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Evangelism and Pluralism(s)

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The theme of my lecture today is evangelism and pluralism. Pluralism is quite obviously one of the most important and pervasive features of the world within which Christians are called to bear faithful witness. And for no Christian practice is pluralism more of a challenge than the practice of evangelism. Evangelism is criticized by both Christians and non-Christians for being associated with attitudes of belligerence and superiority and as a barrier to mutual understanding and dialogue, especially across interfaith boundaries. After all, it's pretty difficult to listen to another person's religious views honestly and openly when you're attempting to convert them to your own.

It would be better to say that my topic is 'pluralisms', for there are many. While there may be a 'plurality' of religions, 'pluralism' is *the story we tell about plurality* – the way we construct its meaning *for us*, evaluate it, and thereby habituate our practices, institutions, and social patterns within plurality. The fact that we use the single word 'religion' to refer to a variety of different phenomena is already an implicit form of pluralism embedded in our vocabulary. We think we have identified common features that unite them all so that a single word can be applied to each of them equally. In fact, what this very example illustrates is that pluralisms are really about unities – about how we are to comprehensively comprehend and make sense of the many.

The way a particular form of pluralism imposes its unity upon plurality is a complex work of social imagination across time with great consequence for evangelism. Indeed, pluralisms can constrict Christian witness so that it can only be imagined on the terms of those pluralisms. Consider, for example, a group of Christians who would like to convert Buddhists to Christianity. The evangelizing Christians in this example are likely operating under the assumption that Buddhism and Christianity are two species of the same genus ('religion') and, moreover, that the two are in competition with one another so that the adherents of the one need to be converted to the other. In other words, the evangelists are working out of a particular pluralistic social imagination that both sustains and is sustained by a story about how to understand the plurality they have encountered.

Imagine now a very different group of Christians who are opposed to evangelistic attempts to convert Buddhists to Christianity, and who ground their opposition on a belief that both religions are valid, perhaps even complementary, so that attempting to convert one to the other is wrongheaded and disrespectful. While this second group of Christians are the ones who are typically called 'pluralists', both groups of Christians might well be operating out of the same pluralistic framework in which Buddhism and Christianity are both 'religions' and therefore examples of the same 'kind' of thing. Each group accepts a unity that has been imposed onto the plurality encountered, and expressed in their common use of the word 'religion' to refer to both phenomena. The fact that they diverge in their assessment of whether the two religions are contradictory or complementary may disguise but ultimately cannot eliminate their mutual starting point that both phenomena

are specimens of the same kind of umbrella phenomenon: ‘religion’. Both groups are operating out of a shared pluralistic social imagination.

My argument is that too often pluralisms constrict the Christian evangelistic imagination. First, they represent impositions of unity onto plurality that eclipse difference and diminish the importance of and respect for the ‘other’. Second, the kinds of unity they impose on plurality force us into competitive modes of comparison and judgment that lead Christians to think we need to secure a space in the world for the good news in ways that only end up distorting the good news. Third, they distract us from grasping the way the powerful unities of empire, nation, and market capture our allegiances, captivate our imaginations, and cultivate vices that undercut and erode the Christian life, not to mention our capacity for bearing faithful witness to the good news. I’d like to learn more about the situation in Germany; but in the United States, nationalism may be far more relevant as a contrast to Christianity than Buddhism or Islam. But standard accounts of religious pluralism obscure this. Those who are hell-bent (Mt. 23:15) on converting Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus to Christianity likely neglect their largest competitor, nationalism, or civil religion – precisely because ‘they’ are ‘us’. But the prevailing pluralistic social imagination prevents us from seeing this.

In talking with you this morning about evangelism and pluralism, I want to examine how pluralisms are narrated and constructed in three particular cultural contexts: empire, the nation-state (and in particular national military chaplaincies), and consumer culture. In each of the three cases, I want us to think about ways these pluralisms habituate the practice of evangelism and how, thus habituated, evangelism becomes an attempt to compete for space in the world, thereby distorting it as a Christian practice.

In all three contexts, a unity is imposed on plurality that possesses an extraordinary capacity for shaping the Christian social imagination and thereby habituating evangelistic practice in ways that are essentially competitive. While I am concerned to trace the way the good news is distorted as a competitor for space in the world, my ultimate hope is to point toward a counter-imagination that habituates the practice of evangelism in rather different directions and refuses the temptation to secure a space in the world for the gospel.

Imperial Pluralism

One of the characteristic features of empire throughout history is the way it tends to devalue the particularity of peoples and of places in favor of an imperial unity. This occurs not only in the realm of cultural practices and patterns but also in the very way we think – one can speak of imperial worldviews, rationalities, and phobias. Empires expand and maintain their power by the homogenization of place through the imposition of a unified and totalizing ‘order’ that erases difference so that one place is the same as another. Thus, whether one is in Jerusalem, Antioch, or Nazareth, all is Rome.

Empires rise and are sustained by their ability to control, whether through more overt forms of physical, economic, or political coercion or through more subtle forms of cultural co-optation. Empires tell stories. And stories have power. Empires also erase difference and suppress alternatives so that the church, by becoming linked to empire, finds its rivals overpowered and the path paved for its evangelistic ‘success’. Such success is often superficial, of course, as indigenous values, traditions, practices, and beliefs are retained below the surface, producing hybridized forms of Christianity

(imperial Christianity is, of course, also hybridized!). As has often been noted by postcolonial theorists, empires typically allow such arrangements and encourage local adaptations of conformity to the larger structures of imperial unity, power, and control.

The consequences of empire on colonized, enslaved, and obliterated peoples throughout the world are well known, and it is no wonder that for many colonized countries, the struggle for independence has been at the same time a struggle not only to de-Westernize, but to liberate themselves from Christianity and to reassert the indigenous traditions that had originally been suppressed but not lost from local memory altogether. These traditions are often an underground well that sustains subjugated peoples and nourishes their resistance to empire across time. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Christian theologies of liberation have at times found more in common with subjugated non-Christian traditions than with those forms of Christianity allied with empire. This very dynamic, in fact, already calls into question any simple understanding of religious pluralism as consisting primarily of the relation between major religious traditions. The consequences of empire are hybridizations and contested identities so that clearly identifying one religion from another is not always so easy; religious pluralism is frequently much more complex than appears on the surface or in standard textbook treatments.

Because empires are so extensive in terms of their influence, the challenge before us is to detect the way evangelism has been shaped by the expansionist logic of empire and the mission of the church subverted by its chaplaincy role in relation to empire. Yes, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And, yes, Jesus instructs his followers to go “and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). But soaked in the waters of imperial imagination this evangelistic impulse is easily distorted, and the humility of the gospel readily jettisoned in favor of sheer extension.

The good news is that Christian witness has not always been overtaken completely by empire and that from the beginning there have always been Christians who understood the church’s mission in the world not as a form of chaplaincy to power but as a form of obedient and counter-imperial witness to the nonviolence of God’s reign. The problem, however, is that it is increasingly difficult to know who and where the emperor is or when we are serving as the emperor’s chaplains. It is also true that while it is difficult to resist a pagan empire, to refuse to fight its wars or worship its gods, it is far more difficult to resist an empire that has come to think of itself as Christian.¹

The pluralism of twenty-first century empire is very different from fourth century empire in that current versions are far less interested in securing and defending a single official religious sponsor or chaplain and more adept at domesticating all religions equally as purveyors and administrators of essentially private experiences. Twenty-first century empire, rather than persecuting religious heretics or minorities (in most cases), can afford to protect religion as a private good by assigning it to a private space that can be protected from public interference, on one hand, while protecting a pluralistic public against the vagaries and particularities of religion, on the other hand. Religious institutions now become essentially privatized arms of what Rui Josgrilberg has called

¹ William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 80.

“the great global machine,”² and are dedicated to the administration of a particular set of ‘spiritual’ goods and services.

One of the ironic features of our present situation is that as religion grows in its public importance around the world, deeply shaping international relations and playing an important role in the formation of social and national identities, religious faith and practice has become increasingly private in the West, constructed as it is within a paradigm of individual consumer choice in which we are taught to respect and keep our ‘hands off’ our neighbor’s religious preferences. I speak from within the context of the United States, where, on one hand, presidential candidates have to present themselves as people of faith (an atheist could not likely get elected president at this point in history) while, on the other hand, our candidates have to try to convince us that their faith won’t actually make any difference to their politics.

Empire domesticates religion either by relegating it to the sphere of the “private” or by preserving a chaplaincy role for it in the public sphere. But when the church is domesticated by empire, it no longer functions as a public in its own right – a social body with the capacity to embody, much less witness to, a new world. The church thus privatized, spiritualized, and depoliticized ends up ‘helping’ the colonized adjust themselves to empire instead of enacting an embodied critique of the system that produces their colonization in the first place. But empire remains intact. When the domesticated church does ‘go public’, it tends to do so within the social imagination of empire, on its terms, and within its discourse.

Evangelism under these conditions is carried out in ways that are perfectly compatible with the increasingly hegemonic and far-ranging claims of the empire over our lives. This is especially true when evangelism is aimed at securing salvation construed as a fundamentally private experience, something that in the past century has come to be known as a “personal relationship with Jesus.” This private relationship with Jesus is imagined as being neutral with regard to social location, income, race, gender, and politics. At least in theory, the wealthy Brazilian landowner can sing praises to the Jesus who has “filled his heart with gladness” right alongside the impoverished 12-year old girl who cuts sugarcane in his fields. Empire will never have a problem with “personal relationships with Jesus” abstracted from bodies both physical and social and thus made compatible with the imperial discipline of bodies in service of the security of the empire and the goods it bestows on its subjects.

The de-formation of Christian witness by a diminishment of the sense in which the church is itself a public also diminishes the sense in which the church is a politics, and one that is rival to other politics. In other words, by accepting its relegation to the sphere of the private, the church’s relationship to empire is de-politicized. Jesus as Lord now becomes compatible with the emperor as Lord. In reality, of course, a depoliticized faith is thoroughly political precisely by virtue of the way it acquiesces to the political status quo blindly and by default. Under the conditions of empire, then, evangelistic practice is domesticated by empire so that the path to salvation is treated as an essentially private, personal choice, journey, or experience. The problem, of course, is that if Christian salvation actually names a ‘way’, then evangelism requires a visibly faithful church that both exhibits and offers this way through *public* habits, disciplines, and social patterns by which our lives are lived and ordered together. The church is created and called by the

² Rui Josgrilberg, “Wesley e a experiência crista,” *Revista Caminhando* 11:18 (Jul-Dec, 2006), 10.

Spirit to be just such a social body with its own distinctive social imagination rooted in the worship of God and in practices and social patterns that are the very shape of its faithfulness.

Pluralism and the National Military Chaplaincy

A second context where we can find pluralism imagined and constructed today, and with important consequences for evangelism, is that of national military chaplaincies. Here, more so than the other two contexts I am lifting up, I speak out of a U.S. context. However, pluralism increasingly shapes chaplaincies throughout the world today, especially in North America and Europe. To speak of the way pluralism is imagined and constructed within the military chaplaincy is to speak also of the way pluralism is imagined and constructed within the modern nation-state (a term that conjoins the political notion of a ‘state’ with the cultural-ethnic notion of a ‘nation’). One of the features of the modern nation-state, or at least those in the West, is the cultivation of a particular brand of pluralism that enshrines Enlightenment values of freedom, rights, and the individual within a matrix of patriotism, militarism, and consumerism. Nowhere is this more the case than in the context of the United States with its distinctive form of civil religion that serves as the “sacred canopy” under which individual and group religious differences are preserved, but only to the extent that they contribute to, or at least do not thwart, the larger projects of the nation-state. The extent to which something like a civil religion is operative in Germany I’d be interested to know, and I look forward to our conversation about similarities and differences.

In the United States, the military chaplaincy has become one of the most important ‘turfs’ on which the contest between evangelism and pluralism is played out. More so than any other public space of its size and influence, the military is deliberately constructed as a religiously pluralistic environment with considerable attention given to accommodating diverse religious practices as long as that accommodation does not adversely affect military readiness. The military is an extraordinary environment in this regard since far more than other pluralistic contexts such as public schools, prisons, or hospitals, it brings together persons from across the nation and from a variety of backgrounds, and requires that they depend on one another very closely.

Another important feature of our military is a decline in the numbers of Roman Catholic or older (what we call) “Mainline” Protestant chaplains in the United States with a disproportionately large number of more conservative, Evangelical chaplains. This representation shapes the way pluralism is constructed, contested, and defended within the military, especially in relationship to the practice of evangelism. On one hand, Evangelicals (who tend to be more theologically conservative) and Fundamentalists as a subset of Evangelicals typically exhibit strong support for the nation and its military and do not communicate the kind of ambivalence, if not outright opposition, to war that one finds among other Christians. Evangelicals have less of a problem adopting the motto of the Army Chaplains Corps, “*Pro Deo Et Patria*” (“For God and Country”). The problem, however, is that Evangelicals also tend not to be the most comfortable with religious pluralism. Chaplains are required to minister to all service personnel while at the same time representing their own faith tradition.

Chaplains have other roles as well, such as the maintenance and support of troop morale, an ever-evolving and expanding role in other aspects of military operations and advising, and their function as a “social conscience” within the military. The latter, however, is necessarily muted by the very nature of the fact that those who enter the chaplaincy tend to be, as Kim Hansen describes it, “safe to have around.”³ Clergy with pacifist leanings or who find it more difficult to serve God and country simultaneously tend not to volunteer. The long history of the chaplaincy going back thousands of years demonstrates that the kind of chaplains who end up in military service tend to be those who find it more natural to employ religious faith as a means of blessing and validating the military operations of the nation or empire they serve.⁴

One of the unique and evolving features of the military chaplaincy in our time as related to religious pluralism is the way chaplains are increasingly being called upon to play the role of cross-cultural and inter-religious mediators and liaisons, thereby placing a greater demand on their capacity for tolerating religious diversity. Chaplains are frequently asked to work with diverse faith communities in foreign countries, to advise their commanders in areas where they can be useful tactically – for example, in reducing inter-religious tensions that complicate military missions. This means today, however, that chaplains and the churches they represent must be prepared to embrace a certain degree of pluralism.

Most military chaplains also have an important civic role. Chaplains participate in military ceremonies outside of the chapel, such as installations, dedications, memorials, public holiday observances, or collective prayers on the eve of battle. These may not be understood as religious in a formal sense, but the importance here of their role in sponsoring a civil religion is of great importance, even though it does not frequently enter the picture in discussions of religious pluralism. If civil religion (or nationalism) really is a religion, however, it is probably the most influential and powerful of them all because of its pervasiveness and its default privileging, especially within the military where, in the context of a manifest plurality, it provides a unity of symbols, beliefs, and rituals. As Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle argue, “nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries. . . . It happens that nationalism also satisfies many traditional definitions of religion, but citizens of nation-states have religious reasons for denying it.”⁵ They go on to ask,

If nationalism is religious, why do we deny it? Because what is obligatory for group members must be separated, as holy things are, from what is contestable. To concede that nationalism is a religion is to expose it to challenge, to make it just the same as sectarian religion. By explicitly denying that our national symbols and duties are sacred, we shield them from competition with sectarian symbols. In so doing, we embrace the ancient command not to speak the sacred, ineffable name of god. That

³ Kim Philip Hansen, *Military Chaplains and Religious Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31.

⁴ See for example the fine collection of historical essays in Doris L. Bergen, *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

⁵ Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, “Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (Winter, 1996), 767.

god is inexpressible, unsayable, unknowable, beyond language. But that god may not be refused when it calls for sacrifice.⁶

On one level, civil religion, or the religion of ‘nationalism’, is ubiquitous and dominant; yet on another level, it is utterly invisible and unrecognizable for what it is. This renders it remarkably powerful, flexible, and resilient in shaping values, directing energy, and providing the broader framework for the construction of pluralism.

Military chaplains play a critical role in this regard as guardians not only of their own particular faith traditions, but of the various forms of nationalistic faith present within a particular society. The challenge, of course, for military chaplains as for Christians more broadly, is that the line is notoriously thin between the position that serving God and serving country are compatible and the practice of treating them as one and the same. Indeed, it is the very nature of nationalism to blur the distinction. When the nation becomes an absolute value for which Christians will die and kill, then we are surely justified in asking whether that line has been crossed.

Countless chaplains are effective witnesses to Christ as they strive to advocate for the human needs of those they serve and to provide spiritual care as well as liturgical and ritual services. Many struggle to help soldiers find some moral purpose in their duties (though some find that remarkably easier to do than others). Many chaplains take great care not to try to secure conversions in situations where those under their care are especially vulnerable,⁷ and instead many speak of evangelism in terms of a “ministry of presence”⁸ by which they gain the rapport and trust of the enlisted. As Andrew Todd puts it, speaking in the context of the British military, “faith is communicated by being as much as by doing; and by example, rather than by seeking to convert.”⁹ At the same time, there is no way of avoiding the fact that chaplains advance the ‘mission’ of a nation and its military. If their incarnational presence is carried out well, as Todd observes, “through their pastoral, ritual, and moral presence, chaplains become ‘force multipliers’ – they contribute, whether intentionally or not, to the military effectiveness of the unit.”¹⁰

The kind of pluralism negotiated within the context of modern Western nation-states (and as exemplified by the military context) is also one that tends to be highly individualistic, so that individuals are positioned in direct relation to the nation-state. In important ways, this positioning eclipses the church as a mediating institution and as a transnational body from which Christians might instead draw their primary identities. Ecclesial identity is subordinated to a higher citizenship and set of national allegiances rendered sacred and ultimate by the rituals of nationalism. As the body of Christ ceases to provide the primary political imagination and source of unity for Christians, private markers of Christian identity become more important, while evangelism is practiced as the offer of a fundamentally private and individual salvation. The church is relegated to a secondary and instrumental relationship to salvation, and evangelism is inevitably shorn

⁶ Ibid., 770.

⁷ Cf. Hansen, 58ff.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Andrew Todd, “Chaplaincy in Contention,” in *Military Chaplaincy in Contention: Chaplains, Churches and the Morality of Conflict* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

of its prophetic character as it is rendered compatible with the nation's claims on us and its demand for our obedience and sacrifice.

Meanwhile the state offers its own political imagination, its own unity, and its own common good, which is little more than the relatively thin coordination of individual rights and freedoms. But without a substantive common good, as Cavanaugh observes, "plurality is not simply a promise but a threat, one that must be met by an even greater pull toward unity." What is the source of that unity? "It can only be that the nation-state becomes an end in itself, a kind of transcendent reference needed to bind the many to each other."¹¹ The state then becomes a kind of savior.

The Pluralism of Consumer Culture

A third context in which pluralism is imagined and constructed in our time is the marketplace, or what we might describe more broadly as 'consumer culture'. One could argue that our formation by the market is so comprehensive and systematic that it rivals our formation by empire, but that would be to say too little, given that market and empire go hand in hand. Of course, empire has always exercised influence on and control of the economies of those it subjugates or purports to represent. In our time, however, it is not only the political that shapes and controls the economic but rather the economic that shapes and controls the political, so powerful and de-territorialized is the market in imperial affairs throughout the world.

"Market rationality" is roughly equivalent to the air we breathe and the logic of the market extends to literally every aspect of our lives from the way we make ethical judgments in terms of costs versus benefits to the way we value objects and people in terms of their *exchange* value. Thus, the services of a professional football player have a higher exchange value than those of a school teacher. Pluralism, within consumer culture, is a value in and of itself because of the preoccupation with choice that is at the heart of consumer formation. Religion is far from an exception to the rule; indeed religious traditions have proven themselves especially susceptible to the processes of commodification as their leaders, beliefs, and institutions are disciplined for the market, and their symbol systems, practices, narratives, and material objects exploited for marketing purposes. As Peter Berger puts it,

The religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be "sold" to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy." The pluralist situation is, above all, a market situation. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities.¹²

Vincent J. Miller in *Consuming Religion* points out that commodification has two important and interrelated consequences for religion – and, I might add, for how pluralism is constructed by the marketplace.

¹¹ Cavanaugh, 47.

¹² Quoted in Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 35.

First, elements of religious traditions are fragmented into discrete, free-floating signifiers abstracted from their interconnections with other doctrines, symbols, and practices. This abstraction of elements from their traditions weakens their ability to impact the concrete practice of daily life. Deprived of their coherence with a broader network of beliefs, they are more readily put to other uses, as shallow signifiers of whatever religious sentiment we desire. The second consequence concerns practices. When abstracted from their conditions of production – that is, from their communities of origin – practices are deprived of their links to the institutional and communal setting in which they shape the daily lives of religious practitioners.¹³

So, for example, we find the images of the Dalai Lama or Gandhi in Apple computer advertisements with the tagline “Think Different.” Moses and Jesus action figures now surface in a child’s toy chest alongside the Little Mermaid or Mr. Potato Head. All religions are made equal by consumerism, but not because they are multiple paths leading to the same goal or culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality, as pluralistic theologians have hypothesized. Rather, equality within consumer culture means that religious symbols, narratives, and practices are equally capable of being constructed as aspects of a ‘brand’ and consumed as disposable commodities – to use Miller’s words, as “things to be played with, explored, tried on, and, in the end, discarded.”¹⁴

In consumer culture, religious pluralism is constructed by imposing onto the plurality of religions the unity of the marketplace. This marketplace unity is accomplished, says Miller, through two interrelated dynamics whereby, first, “traditions are pillaged for their symbolic content, which is then repackaged and recontextualized in a way that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political consequences.”¹⁵ To be sure, the kind of religious pluralism coordinated by consumer culture is one that values and makes space for religious traditions, especially in relation to their symbolic imagery, so that we appear to be offered a vast retrieval of traditions – a “divine deli” as John Berthrong has termed it.¹⁶ Simultaneous to and alongside this process of valuation and retrieval, however, is a second process of abstracting what is marketable from those traditions and then dismissing their more demanding and exclusive dimensions such as doctrine, institutions, and the social patterns by which the traditions inform the daily practice of life.

everything is transformed into a commodity that can be brought to market, exchanged, and consumed. . . . On the other hand, we witness a great hollowing out. Exchange demands interchangeability, equivalence. . . . Rough edges must be smoothed.¹⁷

In the case of religion, this can take place at the level of artifacts such as prayer beads, jewelry and pendants (such as the crucifix), tattoos and other body markings,

¹³ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 3-4

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁶ John Berthrong, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

¹⁷ Miller, 77.

dress, statues, action figures and toys. It can also take place at the level of practices, liturgies, narratives, and music, such as Gregorian chants, yoga, or Tantric sexual practices. What is important is *how* the religious traditions are retrieved, engaged, and employed within the logic of the marketplace, a logic that lifts the practices, symbols, and stories of those traditions out of their original contexts. By eroding the coherence of the traditions and disconnecting them from practices, not only is their capacity for forming the daily lives of consumers undercut, but the traditions themselves are coopted by the dominant values, assumptions, and practices of the wider culture.¹⁸

There is some important work that gets done here that should not be written off as merely shallow or narcissistic, especially insofar as religion begins to show up in new places and new leverage is discovered for calling into question longstanding and oppressive religious monopolies.¹⁹ But while exposure to diverse religious traditions is heightened in consumer pluralism, the capacity for those traditions to pose a serious challenge to the status quo is diminished as is a sustainable commitment to those traditions. Consumer culture may render a religious tradition more accessible but our relationship to that tradition remains one of “shoppers” and “consumers” who engage that tradition as a disposable commodity, with a diminished capacity to inform and sustain the concrete practice of life.

It is worth noticing not only the way the dynamics of commodification create a pluralism by reducing the value of religious traditions to their exchange value by “hollowing them out” so that they are equivalent and interchangeable, but also the way religious traditions themselves have become habituated to that pluralism by incorporating the dynamics of commodification and consumption into their own practices. So, for example, when evangelism is undertaken as a competition for space within this pluralism, it finds itself shading out particularities that are too exclusive or strange in favor of a more generalized spirituality or vague religiosity that will sell and that, to use Miller’s language, “smoothes rough edges.”

The challenge for Christians who would evangelize their world, then, is not that of finding new and clever ways to offer the good news from within a crowded set of lifestyle options available to religious shoppers and consumers. It is rather that of de-habituating the practice of evangelism altogether from the pluralism of consumer culture in which the good news is positioned as a commodity to be consumed and in which Christianity is little more than a ‘brand’ – a skin-deep image of what we want others to think about us that has hollowed out the way of Christ in favor of consumer preferences.

Moving Outside the Prevailing Pluralist Paradigms

All three of the pluralisms I have just sketched (imperial, nationalist, and consumerist) tend to diminish or occlude difference in favor of transcendent unities or abstracted commonalities and that end up domesticating and commodifying religious traditions. In this way, they are not wholly unlike many pluralist theologies of religion that presume to speak from a neutral vantage point that pretends to comprehend a totality but that end up diminishing the extent and importance of the differences among the religions while hiding or disguising their own particular starting point, social locations,

¹⁸ Cf. Miller, 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., 76-7.

and perspective.²⁰ As I have already noted, even the use of the word “religion” itself participates in this dynamic. The word is notoriously difficult to define, and its usage to cover traditions of thought and practice as diverse as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and civil religion already enacts a pluralistic imagination that is employed for the sake of comparison and evaluation. Alister McGrath goes so far as to claim that “it has never been shown that the different world religions share a common subject matter.”²¹

Even if McGrath’s claim is overstated (though I am not sure it is), it is difficult to deny his reminder that the typical, pluralist assertion that all religions are responses to the same ultimate reality is not so much a claim about the insights of the various religions as about the all-knowing pluralist. To make this point, McGrath reminds his readers of Lesslie Newbigin’s insight about the ‘elephant story’ employed by pluralists:

In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant. . . the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world’s religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.²²

Kenneth Surin argues similarly that the writings of pluralists and inclusivists like John Hick, William Cantwell Smith, or Karl Rahner pretend to occupy a “global space” that has supplanted the “gaze of Europe” with a “global gaze” that views the diverse practices, beliefs, and texts of the various religions of the world “in what can only be described as a placeless and deculturated kind of way.”²³ This “global gaze” has the merit of releasing us from a provincialism or narrow ethnocentrism in thinking about religions and their relationships to one another. But just as consumer culture lifts religious symbols, beliefs, and practices from their original context and positions them alongside one another in such a way as to disguise their irreducible differences, and just as a military culture might affirm religious plurality while positioning it under the larger canopy of civil religion, or nationalism, so also many pluralistic theologies participate in the same dynamics of fragmentation, abstraction, and exchange whereby genuine difference is diminished in favor of more global but ultimately colonialist paradigms of evaluation.

²⁰ Cf. Tanner

²¹ Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God and Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 112.

²² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 9-10.

²³ Kenneth Surin, “A ‘Politics of Speech’: Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald’s Hamburger,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 196.

At this point, I would suggest that there are resources in the Wesleyan theological tradition for posing a counter-narrative with the potential to help avoid the competitiveness engendered by other constructions of unity and plurality while providing a robust inner logic and dynamic to evangelism that at the same time embraces difference and accepts plurality without seeking to conquer it through a prior epistemological unity and the kind of apologetics that flows from it. To be sure, John Wesley's theology may be read as imposing a unity of grace onto plurality, but that unity turns out to be a very different kind of unity from that which surfaces in the context of empire, civil religion, and consumer culture.

Grace is imagined by Wesley as the prior, immediate, and universally available offer by God of healing, salvation, and liberation in every human context. Grace may be said to be "supernatural," but since, for Wesley, no person is born in an un-graced state, the distinction between natural and supernatural is purely academic. We are all born graced and no one could even so much as exist whatsoever apart from God's grace. Though prevenient and universal, the operation of grace is nonviolent for Wesley. God is immediately present to all and works by "every moment superintending everything that [God] has made; strongly and sweetly influencing all, and yet without destroying the liberty of [God's] rational creatures."²⁴ For Wesley, every part of God's wisdom is "suited to this end, to save [us] as [humans]: to set life and death before [us]; and then persuade, not force, [us] to choose life!"²⁵

The operation of grace in human life is not only resistible; it is irreducibly plural, for Wesley. What is "vulgarly called 'natural conscience,'" according to Wesley, is to be found "at least in some small degree, in every child" and "in every human heart."²⁶ At the same time, it is precisely because conscience is the product of multiple influences, including God's grace, that there is a remarkable variability in the human response to grace. Michael Lodahl writes,

For Wesley, . . . the human conscience is a *con-fluence*, a flowing together: there is the influence, the inflowing, of all our experiences, education, and relationships; there is also the inflowing of God's own Spirit to quicken, to address, to call, to convict. In . . . reality, these influences are inseparably intertwined. We find this notion particularly clearly in Wesley's sermon "On Conscience," where he points out that the term's etymology is "to know together with" another. He takes this "other" to be God – but *not* "none other than" God! Hence, on the one hand he rejects the phrase "natural conscience" because "properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift of God, above all [God's] natural endowments" [*Works*, 3:482]. On the other hand, conscience "is that faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions, and of their merit or demerit. . . . But this varies exceedingly, according to education and a thousand other circumstances" [483].²⁷

²⁴ John Wesley, in *The Works of John Wesley*, begun as "The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975-83); continued as "The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley" (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 4:43.

²⁵ John Wesley, in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 450.

²⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 4:163.

²⁷ Michael Lodahl, "To Whom Belong the Covenants? Whitehead, Wesley, and Wildly Diverse Religious Traditions," in David Ray Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 201.

The story Wesley offers of God's prevenient, revealing, saving, and sanctifying grace provides a fully comprehensive framework for interpreting human existence and describing reality. But that story, while it is certainly a 'meta-narrative', should lead us to expect – and to embrace – the plurality of responses to grace that we find in diverse religious traditions. Or at least we find in that story no a priori grounds for rejecting other faiths as intrinsically sinful, idolatrous, or in error. The first and most important thing to be said about other faith traditions is not that they are deficient, but that they are different. That difference may even be so radical in some cases as to warrant the assessment that they are not all responding to the same religious object or moving toward the same religious end.

Instead Christians have every reason to stand humbly in the presence of other faith traditions, encountering them on their own terms as much as possible and engaging their adherents in an ad hoc manner that presupposes the historicity, particularity, and distinctiveness of each tradition in every meeting of their respective positions. Christians offering the good news to others possess no indubitable foundations in human experience or grand metaphysical schemes on the basis of which they can clinch the universal superiority of that news as good, saving, or true. They have only the particular story they have been given, the particular savior to whom that story points, and the particular community which attempts to embody and enact this good news. But interfaith dialogue does not require such sure foundations anyway, nor is it possible only from within some supposedly wider, neutral, and more universal and all-encompassing horizon greater than any one religion and on the basis of which they may all be compared.

It is only after careful study, respectful dialogue, and a close and sympathetic attention to the rich particularity of a religion's stories, practices, and way of life, that one can begin to understand a religion in such a way as to make judgments about its commensurability with Christianity or what the good news might mean in the context of that tradition. Taking seriously religious differences in this way does not prevent us from finding God at work in the lives of non-Christians. In fact, given the comprehensiveness of the story we have to tell about grace, we should expect this. But that does not mean that all religions are essentially saying and doing the same thing as Christianity, albeit anonymously or implicitly, or that Christianity is somehow in competition with other religions. The (sometimes radical) differences between Christianity and other religious traditions need not be disguised or denied as a prerequisite to either dialogue or evangelism. What is required is both an unashamed willingness to bear faithful witness to Christ and a genuine openness to the non-Christian, even to the extent that, as Lesslie Newbigin once suggested, "we are prepared to receive judgment and correction" and thus to put our own Christian faith at risk.²⁸

On this view, then, evangelism in the context of religious pluralism takes seriously the universality of grace and it also takes seriously the nonviolent nature of grace as a gift along with the unavoidable acceptance of historical relativity, particularity, and difference. Christians need neither fear nor fight the presence of religious diversity. At the same time, despite the fact that the operation of grace is irreducibly plural given what Wesley describes as "a thousand other circumstances," Christians do not shrink from commending their truth to others as good news even while we seek repentantly to receive

²⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*. Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 182.

correction from others. Christian evangelism is uninterested in competing for space in the world or triumphing over other faiths in a market of crowded options. For in one sense, the good news of Jesus Christ can never be at home. Its truth will always be strange and out of place; it is a news that risks distortion the moment it is spoken. In another sense, the gospel's place in the world is already secure . . . in derelict mangers and abandoned leper colonies, among the poor and those tormented by demons, at weddings with friends and dinner in the houses of known sinners, at the foot of the cross and the door of the tomb.