REFLECTIONS ON PLURALISM

Paul R. Abernathy

An Introduction

Since June 1, 1998, I have been the rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, a vibrant, progressive and inclusive faith community on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.[1] Our mission statement reads:

> St. Mark's Episcopal Church is an open community, welcoming people wherever they are on their faith journey. We celebrate the gifts of God that empower us to engage boldly in the struggles of life and care for others with love, justice, and compassion.

As a community, we describe ourselves in a variety of ways – for example, as a reflection of the bustling nature of our shared life, "The Church of the Holy Activity". However, relative to the title and topic of this short paper, I recall the succinct and insightful statement of one of our members, who spoke of St. Mark's as a community where we seek to question our answers more than we attempt to answer our questions. Indeed, our collective environment is one in which what we believe is not as important in terms of our interpersonal sharing as the depth and breadth of the ongoing process by and through which we as individuals discern, that is, come to know what we believe. In this ongoing quest, we embrace a communal ethos of open engagement one with another and often open challenge one of another. We do this, largely, with an admirable spirit of trusting mutuality and vulnerability. In our corporate personality – which, at our best, is welcoming and accepting, to paraphrase the hymn, "just as one is, without one plea" – we, with no publicly doctrinally articulated litmus test or dogmatically imposed template of belief, offer a safe space of and for individual seekers to discover and affirm what it is that they do (and do not) believe. Corporately, although standing primarily between the centrist and leftist side of the theological and philosophical spectrums, we embody a wide swath of perspectives.

St. Mark's, as my parish and people, has allowed me a rich, both in risk and reward, set of personal and communal experiences…

Personally, I have been able to think aloud, expressing, at times homiletically, what I *really* think and feel without the self-imposed encumbrance of sensing a need to proclaim a traditional biblical and theological "party line". In this – being open both to an inward self-examination at a depth hitherto unexplored, and thus unknown, and to the outward scrutiny of the members of my community – I continue to arrive at new points of self-discovery. I now, more clearly than before, understand myself to be one whose theology (that is, the systematic reflection and articulation of the relationship between the creature or the creation and the creator, between humankind and the one who or that which is greater) is in a near-constant state of flux. If you or even I want to know what I believe, then ask me and I'll tell you. Ask me again tomorrow and my answer may have changed. Formerly, whenever I detected within me this posture of self-questioning and

wonderment, I often would berate myself for my wearying vacillation, my “wishy-washiness”, asking, “Paul, why can’t you settle on what you believe? Why can’t you simply let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’?!”[2] Now, although occasions continue to arise when I wish I were more clear and resolute, I have learned to accept and appreciate both what seems to be my quintessential openness and what appear to be two of its byproducts or fruits: a capacity for self-examination at depth that at times leads to a change of mind, if not also heart, as well as an ability to welcome and entertain more than one perspective, seeing each point of view, also in depth. It is here in these traits that I have come to claim my internal pluralism, my “inner other”, which I believe is an inherent aspect of being and becoming human. All of us, each in her and his own way or ways, harbor within ourselves aspects of personality unseen and unknown to ourselves. We always do not, *cannot* see ourselves clearly. (Here, I find the Apostle Paul’s words most applicable, “Now we see in a mirror, dimly”.[3]) We also knowingly hold within and in internal tension diametrically opposing impulses and instincts. In a word, to be a human is to be a pluralist within and to one’s self.[4]

Communally, I have seen how – what it looks like when – individuals engage and remain in conversation, even and especially across potentially antagonistic and divisive lines of difference. I, in and with St. Mark’s, have lived a communal experience in which the subject of difference, even disagreement, characteristically does not become a point of collision then avoidance, but rather, an entrée into a deeper dialogue, both along individual inward pathways of self-discovery and outward encounter with another, indeed, “the other”.

One instance among many involves our two and one half year communal conversation from Spring 1997 to Summer 1999 regarding human sexuality, specifically whether or not to sanction the blessing of same-sex unions. A task force that represented a cross-section of our community designed a process that involved creating, publishing, and distributing throughout the parish written material incorporating both affirming and opposing points of view (the reading of which was recommended, indeed, respectfully required for participation in parish discussions); scheduling and conducting large group forums and small focus groups; gathering and collating parishioners’ oral and written responses; and preparing a report with recommendations for consideration by the Vestry, our decision making body. Upon formal receipt of the task force report, which recommended sanctioning the blessing of same-sex unions, the Vestry, postponed making a decision by an additional month to allow our parishioners a final opportunity to express their views. Throughout this careful, thoughtful, and respectful process the aim was to create and maintain a safe space for individuals to share their widely varied and at times conflicting perspectives. Irrespective of one’s point of view, at the end of the process, the communal mood was one of satisfaction that a consensus had been achieved. The people of St. Mark’s had come to a decision with which all may not have agreed, but which all could support.

The Origin of a Sabbatical Theme

The focus of my sabbatical, from August 1, 2006 through January 31, 2007– *Twenty-First Century Evangelism: Conversation, Not Conversion* – is a direct and immediate product of my life in community at St. Mark's. My innate openness to "the other", both within and without, nurtured by a parish environment of honesty and challenge, has given birth to a yearning for wider, broader engagement in the world and a desire to take what I have seen and learned about myself and community at St. Mark's into the larger church and wider world.

When I look at this greater ecclesiastical and societal milieu, I behold a rapidly changing and changed church and world characterized by a convergence of peoples and a confluence of perspectives, often competing and, at times, conflicting. This state of things is, simply defined, pluralism. A state of things to which I see – in individuals and institutions, people and parties – two characteristic and contrary responses (in between which, of course, are multiple gradations or variations): on the one hand, degrees of positive acceptance expressed in ecumenical or non-partisan efforts to engage, both in the religious and political spheres; and on the other hand, measures of negative reactivity manifested in active disengagement with "the other" and vigorous retrenchment in separate camps with distinct positions.

Regarding the church and world in which I live, I began to wonder: How can the Christian as an individual, and the church as a community, remain faithful to the gospel call to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in an incontrovertibly pluralistic world (which I define more fully, below), a world so diverse in peoples and an increasing variety of belief systems and ideologies?[5]

Even more, I wonder, can the Christian and the church re-imagine or re-envision the ministry of evangelism (one traditional definition of which is the church's intentional proclamation to the world, in word and deed, of the good news or gospel of Jesus Christ to the end that all may acknowledge him as Lord, accepting the salvation from sin and death or eternal separation from God that he alone offers through his crucifixion and resurrection)?[6] As understandable and acceptable as this definition may be for many, both within and without the church, there may be as many, even those who count themselves as Christians, who refer to evangelism as the dreaded "e" word, for it conjures up nightmarish images of a decidedly doctrinaire form of proselytization. Nevertheless, I intentionally use the word evangelism, partly with the intention of reclaiming it from the sole ownership and use by the religious right.

I believe that evangelism, at its heart, is concerned with the telling or sharing of a story. Although the narrative at the core of the religious evangelistic effort is that of Jesus Christ, it is only as that story is internalized, indeed, incarnated in and interpreted by and through the life of the individual story-teller that evangelism can become real. In this regard then, evangelism belongs to those who find meaning in the Jesus-story and dare to share with others the stories of *their* lives. "Making Christ known" thereby becomes an end in itself and not the means to the end of making others "know (believe in) Christ".

Again, I ask: Can the Christian and the church re-imagine or re-envision evangelism so as to see that its primary aim, as it is traditionally understood, may no longer be to convert “the other” to Christianity, but rather, to converse with “the other” for purposes of mutual and empathetic understanding, which in turn may give birth to a greater spirit of peace?

Still more, can the Christian and the church converse with “the other” with an intentionality manifested in two ways: first, without disingenuity or deceit in regard to the purpose of the engagement, so that “the other” can trust that the conversation is without an ulterior motive of conversion; and secondly, with faithfulness, so that the Christian and the church can maintain and neither sacrifice nor forsake the integrity of that identity?

Finally, can the Christian and the church take part in this conversation while remaining attuned to the voice, which in the midst of the conversation may say, “Please tell me more about your Jesus”, thereby signaling the possibility of a transition from an engagement in conversation to an experience of conversion?[7]

Over time, my wonderment took the shape of an incessant internal inquiry, with these and similar questions repeatedly rising to the level of consciousness. In an effort to frame a response, if not also an answer, I begin with the following reflections on the concept of pluralism.

Pluralism Defined

There are many definitions, descriptions and interpretations of the word pluralism. Anselm Kyongsuk Min, Claremont Graduate University Professor of Religion, offers a most helpful overview, which for its clarity and comprehensiveness, is worth citing in full:

> There is the phenomenalist pluralism of John Hick and Paul Knitter that takes religions as diverse phenomenal responses to what is ultimately the same ineffable transcendent reality, and the universality pluralism of Leonard Swindler, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Ninian Smart, Keith Ward, and David Krieger that stresses the possibility and necessity of a universal theology based on insights from the history of religions. Rosemary Ruether, Marjorie Suchocki, Tom Driver, and Paul Knitter propose an ethical or soteriocentric pluralism that insists on justice as a measure of all religions, while Raimundo Panikkar advocates an ontological pluralism that asserts the pluralism not only of knowledge of being but of being itself. There is, finally, the confessionalist pluralism of Hans Kung, John Cobb, Jurgen Moltmann, J.A. DiNoia, John Milbank, Kenneth Surin, and Mark Heim that insists on the legitimacy and necessity of each religion to confess itself precisely in its particularity including the claim to finality.[8]

Additionally, Lonnie Kliever, Southern Methodist University Professor and Chair of Religious Studies, offers what I consider to be a utilitarian and accessible definition,

which, although equally suitable as a description of diversity, is applicable to both religious and non-religious pluralism:

> Pluralism is the existence of multiple frames of reference, each with its own scheme of understanding and rationality…the coexistence of comparable and competing positions which are not to be reconciled…the recognition that different persons and different groups quite literally indwell irreducibly different worlds.[9]

Similarly, if perhaps sparsely, John G. Francis writes, "structural pluralism (describes a situation in which) society is understood to be made up of competing and perhaps complementary spheres".[10] Marty E. Marty, who references both Kliever and Francis in his book, *When Faiths Collide*,[11] defines pluralism with depth and diversity. His most succinct and, for me, most evocative description of pluralism is "a society of strangers".[12]

Having provided these significant other references, nevertheless as I believe that one always must define one's terms for one's self, I now share my uses and meanings of the words.

Pluralism, and particularly religious pluralism with which I am interested, are modern terms. Beginning and increasingly in the modern era, the approximate historical boundaries being the two hundred years from the late-eighteenth century through the late-twentieth century, and continuing into in the post-modern era,[13] the word, pluralism, has become rooted firmly in our, particularly western, *lingua franca*.

This is true, I think, not because of an innate openness or an increasing receptivity between and among the world's varied faith traditions and belief systems, for, generally speaking, historically the varied camps of faith and belief largely have been either broadly exclusive or narrowly inclusive. On this point, I note one reference among many. Richard P. Hayes, in his article, "Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism", writes:

> Most of the historical religions are based either on an explicit rejection or denigration of another religious tradition or traditions or on aristocratic claims of ethnic or racial supremacy. Examples of religions based on the denigration of other religions are original Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam; examples of essential racist or ethnocentric religions are the religion of ancient Israel and Brahmanism of Vedic India. That all these religions are traditionally triumphalist and not pluralistic is simply something that must be acknowledged; it would be ideologically anachronistic and intellectually dishonest to try to find anticipations of a now fashionable way of thinking (i.e., pluralistically) in traditions that evolved in a social and political setting entirely different from that of the present world.[14]

Rather, I see pluralism's "popularity" due more to a culturally and nearly universal necessity, which was born as a fruit of globalization.[15] As the world "shrinks", global

human awareness of the similarities, and perhaps even more importantly, the differences between and among peoples is a manifest reality.
Pluralism, again particularly religious pluralism, is as a concept or construct, as an idea or way of perceiving and thinking is more ontological than it is epistemological. That is, pluralism is concerned primarily with beingness or what is rather than the ways of knowing what is known. In a word, pluralism attempts to explain why varying positions exist rather than settling the argument among the multiple perspectives as to which is or are more or most right or true. As such, pluralism attempts to engage and explain a world where competing and conflicting faith traditions and belief systems exist.

Having said this, I think that there is a difference between saying, "a pluralistic world" and "a world of pluralism".

The former connotes a *sitz im leben*, a life situation, or an environment in which many cultures or world views dwell. "A pluralistic world" describes a human landscape replete with multiple perspectives, so that all of its inhabitants, at the very least, must confess that this is so. Whether one likes living in a pluralistic land of potentially competing, if not conflicting worldviews, of course, is another matter. Indeed, one may feel threatened or insecure in an environment where different and differing theologies, philosophies, and ideologies share cultural space, and thus an environment in which certitude is more difficult to achieve and maintain. Nevertheless, dwelling in a pluralistic world, one must acknowledge it. Marty might describe this response as one of *"mere pluralism"* – a state in which one is "stunned by the suddenness of population changes…(as things) are not as familiar as they once were."[16] (However, I also must acknowledge that there are those who, perhaps not considering themselves threatened or insecure, actively oppose and resist pluralistic theory and practice, largely under the banner of a distinctly religious absolutism.[17])

"A world of pluralism", on the other hand, refers to a circumstance in which a variety of beliefs and ethical systems not only are recognized, but also welcomed; not only confessed, that is, confirmed as the real state of things, but also embraced. As Lamin Sanneh has said, "The world is becoming one, not from the synthesis of all cultures into one, or from the discovery of a common genetic pool, but from the accelerating pressure to acknowledge and celebrate difference when that is no longer remote. That is the deep movement of the spirit in our time."[18]

I am a pluralist: a self-assessment

I believe that I am a pluralist. Looking at and living in my daily American cultural context as it exists in the Atlantic seaboard metropolitan milieu of Washington, DC, not only do I acknowledge, but also rejoice in the multiplicity of lives and diversity of views dwelling in proximity.

My revelry, in one part, arises from what is, I pray, my reasonably objective recognition and belief that the world is incontrovertibly pluralistic. We inhabit and are a part of a global community. We, the human order, never will nor can return to "the good old days"

when “those people”, being any and all persons, tribes, races, or groups who believed and behaved differently from us (“us” always being the point of reference of whomever is speaking), lived “over there”, away and apart from us, and essentially out of our sight. Our human forebears, I believe, also inhabited a pluralistic world, that is, a global landscape populated by many different cultures and creeds, religions and belief systems. However, I think it fair to assume that, in the past, many people lived, perhaps at times nearly exclusively, within the frameworks of their inherited cultures, religions, and traditions. The modern and post-modern eras – bearing the gifts of ever expanding mass and instant communication and travel – increasingly allow little room for the preservation of a narrowly prescribed worldview through which one may believe that (and behave as if) none other exists.

My revelry in another part, is rooted in my equally sober, if not also somber awareness of the increasing levels of strife and violence between and among peoples. “This fragile earth, our island home”[19] has been and continues to be sorely battered by dissension and division, historically much of it religious in nature. (Here, among many ancient and long-lived confrontations, I think of the rising sectarian violence between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims in Iraq, the ongoing conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and the widespread Christian-Muslim conflagrations in, among many places, the Balkans, Indonesia, and the African nations of Nigeria and the Sudan.) I long for peace. A state of existence not merely of the absence or the lessening of tumult and strife, but rather, the increasing presence of global comity. A state of being that I believe can begin perhaps only at the point of a nearly universal recognition that pluralism is an undeniable and primary aspect of life.

This, my affection for pluralism, on a personal level, was especially apparent to me during the days I spent in the cities of New York, London, and Johannesburg.[20] There, in these great metropolises, far more than in my fairly homogeneous Washington, DC, Capitol Hill neighborhood,[21] I lived the daily, constant experience of brushing up against many peoples, many cultures. I could not walk down a Manhattan, London, or Johannesburg street, passing by and through countless people, without hearing the sounds of multiple tongues, seeing the kaleidoscopic arrays of color and style in native attire, and looking into many faces that appeared to be utterly unfamiliar in feature and tone.

I am a pluralist: some self-questioning

Yet, all this “passing by and through” potentially makes me only a voyeur. For following brief exposures, I could retreat, surely and hastily if need be, to the safety of my lodging and to the sanctity of my familiar thoughts, which no matter how broad in scope, always are narrow in comparison to all of humankind.

So, am I really a pluralist? Do I truly embrace and celebrate diversity in thought and opinion, belief and behavior, theology and ethics?

Let me say straightway for the sake of honesty (which, I pray, would prevail even if I were writing this for no one else to read), that I do have limits. Regarding my internal,

intellectual framework, neither do I accept everything nor do I believe nothing. Moreover, concerning my behavior, I am aware of the dark sides of my personality: morbid thoughts that sometimes rise and roam uncontrollably through the corridors of my mind, particularly in response to hurt, perceived or real; the sometimes violent impulses that well up in my veins, rooted I fear in what my daughter, Kristin, exploring and expressing poetically her sense of herself, has referred to as “genetic anger”; and the unending internal struggles I face in the practice of my professed theological-ethical values of justice and love.[22] When I contemplate the movement from that confusing at times incomprehensible cauldron of instinct, impulse, and intention to action, there are some things that I would like to think I would not, would never do.

I would not commit premeditated murder in the name of God or for my own sake. (Although I can conceive that I could kill someone in self-defense or to save the life of someone I love.) I would not deny water or food to a thirsty or hungry person, even if the one in need was my sworn enemy. (James Fisher, the late uncle of my wife, Pontheolla, referred to Mazarine, Pontheolla’s late grandmother, as one whose compassion for others was so innate, so incarnate that she “would throw a biscuit to the devil if the devil was hungry”. This is as fine a description of unconditional love as I’ve ever heard. I’d like to think that I would do the same.)

However, on these counts, neither I nor my expressed values have been tested severely. I have not been faced with a real threat to my own life or the lives of those whom I love. I have not been placed in a situation where to kill or to be killed was a choice that I felt called to make. Although vocationally I have had many occasions to respond to the basic and physical needs of many, generally I have done so with an inherent respect and regard for the person asking, often suspending the sometimes negative judgments about the veracity of what I have been told. So, again, I’ve not been tested.

Nevertheless, I also say, indeed, confess, again, that I have limits. There are behaviors that I cannot and would not tolerate. For example, I am not a Christian biblical literalist, hence, to exclude my lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) sisters and brothers from the fullest participation in the leadership and sacramental life of the church, in conformity to a strict interpretation of “the plain meaning of the scripture” or to uphold, in the language of Jude 3, “the faith once delivered to the saints”, is abhorrent to me. As another example, I am not a fundamentalist, but rather, a progressive Christian. (In the next section, *I am a pluralist: my self-understanding*, I describe the sense and shape of my Christian progressivism in theory and in practice.) My theological and social sensibilities are inclusive. Therefore, to demonize and anathematize others even and especially those who hold differing viewpoints than I is equally unacceptable to me.

I am a pluralist: my self-understanding

Intuitively, I know that as an individual I have the limits of one who possesses a particular history and specific memories, a mental framework and points of view, and powers of discernment and judgment. I *must* have boundaries; moreover, experientially, I know what they are. None of this, however, is the same thing as saying that I do not

appreciate, even relish difference and revel in diversity. For I do. Then, how do I understand myself as a pluralist?

I am a Christian. I was born into a Christian family. Christianity is a heritage that was bestowed upon me by my parents and bequeathed to me by the generations of family before them. Christianity is an inheritance that I have claimed, both in my life and by my vocation, and continue to embrace. Indeed, being a Christian is an integral aspect of my identity and self-understanding, as native or natural to me as being African American and male. "Being Christian" is one the fundamental ways that I can talk about myself.

By "embrace", I infer that in my human quest for the meaning of life, the Christian story – the Jesus-story – in a word, makes sense. That is, I can see the world and interpret my life within that world clearly through the lens of the gospel witness – a testimony that I sum up as the good news of the cosmic, that is, eternal connection between death and resurrection. Death is inevitable, both the small daily deaths of disappointment and failure, and in the last the ultimate death into the state of non-being, non-existence. Yet, these deaths are a prelude, at least in this world, to the resurrections of second, third, fourth, and so on births to new life. As long as earthly life is, the experiences of disappointment and failure can be overcome or at least coupled with moments of satisfaction and success. As for that final encounter with death, the same faith that allows me to hope in this life for resurrection from death, also prevails. Even short of a belief in some eternal existence after the cessation of earthly life, I have hope that I will live on in the memories of those whom I have loved and those who have loved me.

My Christianity, at its heart and root, is more metaphorical than literal, more mythological than factual. As my friend, Stephanie Nagley,[23] often says, "Everything in the Bible is true and some of it actually happened." From my religious perspective, I read the Bible more with an eye toward beholding its mythological truths and less its historical facts. The biblical story, as mythology, is not fantasy (i.e., a fictive or make-believe tale). Rather, it expresses truths about what is and the way things are through depictions of events, some, if not many, of which may be ahistorical. Thus, I believe in the *truth* of the Jesus-story, for it makes meaning or sense out of my existence. However, I do not necessarily believe in the *facts* of that story as it is traditionally told (i.e., that God, the transcendent creative intelligence and animating power of creation took our human flesh in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, who, as God-man – because of the original sin of disobedience at the dawn of creation of Adam and Eve, the first parents, a sin with which all subsequent generations of humankind are tainted – made a necessary, efficacious, and timeless atoning self-sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and was raised bodily from death).

As this is *my* Christianity, I can accept the validity of other faith and religious traditions. By "validity", I mean that I acknowledge that other perspectives can and do make sense of life. Moreover, I, for myself and for my own use, can find truth or that which is real within other faith or spiritual perspectives. (In this way, I am not simply a relativist. I am not one who seeks to understand the tenets of a given faith tradition only within the culture of that tradition and who, therefore, can acknowledge the value of that heritage for those who have adopted and adhere to it.) For example, Jewish midrash (that

traditional practice of speculative, but nonetheless rigorous inquiry and examination of places where the Scripture is silent, which aims to discover hidden or obscure textual meanings) even and especially in its most orthodox form, has taught me the value of exercising freely and fully the human imagination in biblical exegesis in way my understanding of Christian biblical criticism has not. Even more, Islam (the word, *islām*, means *submit*) has given me insight into the nature of surrender or submission to God, far more greatly than I have discerned or experienced in my Christian tradition. Still more, Buddhism has introduced me to the nature of the contemplative life and the inherency of the presence of the divine within me in a far deeper way than I have discovered in my Christian practice.[24]

Accordingly, the justice and love of my personal Christian confession and practice,[25] which I define as right and fair dealing with all and unconditional benevolence for all, compel me to make "space" for "the other". (I recognize the inherent arrogance in this statement, as it seems to infer that I am the primary actor who must cede some of my space to "the other". This is more my manner of speaking than any indication of my intent. Perhaps more humbly, indeed, more honestly, I need to say that justice and love call me to acknowledge and honor the "space" that "the other" already occupies simply by virtue of her or his being.) I do not, must not, indeed must never assume that Christianity is the only witness to life's meaning. Christianity does not have the "last word" on truth, my truth, or that of "the other", or that of any other.

More Questions

Given this my embrace of "the other", I wonder if it is possible to imagine a world in which there is no one dominant faith tradition or belief system. Indeed, is it possible to envision a world in which dominance was an uncharacteristic attitude or posture of any tradition or system?

Moreover, is it possible to imagine a world in which these traditions or systems, with their adherents, do not exist separated and apart, one from another, but rather share space with all others in the same place? Of course looking at the earth as one place, populated by centers of religious heritage, each historically more endemic to one or more regions than others (for example, the Catholicism and Protestantism of the western world of Europe and North America and the Islam of the Middle East), I can answer this question with an emphatic "yes". However, as a pluralist, I intend that my question point to any place and all places in the world. Is it plausible to imagine that in any one place (and ultimately in all places throughout the world) all faith traditions and ideologies, as centers or loci of belief, share space and join in a common life of conversation as opposed to being "Balkanized" (dwelling adjacent yet separate and distinct, one from another, through the erection and maintenance of firm ideological and usually also territorial boundaries)?[26]

(Having said this, I have little illusion about the complexity, perhaps even impossibility of what I suggest here. For one thing, there is the phenomenon of "internal immigration", that is, the migration of different subsets of persons within a given culture. In American

terms, for example, a plains-dwelling Midwesterner or a coastal Southerner moving to the Yankee, urban northeast. Although all claim the same American historic and national heritage, the regional differences can make the discernment of who is "the other", therefore, who is out of place, more problematic. If the issue is fraught with difficulty locally, that is, in one or any place, it then becomes an ostensibly insuperably complex matter on the global plane, for example, in the movement of an Israeli to the Gaza Strip or a sub-Saharan African Muslim to a Christian enclave in the United Kingdom. Moreover, there is the unavoidable reality that every "place", whether neighborhood, county, region, or nation has a dominant heritage and culture. My question presupposes, perhaps naïvely, a shared, kindred mutuality between and among traditions and worldviews that cannot be achieved. Furthermore, regarding dominance, the addition of the religious dimension complicates matters even more. Religion, always dealing with the ultimate values of life's meaning and destiny, and making the highest claims on the belief and behavior of its adherents, can provoke discord between and among groups. Finally, religious identification also can lead to differentiation and alienation *within* a group of adherents. For example, look at the current crisis within the Anglican Communion – a crisis that seems to prove the dictum of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski: "Aggression like charity begins at home".[27])

Is it reasonable to imagine a world in which each faith tradition or belief system is in dialogue with all others while maintaining its own identity and value without either being exclusivistic in its self-identity and its sense of community or becoming relativistic in its view of the others? (Exclusivism and relativism, as polar opposites, are the potential extremes, I think, that can arise from my encounter with "the other". In the first, I engage in conversation for the precise purpose of seeking to detect an inferiority in another perspective so to declare the superiority of my point of view. In the second, I engage in conversation from the point of view that all ideologies, as expressed in belief and behavior, are culturally-rooted; hence, everything and anything can be considered, indeed, *must* be considered true within its own historical and social context. Between the extremes of exclusivism and relativism, there is the position of inclusivism. In this posture, I engage in conversation to discover points of connection or intersection between my tradition at that of "the other" so that I may perceive elements of truth within the heritage of "the other" and, more importantly, that "the other" may become aware and convinced of the encompassing truth of my heritage.)

Finally, in this "new world" that I am imagining (in contrast to the "old world", which I believe is the current world where faith and religious traditions are the ideological source and impulse for so much premeditated, intentional violence) is it realistic to imagine that one can look at another, who always, in some sense, must be "the other" – and, as human, equally always, in some sense, must be "akin" or, indeed, one's own kin – and see a person who, although always distinctly and decidedly "other" is always, just as all are, God's own? (In Christian practice – which, admittedly, as a particular ideological viewpoint, by definition, must be expressed in inclusivistic terms – this experience of seeing "the other" as God's own is, in the language of the Baptismal Covenant, the act of "seek[ing] and serv[ing] ***Christ*** in ***all*** persons".[28])

If this last point could be realized, then perhaps "God" might become the integrative and common source of identity for all – which, as I read the history of religion, is at the heart of a religious understanding of the nature of things – as opposed to continuing to be the historical "cause" of division between and amongst peoples.[29] Moreover, this idea of God becoming a common ground of identification for all peoples may be grossly simplistic on, at least, two counts.

First, this concept is decidedly "western" and, as such, imbued, perhaps even tainted by the strong influences of reason, religious diversity, and relativism that dominate and shape the perception of reality in the hemisphere in which I live. Moreover, being thoroughly westernized, I may not be sufficiently sensitive to the reality of life in the southern hemisphere where Christianity and Islam, both historically powerfully missionary religions, vie for primacy among the populations of the two-thirds world.

Secondly, the notion of God's centrality is, by definition, theistic.[30] That is, it references an ontological and epistemological framework rooted in a now historically, religiously based belief in God as a supernatural creator and sustainer, as a universal originator and ongoing cosmic overseer of life. As such, this idea does not include those whose beliefs about the beginning and preservation of life can be categorized as atheistic or, at the least, agnostic. I acknowledge this exclusion with regret, for I count among my dear friends many who are troubled by, if not also who reject any idea of a supernatural (certainly, benevolent) God. Nothing within the body of their historical memory, within the realm of their immediate and accessible life experience, or within the field of their firm apprehension of scientifically verifiable truths can allow them to hold as inviolate that which, at best, is mystical and certainly without proof.

Nevertheless, as I assert above, I am a Christian (admittedly defined by my own understanding). As a Christian, this counter-cultural, counter-historical, and, hence, counter-intuitive notion of (the concept of) God as our common human "resting place" of peace is my heartfelt hope. This hope is rooted, as theoria, in the Christian theological doctrine of the Trinity (or God's nature as community) and, as praxis, in the ethical practice of hospitality.

To these two principles, Trinity and hospitality, I next turn.

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[1] See the St. Mark's Church website: www.stmarks.net.

[2] An allusion to the Gospel according to St. Matthew 5.37, in which Jesus addresses the issue of personal faithfulness in keeping one's vow as an injunction against the necessity of oath-taking.

[3] 1 Corinthians 13.12. Here, too, I think of *Johari's Window*, being a schematic depiction of the quadrants of human beingness and knowingness, i.e., that of me which is know by (1) both you and me, (2) me and not you, (3) you and not me, and (4) neither you nor me.

[4] Having said this, I acknowledge that this state of being in "flux" raises a question as to whether there are limits. Are there boundaries beyond which the shifts and movements in my theology cannot or will not cross? (I am grateful to the Rec. Dr. Charles Hedley, Rector of St. James's Anglican Church, Piccadilly London, who, in conversation about this paper, offered this penetrating and sobering inquiry.) I, in effect, answer his question with a question – not my own, but rather, that of Jesus. The question: Who do you say that I am? This is the query that the Jesus of the synoptic gospel narratives directs to his disciples (see Matthew 16.15, Mark 8.29, or Luke 9.20). My friend, Joseph Tarantolo, has said that if one discerns that this question is significant or essential to one's self-definition, then, most probably, that is a sign that one is

a Christian. I agree. As such, this question, as an expression of my “eternal” wonderment, is my limit. Daily I ask myself, who is Jesus and who is he to me? Daily, the answer may differ, one from another. However, the question – important, indeed, of ultimate value – remains the same.

[5] For example, in reviewing the statistics of the years 1970 and 2000, one finds that the numbers of Christian denominations (i.e., agencies consisting of a number of congregations or churches joined in a voluntary alignment) and paradenominations (i.e., recently arising networks of churches that are becoming new denominations [e.g., post-denominational apostolic networks], but resisting the denominationalist tendency toward institutional maintenance, often at the loss of missionary intensity) have increased from 26,350 (10,680 denominations and 15,670 paradenominations) in 1970 to 33,820 (11,830 denominations and 21,990 paradenominations in 2000 (World Christian Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition Volume 1, David B. Barrett, editor, [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], page 10). To expand this review to include the adherents of all religious and quasi-religious groups is to behold even greater numerical growth. (See World Christian Encyclopedia, *Adherents of all religions on 6 continents, AD 1900-2000*, pages 13-15.)

[6] My desire for the church to re-imagine or re-envision evangelism is, in effect and in fact, a call for the conversion *of the church*. My friend, Joel Wilson, with his characteristic insightfulness and attention to irony (particularly in the light of my sabbatical theme), pointed this out to me. Additionally, he asked, “Why (or why should) this re-imagining take place?” Fair enough. I reply that, in my view, as religion, generally, and the Christian church, specifically, given its missiological intent and varying degrees of evangelical intensity throughout the course of history, have been at the heart of so much of the conflict between and among humans, the honesty and humility of a posture of conversion is a reasonable *and achievable* act of conciliation, indeed, reconciliation with the world. Moreover, my longing for peace (see on page 7 the paragraph which begins: “My revelry, in another part, is rooted…”) is at the core of the *ought* as I attempt to answer, “Why should this re-imagining take place?”

[7] The Rev. Dr. John Koenig, New Testament professor at the General Theological Seminary, New York City, during a September 14, 2006, conversation, expressed some appreciation for this point, saying, “Ah, most who are interested in conversation with ‘the other’ never seem to get to this.”

Regarding the conversation that I propose, an attendant issue, I think, is the consideration of how, both in theory and in practice, to establish and maintain what may be termed “a level playing field” in which both parties – say, Christian and religious non-Christian [e.g., Jew or Muslim] or Christian and non-religious non-believer [e.g., atheist, agnostic, or secular humanist] – enter and engage the conversation with a shared or similar spirit of the aforementioned intentionality and integrity. (I thank the Rev. Lindsay Meader, Priest Associate of St. James’s Anglican Church, London, who, in commenting on this paper, offered the phrase, “a level playing field” and the accompanying insight.) Without such mutuality in the attitude of approach, the tenor of the engagement, it seems, is likely to be very different! Having said this, I recognize that I am the only participant that I can “control”. Moreover, I believe that if I were to attempt to exercise control or, perhaps, more mildly and kindly, to exert influence on “the other” party to the conversation, even, presumably, for the “good” purpose of assuring mutual openness, this, too, would make the encounter decidedly different, more artificial, less authentic. Furthermore, I confess that any contemplation of exercising control or exerting influence tacitly acknowledges the dimension of power – that capacity for one to have an affect on a person or thing so to evoke or produce an effect in that person or thing – which, I believe, is an always present, although, at times, when unrealized, perilous aspect in every conversation. (I, again, thank Dr. Charles Hedley for this observation about power. My gratitude also extends to my friend, Otis Gaddis III, who, with a moving passion, raised a similar issue with me during a June 2006 pre-sabbatical conversation about the theme and focus of my study.) Hence, whether or not one likes it, any engagement with “the other” with intentionality and integrity requires an open and mutual discernment about the dynamics of power, involving, at the least, a consideration of these questions: Who has power? In what way[s] is it utilized or wielded? How is it shared?

[8] “Dialectical Pluralism and Solidarity of Others: Toward a New Paradigm”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1998), pages 587-588.

[9] “Moral Education in a Pluralistic World” (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50: 1 (spring, 1992), page 119.

[10] “The Evolving Regulatory Structure of European Church-State Relationships”, *Journal of Church and State* 34 (1992) page 782 (my parenthetical addition).

[11] Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

[12] *When Faiths Collide*, page 115.

[13] By "post-modern era", I mean, simply, an historical period following the "modern era". Generally, the modern era, in the western world, was characterized by a rise in personal religious freedom, the mass movement from an agrarian to an industrial based economy, and a greater reliance on science as the chosen vehicle to engage and resolve the questions of life. However, the modern era, with its two great world wars, among other horrors, left countless expectations unfulfilled. Thus, the post-modern era, which, as I see it, is characterized by a nearly universal quest for truth, but following many paths and a mistrust of certainty as embodied by the institutions – ecclesial, political, and social – that once were believed to be sources and symbols of stability, but now have been proven wanting.

[14] *Journal of Religious Pluralism* 1 (1991), pages 94-95 (my parenthetical addition). I do not believe that one has to look far to find multiple expressions of non-pluralistic thinking among contemporary religious authorities. In a Christian context, I recall the relatively recent promulgations of the Vatican declaring, either explicitly or implicitly, that although other denominations or ecclesial bodies and faith traditions may serve as guides to truth, they, in relation to Roman Catholicism, are in essence and, therefore, necessarily, insufficient and uncertain means to salvation. For example, Pope John Paul II, in the year 2000 encyclical *Dominus Jesus*, reasserted the exclusive salvific role of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. Additionally, on September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI, during a papal address at Regensburg University, in Germany, in which he criticized the West for relying too greatly on reason and abandoning a belief in God, recounted the words of the 14th century Byzantine Christian emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, who, in conversation with a Persian scholar concerning the truths of Christianity and Islam, said: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached". Pope Benedict has apologized for the furor his use of this quote has caused in the Islamic world and, therefore, by inference, has suggested that no denigration of Islam was intended. However, in his address, he opined that although the influence of Greek philosophy had eliminated any conflict between faith and reason within Christianity, hence, the Christian God is incapable of evil, such as the use of violence to advance the cause of religion, by contrast, in Islam, God is unconstrained by human categories, such as reason, which explains why Islam perceives no contradiction in employing the sword as a missionary tool of conversion! Finally, closer to my religious "home", the current crisis within the Anglican Communion over matters of biblical authority, manifested largely in contentious disputes regarding human sexuality, for me, has a decidedly non-pluralistic character.

[15] I use the term, globalization, loosely to refer, simply, to that increasing confluence, if not also erasure of boundaries between and among nations and cultures, which encourages the sense that we, all of humankind, are part of one global village, which, in turn, can give greater rise to a spirit of relativism, which, believing that knowledge and the behavior based on that knowledge are inextricably bound to and must be understood only within the context of the culture in which they arise, sees the comparative equality and validity of a multiplicity of points of view.

[16] *When Faiths Collide*, page 97.

[17] In this regard, in the American social and political contexts, I think of persons or organizations such as Catholics for Christian Political Action, Randall Terry of Operation Rescue, and Fred Phelps, pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church, all who are referenced by Richard Dawkins, in his book, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2006), pages 290-292.

[18] Lamin Sanneh, D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity and professor of history at Yale Divinity School, offered this view in his book, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), page 72.

[19] From Eucharistic Prayer C, The (American) Book of Common Prayer, page 370.

[20] During my sabbatical, I spent a month (August 25-September 24, 2006) in New York City at my school, The General Theological Seminary, a month (September 25-October 23, 2006) in London and in residence at St. James's Anglican Church, Piccadilly, and two weeks (October 24-30, 2006 and November 13-20, 2006) in Johannesburg, which "book-ended" a two-week period (October 31-November 12, 2006) in the KwaZulu Natal region of South Africa.

[21] I hasten to say, in agreement with the comment on this point of my friend, Joel Wilson, that Washington, DC, indeed, is an international city. However, after nearly twenty years of residency, my perspective is that the city is "a collection of cities", e.g., the city of the American federal administration, composed of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government, the diplomatic city, comprised of the various national embassies, the city of the American military-industrial complex, the chief expression of which is the Pentagon, and the city of native, largely African American Washingtonians, whose presence, in an

ongoing era of gentrification, still makes the designation of Washington, DC, as a "chocolate city" apt. As I see it, these "cities" or communities largely exist separately and distinctly one from another, the interplay between and among them running the range from necessarily frequent to occasional to non-existent.
[22] On this last point, regarding justice and love, see endnote 25, below.
[23] The Rev. Dr. Stephanie J. Nagley is the rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Bethesda, Maryland.
[24] Here, I most explicitly speak only for myself. The principles and practices of extensive and intensive biblical analysis, spiritual submission to the divine, and contemplative living are all manifestly present in Christianity, and, undoubtedly, many have encountered and embraced these aspects of faith and life solely through the Christian experience. I, simply, mean to assert that I have not.
Moreover, concerning the last point regarding the experience of the innate presence of the divine within the human life, as I read the New Testament, particularly the gospel accounts, I find few explicit mentions. The closest, clearest reference to this, I think, is found in Luke 17.20-21: "Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed…for the kingdom of God ***is <u>within</u> you***" (New Revised Standard Version, my emphasis). Moreover, I am aware of the rich contemplative tradition in Christianity. However, in the main, Christian contemplative practice, as I understand it, involves more of what might be termed an inner encounter with the great numinous "other" [God] than a mystical inward experience of the oneness [non-duality or non-I-Thou-ness] between the self and God. In Christian lore, this latter mystical occurrence, it seems, is more evident in the so-called Gnostic texts than in the canonical corpus of the New Testament. Finally, having said this, I must confess that probably I am far too rational to be a true contemplative.
[25] As in endnote 22, above, I speak of justice, which I define as right and fair dealing with all, and love, which I define as unconditional benevolence toward all. These are the two fundamental life-principles that I draw from the Jesus-story – that Jesus, in his living, ministering, and dying, both proclaimed and embodied justice and love, and that Jesus, in his rising from death, even when understood metaphorically, "proves" that justice and love triumph over the iniquity of inequity and hatred – which are the theoretical heart and ethical root of my Christian belief and practice.
[26] Dr. Sarojini Nadar, lecturer in the gender and hermeneutical studies department of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, asked me whether it is possible for one firmly grounded in her/his tradition, say, of one of the three Abramic faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, to take part in the sort of conversation that I envision: "If one truly believes in the truth of her/his tradition, how can the conversation with – without a desire to convert – 'the other' be engaged?" On this point, Joel Wilson, additionally, asked me, "Would seeing the world as a pluralistic world be sufficient for this to occur, even with someone who holds to a classic form of their particular religious and spiritual tradition?" These questions highlight, for me, the inherent, indeed, necessary difficulty in conversing with "the other", particularly those others who adhere strongly to their position, for such engagement rather speedily exposes points of difference, potentially, disagreement, and, possibly, dissension and disconnection. Hence, it seems to me that the possibility of conversation rests on the willingness and ability of the conversants to take the risk of suspending the need to convert "the other" to one's point of view, so to embrace one another for the sake of achieving a greater mutual understanding, indeed, self-understanding.
[27] An Anthropological Analysis of War (1948) in "Magic, Science, and Religion", page 285.
[28] <u>The (American) Book of Common Prayer</u>, page 305. My emphasis.
[29] Regarding this division, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially Chapter 8, *The Next Crusade*, pages 167-190.
[30] Here, I am mindful of the distinctions made by Dawkins among theism, deism, pantheism, and, by connection, atheism (*The God Delusion*, page 18).