

CROSSING THE GREAT COMMISSION IN A PLURALISTIC AGE

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1.

The “Great Commission” in today’s discussion refers of course to the commissioning of the Eleven recounted in Matthew 28:18-20.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Especially since the beginnings of the modern missionary movement, this text has been cited as the post-Easter Lord’s command to engage in mission. Catholics may have been the first modern missionaries, but Lutherans from Halle, who went in 1705 to the then-Danish colony of Tranquebar (modern Tharangambadi in Tamil Nadu State) in India were among the first Protestants to engage in what would become the modern missionary movement. In his magisterial history of Christianity in India, Robert Frykenberg notes that they were drawn there by the flow of information on the high culture, religion, and philosophy of India that was coming to Europe and becoming part of the growing body of knowledge that Denmark’s and Germany’s educated elites were beginning to absorb. 1 Out of that flow back to Europe came

both the spur for Protestants to go into mission and the beginnings of the study of the history of religions that would lead to the intense uneasiness of today's American culture about mission.

It is simply a fact of history that the churches began to send missionaries to save pagans from the fires of hell. Why? Because of a number of Johannine, Pauline and other texts epitomized in the Lucan text of Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Because the Western history of interaction from the 8th to the 18th centuries with Islam had largely been one of warfare, sometimes initiated by Muslims, sometimes by Christians, the "no other name" text came to be central to the urgency with which the Great Commission was interpreted. Linked in the modern era to European assumptions of cultural superiority and feeling it was their right to rule Africans, Asians, and Native Americans, the Great Commission is problematic in our day. It must also be admitted that, with the exception of a few historical figures like St Francis of Assisi (1181 or 82 – 1226) , and Raymond Llull (c. 1232 – c. 1315), until the Enlightenment and the advent of a growing appreciation for non-Christian religions on the part of figures such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81), the son of a Lutheran clergyman, few Christians in the West could think of the followers of "other" religious traditions as anything but "pagans" or "infidels."

Today we reap the results of that labeling. Christian theology until the middle of the 20th century scarcely tried to develop ideas about Christian identity that did not so emphasize the New Testament's many texts about salvation "only" in Christ as to make Christianity absolutely superior to other traditions. On a parallel track, the science and history of religion was

producing anthologies and interpretations of these same religions that showed them to be repositories of wisdom. We now have had several generations of educated young people pass through basic courses in the sociology, psychology, and history of other traditions as to make the Christian claim of salvation being granted only in the name of Jesus seem quaint remnants of a bygone day when European Christian culture was the gold standard.

This, I suggest, is responsible for many Christians today finding the Great Commission a source of confusion, and in many cases, the reason they have left the church or, if remaining within it, do so mainly for social reasons. And because they cannot take the Great Commission seriously, neither can they take seriously other central aspects of the New Testament's claim that Jesus is much more than a prophet or teacher, for the Great Commission makes no sense outside the New Testament claim that Jesus is the savior of all peoples.

One of the paradoxical results of the missionary movement that initiated the "World Christianity" that we celebrate today is that it began during the era of colonial expansion in the 15th century with Portuguese ships sailing down the west coast of Africa and persisted in an Enlightenment that at first thought Christianity was an integral aspect of what made Western culture superior. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the assumption that Christianity and Europe were coterminous was gone. An important part of the Enlightenment project, as we all know, is that it was instrumental in creating the world of universities, science, and technology. Theology once had a place in those universities, and in some European universities still does, but university faculties of theology and divinity schools on the campuses of great universities like Chicago, Harvard, and Yale exist for the most part today in a world where every school is in a separate silo, a pluriversity, not a place where the

unification of knowledge is pursued. And in this pluriversity theology has standing only as a form of religious studies pursued with the methodologies of history and the social sciences. The very structure of the university conveys this to our young just when they are in the final lap of preparing themselves to become productive members of society.

The Enlightenment and Christianity, in essence, developed not only on separate paths, but increasingly in antagonistic ways, especially in Europe. About those separate paths much has and can be said. We will not add to it here. Suffice it to say that Christianity is enjoying incredible growth in Africa and Asia, along with renewal and revitalization in Latin America. In European homelands of both the Enlightenment and world mission, however, Christian faith is beleaguered. While the situation in North America is less negative, it is at best spotty and ambiguous, as countervailing winds blow this way and that.

2.

The best measure of these countervailing trends and their influence on attitudes within the churches, as well as a steady drift, especially of young people, away from identification with formal Christianity is available in several Pew Charitable Trust reports.² For some time, those reports were bad news for the group of churches we can roughly group into those affiliated with the World Council of Churches. More recently Catholic and Evangelical Protestant churches that prided themselves in defying those trends have also begun to show signs of losing the allegiance of many of their young in the rise of the so-called “nones,” people who identify with no religious body.

At risk of over-simplification, I want to draw a picture of the broad cultural attitudes that shape the pre-understanding of the “average” American with a Christian background. I think we can

agree that this is not a picture of a deep initiation into the reality of Christian spirituality and discipleship. I know the danger of armchair sociologizing, but what I refer to is a picture from thirty- thousand feet about the sort of people who sit in churches such as the Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches across the land.

Insofar as I anchor myself in research, I use terminology developed by Christian Smith of Notre Dame University and his colleagues, who have studied patterns of religious belief and behavior among young American Christians.³ I have been warned by Professor Mary Hess of Luther Seminary in St. Paul that some of Smith's generalizations fall apart when one drills deeply into particular segments of the groups studied or ask different question than Smith et al. ask. Without endorsing every aspect of the research pioneered by Christian Smith and his colleagues, however, I want to suggest that it makes sense in at least a broad way.

In short, it explains that we today experience the results of more than a generation of "let a thousand flowers bloom, ecumenism" that makes it difficult to introduce our youth and young adults to a path of character formation in which a robust Christian identity is integral to their emerging self-identity. That is to say, the faith life of many is what Smith calls "moralistic, therapeutic deism." In an interview with Tony Jones, he defines those terms as follows:⁴

By "moralistic" I [Christian Smith] mean oriented toward being good and nice, in ways that assert certain moral claims (for example, "You should never have sex with someone you don't really care about.") in fairly arbitrary ways without their being integrated into any larger, coherent moral tradition.

By "therapeutic" I mean being primarily concerned with one's

own happiness, good feeling, personal comfortability, and emotional wellbeing – in contrast to, say, a focus on glorifying God, learning obedience, or serving others.

Finally, by “deism” I mean a view of God as normally distant and not involved in one’s life, except (as qualified by the “therapeutic”) if one has a problem one needs God to solve, one can call on God to fix it and make one feel better. In MTD, in other words, God functions as a combination divine butler and cosmic therapist.

This is a long way from any vital connection with Christian tradition’s notion of discipleship. Yet all of us realize that MTD or something very much like it has a hold on not just the mind of youth but of a large proportion of our congregations. And, to echo an old adage, it has inoculated many so as to make them almost impervious to being infected with the virus of a vigorous Christian identity. I speak of the sort of identity formed in wrestling with the Gospel, much the way Jacob wrestled with a mysterious presence at Peniel and became Israel, the one who has “striven with God and with humans and prevailed” (Genesis 32:28-31).

MTD is far more comforting than the radicality of wrestling with God and deciding to trust the movements of the Spirit that convince a person to throw in his or her lot with the promise of the gospel, trusting Jesus and making fundamental decisions about one’s vocation, spouse, and social engagement in the light of trust in the promise of the Gospel.

By default, absent a more serious discipling program, MTD becomes is the operative theology of many Christians as they go about their daily lives in the United States.

But what has this to do with proclaiming Christ in a religiously plural world?

At least the following. In churches such as the Lutheran and the Catholic, we are dealing for the most part with an educated population that has imbibed an outlook that flattens the contours of human religions and cultures.⁵ Our educated parishioners have taken sociology and psychology 101, and from such courses have learned everything is relative and that one's religious "preference" is most likely a result of geography and temperament. Among adults, "attending church" is often a habit that lays aside nagging doubts about the big "truth" of the Christian Scriptural and theological tradition to keep up a good moral life or to avoid abandoning friends. Many of their children, who don't have the habit of regular attendance, simply see no reason to give allegiance to a tradition that they don't believe in.

The truth of the matter is that if I had grown up in Tehran, I would in all likelihood be a Muslim who follows Shi'a interpretations of Islam. But because I was born of an Irish-American Catholic mother raised in a strong Catholic environment, when she met my father, who was at best a nominal Methodist, I am a Catholic. Many of you are Lutherans for similar reasons.

If I had become a science major and got seriously into it up to PhD level, I would likely be hostile to religion, viewing it as an espouser of myths.

We know from studies that the dominant public media tend to treat religion in one of two ways. In the first, it follows Dwight Eisenhower's opinion that, "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is."⁶ Ike himself moved from being the child of a serious Quaker to a follower of America's then regnant Protestant civil religion. Religion is, in other words, good insofar as it strengthens the nation and Ike was no one if

not a loyal American. An historian of American religion will tell us that gradually the Eastern, Protestant establishment admitted Catholics and Jews into the pantheon of civil religion during and after World War II, but the terms of membership were support of the dominant white establishment, just at the time when the civil rights movement began to shake things up. In the 1960s, the women's movement began, and that was quickly followed by the gender revolution.

A second way media deal with the churches is to magnify the voices of churches that favor the groups that the media favor while clucking with alarm when Catholic bishops or Evangelical Protestants did not fall in line on matters like abortion or gay rights. Catholic bishops, as we know, find themselves in a weakened position as the sons and daughters of their white ethnic mainstays develop attitudes that do not differ materially from liberal Protestants. The one exception to that has been Catholic attitudes toward abortion. And even there, as the hierarchy's credibility has been destroyed by revelations of how they handled the clergy sex abuse scandal, the pro-life movement is lay-led.

3.

We all, of course, know these things. Because you are a Crossings member, indeed, you are probably more troubled by them than many ministers and priests who – unable to figure out a way bring their people deeper –settle for trying to keep peace in the congregation. Sermon preparation for many is an attempt to say something entertaining, non-controversial, and – if possible – inspiring on Sundays or when they're leading a Bible study.

I am no longer in public ministry, but I met many a minister and parish priest during my years at Orbis Books, and I spoke with many hundreds of men and women who were in preparation for

ministry and vitally involved in it. As a person who is now in the pew rather than behind the pulpit or at the altar, I've not been able to refrain from forming opinions about what is going on.

Where does one start? With my classmate Patrick Keifert, let's be realistic and say that we have to start where we are – with *this* congregation, with *this* church.⁷ And when I do that, I think the most important place to look at how we carry out the Great Commission is to look at the state of our worship.

Overall, what I want to suggest is that we miss something vital when Christian worship is not celebrated as a congregation's collective, symbolic joining of its members' personal and corporate identity with the paschal mystery of Jesus' death to self, as he gives up his all to God (the parable of Matthew 26:39 and Luke 23:46). Worship that does not breathe the full Trinitarian dimension of the paschal mystery cannot form a people for whom taking the Great Commission seriously is a lifetime goal. The drama of Luke-Acts as a whole is arguably the most explicit argument for this, for in Luke-Acts the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus find their fulfillment in the bestowal of the Spirit, who animates the church to become the Body of Christ in the world.

Catholics and Lutherans have spilled thousands of gallons of ink over how the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is best understood. For our purposes, I would like to leapfrog over those controversies and find common ground in the primitive church's conviction that the church is the *real Body of Christ* and the *Eucharist is the mystical Body*. My battered copy of the Italian translation of Henri de Lubac's *Corpus Mysticum* tells the story of how that conviction became transposed in later centuries.⁸ In that convoluted process, the church became the mystical body and the Eucharist became the real body, and during

it, the Holy Spirit was downgraded from being the divine Person who breathed life into the body to the one who had a somewhat ill-defined role in enabling the priest to consecrate bread and wine. It was, of course, all part of the sad tale of sacerdotalizing the church, a process that the great reformers of the sixteenth century attempted to reverse.

Alas, what the reformers ended up with was a church in which expounding the Word of God became more important than worship being an integrated action in which the Spirit led God's people to be nourished by the Word and move into the Eucharistic act where – joined in the Spirit – the joined themselves mystically with Christ, as his death was remembered at the altar, spiritually, an act that brought their daily lives and offered them to God with Christ.

As I read the story of Lamin Sanneh's move from Islam to Protestant Christianity and through a variety of Protestant churches to Catholicism, I was struck by a theme that comes up at several places in his recent book:

Catholicism is all things to all people, unquestionably, but at worship it is simply superlative. *The altar properly overshadows the pulpit, I suppose because the divine self-giving is really the first and last word – and our gratitude the most fitting and acceptable response.* Without that preaching is display and salesmanship. Preaching is for us; worship is only for God.⁹

Three quick words: (1) neither Sanneh nor I seek to speak of the superiority of Catholicism; (2) would that Catholic worship actually lived up everywhere to the ideals that Sanneh describes; and (3) what I seek to do here is say that we need to reclaim the integrated drama of Word and Sacrament, a drama in which preaching is a form of mystagogy that leads worshipers to

join at the altar in remembrance of the paschal mystery in the *nunc aeternum* of worship where we say Yes to the promise that is the gospel.

First, to take another run at what I am saying, we come together in liturgy not primarily to hear a sermon but to join ourselves to the historical mystery of Jesus's death and resurrection. Second, the few minutes that the leader of worship can devote to instruction of the congregation cannot be the main source of a congregation's education. The Sunday homily is best understood as "mystagogy," teaching that leads a people to a diagnosis of their situation in the light of the Word and an invitation to respond to the mystery of God's being one with us. If people have not been reading Scripture and other good material, praying over it, and grappling with what it means in the context of their family's life, weekly worship will inevitably degenerate into a routine act. Our Baptist and other Evangelical brothers and sisters have something very right in their notion that weekly Bible study is as important as Sunday worship. The Wesleyan Methodist emphasis on a serious Sunday school incarnates that same wisdom.

I think, though, that too few Lutheran, Catholic, or Anglican communities have learned the lesson that a Eucharistic or Communion liturgy is the occasion when a congregation and its individual members join themselves sacramentally to the Christ who has once-for-all (Hebrews 9:12) entered into the sanctuary "with his own blood."

Yes, I know sacrificial language is problematic in our time. Feminist theology in particular casts suspicion on the patriarchal imagery of obedience unto death, seeing in the crucifixion of Jesus – as popularly interpreted – a horrifying glorification of paternal masochism and an inducement to women to acquiesce in a "scapegoat syndrome."¹⁰ I take such criticisms

seriously but must confess my inability to consider them ultimately convincing. I have learned much from feminist theologians, especially from my teacher Anne Carr, from the articles of friends such as Susan Ross, and most recently from Elizabeth Johnson's attempts to bring a more wholistic vision of Christian life and thought in a world that is grounded not just in Scripture, but also in a renewed appreciation other religious traditions and ecology.

That said, let me return to my main point. That is to suggest that the distinction between a scripture-based homily within the overall movement of a Eucharistic liturgy is insufficiently understood or stressed. I hope you will forgive me for speaking concretely and from within my Catholic tradition. I do so not because I think it is superior but because I am insufficiently acquainted with Lutheran liturgical theology or practice. You have invited me as a guest, and I am honored to be here, but your guest is a Catholic who has a hunch that both of our traditions need to go deeper into our common roots in both Greek and Latin liturgical origins. We should do so while avoiding the tendency of many to think that ancient liturgical practices should be preferred, simply because they are old. We have much to learn from them, but we cannot avoid the responsibility to worship in ways relevant to our own age.

That said, may I observe that in certain seminaries I know, worship is taught as if a fledgling minister or priest is to be the impresario of ever more creative rituals. This modern notion flies in the face of the reality that the late Joseph Kitagawa repeated several times at lunches we had when I returned to Chicago on business. Speaking of the Catholic liturgical renewal, he said it was being implemented naively. Religion, he said, is one of a people's anchors and should change only when a people's fundamental religious consciousness has changed. The role of a priest is to help a people find unity amidst the swirl

of cultural change, not heat things up by introducing controversial changes.

Kitagawa told me at our last lunch that he had left instructions that he wanted to be buried according to the 1927 Anglican Book of Common Prayer with a sermon based on Scripture on our hope for eternal life. "If the Divinity School wants to have a memorial service with eulogies before or after, let them." I could not attend Joe's funeral. I have often wondered if his wishes were respected.

We live in an age when culture is in rapid flux. It is difficult to know, for example, how the debates that rage around gender identity and sexual ethics will turn out. I count myself a feminist and I have gay friends whose following of Christ puts my often tepid discipleship to shame. I also have friends who have dropped out of the church and religion altogether. Others have become Jewish and Buddhist. Others still who feel themselves to be both Buddhist and Christian.

Moreover, I cringe when I hear some Christians use the words of the Great Commission as a call to convert everyone lest they be cast into hell. In my dissertation on the Catholic Church's teaching on "other" religious ways, I came to the conclusion that philosophically and historically, we cannot argue convincingly for the superiority of Christianity. Moreover, the more honest we are, the more we need to confess the ambiguity of every tradition, including our own. I eventually devised a sort of proportion that went as follows:

Just as insights into the age of the universe gained through the study of astronomy and geology led Christians to reinterpret the doctrine of creation, so it is likely that insights from the study of other religions will lead us to reinterpret the doctrine of salvation.

I've added two other such proportions. The first is:

Just as insights from biology, cultural history and gender have led us to understand that patriarchy arose in contingent cultural situations, so we have to dialogue honestly about changes in both religion and society about the respective roles of males and females.

The second is a variation on the above:

These same insights on the seeming plasticity of gender and sexuality necessitate open and honest dialogue about homosexuality and other sexual issues.

Let us be honest, arguments about the value of other religious ways, the challenges of science, and conflicts over sexual ethics and gender have weakened the zeal of churches like the Lutheran and Catholic to carry out the Great Commission. These issues will be with us for the foreseeable future. It is hard to imagine that we will overturn the insights of science into the age of our fourteen or so billion-year universe. Neither will we easily or soon arrive at unanimity about male-female relations or opinions on same-sex relations, not to speak of issues involving transgendered people.

In my opinion, none of these things need to become *articuli stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* if they are handled with humility and respect by all sides. That, however, is something rarer than ideal.

In the meantime, the most honest way to proceed is by moving beyond notions that we can theologically argue people into conformity. Much more in the spirit of the Gospel is a catechesis that is aimed at helping people perform something like the Crossings analysis of their individual, familial, and social situation and bring that to Jesus in prayer. Only when

one encounters the Christ whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light (Matthew 11:30) will that person come to him humbly and ask for what is needed.

The modern minister or priest spends years studying scripture, history, and the various branches of theology, but does she apprentice with someone who knows about the art of caring for souls? Does a congregation look for leaders whose primary interest and talents lie in the balancing act of introducing individuals and groups to both the challenges of the law and the promise of the Gospel?

4.

As nearly as we can understand the religious pre-history of humankind, the world has always been religiously plural. By that I refer to what Joseph Kitagawa calls “a sort of synthesis of what Western convention calls religion, culture, society, and political order.”¹¹ For many thousands of years, of course, such synthetic “wholes” existed in relative independence of one another, inside boundaries marked by seas, riverine systems, language families, and mountain ranges. Many of those groupings were quite small and protected the rituals that united them to life’s forces, “presences,” culture heroes, ancestors, and sometimes gods. Separate as they were, however, there were resemblances and peoples’ borrowed rituals and sometimes myths from one another, and sometimes they paid a rival people to learn the secret of rituals that proved better at guaranteeing rain or the fruitfulness of vineyards, wives, and livestock. On the borderland between such groups, then, exchange begot change.

As cities developed at crossroads where traders met to exchange goods, larger religio-cultural-socio-political groupings came into contact with one another. These cities grew and became the centers of civilizations. Cities grew more powerful as they

produced more valuable goods for trade and as their armies were able to extend protection and law over larger areas. In many places (think of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India), smaller groups were brought together under the banner of the respective cities' rituals, beliefs, and stories.

In that process, what Westerners call "religion" and distinguish from realms like commerce, legitimacy of heritable kingships, the use of military force to enforce decrees, political and legal systems that regulate gender, property rights, care of slaves, and so forth were usually merged into a single mass of customs.

I oversimplify greatly when I jump to the great philosopher and historian, Karl Jaspers. His grand thesis is that, in a so-called "axial period" occurring in a number of places from 800 to 200 BC, something happened, which he describes as follows:

Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being . . . India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to skepticism, to materialism, sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer.

. . .

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void, he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing the limits he sets himself the

highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence.¹²

I hasten to add that in Israel the concrete form of Axial change occurs in relation to the conquest by Babylon. The prophets dig deeper into the traditions of Israel and discover there the purpose of the Law as it is so luminously articulated in Deuteronomy 6:4-7):

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

In literary terms Deuteronomy purports to be a recital of God's deeds in choosing Israel, giving Moses to the people to guide them. According to Daniel Block, Deuteronomy "was Jesus' favorite book." ¹³ Historically, it is likely to have been composed in the wake of the Babylonian captivity,¹⁴ and shows the Axial age transformation that Israel's prophets are making as they search for the reason why Yahweh has abandoned the Israelite nation. The text we have quoted is, of course, one of the favorites Jesus (Matthew 22: 36-40; Mark 12:30-32) and becomes one of the central themes that characterize the "good news" of the Gospel. God seeks to enter into a love relationship with humankind, a relationship in which humanity gains the courage to trust God completely.

5.

Life resists neat conclusions. It is a process, and the Crossings methodology is a process of helping men and women come to see themselves and their world through the eyes of God, in a

first movement of three stages, diagnosing ourselves and our situation. One then crosses over into a second prognosis movement, also with three stages in which we see how God sees us and offers us God's triune self to heal our broken hearts and become one with Jesus.

As I have come to appreciate the Crossings diagnosis/prognosis dynamic, I have come to appreciate it more and more. What I bring from the liturgical traditions of the ancient, medieval, and modern *ecclesia magna* is only the suggestion that liturgy, especially the Eucharistic liturgy offers a pattern for Christians to move from a confession of who they are and how they try to avoid trusting God to laying themselves on the altar spiritually in and with their brothers and sisters, uniting themselves to God, united with our High Priest Jesus. When this is done, the church truly becomes the Body of Christ, and participates existentially in the life of the Trinity. One brings one's whole life – family, work, faults, joys, concerns – to the altar mystically and partakes of the body and blood of Jesus which makes us his body and blood. Mere teaching is directed to the head. Mystagogy leads the entire person to participate existentially in the Mystery of God making us sons and daughters of Godself, brothers and sisters of one another.

References:

1 Robert Erik Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 142-44.

2 See *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, published by the Pew Charitable Trusts in February 2008. See also the Pew Research Center's "Growth of the Nonreligious," 2 July 2013.

3 Two books by Smith and colleagues can be consulted for a systematic laying out of their case. See Christian Smith and

Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009), with Patricia Snell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005), with Melinda Lundquist Denton (New York: Oxford, 2005).

4 Accessed at
<http://www.myspace.com/survivorsindiana/blog/284198710> on 2
October 2012.

5 In the case of Catholicism, the pastoral problem is more complex, for a fast-growing percentage of its membership is not the result of the immigration of white ethnics from Ireland, Germany, Czech and Slovak regions, Italians and other Europeans. I refer, of course, to the many Hispanics who have arrived from Latin America and whom the church has had such difficulty ministering to.

6 Eisenhower uttered these words at the Freedoms Foundation, Waldorf-Astoria, New York City, New York on 22 December 1952.

7 Patrick Keifert, *We are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Eagle, Idaho: Allelon, 2008).

8 Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (Turin, Italy: Piero Gribaudi Editore, 1968; French original, Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1948; English edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). It has been recently translated into English by Gemma Simonds, CJ; see *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages, Historical Survey* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

9 Lamin Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: The Homecoming of an African* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 251.

10 See for example, Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 71-73, 75.

11 Joseph Kitagawa, *The Quest for Human Unity: A Religious History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 2.

12 Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*. Translated by Michael Bulloch. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, original edition, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 1949), p.2.

13 Daniel Block, *How I love Your Torah, O Lord! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: 2011), p. xvii.

14 See John W Rogerson, "Deuteronomy," in James D. G. Dunn and John William Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp 150-55.

[BBCrossingtheGreatCommissioninaPluralisticAge \(PDF\)](#)

Proclaiming Christ Among the Religions

Interpreting Today's Pluralistic Impulse in Light of Christ's Singular Promise

No one feature of modern society distinguishes it from societies of the past than the diversity of religions that coexist side by side in relative peace. We dare not underestimate the significance of this fact and just how recent its development is. It is the result of a complex mix of historical, political, philosophical, and theological factors that has its beginnings in post-Reformation Europe and that is as much pragmatic in its emergence as it is ideological. We also dare not underestimate the interpretive challenge this new situation presents the "modern mind" as individuals and communities seek 1) to understand the world in which they live with depth and seriousness and 2) to respond to an inescapable and ubiquitous demand to justify their particular way of life relative to multiple options. For whatever else this religious diversity might mean, so it seems to me, it is a sign of a two-fold, innate human necessity both, to make sense of the world and to justify our human engagements within the world.

In Christian theology this interpretive challenge has given rise to a new line of inquiry called "a Christian theology of the religions." Its specific goal is to inquire into the relationship between Christianity and other religions, but, in reality, its scope is much more expansive than that. It entails everything that Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr labeled "theology of culture," with religion representing the "depth dimension" of human existence and culture. As such, we can expect to see the same kind of spectrum of views for relating Christ and the religions as Niebuhr found in relating Christ and culture. Therefore, the real challenge in developing a Christian theology of the religions is as much, if not more, an ecumenical challenge (a matter of negotiating the different ways Christians interpret the Christian message) than it is an inter-religious challenge (a matter of negotiating the way Christians interpret the various religions). As such, we can expect to see something

of Niebuhr's five point typology in the various proposals for relating Christianity to the religions.

Traditionally, a Christian theology of the religions has operated with a threefold typology that was first devised by Alan Race in the early 1980s.¹ As he surveyed the literature on the relationship between Christianity and other religions, he identified three basic positions or model: the "exclusivist" model, the "inclusivist" model and the "pluralist" model. Significantly, Race broached the question of the relationship of Christianity to other religions exclusively through the lens of salvation, as though that is the only function religion plays. This limiting of the definition of religion to soteriology, in my judgment, skews and confuses the discussion – especially, from the perspective of a Christian theology that sees the distinction of law and gospel as the hermeneutical key for interpreting daily life in a theological or religious way. But more on that later.

Looked at from the perspective of Soteriology then, exclusivists tend to find no soteriological connection between Christianity and the other religions. Christianity is simply a point of view that is categorically at odds with the other religions. Christ is the way, the truth and the life and nothing more can be said. End of discussion. Salvation is about acknowledging that orthodoxy and yielding to the Lordship of Christ over all things.

My guess is that anyone browsing the web-site and stumbling upon the title of our conference – "Proclaiming Christ alone in a Pluralistic Age" – could easily conclude, "Oh, they are exclusivists," and move on to another point of view if they are so inclined. Of course, that conclusion is not what we intend. We intend a discussion about Jesus that is deeply paradoxical in nature. He is *singularly* the "one for all" so that humanity

might *universally* be “all in one.” This is meant to be language about the good news of Jesus Christ for sinners over against the bad news of God’s Law against sinners. The good news is understood as God’s promise to reconcile the lopsided account between sinful humanity and holy God by accounting Christ’s holiness as our own. Therefore, by asserting the singularity of Christ for salvation we are not intending the kind of “revelational positivism” that Bonhoeffer saw as so troublesome in Barth’s theology: where Christ is viewed as a take it or leave it demand from God. Rather, we see the singularity of Christ not in terms of demand, but as a magnanimous promise, an unprecedented offer that is to be received as a gift by faith. True, deep discussion on such paradoxical matters is not easy to have today – if it ever was. Above all, it entails the art of distinguishing God’s law or demand from God’s gospel or promise. Let it suffice to say for now that the religions can be quite good at identifying God’s law, maybe even better than Christians in some respects – though even there, as we shall see, they are not without their limitations. Where they are not so good, I would argue, is in identifying and handling God’s promise in Christ.

Inclusivists, in my judgment, represent a theological outlook reminiscent of 19th Century Liberal Protestantism, which has also found its way into the thought of certain twentieth century Catholic thinkers, like Karl Rahner. They tend to define salvation in terms of a feeling or an enlightened orientation of love towards the world and God. Significantly, inclusivists see all kinds of soteriological connections and points of commonality between Christianity and other religions, but conclude that Christianity is the clearest expression or fullest revelation of that salvation. Ultimately, for the inclusivist, the religions are not contrary to Christianity as they are for the exclusivist; but rather, they are incomplete expressions of

what is fully expressed in the revelation of Christ. For the inclusivist, all religions find their fulfillment in Christianity. Therefore, Karl Rahner, for example, could call members of non-Christian religions, who acquired something of this enlightened orientation from their respective religions, "anonymous Christians."

Pluralists interpret the diversity of religion in a wholly positive way. For them, the religions do not represent competing versions of salvation, as exclusivists think, or partial visions of salvation that are clarified by Christianity, as inclusivists think. Rather, the Pluralists, all religions (or at least the major world religions) are equally valid paths to salvation. The religions are different with regard to the *path* they take, but they are to the same with regard to the soteriological *destination* they will reach.

The major premise of the pluralist position is what John Hicks calls the "pluralist hypothesis." For Hicks, two empirical observations ground this hypothesis: 1) the fact that people generally have no other option but to appropriate the religious disposition in which they are brought up and 2) the fact that all religions, or at least the great historical world religions, provide a context and a vision for human transformation that exhibit about the same degree of effectiveness.² In the view of pluralists, these empirical observations represent a kind of Copernican revolution in the way we view the world. Transformational outcomes, not *a priori* doctrinal commitments, determine the truth or correctness of beliefs., which means, for Hicks, a movement away from self-centered to other-centered thinking and acting. Since there is no appreciable difference between the life of a believing Christian and the life of adherents of other religions, the religions necessarily share equally in their ability to effect human transformation, that is, salvation.

Presently, "Pluralism" has emerged as one of the dominant interpretations of religious diversity today. That does not mean there are not significant criticisms of it. For example, one major criticism has been advanced by S. Mark Heim in his book "Salvations." Pluralists assume that all the religions mean the same thing by "salvation." They do not, says Heim. Therefore, the "transformational" definition of salvation is NOT a common link between religious traditions. For example, some Christians might say "new creation" not simple "transformation" is the focus of Christian salvation. While some understanding of a transformational component in human life may be a part of all religious traditions (say, for example, the social need for cultivating a common sense of morality and decorum) the ultimate end, called salvation, may transcend that aim. Nirvana is not simply personal or social transformation and neither is the kingdom of God. But also Nirvana is not the same as the kingdom of God.

The Pluralist interpretation of religious diversity is not an idea that emerged out of the blue. It is part of the "pluralistic impulse" that is at the center of our modern world. We live in a pluralistic age. But what that means is not by any means settled. Indeed, a major aspect of the pluralistic impulse in modern society is the search for a philosophy of life that will support the idea of living civilly and with integrity in the face of substantive disagreement. Therefore, in what follows I will do three things:

- 1) I will seek to better understand our context by giving an historical explanation of the rise of the pluralistic impulse in modern society;
- 2) I will seek to construct a Christian theology of the religions using Paul's law-gospel outlook and discussion of Gentile religion in Galatians as my interpretive framework;

and

3) I will make some modest suggestions on the implications of this theology of the religions for mission.

The Rise of the Pluralistic Impulse in Modern Society: A Historical Explanation

For most of world history the dominant paradigm for understanding the relationship between religion and culture has been one of identity. In the Christian tradition this identity was called Christendom. It was inconceivable that a society could exist without religious agreement. Therefore, there was also a close connection between a culture's religious institutions and its state apparatus. The two worked together to ensure the stability, cohesion, and legitimacy of its culture and religious orthodoxy.

As a result societies were identified as much with their "religion" as they were with their political structure, economic arrangements or ethnic makeup. All these things were simply fused together as one and cultures were defined as Christian or Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist, etc. There was no real distinction between the sacred and the profane or the spiritual and the secular. If there was a distinction, it functioned much upon the analogy of a building: with the "religion" being the underground, unseen *foundation* upon which the "secular" above ground, visible *building* set. To use Paul Tillich's pithy phrase, "religion was the substance (the foundation or mainframe) of culture and culture was the form (the facade) of religion."

Of course, if the dominate paradigm for the relationship of

religion and culture is identity, then the corresponding dominate relationship between the religions was conflict. A religiously diverse society was inconceivable. Nothing brought that fact home to Western society more profoundly than the Reformation. What had held Medieval Europe together was the perception of a common Christianity. To be sure, this Medieval Christianity had its conflicts, its diversity, its discontents. Nevertheless, the basic perception was that Europe was Christendom and that its socio-political-cultural legitimacy was founded on a solid religious foundation.

The 16th Century Reformation shook that foundation in an unprecedented, be it unintentional, way. As the various confessional and ecclesiastical groupings (Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Anabaptist and Roman Catholic) formed, each claimed to be the legitimate heir to catholic Christianity. In addition, they also (except for the Anabaptists) formed with the support and protection of local governments, whether in the form of a nation state, a city state, or a principedom. As a result, the post-Reformation alliance of religion and culture, church and state, continued the Christendom model, only now in a state of constant conflict between competing, confessionally opposed states.

Not until the Thirty Years War (1618-48) failed to produce a clear religious victor (and exhausted the spirit, resources and population of the competitors) did the competing confessional states concede the idea of a European Christendom. The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the war, established peace essentially by forcing the competing confessional states to recognize the right of each country to independently pursue its own attempt to create a Christian society on the basis of its own confession. Significantly, this policy of tolerance between confessional states was not based on any theological or philosophical notion of toleration. It was simply a pragmatic

arrangement entered into for the expediency of the moment.

But the peace worked... and that got people to thinking. Maybe toleration of theological differences was not just a political necessity? Maybe it reveals aspects of truth hitherto not imagined by the Christian mind? Maybe religion is not the key to social stability at all? Maybe something else is? So, coming out of the disgust of the war of religions and the success of the policy of religious tolerance there emerged a new wave of thinking. Even some theologians began to see tolerance as fitting neatly within the classical doctrines of the church: especially those "separatist" minded Protestants who saw revolutionary implications for tolerance in the doctrine of "salvation by faith alone" (apart from the coercions of the law) and the Western doctrine of "the two swords" (which asserted that God had given secular authority to the state for the sake of civil order and spiritual authority to the church for the sake of salvation).

In the American colonial context, for example, Roger Williams (1603-1683) becomes a central figure in this wave of thinking as he battles the Puritan theocratic establishment in Massachusetts. At the heart of Williams' argument is his view of "soul liberty." Taking the Decalogue as the universal will of God, religion is about the rights and duties of persons to worship and reverence God in the freedom of conscience (the first table of the Decalogue) and that contradicts the use of any form of coercion relative to religion. Worship and reverence by definition must to be free and voluntary, a matter of faith and conscience, not of coercion and public law. Matters of the state, on the other hand, concern the rights and duties of persons within civil society (the second table of the Decalogue) and there the state has the right and duty to use coercive means to enforce the public good. The powers of the state prevent sinful individuals from trampling on one another's rights and

duties, both religious and civil, and the separation of Church and State prevents the State from trampling on an individual's right to relate to worship God according to the dictates of one's own conscience. By maintaining this distinction between religious and civic rights and duties, Williams concludes, that a "hedge or wall of separation" must be maintained "between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world." By allowing this wall to crumble, Christianity, since Constantine, has allowed the wilderness of the world to destroy the garden of the church. Therefore, religious tolerance and the separation of Church and state (which means the end of Christendom) are normative principles of the Christian religion that have been lost to Christianity for centuries.

To be sure, Williams' theological hermeneutic for grounding religious liberty and the separation of Church and State is very different, for example, from that of the Roman Catholic nature/grace hermeneutic and a Lutheran law/gospel hermeneutic. As a Baptist, Williams' thought is a creative blend of Calvinist and Anabaptist thought that, on the one hand, draws on Calvinism's notion of Third Use of the Law as the unifying principle for all things religious and civil and, on the other hand, tempers the Anabaptist principle of the separation of the religious and civil spheres by seeing the law itself as calling forth a fundamental distinction between a person's duty to God and duty to society. Because most Lutherans, Calvinists and Roman Catholics, at this time, were quite comfortable in their church-state arrangements, interests in rethinking their theological traditions in light of a situation like that in which Williams found himself was simply inconceivable. Only when they also find themselves in a situation like that of Williams (and that, I would argue, is not until the 20th Century) will they begin to think theologically about living in a religiously plural society.

As a result, theological rationales for a policy of religious tolerance within a single society were far and few between. The only other rationale of significant note, to the best of my knowledge, comes from the Quakers. This void of theological argument for religious tolerance made space for another argument that was rooted not in theology but in philosophy, specifically, the new emerging philosophical outlook called the Enlightenment. In Williams' mind, the linchpin of his argument rested on the fact that the Decalogue is the universally revealed will of God reported in Holy Scripture. As a theological argument it is an argument from authority or special revelation. What is new is his interpretation of that revelation: namely, that civil matters and religious matters dare not be mixed. While Enlightenment figures agreed that civil and religious matters must be kept separate, they disagreed that that conclusion needed a theological premise. To the contrary, that conclusion was obvious to reason, the universal possession of all persons of good will, regardless of religious or dogmatic conviction. Indeed, reason alone became the mantra of the Enlightenment for judging the truth of all things, including religious thing. By that standard much of classical Christian doctrine was declared wanting and for many Enlightenment thinkers Deism became the religion of choice. With this development another distinction enters the stage, the distinction between the public and the private. Since classical Christian or religious claims cannot be established on the basis of pure reason, they were deemed private matters exempt from public regulation and social controls. Public or civil claims, by contrast, were subject to the dictates of pure reason and appropriately regulated by social controls.

The view on religious freedom and the separation of church and state that came to inform the American Constitutional tradition is that of the Enlightenment, specifically, as it was

interpreted by John Locke. But this view was adopted not primarily for ideological reasons but pragmatic ones. That's because the colonies were themselves a patchwork of governmental arrangements that viewed the question of the establishment of religion quite differently. In that regard, the colonies essentially operated by the same principle as did Europe under the Peace of Westphalia: by the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, whoever rules, his religion.

For example, on the one hand, the colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut had Congregationalism as their established religion, while New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia were officially Church of England. On the other hand, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania had a strong disestablishment tradition, predating the Enlightenment and rooted in the religious convictions of Baptist Roger Williams and Quaker William Penn, respectively. Still, I might add, while Roger Williams and William Penn both saw religious freedom and disestablishment as fundamental principles of the Christian religion (and gave religious freedom to each other's religious traditions in their respective colonies) that did not mean that they agreed with one another on most religious matters. Just how at odds Baptists and Quakers were on theological matters is illustrated by what is known as the "Great Quaker Debate" of 1672. Roger Williams initiated the debate when he drew up a list of Fourteen Proposition attacking principles, practices and tendencies in the Quaker religion. Religious tolerance, for them, therefore, did not precluded religious debate, but necessitated it. Tolerance is not "pluralism" as that word is ideologically defined today. For Roger Williams and George Fox (the founder of Quakerism) religious tolerance neither relativized the importance of religious differences nor relegated it to the realm of the purely private. Rather, religious tolerance meant that religion was a matter to be

advanced by personal persuasion not governmental enforcement.

In light of the differences between the colonies on religious matters, the founding fathers knew that the colonies would never unite if the arrangement meant establishing a national church. But they also knew that a federal government would never be accepted if it disestablished the church at a state level. As a result, the First Amendment's establishment clause (which states that government shall make no law with respect to establishing or impeding the free exercise of religion) applied only to the Federal Government not to the states. While the idea of disestablishment at a state level soon followed the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, part of the reason for that was due to the Pietist Movement, generally, and the Great Awakening, specifically, that had swept through the colonies in the 1730s and 40s. Better known in America as Evangelicalism, Pietism was a religious outlook that, like the Enlightenment, also emerged in horror of the European wars of religion and in criticism of the failure of Confessional Orthodoxy to bring about a simple and singularly convincing view of Christianity. But instead of retreating into rationalism as the deists had done, Evangelicalism accentuated the devotional and life-style elements of religion, generally, and of Christianity, specifically. For Evangelicalism, religion was not a matter of reason, but of emotion. Christianity was about a personal conversion experience and a corresponding amendment of life, a pious life-style.

Significantly, then, Evangelicalism shared with the Enlightenment both, a *depreciation* of ecclesiastical authority and doctrinal commitment, on the one hand, and an *appreciation* of individualism (the autonomy of the individual to judge spiritual matters) and the accent on life-style, on the other.

The irony of American history, then, is that, at America's founding, Enlightenment Philosophy and Evangelical Protestantism

joined forces to give rise to the modern Secular State. The ideals of the Enlightenment were enshrined in the American Constitution and governed its political life; the ideals of Evangelical Protestantism permeated the wider culture and informed its basic outlook. The result, as George Marsden has noted, is a society that is at once, paradoxically very secular and very religious.³ Secular thinking and religious thinking, therefore, are not necessarily contradictory ways of thinking. Religious conviction and sound reasoning can agree on many things.

In the 18th and much of the 19th Centuries, these two dimensions of American life, the religious and the secular, coexisted in relative harmony. You might say that the way of *pia desiderata* (pious desiring) was consistent with the way of *purus ratio* (pure reason): the pious longings out of which Evangelicals *intuited* the meaning of life was consistent with the way the pure reasoning of the secularists *deduced* it. This was true even though the two traditions rested on very different footings: Evangelical Protestantism on the Biblical text and Enlightenment secularism on the naturalistic principles enshrined in the constitution.

This harmony between the religious and the secular does not mean that there were not lively – even contentious – debates within the society. Abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, etc., were all hotly debated issues. The point is that the debate was as much a debate with each of these traditions as between them. The great moral debates of the age revealed no fundamental conflict between religious intuition and secular reasoning. Indeed, as long as the dominant religious outlook in society was Evangelical Protestantism, the State's responsibility to stay out of religion had the practical effect of giving tacit support to the religious status quo.

Although Evangelical Protestantism underwent a great process of diversification throughout the 19th Century, spawning a myriad of movements and new denomination, the overwhelming perception was that America was an Evangelical Protestant nation. One reason for this perception was the way the symbols and moral vision of Evangelical Protestantism permeated both American culture and its political institution. The week (through blue laws) and the year (through its holidays) were organized around the Christian calendar. In the schools the King James Bible was read and prayers were said. The Ten Commandments were a symbol uniting moral and political law. That perception began to change, however, in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries for many reasons. I can only mention a few.

First, the immigration of Roman Catholics by the millions created a critical mass of Christians who publically opposed this infusion of Evangelical Protestant symbols and assumptions into public institutions. Although Vatican I (1870) officially put Rome on record as being opposed to such modernist ideas as religious freedom and separation of Church and State, nevertheless, the American Catholic bishops availed themselves of "these error" to break the Protestant grip on governmental institutions and initiate a process of "secularization" of public schools.

Second, the security of religious liberty led to the rise of new sectarian religious groups (like the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses) that claimed Evangelical pedigrees but which held religious views that contradicted the hitherto harmony that existed between secular and religious life. This development began to create a wedge not only between religious intuition and secular reasoning but also between the various religious groups themselves. Defining what is normal and what is abnormal religion became harder and harder to do. Ironically, the courts were increasingly called upon to define what is

religious and what is secular, placing it as judge over religious matters. For example, with regard to the Mormons, the courts decided that polygamy was not a religious matter (to be allowed on the basis of Biblical reference and religious intuition) but a secular matter (to be forbidden on the grounds of reason that such an arrangement is harmful to persons and the moral structure of society).⁴ In response, court cases began to emerge that widened the divide between religious life and secular life on the grounds that things religious are private matters and things secular are public matters.

Third, with the rise of modern science and its naturalistic method of inquiry, a new picture of the way the world works (and by extrapolation, how it came into being) came into view. Modern Science, especially, Darwinism, called into questioned the common sense assumptions that had heretofore held religion and science together as necessary complements. Again, the schools became the locus for the conflict, beginning with the Scopes Monkey trial in 1925, and the courts the arbitrator over what is a religious idea and what is a scientific idea. Drawing on the Enlightenment principles that inform the constitution to guide its decisions, the courts continue the process of dividing the religious and the secular into the categories of the private and the public with "science" being very much a public matter. Modern Science by definition is a secular or public thing because it reserves truth claims to "natural" explanations. The courts assert that people are free to believe whatever they want about "scientific matters," but public schools can teach only that which has support through the scientific establishment.

Fourth, the last half of the 20th Century saw not only an increase in religious diversity in America, as immigrants from non-Christian traditions also enter the country, but a growing distrust of all things institutionalized, whether secular or religious. While the so-called countercultural movement of the

60s had many sides to it and no unifying ideology, it did reinforce the value of individualism in a startling new way: it judged all institutions as essentially self-serving and it counseled all individuals to trust primarily in their own intuitions and to act in their own self-interest.⁵ This does not mean, of course, that individuals have wholesale dropped out of society or withdraw participation from its secular institutions. But it has raised legitimation issue about modern culture and its public institutions in a significant way. ⁶ Religious institutions, which have been declining in credibility and numbers ever sense, have especially been affected.

Finally, the latter half of the 20th Century has also seen an emergence of both a philosophical and a practical atheism that aligns itself with the emerging secularization of daily life. Small in numbers, its impact has far exceeded its size. The first Supreme Court case to come to the fore in this regard was *Engel v. Vitale* in 1962 over the issue of school led prayer in public schools. As this group has increasingly targeted the heretofore unnoticed or lingering traces of religious expression in publicly sponsored activities, the American court system has increasingly protected their right "not to believe" and systematically restricted what might be called religious activity of any kind from governmentally sponsored events and programs. It must be noted, however, that many "believers" also support this development and do so on religious grounds not unlike those advanced by Roger Williams. Significant in this regard is the organization *Americans United for the Separation of Church and State*.

The cumulative impact for thinking about religion and the secular that this complex history has created can neither be overstated nor boiled down to a single, simple conclusion. But permit me a few unsystematic observations.

First, as George Marsden has noted, the American experiment (to organize a nation on the pragmatic principle of the First Amendment) has created a society that is at once very religious and very secular. While the catchword “separation” may suffice for defining the practical relationship between religious and public *institutions* – Church and State – it does not suffice for defining the way people themselves actually live out the relationship of the religious and the secular in their daily lives. On the contrary, they relate in a very “paradoxical” way, a way that cannot be compartmentalized. To borrow an idea from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, people are learning to be religious in a secular way. To be sure, they do not generally do this in a well thought out or a theologically unified way. But, then, that is precisely the challenge before us.

Second, this first observation gives credence, I think, to Tillich’s insight that “religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.” The secular form that our culture has taken is not necessarily the antithesis of religion, even though some may try to make it so. Rather, it is a new expression or form of the religious. We dare not forget that in our American democracy, the State is not the same thing as “We the people” from whom the State supposedly derives its authority. Polls still tell us that “We the people” vote in a way that we think is consistent with our religious convictions – we are not schizophrenic – even though we generally do not want government to make a law concerning the establishment of our religious convictions, and have put constitutional restriction on ourselves to prevent it. Therefore, while there is not a linear relation between religious substance and cultural form, there is a paradoxical one – one that pure reason is hard pressed to explain.

Third, the prevailing impulse that the American experiment has produced with regard to religion is not atheism or pure

secularism but religious pluralism. Martin Marty has astutely noticed that there are a variety of pluralisms at work in American culture.⁷ In particular there is political pluralism, which is a pragmatic, political commitment to regard all religions as the same in the eyes of the law – the separation of Church and State. This pluralism is rooted in the First Amendment of the Constitution and emerged in light of the complex history we rehearsed above. But today there is also an emerging “religious pluralism,” the idea that at root all religions are essentially the same. Anecdotally, this idea is nearly ubiquitous among my under-thirty students, even among those who say they are Christians; and academically, it is emerging as *the* new idea among Christian theologians to be addressed – hence, our conference. But the question is, “why the impulse to religious pluralism?” To be sure there are very different reasons why my students hold to it and why some academics hold to it. Nevertheless, let me suggest two closely linked reasons that are by no means comprehensive.

First, the impulse to pluralism is rooted, I think, in a growing recognition by thoughtful academicians that the paradigm of “separation” between the religious and the secular and the idea that religion is a purely a “private matter” (a position which my students tend to hold) do not provide an adequate explanation for the role of religion in the modern world. Therefore, to its credit, the impulse to pluralism among the academicians recognizes that at some deep, basic level the religious and the secular are related in a way that is consistent with Tillich’s dictum. But how are they related? Pluralism basically sees the role of religion in terms of a moral project: specifically, the transformation of individuals and societies, making individuals less self-centered and making societies more just. I will address the weakness I see in that characterization of religion below. Second, the impulse to pluralism is further motivated

among the academicians by the idea that religious tolerance (while having been helpful politically) does not supply a sufficient ground for relating the religious to the secular in a coherent, moral way. The essence of religion must correlate with the essence of the secular if it is to transform the world to make it better. Therefore, the goal of pluralism is to show that “where it matters” all religions (or at least the major world religions) consist of the same moral essence. Whatever diversity we see within and between both religion and culture is, therefore, reconcilable if it is consistent with the essential moral core of religion.

II. Proclaiming Christ Among the Religions: A Law-Gospel Theological Interpretation

For help in thinking about this “pluralistic impulse” theologically, I’m going to turn to St. Paul and, specifically, to his letter to the *Galatians*. I go there because the New Testament still remains for the Ecumenical Christian community a normative witness to Christ as savior and Lord, and the touchstone for all theology, whether they see themselves as Christian exclusivists, inclusivist, or pluralists. What we will see, though obliquely, is that these categories simply cannot handle the dynamic and paradoxical event of Jesus Christ as he comes into the world and among its religions.

To be sure, Paul is not living in a pluralistic age as we are. But there are similarities. In general, the Roman Empire is a very religiously diverse place and, in general, the official stance of the empire regards all religions as basically equal and the same. In that regard, the Romans continued the idea of religious equality initiated by the Greeks and publically

instituted in the Pantheon. Therefore, there was a modicum of freedom for the religions to advance their claims in the public square, even as they were expected, by force of the *Pax Romana*, to live in social harmony with one another. Paul, if I read him correctly, had no criticism of this social arrangement of the religions. Indeed, he seems to benefit from it when he appealed to the State in the face of Jewish opposition to his ministry. More importantly, his tent-making strategy for mission represents just how content he was to vie in the market place for what he called, not religion, but the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But there are also ways in which Paul's context is significantly different from ours. He lives in an empire not a democracy. And as such, there was little chance that the Christian movement through its members (and movement is a better term for it than religion) could have any impact on social policy. Whatever impact Christ's followers had on shaping the secular world was through acts of charity, which Paul endorsed enthusiastically. Indeed, as Paul in *Galatians* gives his account of the Jerusalem Council, he holds two aspects of the Christian life in absolute tension: Christian Freedom and Christian Charity. As he puts it, the council "asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do" (1:10). It would seem that for Paul the life of freedom and the life of charity are coextensive. To be free is to love. Freedom (from sin, death and law and for love, life and mercy) is the gift received by faith in Christ alone.

In order to orient us to the center of Paul's thought on how to relate the good news of Jesus Christ to the religious environment he found himself in, let me begin with a fairly lengthy quote from Chapter 4 (1-11):

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no

better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

My thesis is this: The religions, as Paul understands them, are truly places where God is at work in the world, but at work under the category of law not gospel. Paul is not against religion anymore than he is not against the law. What he is against is people being left with religion alone without the addition of Christ: just as Paul was against being left with the protection of the State alone or Jesus was against anyone being left with bread alone – that is, without the addition of Christ. Therefore, for Paul, the proper distinction between law and gospel, which is his great insight into the ways of God, is at the heart of a constructive Christian theology of the religions.

No single letter of Paul gives more information about his personal journey of faith than *Galatians*. He who once had been a persecutor of the Good News of Jesus Christ in the name of the

Law (for he was very zealous for the law) had now become its most passionate advocate. Why? As he himself tells us, because of “a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12), what Luke narrates as Paul’s Damascus experience. The point of Paul telling us this is part of his legitimation crisis: to let us know that the gospel he proclaims is not of human origin but divine origin. He got it from no one else but Christ himself. And what is that Good News? The singular, simple message that “a person is justified [before God] not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16).

Note! At the heart of the Good News is a conflict between two activities of God that heretofore seemed to escape notice: God’s law and God’s gospel. And as the implications of this conflict began to settle in, some Christians began to have doubts. And not just common Christians, but big name Christians, like Peter, whom Paul had to confront publically on the issue. But common Christians, too! Indeed, it is for these common Christians (Jews and Gentiles alike) that Paul writes the *Letter to the Galatians*. Paul had won them over to Christ but now they, too, were having second thoughts and returning to their old religions. Therefore, Paul writes this letter essentially to explain this conflict at the heart of God’s dealings with humanity in order to further explain why it would be disastrous for doubters to forsake Christ and rely on religion alone.

In Paul’s context Jewish religion, that is, the Law as given through Moses (Paul says mediators), is the immediate focus. And the first question these doubters seem to pose to Paul is this: If faith in Christ alone is what justifies sinners before God, then, why the law?

Because Paul gives a fuller (not a different) answer to this question in *Romans* (partly because he had more time to think about it and partly because it is more general in focus) I’m

going to summarize that fuller answer here. Moreover, to do that I'm going to draw on Luther's summary of the two function of the law, as expounded in his *Commentary on Romans*, for help.

For Paul, as he states clearly in *Romans*, the law is essentially an expression or a revelation of God's wrath or displeasure on human sinfulness. Through the law God gives the knowledge of sin. Philip Melanchthon's pithy way of describing this was "lex semper accusat" (the law always accuses). The law was not given to advise us, but to accuse us. The modern analogue to this is the concept of critique. Wherever critique or evaluation or demand or accusation is taking place, there the law of God is at work. Significantly, no specific knowledge of or faith in God is needed for us to be entangled in the law, or, as Paul would say, to be "imprisoned by" or "enslaved in" the law (Gal 3:22; 4:2). The law is that one universal activity of God where God may remain hidden and still be intimately and imminently involved.⁸ That's because it is a mediated activity of God, not a direct encounter with God. In *Romans*, for example, Paul identifies the Imperial State as such a mediating agent of the law (Rom 13:1-7) and in *Galatians*, as I will show below, he also sees pagan religion as a mediating agent of the law (Gal 4:2).

As Luther observes, this critical activity of God serves two purposes in the world: a civil or political purpose and a theological or spiritual purpose. In *Galatians*, Paul uses the concepts of a prison guardian and a disciplinarian to describe its civil purpose. The point is that it exists to restrain humanity's sinful, selfish inclinations so as to bring some modicum of order, peace and stability into civil society. In *Romans*, Paul asserts that this restraining activity of the law is a "good, holy, and just" thing (Rom 7:12). But don't think that it is giver of freedom in any real or absolute sense. It is not. True, the law does give sinners the freedom to do good, but it doesn't give them the freedom to sin. Prisoners may think of

themselves as free as they go here and there within their cell, but in truth they are limited by the cell. Students may think of themselves as free to procrastinate but, note, time is limited. Their assignments must get done or else. What makes this restraining work of the law “good” is that it gives one sinner some measure of protection from another sinner. What makes it “holy” is that it has divine authorization. And what makes it “just” is that it gives people what they deserve.

In *Galatians*, Paul describes the theological function of the law by reference to “the scripture” (Gal 3:22). The singular is important. Scripture (singular) means the content of what God has disclosed to us; and for Paul that content entails the proper distinction of law and Gospel. I quote: “But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Furthermore, as Paul makes clear in *Galatians* 4:9, the content of scripture is not simply knowledge of God whether abstract or otherwise, though it may include that too. More importantly, the content of scripture gives the deep knowledge of how God knows us. The most essential question, then, is this, does God know us through the law only or does God know us also through faith in Christ? How God knows us is the central spiritual question for Paul.

So back to the theological function of the law. While the political function of the law may leave sinners some room for imagining freedom or presuming righteousness (what Luther called “civil righteousness”), the theological function of the law intends to deprive us of that possibility. The theological function of the law simply exposes us as sinners, people who are condemned by God and liable to death. “Cursed” (Gal 3:10-14) is the word Paul uses for this in *Galatians*. In *Romans* Paul explains the interrelationship of sin, law and death at some length. In *Galatians*, he simply says “the scripture has

imprisoned all things under the power of sin.” Significantly, Paul ascribes no designated, worldly agent for carrying out this function of the law as he does for the civil function. It seems to be left up to God to bring this knowledge about as God chooses in the rough tumble of daily life. As Luther was aware, this knowledge does, at times, creep into our human consciousness. His bouts with *anfechtung* (despair) revealed this. But for the most part, humanity is deprived of this knowledge. That, by the way, as Paul says, is no advantage in the long run. For whether we know it or not “the wage of sin is death.” If ignorance of the theological function of law feels like bliss in the short run, it is ruin in the long run.

But the whole point of *Galatians* is that there is an alternative: namely, faith in God’s promise that “a person is justified [before God] not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). As Paul looks back on Israel’s history through the lens of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ he sees something there that he never saw before: that in God’s calculus, the promise has priority over the law. Indeed, the reason Paul can speak in such a matter of fact way about such a terrifying thing as the theological function of the law is because the gospel so clearly overrules it.

Let’s follow his line of argument. First, Paul observes that 430 years before the law was given Abraham was declared righteous before God by faith in God’s promise to give him an offspring. Therefore, faith in that promised offspring, not works of the law is clearly what justified Abraham. Second, Paul argues, the text reads that God promised Abraham *an* offspring, singular, not many offspring. Therefore, as history has now revealed, that offspring that Abraham trusted God to give was Christ. As it turns out Christ is Abraham’s righteousness. Third, integral to the promise given to Abraham is the idea that Abraham would be a

blessing to the Gentiles. Therefore, Paul reasons, Christ is that blessing to the Gentiles, and everyone who, like Abraham, trusts in the promised offspring is justified before God. Fourth, the law that came 430 years after the promise did not nullify the promise, but rather revealed why the promise is necessary. It is necessary because of sin and God's curse upon it. The purpose of the law is to reveal the curse and it does this by showing that we cannot "observe and obey" (Gal. 3:10) all that the law demands. Fifth, the fact that God's curse rests on all humanity explains why the offspring, Christ, had to suffer death on the cross. He came to bear our curse so that by faith we might receive his blessing. And the blessing is this: that we are accounted righteous before God because of faith in Christ. Sixth, for Paul the blessing translates into true freedom: freedom from sin, law and death and freedom for repentance (Gal. 6:1-5), love (Gal. 5:13), and eternal life (Gal. 6:8). Ultimately, then, for Paul, there is only one conclusion to draw from all of this: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:28-29). Sounds like our conference theme: "One for all and all in One."

As I said earlier, the occasion for Paul's letter to the Galatians is precipitated by the fact that many of his converts to Christ – Jews and Gentiles alike – are considering forsaking Christ and returning to their old religions. The question is, how did Paul think about Gentile religions? You might think that he thought of them as simply evil or demonic, but he didn't. In essence, he thought about them in the same way he thought about his Jewish critics. He thought about them with regard to the distinction of law and gospel. Paul's qualms with his Jewish critics is not rooted in anti-Judaism but in the fact that the

so-called Judaizers stripped Judaism of the promise and kept only the law. Paul's criticism of Gentile's religion is not that they have stripped their religion of the promise, but that they have never added it. Paul's insight that Gentiles do not need to adapt Jewish laws and customs to be Christian, applies also to Gentile religion. Gentiles do not necessarily need to forsake their Gentile laws and customs, either. However, those laws and customs do need to be relativized and adapted in light of the gospel of Christ. In short, as Paul encounters the religions of his day he does not adopt a purely negative view of them, but a nomological view of them. He identifies how they carry out the functions of the law so that he can thereby show why the promise needs to be added.

I think the verses I quoted earlier (Gal. 4:1-11) support this interpretation of Paul. While the word "religion" never appears in the text of Galatians or any of the so-called authentic letters of Paul, what we typically identify today as religion does: namely, things like "observing special days, months, and seasons" (Gal. 4:10) and, of course, such ritual activity as "circumcision" (2:12). But even then we must be careful. Paul does not give us anything close to a full-blown theology of Gentile religion. But he does make three simple, salient points. First, we should not trivialize or minimize the power of these ritual practices. They are not merely a psychological or therapeutic exercise to make us feel good—though through them we may feel good. Nor are they simply a sociological exercise in community building or group support – though it may do that, too. What worship and ceremony do is bind us to the religious objects we worship. Indeed, so adamant is Paul about the power of ritual to bind us to its object that he describes it as "enslaving" (Gal. 4:3).

Second, the language that Paul borrows from Gentile religion to describe the object of their worship is "the elemental spirits

of the world" or *stoicheia* in the Greek (Gal. 4:3). As Ed Krentz notes, the term has philosophical roots and designates the ordering principles of the cosmos to which people are to align themselves.⁹ Gentile religion personalizes these principles as powers to be dealt with. While Paul calls these elemental spirits "weak and beggarly," he does not call them evil or demonic. Why is that? Because for Paul, what the "elemental spirits" do in Gentile religion, the angels do in Paul's contemporary Jewish theology. That is they mediate the law of God (See Gal. 3:19-20) and are a way of describing why the law of God is ubiquitous. Paul, I would argue, has no qualms with how Gentile religion might serve the civil function of the law. The works of the law done by the Gentiles in response to the elemental spirits of the world, God's mediators of the law, can be very impressive. But those works don't justify a person before God. Only the promise justifies. And that is Paul's only concern. He is not concerned that the Gentiles don't have the law in some form or understanding. They do. The problem is that they don't have the promise that redeems from what that law in its theological function does to people. It condemns them! The reason the elemental spirits, the mediators of law, are called "weak and beggarly" is because they cannot save. Gentile religion, therefore, is not simply negated in Paul's thought. Rather, what it needs is the addition of the promise.

Third, the addition of the promise to Gentile religion is not a simple addition. It entails both, a radical rethinking of God's work in the world as twofold (as law and promise) and a fundamental reorienting one's whole life with regard to both God and neighbor. Paul's word for this reorientation is "freedom" as opposed to "slavery" (Gal. 5:1). His way of describing how law and promise collide in the believer to reconfigure their whole way of life is expressed in *Galatians* 2:19-21 in a pithy and paradoxical way:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2:19- 21).

Before God Christians live by faith alone in Jesus Christ, who is their justification, in whom they have died and have been set free from the bondage of sin, law and death; before the neighbor Christians live by love alone and thereby become “slaves to one another” (Gal. 5:13) in thanksgiving to God. Although in *Galatians* Paul doesn’t speak about the ritual reorientation that the addition of Christ might mean for Gentile religion, he certainly does in both *Romans* and *1 Corinthians*. Essentially, the new, overall focus of religious ritual is now turned toward facilitating the believers dying and rising in Christ as the eschatological trajectory of baptism. The daily agenda of believers becomes repentance (using the law to identify sin) and forgiveness (adding the promise to take away sin). And finally, the regular gathering of the community of believers is aimed at being reconciled to God and one another through Eucharistic participation in the body and blood of Christ.

To be sure, what this eschatological reorientation might look like in any particular place is an open question. Paul was in principle content to proclaim the promise and let the spirit blow where it wills. As a result, the congregations he associated with to a large extent developed their own way of living out the dialectic of law and promise, making the Pauline churches a diverse tapestry of ritual, ethical and organizational practices, whether in Corinth or Thessalonica or Galatia. This is not a prescription for relativism or syncretism, however. Anything but! Rather, this diversity is

perfectly consistent with Paul's single-minded focus on the gospel as the new orientation of the believer's whole way of life. A quick look at the passionate debate Paul undertakes concerning the meaning and implication of this addition of the gospel in the various congregations he associates reveals this.

III. Bringing Christ to the Religions – A Missional Suggestion

In closing, I want to address what I think is one of the most critical challenges that modern religious pluralism presents to the Church today: Pluralism's challenge the legitimacy of Christian mission. Modern religious pluralists say that there is essentially no need for Christian mission among the religions because the religions are all the same. Moreover, they add, if we would only recognize that fact then the world would be a better place. I would respectfully disagree and point to the difficulty pluralists themselves have in defining "religion" for support. In the tenure of my teaching of religious studies, I have not encountered a single introduction to the subject matter that doesn't discuss the impossibility of defining "religion." Why is that? Because, as they note, the religions disagree on too many basic things.

One of the basic weaknesses of religious pluralism, in my judgment, is that it does not know how to deal with honest disagreement as a fact of life. I'm reminded of Jurgen Habermas' insight on honest disagreement as a fact of life. He said something like this, and I am paraphrasing him: There is no greater achievement in human communication than when two people truly come to understand one another and still disagree. He says this because usually we assume people disagree with us because they don't understand us. But that, according to Habermas, is not necessarily so. People can truly understand one another and

still honestly disagree with one another.

As I have interpreted Paul, integral to the Christian gospel is a mission imperative. That's because the promise of Christ is not something that is naturally encountered by people in their world of law; rather, the promise of Christ is something that must be *added* to their world of law. Believers who have received the gospel are called *not* to keep it to themselves, but *to share it* with the world. We do the world a great disservice when we have help to offer and we do not give it. We have no trouble today understanding this with regard to our physical lives, but we have great trouble understanding it with regard to our spiritual lives.

Having said that, I would also agree that much of what passes off as Christian mission today is not very informed and, accordingly, not very respectful of other religious traditions. Christian mission is often triumphalistic and imperialistic. The message of Christ is often presented as a divine demand for us to meet instead of a gracious promise for God to keep. Put simply, Christians are not very adept at distinguishing God's law from God's gospel. What ends up happening, then, is what happened in Galatia between the Judaizers and the Gentiles. They begin to push their particular way of living under the law as the most important thing (their political, ritual and moral positions), rather than promote the promise of Christ as the ultimate thing. For Christians who know how to distinguish law and gospel, we can let quibbles about the law be just that: quibbles. By calling them "quibbles," however, I do not mean to say that they are not important things to be discussed. They are! What I mean is that in the grand scheme of things they are not "ultimate." Rather, they are "penultimate" to use Bonhoeffer's term or *adiaphora* to use Melancthon's term or "weak and beggarly" to use Paul's terms. Christians dare not forget that they will never meet the demands of the law; their

hope rests somewhere else, in the promise of Christ, who has made the demands of the law obsolete for those who believe.

Modern pluralism, however, does teaches us an important lesson. Inter- religious dialogue and cooperation must be part of the Christian engagement with the world. Both the model of conflict and the model of tolerance must go. In my judgment, Paul's nomological understanding of the religions provides a meaningful point of departure for both inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. From the standpoint of cooperation, given Paul's understandings of religion and the civil function of the law, there is no reason from a Christian point of view why the religions could not work together on all manner of social and civil issues.

From the standpoint of inter-religious dialogue, there is no reason why Christians could not expect to learn something from other religions about the movement of God's law in the world. Indeed, the history of Christianity itself teaches us that Christians have a rich tradition of learning from non-Christians new understandings about the way of the law in the world. From the New Testaments' use of stoic philosophy in its ethical thinking to the scholastic retrieval of Aristotle from the Spanish Moors to the modern intrigue with Gandhi's method of non- violent civil disobedience by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King – Christians have learned much about the law of God from other religious and philosophical traditions.

But Christians will not only want to dialogue about the law as it is understood by their fellow religionists, they will also want to dialogue about the promise and its relationship to the law. To be sure, the promise places one major restriction on the understanding of the law: the law is not a means of salvation; Christ alone is given for that purpose. Moreover, it is very likely that this will be one of the major sticking points in

inter-religious dialogue over which the fact of honest disagreement might persist. Even so, that fact does not preclude Christians from either gaining a better understanding of their fellow religionists or from understanding better the intellectual and existential challenge of trying to explain the promise of Christ in today's world.

Let me leave you with one final, irreverent thought. It presupposes the nomological definition of religion I teased out Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*. If the promise is meant for "all peoples" (the Gentiles) and the idea of "all peoples" includes not just race and culture, but religion, might not the promise also, then, be meant for all religions? Could we then not speak of something like Buddhist Christianity, in which "Buddhist" represents the tradition of the law and "Christianity" represents the promise of Christ that has been added to it? After all, we are accustomed to thinking of Jewish Christianity. While I'm not actually proposing that we start talking this way (at the least, Buddhists should have some say in this matter) I do think that wrestling with the thought could help us to understand better, both the significance of the distinction between law and gospel in interreligious dialogue and the place of Christ among the religions.

Steven C. Kuhl
East Troy, WI
January 25, 2014

References:

1 See Duane Olson, *Issues in Contemporary Christian Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 271.

2 Ibid., , 157.

3 George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (Belmont, CA:

Wadsworth/Thomson, 2001), 5.

4 Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court? Supreme Court Decisions on Church-State Separation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 21-2.

5 See Marsden

6 Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

7 Martin Marty, "Pluralisms," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (2007), 14-25.

8 By the way, Luther's notion of the hidden God can be a key resource for developing a theological understanding of the secular. It explains why we can talk law without reference to the God who is its author in secular matters.

9 Edgar Krentz, *Galatians in the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 59-60.

[ChristAmongtheReligions \(PDF\)](#)

The Old Testament and Other Religions

Participants in the Crossings Conference received a handout listing only the biblical passages. I have included now in red notes that were the basis of my presentation that accompanied

the handout.

Conditioning factors in this conversation:

Mission in the 20th-21st century has emphasized dialogue, listening to the other, as necessary attitudes as we bear witness to what we have seen and heard.

Violence and hate in our country; violence today in Central African Republic

I think of the different approaches of two of my own great teachers.

- G. Ernest Wright *The Old Testament against its Environment*. Caricature of Baalism.
- Thorkild Jacobsen The holy = *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the mystery that causes us to tremble and that fascinates us).
- *Christian Century* (and how did that turn out?) or Interfaith Century

I. Unhelpful Items about other religions in the Old Testament

Example I

3 Do not **intermarry** with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of Yahweh would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

5 But this is how you must deal with them: **break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire.** Deut 7:3-5

In our time—one of the items our marrying couples often have not considered well is the implication of their faith commitments,

or lack of them, for their marital relationship. In Jewish-Christian marriages rabbis lament that the Jewish partner often ceases to practice Judaism.

As we think about these difficult passages, we need to remind ourselves that the OT of course is a full part of the Christian Bible.

Example II

16 But as for the towns of these peoples that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must **not let anything that breathes remain alive**. 17 You shall annihilate them— the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites— **just as Yahweh your God has commanded**, 18 so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods (what sorts of misunderstandings of Canaanite religion are hinted at here?), and you thus sin against Yahweh your God. Deut 20:16-18

Many biblical scholars doubt that Israel ever actually followed this terrible custom. What is terrible is not only the custom, but the fact that Yahweh commanded it.

Example III

12 If you hear it said about one of the towns that Yahweh your God is giving you to live in,
13 that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, “Let us go and worship **other gods**,” whom you have not known, 14 then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation. If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among you, 15 **you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it** (herem and everything in it—even putting its **livestock** to the sword. 16 All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil

with fire, **as a whole burnt offering to Yahweh your God**. It shall remain a **perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt**. 17 Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand, so that Yahweh may **turn from his fierce anger** and show you compassion, and in his compassion multiply you, as he swore to your ancestors, 18 if you obey the voice of Yahweh your God by keeping all his commandments that I am commanding you today, doing what is right in the sight of Yahweh your God. Deut 13:12-18

Example IV

19 Moreover, Josiah (the great reformer) removed all the shrines of the high places that were in the towns of Samaria, which kings of Israel had made, provoking Yahweh to anger (a century after the Northern Kingdom had been destroyed); he did to them just as he had done at Bethel. 20 He slaughtered on the altars **all the priests of the high places** who were there, and **burned human bones on them**. Then he returned to Jerusalem. 2 Kgs 23:19-20

The violent acts of Josiah against the priests are followed five verses later by this high praise:

25 Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him. (2Kgs 23:25)

Example V

Note the unsympathetic and deliberate distortion of non Israelite religion in the following passage. Compare the distortion of Judaism in medieval Christianity, or the distortion of Islam in popular culture today.

14 He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. 15 Then it can be used as fuel. **Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread.** Then **he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it.** 16 Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat (cooks burgers), eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” 17 The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!” 18 They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. 19 No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” 20 He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?” warm oneself—cook or bake—make the rest into an idol (an image of a god does not create a god; Second Isaiah was locked in a struggle against the popular culture and religion of Babylon which surrounded the people) Isa 44:14-20

At their best, other religions did not worship the idols themselves, but the deities they represented, which were thought to be present through the idols. Still, the prophet denounces the absurd possibility that access to God can be captured in an object or artifact made by human hands.

Summation about unhelpful texts:

- We should not minimize the threat Israel felt from intermarriage or falling under the sway of the majority culture.

- We find the violence against other religions and their religious officials reprehensible, especially since it is often commanded by Yahweh. Did Yahweh command these things or did the religious officials say that he did?
- We find the depiction of the religion of the other often biased, even a caricature. Little attempt to understand the other.

II. Helpful items about other religions in the Old Testament

Example I

The first commandment: You shall not have other gods before me.

Ambiguity about the word before. Does it mean in preference to me, or does it mean in my presence, that is in my temple. Or does it mean against my face, that is in defiance of me. The Decalogue deals with monolatry rather than with Monotheism. As Luther pointed out, anything you fear, love, and trust above anything else is your God. The existence of other gods is not denied.

Example II

Jephthah to the Ammonite king

Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that Yahweh our God has conquered for our benefit? Judg 11:24

Jephthah has an argument over land with the king of the Ammonites. Technically speaking Chemosh was the God of Moab rather than of Ammon. But the land under dispute was considered to be under Chemosh's control. A note in the Harper Collins study Bible says: Early Israel supposed that the gods of other

people's really existed.

Example III

17 Then Naaman said, "If not, (that is, if you will accept an honorarium) please let two mule- loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except Yahweh. Is Yahweh limited to the land of Israel:

18 But may Yahweh pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon (thunderer, an epithet of the Syrian god Hadad), when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may Yahweh pardon your servant on this one count."

19 [Elisha] said to him, "Go in peace." 2Kgs 5:17-19

A little Israelite servant girl had been taken captive by Naaman and worked for Naaman's wife. He was afflicted with a skin disease, probably not Hanson's disease. The girl said: If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him. The King of Syria sent Naaman to Israel with a cover letter. The King of Israel thought he was being set up. He is trying to pick a quarrel with me. He tore his clothes. Elisha sent a message, why did you tear your clothes? Let him come to me. Naaman goes to Elisha's house and the prophet treats him coldly and tells him to go wash in the Jordan 7x. Naaman goes off in a huff. His soldiers say: If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult you would have done it, what would it hurt to do something simple? He is cured. Naaman offers big honorarium to Elisha. Elisha emphatically refuses the honorarium twice. Elijah and Elisha belonged to the "Yahweh alone party." See the contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah killed all of the prophets by the Wadi Kishon. Hence Elisha's tacit permission for Naaman to compromise himself is

astonishing.

Example IV

3 No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh,
4 because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Deut 23:2-4

Gen 19:30-38 Ammonites and Moabites are incestuous bastards.

The Book of Ruth offers acceptance to Ruth who was a Moabite (despite what the law said), and she is recognized as the great-grandmother of David. Is the book of Ruth propaganda for David, or is it a protest against the harsh policies of Ezra and Nehemiah against intermarriage? See Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 10.

Ruth is included in the genealogy of Jesus along with Tamar the Canaanite, Rahab the harlot, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. All these women are foreigners. Several of them are of dubious sexual behavior.

The book of Ruth calls the concerns of Deut 23:3-5 into question.

Example V Jonah

5 Then the mariners were afraid, and **each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them.** Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was **fast asleep.** 6 The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

Each of the sailors prayed, while Jonah was fast asleep..

7 The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, **and the lot fell on Jonah.** 8 Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

9 "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, **who made the sea and the dry land.**" 10 Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of Yahweh, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; **for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.**" 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. 14 **Then they cried out to Yahweh, "Please, Yahweh, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, Yahweh, have done as it pleased you."** 15 So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 **Then the men feared Yahweh even more, and they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows.**

After his five word sermon to Nineveh was so successful.

3 And now, Yahweh, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And Yahweh said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the

city.

6 Yahweh **God appointed a bush**, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, **God appointed a worm** that attacked the bush, so that it withered.

8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then Yahweh said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, **that great city**, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left (talk about being criminally dumb), and also many animals?" Jon 4:3-11

The book ends with a question. Did Jonah answer yes. Or is the question really addressed to the reader?

Justice = Jonah; mercy God's treatment of Ninevites

Repentance is for outsiders and compassion is for God

Jonah does not want to preach to hated Nineveh and is disappointed when Nineveh repents

Particularism = Jonah's resistance to his call. Universalism = God's treatment of sailors and Ninevites.

Jonah was jealous that God's special love for Israel was here being extended to those he considered Israel's enemies.

Jonah was committed to a God of strict justice and was scandalized by God's compassion for those he considered to be wicked and due for severe punishment.

Example VI

6 I am Yahweh, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,

Alternate translation:

I am Yahweh, I have called you for a saving purpose,
I take you by the hand and will protect you,
And make you the mediator of my covenant with the peoples,
A light to the nations.
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. Isa 42:6-7

Does this refer to literal or metaphorical blindness?

Summary of helpful words about other religions in the OT

There are passages that concede the existence of other gods
(first commandment; Jephthah)

And passages that recognize the limitations of hardline positions (Naaman and Elisha; Ruth and the Moabite condemnation; Jonah (justice vs mercy). These passages establish a climate of mutual respect and dialogue and humility of the believer over against other religions.

Second Isaiah's vocational understanding of Israel's and our need of bringing light to the nations by telling what we have seen and heard, and by seeking justice for all of God's people change an academic conversation about religion into an

invitation, even an imperative, to go and tell, and let God sort out what God will do with those who are not Christian.

Ralph W. Klein

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The Old Testament and the Ancient Near East
<http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/>

[TheOldTestamentandOtherReligions \(PDF\)](#)

African Realities Today Through Lutheran Lenses

Colleagues,

Last September Gary Simpson, systematic theology prof at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, was whisked to Tanzania, not quite like Elijah and the fiery chariot (but close), for a Lutheran World Federation event. Since he's my "Doktor-kind," Seminex's first doctorate granted in systematic theology, I try to keep track of him. Not easy to do with all the irons he has in the fire. But to keep me mildly up-to-date he sends me stuff now and again. Which is proper protocol on his part toward his Doktorvater. He sent me this the other day. I have his permission to pass it on to you. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Reversing Poverty in Africa: The Role of Governments and Civil Society

**What Does this Mean? "Africa Is The Lord's and The Fullness Thereof. Praise Be the Lord."
(Psalm 151:1-2)**

**Lutheran World Federation Consultation on Poverty
and The Mission of the Church in Africa
Arusha, Tanzania
6 September 2006**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ here in Africa. Thank you very humbly for inviting me to reflect with you on the theme for this third day of our consultation. I am a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a teacher of the church and professor of theology at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, U.S. A.

My assignment is to address the question, "What does this mean?" This, of course, is Martin Luther's famous question asked throughout his catechisms. By asking, "What does this mean?" Luther was asking, "What is God up to in the world?" In the context of this consultation, then, we can ask, "What is God up to in Africa today?" My task today is to be a theological witness, to give voice to what I have seen and heard and experienced among you in light of God's Word and work. I will offer, therefore, theological reflection that connects the themes from all three days so far.

What I have witnessed these three days is that God is up to transformative, innovative, emancipatory, and reconciliatory things. To use the metaphor that several have already cited,

God is up to “eagle” things. I have eleven theological reflections. First, let us dwell in the Holy Scriptures on Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” The Holy Spirit has, of course, provided us with 150 psalms. In light of our African context here I suggest “Psalm 151:1-2” as follows:

“AFRICA IS THE LORD’S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.

PRAISE BE THE LORD.”

1. Africa is an abundant continent! On the first day of our consultation Dr. Senait Bahta of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Eritrea prophetically announced, “Africa is not a poor continent; rather, it has been dispossessed.” Indeed, Africa is an abundant continent! In this light Dr. Kjell Nordstokke of the Lutheran World Federation noted in his opening remarks, “Poverty in Africa is a scandal.”

“AFRICA IS THE LORD’S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.

PRAISE BE THE LORD.”

2. Africa is an abundant continent precisely because the triune God is an abundant God. Yes, God is an abundant triune communion of three divine persons. This theological truth underlies Dr. Bahta’s prophetic announcement that Africa is an abundant continent. God’s abundance resides in the three divine persons-Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit -who freely and fully share in each other’s open reality and who freely share their abundance in the creation of all things. God’s being is communion. This theological confession goes back to the Holy Scriptures and was mediated to the church catholic through an insight developed in the ancient African Christian tradition innovated by Athanasius of Egypt in the fourth century after Christ.

The tradition following Athanasius used the ancient Greek word *perichoresis* to express the rich, free sharing of all things among the divine persons of the trinity. This ancient word, *perichoresis*, had its everyday setting in the mutual sharing of burdens and joys within flourishing neighborhoods of the ancient world. The church today will do well to retrieve the truth of *perichoresis* as central to the life of the church in Africa, and throughout the world.

In his own time of the sixteenth century in Europe Martin Luther capitalized on this Athanasian tradition of *perichoresis* to develop the biblical theology of the cross of the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus and the Holy Spirit's justifying, promising abundance of faith alone in God and love alone for the neighbor. Because God's triune abundance means Africa is an abundant continent, Lutherans in Africa might find themselves agreeing with the African American prophet, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights slogan, "God don't make no junk." For this reason racial discrimination and economic dispossession are scandals of the highest caliber.

"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD."

3. The church in Africa is rich. Bishop Zephania Kameeta of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia stated this in our consultation's keynote address, "The Self-Understanding of the Church and Poverty in Africa." Bishop Martin Shao of the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania echoed this same sentiment and stressed the wholistic nature of the African church's richness. Churchly richness must never

be understood reductionistically. Theologically speaking the church's wholistic abundance has its continuing source, strength, and joy in the perichoretic sharing of God's being as communion.

In an afternoon conversation on 6 September 2006 President Dr. Thomas Nyiwe of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon and Bishop Dr. Musa Biyela of the Diocese of Swaziland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, raised the question of gradual erosion, even eclipse, of the African ethos of sharing under certain economic globalizing dynamics. This question must now be raised up for critical analysis, testing, and response.

The erosion of ecclesial sharing contradicts the very being and life of the church in Africa because it contradicts the perichoretic life and abundance of the triune God promised and made present by the Holy Spirit in the justifying word for the sake of the entire world.

*"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD."*

4. The church in Africa is ripe for innovation in leadership. In his keynote address Bishop Kameeta pointed to the crying necessity for a new form of leadership. God is providing a new opportunity for the African church, an opportunity for the benefit of the entire church catholic, to innovate in ecclesial leadership. What is the "new" in new leadership? Again, we can borrow from the African Athanasian tradition of perichoresis. What is the shape of perichoretic leadership in contrast to hierarchy? What is the nature of perichoretic-shared power in contrast to unipolar power? What are the habits of perichoretic practices in contrast to one-directional,

one-dimensional, infantilizing practices?

Bishop Kameeta took note of the shortage of wide participatory ways of ecclesial life and research. Reverend Marie Barnett of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone led a sustained and energized deliberation about women leadership relative to general ecclesial leadership. In an opening devotion on 6 September Sister Petrine Shimi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia urged churches in Africa to listen attentively to the Holy Spirit who is calling us "to team-up with God." Here again we are witnessing God's perichoretic ways with the church, ways that do not leave untouched and untransformed the very character and practice of church leadership.

The time is ripe to reflect on what we can call "the participatory golden rule": "decision-makers must be consequence-takers; and vice versa!-consequence-takers must be decision-makers." Yes, indeed, consequence-takers must be decision-makers! Those who bear the impoverishing, dispossessing consequences of economic policy must be full participants with effective voice in decision-making processes, procedures and bodies.

*"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD."*

- 5. Innovative perichoretic leadership and power readies the church in Africa to be "critical public companions" with government and civil society. Bishop Kameeta introduced a third crucial point in his keynote address that the churches in Africa be in "critical solidarity" with governments and civil society. This entails a reconsideration of the church's interaction with national, regional, and local governments within the*

diversity of African countries. As African nations strengthen democratic forms of government Lutheran churches will have new opportunities to engage, influence, and lead the flourishing and welfare of the African continent. Innovating churchly leadership with perichoretic practices will increase our capacities to lead within African nations. As we innovate churchly leadership we can inaugurate churches, congregations, and diaconal institutions as “critical public companions” (G. Simpson, 2002) with government and civil society. The vocation of Lutherans as critical public companions is another crucial case of “teaming-up with God,” as we will see in a subsequent point.

“AFRICA IS THE LORD’S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD.”

6. God puts us Lutherans here in Africa “for such a time as this!” Sister Petrine Shimi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia stunned us on the morning of 6 September when she announced to us God’s Word: “You were put here in Africa ‘for such a time as this’” (Esther 4:14). This is a theological truth claim of the highest magnitude. The triune God is a time-full God. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not some timeless, aloof, invulnerable god, unmoved by earthly things and earthly sufferings. We African Lutherans are put here “for such a time as this” precisely because God is a timely, incarnated, crucified, risen and reigning God. The African American theologian Martin Luther King, Jr. began his prophetic ministry on 5 December 1954 by announcing, “There comes a time.” There comes a time when God’s people can no longer tolerate racial discrimination and remain silent in the face of economic dispossession. God is a time-full and timely God and calls Lutheran

*churches in Africa “for such a time as this.”
“AFRICA IS THE LORD’S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD.”*

- 7. In this era God is doing something revolutionary across the globe, raising up a new reality called civil society. It is incumbent upon African churches in our time to imagine God’s presence and work in and through civil society. Lutheran churches in Africa are well positioned to research and develop the dynamics of this rapidly emerging new global civil society and the hopeful signs for developing more participatory, democratic governments and stakeholder economies. How is God in civil society calling Lutheran churches in Africa to a new vocation for human flourishing on this abundant continent? Now is the time to reflect deeply on the vocation, procedures, and practices of churchly citizenship.*

*“AFRICA IS THE LORD’S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD.”*

- 8. The emerging vocation of civil society across Africa provides new opportunities for developing more democratic forms of government. The Honorable Mizango Pinda, Minister of State, Prime Minister’s Office, Regional Administration and Local Government, United Republic of Tanzania, presented a brilliant, provocative, and comprehensive picture of “Reversing Impoverishing Trends in Africa: The Role of Government and Civil Society-Tanzania Experience.” Both Reverend Marie Barnett of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone and Sister Rejoice Agongtara of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria stressed from the perspective of their national locations the critical need for a vibrant, vigorous civil society in the process of promoting responsive, participative democratic forms of government. Without*

vigilant civil societies based in and growing out of everyday life situations even democratic governments drift at a distance from the people.

While administrative power is the prime medium of government and money is the prime medium of market economies, "solidarity" is the prime medium of civil society as Dr. Thomas Nyiwe stressed in his consultation address. Civil society solidarity is a crucial factor if democratic governments are to effectively reverse poverty on widespread bases. Minister Pinda gave an overview of the constitutional and legal "space" provided to civil society within the Tanzanian situation. There is a crucial "role" for civil society and he enumerated eighteen challenges that government and civil society interaction must take on. The sociological notion of "role" is acceptable as far as it goes. But according to sociological imagination some entity, usually some governmental or economic organization, assigns the "role" and ushers the assigned "role" to its place. The church can go beyond the sociological imagination of role assignment and hear God's living word calling civil society to be God's own "left hand" minister of solidarity, to use Martin Luther's formulation. The church's vocational imagination will constantly attend to God's call to civil society and thereby not allow civil society to flinch especially when it exercises its "critical solidarity" tasks (see especially Pinda, 9.1.4). There will come times when civil society will need to elbow for public space in order to voice its solidarity with people in poverty and under unjust dispossession.

"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD."

9. *The diaconal ministry organizations of the Lutheran churches in Africa will realize opportunities for new learnings. Minister Pinda identified five specific sectors for joint action and partnership among government, civil society, and economic organizations within the Tanzanian situation: education, health, participatory planning and capacity building, environment, and human rights and good governance (8.3-8.11). Dr. Thomas Nyiwe has emphasized the new learnings which diaconal ministries will be able to undertake. Historically Lutheran churches in Africa have been strong and effective leaders and providers in the area of education and health and to some degree in capacity building. Now we must enter fully into participatory planning, sustainable environmental protection, and into the protection and expansion of human rights and the promotion and accountability of good, effective, and efficient democratic governance. The church's diaconal ministry has historically followed closely on the classic six works of mercy announced by Jesus to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and accompany the imprisoned (Matthew 25). The church will now capitalize on our deep knowledge and expertise by bringing this knowledge and expertise to the public policy-making table for actualizing ever more just ways of life. Diaconal ministry now inextricably links together works of mercy with prophetic works of justice. In this way the church's essential diaconal ministry continues growing in new contexts and times across the prophetic (critical solidarity), the sapiential (wisdom for everyday living), and the pacific (just peacebuilding) dimensions of the diaconal.*

"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.

PRAISE BE THE LORD."

10. "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus gave to the church catholic his petition to pray fervently and frequently for daily bread. In his catechisms for the church Martin Luther noted four crucial aspects of this petition. First, Jesus gives this petition for daily bread both as a command that we must pray it and as a promise by God so that we may trustingly expect God to answer. The Lutheran churches in Africa frequently and fervently obey this command and trust this promise.

Second, daily bread means precisely that, "bread," bread in all of its materiality for nurturing the body. Luther rejected centuries of Christian interpretation that reductionistically "spiritualized" or de-materialized this petition. Luther emphasized the biblical materiality (not materialism) of daily bread. Jesus gives this wonderful petition because humans as bodily creatures "need" daily bread. Lutherans in Africa today follow strongly in this tradition of interpretation and action.

Third, Luther noted that Jesus meant this petition very "comprehensively." That is, daily bread includes everything that it takes to produce, deliver, and receive daily bread. Luther noted especially the need for good, just, responsive government. He even urged governments to place a loaf of bread on their national seals and emblems rather than symbols of war. Luther further noted that God reserved one entire commandment-"Thou shalt not steal"-out of ten to cover economic life. Luther emphasized not only not stealing our neighbors' property and business but that God's command also requires all people to help protect and develop the property and livelihood of all our neighbors without prejudice or discrimination.

On numerous occasions Luther himself wrote on the obligations that this commandment placed upon governments relative to the economic life of sixteenth-century Germany. This commandment obligates churches in Africa to do likewise in our contexts. Bishop Paul Fynn of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ghana fervently pleads that Lutheran churches in Africa develop practical strategic action regarding the economic life of specific contexts. Biblical materiality recognizes the Godly possibilities for practical strategic action. If people and organizations of good will do not undertake God pleasing strategic action, then powerful global entities and interests will plan strategically, often under dispossessing interests. Brother Enos Moyo of the LWF Zambia Christian Refugee Service and Sister Lorpu Mannah of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Liberia have shown us comprehensive programs and strategic action plans for local capacity building and just peacemaking. These and many other examples urge Lutheran churches in Africa to multiply similar efforts and innovate new initiatives geared toward local practical situations. Few entities are as close to the ground as are the Lutheran churches in Africa and thereby as able to be effective and efficient as we abide faithful to our Lord's petition for daily bread.

Fourth, Luther noted that Jesus' petition meant both that daily bread would be available and thus "used" but that Jesus prayed that our daily bread would also be "enjoyed." Here again Jesus proclaims to the church and the world the joy of proper biblical materiality. The triune God's created abundance is for the joy of all creation, for the joy of Africa. The Lutheran churches in Africa excel in the doxological ministry of joy in all

diaconal service.

*"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD."*

- 11. With vigilance the Lutheran churches in Africa welcome a new era of cooperation between governments and civil society for the flourishing of all people. Minister Pinda notes (10.1) the "irreversible process" since 2001 of cooperation between government and civil society in Tanzania. We can take this statement as a positive and noteworthy promise. On the other hand, we can never take such cooperation as inevitable or irreversible. Each national situation has its own particulars constitutionally, legally, socially, economically, and culturally. Lutheran churches in Africa will attend with care to particularity. Hopeful eternal vigilance is the democratic citizen ethos appropriate for Lutheran churches that pray, watch, wait, and act upon Jesus' petition for daily bread. As Lutherans in Africa we thank and praise God for calling us "for such a time as this."
"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.
PRAISE BE THE LORD."*

Thank you, brother and sister Lutherans, for allowing me to testify to what I have seen and heard and experienced among you during this consultation, and I pray God's perichoretic abundance be upon all that you undertake in the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*Gary M. Simpson
Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN*

The Good News of St. Matthew's Genealogy

Colleagues,

I trust that most all of you know who Marcus Felde is. If not, you should. These days he edits our quarterly Crossings newsletter. He's a long-serving member of the Crossings Board. And if you follow his occasional text studies in our weekly Sabbatheology series, you'll know what I mean when I say that he makes words dance like nobody I've ever known with the possible exception of his teacher and mine, the late Robert W. Bertram.

Marcus's main job is to serve as pastor to the saints of Bethlehem Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Indianapolis. Some days ago he sent us a sermon he preached there on the first Sunday after Christmas. I read, I learned. I asked him to let us share it with all of you, and he graciously consented. So here it is. St. Matthew says of the wise men that, when they saw the star, "they joyed a mega-joy—and then some!" (2:10). I'm guessing you'll taste a bit of that joy too when you see what Marcus makes of the passage that launches Matthew's Gospel. I, for one, am forever cured of the folly of treating that recital of names as boring and negligible. You might say that I'm a wiser man than I was. Thanks, Marcus!

By the way, I hear from Cathy Lessmann, the person who makes Crossings events happen, that there's still lots of room in the inn that's housing the forthcoming Crossings conference. January 26-29, at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois, just across the river from St. Louis. Two reasons

for [signing up](#), if you haven't done so yet: a) you'll get a fuller set of specs on the good news Marcus talks about in his sermon—news designed to increase your joy in Christ, and to bolster your own calling as an emissary to “the nations”; b) you'll meet the bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, who has just penned one of the most refreshing and important pieces that readers of the ELCA's *The Lutheran* has seen in that publication for a very long time. [Here it is](#).

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

The church year 2013-14 is the year of Matthew. Most Sundays, we will be reading from Matthew. This began already in Advent.

On the First Sunday of Christmas the appointed gospel is the story of the slaughter of the innocents. But, hold on. Why is the opening of the Gospel never read, never proclaimed? This year, I experimentally offered another option for the First Sunday of Christmas. This was my sermon.

“Happy Days Are Here Again” A sermon for the First Sunday of Christmas (using an alternative Gospel reading), December 29, 2013.

Pastor Felde, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, Indiana.

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the

father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

In the name of Jesus.

I could be wrong, but I think the opening lines of the gospel of Matthew, which look like a dusty old genealogy of Jesus, are a thesis statement. They let us know what Matthew is about to

proclaim to us: Jesus is good news!

I say I could be wrong, but I'm not the first person to come up with it. [*The International Critical Commentary by Davies and Allison refers to this interpretation. The Albright commentary on Matthew in the Anchor series gives it short shrift.*] The idea would never have occurred to me, though, if I had not served a while as a missionary in Papua New Guinea.

The key verse is 1:17:

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

The crucial word in that verse is "fourteen."

I don't have time to tell you what commentators make of the obvious fact that Matthew labors to fit the pedigree of Jesus into three fourteen-generation spans. I'll just barely have time to tell you my own theory. And I'm telling you not as a matter of lecturing you, but because it is one way Matthew tells us the good news about Jesus.

Until I lived in the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea, the number fourteen meant nothing to me. That was because I had zero awareness of the phases of the moon. I did not think "lunarly," although I lived in a culture which still observes a seven-day week (a quarter of a moon) and likes to pay people "fortnight"ly (that's a contraction of fourteennight). Our culture prefers to divide the year evenly into twelve, so our months have lost their synchronicity with the moon, even though "month" comes from "moon." The first of the month is no longer, as it used to be, an actual new moon.

In Papua New Guinea I learned from local people that their weather is much affected by the phases of the moon, more than by the sun—which is a constant in the tropics. I could avoid muddy slogs in the jungle by planning any long walk around the full moon. I was not surprised to learn that their number system uses a base of fourteen. Not ten or twelve. Fourteen. They count in fourteens. We're talking congregational meetings in which finances got explained to the older people using that system!

Reading the genealogy in Matthew 1, I began to suspect that the number fourteen might refer to the phases of the moon. People in Matthew's day were probably also very moon-conscious.

But a month has twenty-eight days, right? Well, during roughly fourteen days the moon is becoming brighter, waxing. Seven days waxing crescent (less than half), seven waxing gibbous (more than half). Then, for about fourteen days, the moon is disappearing, waning. Seven days waning gibbous, seven days—approximately—waning crescent, until it disappears at the new moon. Then, it starts over. (Check out the diagram [included in the body of this e-mail].)



Breaking the month in half in a manageable way, the fourteenth of the month is the full moon. Passover is celebrated, for example, at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month. At the full moon!

Matthew 1 presents the genealogy of the Messiah in this way: Fourteen generations passed while God worked with his people, starting from scratch with a promise to Abraham in the land of Ur, going to the high point of the anointed King David, who brought Israel to its acme of peace, prosperity, and influence, expanding its boundaries to their greatest extent ever. Fourteen generations. The waxing of the kingdom. David represents the full moon.

Then, over fourteen generations, Israel suffered in many ways by being divided and conquered, until, at its very lowest point, the cream of Judah were deported to Babylon. God's kingdom reached its nadir. Fourteen generations, the waning of the kingdom. Exile represented the absence of light with the new moon. (Perhaps deterioration is represented at the onset of this section of the genealogy by the fact that David was succeeded by a son who was born to him by someone else's wife!)

Finally, at this end of time, Matthew proclaims, another fourteen generations have produced a new Anointed One, the new Messiah, to whom—as Jesus says in Matthew 28—"all authority in heaven and on earth has been given." Fourteen generations of God working anew amid his people, the nation growing back not just to its former glory but to unimaginable, even universal influence and glory. Because, here is Jesus! The moon is once again full, on the fourteenth day "generation" after the deportation.

Represented in the lordship of Jesus who, by the way, in Matthew is frequently called "Son of David"!

Thus what at first glance looks like just a list of ancestors is in fact a way of proclaiming that God's anointed one was present to fulfill completely all that God had been doing since Abraham. Things had gotten better and better, things had gotten worse and worse, but now—everything would be all right, because Jesus is king. The moon waxed, then waned, then waxed again. Fourteen, fourteen, fourteen. According to Matthew, this is the gospel.

This reading of the genealogy as good news is a good way of reminding us all that the gospel of Matthew *is* good news. It is all about something wonderful that has happened in Jesus, which has happened to all of us. It begins with a sort of numerical-astronomical analysis of the Jesus event, and it ends with this:

"I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus was born to be "Immanuel," "God with us." That is why he confirms at the end of the book that God is not departing. The glory is not going out of Israel, this time. The righteousness and peace Jesus brought are not disappearing. God is faithful. God is staying with us, with all of us. These are halcyon days! The moon is bright! Jesus is the light of the world! Party on! Believe!

Midway through the book, Matthew quotes Isaiah to describe what is happening in Jesus:

*Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.*

This is great news for all the people in the world.

As I preach Matthew for a year, I hope I will always be able to stick to this main thesis. Because it will be tempting sometimes, in reading Matthew, to turn it into a guidebook for us to know what to do so we can make the world a better place, when in fact it is not a guidebook but a searchlight, trained on what God has done, not on what we might do.

Jesus prayed (see chapter 11): "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants: yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been

handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**" This is the Messiah of Matthew's gospel, good news for dispirited people who have hoped, and lost hope, but have found a new and everlasting hope.

Amen.

Can One "Preach" the Law? An Interchange, Part 2

Colleagues,

Last week we sent you [a swap of notes](#) between Ed Schroeder and Martin Lohrmann on the question of whether the verb 'to preach' is appropriate for talk from a pulpit (or, as in lots of places these days, a "platform") about the Law of God. As the second round of notes will confirm, the question is less abstruse than it will seem on first hearing. Just by the way, if any homegrown German speakers among you would care to have their own crack at turning Werner Elert's terminology (see below) into useful English, we'd be glad to hear from them.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Ed Schroeder, replying to Martin Lohrmann—

The deeper background of my own take on this is, no surprise, my teacher Werner Elert. Sixty years ago (sic!), in 1953, I was listening to him live during the Sommersemester at the University of Erlangen, with Bob Schultz and Dick Baepler sitting next to me. “Die drei Amerikaner aus Missouri!” Bob was already working on his doctorate under Elert. Dick and I (he later spent a lifetime career at Valpo) were still at Concordia Sem, St. Louis, but had snuck over there as exchange students to get the Lutheran confessional goodies that Jaroslav Pelikan (young Turk at Concordia for just a couple of years, and we were there for them) had told us we could get from Elert without the bane of verbal inspiration.

From Elert we learned what the Law/Gospel mantra was all about. It became Schultz’s doctoral dissertation, “*Gesetz & Evangelium in der luth. Theologie des 19ten Jahrhunderts. 1951.*” (I just googled the exact title and got 1210 hits!)

Yes, the Gospel must be proclaimed. And if “preach” is the best English word we have, then so be it. But why not “proclaim” as our preferred term, since “preach” in our argot is so loaded with expected “you gottas”? “Don’t preach to me!!!”

That was Fred Danker’s constant drumbeat, with New Testament rootage: “Don’t preach. Proclaim.” One of the two good-news terms turned into verbs in NT Greek is *kerygma*, a proclamation, an announcement, something a herald brings to people that they didn’t know/hear before. But of course what gets brought is THE specific Christ-message, not just any “religious” info. And even *euaggelion*, as Good Message, might now have an analog in our lingo since “message” has become a verb in our cyber-culture. But here too the referent is THE specific Christ-

message as something not present or heard before. Not just any message.

[Concordia's great homiletics professor] Richard Caemmerer had helped us seminarians see the real "Aha!" about the Gospel. But it was with Law that we got our eyes opened in Erlangen sixty years ago, and specifically in St. Paul's humongous exposition of the term throughout all his epistles. But it's elsewhere in NT writers too. Yes, a new take on Torah/*nomos*/law which isn't readily found in the OT. But that should not surprise us after Christ has come to exegete the law rightly—specifically for the Hebrew law-experts themselves, and scandalously so—and finally to terminate it.

Elert's German rendering for the reality designated by the term law was "*Gesetzmässige Existenz*," rendered into English as "nomological existence." That's an egghead neologism if there ever was one. But still it says what is meant: "life totally enwebbed by God's *nomos* [law]."

The full reality of nomological existence is spelled out *in extenso* in Elert's ethics book, *Das Christliche Ethos*. The first third of the book is "Ethos unter dem Gesetz," i.e., "the quality of human life totally enwebbed by God's *nomos*."

And that's the first reason why "nomos" doesn't have to be "preached." It's already there, in full force. It's the neurological network running the whole shebang of the old creation.

Elert heard Paul (but not only Paul) signaling that there are three distinguishable webs within the operational network of nomological existence. He called them "Gefüge," which is tough to render into English. For now, my term is web. Seinsgefüge, Sollgefüge, Qualitätsgefüge.

Nomos/Law is:

1. The web of my being (Sein), the primal nitty-gritty of human life. It's the web of human existence itself—all those relationships into which I am thrust when I appear on the planet. These are the “givens” of my particular life, which are different from the givens of any other human being.
2. A web of “du sollst.” These are the implicit/explicit “shoulds” that arise in these relationships. Zillions of them. The Decalogue, sure. But also the umpteen other demands/expectations that come to me day in, day out.
3. Qualitäts-gefüge. A web of evaluations where the quality of my life and actions get spelled out and communicated to me. Constantly, regularly, from the others in my many human relationships, and also from the non-human agents in the creation.

God in all this is, of course, present.

1. As creator and “manager.” Schöpfer & Gubernator are Elert's German terms.
2. As legislator (Decalogue, etc.).
3. As judge, verdict-giver—and finally executioner, executing the verdicts.

And when the good news comes, initially at number 3 with the new verdict: sinner guilty, yes, but forgiven in Christ, then comes good news at number 2: grace imperatives replace law imperatives. At number 1 new creation replaces old creation—even the wild prospect of the laws of space and time being abrogated, as we see hinted in the post-Easter appearances of Jesus recorded in the gospels.

Summa:

“Preaching” law? Bringing the law—THE OTHERWISE ABSENT LAW—into people’s lives during the sermon? Hardly. They’ve been stuck in it ever since they got up to come to church. And every minute since last Sunday. And....

To carry out the one-and-only proclamation task (preaching, if you insist), the Gospel-proclaimer—as pre-proclamation—exposes, pinpoints, turns the lights on to, the already operational law, overwhelmingly operational law. So overwhelming that Paul will call it a curse. And then gets to the point for which she’s in the pulpit: “Have I got good news for you!”

That’s why Bertram’s diagnosis/prognosis seems so “winsome” (his favored term) to me.

Diagnosis exposes, turns the lights on. Nomological existence is 100% on the scene. Folks are blinded from seeing it.

Prognosis is “Have I got good news for you!”

The “pre-proclamation” part of the homily is fundamentally a VISUAL one. Helping folks “see” what’s already there. As an M.D. does when you’re getting diagnosed at the doctor’s office. And for the homily, seeing down to the bottom of the well. Initial diagnosis, advanced diagnosis, final diagnosis.

Bob would often spec out the Ur-Greek behind the “gnosis” part in dia- and pro- as a visual phenomenon. Gnosis in Greek thought was “seeing” something that you hadn’t seen before. That was Socrates’ regular gig. He claimed never to have taught anyone anything. Just getting them to “see” what was already there—even in their own heads! (This idea is still present a tad in our English when you finally catch on to something. “Now I see.” It’s also in our term “insight.”)

Au contraire the prognosis, à la Bertram. Though it’s also

seeing, it's a particular seeing, an Aha!, that comes from HEARING something you hadn't heard before. "Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven." Hearing this, you start to see/trust that you are indeed the forgiven sinner that you have been proclaimed to be. Bob even punned the "dia-" and "pro-" prefixes to "gnosis," this way. Law is God seeing through us. Gospel is God seeing us through. The former is taking away our blinders about what's already going on. The second is proclaiming to us a message that we could never have guessed from just having "seen" what God sees when he sees through us.

Cheers!

Ed

Hi Ed,

What I mean by "preaching the law" is the same thing as the Crossings steps of speaking the "diagnosis" part of the message. The diagnosis needs to be publicly proclaimed. Yes, people live under the oppression of this killing law all the time, so that it is not good news to hear it. Still, the law and our sickness under it needs to be publicly diagnosed, preached, confessed, shared, etc. for the sake of applying the good news to our otherwise sin-sick (and law-sick) souls.

Although the word that kills belongs to God's alien work, it is nevertheless also of God. "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (from Hannah's song in 1 Samuel). Because we are *simul justus et peccator* in this life, both works happen in us every day (as in Luther's explanation to baptism in the Small Catechism). God willing, our sermons also belong to this larger work, so again I'm using the word 'preaching' as part of the entire sharing of the gospel.

All the best,
Martin