

Grace without conversion

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue



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Father Emil, wearing his long black cassock, was leading us through his new Palestinian school. He's a winsome priest from Jordan who could pass for a young Omar Sharif.

Over the years our Presbyterian congregation in Washington, D.C., and his Roman Catholic parish in the West Bank have developed a strong partnership. We contributed to the construction of this parish's school; they stretched our understanding of the gospel.

Our little delegation from Washington shuffled down the stone halls of the new school, occasionally peering into a crowded classroom, hoping to catch the eye of a young student who might dare a smile or subtle wave. Father Emil was walking backward as he led our tour, telling us about all of the hope the school provides to families who live amid so much poverty and frequent outbreaks of violence.

Half of the students in the school, he told us, are Muslim. Their parents fully realize it's a Catholic school, but it provides the best education in town. And that's what they want for their children. I noticed several people in our delegation raising their eyebrows, but no one asked a question.

Then we walked past a required religion class, where a nun was teaching. Just as we had been told, half of the girls were wearing the headscarves that marked them as

Muslim. Now my own eyebrows were raised. “How does that work?” I wondered to myself.

Father Emil eventually led us out of the school and across the courtyard to the parish sanctuary. Along the way we saw older boys playing soccer while the girls lined the fence, lost in conversations. Half of the girls were clearly Muslim, but many were talking to others whose heads were bare.

When we arrived in the sanctuary, the priest told us that they offer mass every day for the students and that all were free to participate. This was too much. One of my church members blurted out, “Father Emil, are you trying to turn the Muslim children into Christians? Doesn’t that create major social trauma for them—tearing them apart from their families? Do their parents really know what you are doing?”

The priest’s eyes grew to the size of saucers. “I am not trying to convert anyone,” he said emphatically. “I just want these children to know that God loves them, that their sins are forgiven on the cross of Jesus who rose from the dead, and that the Holy Spirit will keep them close to their Savior. I want them to have all of the means of grace they can get because life is hard here. But I would never ask a Muslim to become a Christian.”

As I said, the Palestinian Christians stretch our understanding of the gospel.

They live in a part of the world where religion is not a voluntary association but an inheritance of birth. It is even written on the ID cards they’re forced to carry. It has little to do with spiritually inspired choices and everything to do with a given, unconvertible political identity. So how does one present gospel in such a context? By talking about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the grace of God—but not about the Christian religion.

I spent an extraordinary amount of time in seminary and graduate school learning the rich theological tradition of Christianity. For over 30 years I’ve climbed behind the pulpits of churches and the lecterns of classrooms. I’ve lost count of how many times I left a hospital room struggling with theodicy issues or graded a paper down because the exegesis was sloppy. Now I am the president of a seminary that is devoted to exploring the heights and depths of our theological tradition. But to what end?

The goal was never to train specialists in the Christian religion. Our theology has always been the handmaid to faith in Jesus Christ. The clearer the theology, the more vibrant the faith, and that's the only good reason to study it.

This is another starting place for Christians who want to live faithfully around those of other religions and no religion.

Father Emil, who is an expert on living in a religiously diverse society, believes that the church cannot worry about whether people call themselves Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus or Christians. He's not alone. The best Christian theologies suggest that in the end what we are really worried about is whether people have experienced the grace that God was dying to give us in Jesus the Christ.

Obviously there are substantive and contradictory affirmations that divide the great religions. I follow Christianity because I believe that what it proclaims is true. But one of those theological proclamations is that Jesus is never limited by a religion that often has to run to keep up with him.

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus showed up in places where the religious leaders were sure he didn't belong, and he kept doing things that broke the rules. This is still his nature. I'm not about to tell him he can't find his way into the heart of a Muslim schoolchild.