God’s Fairness to People of All Faiths:  
A Respectful Proposal to Pentecostals for  
Discussion Regarding World Religions  

Tony Richie  

Introductory Testimony and Task  

“Mom,” I asked as a teenager, “how do we know that Christianity is right?” “Because the Bible tells us so,” she replied nonplussed, without interrupting her work. “What about people of other religions?” I asked. She looked up from her work now. “What about them?” “Are they all automatically going to hell?” “Well,” she said, fidgeting a bit at this point, “we just need to tell them about Jesus.” “What about the ones who die without hearing? Are they lost without a chance?” I pressed. “Oh, no,” she answered more firmly. “The Lord is not willing that any should perish. God makes sure everybody has a chance to be saved.” “Great!” I replied, really intrigued. “How does God do that?” Without any hesitation now, Mom gave it to me straight...sort of. “Oh, the Lord finds a way somehow. He has ways we don’t always understand. His thoughts are above our thoughts and his ways are above our ways. One thing we know for sure though: God is always fair to everybody.” “How do we know that, Mom?” I asked one more time. “Because the Bible tells us so,” she replied nonplussed, as she went back to her work.¹  

I am a third-generation Pentecostal. Both my paternal grandparents and my maternal grandmother were baptized in the Holy Spirit before I was born, as were my own parents. My maternal grandfather followed later. My father has been a Pentecostal preacher from the time I was barely a year old until the time of this writing forty-five years later. I have been a Pentecostal preacher, pastor, and teacher for a quarter of a century myself. I find that I have an undiminished desire to be faithful to my Pentecostal experience and heritage. 

¹ This true-life personal testimony from my own youth illustrates for me what I have since found to be a common attitude among many grassroots Pentecostals regarding other religions: an optimistic ambiguity.
I also sincerely believe Pentecostals need to move beyond rehashing our past to readying ourselves for the present and the future. I tend to process and apply these twin impulses according to a dialectical schema of continuity and creativity. For me Pentecostal continuity and creativity in this context signify a bold attempt to build faithfully, on the base of our theology and spirituality, a brave but not brash faith and practice adequately addressing the existential needs of the day but keeps an eye on the days to come as well.2 The following represents an attempt to apply this rationale in one important area.

An area of contemporary life that is now much more than a subject of idle curiosity for the young concerns our understanding of other religions and interacting with their adherents. According to some scholars, America has become the most religiously diverse nation in the world.3 When I was invited by the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) to serve as a representative (with Amos Yong) on the Interfaith Relations Commission (IRC) of the National Council of Churches (NCC), I was thrilled at the opportunity to work hands on, in depth, with an ecumenical group of Christians, and in dialogue with adherents of other religions. Here is an opportunity to address one of the most pressing needs in our contemporary world and to offer unique contributions from our Pentecostal perspective on relations among religions.

Almost immediately the lack of adequate attention by Pentecostals to this topic of relations among the religions became apparent. I find myself asking questions again. Are American Pentecostals, acclaimed for our missionary ability, prepared to deal with the developing diversity of religions right on our doorsteps? Can we do so in a manner faithful to our roots in Scripture and our heritage as a historical movement?4 What do members of the SPS really think about this serious subject, anyway? What about other Pentecostals? What about our pastors and members on the

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4 My own view is generally set forth in “‘The Unity of the Spirit’: Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenicists and Inclusivists?” presented at the 34th Annual Meeting of the