

The Darwin Studies  
Study 2: Inclusion, Exclusion and Embrace  
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A Chaplaincy Story of Inclusion and Exclusion

From Denominational to Ecumenical

When I was first appointed as chaplain to Flinders University seven years ago I had no idea that I would ever have to confront ministering among other faith traditions. I expected only to be ministering to Christians. Formerly I had been State Director of Scripture Union, a Christian 'parachurch' organization concerned with outreach to young people, children and families, and before that, a secondary school teacher in state schools.

My appointment by the Uniting Church was to be "Chaplain to the University", but traditionally this had always meant ministry among Christians. At that time there were, and always had been, only Christian chaplains on campus, ministering among their own denominations.

But the culture of the university was changing and it was becoming increasingly difficult to conduct ministry amongst students along traditional lines. With the introduction of HECS, (a scheme to charge students for their tertiary education), not only did many students need part-time jobs, but there was the increased pressure of the cost of failure. Fewer and fewer students attended meetings. So the chaplains found themselves having to reinvent their chaplaincy. We began by deciding to be a chaplaincy team. This meant collegial support for and a transparency with each other. It also meant working together on common

projects. This move away from sectarianism seemed to be welcomed by the wider university community.

“...for the spiritual benefit of all.”

Flinders University chaplaincy is located within the Religious Centre. This complex of meeting rooms and offices was a gift to the university at its inauguration in 1967; the intention of its founders was that it was “for the spiritual benefit of all”. However, the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) group was by far the biggest religious group on campus and dominated use of the centre. Its approach was adversarial on issues or persons not holding its own ideology. Some groups did not feel safe within the Religious Centre and continued to use other facilities. Mindful of the donors’ intentions, the chaplains embarked on a process of inviting these other groups, Christian and non-Christian, into the Centre.

When a Pagan group was officially formed on the campus, the AFES group vigorously opposed it at official and unofficial levels. I was as shocked as anyone to be confronted by the word “Pagan” and that a group of students were seeking recognition as the “Pagan Association”. I pictured blood sacrifices by the lake and naked orgies in the light of the full moon! But, as a matter of principle, I recognised their right, if they were a bona fide religious group, to use the Centre. So I rang their leader and was surprised to find myself speaking with an intelligent, thoughtful person – not at all as I had expected! This encouraged me to put on hold my own prejudices and listen to what she was proposing. It seemed to me they had every right to use the Centre. As I got to know members of their group, I found among them a profound respect for the environment and a deep understanding of ritual and the significance of the aesthetic. I got a sense that they were recovering religious elements they understood to have been lost, colonised, or distorted by the Christian tradition. What impressed me most was a strong ethical sense, focussed on mutual respect. This seemed profoundly at odds with what I was experiencing within the leadership of the AFES Christian

group, to which I would have been expected to ally myself. In fact the introduction of the completely “other” seemed to bring into focus the exclusivist and adversarial stance of this dominant Christian group. The chaplains became troubled by the arrogance and controlling spirit instilled by its leadership – so that, paradoxically, the Christian chaplains often found themselves advocating for *non-Christians* in the face of what was essentially violence and abuse by the ‘Christians’!

### From Ecumenical to Multifaith

The challenge really came home to me when the Pagan Association told me that they wanted to appoint a Pagan Chaplain. I knew that if the Pagan community requested the University to appoint a chaplain, under Equal Opportunity legislation, the University would be hard pressed not to agree. There would have to be serious reasons for exclusion. With regard to civil behaviour I could find none.

Amongst the chaplaincy team there were varying degrees of acceptance of the possibility of Pagan Chaplaincy. During this time, the 2000 Global Multifaith Conference of Tertiary Chaplains was held in Vancouver, Canada. Those of us who attended found our position of religious co-existence and mutual respect affirmed. The one chaplain who didn’t attend the Conference continued to have difficulty with ministry in a pluralistic context. He could not reconcile his ordination vows with a multifaith chaplaincy, which required us to support each other's ministry on campus. As a lay person, I had not expected this dilemma. He eventually resigned his chaplaincy.

The person to be appointed as Pagan Chaplain graciously agreed to abide by the Protocols and Guidelines developed by the Christian-based Tertiary Chaplaincy Council, which was responsible for the governance of Christian Tertiary Chaplaincy at that time. So in 2001, after two years of dialogue and discussion, the Pagan Chaplain was appointed by her religious body and accepted by the

University and the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (TCMA), the chaplains' national multifaith professional body. A Buddhist Chaplain soon followed. As chaplains, now from various faith traditions, we decided to see ourselves as a Multifaith Chaplaincy Service and to deal with the implications of this as we travelled together in service to the university.

### Our First Steps in Multifaith Action

During this process in the late 1990's, we were hearing reports of Indonesian soldiers slaughtering innocent civilians in East Timor, intimidating their vote for independence. In Australia there was outrage. At Flinders this was naturally directed against Indonesian students, many of whom were Muslim. In the process of encouraging non-Christian groups to use the Religious Centre I had been developing a relationship with the President of the Flinders Islamic Students Association. In the face of the events in East Timor, we decided to hold a public meeting, as Christian and Muslim, to denounce this violence. This very moving event, supported by staff from the Department of Asian Studies, took place in the Religious Centre and resulted in an immediate decision, encouraged by some members of the Students Association who were present, to hold daily prayers together in the Religious Centre the following week. So at 12 noon each day, each of the religious clubs/associations/societies, representing the major faith traditions, took their turn leading "Prayers for Peace" in the Religious Centre. We were not conscious of it at the time, but this was our first example of multifaith in action! The AFES group would not participate in prayers led by anyone but themselves, but reluctantly agreed to lead one of the prayer meetings, so representing the Christian tradition. Each day students from various faiths attended. I was struck by the dignity, respect and grace within the other faith traditions, stark contrast to the AFES Christian group. So, for example, members of the Pagan Association were the ones who volunteered to help distribute about 500 tea light candles, with "Pray for Peace" attached, to students across the university. They also brought flowers and added creative, welcoming touches to the Religious Centre.

This willingness to serve, and concern for aesthetics, brought to us by the Pagans became important in refurbishing the Religious Centre, which hadn't had a coat of paint in 30 years! This makeover, funded by the University, was not only on the building but also in our relationship with the University, culminating in the University's Public Affairs Office helping us organise a re-opening event. Representatives of nine faith traditions blessed the Centre in their tradition; priority was given to the first blessing - a smoking ceremony conducted by an Indigenous representative. The Centre was then officially "re-opened" by the Chancellor. After the guests moved through the Centre, they packed the main meeting room and were welcomed by the Vice Chancellor. A dinner in the Union restaurant followed, former chaplains were introduced, and the Rev Dr David Millikan, Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, spoke about current religious movements in Australia. The interaction of chaplains, religious officials and university staff, as guests changed tables throughout the night, gave an opportunity for convivial interaction. A very memorable, enjoyable and significant evening, fulfilling all our hopes for what the Religious Centre could stand for in the future!

When September 11 shocked the Western world I was on holidays. I immediately returned to give comfort to American students. Members of the American Studies Department, the Residential Hall and the International Office appreciated it. Before long it became evident there was a backlash directed at the Muslim community. Following on from the East Timor episode, I had begun to attend Muslim Prayer on Fridays to express solidarity with Muslim students and to become more aware of their needs. By praying with them, I discovered, for example, that the Muslim Prayer Rooms had no ventilation, so we were able to have an opening window installed. Soon the relationship with some of the Muslim students grew to the extent that we had Friday lunch together on the basis of mutual friendship. When the backlash against Muslims began, following September 11, I already had a network to relate with. It was clear there was a

need to provide a forum for Muslim students to voice their response to September 11, as well as Americans and Australians, to try to make sense of this new reality of terrorism. A forum was organised with a speaker from the Islamic Students Association, a member of staff from International Politics, whose Masters thesis was on "Terrorism" (and she was an American Australian) and a Vietnam veteran who spoke personally about the effects of war and violence. A broad cross section of students attended including some from the AEFS group. Constructive discussions continued in the Religious Centre that afternoon, long after the forum had officially finished. Students from different faiths were meeting for "inter-faith dialogue" at Flinders for the first time! It was clear that the events of September 11 had created this imperative; the chaplains had provided a safe place and an appropriate context for conversation leading to greater understanding that might otherwise not have taken place.

Following September 11, the chaplains also responded to invitations from the wider community wanting to understand Islam. We took Muslim students into schools, churches and community groups fostering their inquiry and encouraging genuine interchange. The story of the Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy Service had leaked out to the wider community. We had become a point of contact as interfaith relations had become a community concern. So, for example, during 2003, we were contacted by Mitsubishi Motors to assist them with the appointment of their chaplain; they had "Google-searched" for *multifaith chaplaincy* and found us on the Internet, barely a kilometre away! The multifaith aspect, so important with respect to their workforce, had attracted them to us.

After September 11 the Commonwealth Government commissioned an inquiry into religious discrimination against Muslims. The Chaplains responded to this inquiry and held a meeting of interested people to gather and discuss their responses. The participants so appreciated the discussion they decided to continue to meet. This became *The Round Table* – a forum for invited speakers,

seminars and workshops promoting understanding and respect amongst religiously diverse participants.

*The Round Table* provided an excellent entry point for the Co-ordinator of the Latter Day Saints Education System who visited Flinders University weekly to meet with Mormon students – a group the chaplains had previously persuaded “in from the cold” to use the Religious Centre. Although not a formerly recognised chaplain, he became a valued participant at TCMA meetings and a supportive encourager of the chaplains and their work at Flinders. He also became an enthusiastic contributor to the national TCMA Conference held in Adelaide in September 2003. Even though he has now transferred to Sydney, his successor continues to be a valued contributor among the chaplains and with TCMA.

In planning for the 2003 TCMA Conference held in Adelaide it was imperative to the South Australian chaplains that *multifaith* needed to be a primary consideration. So we invited Jessiee Kaur Singh, a Sikh and Chairperson of the Multifaith Association of South Australia, to welcome participants to Adelaide and the Conference. She was so keen to do this that she asked to participate in the whole conference! This eventually led to her being appointed as a Chaplain to Flinders in 2004. Another person interested in the Conference was Rev. Jude Noble who had recently been ordained as a Minister in the Metropolitan Community Church. Attending the conference also led to her being appointed as a Chaplain to the gay community at Flinders University. Yet another was Rabbi Dr Patti Kopstein. I had met Patti at a multifaith prayer breakfast early in 2003. She had recently arrived in Adelaide with her husband, as joint Rabbis at the Progressive Jewish Synagogue. We discovered that she had been trained as a multifaith hospital chaplain in the USA; so we invited her to share that experience at our Conference. This had a double effect. Patti became keen to become a chaplain and a member of TCMA. She was later appointed to Adelaide University, the first non-Christian chaplain in its history! Now she is also a chaplain at Flinders. The second was the enthusiastic response to her

conference address. The TCMA Executive agreed that we chaplains in SA might investigate how multifaith chaplaincy training might be undertaken in Australia.

## First Steps in Sharing Our Experience

We began to explore multifaith chaplaincy training by conducting a workshop in November 2003 to which we invited a number of interested parties both from religious and educational perspectives. This conversation gave us a more realistic idea of what might be involved. One significant aspect of this conversation was the realisation that a multifaith chaplaincy team was in a unique position in the university and the wider community to

- be agents of multifaith dialogue,
- have a significant role in constructing and conducting “community liturgy”,
- be a knowledge base that was able to define points of limitation and referral
- bring a sense of professionalism to this arena.

Since then I have realised that arguably the only tangible working model of explicit religious inclusivity that can be seen at work on a common project in SA is the Multifaith Chaplaincy Service at Flinders. There may be short-term multifaith projects or events, but we are probably the only explicit multifaith *community* at work in SA. And what we might share is our hard-won experience of being such a functioning community.

It became clear that we had to start documenting our experiences at Flinders University. When Jude Noble and I began to meet to do this at the beginning of 2004, it became clear that the task was overwhelming. We decided we needed help. Could we find a research assistant? I rang Multicultural SA and the CEO was excited about the possibilities of providing multifaith chaplaincy training at a national level. Patti Kopstein and I then had a meeting with the Chairperson and the CEO of Multicultural SA to clarify our needs and to see whether Multicultural SA could facilitate such a project. This discussion is continuing. Unbeknown to us, Multicultural SA was in the process of bringing to Adelaide, at short notice,

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a leading Muslim cleric from New York. Though involved in interfaith dialogue for years, he came to prominence following September 11. We were in a position to help Multicultural SA with the publicity and were able to arrange for the Imam to attend a meeting of tertiary chaplains. The perspective the Imam conveyed to us was very encouraging and underlined the global importance of what we were doing at Flinders.

As chaplaincy began to move from the Christian paradigm to the multifaith, the composition of our monthly TCMA meetings began to change. We were not without our awkward moments and misunderstandings. But as we have been getting to know each other, the bonds of affection have been growing; the contributions being made to each other's lives and to the common ministry of service to others have been increasingly apparent and valued. I sense we are on the edge of something significant, very human, very fragile, yet life-giving and quietly beautiful.

“exclusion and embrace” as proposed by Miroslav Volf.

Some of the theological tools which helped me through this period came from my reading of “Exclusion and Embrace” by Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf.

Volf was invited to leave his home in the U.S. to provide theological reflection on the crisis which was occurring in his native Croatia. The extremes of “ethnic cleansing” provided an impetus to develop a theology that took seriously the cycles of violence arising out of “difference”, where both parties are victims and “sinned against”, a theology which might help us understand how such cycles might be broken and peace established.

Some of the objections to embrace of “the other who is different” that were put to me during the struggle to free the Religious Centre from the dominance and exclusion of one group were that somehow one’s own faith is compromised; that as a public figure one is setting a bad example; and that one is giving a message that one faith tradition is as good as another. I take these to be essentially arguments about religious purity – such purity is sustained by maintaining boundaries, which must not only *not* be crossed but, for a public figure, must be *seen* not to be crossed.

One particular passage from Volf’s book really challenged me concerning the nature of sin and the identity of the “sinned against”. In his theological reflection on “ethnic cleansing” Volf<sup>1</sup> comments:

*In the Palestine of Jesus’ day, “sinners” were primarily social outcasts, people who practiced despised trades, failed to keep the Law as interpreted by the religious establishment, and Gentiles and Samaritans. A pious person had to separate herself from them; their presence defiled because they were defiled. Jesus’ table fellowship with social outcasts, a fellowship that belonged to the central features of his ministry, turned this conception on its head: The real sinner is not the outcast but the one who casts the other out (my italics)...Sin is not so much a defilement but a certain form of purity: the exclusion of the other from one’s heart and one’s world. In the story of the prodigal son, the sinner was the elder brother – the one who with-held an embrace and expected exclusion. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in her otherness and a desire to purge her from one’s world, by ostracism or oppression, deportation or liquidation. The exclusion of the other is an exclusion of God.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> For the development of his theological reflection, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Abingdon 1996.

<sup>22</sup> *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of “Ethnic Cleansing”*, Miroslav Volf, in *Emerging Voices in Global Theology*, William A. Dyrness (Zondervan. 1994) p30 –32

I was born in Port Augusta. My loving parents did everything they could, with limited finances, to give my brother and I a good start in life. That meant shepherding us to the other side of the street if there were aborigines ahead. “They would probably be drunk.” Not a lot was said, but one learnt to be racist – for what seemed at the time to be good reasons.

We shifted to Adelaide so that we could get a “good education”.

When I was a university student in the early 1960s, I used to travel into the city by train. I was a keen member of the university Evangelical Union and regularly had my “Quiet Time” for an hour every morning, reading my *Scripture Union Notes* and kneeling for prayer by my bed. One day I noticed an Asian student on the platform, an unusual sight in those days. No one had ever told me directly that Asians were an enemy, but I had seen enough war films! I knew from my own family history how we fought against the Japanese and I’d heard about wartime atrocities; and there was a theory about Asian communists taking over the countries to our north – that was why we needed to be in Vietnam, to stop them there before they descended on us! I continued to notice this Asian student on the platform. He was very foreign ... conspicuously foreign.

One morning I felt a growing conviction that I had to say hello to this Asian student. I can’t remember how this conviction was triggered. But they say we tend to remember those things that have been extreme to our experience – touching the hot stove, dropping a bucket of sand on a big toe! The anticipation of saying hello to him, I remember, was traumatic. I prayed for courage. When I did approach him and said “hello”, I recall my surprise when he simply responded with a smile and a warm “hello” back. Later the hello’s became the beginning of a conversation and then a friendship.

I now see I *needed* that Asian student to bring me freedom from the racism I had absorbed as a child. I needed him to expand my limited white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon world. I doubt if that freedom could have been taught me from books. I had to enter into an experience, that act of opening Volf calls *embrace*:

*Why should I embrace the other? The answer is simple: because the others are part of my own true identity. I cannot live authentically without welcoming the others – the other gender, other persons, or other cultures – into the very structure of my being. For I am created to reflect the personality of the triune God...In the presence of the divine Trinity, we need to strip down the drab gray of our own self-enclosed selves and cultures and embrace others so that their bright colors, painted on our very selves, will begin to shine.*<sup>3</sup>

For Volf, the very nature of the Godhead – three persons in one, “different” yet one, in embrace of each other – this is the source of his understanding that we, in the image of God, also need the “other”.

Do I *need* a Modern Pagan as my fellow chaplain? Five years ago I would have answered strongly in the negative. Why would a Christian, confident in the saving power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ consider for a moment embracing a Pagan as friend and colleague? What need would I have?

As I began to spend time with my Pagan friend, as with my growing number of Muslim and Buddhist friends on campus, I found myself on a similar journey to that which I had experienced so long ago as a student. In their humanity I found my own prejudices being called into question, my own fears released. This was not a syncretism - it had to do with the *enlargement* of my world and an enlargement of my understanding and life with God as a Christian.

*Each does not simply affirm the otherness as otherness, but seeks to be enriched by it.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of “Ethnic Cleansing”*, Miroslav Volf, in *Emerging Voices in Global Theology*, William A. Dyrness (Zondervan. 1994) p 40.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p27

The argument for purity, then, may well be an argument in favour of a dualism that belies a controlling spirit. Such an argument for “judgement” and “boundaries” (even “truth”<sup>5</sup>) betrays the very violence that had Jesus betrayed and put to death.

There may be something to be said for establishing a clear line of separation between warring factions in the short term. But can this be “peace”? Not in the Biblical understanding.<sup>6</sup> “They will remain ‘they’ and we will remain ‘we’, and we will never include ‘them’ when we speak of ‘us’. Each of us will be clean of the other and identical with herself.”

The only way to peace is through embrace – that is, after parties have forgiven and repented, for without repentance and forgiveness embrace is a masquerade. An embrace involves always a double movement of *aperture* and *closure*. I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and of desire to include the other. They are an open invitation to the other to come in and feel at home with me, to belong to me. In an embrace I also close my arms around the other - not tightly, so as to crush her and assimilate her forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently, so as to tell her that I do not want to be without her in her otherness. I want her to remain independent and true to her genuine self, to maintain her identity and as such become part of me so that she can enrich me with what she has and I do not.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Such “truth” is usually that which is reduced to propositional dogma.

<sup>6</sup> For a theology of “shalom” (peace) see Jim Punton “The Community of Shalom, God’s Radical Alternative”, Frontier Youth Trust 1977. Shalom-peace is not merely the absence of war. In the Christian Scriptures it is the new relationship with God, replacing the former hostility, and it is right relationship between persons. It is therefore not a static state, but an interactive and dynamic one.

<sup>7</sup> Volf p 39

So a “Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Service”, if it is to reflect the life of Jesus, must be a community of embrace.<sup>8</sup> As the chaplains embrace each other, each respects the identity and independence of the other and resists the temptation to “change” the other to be like them, because each has a growing understanding of being enriched by the other’s uniqueness and difference.<sup>9</sup>

“Multi-faith” is not “Inter-faith”. Multi-faith accepts, indeed *values*, difference; it is not seeking a unity of belief. But the journey of the chaplains together as a community of embrace is *inter*-faith in as much as understanding is vital to healthy relationships. The understanding of each other’s belief systems, the listening to, and understanding of each other’s histories and day-to-day concerns takes place within the context of a shared role and a shared task - serving the spiritual needs of the university. Where there are conflicts<sup>10</sup>, more likely they may be about strongly held ethical values. Such conflicts may be useful in shedding light on individual blind spots. Each member may well find aspects of their tradition in question. That is not necessarily a bad thing; one would hope that as a result, each person would be moving toward a more robust and

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<sup>8</sup> One implication is that individual religious bodies seeking to have chaplains appointed to such a chaplaincy will need to take its communal nature into account. This would likely involve negotiating with the existing chaplains themselves before any interview or appointment process takes place. Another implication is that any governing body serving such a chaplaincy would most likely also be “a community of embrace” - a multi-faith body.

<sup>9</sup> In *Christianity in the Third Millennium*, (Theology Today, Vol 51 1994-1995 No 1) Jurgen Moltmann argues the need for inter-religious dialogue. While agreeing with Moltmann, the immediacy of the situation confronting us as chaplains of various faith traditions calls for more than that which is evoked by the word *dialogue*. What is demanded is the movement from ‘word’ to ‘action’ implied by his descriptor *network of relationships* which he sees as emerging from such dialogue. My contention is that any such movement is precluded if one takes the position that before ‘action’, ‘word’ must be satisfied. Rather, in relationship, (or Volfs “embrace”), dialogue takes place alongside and, particularly, reflecting on, joint action. “The great religions must come to dialogue with each other. The goal of interreligious dialogue cannot be the melding of all religions into a unified religion but rather a mutual acquaintance and the discovery of one’s own identity in relationship to others. Openness toward others and steadfastness in one’s faith are the conditions for interreligious dialogue. Someone who cannot be open toward others will learn nothing new. Whoever gives up his or her own identity becomes superfluous. In interreligious dialogue, the religions do not remain separate, but neither do they become mixed up. What emerges is a network of relationships that allows a fruitful interchange of religious thoughts and forms and also allows for joint actions in society. Anyone who expects more than this is hoping for too much; anyone who expects less hopes for too little.”

<sup>10</sup> Because of our own human frailties and personality differences, conflicts are inevitable. However it may be more likely that, provided we are willing to treat each other openly and with transparency, the resolution of such conflicts will be productive to personal growth and the life of the group.

enriched faith within their tradition. But above all, the care the chaplains show to each other, and the respect in which they hold each other, are gifts they bring, not only to the university, but to their own faith tradition communities.

The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace - places where the Exclusion System has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other.<sup>11</sup>

Recently I was reading Luke Chapter 4 – we all know that wonderful heraldic quotation Jesus used from Isaiah to announce the essence of his ministry – “ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor...” I have tried this out on a few Christian friends: I have asked what happened next, after the Isaiah reading? Some remember that Jesus was rejected and the people tried to throw him off a cliff. Presumably the congregation (from Jesus’ home town) got upset that Jesus was big-noting by ascribing this text to himself. They must have been reacting to Jesus’ delusions of grandeur!

It has taken befriending a Pagan for me to see something I hadn’t seen before<sup>12</sup>. After reading the text, Jesus sat down - the Rabbinic preaching position. We remember the text, but what was the sermon? The climax to Jesus’ sermon – on this key text which sets out the nature of his ministry – is about two "Pagans"!

25. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.

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<sup>11</sup> Volf p 40

<sup>12</sup>. Other texts also come to life when one drops the emotional baggage long carried with such words as “pagan”. Phillip Johnson in his workbook "Sacred Quest: Training Manual & Workbook" (New Age Mission/ The Community of Hope, 2000) lists over a page of positive Scriptural references to Pagans: in the hebrew Scriptures there were Pagans who believed and repented and God revealed things both through Pagans and Pagan forms of religion.

26. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

27. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian."

28. All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

29 .They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.

30. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Not only does Jesus not tell them a feel-good heroic story of the Jews but Jesus tells his hearers that God actually loved these two outsiders preferentially! This is scandalous teaching! Jesus upset them by pointing out something of the love of God for others - Jahweh blessing "outsiders" when the "insiders" thought they had a mortgage on God!

In this reading of Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, Jesus is confounding a model of Jewishness that assumed Jahweh was exclusively 'for' Jews. Jesus gives two examples of Jahweh being for non-Jews in contradiction to their narrow expectations - God outside their square! Jesus pronounced judgement on the exclusionary principle of his day and went on to live out the meaning of the Isaiah text, embracing the excluded ones. In doing so, Jesus broke the purity laws of his day; the gospel record expounds the freedom of such a life, centred on orientation toward a God of love, and lived preferentially for "the poor", the marginalized and excluded. Jesus' heraldic proclamation, "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" is a call to reorientate the centre of one's life toward such a God.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 1:15

There may be times when those whom we would expect to be closest to us may get angry and even physically violent toward us when their self-interest is threatened by the priorities revealed in a Gospel that is “good news” to the “outsider” and the “unclean”. In such cases we might do well to follow Jesus’ example to simply “walk right through the crowd and (go) on our way”.