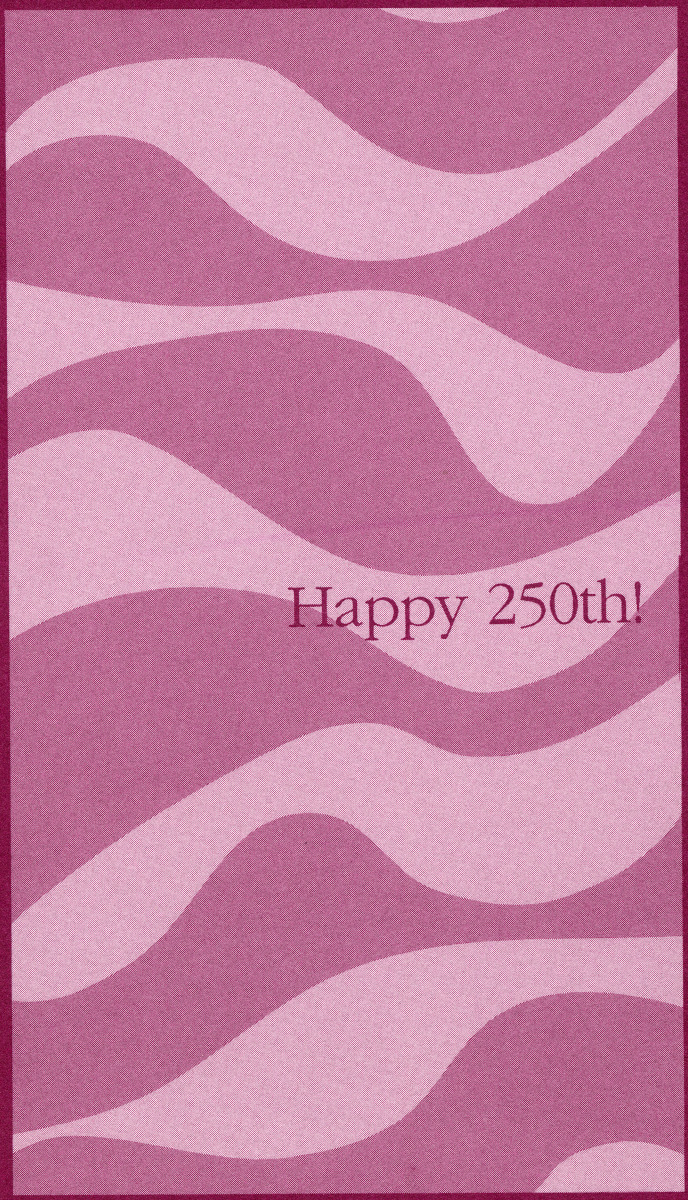
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Happy 250th!

I ran out of time trying to find out the technical name for a 250th anniversary. Wedding charts don't go that high, and even the diamond anniversary for them can represent either the 60th or the 75th year. A centennial stands for the 100th anniversary of something, and our Bicentennial twenty-two years ago (can it be?) marked the two hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution. Sesquicentennial describes the 150th anniversary of a person or an event.

One of my classmates used to do an uproarious parody of one of our teachers who was given to pairs of expressions: sin/grace; law/gospel; *justus/peccator*; church militant/church triumphant; kingdom of the right/kingdom of the left. With each pair the professor (as played by my classmate) would wave his right and then his left hand. The punchline came when the "professor" came to the Trinity: right hand, left hand—right foot! You had to be there. It was funny.

So I am also all hands *and* feet when it comes to naming a 250th anniversary. I can't call it a centennial plus a sesquicentennial, or a bicentennial plus a golden anniversary. 250th it is for now.

Robert J. Marshall tells the story of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), the American Lutheran pioneer, whose career was recently reviewed at a conference to mark the 250th anniversary—there you have it—of the Lutheran Ministerium, founded in 1748. Four distinct areas of contributions are recognized—mission, organization, personal Christian experience, and ecumenism—and in each case we hear of Muhlenberg's own activities, subsequent developments over these 250 years, and current outlooks. Muhlenberg's legacy includes the two-tiered polity of local congregations and a larger churchwide structure typical of all Lutheran bodies in the USA. He believed the church still had to be planted, especially in America, and he was a unique blend of pietism and tradition himself: "Theoretical knowledge, without practice and experience, leaves a person in the lurch when trouble comes." Muhlenberg had good relations with the Reformed though he had difficulty with the Moravians, Quakers, and Anabaptists. His heirs are still saying yes to some ecumenical movements and giving not quite so clear an answer to others.

Alan Neely delivered the Scherer lectures on mission at LSTC last year and we are happy to publish them in this issue. Pluralism is evident everywhere today though prior to the 16th century the vast majority of Christians were Europeans, and until the 20th century, non-Christian religions, with the exception of Judaism, were almost entirely in the non-European areas of the world. Today there are 5.5 million Muslims in the United States, nearly a million Hindus, a quarter of a million Buddhists, and more than four million Jews—and most of these counts are probably low! Many of these people are much more active religiously than they were in their countries of origin, just like many of our own ancestors within the Christian camp. While the media focuses on the tawdry, the ugly, the mean, and the vicious aspects of interfaith relationships, the church at its best creates interfaith councils, dialogue groups, and other means of understanding. We must take off our shoes when approaching another religion, or else we may forget that God was there before our arrival.

Alan Neely also addresses how religious pluralism has been treated throughout U.S. history. Roger Williams believed there should be a wall of separation between church and state and openly challenged the legalized seizure of Indian lands. States like Massachusetts, Maryland, and Pennsylvania made some progress toward religious freedom, but they lagged behind Rhode Island. The first two amendments to the constitution prohibited the establishment of religion and protected the free exercise of it, and ruled out religious tests for public office. The wall between the church and the state has been porous over the years, and issues like the funding of parochial schools and the rise of religious hate groups are challenging the older status quo.

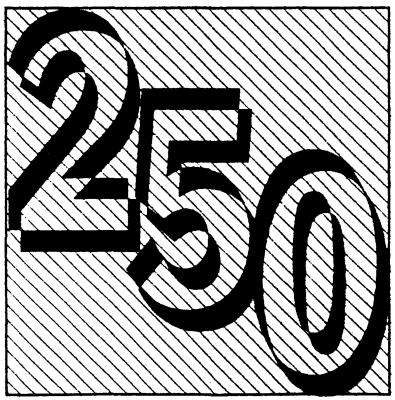
Holland Jones protests against the notion that one can only believe what one experiences through the senses. When the voice of God, mediated through the reading or preaching of the Scriptures, authorizes one to live in Christ, to love one's brothers and sisters, and to long for a new heaven and a new earth, it has effected faith. Authority has to do with the ways concrete communities can be authorized to live, act, and hope in a manner which may at times oppose the accepted norms.

Edgar Krentz provides orientation for those who would like to preach on the book of Colossians. The biblical author lived in a world where the universe was perceived as a threatening place, filled with hostile powers, but he saw the church as the place where Christ rules. While Christ is proclaimed as Lord in the universe, he is not yet recognized as such in the world. The cross, however, means that the elemental spirits of the universe are defeated and are captives without power. Since Christ is exalted as Lord, Christians should think those

things which are above. Peace happens when the account of Christ lives richly among Christians. Christ brings order out of chaos, peace out of water, liberation out of enslavement.

Kristin Johnston notes that our existence as the image of God is lived out every day in every one of our interactions with one another, the significant as well as the superficial. We have been given authority over all creation, not just over animals and plants, but over the molten core of the earth and the heavenly bodies above our heads. As God has created the world in beauty and goodness, we should use our creative powers to preserve and protect the world in all its glorious diversity.

With all these good thoughts churning in my mind, I'm still frustrated in this 25th year of editing *Currents* and 36th of being part of a Lutheran ministerium that I can't think of the technical name for a 250th anniversary. So the first person who calls (773-256-0721) or E-mails me (rklein@lstc.edu) with the right answer gets a year's free extension on her or his subscription. Extra credit for anyone who knows what to call the 350th anniversary of the Peace of Westphalia, also in 1998.



Ralph W. Klein
Editor

The Church Still Being Planted

Robert J. Marshall
Senior Scholar in Residence
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The title of this article is a theme adopted by a group planning for the observance of the 250th anniversary of the Lutheran Ministerium, the oldest continuous Lutheran organization in America, other than a few congregations. In recalling the first meeting of the Lutheran Ministerium which occurred in August, 1748, the group decided to draw upon a description of the church coined by the convener of that early meeting. It was Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), the pioneer Lutheran pastor, who experienced and often articulated the contrast between the firmly established church in Europe and the church in the "New World" with its instability and open future.

The planning group perceived that the situation of the church in America today is not entirely different from what it was in Colonial times. The dynamic of American culture, the mobility of the population, continuing immigration, changing neighborhoods, and the ever-pressing mission challenges of the New Testament place the church in a situation where it might gain helpful insights from the Muhlenberg tradition as it developed through the years.

An introductory seminar in Baltimore, January 31 and February 1, 1997, brought together historians, some specialists in the study of the Muhlenberg era, bishops from the eastern synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and other church representatives, over fifty in all. They discussed the four subtopics presented here: (1) mission, (2) church organization, (3) personal Christian experience, and (4) ecumenism. These were each pursued from (a) Muhlenberg beginnings, through (b) two centuries and more of history, to (c) lessons for confronting current situations.

Mission

Beginnings. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg has been called, deservedly, a "Missioner Extraordinary."[1] Yet he was a missionary made and not born. His life as a missionary began in his early twenties when he was a student at the new University of Göttingen in the German state of Hanover, and associates helped him experience a renewal of faith that led him to volunteer as a teacher of poor children who couldn't afford to go to

[1] Helmut T. Lehmann, "Missioner Extraordinary," published in newsletter *Partners in the Spirit*, Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Wescosville, PA, 1992).

school. The next step was at Halle, which was already a mission center. He began as a teacher, then was ordained to serve as a pastor. He had wanted to go to India. Pennsylvania came as a second choice.

As a missionary from Halle, he was assigned to provide pastoral care to German emigrees. He was accountable to the directors at Halle and he continued to send them reports until the end of his life.

Muhlenberg soon learned that hardships could characterize a missionary ministry. The fourteen week voyage across the Atlantic brought severe bouts with seasickness, bad food and water, threats from pirates and enemy ships, and a rowdy crew. In addition to scolding the crew, he conducted worship for them when they requested it. He found greater pleasure in the personal ministry to a Lutheran Salzburger family on board.

Once located in eastern Pennsylvania at the three congregations which had sought a missionary, Muhlenberg began in 1742 his regular travels on horseback to serve all three. He covered tiring distances at night as well as day, through snow and rain and flooded rivers as well as in the scorching heat of summer sun. His pay was so little that he borrowed money to buy clothes and a better horse, then later, land and a parsonage.

Gradually the scope of his mission became clear to Muhlenberg. He had started with a three year term. As the end of the time came near, he realized the continuing, indeed growing, need for pastoral ministry in America and he decided to stay, build a house, and marry. It was then, in 1745, that he began to describe the church situation where he was working as "Ecclesia Plantanda," the church still has to be planted.[2] His mission continued for the rest of his life.

During that time an ever-expanding territory was demanding his attention. Muhlenberg was called upon, either because a group of people had not had pastoral services for a long while, or because there was a quarrel they hoped he could settle. When a second missionary arrived from Halle, Muhlenberg arranged for him to serve the Philadelphia congregation, while he himself took the congregations farther out, where it would be easier to reach new places still more distant. He traveled west to Lancaster and York, south to Frederick, Maryland; east to Raritan, New Jersey, and New York City; and still farther in every direction.

The motivation for it all came from his sense of personal benefit from having received the gospel, and the conviction that all people needed it as much as he. Muhlenberg was ready to hold worship in homes or barns, in public buildings or open fields. He was willing to preach in German or English to make certain the message would be understood. When he had been in Charleston, South Carolina, like a true missionary, he had decried the neglect of the slaves' religion. He regretted the difficulty and failure of missions to the Indians. Yet he confined his own missionary work to German immigrants as he had been assigned, and he had more to do than one missionary could manage.

He sympathized with the people he served. Many had come as indentured servants, and even when liberated they often struggled desperately with poverty. The church provided schools that taught not only Luther's Small Catechism and the Bible, but reading, writing, and arithmetic to assist in earning a living. As was customary at Halle, Muhlenberg was also equipped with herbs and medicines to assist the ill.

Yet the focus of mission in the Muhlen-

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[2] Theodore G. Tappert, in *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 56.

berg tradition was clearly being established as reaching people with the gospel by every possible means.

Subsequent history. In the years after Muhlenberg, as the population moved ever westward, the ministerium which he had led began in 1805 to recruit pastors for summer service as itinerants among new settlements. The New York Ministerium and the North Carolina Synod did likewise. Later, full-time missionaries were sent. There were outposts in Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Canada, Kentucky and Tennessee.

In Ohio the Lutheran church owed its beginnings to a frontiersman, chosen by the people to be their preacher. He traveled east to be licensed by the Pennsylvania Ministerium, then, ten years later, ordained. The Pittsburgh Synod was organized with the Great Commission in the preamble of its constitution. Into the twentieth century, the growing population and expanding territory made home mission a daunting task.

New forms of mission began to develop. In the 1840s William Passavant from Pittsburgh began to promote "inner mission" to reclaim people spiritually and rehabilitate them physically. Health, education and welfare, as well as better worship forms, were all included.

Foreign missions was advocated, using Muhlenberg as the model of a missionary who had left his homeland to serve overseas. In 1842, exactly one century after Muhlenberg's arrival in America, John C. F. Heyer arrived in India as a missionary from the Pennsylvania Ministerium.

During the Civil War, the Pennsylvania Ministerium provided chaplains for the Union forces. After the Civil War, with the heirs of the Muhlenberg tradition divided among three organizations, home missions not only continued but took on new forms. The General Council had missionaries at the ports of entry to the United States to assist immigrants. It maintained, as did the General Synod, a seminary in Germany to train pastors for service to immigrant congregations in America.

Into the twentieth century, the growing population and expanding territory made home mission a daunting task.

While other church bodies had organized in the Middle West to serve immigrants from various predominantly Lutheran territories in Europe, often absorbing earlier missions begun by eastern synods, those from the Muhlenberg tradition took a new approach and organized English language congregations from Ohio to the Pacific.

When the spiritual heirs of Muhlenberg united into the United Lutheran Church in America at the close of World War I, they had missionaries overseas in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Yet their work in foreign missions did not match proportionately the overseas work of some other Lutheran churches in America.

Since the war had put the use of the German language into steep decline, home missions became largely a matter of establishing new English language congregations. The exceptions came from newer immigrant groups, such as those from Slovakia, Hungary, and Finland.

The new united church developed a growing emphasis upon social concerns.

Political advocacy had begun by the eastern synods in the early nineteenth century. Such issues as temperance and Sabbath (Sunday) observance had been at the head of the list. Some synods in the North had declared slavery to be a sin. While those in the South might show concern for the religion of the slaves, once the Confederacy had formed, they tended to declare that slavery was not a sin. Such conflict in viewpoints had encouraged the predominant pattern among Lutherans to consider social action an individual matter. With the United Lutheran Church in the 1920s, however, public issues became a regular part of the church's agenda. Later it published three volumes on "Christian Social Responsibility."[3]

With the United Lutheran Church in the 1920s, public issues became a regular part of the church's agenda.

Other new ministries, in which the United Lutheran Church took the earliest initiative, included pastoral service specifically for students at universities and radio programs such as the National Radio Pulpit aired by the National Broadcasting Company.

The war had brought cooperation with other Lutheran church bodies to serve soldiers and sailors and to care for orphaned missions which had been cut off from support by Lutheran mission societies in Europe. World War II increased such cooperation and added home missions in war industry towns. After the war, campus ministry was among the additions to cooperative work.

In the 1962 (LCA) and 1987 (ELCA) church mergers, the Muhlenberg tradition was joined with other traditions that agreed with the breadth of concerns included in reaching people with the gospel.

Current situation. At the beginning of a new century, the church formed from a mixture of Lutheran traditions will be assessing where it is headed with home mission, global mission and social mission. Memories of great endeavors during the quarter century following World War II are dying out with the generation which experienced them, and the trends suggest the question, "What next?"

During the "religion boom" following World War II, new congregations were established by the hundreds for mobile, fairly prosperous, white middle class families, and in the ULCA the Muhlenberg words were turned into a motto, "The Church Must Be Planted." Then the church widened its mission to assist existing strategically located congregations to survive and serve a diversity of peoples. Now a shortage of funds requires the difficult task of establishing priorities and long-range strategies.

Time was when congregations could be mobilized by the thousands to join in uniform evangelism programs to attract new members and reactivate the inactive. Presently many congregations insist upon greater freedom to pursue their own mission initiatives and emphasize the distinctiveness of their circumstances.

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[3] Harold C. Letts, ed., *Christian Social Responsibility*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

Global mission responded to the new independence of former colonial territories and assisted in organizing autonomous churches in those places. Rather than concentrating on a limited number of mission fields, which had won a degree of loyalty among members of the supporting churches in America, emphasis has been placed upon projects which will allow greater flexibility as change may require. New loyalties have been engendered by developing relationships between specific churches overseas, or sections of them, and individual synods or congregations in the ELCA. Although conversions are far from out of date, the greater respect for peoples of other cultures has called for putting demeaning attitudes aside, and for engaging in interfaith dialogue. Such dialogue has become appropriate at the home base in America, too, as religious diversity has increased.

After World War II relief aid overseas secured donations by the trainload and by the tens of millions of dollars. World Hunger appeals have continued to elicit generosity for overseas emergencies, although emergencies at home have been gaining more in support. Efforts overseas have moved toward promoting self-help community development. Government support for such work by churches has diminished from the earlier major proportion to the present very little.

At home the War on Poverty increased the reliance by governmental units upon the church's social service agencies. Lutheran agencies received additions largely from government to their existing funding and reached a total from all sources approaching two and a half billion dollars, the largest service program of any Christian communion. As the ideal of a humanitarian government wanes, both in overseas and domestic services, the church agencies face major priority and strategy decisions.

The enthusiasm among segments of the church's membership for the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement in the 1960s may now be replaced by environmental concerns. In each instance corporate response by the church has been expected by some, in the form both of official statements and of action for the common good of humanity.

In a society with strong forces for "earn your own way" individualism, and a widespread belief that everyone has a chance to "make it" in a free society, the church may join in the debate over definitions of freedom, justice, and peace, and about the causes of poverty, delinquency and violence. It can espouse self-help and ecological responsibility as causes deserving nurture. It will want to minister to those who are already disciples, comforting them as needed, challenging them when possible. The mission has grown to be as diverse and complex as modern life, but it still exists only because the church has received the gospel which God has given for new life in Christ.

Organization

Beginnings. There were Lutheran organizations in America before Muhlenberg's arrival. As early as the 1620s and 1630s there were Lutherans in the Dutch colony along the Hudson River, but they had trouble receiving governmental approval for a pastor until the British gained control in 1664. Along the Delaware River, again in the 1630s, Lutherans were dominant in the Swedish colony. In the Virgin Islands, Danish Lutherans built Frederick Church in 1666. In the 1730s along the Savannah River, the Salzburgers settled after fleeing persecution in Austria. In addition, by the time of Muhlenberg's arrival in America, there were Lutheran settlers in Nova Scotia and in Maine, as well as in his assigned

Muhlenberg proved to be a master organizer, and several features of his developments survive to this day.

destination of Pennsylvania.

Although congregations survived in these places, larger Lutheran organizations did not. In New York and northern New Jersey, in 1725, William Christopher Berkenmeyer organized fourteen congregations into parishes, structures which had disintegrated by 1751. In New Sweden the congregations were a district of the Skara diocese in the homeland and later came under the Archbishop of Uppsala. Under authority of the Church of Sweden, the first Lutheran pastors were ordained in America. Their church buildings might also have been first. The first Indian missions were conducted by a Swedish Lutheran pastor. When Sweden gave up its colony to the British, however, the congregations aligned with the Anglican Church. In Ebenezer, Georgia, the Salzburgers not only built church buildings but also an orphanage, the first Lutheran social ministry institution in America. Yet with the American Revolution, these colonists began to scatter. No Lutheran organization survived from any of these beginnings, except a few congregations.

It was three congregations in Pennsylvania which helped determine the course of Muhlenberg's life. New Hanover, Providence (or Trappe), and Philadelphia, all established by 1730, organized as the United Congregations in 1733 and appealed for a pastor from Europe. The initiative of responsible laymen was matched by their faithfulness, as they waited for nine years. They were already organized as deacons and elders, who would meet Muhlenberg and agree on how he should proceed to get acquainted and establish his leadership in the congregations.

Muhlenberg was accustomed to a much more secure and ordered organization of the church than he found in America. In his hometown of Einbeck, where he had been baptized, catechized and confirmed, there were church buildings centuries old, pastors and other church personnel who were trained, assigned and supervised by an ecclesiastical organization for the town and its territory, where the government provided legal and financial support. None of this existed in Pennsylvania. At Halle he had known the complex of institutions built by A. H. Francke with support from wealthy landholders. By cooperation with the ecclesiastical authorities of Saxony, he had been ordained in Leipzig. The Halle mission network included ties in London with the court chaplain Ziegenhagen, who was the point of contact for the Pennsylvania congregations. The young Muhlenberg benefited from some time with Ziegenhagen before setting off for an almost totally undisciplined and minimally structured church environment.

Fortunately Muhlenberg proved to be a master organizer, and several features of his developments survive to this day. He relied on authoritative documents, such as his ordination certificate, to displace self-appointed ministers who had no such authorization. Since he wanted a proper call from each congregation he asked the leaders to sign a document which he had drawn up to specify the division of responsibilities.

A few years later, in 1748, Muhlenberg

invited to a meeting the four pastors who had followed him from Halle, the Swedish provost, and John Christopher Hartwick who had come from Hamburg, Germany, to serve a parish in New York and had visited Muhlenberg two years earlier. The date was August 15 on the calendar in use at the time. It would be August 26 on our current calendar. The occasion was the dedication of a sizeable new church building by the Philadelphia congregation. The stated purpose was "closer union among the preachers," plus "consultation and agreement in matters concerning the congregations."[4] Laymen from some ten congregations were in attendance to report on their congregations and to provide advice when requested. Only the pastors would vote.

Muhlenberg wanted approval for an order of worship, which he and a couple of other pastors had developed. The liturgy which was adopted was the best that Lutherans would have, according to traditional standards, for another century.

Uppermost of items on the agenda was ordination. There were never enough pastors. School teachers had to be licensed to preach and tutored in private to prepare for ordination. Muhlenberg held to the policy in Germany that the church should provide for the examination and ordination of candidates. He did not want to practice private ordination as some had done. Muhlenberg made it clear that he did not believe that ordination conferred any "inherent power" or effected any "personal change," but that ordination provided the authority to hold the office of pastor and to perform the functions of the office.[5]

The new organization assumed significant responsibilities for strengthening good order in the church, but it did not have much structure of its own at the beginning—no officers for the first two years, no regular annual meetings until 1767—and was considered an experiment by Muhlenberg. After all, the mission of the church over an expanding territory and growing population was too demanding to allow much time for seeing to its organized embodiment beyond congregations. Then too Muhlenberg could be counted on to serve as Senior, not only in length of tenure or the expectation of the Halle fathers, but even more in his forceful leadership. The organization did not feel the need for a constitution until 1781, when it finally settled upon a name: Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of North America. Districts or conferences were allowed, where pastors located near each other could meet.

In the meantime, in 1762, Muhlenberg had developed a constitution for St. Michael's congregation in Philadelphia. The form which he used had origins in sixteenth century Amsterdam, where Lutherans were a minority free church much like Lutherans in America. The form had been adapted in London, in New York, and among the Salzburgers in Georgia. It provided for the congregation to elect its pastor and its lay leaders.

In all of the texts which Muhlenberg developed for organizational purposes, a confessional basis was included. In the call for a pastor, the constitution for a congregation, and for the Ministerium, there was reference to the Augsburg Confession and often to the other Lutheran symbolical documents. In the order of worship there was the creed.

He had adopted a polity that would survive through these 250 years and many

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[4] *Documentary History of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and Adjacent States, Proceedings of the Conventions from 1748 to 1821* (General Council Board of Publication, Philadelphia, 1898), 3-42.

[5] Tappert, *op. cit.*, 47.

changes in church structure. The laity were members of congregations where they had defined powers and responsibilities. The pastors were members of a ministerium, which could decide about discipline of its members and about who qualified for ordination. The structures indicated that the church was both local congregations and a more universal reality, a fundamental aspect of the Muhlenberg tradition.

Subsequent history. For over half a century after Muhlenberg's death in 1787, a responsiveness to the American environment seemed to influence Lutheran organizations more than loyalty to Lutheran identity.

In the constitution adopted in 1792, the Pennsylvania Ministerium did not include any reference to the Lutheran confessions. Neither was acceptance of the confessions required for ordination. In accord with government by the people, which was developing in the new nation, lay delegates were now allowed to vote at Ministerium meetings.

Since the conferences were forming separate synods, the Ministerium proposed a General Synod to maintain unity. Quite the opposite resulted. Synods began to divide between those which favored and those which opposed a General Synod, which was finally founded in 1820. The Ministerium itself remained a member for only a couple of years. Fear of centralization and disagreement about confessionalism were among the reasons. Some Ministerium congregations were more interested in relations with the Reformed Church than with Lutheran unity.

S. S. Schmucker became president of Gettysburg Seminary, organized in 1826, the first Lutheran institution to endure until the present. He strove to make the General Synod a viable organization, and by the 1850s most eastern synods had joined again, including the Pennsylvania Ministerium. In the interest of Americanization, however, he proposed slight emendations to the Augsburg Confession, a move which engendered new debates and divisions.

In another fifteen years the General Synod had broken into three parts, dividing the heirs to the Muhlenberg tradition. The Civil War had caused the southern synods to organize on their own. Renewed concern for confessional identity brought a withdrawal of half of the northern synods that remained, to form the General Council in 1867 under the leadership of the Pennsylvania Ministerium. Each part had its own seminary, a new one in Philadelphia and one in the South since 1830.

By 1888, however, the kinship felt by the three groups had led to cooperation in producing a worship order, the Common Service. In 1918 they came together in the United Lutheran Church in America on the basis of the Lutheran confessions.

By that time, Muhlenberg would have been gratified at the number of Lutheran institutions. His plans to build some in Philadelphia had gone unfulfilled. In the 1840s William Passavant had begun starting orphanages, hospitals, a college and a seminary. No Lutheran can claim credit for more institutions than he. Others were at work beginning in the 1840s, which was a boon decade for founding institutions. One college in Allentown, Pennsylvania, was named for Muhlenberg.

Muhlenberg would have been surprised by the complexity of church structure. Besides synods, there were boards and committees within the synods and within the churchwide organization of the ULCA. In addition, cooperation brought participation in the Lutheran World Convention and in councils of an interdenominational makeup.

Disagreements about the inspiration of Scripture, lodge membership, and inter-

church relations divided Lutherans and were issues on which the ULCA held distinctive positions. For Lutheran unity the ULCA considered subscription to the Lutheran confessions sufficient, and in 1962 it merged with Lutherans of three other traditions to form the Lutheran Church in America. Then in 1987, Lutherans of a still greater mix of traditions formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The international organization had become the Lutheran World Federation at the close of World War II. In America, the organizations which were bringing the greatest variety of Lutherans together were Lutheran World Relief and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. Confessional identity was a unifying force when it came to service, although theologically it could still be divisive.

Current situation. As the ELCA faces the future, some prognosticators are predicting that megachurches (self-sufficient, all-inclusive congregations) will dominate among church structures. Others predict a disintegration into house churches small enough to assure a congenial group committed to service according to a New Testament model.

If complex denominational structures persist, congregations will still continue to experience pressures to expand their involvement in local mission, even as they are challenged by the church body to worldwide cooperation and a universal vision. Where Lutheran institutions, such as colleges and social service agencies, no longer serve predominantly church constituencies, constant attention to defining their church relationship will be needed. Synods and churchwide structures will be called upon to serve a diversity of people and still maintain unity with a clear identity and integrity.

In a society that has developed a proliferation of voluntary organizations, the church has reason to assess which of its programs deserve priority on the basis of clearly combining Christian faith with effectiveness in Christian service.

The ELCA has an excellent description of the "nature of the church" in its constitution (Chapter 2.02):

> The church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.

Although the ELCA statement copies substantially a similar statement that was in the LCA constitution, the dual nature of the church echoes the structures which Muhlenberg defined over two centuries earlier.

As a corporate entity in a free society, where people are to decide the direction of the nation, the church faces the question whether it has a responsibility to serve as a conscience for society as moral guide or goad. As an organized group of people, what is the church's responsibility to its own members? What claim to their time, talents and treasure is proper compared to their divine calling to other institutions, such as families and those structures providing for daily work and for civic order? How does the church teach stewardship in a society which can exaggerate the need for material goods while it is raising the standard of living for some and increasing the difficulty of survival for others?

Organization for the church is more than a framework. It is people in dependable and purposeful relationships. Along with all the human needs that the organized church may serve, it will want to be a seedbed for mission, for planting the gospel in people's lives, for growth as a confessing church in whatever its social setting.

Personal experience

Beginnings. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg understood the course of his life to have been determined by his experience shortly after he began his studies at the University of Göttingen. He believed God had rescued him from "boozing" and "brawling" with the wrong associates.[6] God's agents had been three students from the University of Halle and Professor Oporin. He credited the theological courses with awakening his deeply personal awareness of sin and justification by Christ, and with strengthening his faith for the power of a new life.

Such experience needed continuing renewal. Muhlenberg spoke of daily repentance. He believed in reflecting on the spiritual significance of a day's events and keeping a journal record.

Muhlenberg replayed his own experience in his ministry to other individuals and families. When someone was ill or dying or wanted counsel, Muhlenberg would read to them from Scripture, discuss the pertinence of the text, encourage the persons to respond by describing their feelings, if with tears, so much the better. He would lead them in a confession of sin and of faith, pray with them, and assure them of God's grace. His basic premise was that "theoretical knowledge, without practice and experience, leaves a person in the lurch when trouble comes."[7]

In advising a man who wanted to work for the Lutheran church, Muhlenberg recommended the study of the Bible, the Lutheran symbolical books and such authors as Luther, Arndt, and Spener in order to acquire "the fundamental biblical and theological truths and experience them."[8] He believed a pastor should have experienced the truth of the doctrines which he was expected to teach and preach. It was not enough to stick to the "unaltered Augsburg Confession with an unaltered heart."[9]

Yet experience was not self-sufficient. Only the Word of God, the promise of the gospel, provided the source for trust and assurance of salvation.

Muhlenberg disagreed with George Whitefield, who taught that every adult needed a conversion experience. He defended infant baptism, took care to provide for catechization, and held the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be an integral part of the life of faith. As a result Muhlenberg has been dubbed an "orthodox pietist."[10]

For worship experience, he wanted the traditional liturgy. Although he knew that his Germans considered the sung liturgy of the Swedes to be too "papistical," and that the immigrants had come from different locations and liturgical traditions, he solved the problem by using as a basis the liturgy in use among the Lutherans in London and introducing some variants from several Reformation liturgies in Germany.

Muhlenberg thought of experience with

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[6] *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942-1958), 1:3.

[7] *Ibid.*, 1:498.

[8] *Ibid.*, 1:182.

[9] *Ibid.*, 2:387; 3:427.

[10] Lehmann, op. cit., 9-10. For more extensive study, cf. Robert F. Scholz, "Was Muhlenberg a Pietist?, *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 52:2 (Summer, 1979), esp. 50-58.

particular reference to feelings, convictions and the motivating power of the will in relation to Jesus Christ. Today's analysis might consider his cultural background as a part of his experience and thus explain (1) his adherence to a certain brand of Christian tradition, (2) his desire to perpetuate a scholarly professional ministry, and (3) a historical liturgy. These indeed belong to the Muhlenberg tradition.

Subsequent history. After Muhlenberg's time, his combination of pietism and tradition began to lose out. The pressure from rationalism and deism in small measure, and from revivalism in large measure, made the confessions seem less important.

During Muhlenberg's last years, the Enlightenment in Germany had caused Americans to question the wisdom of seeking pastors from there. Any attempt to make rationalism fit with supernatural revelation was too confusing for most people, even when it was attempted by the Halle graduate who had become president of the New York Ministerium.

The Pennsylvania Ministerium made "experimental religion" a constitutional requirement for the clergy. Sermons were to aim for edification and were to be judged by their practical value. Emotional intensity, greater than had characterized Pietism, became prevalent in revivalism during the first half of the nineteenth century.

S. S. Schmucker in his inaugural of 1826 highlighted "fervent piety" as a prerequisite for theological education. Like Muhlenberg, his experience included scholarly learning, but not with quite the same commitment to the Lutheran confessions. Rather, at Princeton where he studied, the battle of biblical revelation against rationalism probably contributed to Schmucker's later effort to adjust Lutheran confessionalism to his experience of religious pluralism

He believed a pastor should have experienced the truth of the doctrines which he was expected to teach and preach.

in America, and it should be remembered he showed a concern for the confessions at a time when some Lutherans were ignoring them altogether.

The worship experience among Lutherans also reflected current trends. The traditional form was revised and replaced. Historic elements, even the creed, were dropped. With responsive liturgy gone, the congregation participated in little more than hymn singing. Prominence was given to the sermon and to "prayers from the heart."

In the 1850s a shift began. Germany was experiencing renewed interest in historical origins, and changes were introduced in Pennsylvania by immigrant pastors who became presidents of the Ministerium. Some historic liturgy was introduced in 1855. The English translation became the Church Book of the General Council, then of the General Synod and of the United Synod, South. The Muhlenberg tradition in worship was getting back on track.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, intrusions by scientific learning were becoming a part of experience to be considered by religious leaders. The influence was felt in "natural theology" and in biblical study.

Before the Civil War natural science was largely a matter of collecting flora and

fauna and organizing them according to species. Some Lutheran pastors gained recognition for their notable contributions. Theologically the emphasis was placed upon the harmony between science and the Bible.

A change occurred when Agassiz and Darwin presented their challenging theo-

Will conformity or diversity prevail in the foreseeable future?

ries. Although rejection of the new science prevailed among Lutherans, Milton Valentine at Gettysburg Seminary as early as 1884, and later Henry Eyster Jacobs and John A. W. Haas at Philadelphia Seminary asserted that, if proven, the new scientific theories posed no threat to Christian faith.

Literary and historical criticism of Scripture struck closer home. Again there were strong opponents. Early in the twentieth century, however, Jacobs and Haas were claiming that verbal inspiration of Scripture was neither necessary nor Lutheran. F. H. Knubel, who would become the first president of the ULCA, agreed.

In 1938 the ULCA adopted the Baltimore Declaration, which held that the Bible received its authority from its message. Charles Jacobs had developed the case for considering the Word of God in a threefold sense: gospel message, Jesus Christ, and Scripture in which Christ is central. This ULCA formula survived to be largely adopted in the ELCA constitution.[11]

After 200 years of the Muhlenberg tradition, there was a characteristic readiness to adjust to the cultural environment, as well as an expectation that experience should correlate with the confessional understanding of Scripture.

Current situation. Today the role of experience in Christian life is commonly termed spirituality. Can Muhlenberg's combination of pietistic experience and confessional commitment shed light upon a Lutheran type of spirituality? If so, both studied understanding and emotional feeling would be included, along with certain specific activities.

These activities would involve Bible study and prayer in private and in groups. In public worship, hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments would receive priority in a setting of prayer and praise. Christian fellowship would emphasize giving and receiving comfort and counsel with other Christians. The desired result: experiencing the presence and the power of God, together with motivation and commitment for Christian living. In church and out, generosity and ethical conduct would be a constant concern.

For worship today, there are contrasting trends. An increase in liturgy and symbolism in worship have pushed the historical horizon back to pre-Lutheran traditions. On the other hand, there are freer forms of worship preferred by some congregations. Or a congregation may offer a choice at different services. Will conformity or diversity prevail in the foreseeable future? How can Christian community be experienced, in spite of diversity and fragmentation in society?

Two aspects of present-day experience deserve special attention, one of more recent development, the other of longer duration.

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[11] Chapter 2.02.

Forms of experience as a part of a new social consciousness have received explicit expression in recent decades. The "black experience" or the "feminine experience" are examples of special insights and concerns of a particular group, which deserve the attention of the church for the benefit of the whole society. Since the movements involved include non-religious people, the church needs to encourage its members to share their perceptions of the Christian grounds for participation and for a positive contribution by the church. A Lutheran churchbody may adopt an official policy statement for social goals and social action, but then it must foster specific study and action programs.

A more long-standing aspect of modern culture, science, is concerned with provable natural causation and process, and it should not be expected to prove or disprove the existence of God. Although the church can acknowledge the degree to which everyone is indebted to scientific discovery and the resulting technological development, it also needs to recognize that science is continually theorizing, and debating probabilities in order to correct or augment its findings, rather than to promote an absolute determinism.

In a free society where many divergent interpretations of life experiences are available, Christians still have reason to wonder at the hiddenness as well as at the grace of God. Amid the imperfections of human attainments and understandings, Christians may seek a wholistic involvement of faith with social and intellectual challenges of our time, while spiritual strength remains greatly dependent upon traditional resources.

Ecumenism

Encountering new dimensions of religious pluralism in America, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg made himself at home by being friendly toward other churches, but selectively so. He was ready to cooperate with Presbyterians and Anglicans, and with a revivalist preacher such as George Whitefield, but especially with the German Reformed. He might preach in their churches and they in his. Interestingly when he had preached in a congregation with both Reformed and Lutherans present, he recorded that he had preached in a manner that would offend neither group. Although he could cooperate to this degree, he cautioned against allowing union churches to produce laxity in teaching.

As for selectivity, he had the most trouble with Moravians. When Muhlenberg left Germany, Count von Zinzendorf was under the ban in Saxony and forbidden to enter Hanover. He was being criticized by Pietists and Orthodoxists alike.

Upon disembarking in Charleston, Muhlenberg heard about a conflict between pro-Moravian and anti-Moravian Lutherans and Reformed in the very place where he was headed. The part of the congregation in Philadelphia which had accepted the preacher sent by the Moravians had taken over the church building and locked out the others. Eventually the court returned the property to those who had rejected the Moravian preacher.

Muhlenberg met with Zinzendorf, who questioned his legitimacy. Muhlenberg found fault with the Moravians' de-emphasis of the Law, repentance, faith and sanctification in their effort to focus on the love of Jesus. In addition they appeared to hope to dominate in a union of German Christians. Although Moravians eventually gave up any aggressiveness and Zinzendorf regained good standing in Europe, they continued to be among those less acceptable to Muhlenberg.

Muhlenberg did not consider Quakers and Anabaptists to be "church people," because of their attitude toward sacraments. He took exception to various "specious sects," because they relied only on proof texts, or accepted sudden conversions, or opposed churches and their sacraments.

Even where Muhlenberg was friendly, he remained doctrinally discriminating. After an Anglican had praised the divine institution of episcopal succession, Muhlenberg responded, "the terms 'episcopi' and 'presbyter' are synonymous in the apostolic writings; and succession was dragged through deep mud during the dark ages."[12] He set a pattern of selective openness with other churches, which became characteristic of the Muhlenberg tradition.

Subsequent history. After Muhlenberg, friendliness moved toward formal arrangements. For several years the New York Ministerium agreed that the Episcopal Church should serve English language Lutherans. Later the influence of the Oxford Movement brought high church tendencies not appreciated by Lutherans, and the agreement was terminated.

In South Carolina, again for a few years, some Lutheran and Reformed ministers formed a united organization. There was much talk of a similar union in Pennsylvania, where there was already cooperation in church buildings, a hymnal and the founding of Franklin College (today Franklin-Marshall).

Friendliness now extended to Moravians. The North Carolina Synod even elected a Moravian to serve as secretary, then as president. Methodists were out of favor, however, because the enthusiasm in their worship was attracting Lutherans away from their home congregations.

In the mid-nineteenth century S. S. Schmucker sought Protestant unity on the basis of fundamental scriptural teachings; but he did not include Unitarians, Campbellites, Baptists, and certainly not Roman Catholics or deists. He was a leader in organizing the International Evangelical Alliance in 1846.

In contrast Charles Porterfield Krauth, interested in Lutheran unity, led the General Council in developing the Akron-Galesburg Rule of 1872-75, to oppose sharing pulpits and altars with non-Lutherans.

The General Synod allowed freedom in such matters. Then in 1908 it became a charter member of the Federal Council of Churches, but left in 1917 to join in forming the United Lutheran Church in America.

The ULCA worked out its ecumenical policy in the Washington Declaration of 1920, which advocated cooperation in interchurch endeavors. Prepared by F. H. Knubel and Charles Jacobs, the content had been presented earlier in an inter-Lutheran meeting, where it had not been well received.

The ULCA was developing two criteria for ecumenical cooperation: (1) the evangelical principle for alliance only with churches which confessed Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Savior, and (2) the representative principle which required that only official representatives of churches, and no co-opted individuals, would have power to vote. Since the Federal Council did not honor either principle fully, the ULCA held only a consultative relation to that organization.

The ULCA and its antecedents had participated in interchurch world mission conferences and the International Missionary Council, and in most of the international Conferences on Faith and Order and on Life and Work.

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[12] *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, op.cit., 1:323.

In planning for the World Council of Churches, the ULCA took the lead in mobilizing Lutheran support, both at home and abroad, for representation according to confessional families rather than by national constituencies. Abdel Ross Wentz won the case in committees and at the first Assembly in 1948. Then Franklin Clark Fry received high office in the WCC Central Committee.

In 1950 the ULCA took a leading part in applying its ecumenical principles in the formation of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. On the same basis, synods and congregations were encouraged to join state and local councils of churches.

In all of these ecumenical developments, the ULCA was consistent with the Muhlenberg tradition of interchurch relations on a selective basis.

Current situation. In the 1960s a new ecumenical development involved all churches that would be in the ELCA, namely bilateral dialogues, first with the Reformed-Presbyterian churches, then the Roman Catholic Church and finally the Episcopal Church. Later dialogues have included Methodists, Baptists, Conservative Evangelicals, Orthodox, and Moravians. International dialogues have been under the sponsorship of the Lutheran World Federation.

This development led to a major shift taking place in ecumenism. For about 25 years after World War II, the conciliar movement dominated the ecumenical scene. Now interconfessional dialogues are front and center.

Councils of churches have been a comprehensive type of organization. They incorporate most major Protestant denominations and Orthodox churches, and their programs cover most areas of church activity. Since the disruptions of the 1960s, they have suffered from declining support and retrenchment in program. In the NCCCUSA a salient feature has been the prominent place of "Black" churches. In addition to the growth of membership in the WCC from churches in developing nations, Lutherans have had great interest in the study of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, a multilateral process for matters usually reserved for bilateral dialogues. A key figure at a crucial point in the process was William Lazareth who could be called a representative of the Muhlenberg tradition.

> Even where Muhlenberg was friendly, he remained doctrinally discriminating.

In contrast to the broad representation and programming of the conciliar movement, dialogues have usually involved a small group of specialists limited to study and discussion of the theology and polity of two confessional families, thus narrow in scope but as deep in the topics discussed as the essence of the church.

From this very focused activity has grown proposals for full communion, which suggest broad and profound implications from the dialogues. According to the Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment adopted by the 1991 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, full communion with another church involves not only intercommunion, sharing pulpits and transfer of members, which have been practiced quite generally already, but interchangeability of ordained

The diversity of peoples and the complexity of structures is greater, but the need for planting the church in a changing society remains the same.

ministers, common commitments to evangelism, witness and service, and common decision making.[13] In the past, decisions about this variety of matters would have been made separately over a considerable period of time and with due attention to particular conditions that pertain in each case. Now it remains to be seen what difference full communion makes as a commitment to work with other churches on a whole panoply of involvements.

By adopting the Formula of Agreement,[14] which had already been approved by the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, the way has been opened to actual experience with full communion. A joint committee is to "coordinate implementation."

Based as it is on "A Common Calling, The Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations, 1988-1992,"[15] the Formula breaks new ground. It specifically notes with refreshing and uncompromising honesty, not only "agreement on the essential matters of the gospel," but also "important theological differences." In the past such differences would have been sufficient to prevent altar and pulpit fellowship. Instead, "the varying emphases" are declared to "provide complementary expressions of the church's faith in the Triune God," not "disagreements that need to be overcome," not church-dividing, but "diverse witnesses to the one gospel that is confessed in common." "Complementary" is the new key word. Confessional complementarity is matched by another new emphasis: "mutual affirmation and admonition." The churches affirm each other because their diversity is needed for adequate witness, and they admonish each other because none of them claims to be perfect. Theological dialogue is to continue, even as the churches develop new dimensions of cooperation.

Since full communion with the Episcopal Church in the USA remains a burning issue for the ELCA, what pattern of relationship may be anticipated? In addition to an "Agreement in the Doctrine of the Faith" in a summary of "the international Anglican-Lutheran doctrinal consensus,"[16] will the differences that have marked the theology and polity of the two churches be clearly stated and evaluated? Will these differences be seen as complementary and reason for affirmation and admonition? Or will quite a different pattern require amendments to the governing documents of the ELCA in order to attain a conformity on a threefold ministry and on a "distinct minis-

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[13] Minutes, ELCA Churchwide Assembly, 1991, pp. 357-358.

[14] *Ecumenical Proposals*, "Documents for Action by the 1997 Churchwide Assembly" (Office of the Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, 1996), 18-22, esp. p. 19 for quotations.

[15] Keith F. Nickel and Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

[16] *Ecumenical Proposals*, op cit., 7-13.

try of bishop" that "embodies the historic continuity of each bishop and the diocese or synod with the apostolic church and ministry through the ages"? Will it require a half dozen bishops from the two churches to participate in the "ordinations/installations" of bishops, and will such representation from only these two churches be considered the best way to provide "a sign of the unity... of the whole church"? These are some of the issues needing further exploration.

In this new ecumenical era, how many patterns for proceeding toward full communion are likely to develop? Since full communion is considered with one church, or one family of churches, at a time, how will inconsistencies be avoided, in order to minimize the possibility of conflict eventuating with one church or another over the course of time? As always in ecumenical relations, more than sentiment and personal preferences will be needed in order to take all three of the emphases of John 17:17-23 seriously: the truth of God's Word, the mission of being sent into the world, and unity through Christ.

At the same time, the ELCA has become concerned about relations to Judaism and to some extent with Islam and other religions. Such inclusiveness has influenced the compositions of some local councils or conferences of churches, which only in the last couple of decades had begun to include Roman Catholics.

In the past 250 years Lutherans have moved ever outward in interchurch relations, from informal friendliness and sharing to formal organizations and agreements, but with selectivity concerned with confessional commitments to the gospel. With people of other faiths, the emphasis has fallen on dialogue, mutual understanding and cooperation for community wellbeing. The diversity of peoples and the complexity of structures is greater, but the need for planting the church in a changing society remains the same.

Religious Pluralism: Threat or Opportunity for Mission?

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Recently a news director for National Public Radio wrote, "In America, it is more and more evident each year that diversity has replaced unity as the underlying assumption of our national culture."[1] What he labeled euphemistically as "an underlying assumption" is, however, frequently portrayed in more graphic, disturbing terms as "culture wars"[2] or to use *Time* magazine's more vivid metaphor, "America's Holy War."[3] In either case, it should be clear to any perceptive observer in this country today that encounters between peoples who share neither a common culture, religion, or identity often engender anxiety and fear and result in misunderstandings, conflicts, and even violence. Conflicts of this kind are always lamentable, often avoidable, and they can be exceedingly dangerous for anyone perceived to be different.

Religious pluralism in the United States: a brief history

In the past, even when I was a youth, it was a matter of pride that the United States was a religiously pluralistic society. But ours was a very limited pluralism. From the time the Puritans arrived and established themselves in what they called "New England" and later in other colonies along the eastern seaboard, their communities—and later the nation as a whole—were overwhelmingly European and Christian in terms of the culture. This is less and less the case today. The roots of the change can be traced to at least five centuries ago, but only in the last forty years has the change become conspicuous to most of us.

The roots of change. Prior to the sixteenth century, Christianity was predominantly—though not exclusively—a faith concen-

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[1] "One Nation? American Culture Wars: The Search for Common Ground," May 9-15, 1995, Director's Notes of the printed text distributed by WUNC, Chapel Hill, NC, prior to the airing of the series.

[2] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). See also Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

[3] *Time*, December 9, 1991, p. 60.

trated in Eastern and Western Europe. Enclaves of Christians existed outside of Europe, the faith having been carried to such distant lands as South India and China well before the end of the first millennium. Forms of Christianity also survived the incredible seventh-century spread of Islam that swept through the Middle East, westward across North Africa, into southern Europe, eastward through Persia, and into India. In most cases, however, Christians outside of Europe survived as struggling minorities, oftentimes closed and defensive. The vast majority of Christians were Europeans. In fact, virtually all Europeans were considered to be Christians, albeit inaccurately.

With the so-called discovery of the Americas in the last decade of the fifteenth century, followed by the rise of multiple European colonial powers (besides Spain and Portugal) and the modern missionary movement, Christianity was taken to peoples, lands, and cultures all over the world. Unfortunately, a tragic feature of this largely European expansion was the political domination and economic exploitation of non-European peoples often sanctioned or ignored by western Christians. Meanwhile, the religious impact of Christianity on non-Europeans ended the geographical confinement and cultural isolation of the world's religions and peoples. For whereas before the sixteenth century Christian and non-Christian peoples frequently intersected and sometimes clashed, since that time their contacts have increased even to the point of periodic intermingling and constant challenging of each other. Not only has the Christian faith penetrated previously closed societies, gained from them millions of converts, and established hundreds of thousands of Christian congregations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia, the increased presence of non-Christian peoples in the West—together with the gradual awareness of what these people believe and practice—have forced Christian theologians to re-think many long-held ideas.

As already implied, until this present century, adherents to these non-Christian religions—with the exception of Jews—were almost entirely concentrated in non-European areas of the world. India was the home of Hinduism. Buddhism was the predominant religion of the Far East, and Islam dominated the Near East, North and Central Africa, and spread eastward as far as present-day Indonesia.

Though most Hindus still live in the Indian sub-continent and Buddhists in East and South East Asia, Muslims dominate or represent significant minorities in many African and Asian countries. Moreover, a significant dispersion of Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists to the West has taken place in this present century, especially since the late 1940s and the 1950s. Though it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when this non-Christian diaspora began, certain features of it are quite clear.

Islam in the Americas. Some African-American scholars contend that as early as the sixteenth century when hundreds of thousands of Africans began to be brought to the Americas as slaves, many are believed to have been Muslims.[4] Some of them and virtually all their descendants became professing Christians. In the last half-century, however, a substantial number of African Americans in the United States have abandoned the Christian faith

[4] According to Alan Austin, at least 10% of the slaves sold in the Charleston, South Carolina, market, for example, from 1711 to 1808, were "to some degree Muslims." *African Muslims in Ante-bellum America* (New York: Garland, 1984), 35. Austin goes on to say that his estimate of 10% is less than that of some scholars.

and embraced Islam. Whether this phenomenon can be explained as the result of genetic disposition, the slow impact of collective memory, or simply rebellion against one of the principal institutions of the perceived oppressor, I would not venture to say. But the growth of Islam among African Americans is not only significant in terms of numbers, it is crucial to understanding the rapidly changing cultural and religious makeup of this country.

Before the end of the nineteenth century, some Turkish and Arab Muslims entered the U.S. as immigrants, nearly all of them settling in major industrial cities such as Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Those who practiced their faith did so in homes, rented rooms, or in small, nondescript buildings. Early in the present century several hundred thousand Muslims from Eastern Europe were allowed entry, and one of the first mosques built in the United States was constructed in Maine in 1915 by Albanian immigrants. Then in 1928 Polish Muslims opened a mosque in Brooklyn, N.Y., and slowly a few others began to appear. Then in 1947 the magnificent Islamic Center opened at the corner of Massachusetts and Belmont Avenues N.W. in Washington, D.C. Now there are mosques and Islamic centers—more than 1500—of every size scattered throughout the country.

Hinduism in the Americas. With the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in the 1830s, large numbers of poverty-stricken East Indians were lured to the British and Dutch colonies of the Caribbean to replace blacks on the sugar plantations. Few of the East Indians returned to India, and eventually some of them and their descendants were among the more than a million immigrants from the West Indies who entered the U.S. between 1820 and 1970. Until after World War II, however, the number of Hindus in the United States was small.

In terms of public impact, Hinduism clearly emerged as a rival faith in this country during the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions meeting in Chicago. A small contingent of Hindus had come from India, and more than one gave major addresses to the assembly. No one, however, European or Asian, Christian or non-Christian, was received more warmly and enthusiastically than the diminutive Bengali ascetic, Vivekananda. Richard H. Seager in his recently published study of the Parliament notes that Vivekananda was "a favorite of the press and crowds," and every time he appeared "in his ocher robes and turban, greeting the audience as his sisters and brothers in America, he received several minutes of tumultuous applause."[5] Not only did this diminutive ambassador of Hinduism charm those attending the Parliament, he left the United States after having established a permanent Hindu presence in this country, the American Vedanta Society.[6]

Buddhism in the Americas. Earlier, in the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of Chinese, some of whom were Buddhists, were brought to the United States as indentured workers. A few temples were opened—two, for example in Montana. But when the jobs for these Chinese workers were completed, many though not all of them were returned to their homeland. Buddhism, albeit very weak, had a gained a foothold and was here to stay.

These Chinese indentured workers were first brought this country to toil in the California gold fields and later to work in the

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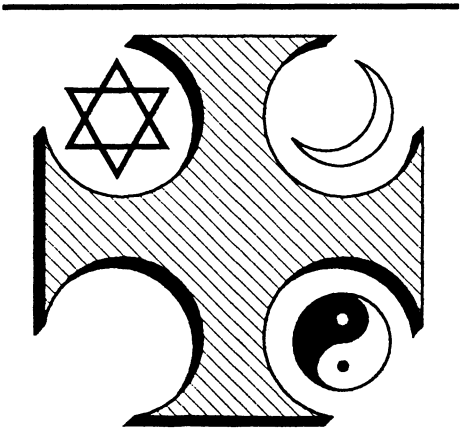
[5] *The World's Parliament of Religions. The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 111.

[6] *Ibid.*

construction of the transcontinental railroads. In a book published early this year, two Alabama historians observe that within five years following the end of the Civil War, "nearly a thousand Chinese laborers" were brought to Alabama to construct a rail line linking Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Meridian, Mississippi.[7]

Like indentured workers in other lands, the Chinese were severely restricted and were not free to mingle with the society. In Alabama, for example, they were forced to live in camps set up for them outside the towns and cities. More than three hundred of these Chinese were bivouacked outside Tuscaloosa and their provisions were supplied by the railroad company. When in 1871, shortly after the work had begun, the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad declared bankruptcy, these Chinese laborers were suddenly cut off from their jobs and support. They survived only because they were able to live "off the land" by catching crayfish and gathering berries they scavenged from the nearby creeks and fields. Eventually, the ever-roving labor agents managed to relocate some of them on the sugar plantations in Louisiana, but according to one southern historian, the economic collapse ot this single railroad company "resulted in the largest dispersal of Chinese to occur in the South."[8] Many southern U.S. Chinese families today can trace their ancestry back to this one economic incident when their forebears, by their own resourcefulness, were able to overcome what could have been a disaster.

In contrast to the Muslim African slaves who preceded them, the Chinese and East Indians who came to the Americas retained for the most part their cultures and their religious beliefs and practices, and therefore they represent the earliest Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims resident in this hemisphere. Many others, however, followed:



Buddhists from Japan and other areas of Asia, Sikhs from India, and Muslims from eastern Europe and Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and other African and Asian lands. As already indicated, most of them originally settled in the major industrial centers of the country where they found jobs, friends, and a degree of anonymity. Those who maintained and practiced their faith did so unobtrusively, and until the last half-century, relatively few mosques or temples were built. The worship centers which were opened were small and unimposing, and as already implied, they were for the most part found in the largest cities. Today, however, the situation has dramatically changed. Temples and mosques can be found in virtually every urban area of this country.

Moreover, until the 1960s few people

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[7] Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley, *Taking Christianity to China. Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1850-1950* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 22-23.

[8] Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 92-95. Cited by Flynt and Berkley, 22, n.2.

outside the largest U.S. cities had contact with or knew any person whose culture and/or religion was neither Christian nor Jewish. Is this not one of the reasons why Bible reading and prayer in the public schools was commonplace? Few school administrators, teachers, or pupils were aware of the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, or the sayings of Buddha, though more did know of the *Qur'an* (*Koran*). The Bible was the only sacred text most North Americans had ever seen or knew existed.

Religious pluralism in the United States: the present reality

Following World War II, however, especially in the late 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus—as well as persons of other non-Christian faiths—began coming to the United States as students, as business people, and finally as immigrants and residents. When they began settling in areas other than the largest northern, mid-western, and western cities, the cultural and religious scene in this country began to change, and this change has continued unabated. Until recently, religious pluralism for most people in the United States meant living and working with people whose culture and faith—if they were persons of faith—were either Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. Pluralism for some was exemplified in the multitude of *Christian* denominations and the ability of Christians to tolerate Jews. The presence of practicing Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims was rare if not totally unknown in most communities in this country.

Today, because of the changes in the culture resulting from the increasing presence of peoples of many faiths—Christian and non-Christian—religious pluralism means something entirely different from what it meant fifty years ago. Furthermore, this dramatic transformation of the religious makeup of this country means that Christian hegemony so characteristic of the past has ended.

Daily contact with believing and practicing Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Confucianists, Taoists, and Shintoists raises complex social as well as legal questions. What is the legitimate role of religion in public life, for example? What rights do non-Christians have in this country? What are the ramifications of the linking of religious agendas to political platforms and parties? And what is the theological and missiological challenge peoples of other faiths represent?

The demographics. The dimensions or demographics of this profound alteration in U.S. society are not easily discernible, but there are some indicators. The English Pilgrims who came to North America in the seventeenth century and established themselves in this new land were professing Christians. The people who were already here—the Native Americans—were not Christians, nor was their culture. The Europeans in fact assumed that the Native Americans were devoid of culture, and their religious impulses and practices were routinely described as pagan or heathen. Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the well-known colonial clergyman, for example, summed up the prevailing opinion among the colonists when he declared, "The best thing we can do for our Indians is to Anglicise them," that is, make them like the European colonists.[9]

Many, though not all, the Native Americans were "Anglicized," as were most im-

[9] William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 31.

migrants into the United States and their descendants—even African Americans—until the last half-century. The "melting pot" image was not therefore, as some regard it, pure myth. At least this was the case until the last three or four decades. Admittedly, numerous sub-cultures existed: Irish, Italian, German, Scandinavian, African American, Hispanic, Chinese, and Japanese, to name only a few—but most of these sub-cultures, with certain exceptions, lived in accordance with a generally accepted set of values influenced by the predominant Christian faith. Virtually all African Americans were professing Christians as were a significant percentage of the Chinese.

As already noted, some Hindus and Sikhs—besides the Buddhists and Muslims who arrived earlier—managed to enter the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, but they were few in number and largely went unnoticed until they sought U.S. citizenship.[10] It would have been regarded as a breach of the Constitution for anyone to have been denied entry because of his or her religion, but given the fact that a series of immigration laws were passed specifically aimed to keep Asians out of this country,[11] and given the additional fact that most Asians were not Christians, by severely limiting their numbers in this country, the effect was a maintaining of the status quo.[12] When the Immigration and Nationality Act was amended by Congress in 1965, however, all the previously practiced national quota systems

[10] A curious case was argued before the Supreme Court in 1923 when Bhagat Singh Thind appealed the decision of the Ninth Circuit Court which had denied him citizenship under the current immigration law. Some have mistakenly concluded that the Court of Appeals as well as the Supreme Court refused Mr. Singh's petition because he was a Hindu. According to the decision, however, Singh though indisputably "a high caste Hindu" and thus "of the Caucasian or Aryan race," was rejected because, said the court, he was "not a white person within the meaning of the nationalization laws." In other words, Mr. Singh was not allowed to seek U.S. citizenship not because of his religion, but rather because of his race. The racial bias of the Supreme Court at that time is clear from reading the decision. See *United States Reports*, vol. 261. *Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court at October Term, 1922. From January 30, 1923 to and Including April 9, 1923*. Ernest Knaebel, Reporter (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923): 616-620.

According to Robert D. Boyd, from 1920 to 1940 all people entering the U.S. from India were tabulated as Hindus by the federal classification system. "Census Categories Spark Renewed Debate," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), October 8, 1996, p. 2A.

[11] Exclusion Acts against "Orientals" were passed by Congress in 1882, 1888, and 1892. They prohibited Asians from entering the U.S. A so-called gentlemen's agreement was reached in 1907 between the U.S. and Japan which greatly limited Japanese immigration, but this was not satisfactory to the agricultural interests on the West Coast. Thus, the Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited altogether the entry of Asian laborers.

[12] *Immigrants to the U.S. & Countries of Origin 1820-1970:*

Germany	6,917,000
Italy	5,176,000
Great Britain	4,792,000
Ireland	4,302,000
Austria-Hungary	4,302,000
Canada	3,969,000
Russia	3,347,000
Mexico	1,593,000
Sweden	1,267,000
West Indies	1,090,000

Other countries sending more than 100,000 immigrants were: Greece, Norway, Turkey, Poland, Portugal, France, Denmark, Romania, Belgium, Spain, and Czechoslovakia.

were abolished. The law which earlier favored immigrants from Europe and severely restricted Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians, as well as Africans and Latin Americans, was revised, and the patterns of immigration into this country—and concurrently the religious configuration—began to change dramatically.[13]

Because we have no national religious census, however, no one knows exactly how many peoples of other faiths are now in the United States. Samplings and estimations vary widely. In a study published in 1988, for example, it was concluded that though the population of Jews in this country had remained stable for the previous thirty years, the number of Muslims had quadrupled. More than three million Muslims were said to be in the U.S. The same study estimated that there were at least 700,000 Hindus and 250,000 Buddhists then in the country.[14] James Davison Hunter in his widely read *Culture Wars* suggests that in the early 1990s there were more than four million Muslims, three-quarters of a million Hindus, and six hundred thousand Buddhists.[15] This part of his study, however, is replete with inaccuracies, and therefore the

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[13]The first law limiting the number of immigrants into the U.S. was passed in 1921. The number of immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. in any year after 1921 could be no more than three percent of people from that country who were living in the U.S. in 1910. Then in 1924 the percentage was lowered to two percent and 1890 was made the base year. Five years later, 1929, the national-origins law was passed limiting the number of immigrants to 150,000 per year and clearly excluding certain groups. The central restriction was aimed specifically against Asians, the rationale being to prevent any significant change in the racial composition of the population.

These provisions continued until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which established quota visas for all countries. The number of immigrants allowed from each country was based on the percentage of the white population living in the United States in 1920 who had originated from each country. The law, however, applied only to non-Oriental immigrants. Asians continued to be severely restricted.

The 1965 Immigration Act revised the 1952 law by abolishing completely the quota system based on national origin. The new law, however, limited the number of immigrants to 170,000 annually from non-Western countries and 120,000 per year from countries in the Western Hemisphere. It also established a list of preferences based on criteria such as family relationships, education, occupational skills, and need for persons with those skills in the United States.

[14]See *The Williamsburg Charter Survey on Religion and Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Williamsburg Charter Foundation, 1988), 35.

[15]On pages 73-74 of his *Culture Wars* (1991), Hunter says: "Religious and cultural pluralism expanded after the war, as religious traditions native to Asia and the Middle East began to appear in the United States in greater numbers. For example, in 1934 there was only one mosque in the United States and fewer than 20,000 Muslims. By 1988 there were 600 mosques or Islamic Centers and more than 4 million adherents nationwide. These figures make Islam the eighth largest denomination in the United States—even larger than the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the United Church of Christ, or the Assemblies of God. Just over half of these Muslims are recent immigrants from all over the world, particularly Pakistan, India, Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. The remainder are indigenous to America and belong to one of the branches of the movement formerly known as the Black Muslims. Some speculate that soon after the turn of the century, the numbers of Muslims will surpass those of Jews, making them the second largest body of religious believers after Christians.

"The growth in the size of the Hindu community is more difficult to assess because Hinduism tends to be a family religion in which a great deal of worship takes place in the home. Even so, estimates placed the

reliability of his statistics is questionable.

In 1989-90 a group of sociologists at the City University of New York (CUNY) did what they called a "National Survey of Religious Identification," and they published their findings in 1991. They estimated the number of Muslims then in the United States to be 877,000 of which 351,000 were Black Muslims (or 40%). Jews, they said, numbered 3,157,000. The survey, however—like others of this type—was a sampling. The interviewers spoke by telephone with 113,000 adults in the 48 contiguous states, and the respondents were asked one question about their faith, viz., "What is your religion?"[16] Like the two previously cited sets of data, the CUNY study is of limited value in terms of the religious affiliation of the respondents.

The National Council of Churches *1995 Yearbook* gives the following figures: 5,500,000 Muslims, 910,000 Hindus (1,315,000 in North America), 230,000 Buddhists (578,000 in North America), and 4,300,000 Jews.[17] But as you can see, the numbers are all "rounded-off" and clearly represent estimates, not hard data.

According to the Bureau of Census of the U.S. Department of Commerce, there were living in the U.S. in 1994: 625,000 foreign-born Chinese, 533,000 foreign-born Koreans, 496,000 foreign-born Vietnamese, and 494,000 foreign-born Indians.

One can only guess how many of the

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number of Hindus in America in 1940 at about 150,000. By the early 1990s this figure had grown to about three-quarters of a million, with forty Hindu temples. Like Hinduism, Buddhism has no central bureaucracy, no single leader for its many different schools; worship is very often a private matter and, therefore, a difficult phenomenon to track. The introduction of Buddhism to America came as early as 1893 with the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. At that time and throughout the twentieth century, virtually all the Buddhist immigrants were of Japanese ancestry. By 1909 there were just over 3,000 Buddhists in America. The number of Buddhists gradually increased until 1960 when, over the following decades, Buddhism experienced the most dynamic growth in the history of America. One of the largest of the Buddhist schools is the Buddhist Church in America (the Jodo Shinshu sect), which claimed in 1988 to have one hundred churches and 100,000 members. In 1960 it could claim only 20,000 members. The other Buddhist presence is the Nichiren Shoshu sect, which in the same year claimed to have forty-six community centers, six temples, and 500,000 members. For Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the greatest concentrations of adherents are found in metropolitan areas, but in Hawaii, Buddhism competes with Catholicism as the dominant religion."

There are so many obvious mistakes in the comments above that one can only wonder about the credibility of the statistics Hunter offers. In endnote 13, page 332, Hunter says his data are from Richard Ostling, "America Facing Toward Mecca," *Time*, 23 May 1988, pp. 49-50. "For comparative figures," Hunter adds, "see Terry Muck, 'The Mosque Next Door,' *Christianity Today*, 19 February 1988, 15-17; and the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* [National Council of Churches].

[16] "Surprises Surface in Religious Study," *Chicago Sun Times*, Ap 7, 1991, Microfiche: NEWSBANK 1991. Soc 40:32; "Free-Form Freedom of Religion," *USA Today*, Nov 18, 1993, 2D. Nineteen other questions were asked by the interviewers, but they related to age, marital status, level of education, income, and race, not to religion. How reliable, therefore, are the data about the religions of the respondents when the questions are asked by telephone and no follow-up information about their faith is sought? Are the respondents candid? Is the faith they identify a faith they practice?

[17] If there are 5 million or more Muslims in the U.S., they would represent the fourth largest religious group in the country. Only Roman Catholics and two Protestant denominations are larger, the Southern Baptist and the National Baptist conventions.

1,654,000 Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese are Buddhists, and how many of the 494,000 Indians are Hindus (or Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains).[18]

A number of scholars are attempting to secure more accurate statistics, such as Professor Diana L. Eck of Harvard, but to date one can only estimate the actual numbers.[19]

On the basis of my own study and observation, I am inclined to think these samples or estimates probably are less than the actual numbers, and most likely there are more than five million Muslims, more than a million Hindus, and more than a half-million Buddhists living in the United States today. Like Christianity, each of these religions is divided into numerous sub-groups. Yet virtually all forms of these religions can be found somewhere in the country. There are, for example, Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, China, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Korea, and Japan, and they practice Theravada, Mahayana, Tantra, and Zen forms of Buddhism. The same is true of the other faiths. In addition, there are Jains, Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Baha'is, Rastafarians, worshippers of Isis, along with hundreds of other imported and home-grown varieties of religion. The United States has become, therefore, an irreversibly multi-religious as well as multi-cultured society.

A century ago when the first World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago, it was said that there were no Hindus living there. Those who attended the Parliament came as invited guests from India. Now there are at least sixteen Hindu temples in metropolitan Chicago, and scores of others have been constructed all over the U.S. Hindus, like Muslims, are also opening in some places their own parochial schools.

According to Muslim leaders, there are more than 1500 mosques in the United States and an increasing number of Muslim elementary and secondary schools.

Buddhists meanwhile have their own network of temples, house-temples, and store-front worship centers—many of which are located in mid-size and smaller cities of the country.

Unforeseen developments.

—One of the curious and surprising facts about these new religious communities is that many of the devotees were not faithful, practicing Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims until *after* they arrived in the United States. But like other immigrants before them—including many of our European

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[18] *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1996* (Mahwah, NJ: World Almanac Books, 1996), 393.

[19] Eck's undertaking is called "The Pluralism Project," a three-year research effort funded by the Lilly Endowment. She utilizes her students to gather statistical data on the presence and activities of peoples of other faiths during the last twenty-five years in designated cities and communities. The stated goals of the project are: (1) "To document and better understand the changing contours of American religious demography"; (2) "To study the religious communities themselves," not only their places of worship, but also their retreat centers and informal networks, how they have adapted to the U.S. scene, their means of educating their constituents, especially their children, and how they interact with civic or non-religious institutions including the government; (3) "To explore the ramifications and implications of America's new plurality through case studies of particular cities and towns, looking at the response of Christian and Jewish communities to their new neighbors, the development of interfaith councils," and assess the questions of church-state relations in this new context; and finally (4) "To discern, in the light of this work, the emerging meanings of religious 'pluralism,' both for religious communities and for public institutions."

In view of the fact that precise statistical data are not available on the membership of religious groups in the U.S., would it be wise

ancestors—their faith or religion has assumed a new significance in their lives. Obviously, it is a means of preserving their language and culture as well as a way for finding and being with others from their countries. It is also a readily accessible means of collective and individual security. Thus, their newfound religious ardor frequently has as much to do with their desire for community and for maintaining their sense of cultural and linguistic identity as it does with religious devotion. But was this not also true of many of our Christians ancestors who immigrated to this country?

Whether and to what degree these new non-Christian residents and citizens will be accepted by the majority of people in the United States and assimilated into the prevailing American Christian culture is yet to be seen. One fact, however, is certain, it will not be solely up to them.

—Once again in our country emotional and political steam is building up regarding the issue of immigration—especially illegal immigration—and it is quite possible that further legislation inspired by neo-Nativists and passed by legislators both at the state and federal levels will ignore our history, distort our established values, and inflict, especially on innocent children, unnecessary hardship and suffering. That immigration ought to be legal is a given, but illegal immigration, says Richard Rayner, has become "America's most exaggerated threat."[20] The issue is of course complex, but it is not likely to be resolved in any just fashion if left solely to politicians.

These are nonetheless primarily sociological, economic, and political issues. For us as professing Christians, there is a deeper and perhaps even more crucial question, namely, what should be and what will be the theological and missiological response of us to the presence of peoples of other faiths in this land?

What should be and what will be the theological and missiological response of us to the presence of peoples of other faiths in this land?

—Christianity continues to be the religious faith with the majority of adherents in the United States, and Christianity continues to claim the largest plurality of followers in the world. But churches and Jewish temples are no longer the only centers of worship in Europe and the Americas. Moreover, despite nearly a century of institutionalized ecumenical endeavor, Christians remain divided into hundreds, even thousands, of competing and sometimes antagonistic camps. Complicating the picture is the fact that Christianity, in the West at least, is no longer the most evangelistic and aggressive missionary faith. In the United States churches now are having to compete

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to include on the federal census form a question regarding religious affiliation? I would be reluctant to advocate such a change for two reasons. It is the responsibility of the churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques to maintain this information—if they think it important—not the government. Moreover, information of this kind could be used by neo-Nativists and others to stir up fear and animosity against minority groups.

[20] "What Immigration Crisis?" *New York Times Magazine* (January 7, 1996): 26-31, 40, 46, 50, 56.

with equally if not more passionately committed followers of other faiths who represent not only the other major religions, but also hundreds of new non-Christian religious groups. What this portends for the Christian and Jewish communities in the coming decades is not clear. But one thing is certain: the future religious scene in this country will be radically different from what it has been in the past.

Christian responses: a sampling

In the remaining moments I can only touch on the subject of how Christians and churches are responding to peoples of other faiths in their communities, and before giving some specific examples I want to make some general observations.

1. Most mainline denominations have someone or some office assigned to ecumenical and/or interfaith relations. A part of their assignment is to keep abreast of the changing religious scene, issue statements, and publish and distribute accurate, attractively-prepared, and useful materials. An example is the Presbyterian Church USA's excellent document "Interfaith Marriage," a 55-page guide which includes a discussion of the issues as well as practical suggestions and representative inter-faith liturgies.[21] Two other examples are the United Church of Christ's statement, "The Relationship Between the United Church of Christ and the Muslim Community," and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's "Report on Multicultural Mission Strategy."[22] In a class by itself is the Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom's pamphlet, "Mission, Dialogue and Inter-Religious Encounter," which includes a specific plan for "Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs."[23] When I refer to these documents even in conversation with clergypersons, I discover that most of them appear to be surprised and unaware of the storehouse of resources available from their own denominations, and they frequently know nothing of what is available from other sources.

2. Attempts to do something positive and move beyond interfaith suspicion, fear, and antagonism are few and their impact mixed. Interfaith councils have been organized in some cities, but they are often composed primarily of clergy, and unless there is a crisis, the activities of these councils rarely are high on clergy agendas or garner widespread support. One of the most impressive of which I am aware is the "Partnership of Faith" in New York City. The group is composed of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders and not only works to reduce ignorance and suspicion among the many religious factions and promote healing and understanding, but they also tackle the difficult questions such as Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence on Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses.*

3. Most Christians I encounter are unaware or only marginally aware of the presence of peoples of other faiths in their cities and communities. The next time you are with a church group, ask them how many Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist temples and how many mosques are in their city. If one does not see these signs of change or chooses to ignore them, he or she is engaging in a kind of "disconfirmation" of our own reality.

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[21] Available from the PCUSA Distribution Management Services, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202, Phone (800) 524-2612.

[22] Commission for Multicultural Ministries, ELCA, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631.

[23] The Inter-Faith Network for the UK, 5-7 Tavistock Place, London, WC1 955.

4. Some denominations, congregations, and individual Christians speak boldly about "converting the world to Christ," and they openly target in their evangelization efforts Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and, I might add, even other Christians. Christ's followers, they declare, are called to announce the good news of the gospel to all people everywhere, and this surely includes people of other faiths. Moreover, the good news or the gospel, they say, is "salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord."[24]

To encourage Christians to share their faith with others is, I believe, both appropriate and commendable. What is questionable is *when* and *how* such a witness is most appropriately and effectively made. Here one must decide what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. Also, what is conversion? Is Christian conversion the verbal or intellectual acquiescence to a set of theological propositions? Is conversion the submission to the rite of baptism and enrollment in a Christian church? Or does becoming and being a Christian mean accepting God's gracious invitation to a relationship of love, forgiveness, and trust in Jesus Christ? If it means the latter—and I believe it does—then how can one "witness" to a person of another faith without knowing the person, that is, without having established some kind of trusting relationship with him or her? Furthermore, how can one presume to tell another about the Christian faith without knowing something about the faith of the one to whom the witness is being made and having one's knowledge supplemented by that person's witness? Do we as followers of Jesus Christ not have something to learn from others in terms of God, faith, and religious devotion?

5. Inter-religious encounters are a logical means for establishing an atmosphere where informal as well as formal dialogue can occur. We have nearly a half-century of accumulated experience in interreligious dialogue, and the ways and means are readily available.[25] Some dialogue groups continue for long periods of time; one of which I was a part went on for a decade. Some are formal; others are informal. Most dialogues, however, are of relatively brief duration. The problem is that interfaith dialogues have involved primarily clergy, and rarely have laypersons or grassroots believers been included. My concern is that congregation-sponsored interreligious encounters be on the agenda and calendar of all churches genuinely interested in peoples of other faiths, for they represent one of the easiest ways to foster better understanding, mutual respect, and community development.

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[24] The Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board, for example, says: "With America's growing multi-faith population in mind, the Home Mission Board created the Interfaith Witness Department, giving it the task of assisting Southern Baptist believers, churches, association and state/national bodies in their efforts to tell others about Christian beliefs and Baptist distinctives in the global village of the United States. The first object of home missions is to lead Southern Baptists in telling all Americans about Jesus; this includes of course, offering each and every one an opportunity to respond (*Beliefs of Other Kinds*. Atlanta: Home Mission Board, n.d., 150).

[25] The Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1960, New York, NY 10115, a ministry of the Franciscan Friars, is an example. Also, "Seminarians Interacting," a biennial National Workshop on Christian/Jewish Relations, 71 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003, is another of several well-known and tested efforts to promote interreligious dialogue. See also the pamphlet, "Interfaith Guidelines on Dialogue," PCUSA's Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202. Tel (502) 569-5292.

"Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to *take off our shoes*. For the place we are approaching is holy..."

Besides the examples already given, I want to mention some other models of Christian responses to peoples of other faiths.

6. Increasingly common are ecumenical, interfaith services of worship in the month of April commemorating *Yom Hashoah*, the day set aside to memorialize the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Protestant congregations and judicatories, Roman Catholic dioceses, as well as the Anti-Defamation League and the B'nai B'rith, commonly sponsor these memorial events.

7. Then there are those interfaith events that bring peoples of good will together in times of collective tragedy or crisis. This past summer, many participated in services designed to raise public awareness of the church burnings that have occurred during the past few years. Most of the destroyed or damaged buildings belonged to African American congregations, and most were in the South. In the Sunday evening service last July held in the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, Jews represented one of the largest groups in attendance.

8. In Fort Worth, Texas, Protestant churches have established the Tarrant Area Community of Churches specifically to nurture community by giving "visibility to the essential unity of the church," calling one another "to witness and service" in the community and the world, and being a concrete "expression" of a common "striving for justice, peace and human dignity." Beyond this, the organization has established an Interfaith Resource Center for the purpose of making peace and doing justice by "alleviating interreligious and inter-ethnic conflict, promoting understanding of differences, and fostering cooperative service." A part of the Center is the Interfaith Peace Institute which sponsors interfaith awareness seminars, interfaith contact groups, interfaith dialogues, and interfaith conflict mediation.[26]

9. In 1990, in DuPage, Illinois, a coalition of religious and civic leaders began the "Interfaith Resource Network." Activities of the Network include an annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Commemoration, the DuPage Task Force on Diversity in Education (with Elmhurst College), "Women, Leadership and Religion" series, and other educational programs for public as well as private schools, libraries, and civic groups. The Network not only develops and provides curriculum materials, they also engage in teacher/leadership training. This has been one of the Network's most important contributions. They do this with one full-time employee, Ms. Deborah Levine, and an all-volunteer executive committee composed

[26] For the Articles of Incorporation and other information, call or write Dr. Henry N. Smith, Director, Tarrant Area Community of Churches, 801 Texas Street, Fort Worth, TX 76102, Tel (817) 335-9341.

[27] DuPage Interfaith Resource Network, co Bethany Theological Seminary, Meyers & Butterfield Roads, Oak Brook, IL 60521, Tel (630) 572-1400.

of a Roman Catholic sister and Roman Catholic priest, two rabbis, a Presbyterian pastor, and two laypersons.[27]

10. Five religious organizations in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, with a sizable foundation grant recently launched what is called "Congregations in Community." The goal is to recruit and train 7,000 volunteers to facilitate and expand the efforts of religious organizations (including congregations) to provide support for children and families through child care, tutoring, after-school programs, homeless shelters, transitional housing, and other services, and bringing together people of different faiths to deal with the problems of their communities. The Council of Churches, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and the Masjid An-Nur/Islamic Centers of Minneapolis and St. Paul are all participating in what is a pioneering effort of interfaith cooperation.[28]

You may wonder why I have limited my remarks to positive responses Christians are making to the presence of peoples of other faiths in our land. One reason, of course, is the constraints imposed by a single lecture. But there is also a philosophical reason. The good things that happen and are happening rarely make the news, rarely are seen on the front pages of the papers. The tawdry, the ugly, and the mean or vicious responses, on the other hand, are often widely publicized. I have a folder full of examples of discrimination, threats, and violence, and they deserve to be mentioned, if for no other reason than to inspire persons of good will to go and do otherwise. But the "not-so-Christian" responses will have to await another lecture and another venue. Meanwhile, I would ask you to join in putting into practice the admonition of Kenneth Cragg, long-time missionary to Muslims:

Our first task in approaching
another people, another culture,
another religion *is*
to take off our shoes.
For the place we are approaching is holy.
Else we may find ourselves treading
on another's dreams, [and]
More seriously still, we may forget that
God was there before our arrival.[29]

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[28] "Interfaith Program in Community Service," *Christian Century* 113 (May 15, 1996): 538-9.

[29] I have altered slightly this beautiful statement. Other complimentary affirmations are worthy of note as well. Several months ago, for example, a Princeton Seminary student added to my collection of statements of mission by giving me a copy of one from the Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Des Moines, Iowa, a portion of which is:

"We are a people on a journey, witnesses for God and disciples of Jesus Christ—people of the church ecumenical and citizens of the whole earth. As pilgrims we are energized and led by the Holy Spirit toward "at oneness": with God and each other.

"We have a common Story. We share that Story along with our own unique stories in openness and trust. Called individually to be members of the Body of our Lord, we are made new by the creative power of God in Christ. Living our faith in relationship to our Creator and each other, we seek to make a difference in the quality of all life.

"We are called to be authentic persons in our worship, fellowship, teaching and service. Tension exists as we respond to this calling, but we regard it as creative and productive. We desire to enable each other to fulfil our mutual ministry with a vision of wholeness and peace.

"We invite all persons to join us in this pilgrimage."

Is Religious Pluralism Possible, and Do We Want It?

Alan Neely
Raleigh, North Carolina

In his novel *Caribbean*, James Michener recounts a sixteenth-century conversation that takes place in Cartagena, Colombia, between two historic adversaries, the British admiral Sir Francis Drake and the Spanish governor, Don Diego Ledesma. Don Diego speaks:

> "How simple things would be if your Catholic Queen Mary had lived longer... with our Philip as her husband, and one great religion binding our nations together. Then we could as allies terminate that damnable apostasy in the Netherlands and wipe out Lutheranism in Germany and live together with France and Italy as our Catholic cousins, one citizenship, one faith."[1]

The conversation is—as is Governor Ledesma—Michener's literary invention. But in it he captures concisely and penetratingly a long-held concept, namely, that politically and sociologically it is better for a people living together, be it in the same town or country, to espouse a single religion, one without challenge. This is always preferable to a situation in which suspicion, rivalry, conflict, antagonism, strife, and religious wars prevail. This was even more true in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when theological controversy and physical harassment, inquisitions, persecution, and carnage were all European people knew. No people had succeeded in living side by side or in close proximity while professing different faiths without succumbing to distrust, enmity, and finally to violence. Religious pluralism was simply unthinkable.

Nearly half a millennium has passed since those bloody centuries, but given the incidents and levels of religious controversy in the world, is not the underlying philosophy of Don Diego Ledesma still

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[1] James Michener, *Caribbean* (New York: Random House, 1989), 143. Ledesma's attitude was not simply a matter of religious intolerance and nationalism—though these were intimately involved. Provincialism and individualism were family matters, matters of one's immediate family—as revealed in the following lines written by a sixteenth century poet in Cartagena: "My Spain against all other countries./ Her religion against all other religions./ My part of Spain against all other parts./ My colony against their colony./ My big family against all other big families./ And my wife and children against my brother's wife and children." (114)

appealing? If by referendum we could decide such matters, would not a single, dominant, monolithic religion be better than our hodgepodge of competing faiths?

The ambiguous appeal of religious pluralism

In view of the extensive, extraordinary changes which have transpired in the U.S. during the past three or four decades, can we not conclude that a society characterized by religious pluralism has become less and less attractive? It certainly has for many people. Why is this so? One obvious reason is that religious and political factions, often coalescing around a single agenda, have emerged and have become increasingly strident in their public pronouncements, demands, and behavior. Special interest groups are now so prolific and influential that they appear to be shaping and determining the direction of political life of the country.

A number of observers, many of them well-known sociologists, political scientists, and theologians, appear to have despaired of achieving any workable degree of societal harmony or religious wholeness. Given the single-minded determination of the many competing blocs, each insisting on having things go its way, American society began to be fractured in unprecedented ways in the 1960s and 1970s. Ronald F. Thiemann, Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, for example, says that these fissures have "shattered any illusion of political and religious unity within the American populace."[2] Sociologist James D. Hunter and political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre agree, and they insist that rival coalitions formed during the last thirty or so years do not want to listen to what others are saying, or if they are obliged to listen, they do not understand each other. Because they begin with antithetical moral and religious premises, their conclusions and positions inevitably clash. Furthermore, the divisions now evident in our culture are so acute that any genuine consensus on policy issues perceived to be moral and religious is not possible.[3]

Such a gloomy assessment should not, however, be accepted without question. Factions, blocs, and "special interest groups" are not a recent phenomenon in the history of this country. From the beginning—even before the arrival of the Pilgrims—there were competing, often mutually antagonistic Native American tribes who found it difficult and at times impossible to live peaceably with each other. Though these inter-tribal conflicts were not religious, they were not put aside in every instance after the arrival of the European settlers. Thus, colonists often skillfully exploited the divisions between competing Native American tribes and played one against another.

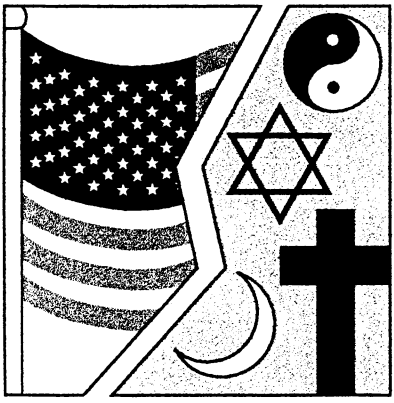
Likewise, in the newly established American colonies profound differences in social, political, and theological views emerged soon after their founding, and the struggle to maintain religious and social unity while according minorities protection and rights was as difficult as it was prolonged. In fact, it was not until the passage of the first ten amendments to the Constitution in 1789, and their subsequent ratification by the states in 1791, that freedom of religion was accorded everyone and became the law of this land. Questions, however, were soon raised about whether the federal statutes applied to the states.

The matter was far from settled. It was

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[2] Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 36.

[3] Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).



challenged and re-interpreted more than once. After all, what does religious freedom entail? What does it imply? Do federal laws and constitutional amendments apply to states?[4] We have been debating these questions now for more than two hundred years, and currently the discussion about the meaning of the non-establishment clause in the first amendment is more heated than ever. At first reading, the significance of the amendment appears clear and self-evident: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The government—or so it would seem—is forbidden from favoring any religion or religious institution by according them special status or special privilege. Furthermore, the government is prohibited from giving financial subsidy or material support to any religion or religious institution. Public funds (that is, tax monies) are not to be used to benefit or finance any religious groups or any religious endeavor.

The amendment also appears to be saying that the government is likewise prohibited from interfering in any way with the individual or collective practice of religion, be it in the ways people choose to worship, the content of their theology, the means they employ for religious instruction, or the nature of religious activities identified as exercises of faith.

This principle of non-establishment on the one hand and free exercise of religion on the other have for more than two hundred years preserved a perceptible but sometimes shifting line of demarcation between the church(es) and the state as well as between the individual and the state. These two principles therefore have defined as well as limited the role of government in religious matters while at the same time safeguarded the religious freedom and rights of the citizenry.

This first amendment to the U.S. Constitution also has enabled the government to function without frequent interference by religious leaders and institutions, and it has helped shield the Congress, the President, and the Courts from the entreaties and pressures of those who, if allowed, would procure from the government and the public treasury whatever monies and special favors possible. Likewise, the non-establishment clause has made possible the development of a social environment in which people and institutions of faith, as well as people who profess no faith, can live without fear of oppression or harassment by government, but with government protection from acts of violence by hostile individuals or groups. One's belief or lack of belief, as far as the law is concerned, is a personal matter and an inalienable right protected by the

[4] In terms of the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment, it was not until 1868 and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution that states would have to comply. The Fourteenth Amendment includes the following: "No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States... or deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

Constitution.

No less important, religious individuals as well as religious groups and institutions have been free to function and free to propagate their beliefs without fear of intimidation, harassment, or persecution either by the state or by other religious entities. Arrest, imprisonment, torture, banishment, and execution—long inflicted on religious minorities in centuries past as well as in some areas of the world even now—have not only been illegal in this country, but comparatively speaking, religious discrimination and mistreatment of religious minorities have been limited.

What then are our options as we witness the increasing pluralization in our society, the growing numbers of competing religions, and the increasing tensions as we move into the next century and the next millennium? For some, tolerating religious pluralism is deleterious because at best it leads to a watering-down of faith and the loss of spiritual identity and vitality. At worst, it leads to conflict and violence. Are these our only choices?

The agonizing path to religious liberty

Prior to the seventeenth century, religious freedom was unknown. To have proposed liberty of conscience even in the most enlightened areas of the West would have struck people in previous centuries as preposterous, as unthinkable as journeying to the moon. Don Diego Ledesma's point of view was accepted as a given, as evident as the nose on one's face. Certainly a single religion was considered to be ideal, provided of course that it was the religion espoused by the majority. This was the position of our Pilgrim forebears who risked everything to come to America to escape the restrictions, oppression, and persecution by their English king and subjects. But ironically, these same Pilgrims who longed for religious freedom for themselves were disinclined to accord freedom to those who refused to conform to the religious way of thinking in the Massachusetts colony. Leo Pfeffer describes the initial situation in colonial America as "old world patterns transplanted."[5]

The route from coerced conformity to restricted toleration and finally to freedom in matters religious is an extraordinarily complex and lengthy odyssey. But glimmerings can be seen in late sixteenth-century Holland[6] and later more clearly in a few of the North American colonies.

The Massachusetts Colony. Edwin Gaustad in his recent biography of Roger Williams, *Liberty of Conscience*,[7] says surprisingly that Williams' motive for coming to America was not to search for religious freedom. Rather, Gaustad contends, Roger Williams quit England for America because of his commitment to religious "separatism," that is, to his ideal of finding or founding a "pure church." What he found in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, however, soon convinced him that a church could never be pure until freedom of conscience and liberty of religious practice were assured. For in the Massachusetts Colony, Williams discovered, was a church not unlike that he had left in England, namely an intolerant church, and his pointed denunciations of the colony's failings at this point soon brought the wrath of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities down upon him. He was obliged therefore

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[5] *Church, State, and Freedom*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 71.

[6] Anson Phelps Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* 1 (New York: Harper, 1950): 118-20.

[7] Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

to flee the colony altogether in 1635 or risk being seized and banished back to England.[8]

During Williams' four years in Massachusetts, that is, from the time he and his wife Mary arrived in 1631, and until he fled into the Rhode Island wilderness in 1635, two unshakable convictions were forming in Roger Williams' fertile mind. First, his distrust of the mingled power of church and state increased, and he concluded that a "wall of separation"—and these were his words—should be established between the two. Second, Williams began to question and later openly challenged the royal charters which the English colonists contended legalized their seizures of Indian lands. To expropriate the property of those unable to defend themselves or their interests, Williams reasoned, was not only immoral, it was illegal.

These were radical, revolutionary ideas which were certain to make him suspect. On the surface, his two conclusions appear to be unrelated. But I believe they are inextricably connected, and they can and should serve as guiding principles for any society, especially one composed of a plurality of religions and a variety of cultures.

Roger Williams' first conclusion, that is, his distrust of the fusion of the power of the government with that of the church, was initially kindled by the obvious and increasing readiness of the Massachusetts authorities to restrict religious freedom and enforce religious conformity. By 1635, for example, the political authorities had already limited voting privileges by giving the right to vote only to members of the church. Then came the decision to allow the Colony's political rulers to oversee all the affairs of the congregations, including deciding on the qualifications of the ministers and elders. It was only a matter of time, therefore, before the same Court would extend its authority to include virtually all matters of religious life, including what citizens believed and how they behaved. "The civil authority," the Court declared,

> hath power and liberty to see the peace, ordinances, and rules of Christ observed in every Church, according to His word.... [And] It is the duty of the Christian magistrate to take care that the people be fed with wholesome and sound doctrine.[9]

To Roger Williams, such an extension of authority and usurpation of power by civil authorities was unthinkable and intolerable. Religion, he contended, was a matter of individual conscience, not the domain of government.

The second conviction that formed in Williams' mind during these first four years in America, namely what he considered to be the illicit seizure of the Native Americans' land, resulted from his close contacts with, knowledge of, and growing respect for his Native American neighbors. Even before he fled into the wilderness of Rhode Island, Roger Williams had begun what became a life-long friendship and relationship of trust with the Indians. Furthermore, during the first winter of his exile, 1635-36, Williams probably would have died—starved or frozen—had his Native American friends not come to his aid. It was from them that he and his small band who fled the Massachusetts Colony purchased a site in the Rhode Island wilderness which became the new settlement Williams named "Providence," the first colony in America where freedom of religion would be guaranteed for everyone, Christians and non-Christian, colonists and Native Americans alike.[10]

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[8] Stokes, *Church and State*, 195.

[9] Leo Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 75.

[10] Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 29-31.

The Rhode Island Colony. It took several years—until 1644—for Williams to obtain royal approval for his Rhode Island Colony, but soon thereafter he proposed and the Assembly of the Colony approved an act which assured liberty of conscience and freedom of worship to every resident. To insure that this newly established freedom would be preserved, Williams advanced his idea of a "wall of separation" between the church and the state. The laws of the colony, of course, did recognize the authority of the civil magistrate over the "outward state of men," but not over their minds and consciences. Always fond of metaphors and analogies, Williams in a letter to the colony in 1654 likened a commonwealth to a great ship which, as he described it, transports hundreds of souls. Oftentimes, on the same vessel, he said, there are Roman Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Turks (Muslims). During the voyage, all passengers should enjoy full liberty of conscience. If they do, Williams continued, it will be evident in two respects:

> none of the papists, protestants, Jews, or Turks [will] be forced to come to the ship's prayers or worship, nor [will they be] compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any.[11]

Not only did Williams insist on the right of the passengers—and by implication the citizens of a commonwealth—to refuse to participate in the ship's services of worship, but he also upheld the passengers' right to engage in alternative worship or desist from worship altogether should they so desire. Granting passengers such religious latitude, Williams continued, would not impinge on or threaten in any way the authority of the captain to chart the ship's course or to maintain order and discipline among the passengers and crew. It would simply recognize that religion is ultimately a matter of conscience, not the business or concern of either the captain or the crew, that is, of the state.

Prior to the seventeenth century, religious freedom was unknown.

These ideas were unprecedented, extreme religious thinking for the time, and it was not until 1663 that Williams was able to obtain the approval of King Charles II for complete religious freedom in the Rhode Island colony. The language of this part of the charter is clearly that of Roger Williams, and the provisions are unambiguous.

> No person within the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be any wise molested, punished, disqualified, or called in question for any differences of opinion in matters of religion; every person may at all times freely and fully enjoy his own judgment and Conscience in matters of religious concernments.[12]

Thus, in contrast to the Massachusetts authorities, and even in contrast to the handful of other colonial leaders who proposed religious tolerance, Roger Williams stands alone as a passionate advocate and defender of complete religious liberty for all—Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, nature worshipers, and non-worshipers. It

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[11] "To the Town of Providence," quoted by Stokes, *Church and State in the United States*, 197.

[12] Cited by Sanford H. Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 436.

Roger Williams stands alone as a passionate advocate and defender of complete religious liberty for all.

was a position extraordinarily advanced for his times.

It can be said, therefore, that unqualified religious liberty and a milieu for genuine religious pluralism protected by law inched their way into human history by way of this small, struggling, dissident colony of Rhode Island. Religious freedom for all peoples in this country, however, would not come for more than a century, that is, until after the War of Independence and the adoption of the federal Constitution. It was not the result of the efforts of a single individual. Several national leaders were involved and others supported the idea, but the pioneer, without question, was Rhode Island's Roger Williams.

Prior to 1789 a measure of religious tolerance was practiced in three or four of the other colonies—particularly in Maryland and Pennsylvania[13]—but only in Rhode Island was freedom complete. Of Maryland, for example, Sanford Cobb says, "At different times Maryland faced both ways, for liberty and against it, while the conduct of affairs was in the midst of chronic broils and factions."[14] Maryland, nonetheless, deserves more extended comment.

The Maryland Colony. The year after Roger Williams came to Massachusetts, that is, in 1632, England's King Charles I granted the region which subsequently came to be known as Maryland to a nobleman named George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, and a convert to Roman Catholicism. Unfortunately, Calvert died before the charter was formally issued, and the King awarded the colony to Calvert's son, Cecil, the second Lord Baltimore who, like his father, was a Roman Catholic. Though he dared not say it openly, George Calvert saw the new colony as a needed refuge for his beleaguered fellow Roman Catholics, and the wording of the charter made him "virtual king and head of the Church in Maryland, if she should choose to exercise supremacy."[15] But he also theorized that a thriving colony in the New World would best be assured by attracting people of other faiths and assuring them that their religious life would be free from harassment and persecution. Later, the second Lord Baltimore proceeded to draft a law which would guarantee religious toleration for everyone in the Maryland colony, *provided they professed a belief in Jesus Christ.* Jews, Turks, or unbelievers, however, were not acceptable. Restricted though the statute was, it was not until 1649 that the Maryland Assembly, prodded by the third Lord Baltimore, approved Cecil Calvert's "Toleration Act," and it was substantially less than a guarantee of complete religious freedom. The provisions of the law applied only to Christians, that is, to those who professed belief in Jesus Christ, and they were assured of protection from

[13] New York and New Jersey, because of the presence of different religious groups, did grant minorities varying degrees of freedom, but not that enjoyed in Rhode Island. See Sanford Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty in America* (1902), 301-421.

[14] Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty* (1902), 362.

[15] Cobb, 366.

religious persecution. Any who claimed to be a believer in Jesus Christ

> from henceforth be any ways troubled, molested, or discountenanced for, or in respect to, his religion, nor in the free exercise thereof within this province, or the islands thereunto belong, nor in any way compelled to believe or exercise any other religion against his consent, so that they be not unfaithful to the lord proprietary, or molest or conspire against the civil government.[16]

Besides limiting tolerance to professing Christians, there was a darker side to the statute. It also provided for the death penalty for blasphemy or for the denial of the Trinity as well as fines for speaking disrespectfully of the Virgin Mary or the Apostles and for desecrating the Sabbath Day.

Thus one can say that though a measure of religious freedom was allowed in the colony of Maryland, the authorities did not grant true liberty of conscience and religious freedom to its citizens until after the Revolutionary War. It is also worth mentioning that prior to the American Revolution, Protestants in the Maryland colony grew restless under their Roman Catholic governors, and no matter how broad-minded they were, on more than one occasion Protestant factions sought to wrest control of the colony from the Roman Catholic authorities. Political and religious conflict, not harmony, was therefore the product of Maryland's Act of Toleration.

The Pennsylvania Colony. About the time of Roger Williams' death in the early 1680s a young 37-year-old English Quaker named William Penn faced two very difficult problems. The first was how to collect a £16,000 debt owed to Penn's deceased father by King Charles II. Also, Penn longed to secure a place somewhere in the emerging British empire where he and others like him could practice their Quaker faith freely and escape the discrimination, molestation, and intermittent persecution which they, as well as other dissidents, often experienced in England.

Young Penn consequently made what was a daring proposition to the king. He offered to settle the debt if Charles would grant him a substantial tract of land that Penn specified as lying between 40 and 43 degrees latitude and up to five degrees longitude west of the Delaware River—essentially what is now the state of Pennsylvania. The king readily agreed, for he saw Penn's offer not only as a way to relieve himself of a huge indebtedness, but at the same time to rid England of a significant number of religious troublemakers.

Thus in 1681 young William Penn, royal charter in hand, made preparations to come to America, and the following year he claimed the land and established a new colony. He originally wanted to call the colony New Wales, but when this provoked objection in the king's Privy Council, Penn named the area *Sylvania*, meaning "Woods." Charles added the prefix *Penn* in honor of William's father who had been a British admiral. Soon Pennsylvania came to be called Penn's "Holy Experiment," for the governance of colony was supposedly based on the "Great Law" which Penn himself had drafted. All colonists were assured the following rights: religious freedom, judicial process, vote, fair taxation, education, and gainful employment—rights that proved easier to promise than to fulfill.

News of these guarantees, nonetheless, spread throughout western Europe, and Pennsylvania was soon attracting larger and larger numbers of European immigrants throughout the 1700s. Besides the English

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[16] Cobb, 376.

and Welsh Quakers who came with Penn, Dutch Quakers followed as did a large number of Rhineland Germans, most of whom were adherents to one or another of a number of religious sects collectively labeled by their detractors as "anabaptists." They included the Amish, Dunkers, Mennonites, Moravians, and Schwenkfelders, all of whom came to be identified incorrectly as "Pennsylvania Dutch," a designation that unfortunately stuck. The earliest of the Rhineland Germans settled in the fertile farming areas north and northwest of present-day Philadelphia, and later they migrated farther toward the west. The third major immigrant group to arrive in Pennsylvania was composed primarily of Scottish and Irish Presbyterians who moved beyond the English and German settlements into the western regions of the colony, that is in the area of present-day Pittsburgh. These formed the core of the first European settlers in the Pennsylvania colony. They were a diverse group of people who were followers of essentially the same faith.

Shortly after his arrival William Penn signed a treaty of friendship with the Native Americans, and, like Roger Williams, he paid them for virtually all the land he had been granted by King Charles. And though Pennsylvania was the third American colony to accord its citizens a significant measure of religious freedom, it was considerably less than that allowed in Rhode Island. Liberty of conscience and freedom from compulsory worship were granted to those who professed belief in "the one Almighty and Eternal God to be the Creator, Upholder, and Ruler of the world."[17] Labor on the Sabbath, however, was strictly prohibited, and all government officials were required to be professing Christians. Jews and other non-Christian theists were allowed to settle in the colony, but they were not permitted to hold public office nor could they vote.[18] Those calling themselves deists or atheists were not allowed to reside in the colony.

The Bill of Rights

For the most part, succeeding waves of new settlers who settled in the North American colonies adjusted to whatever level of religious freedom prevailed, as did their descendants. In most cases they underwent a lot less stress as far as their religious lives were concerned than they had experienced in Europe. Unfettered as they were by the centuries of religious conflict that characterized the lands from which they had come, they doubtless thought of their new land as relatively open and tolerant of religious diversity. In fact, the majority of the colonists were not members of any church and many practiced no formal religion.[19] In most of the colonies, citizens lived far removed from government and religious authorities and therefore went unmolested. Religious tolerance, however, varied from colony to colony, and except for Rhode Island, religious life could hardly be described as genuinely free.

True "freedom of conscience" in matters religious only became legal, as already

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[17] William Penn, "Frame of Government," Section 35. Cited by Stokes, *Church and State* (1950), 206, and Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Freedom* (1902), 442.

[18] "The Great Law or Body of Laws," as cited by Cobb, 443.

[19] By the early decades of the seventeenth century, the uncontested hold of the established churches was loosening, and a religious apathy began to spread throughout the colonies. Soon the vast majority "of colonial Americans were not formally affiliated with any religious organization." George C. Bedell, Leo Sandom, Jr., and Charles T. Wellborn, *Religion in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 137.

indicated, with the adoption and ratification of the first amendments to the U.S. Constitution, amendments commonly referred to as the Bill of Rights—approved by the Congress in 1789 and ratified by the requisite number of states two years later. The first and sixth amendments pertain to the matter of religious freedom. The first amendment reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Amendment six addresses a separate issue, namely, the matter of religious qualification for holding political office. It reads: "...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

These are extraordinary provisions, and the role played by Thomas Jefferson, and more importantly by James Madison, in their composition and adoption represent a crucial transition in our nation's history. Having said this, one should acknowledge that in 1791 few church or political leaders believed that religion, much less the church, could or would survive without the moral and monetary support of the government. Fewer still anticipated the positive benefits or the complex problems which would arise from attempts to implement these two statutes.

Where we are today

What should we think and what can we conclude after more than two centuries of church and state "separation" in the United States? What is the result of this arrangement and what does it portend for the phenomenal multiplicity of religions in our country and society?

1. Irreligion and godlessness, despite what some claim, have not prevailed. That there are serious moral and social problems in this society, few would deny. But they can hardly be attributed to the repression or decline of institutionalized religion.

2. Churches and other religious institutions not only have survived, they have thrived, as much or more here than in any country on earth.

3. The rights of non-Christians and non-religious to immigrate and settle in this land have been upheld, albeit inconsistently, and Christianity is no weaker for this. Whatever challenges Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or any other faith appear to pose, the challenges to our theology have been salutary, and the presence of peoples of other faiths has enriched our society and culture.

4. The traditionally-called "wall of separation" between church and state, first proposed by Roger William and later championed by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison has never been—and some would say was never intended to be—absolute or impenetrable. The "wall" is a metaphor, not a literal bulwark. Congressional and military chaplains, "In God We Trust" emblazoned on our money, oaths of office repeated by government officials with their hands on a Bible and concluding with "So help me God"—accompanied by public prayers—all indicate that whatever "wall" exists is exceedingly porous.

5. Many of the questions that arise out of a pragmatic interpretation of the Constitution lend themselves to differing and often controversial answers. That is what makes the field of Constitutional law, especially laws related to questions of church and state, so fruitful and challenging both for legal and theological scholars.

6. Freedom of religion—as well as freedom from religion for those who want it—is still the law of the land. But increasingly, religious freedom is being challenged in ways that are quite unfamiliar to jurists, theologians, and ethicists, as well as others

both inside and outside the church. The string of legal battles apparent to anyone familiar with the work of the courts, particularly with the Supreme Court, knows the difficulty and often the inability of the judges to reach unanimous decisions in most of these cases.[20] The present division on the Court virtually assures a split decision in most cases touching on moral or religious issues.

7. As the struggle for funds becomes more acute in urban areas, an increasing number of "creative" attempts are being made to breach the traditional wall of separation of church and state. Vouchers for private and parochial school children are advocated by many people in our land. Cardinal John J. O'Conner, for example, recently offered to educate in the New York City parochial schools as many as 1,000 students if the city will provide full tuition for each student, that is, between $2,000 and $3,000 per student per year. His offer was enticing in view of the fact that the public schools are terribly overcrowded and thousands of students have neither classrooms, desks, textbooks, nor other learning materials. Many observers, however, see this as the first step toward the direct funding of parochial schools and a clear violation of the non-establishment clause.[21]

Finally, I would mention the rising number of religious "hate groups" in the U.S., including the Aryan Republican Army, the Arizona Vipers, the Montana Freemen, the Phinias Priesthood, and the Smokey Mountain Nation of Israel Church. All these groups are militantly anti-government, and they nonchalantly accuse the federal authorities of conspiring to impose a one-world government on the citizens of the U.S. and destroy all vestiges of the Christian faith. They are virulently anti-Semitic (Jews and Arabs), anti-gay, anti-Hispanic, and anti-black. They are against all "racial mixing." They oppose international treaties and alliances, and they see the United Nations as the principal purveyor of internationalism and "one-worldism." A number of members of these groups have been arrested and convicted of bank robbery, fraud, threats against and intimidation of public officials, illegal possession of firearms, and acts of terrorism. The accessibility of guns and explosives in this country makes it possible for them or anyone else to stockpile large caches of weapons, and it is clear that some members of these groups are not reluctant to use them.

This brings us back to our initial question. Would it be better to rid ourselves of all these different creeds and religious factions, espouse a single faith, and live under a single religious authority? If not, are we destined to see more and more tension and experience more and more religious conflict? Conversely, is our best alternative, maybe our only alternative, a thoroughgoing, unabashed secular society? Is this in fact the direction we are headed? Is religious pluralism possible any more, and if it is, do we truly want it?

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[20] See Addendum

[21] See "New York Prelate Floats School Plan," *The Christian Century* 113 (Sept 25-Oct 2, 1996): 887.

Addendum

The list of the cases involving religious questions and/or institutions decided by the Supreme Court is extensive.

In 1842 New York state refused to provide financial aid to parochial schools. The courts have upheld this decision since that time in a number of cases, but the issue has become more complicated and the litigation more frequent.

The following represent examples of religious cases decided by the Supreme Court:

1947, *Everson v. Board of Education.* The Court allowed for public funds to be used to transport students to Roman Catholic schools, but not for their instruction.

1948, *McCollum v. Board of Education.* Court ruled that public school property could not be used as a site for religious education, thereby invalidating a practice dating back to 1914.

1952, *Zorach v. Clauson.* Court declared that tax monies could not be used to finance religious activities—in this case for the teaching of religion. The Court, however, allowed public schools to continue the practice of "released time" programs, provided parents requested them in writing, the classes were taught by non-school personnel, that children were not coerced or encouraged to participate, and the religious instruction took place other than on school property.

1962, *Engle v. Vitale.* Court declared unconstitutional a state composed prayer for school children in New York state. Though the prayer was "non-sectarian," and consisted of the words: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our country," it was to be said in every school at the beginning of each school day. Despite the proviso that children could elect not to be present in the room where the prayer was said, religious utterances sanctioned by the state, the Court ruled, were an unconstitutional attempt to establish religion.

1963, *Abington Township School District v. Schempp.* The Court declared Bible reading in public schools a religious exercise and therefore unconstitutional.

1963, *Sherbert v. Verner.* The Court overturned a state court decision which had denied a Seventh Day Adventist worker unemployment compensation after she was fired for refusing to work on Saturday.

1965, *Griswold v. Connecticut.* Court declared unconstitutional a state law prohibiting the use of contraceptives. The state law was strongly advocated and defended by the Roman Catholic Church.

1968, *Board of Education v. Allen.* Court ruled by a vote of 6 to 3, that New York could loan state-purchased text books to non-public school students.

1968, *Epperson v. Arkansas.* Court held that an Arkansas law prohibiting the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools (including state colleges and universities) violated the non-establishment clause in that the law was designed to protect what was a religious doctrine (creationism).

1972, *Wisconsin v. Yoder.* Court rejected as unconstitutional criminal penalties imposed by the state on Amish parents who refused to send their sixteen year old children to public school.

1973, *Roe v. Wade.* Court ruled that a woman could elect to have an abortion during the first trimester of a pregnancy. No other decision by the Court has so divided the country. Opponents of the ruling base their arguments against *Roe v. Wade* on what they regard as moral and religious principles.

1972, *Lemon v. Kurtzman.* In the first case, the issue was a Pennsylvania law authorizing the Superintendent of Public School "to reimburse" non-public schools for mathematics, foreign languages, physical science, and physical education teachers' salaries, as well as for text books and instructional materials. The other case, joined to the first by the Court, was the Rhode Island practice of subsidizing non-public elementary school teachers' salaries. The Court ruled both these practices unconstitutional on the basis that they constituted government aid to religion and religious institutions. Chief Justice Burger set forth a threefold test for future cases: (1) Any government aid to a church-related institutions must be for programs that have a clear secular purpose; (2) the programs must neither advance nor inhibit religion; and (3) the government must not be or become excessively entangled with religious institutions in administering the programs.

1980, *Stone v. Graham.* Court struck down a Kentucky law requiring that copies of the Ten Commandments be displayed on the walls of all public school rooms. The defense's argument was that the copies had been paid for with private money, and therefore violated no law. The Court interpreted the practice as an attempt to establish religion and thus unconstitutional.

1981, *Thomas v. Review Board.* Court reaffirmed the earlier decision made in *Sherbert*

v. Verner (1963), invalidating a lower court's decision that a state could refuse to pay unemployment compensation to a Jehovah's Witness who, for religious reasons, quit her job rather than work in the production of weaponry.

1981, *Widmar v. Vincent.* Court held 8 to 1 that any state university facilities open to non-religious speakers and student groups must also be opened to religious student organizations, even if they wanted to use the space for prayers, hymns, and Bible studies.

1983, *Marsh v. Chambers.* Court upheld the Nebraska Legislature's practice of opening each of their sessions with prayer led by a chaplain paid with public funds.

1983, *Bob Jones University v. U.S.* Court by a vote of 8 to 1, ruled that the IRS could deny federal tax exemption to a school that practiced racial discrimination. All the justices rejected the school's claim that the ruling was an infringement on the institution's First Amendment right of religious freedom. But Justice Rehnquist dissented warning "of the danger of abrogating the Separation of Powers."

1984, *Lynch v. Donnelly.* Court upheld the right of the city of Pawtucket, RI, to display a Christmas creche on public property.

1984, *Jaffree v. Board of School Commissioners.* Court upheld a lower court decision that the Alabama law authorizing voluntary participation in a prayer composed by the state legislators was unconstitutional.

1986, *Wallace v. Jaffree.* Court invalidated another segment of the Alabama law that mandated a one minute period of silence for "meditation or voluntary prayer" on the basis that the law was a guise to return prayer to the public schools.

1986, *Bowers v. Hadwick.* Court upheld the Georgia law criminalizing homosexual activity (sodomy) between consenting adults. Arguments against homosexual behavior were in part based on religious beliefs.

1988, *Allegheny County v. Greater Pittsburgh ACLU.* By a bare majority the Court ruled that a creche, Christmas tree, and menorah could be displayed on county property.

1990, *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources v. Smith.* The Court upheld an Oregon decision denying unemployment benefits sought by two Native Americans who were dismissed from their jobs for having used "a controlled substance," peyote, in a religious ceremony. The effect of this decision, however, was nullified by the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act which makes it much more difficult for the government to interfere with religious practices. The words of the law are that it is the burden of the state to demonstrate a "compelling interest" before attempting to intrude in any way on religious exercises. Public health and safety would, for example, be a justification for government intervention. The Court in this case dismissed the fact that 23 states had by law exempted Native American ceremonies. But the fact that Oregon had not prompted the Supreme Court to say that the free exercise clause does not require a religious exemption.

1990, *Cruzan v. Missouri.* The Court ruled that an individual does have the right to refuse life-sustaining medical treatment. In cases where the individual is unable to indicate his or her wish (being comatose, for example), the state can require evidence that the individual would, if able, make the choice declining life-sustaining procedures.

1995, *Rosenberger v. University of Virginia.* The University of Virginia must, the Court ruled by a vote of 5 to 4, provide funds for student religious publications if the school is providing support to non-religious student organizations for their publications.

1995, *Capitol Square Review & Advisory Board et al. v. Pinette et al.* The Court also decided by a vote of 7 to 2, that the Ku Klux Klan had the right to place a cross in a public park near the Ohio state capitol building because, the ruling said, the park was public and an open forum.

1996, *City of Boerne, TX, v. [Archbishop] Patrick F. Flores.* The Court has agreed to hear the case of a Roman Catholic Church in Boerne, Texas, where the city refused to give the church a building permit to construct an addition. The city, curiously, is challenging the right of the Congress to pass any law that usurps power from state and local governments.

What is Truth/Faith?

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The question of western civilization in the first millennium of the Christian era was Pilate's question, "What is truth?" By the end of that millennium it had been determined by the majority of western Europeans, "Truth is what the church professes." Then came the Reformation!

Its answer to the question was "Truth is what the Bible says," "*Sola Scriptura.*" Then came what folks ever since have referred to as the "Enlightenment," because it was regarded as better than the era that preceded it known as "The Dark Ages." By that time, due to the curse of denominationalism effected by the Reformation, thinking folks had realized the Bible says a lot of things on a lot of subjects. The philosophers of the "Enlightenment," realizing how difficult it was to define truth, changed the question to "What is faith?" and answered that question by suggesting one can only believe what one experiences by means of her five God-given senses: "Seeing is believing." Whatever, of all the Bible says, one can experience as real, is truth; only what is thus determined to be real is really true, some thing on which one can base her faith. I have often wondered how that development came to be called the "Enlightenment."

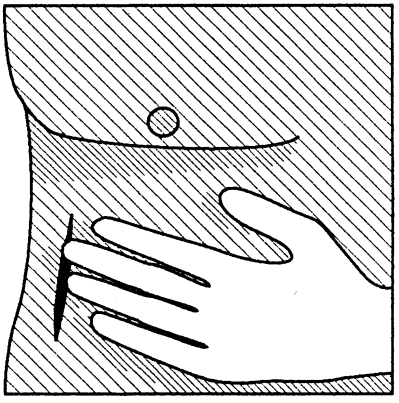
But there were some biblicists in western European civilization, which now included the Americas, who insisted that definition of "Faith" is precisely the opposite of what the Bible says. The "Hall of Fame of the Faithful" begins by defining faith as "the evidence of things *un*seen" (Heb 11:1).

Thus the battle was joined, the "conservatives" attempting to conserve the perspective of the "Dark Ages," and the "liberals" trying to conserve the perspective of the "Enlightenment." And most people—Christians and non-Christians—came to regard this contest as a spectator sport. Each person was encouraged to decide for whom she should cheer or vote.

This has forced theologians to seek a new definition of Truth and Faith. As I was recently paging through my favorite Bible Dictionary looking for an informative article to peruse, I noticed one written by Walter Brueggemann, entitled "Biblical Authority in the Post-Critical Period." Back in Saint Louie in the decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, Walt was one of the "good ole boys" in my field of expertise, "Old Testament Interpretation and Theology." So I read it.

Walt, unlike yours truly, could "converse," some called it "communicate," consummately in the theological jargon of our profession. His article began thus,

The governing categories for the questions that have dominated the modern discussion of biblical authority for the last two centuries need to be assessed and appreciated in their own cultural context. The question of the authority of Scripture as understood in the Euro-American (i.e. western European



civilization including America) context has been framed in response to the rise of science, the emergence of scientific method, and the dominance of historical-critical modes of handling literature.... Prior to this development in the 17th and 18th centuries there was in the West a sufficient consensus concerning the nature of Scripture. Thus, even critical questions were set within the secure framework of well-established and widely held convictions about the religious authority of the Bible.[1]

I guessed that this was Walt's way of introducing the aforementioned contest.

As I continued to read, this was confirmed:

The above changed, however, with the introduction of new thought patterns that shattered the theological consensus and paved the way for the study of the Bible as an autonomous piece of literature—a literature that was increasingly understood in relativizing ways. This suggestion of relativity concerning the Bible in turn evoked an urgency with respect to its certitude and absoluteness, a phenomenon new to biblical studies. Thus the "Battle for the Bible" (Lindsell 1976) forced extreme positions, radical and reactionary, concerning such matters as inspiration, revelation, inerrancy, and infallibility. It must be recognized that the very posing of the question in terms of revelation and scientific criticism is reflective of a cultural crisis which challenged every authority and which defined the debate in terms of relativity and absoluteness. The above categories of discussion unfortunately skewed the matter in a number of ways.[2]

Now, didn't I tell you what an expert Walt was at theological jargon? Having thus posed the problem, Walt begins to solve it with this suggestion:

Ours is a religious and cultural situation in which the question of authority must be posed anew, because the categories of the conversation have shifted. Ours is a post-modern, post-scientific, post-Enlightenment, post-positivistic situation (Gilkey 1981; Harrington 1983). It will not do to frame the question of authority [What is Truth?] as a scholastic one of proof, or as a romantic one of experience, or as a probe into scientific categories. The question now becomes one of what it means to be a community of interpretation and action called into existence by a text that remains distant and of less utility in the pursuit of certitude [What is Faith?]. Thus it appears that the question has been wrongly cast as one of authorship *[emphasis his], a question we might expect from a book-oriented society preoccupied with questions of copyrights, sources, documentation, and scientific facts. The Bible itself has almost no interest in such modern questions of authorship which result in hopeless and mis-*

[1] ABD V:1049-50.

[2] *Ibid.*

guided investigation of claims of inspiration and revelation.

Rather, authority has to do with issues of authorization *[emphasis his], i.e. how, in a pluralistic world like ours, concrete communities can be authorized to live, act, and hope in a manner which may at times oppose the accepted norm, a manner which can be justified neither scientifically nor experientially. It is this authorization of a community's obedience and praise that is the real issue in the question of the authority of Scripture [What is Truth?] In order to answer this question of authorization [What is Faith?], we must attempt to free ourselves of the immobilizing influence of the Enlightenment categories of certitude. An increasing number of people draw the conclusion that communities created and authorized by these texts are summoned and permitted to live, act, and hope in different and dangerous ways, and authorized by a different "voice" which is heard in the text, even if that voice cannot easily be accommodated in the conventional categories of academic investigation. The "authorizing voice" of Scripture "heard" in the community needs to be understood as a theological reality mediated through the biblical literature. That is, the authorizing voice heard in the text, albeit mediated through social institutions and more immediate experiences, is indeed the voice of the Holy God. That is the (The Truth) communities of faith heard in the text, a voice which authorizes them to live, act, and hope [that is Faith].*

When the voice of God mediated through the reading or preaching of the Scriptures authorizes one to live in Christ, to love one's brothers and sisters, and to long for the new heaven and earth God will create, it has effected faith.

As another mentor of mine, Ken Copeland, is wont to say, "He, who is seated and ruling at Our Father's right hand, until His Enemy has become His footstool, invites all who confess Him as Lord to rule with Him. We can be certain that we are ruling, as His voice authorizes us to do, when our feet are resting on His footstool's head."

—Ground Hog's Day, 1997

Κατὰ τὸν Χριστόν: Preaching Colossians in Year C[1]

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Colossians is a short, but impressive letter that makes a unique and important contribution to understanding Christ and our faith. Joseph Sittler appealed to this letter in "Called to Unity," his famous address to the World Council of Churches in 1961[2] which helped to set the theological agenda for our time and called world Christendom to a reconsideration of the significance of Colossians.

The lectionary calls for reading texts from Colossians on five Sundays in the Year of Luke (Series C)—Pentecost 8: Col 1:1-14; Pentecost 9: Col 1:21-28; Pentecost 10: Col 2:6-15; Pentecost 11: Col 3:1-11, and Christ the King: Col 1:13-20. Lessons from Colossians also appear once in Series A (Easter: Col 3:1-4) and Series B (Christmas 1: Col 3:12-17). Overall the three year cycle omits only 1:29 (a strange omission), 2:1-5 (pastoral concern for readers), 2:16-23 (extended rejection of the false religion), and 3:18-4:18 (*Haustafel* or list of household regulations; closing exhortation, greetings, etc.). This current liturgical year offers an opportunity to preach a series on this significant text.

The situation Colossians addresses

Many scholars (I among them) think that Paul did not write Colossians; rather one of his gifted followers wrote this letter to meet a new threat to the faith. They base their opinion on the letter's language and theology, different from that in Paul's undoubted letters such as Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans. (I will nonetheless name the writer "Paul," though he may not be the writer.) Colossians' unique features reflect the situation addressed. Many words typical of Pauline theology do not occur: sin (ἁμαρτία), righteousness or justification (δικαιοσύνη), freedom (ἐλευθερία), law

[1] Revision of the oral version that appeared in *Resource* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, June, 1989).

[2] Reprinted in *Currents* 16 (1989) 5-13.

(νόμος), promise (ἐπαγγελία), boasting (καύχημα), brother (ἀδελφοί, ἀδελφή, of Christians), to believe (πιστεύειν), obedience (ὑπακοή), salvation (σωτήρ, σωτηρία), etc.[3] That would be surprising in authentic Paul, for these are hallmarks of his theology forged in a Jewish environment.

Colossians also has its own peculiar language patterns. Thirty-four terms are *hapax legomena*, words that occur only once in the NT; many are characteristic of the religiosity against which the letter warns: visible (1:16, ὁρατος), to be first (πρωτεύειν), to make peace (1:20, εἰρηνοποιεῖν), firm stability (2:5, firmament? στερέωμα), philosophy (2:8, φιλοσοφία), divinity (2:9, θεότης), bodily (2:9, σωματικῶς), to condemn (2:18, καταβραβεύειν), to enter mystery rites (2:18, ἐμβατεύειν), etc.[4] In addition there are 28 terms used elsewhere in the NT, but not in other Pauline letters, ten words shared only with Ephesians, and 15 used in Colossians and Ephesians, but not elsewhere in Paul.[5] This language reflects both the religion of the environment and the liturgical life of the Colossian community. So does the style; long, complicated sentences (e.g. 1:9-20!), with frequent use of synonyms or nouns in genitive chains, are characteristic. There is almost no apocalyptic language. Colossians thinks in different categories, more spatial than temporal, and yet it continues great Pauline themes.

The letter warns the Colossians against a religious threat that arises from their environment. In one sense it sounds very modern. Colossian Christians believed in Christ in a non-Christian world saturated with religion(s). The kosmos, made up of earth and the seven heavens above it, was out of joint. The sun, moon, and five planets known to the ancients were thought to be spiritual beings, "elemental spirits of the

Colossians thinks in different categories, more spatial than temporal, and yet it continues great Pauline themes.

universe," who were hostile to God and humanity. These στοιχεία τοῦ κόσμου prevented access to God by intercepting sacrifices and prayers; moreover, these heavenly beings ("thrones, lordships, rulers, authorities" in 1:16) controlled human destiny on earth.[6] Given that world view (known to us from modern astrology) Colossians thinks in spatial terms more than in temporal, apocalyptic terms. People felt the need to placate these spiritual beings by appropriate ritual and cultic acts ("worship of angels," 2:18; a ritual calendar, 2:16), by food laws, possibly also laws (δόγματα, 2:20) about sexual contact. People achieved religious experiences by denying themselves

[3] Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 86; Raymond Collins, *Letters that Paul Did Not Write* (Good News Studies 28. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 179.

[4] Lohse, 85.

[5] Lohse, 85-86.

[6] Very useful is Clinton E. Arnold's discussion in *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (WUNT 77. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). Briefer, but instructive is A. J. M. Wedderburn's discussion in *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1993), 3-22.

food, a form of self-humiliation (ταπεινοφροσύνη, 2:18) to achieve ecstasy—a term usually used by Paul of a positive human self-evaluation. In short, the universe ("all things," τὰ πάντα, a phrase occurring six times in 1:15-20) was a threatening place filled with hostile powers; the universe was out of joint. Living in a hostile world in which the powers were in rebellion against God challenged Christians to come to terms with it.

The cosmic Christology of Colossians

Christ as criterion. Paul's answer in Colossians is in one sense simple: evaluate everything "according to Christ."[7] The language is technical, drawn from philosophic ethics, where the preposition κατά with the accusative gives the criterion by which one evaluates actions. The Colossians are to reject anything that reduces the reality of Christ. And Paul describes Christ cosmically and then applies that description to every facet of life and religion. His vision is majestic. Adolf Deissmann supposedly said: "When I open the chapel door of the epistle to the Colossians, it is as if Johann Sebastian Bach himself sat at the organ." Colossians' Christology overwhelms the perceptive reader. Reading Colossians is like entering a great medieval cathedral; one stands in awe at the size and majesty of the proportions.

Colossians 1:15-20 as interpreted in 1:12-14 and 21-23 is a key passage for understanding the letter. Most scholars agree that Col 1:15-20 is a great hymn to the Cosmic Reconciler, sung by the Colossians. Paul quotes it and interprets it to address the Colossians, taking his starting point in their worship—a method well worth emulating today. The hymn itself asserts that Christ is superior to the cosmic powers because he made them (cosmic Creator), and holds them together (1:17). He also has reconciled them to God, made peace in the universe (1:20), and therefore "de-demonized" the kosmos. Creation and reconciliation establish Christ as the *Kosmokrator,* the Lord of the universe. He is the "head" over his "body," the universe; the "fullness" (πλήρωμα, 1:19, technical term in some non-Christian syncretistic religions of the time for the full band of spiritual beings that exist as mediators between God and the world) dwells in him. A magnificent vision of Christ.[8]

Body as church, church as body. But Paul modifies this hymnic theology. The church, not the kosmos, is Christ's body, the place where he rules. Paul interpolates the modifier "the church" into 1:18a to modify the understanding of body. Christ rules as Lord in the church, and only there. He is proclaimed as Lord in the universe (1:23), but not yet recognized as such. Therefore the Christian, who "has been translated into the kingdom of his beloved Son" in baptism (1:13), must remain "firmly grounded and founded in the faith, not moving away from the hope of the gospel proclaimed in all the kosmos" (1:23). That prohibits any recognition of the elemental spirits of the universe as having power (lords). Christians live under the sole Lordship of Christ.

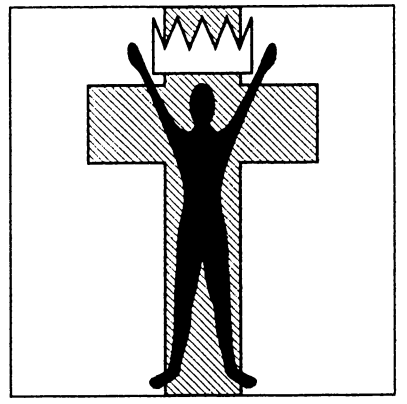
Cross and kosmos. Paul changes the hymnic Christ by stressing the cross as the means of reconciliation. "Through the blood of the cross" (1:20) is the second interpretive addition to the hymn. Christ makes

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[7] He faults the Colossians for not doing this in Col 2:8: καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν.

[8] The literature on this passage is immense. A useful introduction is George E. Cannon, *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

peace by defeating the elemental spirits. Colossians 2:14-15 uses the metaphor of the τροπαῖον (the victory dedication) of the Roman army to clarify the significance of the cross. After a military victory a T-shaped wooden cross was set up; the helmet, breast-plate, and greaves of the defeated ruler or general were placed on it; his weapons were leaned against it, and a placard was nailed to the trophy announcing the victory. A triumphal procession followed in which the defeated general was led as captive behind the victor. That is what the cross means: the elemental spirits are defeated, dethroned, captives without power. They can no longer threaten Christians who know the one Lord. His reality and victory are now the standard of faith and life. Christ alone is the bodily presence of God in the universe (2:9); therefore he is the head of all rule and authority (2:10). To be head means to rule. The spirits are neither lords nor divine.



According to Christ: worship as edification

Life in the body. Christ is Lord of the church, his body. The church therefore takes its shape, its life, from him. Colossians 3-4 explicate what that means. It is first of all a call to fidelity to what he is. What Christ is determines what Christians are. Since he is exalted as Lord, Christians think "the things that are above, not earthly things" (3:2). Christ rose from the dead; baptism is death and resurrection life for the Christian (2:12). (Here Colossians breaks the eschatological reservation Paul expresses in Romans 6, where the life of resurrection lies in the future.) Fidelity demands a daily movement from the "old humanity" to the "new humanity" (the Greek ἄνθρωπος is inclusive); that happens when Christ is everything and in everyone (τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός, 3:9-11). It is striking that in Colossians Christ does for Christian life what the Spirit does in Romans and Galatians.

Worship as mutual enablement. Colossians is the first book to discuss the role of worship in forming Christian life! (3:12-16 [17]). 3:12-15 opens the parenetic section of Colossians (the exhortation to Christian life). It calls for Christians to be mutually supportive. Read the list of what Galatians calls the fruits of the Spirit in 3:12: "feelings of mercy, goodness, humility, meekness, big-heartedness. 3:13 calls for "putting up with one another and forgiving one another as the Lord forgave you." This is all summed up in the term love (ἀγάπη, 3:14).

Hymns and life. Colossians 3:15-16 is a precious passage. Christ's peace is to be boss in Christian hearts (3:15). That happens when the λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ "lives richly among you" (3:16). The λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ is mistranslated "word of Christ"; it means "the account of Christ," that which explains him for what he really is. That account comes in psalms, hymns, and odes. Interestingly, Paul describes these as πνευματικαί, "carrying spirit" or "in-

spired." The oldest inspired texts in the New Testament are these hymnic passages that are useful to teach and admonish (3:16), that enable one to do everything one does "in the name of the Lord Jesus"! (3:17) Colossians presents hymnody as *the* enabler of Christian living.

Life in an ordered world

Colossians 3:18–4:5 show how this works its way out inside the Christian community. The Christian faith is not a new set of rules. Paul rejects that option in rejecting the religiosity of the elemental spirits of the universe. The Christian lives under a powerful Lord who forgives and enables life without fear, in whom ethnic, religious, and social distinctions are lost. Colossians 3:11 lists these social distinctions as Greek and Jew, circumcision and un-circumcision, barbarian and Scythian (in some respects *the* despised race in antiquity), slave and free person. One must read the ordering of the world in 3:18–4:5 in the light of this great declaration. Colossians does not escape all of the social restrictions of its day. Women and slaves ordered to be subject to husbands and owners are no longer acceptable in our world. But the idea that Christ brings order out of chaos, peace out of war, liberation out of enslavement, is always relevant. The Christ of Colossians even liberates from the enslavements not recognized in the letter. This Christ is indeed cosmic—in the church and among his people.

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Over All Creation

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A Meditation on Genesis 1:26-31

There are two questions a thoughtful reading of Genesis 1:26-31 engenders. The first question is, What does it mean that humans—male and female—were created *imago Dei*, in the image of God? The second is, What does it mean that humans—male and female—are to have dominion over all the other living creatures of the earth?



However, there are two other questions, better questions, which have more urgency, and a prior claim upon us, and I would phrase them as follows: first, What does it mean to us, believing Christians, that not only we, but every single man and woman with whom we share this earth, has been created in the image of God? And second, What does it mean for us, called by God to faithfully serve Jesus Christ in the world, that we

have been set apart and above, given authority over all creation?

To the first question. I am from Denver, and I had the pleasure of spending an Easter break at home with my family in Denver during jury selection for the Oklahoma City bombing trial. This was the prime topic of conversation and front page news every day, as the huge pool of 500 potential jurors was convened, and questioning begun. One of the most important questions each juror was being asked was, "Would you be able to recommend the death penalty, if the defendant is found guilty?" Or in other words, would you be able to vote to take this man's life, in recompense for the lives that were lost in the bombing?

Most of us are very fortunate that we did not lose a loved one in that tragedy, and thus it is perhaps easier for us to answer that question in the negative. But I believe that it is more than mere happy circumstance that should inform our response, as if another situation would somehow justify a different answer. According to the Genesis text, Timothy McVeigh, because he is a human being, was also created in the image of God, just like you and me, and this forces us to ask if there is not something inviolate and sacred about that, is there anything we can do, any sin we can commit, that can somehow "void" our hallowed status as the very reflection of God? *How are we* the image of God? Is it based on what we do? How we think? What we believe? What is it about human existence that makes us "like God"?[1]

Let us look, then, to the text and examine more specifically this concept of "image" which is the spark of our very existence. I would like to suggest that the true meaning of our likeness to God is linked to God's statement in verse 26, "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image." God is speaking in the plural here. While there continues to be controversy about the full range of theological ramifications implied in this verse, there is at least one important conclusion we can draw. If we take the text literally, human existence is not merely the individual re-creation of God's likeness repeated billions of times, a storehouse of cookie-cutter, assembly-line factory goods, but rather a fundamentally *relational* phenomenon, intimately linking each person with all others, making our lives radically communal at their very inception.

This means that, properly speaking, *I* am not created in the image of God—only *we* are created in the image of God.[2] This is not self-effacing humility or self-denigration. Rather, it points to the fact that without the larger human community, made up of friends, family, professional colleagues, neighbors and so on, there would be no individual existence at all. Who are you? You are the daughter of your parents, father of your children, sister to your brother, spouse, godparent, cousin, pastor or deaconess, church member, community resident, regular customer at this or that business, best friend, world traveler. If you tried to define yourself apart from the network of

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[1] I am aware of the extensive theological discussion which centers on the damage to and loss of God's image in human existence due to sin. However, this discussion does not change the reality of this text, which as God's word addresses us even in our sinful condition, and thus, it cannot simply be overlooked or ignored.

[2] In volume 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), Gregory of Nyssa states the following: "I think that the entire plenitude of humanity was included by the God of all, by His power of foreknowledge, as it were in one body, and that this is what the text teaches us which says, 'God created man, in the image of God created He him" (p. 406).

relationships that has formed the very core of your being since your birth, you would find precious little to say. Because as a Christian, I believe that God in God's very being is relational, I believe that our being is also inherently relational. As Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki writes, "We must appropriately think of ourselves, therefore, not simply as individuals, but as individuals-in-relation to the whole, or as individuals-in-community."[3] Consequently, our existence as the image of God is lived out every day, in every one of our interactions with one another, the significant as well as the superficial.

And is this not what we confess as Christians? In Colossians 1, we read that it is in Jesus that *all things* hold together, and that through him, God was pleased to reconcile to God's self *all things*. More often than not, we do not take *all things* literally, because we are afraid of the ramifications of what it would mean if all things, all people—even people like Timothy McVeigh—were the object of God's great love, justified and forgiven through Christ's death and resurrection, and participants, just like us, in the kingdom to come.

Because what, then, does that say about the judgments we make about those who are different from us, the way we treat those we disagree with, and the things we say about those we just plain don't like? Jesus told the crowd, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mt 7:1-2). If we are honest, we should ask ourselves if we really believe this. Perhaps if we had a better understanding of the *radicalness* of our relational existence, we would take Christ's warning more seriously. If I hurt you, I am at the same time hurting myself because I am related to you. If I judge you, I am at the same time judging

Our existence as the image of God is lived out every day, in every one of our interactions with one another...

myself because we are not independent of one another. We are truly the one body of Christ much more literally than we often assume, precisely because we were created together—all of us—in the very beginning of creation.

This leads to the second question: "What does it mean, then, for us, that we have been given dominion over the rest of creation? This question is intimately related to the first, and its answer follows from our relational existence. It also challenges us to broaden our perspective about the nature of "relationship," that we might use this same idea to better understand how we are called to live out the dominion we have been given.

Those of you who are pet owners hardly need to be told that very deep and meaningful relationships exist between human beings and animals. However, even if you have not experienced this personally, who could forget the image, so prevalent a few months ago, of the gorilla cradling the little boy who had fallen into her cage, keeping him safe until a zookeeper could retrieve him? Or perhaps you have read stories

[3] Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 157.

about dolphins who have protected swimmers from sharks and kept shipwrecked survivors afloat until help arrived. There are volumes of stories similar to this, which all point to a level of kinship that defies explanation. In order to truly reflect the reality in which we live, talk about our communal existence cannot be limited exclusively to the human family, but rather must be expanded to include at the very least animals as well.

Yet, why stop there? We would certainly be remiss if we did not have a word to say about plants also. Through friends, I have seen up close how plants flourish under love and care; and most of us are probably aware of the effect plants have on our psychological well-being, to say nothing of our biological dependence upon the oxygen they release in photosynthesis. So, if our understanding of community is expanded to include animal life, there is no reason why it should not be broadened further to include plant life as well.

However, should we not go even further? Are there not even more comprehensive statements that could be made about the interconnectedness of our existence? As I said earlier, I am from Colorado, and for that reason, the mountains have a certain spiritual claim on my heart that I cannot quite explain. They are a part of my spirit, so to speak, in a unique and powerful way, and I feel a sense of belonging every time I am in a mountain range, whether it be the Coast mountains in Juneau or the Alps in Switzerland. This is a characteristic common to all of us, I imagine. For each of us possesses a geographic sense of place that includes some physical aspect of what "home" means for us. Maybe it is a certain city, or a small town; a favorite vacation spot, or retreat center. Perhaps it is the wide open spaces of North Dakota, or the long coast of Norway. Regardless of where your spirit finds its refuge, we all have some geographical, physical dimension to our sense of self which has left a deep imprint upon our very being.

Why do I mention this at all? Because, in the end, I believe that our relational existence does not only include the connections we have with other people, nor even only those we have with all living creatures—animals and plants. Rather, our relational existence extends down to the molten core of the earth beneath our feet and high above to the moon and stars above our head. The entire universe—beyond even what we can see or know—is a part of our being. After all, in the Genesis 1 account of creation, human beings were not proclaimed good in isolation. Rather, it was only after God saw all that God had made, all creation, interwoven and interdependent, did God see that it was all, indeed, very good.

It is in this context that we need to understand dominion. We have still been set apart and above the rest of creation—there is no getting around that. In relation to the rest of creation, we have the awesome power to destroy and create, to give life and take it away. Rivers can be literally polluted to death, or cleaned and restored. Species of animals can fade into extinction, or revive under our care and protection. We alone of God's creatures have the ability to dramatically and profoundly affect the entire world through our deliberate action or inaction, and to pretend otherwise is irresponsible and ignorant. However, when we see our well-being as dependent upon that of the rest of creation, then the world "dominion" itself takes on very different connotations. And when we see our well-being as intimately linked with that of humankind as a whole, then our call to ministry also takes on very different connotations.

Part of our happy obligation as believers in the Christian faith is to proclaim the

inherent goodness in all of creation. This means that we do not have to do anything to become good in God's eyes. Rather, from our birth God has looked upon us, just as we are, with great love and joy. And again, if that is true of us, sinners that we are, it must also be true of every single person in the human family. And in a world which constantly surrounds us with messages telling us that we are not good enough, not wanted, not successful, not special, the message of God's passionate love for us cannot come too often.

So, as believing Christians, what does it mean that we have been created in the image of God, and given dominion over creation? It means that as God in God's very being is relational, so should we understand and live out our existence in loving relationship with all creation. And it means that as God has created the world in beauty and goodness, so should we use our creative powers to preserve and protect the world in all its glorious diversity. Raimon Panikkar has coined a wonderful phrase which points to the interconnected reality in which we live, move and have our being. He calls it "the cosmotheandric experience."[4] That is, the reality of the world, God, and humanity's shared experiences, all interwoven and inseparable, destinies inextricably linked. Make no mistake, this is gospel, for it reminds us that God has not set us adrift, left us to our own devices, and abandoned the world to brutality and destruction, but rather has chosen to be "God-with-us," *all* of us, for all eternity.

Mother Theresa once said, "If we have no place, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Mother Theresa once said, "If we have no place, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." You belong to me, I belong to you, the world belongs to us, and we to it. And, most importantly, we all belong to God; and it is in that relationship that we have life, and life abundantly.

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[4] Raimon Pannikar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Book Reviews

The Recovery of Mission. By Vinoth Ramachandra. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. xii and 293 pages. Paper. $25.00.

Vinoth Ramachandra, a Sri Lankan evangelical scholar, tackles the formidable question of Christian mission centered in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God and Saviour of the world. He engages Asian theologians Stanley Samartha, Aloysius Pieris, and Raimundo Panikkar, whom he sees as advocates of the pluralist paradigm. The author believes that "it is important that we all, from North and South, heed the call of the late Kenyan Anglican theologian John Mbiti, to 'embrace each other's concerns and stretch to each other's horizons'" (x).

Ramachandra notes that there is confusion in the way Samartha uses 'christology.' Thus, Samartha's *advaita Vedanta* "Mystery-centered" theology is seriously flawed. Ramachandra concludes that Samartha is "effectively saying that no personal God exists, or if a personal God does exist, that God does not communicate God's self to us in a way that we can know to be true" (14). He perceptively asks, "Is [Samartha] laying claim to an non-symbolic access to the Transcendent: a vantage point from which he can now survey the whole world of religion and identify them as but historically and culturally conditioned responses to the Transcendent? And how, one wonders, would such a vantage point itself escape the historical and cultural conditioning that Samartha argues is endemic to all human beliefs?"(15) The author concludes that "the theological programme that Samartha advocates for the church in Asia resembles the challenge of the gnostic sects in the second and third centuries C.E." (31).

Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, has built his theology upon "the 'religiousness of the poor,' as he has sought to articulate a theology of liberation in the setting of Buddhist-Christian-Marxist dialogue. Ramachandra summarizes Pieris' evaluation of Christianity in Asia thus: "Pieris feels that it has arrived too late, for Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic cultures are already deeply entrenched in Asian soil. Christianity has 'miserably failed' outside the Philippines and some tribal societies in India and South-East Asia, despite over four centuries of aggressive propaganda. 'History shows, and sociology justifies, the phenomenon that one metacosmic religion already inculturated in a clannic society cannot be easily dislodged by another metacosmic religion except by protracted use of coercion—that is, by irreligious resort to mass conversion'." (47) Pieris' "use of Scripture is sparse," and is really eisogesis. What is particularly Christian about Pieris' biblical hermeneutics "is that agapeic involvement in the struggle of the poor must take the shape of the cross.... The Christian contribution to the religiously inspired struggle is to serve as a catalyst: drawing out the liberative streams in all faiths in the common quest towards a 'religious socialism'" (51).

Of Panikkar's quest for inter-faith understanding, Ramachandra sympathetically writes: "Since the 1960s, he has championed an *oikumene* of world faiths, trying to marry the personalism of the Semitic faiths with the *advaita*, non-dual, experience of Asian faiths in such a way that diversity is not obliterated but anchored in a transcendent mystery" (76). But "Panikkar has no room in his schema for unbelief, and hence no acknowledgment of the sincerity of doubt (and of doubters) and the anguished, Job-like questioning of reality. There is no sense of human perversity, no place for crises of repentance and conversion" (89). Ramachandra is critical of the loose connection Panikkar makes between his 'christic principle' and 'trinity' and the historical event of Jesus Christ. He praises Panikkar's commitment "to an ontology in which differences are real and do matter," which sets him apart from "the ordinary variety of liberal pluralism." But, Panikkar's approach sunders the Spirit from the Logos. What is saddest "in any Christian reading" of Panikkar's extensive writ-

ings is "the almost total absence of any attention to the ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus" (103).

In relation to Mbiti's sober counsel endorsed by the author, the latter could have strengthened his work by paying more attention to how the respective approaches and "legitimate concerns" of the three theologians find significant and necessary resonances within historic Christianity. Perhaps this is the question this work asks. Ramachandra's work is heartily commended to anyone who wants to seriously consider the question of religious pluralism in light of the historic confession of Christians who sacrificed much to make the gospel of Jesus Christ known in word and deed.

Winston D. Persaud
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Word, Worship, World & Wonder: Reflections on Christian Living. By Karen Lebacqz. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997. 103 pages. Paper. $14.95.

With a seemingly simple subject treated in a relatively brief way, this book draws us in, not unlike the wonder of the Word and worship and the world do. Lebacqz, addressing a church in change, tells of her own longing to help shape a church with positive images. Chapter by chapter she approaches each "W." She urges us to *wonder* at the beautiful, awe-full, and mysterious, which come together in church through sound and sight and touch. She finds in the *Word* conviction (not merely blame) and the opportunity for connection with others to effect social change. She invites us to see the performative power of words and the passion of prose and poetry. *Worship* is the Word incarnate in the gathered community and the *world* a place where the Word can be incarnate not only ethically in our personal lives, but in liberating reconstructive ways so that we can create a sustainable community of justice.

Writing from the perspective of feminist ethics and bioethics, she purposely writes as an educated layperson (she is a clergywoman and a professor) making this a helpful book to hand to laity who also want the church to be "life-producing." Lutheran readers should take heart: while many aspects of this book will not seem "new," Lebacqz, coming from what she calls a "low church" tradition, "gained considerable respect—even envy—" for a more liturgical community. This book could help Lutherans more fully appreciate their heritage and challenge the church to use the senses as well as the intellect. A hospitable, liturgical, politically liberating church may be just what many people seek. Imagine that!

Norma Cook Everist
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Crisis of Conscience: Philosophers and Theologians Analyze Our Growing Inability to Discern Right from Wrong. Edited by John M. Haas. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996. v-xiv and 173 pages. Paper. $15.95.

This book examines conscience and responsibility in Roman Catholic thought. The book is composed of eight essays by Roman Catholic philosophers and theologians, six of which were delivered at a conference held at Orvieto, Italy, May 27, 1994. The conference occurred in the wake of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor (The Splendor of Truth)* August 6, 1993, and the response within the Catholic Church to that encyclical.

The connecting thesis of the book is that the inability of individual Christians to make responsible decisions is linked to its lack of grounding in the intuitive conscience (synderesis) which has traditionally directed the church. Conscience has come to be understood as subjectivity, rather than as an expression of liberty in the Holy Spirit. Individuals need to look to the Spirit's direction, the inner voice that directs Christians to the truth, in order to rely on the conscience as an authority.

Of great value in the book is the great diversity of backgrounds of the authors. Church roles include a papal theologian, an archbishop, a priest, and professors of philosophy, theology, medieval studies, and moral theology. National origins include Italian, Spanish, Polish Ameri-

can, Swiss, and German. The varieties of these backgrounds suggest the breadth of traditional viewpoints within the Roman Catholic faith.

Although the arguments and thought of each writer remains linked to tradition, particularly to the Thomist tradition of conscience and natural law, the book presents nuanced views of how that tradition is to be interpreted today. Still the book does not answer how the individual Christian is to make an individual decision except by seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance and the church's authority.

The larger audience within the church will find useful the way in which this book raises issues of authority. However, the book will be most useful to pastors, teachers, and students in seminary or graduate school classes who have some knowledge of Roman Catholic thought and ethics.

Roger H. Black
English Lutheran Church
LaCrosse, Wisconsin

The Sexuality of Jesus. By William E. Phipps. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996. 250 pages. Paper. $16.95.

Known for his 1970 controversial book entitled *Was Jesus Married?*, William Phipps justifies the new offering as a necessary response to "much confusion over the whole scope of Jesus' sexuality, from womb to tomb" (8). He intends the six chapters of *The Sexuality of Jesus* as a more comprehensive treatment of the topic raised in his first volume over 25 years ago. After the introduction, Phipps considers the following topics in order: "Beginnings and Maturation" (views regarding Jesus' conception and his earliest sexual development); "The Celibacy Debate" (whether or not Jesus remained celibate throughout his adulthood years); "Women and Magdalene" (Jesus' attitude towards women in general and his relationship with Mary Magdalene in particular); "Sexual Renunciation in Western History" (the influence of ascetic tendencies in the Hellenistic world on Christianity's approach to sexuality, including that of Jesus); and "Significance of the Topic" (a summary of his case regarding the sexuality of Jesus and its import for us today).

At the outset of the final chapter, Phipps writes: "We examined a bewildering variety of responses to these historical questions: Did Jesus and his mother remain virginal? Did Jesus remain a bachelor or did he marry? The lack of explicit information regarding the way Jesus expressed or contained his sexuality accounts for the difficulty of this probe" (170). Herein Phipps pinpoints the two problems in writing a book on the topic of Jesus' sexuality: the paucity of textual sources and the overabundance of scholarly and non-scholarly speculation regarding this issue.

This leads me to my major misgiving about the book. In chapters 2-5 Phipps does not develop answers to the historical questions posed by him (e.g., whether or not Jesus was married, or what was his relationship with Mary Magdalene) as carefully reasoned arguments based on the textual and cultural evidence available. Rather he typically proceeds by assembling an eclectic array of "responses" from a variety of sources and time periods. For example, when discussing Jesus' relations with Mary Magdalene (122-142), Phipps treats the New Testament's testimony to Magdalene and then cites comments of psychiatrist Colin Parkes, grief counselor William Worden, the 19th century French biblical critic Ernest Renan, and Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis in support of the suggestion of Celsus, the second-century opponent of Christianity, that Magdalene's Easter encounter with Jesus was the result of a "hallucination triggered by grief." Thus, although Phipps acknowledges the lack of evidence to answer certain historical questions, he appears to build support for his conclusions by largely accumulating later interpretations and speculations.

Clearly Phipps' main purpose for undertaking his study is to cast doubt on the reigning convictions in Western Christianity—and especially Roman Catholicism—that Jesus was celibate and that his mother Mary was and remained a virgin. Since the Roman Catholic Church's official view about Jesus' sexuality legitimates important practices such as priestly celibacy, Phipps knows that much is at stake in his attack on the church-sanctioned position. On the one

hand, Phipps is probably correct in asserting that the evidence (or rather the lack of it) in the New Testament does not explicitly support the conclusion that Jesus was celibate. But, on the other hand, his frequent assertion that Jesus was married reads too much out of the "silence" of the New Testament texts.

In his consideration of topics such as "Jesus' attitude towards women" (110-122) and "Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity" (143ff.), Phipps agrees with much recent scholarship. Other volumes, however, undertake these investigations more carefully and comprehensively (so, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* and Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*). Phipps is certainly right in concluding that major ascetic tendencies in earliest and subsequent Christianity obscured and even distorted positive attitudes towards women and marriage apparent in most New Testament texts. Yet this conclusion allows Phipps only a portion of his overall argument. He can assert that the later church's emphasis on sexual renunciation and celibacy (even viewing sexual intercourse as impure) are not justified by the New Testament itself or more narrowly by Jesus' celibacy as the model. He cannot, however, establish the more specific case for Jesus as a married Jew, possibly to Mary Magdalene. Moreover, he too easily dismisses the texts in Matthew and Luke which depict Jesus' birth following a virginal conception. Phipps never really undertakes a serious theological discussion of these Gospel texts.

Finally, I think that Phipps arrives at the fitting theological conclusion when he quotes approvingly Rosemary Ruether who argues that it is inappropriate to "enshrine" one particular sexual life style (e.g., married or celibate) for Christians on the basis of Jesus' life (p. 198). Though Phipps' book is concerned with important issues of sexuality and gender, his rather random method of citing a great variety of ancient and contemporary authors with little or no attention to the contextuality of these writings does little to further the scholarly discussion of the topics.

James L. Bailey
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida. Edited and with a Commentary by John D. Caputo. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997. xv and 215 pages. Paper. $17.95.

Deconstruction and Derrida have been considered by many Christians four-letter words. Such has been the frequent impression made by those enamored with deconstruction on those who treasure Scripture and the Christian tradition. If deconstruction be anti-metaphysical, the assertion that nothing has meaning, and that all attempts to make sense of the world lack a foundation, then clearly deconstruction finally leads theology to a dead end.

In *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John Caputo offers, in dialogue with Jacques Derrida, a stunningly different angle on the place of deconstruction in contemporary thought. On October 2, 1994, a roundtable discussion was held between Jacques Derrida and members of the Villanova University philosophy department on the occasion of the inauguration of a new doctoral program in philosophy. This book consists of a transcript of this discussion with Derrida (25 pages) and Caputo's enlightening commentary on it (171 pages). As is apparent from the page count, Caputo's interpretation of Derrida and deconstruction provides the bulk of this book. Yet the entire format yields tremendous food for thought.

Caputo interprets Derrida much in the train of the Jewish prophets. Deconstruction as a method and a philosophy does not exist as an end in itself. Rather, one gets the impression that deconstruction, in the hands of Derrida, serves the primary purpose of iconoclasm against the idolatries of the modern world. Wherever thought elevates itself to absolutism—just think of the tyrannical systems which have dominated the century past—deconstruction aims at unmasking the folly.

Yet unmasking is not the final point. Beyond deconstruction emerges the possibility of the inbreaking of the eternal. When totalizing systems crumble, space is created for hospitality to the stranger and the building of genuine community. The central impulse driving deconstruction is that of relentless justice until, in

Christian terms, the kingdom comes. Truth arrives as an event occurring in language (cf. the parables of Jesus) in the mean time.

While this is not explicitly theological discourse, in Caputo's interpretation deconstruction resonates with themes which belong to the Christian core: community, hospitality, justice, gift, the messianic, faith, and even prayer. Deconstruction prepares the way of the Lord. Given Caputo's close relationship with Derrida, one has reason to trust the reliability of this interpretation.

Although written in the language of philosophy and punctuated by the playfulness of deconstruction, this book is to be recommended to those wanting to take a fresh look at Derrida and his philosophy. Christian theology needs to remain in dialogue with the major intellectual movements of every age. Caputo would have us learn to see deconstruction no longer as enemy but as ally in the common cause of (transcendent) justice.

For those interested in an even more in-depth analysis of Derrida's thought, Caputo has subsequently published *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Craig L. Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church. Edited by William R. Barr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. xviii and 553 pages. Paper. $39.00.

This book is a collection of articles recently written by forty scholars, constituting a formidable volume. The editor has chosen these articles with intent to represent the whole range of major traditions within the contemporary Christian Church: Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic. The back cover states that the writers include persons from all across the world "both male and female, lay and clerical, liberal and conservative." With only one or two exceptions, however, the great majority represent a relatively centrist theological position, consciously or unconsciously expressive of what this reviewer sees as intent to be "constructive" (as in the title) and helpful to a wide variety of readers.

"Part one contains essays on constructing theology from diverse perspectives. Part two focuses the discussion on the doctrine of God. Part three considers humanity within the fabric of creation. Part four explores the significance of Jesus Christ. Part five looks at the church and Christian life. Part six examines issues related to eschatology." (quotation from the publisher's "New Book Information")

The selection of articles clearly represents a concern for a wider context for Christian theology. All writers are rooted in Christian faith and church life, but they represent the editor's hope for "interaction and conversation among Christians around the world." Hence the wide spectrum of kinds of writers. The editor is personally concerned to participate in interreligious dialogue, but except for some suggestions in this direction from the authors themselves this book does not take on this responsibility. The editor, however, wishes to take account of the whole range of God's activity in the contemporary world in so far as this may be discerned. His primary aim is "to seek a clearer, deeper understanding of God in relation to the world and human life for the sake of more faithful and responsible participation in God's mission in and for the world." He sees Christian theology as ineluctably bearing a missionary nature, a truly universal theology that touches all the "basic elements of the human condition and the overall world situation." The editor defines the Christian gospel as "the message and power of God's creative-redemptive work of justice and reconciliation breaking through and breaking down all humanly constructed divisions."

I would city as particularly significant articles "Divine Revelation" by Franz Jozef Van Beeck, S.J., and Verna Harrison's "Word as Icon in Greek Patristic Theology" for their apt and helpful discussion of early Christian theology. There are other fine treatments by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox writers as by persons from the two-thirds world. I liked Kosuke Koyama's article. There are notable articles working toward feminist theology. There are a few errors of fact in the text of some writers, but

for a book of this size they are very few. Of the writers who classify themselves as evangelical almost all are irenic and relatively centrist in theological perspective. To this reviewer one exception would be the last article by William B. Crockett, a tour de force of literalistic interpretation, quite inferior to the discussion of the same theme (eschatology, more specifically "hell") by John R. Sacks, S.J.

This book is highly recommended for all readers who would confront a wide range of contemporary Christian theology.

Richard Henry Drummond
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary

Briefly Noted

Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue. By Maurice Wiles (Trinity Press International, $9.95). Maurice Wiles candidly acknowledges that he is far from qualified to write on this most pressing subject. He looks for clues by attending to how the church's history, including its engagement with the Hellenistic philosophico-religious tradition, shows its use of significant elements, concepts, and categories (albeit in transformed ways!) from its contextual competitors and adversaries. He examines Rahner's 'existential' approach as a 'Test Case,' which "enables us to recognize... that different religions may represent different articulations of the underlying, universal offer of divine self-communication" (51). In his proposal of "A Theology for Dialogue," he asserts that there should be full commitment and openness to change, as well as loyalty and self-criticism. What may be perceived as antipodes are in fact compatible because each is implied by the other. This brief book is worth reading! *Winston D. Persaud*

Apologia. By Max L. Stackhouse, with Nantawan Boonprasat-Lewis, J. G. Collison, Lamin Sanneh, Lee Harding, Ilse von Loewenclau, and Robert W. Pazmino, and with a Foreword by Donald W. Shriver, Jr. (Eerdmans, $72.00). As its subtitle (Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education) indicates, this volume is an attempt, a commendable one at that, to grapple with the unavoidable question of how to do theological education today. This book is of immense value in raising such critical questions as: Is there anything normative in Christianity? How do we arrive at what is true? By social analysis? By liberating praxis? By attending to the Christian scriptures? The work is really the results of an inter-disciplinary theological dialogue, involving scholars and educators from five continents. On the question of truth claims which theological education cannot avoid addressing, Stackhouse writes: "Strictly speaking, only four doctrines appear to have been accepted by the whole church over its entire history and to provide the boundaries of what it means to be Christian: (1) that humanity is fallen and in need of salvation, (2) that revelation takes place in history in the way that the Bible authoritatively indicates, (3) that the doctrine of the Trinity accurately points to how God can best be understood in non-Hebraic terms and what that means for life in the world, and (4) that Jesus is the Christ—the way, the truth, and the light. Precisely what each of these means has been a matter of considerable dispute, and most of the disputes are not finally settled" (170). However we might think about this reductionism, *Apologia* is an invaluable tool to theological education today in terms of the questions it raises! I highly recommend it. *Winston D. Persaud*

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Preaching Helps

The Holy Trinity—Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Series C

"My Karma Ran Over Your Dogma"

I confess that even out here in Berkeley I haven't seen that particular bumper sticker in some years now. Nevertheless, the noun "dogma" and the adjective "dogmatic" are not held in high esteem anywhere in the country, not even in church, at least not in most parts of the ELCA. Quite the opposite! And yet in his first offering for this issue, Pastor John Rollefson quotes from Dorothy Sayers' essay, "The Dogma is the Drama."

Given the choice between "comforting sentiments" or "vague uplift" on the one hand and the "terrifying assertion" (= dogma) that the Creator of the world has lived in our world and passed through the grave to newness of life, Dorothy Sayers could be counted on to celebrate the drama of the dogma.

In some old doctrinal warfare I remember learning that the Lutheran Confessions speak of "doctrine" in the singular. We Lutherans, I was told (and I believe it), have not many dogmas and decrees and doctrines but only one: the doctrine or message of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. When the Confessions use the plural "doctrines," they are always referring to false teachings.

Furthermore I learned in that same warfare that "dogma" means "what the church is obligated to preach and must preach if it really is to be the church." As Paul said, "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel."

All of that might sound not simply serious but solemn in the sense of joyless. But that is far from what we get in John Rollefson's treatments of the texts for these opening Sundays of the great, green Pentecost Season. I was astonished and delighted as I read his offerings to see the abundance of fresh and refreshing reference to movies and books and above all to songs. And John's prose itself sings.

I am writing these words a few days after Christmas. It isn't even the New Year yet. In front of me is an article by Gustav Niebuhr, reporting to readers of the *New York Times* for December 24 on the way "Pastors Prepare the Hardest

Sermon," namely preaching on Christmas. Niebuhr interviewed preachers, asking how they prepared for the task of saying something fresh and immediate, when everyone knows the story already and yet they throng to church in hopes of being touched and moved once more.

Simplicity and brevity are essential, he was told. Or find a story, perhaps about a child, to connect with people's emotions. One preacher tries to imagine that this is his own first Christmas. Another drapes himself in a cloak and plays the part of a shepherd standing at the manger, reciting his experience.

Niebuhr interviewed preachers from Hartford to Atlanta, from New York City to Eagle River, Alaska. It is clear that these preachers take their preaching seriously and work to speak a word that will connect listeners to the bright Mystery disclosed in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is an awesome task at Christmas—and in all the passing seasons of the church's year, Sunday after Sunday.

The author of the studies and reflections in this issue of "Preaching Helps" is **Pastor John Rollefson**. John graduated from Luther College (history and classics) and took his M.Div. at Yale Divinity School. Then he earned two M.A.'s, one at the University of London and the second at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

For the past eight years John has been Pastor of Lord of Light Lutheran Church, which is the Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Before that he served for 10 years at Our Savior's in Milwaukee, a large metropolitan church, and before that for five years at St. Francis in San Francisco. John is deeply involved in ecumenical concerns and last year completed service on the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee. In the summer of 1997 he was an ELCA delegate to the Ninth Assembly of the LWF in Hong Kong.

To John, many thanks for sharing your reflections on the powerful texts of the opening weeks of Pentecost and for giving us a glimpse into your own habits of preparation.

To all you preachers, many thanks for your devotion to the task of proclaiming the dogma/drama of the gospel, season by holy season.

Yours,

Robert H. Smith
Editor of *Preaching Helps*
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

The Holy Trinity
First Sunday after Pentecost
June 7, 1998

Psalm 8
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

First Reading

Today's readings from Hebrew Scripture, from Proverbs 8 and Psalm 8, conspire to chant an antiphonal hymn between God and humanity in which the mediating figure of Wisdom serves as cantor.

The opening verses of Proverbs 8 portray Wisdom (*sophia* in Greek) as a woman standing at the public intersections of city traffic hailing passersby and inviting them to stop and welcome her into their lives.

Verses 22 and following less suggestively but just as provocatively represent a shift in perspective in which woman Wisdom now is found narrating her autobiography, so to speak, in which she stakes her claim to be God's first act of creation and witness to all that transpired. More than that, in famously ambiguous Hebrew, Wisdom describes herself as being "beside" the Creator God "like a master worker," or alternatively, "as a little child" (Prov 8:30). Samuel Terrien, a noted Old Testament scholar, prefers the translation "architect." He further suggests that the "Feminine Wisdom at play" of this passage might be understood best as the "daughter of Yahweh" (much as the Prologue of John's Gospel will later identify the Word (*Logos* in Greek) as the preexistent "son of the Father" become incarnate). Wisdom, Terrien concludes, "incongruous as it may seem, should be considered the pivot of Scripture, the motif that, more than any other, leads from the Old Testament to the New" (*Till the Heart Sings* [Fortress, 1985], 87ff.).

And then there's Psalm 8, which can be understood as a kind of antiphonal paraphrase on the part of a humanity wistfully and reverently meditating on the glories of God's creation and the special "mindfulness" God evidences towards us. This too can be seen as a wisdom song, a song we can sing as we heed Wisdom's invitation amid the busy crossroads of life to stop and consider the origin and purpose of existence—and to delight in God.

Both New Testament readings seem chosen because of their implicit three-fold sense of God. "God" (also "the glory of God" and "God's love"), "our Lord Jesus Christ," and "the Holy Spirit" all appear in five short verses of Paul's Letter to the Romans. The unselfconsciousness of the intertwining of these various references to God in the context of a much-loved and used pastoral counsel to the suffering is a vital witness to the New Testament's sense of a God who will not be bound to a single referent or name but is experienced variously and yet identified as one with the "elusive presence" of Yahweh of Hebrew scripture and tradition.

Pastoral Reflections

Holy Trinity is a Sunday dreaded by many who might prefer the church's holy day to be co-opted by other Spring-time holidays like Mother's Day or Memorial Day. The challenge of preaching a "doctrinal sermon" is one few of us relish because we fear that doctrine, especially a doctrine often judged as arcane, abstruse and heavy as the Trinity, simply will not prove appetizing to the lighter appetites of contemporary Christians. But this is to underestimate our congregations, ourselves, and the delectable Word set before us today.

Dorothy Sayers, the Christian apologist, Dante scholar and author of the Lord

Peter Wimsey mysteries, argued memorably in an essay published sixty years ago that "The dogma is the drama," by which she meant

> . . . not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death.

"Show that to the heathen," she concluded, "and they may not believe it, but at least they may realize that here is something a man (sic!) might be glad to believe." (Dorothy Sayers, "The Dogma is the Drama," in *Creed or Chaos? and Other Essays* [Methren and Co., 1947], 24.)

Today we might say, "Show that to our congregations"—even and in some ways especially my own well-educated university congregation—and our fear is we will be hooted down as too intellectual, out of touch, or insufficiently contextual. And that's where we're dead wrong! Holy Trinity Sunday presents a terrific opportunity to revel in the "delight" of God in humankind and for us to delight in the praise and contemplation of our Triune God—the God of Scripture and Tradition but also the God of our experience and hope, our Origin and Destination who continues to surprise and astonish us and shatter our religious complacency, redefining even our sense of our own religious "needs."

Holy Trinity is a day to delight in God, by singing such old war-horses as "Holy, Holy, Holy" but juxtaposing it with the likes of Brian Wren's contemporary "God of Many Names" and "God is One, Unique and Holy." Today can be an occasion to explore the church's contemporary fascination with and conflict over God-language, a time to introduce some of the insights of feminist theologies into the doctrine of God, and especially in light of Proverbs 8 some of the fresh and exciting work being done on the figure of Wisdom in Hebrew Scripture and the tantalizing references to wisdom in the New Testament, including some of Jesus' own sayings.

Affectively, explore ways in which to let delight mark the occasion of The Holy Trinity. Without vaporizing the doctrine of the Holy Trinity into a "new age" celebration of sheer spiritualization, allow the Scripture, with Proverbs 8 and Psalm 8 leading the way, to seduce you and your people into exploration and appreciation of what it might mean for God and humankind's essential relationship to be one of mutual delight, originating with God and reciprocated by humankind.

Proverbs 8 gives witness, as Terrien suggests (p. 97), that Israel's wisdom tradition itself permitted playful speculation regarding the "transpersonality of God" and the "collective personality of the godhead." The church, in time, would find it necessary to define its doctrine of God in terms of the Holy Trinity. It's noteworthy, however, that the technical theological term used to describe the interrelatedness of the three persons of the godhead was "perichoresis," a Greek word that literally means "dancing around." Play and delight are at the core of today's celebration of the Holy Trinity. JR

Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 6 June 14, 1998

Psalm 32
2 Samuel 11:26–12:10, 13-15
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36–8:3

First Reading

Stories often serve as the vehicle of God's truth. By indirection a well-told story can help people discover truth, even truth about themselves, that other, more direct forms of discourse, fail to communicate.

A millennium separates the telling of the prophet Nathan's parable to King David and Jesus' parable spoken to Simon the Pharisee. But God's truth, embodied in these fictional narratives, discloses the sin of both. David, confronted with God's truth, repents. The response of Simon the Pharisee isn't disclosed. But his judging behavior is. And, ironically, Jesus is revealed in the story he tells as the prophet he truly is (and Simon assumes he cannot be) precisely because Jesus does know that the nameless woman who has bathed his feet with her tears and anointed them with ointment is a sinner—a sinner seeking forgiveness.

The second reading is the first of four successive readings that will be heard from Paul's letter to the Galatians. In today's reading Paul contrasts what it means to pursue justification by means of the law with justification through faith in Jesus Christ. Having "died to the law" Paul says "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Paul's autobiographical testimony to the power of justification through faith finds its analogue in Jesus' welcoming words to the woman: "Your sins are forgiven.... Your faith has saved you: Go in peace."

Pastoral Reflections

"You're the man," the prophet, Nathan, tells the king, David. "You're the man," the prophet, Jesus, tells the Pharisee, Simon. Jesus didn't invent the telling of parables to convey God's truth, but he certainly mastered the art. As James Breech puts it in *The Silence of Jesus* (Fortress, 1983), Jesus through his parables told open-ended stories that evoked a whole fresh and authentic mode of being human that Jesus identified as "God's reign." Jesus' encounter with the nameless woman who disrupted the dinner party at Simon the Pharisee's house, and the story Jesus told Simon in response to her loving intrusion and his summary judgment of her, demonstrate the disclosive explosion that occurs when God's truth is spoken to power, political or religious, even and especially when clothed in fictive narration.

This is a day that invites the preaching of a story sermon. (See, for example, my Ann Arbor neighbor Michael Lindvall's collection of sermons entitled *Good News From North Haven* [Pocket Books, 1991].) Or play with the way in which both Nathan and Jesus find themselves in a tricky "pastoral" real life incident with a powerful person that leads them to the prophetic indirection of "insinuating" God's truth into the encounter by telling a story. A congregation in our Synod recently refused to accept as members two gay men who presented themselves as a long-time committed couple. The congregation, citing its constitution and the ELCA's "Vision and Expectations" for rostered clergy, argued that while the church is composed of forgiven sinners, sinners unwilling to repent of their sin should not be welcomed. Our Synod Council is currently wrestling with what to do about this. Both the question of how to determine what is sinful and how to respond to those judged sinful are pressing pastoral issues. Lead your congregation in struggling with this or

another such story in the context of Jesus' story.

The spare good news for the day is most clearly articulated in the words of Psalm 32: "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is no more." A story will put flesh and blood on the bones of this gospel truth. A new song will, also: for example, Brian Wren's "A Prophet Woman Broke a Jar" (*New Beginnings* [Hope Publishing, 1993]) or Sherri Hansen-Grant's and Dana Runestad-Rabe's "Breaking Open the Jar," written for the ELCA's hymn competition in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women. Flannery O'Connor's short story entitled "Revelation" (in *The Complete Stories* [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987]) provides a graphic unmasking of the religiously respectable in their attitude toward the "sinners" of this world. In Mrs. Turpin's final epiphany in the pig parlor we are all given a preview of what the radical reordering of priorities and judgments in God's reign will look like when she and her ilk will be found bringing up the rear of the procession streaming into heaven,

> ... marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They all were on key. Yet you could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (p. 508)

JR

Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 7 June 21, 1998

Psalm 22:19-28
Isaiah 65:1-9
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

First Reading

"Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you," Jesus tells the man he has delivered from the "legion" of demons. The apostle Paul's words to the Galatian Christians might be thought of similarly as an encouragement to witness to the miracle of healing of divisive social distinctions that is experienced as one is "clothed with Christ" in the waters of baptism. Ethno-religious, econo-political, even sexual and gender distinctions dissolve, Paul says, in the washing of the baptismal promise where all become "one in Christ Jesus."

Interestingly, though, while Christians are no longer "Jew or Greek" in any conventional sense, Paul concludes his thought by making the particularistic assertion, "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring," by which he means "heirs according to the promise." This, *contra* Marcion and all his successors who would ignore or depreciate Hebrew Scripture as the medium of God's Word, positions us so as to hear as our own the hard and even sarcastic Word spoken through the Prophet Isaiah as an angry thunderbolt upon a people whose religiosity could not mask their infidelity.

Pastoral Reflections

A recurring theme of Scripture as well as a pressing contemporary reality in the church is the tension between our natural human urge to be religious and God's call to covenant fidelity. In our supposedly secular

age, spiritualities abound and the human need to act religiously has created a huge market for a wide diversity of consumer tastes in things spiritual. A favorite New Yorker cartoon depicts a guy, obviously distraught, with a noose around his neck, balanced precariously on a large stack of books with titles like *Affirmative Therapy*, *Self-Helping*, and *More Joy*. The message is clear: the idolatrous religion of self-help is about to kill him. (See Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* [Eerdmans, 1995] for a contemporary exposé of religious consumerism as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's haunting critique of religiosity in *Letters and Papers From Prison* ([Macmillan, 1953].) I think it was Anglican Archbishop William Temple who once put it: "It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in our being religious."

In our text from Isaiah, God dares to be imaged as a frustrated because ignored suitor for Israel's affections:

> I was ready to be sought out by those
> who did not ask,
> to be found by those who did not seek me.
> I said, "Here I am, here I am"
> to a nation that did not call on my name.
> I held out my hands all day long
> to a rebellious people,
> who walk in a way that is not good,
> following their own devices. (65:1-2)

One can hear and feel God's plaintive and almost pathetic sense of rejection as Israel not only spurns the divine overtures but seemingly goes out of the way to heap abuse on God. Israel's culminating act of "dissing God" is clothed in explicitly religious terms as God is told dismissively, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you" (v. 5). Israel "too holy" for God! No wonder God is miffed and decides to "measure into their laps full payment for their actions." And yet, even in the face of such outrageous behavior, the scorned lover God vows "for my servants' sake" to not "destroy them all" (v. 8).

This image of the pain God suffers from Israel's continuing acts of infidelity is one the prophet Hosea will bring to even more poignant articulation in his relationship to his estranged wife, Gomer. (See Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* [Harper and Row, 1962].) Today's text offers us, saturated as we are with our own post-modern ways of being too holy for God (too spiritual, too secular, too anti-institutional, too busy, too... [fill in the blank]), opportunity both to prophetically critique the cult of religious consumerism in our day and to proclaim the goodness of a God whose power of love is greater than our rejection and who seeks to liberate us from the individualistic demons of our own "religious needs." These include, as Paul reminds us, our clinging to the old distinctions that in baptism are washed away and drowned even as we are clothed in the new identity that is ours in the community of Christ's baptized.

Find a baptismal hymn that sings of this as, for example, Ruth Duck's "Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters" or John Ylvisaker's "We Were Baptized in Christ Jesus," both of which are found in *With One Voice*. JR

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 8 June 28, 1998

Psalm 16
1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Galatians 5:1, 23-25
Luke 9:51-62

First Reading

Unlike Elijah of our first reading who permits Elisha to bid farewell to his parents before taking up the prophetic mantle, Jesus will allow no delays or side trips to those who respond to his invitation/command, "Follow me." "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the dominion of God" is Jesus' memorable and peremptory adage, reminiscent of both Lot's wife's fatal look back and the agricultural maxim about the impossibility of plowing a straight furrow if one insists on looking backward rather than forward. The point here, as Jesus will underline in Luke 12:22-31, is that seeking God's dominion takes precedence and priority for those who would follow him.

This reminder about the cost of discipleship is preceded by the brief foray of Jesus' band into Samaritan territory where "the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem." This recalls the historic animosity between Jews and Samaritans based in part on rival centers of worship and theologies. James and John (whom Mark but not Luke or Matthew nicknames "Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder," Mk 2:17) react excitedly to the Samaritans' rejection by asking Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Where they thought they had assumed such incendiary powers isn't clear. But a few verses later (in next week's text), upon sending out the seventy, Jesus advises his emissaries when encountering rejection to simply say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you; yet know this: the dominion of God has come near." Jesus concludes ominously: "I tell you on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town" (Luke 10:10-12).

Pastoral Reflections

The foregoing reflections on the primacy and priority that following Jesus entails in one's life finds its content in Paul's exhortation to the churches of Galatia. Hearing this as we will on the Sunday prior to the celebration of the Fourth of July in the U.S. presents a ready-made context in which to struggle to discern the meaning of Paul's words, "For freedom Christ has set us free," words that so stirred the heart of one Martin Luther as to inspire his great Reformation tract of 1520 *The Freedom of A Christian.*

Paul's words provide an opportunity and a spur to consider the nature of the freedom we experience and pursue as American Christians. Of special relevance is Paul's caveat, "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence," which we hear amid a dog-eat-dog economy in which his words about "biting and devouring one another" and the need to "take care that you are not consumed by one another" sound the clarion warning of a clear and present danger. The antidote to such rabidly licentious behavior is not bondage to a new legalism but, in a rare Pauline citation of Jesus' own teaching, the "single commandment" that sums up the "whole law": "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The ELCA's recent economic life study *Give Us Our Daily Bread* (ELCA, 1996) will prove relevant here.

Paul then goes on to catalogue the "works of the flesh" that provides ample opportunity to speak specifically about behavior that is

inconsistent with those seeking to inherit the dominion of God.

But Paul isn't content to list vices. He wants his readers to know what "the fruit of the Spirit" looks like embodied in human flesh and blood. This catalogue of virtues reads suspiciously like a description of Jesus' way-of-being with people. What allows this to be freeing good news and not a new moralism is Paul's concluding assurance that such Christ-like behavior is possible for the likes of us sinners since we live and are guided by the Spirit of the One who was crucified and raised and who himself dared to live his life in this God-given freedom.

Steven Spielberg's recent film "Amistad" provides an opportune occasion to reflect on the universal human struggle to attain freedom, particularized in the context of our nation's history of slavery and racism, what has been called America's "original sin." The scene in which one of the imprisoned Africans recounts with enthusiasm the Christian story by means of an illustrated Bible and the almost natural identity he finds of Jesus' story with that of the captured Africans' plight and hope for freedom is particularly poignant.

James Weldon Johnson's so-called "black national anthem," "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (*LBW* #562) is an appropriate hymn. Or try the catchy Tanzanian hymn "Listen, God Is Calling" (*With One Voice* #712) or the well-loved South African freedom song, "Freedom Is Coming," in *Freedom is Coming* (Walton, 1984). JR

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 9 July 5, 1998

Psalm 66:1-9
Isaiah 66:10-14
Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

First Reading

In contrast to our reading from Isaiah 65 of two weeks ago, which, with no little sarcasm, pilloried Israel as being too holy for God, today's text from Isaiah's ultimate chapter sings a paean of joy at the promise of Jerusalem's restoration:

> Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad
> for the city,
> all you who love her:
> For... I will extend prosperity to
> Jerusalem like a river,
> And the wealth of the nations like an
> ever flowing stream. (Isa 66:10, 12)

This sentiment is echoed in the psalmist's urging to "make a joyful noise to God, all the earth," the God who "rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations" (v. 7). The personal involvement of God with the people of the covenant here is imaged in the lovely God-as-patriarch-shattering metaphor:

> As a mother comforts her child
> so I will comfort you. (66:13)

It is hard not to think that Jesus had Isaiah in mind as he uttered his lament over the city: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under wings and you were not willing!" (Lk 13:34). Today's Gospel reading narrates the story of Jesus' sending out of the

seventy with the warning that they will be like lambs amid wolves. He advises them how to respond both to the welcome and rejection they will experience because of the message they bear: "The dominion of God has come near to you."

Pastoral Reflections

Some will remember the ominous dismissal that the crusty desk sergeant of the TV police series "Hill Street Blues" uttered at the conclusion of each morning's platoon meeting: "Be careful out there." Jesus seems to be sending the 70 out in a similar manner urging them to the task at hand but warning them about what to expect.

Today, the day after the Fourth of July, with the encouragement of Isaiah and Jesus, might be a timely occasion to consider the nature of our calling as emissaries of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a sometimes hostile and occasionally welcoming environment. Amid this commission (see Acts 1:8 for Luke's version of the "great commission") to go with the gospel we are also called to exercise our calling as citizens locally, nationally, and globally. The Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall's Hein-Fry lectures of several years ago *(God and the Nations* [Fortress, 1995])* offer stimulating encouragement to reflect on God's involvement in history and both the problems and freedoms we contemporary North American Christians face amid the rapid dissolution of post-Constantinian Christendom. Here the psalmist's assurance of a God "who keeps watch on the nations" and the prophetic reminder of our "Mothering God" (see the hymn of this name in *With One Voice*) who comforts us in our distress as well as rejoices with us in the particularity of our peoplehood and love for our city surround us with the encouragement to carry out our calling in the thick of everyday life, political, economic, social and cultural. See Ronald Thiemann's *Religion In Public Life* (Georgetown University Press, 1996) and Glenn Tinder's *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (Harper, 1991) for stimulating encouragement to relate our Christian faith to the public life of our society.

Paul, in the last reading we hear in our series from Galatians, expands on one of the "fruits of the Spirit" catalogued in last week's reading: gentleness. Gentleness involves "bearing one another's burdens." Yet Paul quickly cautions "all must carry their own loads." This tension between social and individual responsibility, recently so evident in our public debate over welfare reform, is concluded by Paul on this note: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." President Bush's vague yearning that we might become a "kinder, gentler nation" is one with biblical warrant. On this Fourth of July it is good news to be reminded that there is no lack of such opportunities in our community, in our nation, and in our world. JR

*These lectures are also printed in *Currents* 22:6 (December 1995)—ed.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10 July 12, 1998

Psalm 25:1-10
Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

First Reading

All of our readings conspire to compose an extended response to the psalmist's plea:

> Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
> teach me your paths.
> Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
> for you are the God of my salvation.
> (Ps 25:5-6a)

Deuteronomy begins with the reminder that it is God's delight to prosper those who "turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (30:9-10). God's commandments, then, are not intended to be "too hard" or "too far away" to obey. Instead they are to be seen (see Psalm 119) as God's good gift to Israel so as to make the God-pleasing and thus prosperous life possible. "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe it." As the psalmist concludes:

> All the paths of the Lord are steadfast
> love and faithfulness,
> for those who keep God's covenant
> and decrees. (25:10)

Our Gospel reading is Jesus' story of "The Man Who Fell among Robbers," better known as "The Good Samaritan." Luke situates the story as Jesus' parabolic response to a lawyer who came inquiring what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' first response was to ask him what the law, in which the lawyer was supposed to be professionally proficient, itself says. He answers by quoting from our Deuteronomic text for today as well as Leviticus' "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). You already know the answer, Jesus in effect says: "do this and you will live." But the lawyer, Luke explains, "wanting to justify himself," asks further of Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells his story as response, a story that not incidentally holds the unloving behavior of the priest and Levite up to scrutiny.

Today's second lesson presents the first of several readings from the letter to the Colossians traditionally attributed to Paul the Apostle but widely thought to be deutero-Pauline. We hear today the letter's opening verses which contain both the greeting and thanksgiving sections of the Epistle.

Pastoral Reflections

Our Lutheran polemic against "works righteousness" makes it difficult to create a hearing for today's texts. Yet today's readings all the more need to sound forth as the good news of God's will to save that they surely are. Our second reading begins with a word of thanksgiving to God for "the gospel that has come to you," in words reminiscent of Deuteronomy ("the word is very near you"). Further, Colossians says, this gospel "is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world... and so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves" (1:5-6). God's intended result sounds a note similar to Psalm 25: "so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to the Lord as you bear fruit in every good work..." (1:10).

Jesus' parable offers a concrete example of God's law-of-love in action where the neighbor is defined as the near one in need God has set in our path. Self-justifying religious reasons might lead one to ignore the opportunity to love one's neighbor by passing by on the other side. One has thereby missed the point of God's word having drawn near.

Michael Walzer in his book *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Harvard, 1987) retells a Talmudic story interpreting today's text from Deuteronomy about the "nearness" of God's word that may help us Christians to gain insight into Jesus' story illustrating the neighbor in need. The story involves a dispute among a group of rabbis; the subject doesn't matter. One rabbi, Eliezer by name, stood alone, a minority of one, having brought forth every imaginable argument but failing to convince his colleagues. Exasperated, he called for divine help: "If the law is as I say, let this carob tree prove it." Whereupon the tree was lifted hundreds of feet in the air. But the other rabbis insisted: "No proof can be brought from a carob tree."

And so Rabbi Eliezer tried a second and a third time and miracles again occurred at his order. But still the other rabbis wouldn't agree to his interpretation of the law. Until finally, Rabbi Eliezer called on God to directly intervene: "If the law is as I say, let it be proved from heaven." Whereupon a voice called out, "Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer? In all matters of the law it is as he says."

But Rabbi Joshua stood up and exclaimed, "It is not in heaven!" Morality, in other words, Walzer concludes, "is something we have to argue about" (pp. 31-32). Or in terms of Jesus' story, one cannot escape the neighbor in need by seeking God's answer from on high, even when we think we're on a religious mission like the priest and the Levite. "Who is my neighbor?" is an evasive question, a self-justifying question, an ultimately blasphemous question. For the word is not "too hard" or "too far away" or "in heaven." The good news is "the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut 30:14). The opportunity to make one's faith active in love, as Luther would put it, is as near as your neighbor in need. A simple Chinese hymn that was used at the Ninth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Hong Kong last summer sings memorably of the call to love one's neighbor:

We are your people:
Lord by your grace,
You dare to make us
Christ to our neighbors
of ev'ry nation and race....

Called to portray you,
Help us to live
Closer than neighbors,
Open to strangers,
Able to clash and forgive.

—Mabel Wu, "We Are Your People,"
LWF Assembly Worship Book, 1997

JR

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 11 July 19, 1998

Psalm 15
Genesis 18:1-10a
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

First Reading

"O Lord, who may abide in your tent?" the psalmist asks (15:1a). Today's and next week's Hebrew Scripture readings are both taken from the 18th chapter of Genesis and supply an answer to this question. This provides an unusual opportunity to let the narrative from Hebrew Scripture take the lead for these two Sundays both of which focus on issues of "hospitality." I urge the reader to see John Koenig's insightful study *New Testament Hospitality* (Fortress, 1985)

for a careful and provocative account of this central dimension of Jesus' life and teaching against its Jewish background and as practiced in the earliest New Testament communities.

Today's account of God's theophany to Abraham and Sarah in the person of the "three men" who visit them under the oaks of Mamre is the Old Testament's classic story of hospitality which the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews will later refer to as an example of "entertaining angels unawares" (13:2) as one of the gifts received for extending hospitality (literally "love for the stranger" or *philoxenia* in Greek). This encounter has been memorably portrayed in the Russian icon "The Three Visitors" which expresses the traditional Orthodox view of this episode as an Old Testament revelation of the Holy Trinity. (See Henri Nouwen's *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying With Icons* [Ave Maria Press, 1987], chapter one.)

But here let the story tell itself, focusing on the care with which Abraham and Sarah provide hospitality to the three strangers. Before leaving, one of the visitors tells Abraham that he will return and that his wife Sarah will have a son. The appointed reading ends here, but why resist telling the rest of the story in which Sarah, overhearing, bursts into laughter at the incongruity of herself as an elderly, barren woman giving birth? (See Ray Makeever's songs "Live Out the Love of God" and "Abraham and Sarah," both found in *With All Your Heart* [Fairway Press, 1984], for rare references in hymnody to Abraham and Sarah.)

Pastoral Reflections

Hospitality has become an "industry" in the U.S., and our national retreat into the privacy of our homes and gated communities means that we encounter the stranger as little as possible and only on our own terms. (See Parker Palmer's *The Company of Strangers [Crossroad, 1981].*)

Today's texts offer an unrivaled opportunity to be encountered by the good and disconcerting good news that strangers may bear us the Word as God's emissaries. It is a timely occasion to hold up for scrutiny not only our own attitudes toward strangers (refugees, the homeless, other races and economic classes, sexual minorities) but also our well-meaning religious efforts at openness, inclusiveness and welcome. (See Patrick Keifert's *Welcoming The Stranger* [Fortress, 1992] and Thomas Ogletree's *Hospitality To The Stranger* [Fortress, 1985].)

Our Gospel story of Mary's and Martha's welcome of Jesus is a reminder that true hospitality includes attentiveness to the stranger (Mary) and not merely courteous "niceness" (Martha). But try to resist making Mary and Martha into moral exemplars of what the authentic "church lady" is to resemble!

Colossians reminds us of the good news that we ourselves were once "estranged and hostile," in other words "strangers," and that Christ has reconciled us to God. Last summer I had the rare opportunity to preach just this message to a jam-packed downtown congregation of over a thousand people in Nanjing, China. I was chosen as preacher by our 18-member delegation from the Lutheran World Federation for no better reason than that I was the only native English-speaker among our group and that preaching in English would result in the need for only translation into Chinese. We were all the guests of the China Christian Council, the "post denominational" Protestant Church in China. To experience the hospitality and welcome we were extended as "strangers" and then to be invited to preach the gospel of welcome and reconciliation to these Chinese sisters and brothers was truly an epiphany of that strong gospel hospitality of receiving and giving that Koenig so well articulates in

his study. Should I have been surprised that our hymn of the day following the sermon turned out to be a lustily sung Chinese language rendition of the American oldie-but-goodie "What A Friend We Have In Jesus"? JR

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 12 July 26, 1998

Psalm 138
Genesis 18:20-32
Colossians 2:6-15 [16-19]
Luke 11:1-13

First Reading

There's a lot of coming and going in summer. Consequently it may be wise to summarize last week's story of the visit of the three godly visitors to Abraham's and Sarah's tent and the hospitality extended them. Sarah's irrepressible laugh provides a good, light transition to today's reading, but there's no reason not to let our hearers in on God's internal conversation that precedes today's pericope (Gen 18:16-19).

Today's reading contains the succeeding episode (from last week) of Abraham's bargaining with God over the fate of the cities Sodom and Gomorrah, the outcry over whose sins has reached God resulting in the divine investigative mission of the three men who visited Abraham and Sarah. The crux of Abraham's argument with God over what Abraham conceives to be God's plan to wipe out the whole city, righteous and unrighteous alike, is contained in Abraham's question that so well articulates humanity's age-old concern with theodicy: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" God inexplicably consents to play the bidding game with Abraham, and the reading ends with God agreeing to spare the city if only ten righteous can be found in it.

The story continues beyond our appointed reading, however, and since next week's pericope moves on to Ecclesiastes, I strongly urge at least condensing the remainder of the tale. This is particularly important in view of the widespread misunderstanding of the story that has become a pretext throughout so much of the church's history for the exclusion and even persecution of homosexual people. A careful explanation of the story (especially in light of last week's sermon) will reveal that the besetting sin of the men of Sodom was their aggressive inhospitality (xenophobia) to the visiting strangers (angels). And indeed other biblical references to the sin of Sodom bear out this inference (Ezek 16:49, Lk 10:12, e.g.). While the rape of Lot's visitors seems to have been the men of Sodom's intent, Lot's outrageous offer of his virgin daughters instead reveals that violent lust and certainly not same-sex behavior *per se* is the sin of Sodom. How cruelly ironic it is that one of the Bible's classic texts condemning aggressive inhospitality and hatred of the stranger should have become over the years a major "proof text" for the church's inhospitality to people of same-sex orientation. (See John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* [University of Chicago, 1980], pp. 92 ff.).

Colossians speaks of God "having forgiven us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands" by, in the most graphic of images, "nailing it to the cross" (2:13-14). This is what makes hospitality both possible and necessary as a central expression of the gospel. Ray Makeever's song "People of the Word" (*Dancing at the Harvest* [Augsburg Fortress, 1997]) sings honestly of the difficulty and the joy that the biblical call to welcome the stranger brings in its wake for those who

are part of Jesus' table community.

The Gospel reading in which Jesus instructs his disciples how to pray by inviting them to join him in calling God "Our Abba," contains not only Luke's version of "The Lord's Prayer" but also Jesus' peculiar parable of the "importunate friend" and a series of maxims illustrating the active dimension of prayer. (See venerable New Testament scholar Oscar Cullman's recent *Prayer in the New Testament* [Fortress, 1995].) Here the good news is that God is approachable and is more receptive to our prayers than even a loving parent or an intimate friend. My Chinese hosts (see last week's comments) knew what they were doing in singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" (*LBW* #439) as a response to our visit. We could do worse than join them with our voices this Sunday. For it is God's welcome of us as we are that makes possible our welcome of others as they are (Rom 15:1-7). Another hymn sung at last summer's LWF Assembly in Hong Kong sings hauntingly in the melody of a Filipino folk song of this reality which becomes especially tangible for us in Holy Communion:

Far beyond our mind's grasp
and our tongue's declaring
You are here in mystery,
silent, true, unfailing:
Lifted once on Calv'ry,
sin and weakness bearing,
O Lord, how wonderful,
you call us through the veil.

None of us is worthy
to receive your essence
In this meal together; yet,
the gift is yours by choice.
Death can never snatch us
from your holy presence,
Your promise is for life;
we can only rejoice.

—Asian Institute for Liturgy and Music
Quezon City, Philippines
LWF Assembly Worship Book, 1997

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