violent narrative.

In order to be vulnerable, however, we need to *empty* ourselves, especially from power of any kind. Reconciliation with people of other faiths can never happen when we are busy protecting, keeping, and fulfilling our power.²⁰ This kind of self emptying practice is what Apostle Paul said about Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:5-8:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross”²¹

It is precisely through the recognition of our vulnerability that we are able to share our life with others in the deepest sense whereby we affect as well as are affected by others. It is such a vulnerability that has been demonstrated by Jesus.

¹⁸ For detailed elaboration of these virtues and some more others see Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus S. Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 69-94.

¹⁹ Ron Kraybill, “The Cycle of Reconciliation,” in *MCS Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual*, 4th ed.

²⁰ In my article “Recognizing the Other's Insecurity” (see note 15), I have shown some examples of power cultivation done by some groups of Christians in Indonesia that can easily be perceived as posing a threat to other religious groups.

²¹ It is very interesting to see that all major religions in the world know and even encourage such self emptying practices. Thus, while Christians believe in *kenosis*, Moslems believe in *jihad*, Hindus believe in *ahimsa*, and Buddhists believe in *tapa*.

[Jesus] taught us that the way to salvation lies through vulnerability. So it is that when he was alive he walked vulnerably among Romans and tax collectors and other unfitting characters (which included women in his sexist culture), among outcasts and foreigners, Canaanites and Samaritans, among the diseased, the demoniacs, and lepers, and infectious. And when the time came that he should die, he vulnerably submitted himself to the killing wounds of the entrenched Establishment of his day.²²

Humility is a virtue by which we acknowledge the truth of others, while at the same time realize that we are not the sole holders of truth. Related to faith, the virtue of humility enables us to understand that none of us is able to see the whole truth of God, let alone to see the whole of it simultaneously at the same time. God's truth is always bigger than we have yet seen, and ultimately we cannot see it without the other. While it is true that God's truth (ontology) is unlimited and absolute, our understanding of that truth (epistemology) is always relative, subjectively and culturally constructed, and thus limited. Therefore we simply cannot and should not impose our perspective about God's truth upon others and force them to comply with it.

Furthermore, we need to remember that the nature of religious language is that it is always a confessional language. And confessional language is none other than love language which is very subjective. When I say that my mother is the best mother in the whole world, I am using confessional language based on my experience with my mother. It is love language. As such, it is true for me, not an illusion. That confession, however, does not squarely mean that other mothers in the world are simply not good. The confession that I make about my mother is a subjective one. I may share with other people about what the good mother is based on my experience with my mother, but I cannot judge from the outset that the other mothers are simply bad. Of course, we cannot simply apply this metaphor to our understanding of God and our relation with him as if there were many gods in the universe and each religious group adheres one of them. I just want to say that confessional language is always a love language which is subjective. Therefore I can only engage in sharing with people of other faiths if I humble myself.

It does not mean, however, that we have to simply give up our perspective and submit ourselves to others. Both attitudes are destructive because we either oppress others (forcing) or we oppress ourselves (giving up). What we should do is to collaborate with others in humility. We need to remember that God has called us to the biblical virtue of forbearance,

“[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7)

The word **u`pome, nw** (*hupomenō*) in this verse carries a very rich meaning. It refers to a virtue that enables us not only to forebear the difficulties, but even to transform the difficulties into joy. It is such humility that will enable us to walk with people of other faiths, even the radical ones, in the search for transformation. Perhaps we do not see any immediate concrete solution to the problem of relationships between different religious groups before us, yet we are

²² M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, Touchtone Book, Second Touchtone edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 227, cf. 231.

willing to walk with the others and share the pain. We do not give up on them, just like Jesus never gives up on us. It is this kind of attitude that can win the hearts of those alienated.

Hope is a virtue that enables us to believe that God is at work making peace and reconciliation, even in the midst of difficult tensions between Christians and other religious groups. We also believe that God has a vision for the church and the world that is bigger and more profound than we can imagine. So we do not give up to despair; neither do we surrender to cynicism. We do not revert to violence, including verbal violence by which we are demeaning other religious groups, thinking all other ways to transform tense relations between Christians and other religious groups into peace are useless. Violence is actually a form of self-justification by which we give meaning to human life. After all, our mission as Christians is not primarily to bring solutions to the world's problems, but to bring hope for redemption. We believe that Jesus is Lord of all, and that his Lordship can express itself in surprising ways – and in the most unlikely of places. We believe that the Holy Spirit is at work, and that all kinds of creativity can break loose – if we pray trustingly and if we vulnerably open ourselves to the Spirit's work.

Hope is a very important virtue because many people, even the religious ones, quite often come to believe that violence is something that has been so engrafted in human life that we can do nothing to prevent it, let alone to stop it. Many of them are hopeless and powerless when they see the reality of violence in the world. In their opinion, human beings seem to have been destined to fight against each other and there is nothing we can do to change this destiny. *Que serra serra*, whatever will be will be. It is related to this matter that we need to cultivate the power of imagination which is based on hope.

We have seen before that one of the dangers related to religious extremism is romanticism. It is to overcome the problem of romanticism that we need to bring imagination into our mission. While romanticism tends to look backward, imagination invites us to look forward. The intention is not to relive past history, but to construct a future where people from different religious groups can live side by side without terminating each other.

EPILOGUE

Brian McLaren,²³ during the Billy Graham Center 2004 Evangelism Roundtable, correctly warned that churches today need a radical rethinking in regard to our understanding and practice of evangelism. He proposed five points: 1. We have to admit that we may not actually understand the good news, and therefore need to rediscover it. We need to understand that the gospel is not first of all “information on how one goes to heaven after death . . . but rather a vision of what life can be in *all* its dimensions” and a way of life to bring that vision into reality. The battle line is thus “between salvation beyond history from hell by grace versus salvation within history from sin by grace—with *sin* including both personal and social dimensions.” 2. We have to redefine what a disciple is, bearing in mind that evangelism is not about recruiting refugees from earth to heaven, but recruiting revolutionaries who are willing to compassionately “bring the good and healing will of heaven to earth in all its crises.” 3. We have to do good works. We need more Christians who move, not away from, but into the world to love their

²³ Brian McLaren, “A Radical Rethinking of Our Evangelistic Strategy,” *Theology, News & Notes* (Fall 2004): 4-6, 22.

neighbors. The Great Commission has to be carried out hand in hand with the Great Commandment. There was a time in history when one could only become Christian because one actually *knew* a Christian. That was the only evidence of the gospel that people of the world could see. 4. We have to decrease the amount of time spent on church attendance and work more to deploy Christians into communities and neighborhoods. Christians need to spend less time in the church and more time in the world to interact lovingly with their neighbors. 5. We have to start new “hives” of Christianity, which is more honoring and receiving than protesting and rejecting other models of living as the church. These new hives will focus on spreading the good news about God who has sent his Son to save the world, not to condemn it, and promoting individual transformation through spiritual practices in order to be a transforming community.

When we look at the Bible, we will find this idea at work in the stories of Jesus’ table fellowship, especially with the considered outcasts and sinners. Through his table fellowship Jesus has demonstrated that he is willing to embrace the outcasts and sinners and turn human statuses and roles upside down. Unlike the Pharisees, he makes clear that the kingdom of God is an inclusive community where there is “open commensality”²⁴ that includes people who are considered outcasts and sinners. Jesus has demonstrated that the invitation to the Messianic banquet that symbolizes the New Age brought in him is unrestrained. Everyone is invited regardless of social standing and religious labeling. There is no social ostracism that can hinder God from extending his favor. No one is excluded at the outset. Jesus’ table fellowship is no less than divine revelation to the outcasts and sinners that God has accepted them. Jesus has demonstrated that salvation is achieved through association, not segregation.

In his table fellowship, Jesus demonstrated that his embrace of the outcasts and sinners comes before unity, not the other way around. Unlike the Pharisees who demand everybody to be alike first before they can embrace others, Jesus embraces the outcasts and the sinners even when they are still sinners and before they make any commitment to him. Jesus’ “*will to embrace* precedes any ‘truth’ about others and any construction of their ‘justice.’ This will is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable; it transcends the moral mapping of the social world into ‘good’ and ‘evil’.”²⁵ Jesus’ table fellowship thus manifests a “cultural protest” that is concerned, not with a temporary yielding of the existing norms, but with a total transformation of the norms.²⁶

Jesus has demonstrated that in him the Messiah has indeed come and the New Age has indeed broken in. The kingdom of God that humankind is longing for is no longer a future hope. It has become a present reality. There is now a new life, a whole new world where Christians and other religious groups can embrace each other and live together in peace and joy. May we all not only sing out the hymn of peace but also live it out in our lives, “*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*”

²⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus In Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 109-111.

²⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29.

²⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness & Politics in The Teachings of Jesus*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity vol. 5 (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 75-78, 123; Bruce Chilton, *A Feast of Meanings: Eucharistic Theologies from Jesus through Johannine Circles*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. LXXII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 29.

