It’s a Different World—Or Is It?

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Several months ago a prominent historian and commentator on American religious history was asked to speak to a group of fellow seminary alumni on “social change in the new 21st century.” His audience consisted mainly of Lutheran clergy and their spouses (an assembly not unlike the one gathered here today). The last portion of his presentation concerned the condition of society. His hosts asked him to be current, so he presented a list of 26 “soundings.” Here’s the list:

1. The Christian faith is facing persecution.
2. Few citizens are reading the gospel.
3. Even fewer accept it.
4. Even those who accept the gospel tend to be apathetic, listless.
5. Society is allowing schools to decay.
6. There is widespread inattention to pastoral activity.
7. The pulpit often goes unheard.
8. Militant Muslims are threatening.
9. Some are tempted to respond to these threats by engaging wrongly in crusades.
10. Muslim attacks do expose our culture’s social injustice.
11. These attacks also expose our own religious [sluggishness].
12. [Apathy] at home is more dangerous than the Islamic threat.
13. The deadly sin of pride afflicts our culture.
14. Luxury colors the lifestyles of choice.
15. High-interest rates are a problem for the poor.
16. The wealthy are especially guilty, because they exploit the underclass.
17. And the upper classes exploit religion to justify their way.
18. “Spirituality” is a disguised threat to the gospel.
20. Materialists and [pleasure seekers] have taken over the prospering churches.
21. Intellectuals and artists are indifferent to Christianity.
22. There is neglect of the sacraments, especially Holy Communion.
23. “House churches” are escapes and refuges for many.
24. Atheism is favored in intellectual circles
25. Too many theological educators stress the humanity of Christ, not His deity.
26. Through most of these issues, Roman Catholicism today complicates the picture.

Sound familiar? Sound harsh? We may divide the list into three more-or-less equal parts: accurate reporting, cranky whining, and prophetic judgment.

Here’s the catch: all 26 soundings were from Martin Luther. Many were directed at his congregation in Wittenberg. Our contemporary scrutinizing, sniveling, and soothsaying often echo voices heard through the ages in situations not wholly unlike, yet not entirely identical to, our own.

Every generation, I suppose, has considered its own the most modern, most frightful, most godless in all history. Maybe we just spend more time today telling one another this is so. For all the extensive documentation Jimmy Long presents in his book *Generating Hope: a Strategy for Reaching the Post-modern Generation*, it remains difficult for me to pinpoint my lifetime, more specifically 1968, as the year postmodernism began.

Still, people insist it is a different world. Among the evidences Lyle Schaller cited in 1989 that our world differs from that of the past were:

- decline in numerical growth in mainline churches and the corresponding rise in evangelical, nondenominational, charismatic, and community congregations
- lengthened life spans and the graying of America
- emergence of a huge array of parachurch organizations and groups
- conception of church membership as “a way station for the individual on a religious pilgrimage, not as a destination”
- worship marked by increased pace, more practical messages, and less traditional religious music
- a growing number of Americans who, when asked their religious affiliation, reply, “None”
- increase in families headed by a never-married mother
- unprecedented increase in the number of one-person households
• shift in perception of the ministry from a vocation to a profession, coupled with “the rising discontent with credentialism” in congregational and synodical ministries
• increasing sophistication of a better educated population

For these and many other reasons, Schaller entitled that year’s book, It’s a Different World.4

A decade later, however, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary President David Valleskey, addressing the same topic, voiced a counter thesis:

“It’s a different world out there.” I don’t know how many people, pastors in particular, have told me that in the past few years. I am given the impression by some that we have been preparing you men for a parish ministry that no longer exists, that we have been getting you ready to work in the world of the past rather than the world of the present.

Yet, he said, “I’m going to make the assertion that It’s the Same World Out There, because I. Facing you is the same enemy, and II. With you will be the same Lord. Religious indifference, selectivity, and syncretism are just as prevalent today as they were during the time of Zephaniah, six centuries before Christ. “We see God’s Word of truth shunted off to the side as irrelevant.” Yet the prophet’s words of encouragement are also true: The LORD your God is with you; he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing [Zephaniah 3:17–18]. That “is the Lord’s message to you and it is the Lord’s message from you to the world.”5

It’s a Different World— Or Is It?

We need to be authentically Lutheran

Lutherans are sometimes surprised to hear Evangelicals and conservative Protestants speak about them in complimentary tones. Kenneth Kantzer, former editor of Christianity Today, commended Lutheranism for some of the very things we take for granted. “When it comes to educating young people,” he wrote, “Lutherans have set the standard. No other Protestant group has done so much to establish and maintain elementary and secondary-level schools.” “Most children in a normal Lutheran church know their Bibles better and have a better command of doctrine than those from any other major denomination.” “No other denomination so exalts the cross as the symbol of divine grace for sinful humankind.”6

Mark Noll, professor of church history at Wheaton College, though he castigates the “remarkably unremarkable” history of American Lutherans,7 and though he depicts Lutherans as “mildly exotic ethnic— sort of like the Mennonites, only more numerous,” and though he chides the near invisibility of Lutherans in American public life, nonetheless argues that Lutherans “have much to offer to the wider American community, but only if they can fulfill two conditions.” They must—these are Noll’s words—“remain authentically Lutheran” while finding out “how to speak Lutheranism with an American accent.” American Christians, Noll maintains, need to hear the uniquely Lutheran convictions “that God saves in baptism, that God gives himself in the Supper, that God announces his Word through the sermon.”8

Even Garrison Keillor, who often pokes fun at Lutherans— he has said, for example, that
Different World

- “serious Lutherans, when they get together, talk about sin,” and that
- “when given the option, Lutherans will always downsize,” and that
- Lutherans “are the people for whom the word ‘repressed’ was invented,” and that
- a favorite sign outside a Lutheran church announces the topic of that week’s sermon as, “It could be worse”—

still seems to like us. Keillor is fond of his fictional Pastor Inqvist, whom he considers “a good pastor.” He admires Lutherans for being “ferocious truth-seekers and terribly intolerant of hypocrisy.” And Lutheran kids, Keillor observes, “tend to be spared some of that rebelliousness and self-indulgence that society seems to expect of teenagers but that can be so destructive.”

We may not agree that our world is different from that of a generation ago, or a century ago, but there need be no disagreement what our strongest contribution to our world can be: We need to be authentically Lutheran. But let’s be sure we know what we mean—and don’t mean—with those words.

Being authentically Lutheran means we preach and teach an unconditioned gospel. It is not that God will forgive our sins if we are sorry, or because we are sorry. It is not that God will forgive us if we believe, or even when we believe—as if forgiveness is somehow real only when faith makes it so. There is a great difference between saying, “God will forgive you if you believe,” and “God has forgiven you; believe.” There is no place in our preaching or teaching for an iffy gospel. The primary declaration of Christianity is not “This do!” but “This happened!”

Once we think God will forgive us if we believe, or if we’re sorry, or if we feel good about Him, we soon find ourselves on the maddening search for some sort of inner, tangible, subjective assurance of our forgiveness beyond the dependable words and promises of God. The good news is God forgives us whether we feel wonderful or like the worst damned sinner in the world (I mean that in the theological sense). Long before we were born, long before we came to faith, God loved us and in Christ forgave us.

Being authentically Lutheran means we value the sacraments highly. The most important question we must ask about Baptism and the Lord’s Supper is, “Are they things we do for God or things He does for us?” If Baptism is something we do for God—a mark of our loyalty or an act of our obedience—then of course we can only do so after we have reached some prescribed age of accountability. Then we will hardly be inclined to encourage colleagues or students with the reminder, “You are baptized.” If the Lord’s Supper is something we do for God, we soon find ourselves discussing how many times we ought to go rather than rejoicing at this great gift we get to receive over and over. “I go to the Sacrament,” Luther said in his Large Catechism, “trusting not in my faith, but in the word of Christ; whether I am strong or weak, that I commit to God. But this I know, that He bids me go, eat and drink, etc., and gives me His body and blood; that will not deceive me or prove false to me.”

Being authentically Lutheran means we live in the awareness that we are—Luther’s words—simul iustus et peccator—at the same time saint and sinner. Why are we ever surprised to find that friends, classmates, spouses, offspring, co-workers, administrators, board members, policemen, the government, neighbors, students, etc., can be so nasty? Never mind the heathen—how nasty God’s people can be! Despite our comprehensively developed doctrine of original sin, we still find ourselves
expecting people to be nicer than their sinful flesh allows them to be. “Where people are essentially 
nice,” observed Prof. Daniel Deutschlander, “we should expect that they would hear the Word with 
gladness. We should expect that they respect their pastors. We should expect that they would 
attend church and all of its attendant organizations faithfully.” How shocking to learn “that very 
few take doctrine seriously,” and “that less than even half [of a church’s members] attends the 
worship service,” and “that contributing 2 percent of our income to the work of the church should 
be considered a great triumph!”

Yet we are truly saints through what Christ did living and dying in our place. **If anyone is in 
Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17).** Dr. 
Siegbert Becker challenged us once (as he often did) by asking, “Is it OK to tell a Christian, ‘Go out 
and live as you please?’” Instantly we thought, “Of course not. Then he will go sin up a storm.” 
But Dr. Becker said, “Yes, it is OK to tell a Christian, ‘Go and live as you please,’ because a 
Christian is a new person. If he could live as he pleased, he would never sin again! The sinful nature 
waants to sin up a storm, sure, but the sinful nature no longer defines who a Christian is.”

Being authentically Lutheran means we maintain a proper regard for God’s penultimate gifts. God’s ultimate 
gift to us, His last and greatest blessing, is the good news of our rescue from sin, Satan, and the 
grave. His “next-to-best” gifts include all the marvels of the created world, together with the skills 
and intellect to enjoy them. In our eagerness to defend Third Article truth— “I believe that I 
cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him”— we 
must not disparage First Article truth— “I believe that God gave me my mind and all my abilities.” 
The Lutheran Reformation was born in the university, so one should hardly expect intellectual rigor 
and academic achievement to be despised in Lutheran schools and churches. The old General 
Prayer led congregations to ask the heavenly Father to “cause all useful arts to flourish among us.”

We are authentically Lutheran by living out the real treasures of a Lutheran-Christian view of life. 
But the flip side is that we may need to get over being so parochially WELS.

One way to get over being so parochially WELS is to look beyond our safe synodical surroundings. As 
comfortable as it is for many of us to live and move and have our being within our interconnected, 
terrelated little WELS-world, we may never imagine how intimidating and off-putting “hyper-
WELS-ness” can be to those who are not fifth generation graduates of our synodical school system 
or who do not routinely plan their family vacations around the preaching schedules of all their 
uncles. (That may include more of us here today than many of us here may realize!) For example: 
by the most recent statistics available to me, 78% of Wisconsin Lutheran College students belong to 
the WELS, and a high percentage of that high percentage are veterans of a dozen or more years in 
our education system. Many are teachers’ kids or pastors’ kids to boot. Arriving here, they soon see 
dozens of other similarly imprinted classmates who performed with one another artistically, 
competed against one another athletically, and may even be related to one another genetically. Not only 
do they think and speak WELS, but they also may have come to regard their WELS-ness as the 
norm against which all other things should be measured. What extraordinary perseverance it must 
take for non-WELS students, or for teachers who are not “lifers,” or even for WELS students not as 
thoroughly marinated in the system, simply to remain on our campus!

And so, our best ice-breaker may not be to ask someone’s last name, followed by, “Oh, you must be 
related to __________!”
Another way we need to get over being so parochially WELS is we must stop treating other Christians as the enemy. It is easy, of course, to consider this a necessary exercise in preserving doctrinal purity or maintaining proper fellowship lines. I’d like to talk more about the doctrinal side of this in a moment; what I’m thinking of now has little to do with safeguarding God’s truth and everything to do with plain acts of unthinking rudeness. Several years ago I conducted a survey of WLC and MLC students regarding their perceptions of our fellowship teachings and practices. One of the hypotheses I was testing was this: the more contact a student has had with non-WELS classmates, roommates, or friends, the less black-and-white that student’s perception would be regarding how church fellowship principles are to be exercised toward other Christians. My hypothesis was largely demonstrated to be correct. Most troubling in the survey results were anecdotal comments from some respondents regarding the treatment they received from their new WELS friends. “I am a first generation Lutheran,” wrote one student, “and I have been, at times, shocked at the separatism I have encountered. It isn’t easy being ‘grafted’ into the WELS. You have to be pretty independent and stubborn about ‘belonging’ when you aren’t sure you are necessarily welcome.” Said another: “It almost seems as if lots of people look for reasons NOT to have fellowship.”

In a longer passage, one student summarized her experience through her pre-college years:

Our church “hated” the Missouri church down the road. They were our enemies on the school bus, on the basketball court, and it even carried all the way to the early years of high school. Looking back now I see how ridiculous it all was and I’m saddened and angered that the leadership in my church did nothing to stop the bitter feelings and in fact promoted them when in all actuality [Missouri Lutherans] believe almost identically the same as we do. While I appreciate our synod’s unchangingness for the fact that we haven’t lost the true Word, I am also frustrated by our alienation of those who could be valuable allies. I feel that to rub in our differences in such a manner is a sin and could be preventing some from salvation because they are turned off by such bickering. I believe that we should keep studying God’s Word and continuing to talk with those of similar faith and try to help each other in our struggle to stay afloat. There is a fine line between trust in God as Savior and [trusting correct] doctrine as salvation, and right now I feel we err on the side of doctrine. What the balance is, I’m not sure, but I wish we would work on it instead of perpetuating dissent among believers.

One thing more: to get over being so parochially WELS, we must stop blaming everything we don’t like in our church life on our being German. It’s so unfair to the Germans. Besides, other than an occasional Ja wohl, how German are most of us anymore?

We must reconsider how we relate to non-WELS Christians

Jesus did say, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters” (Luke 11:23; see Matthew 12:30). But there is also an account in the Gospels in which John complained to Jesus that he and his mates saw a man driving out demons in Jesus’ name. “And we tried to stop him,” John said, “because he is not one of us.” Jesus’ answer may have surprised John—and us: “Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you” (Luke 9:49–50). Important to note is the context of Jesus’ first statement. “He who is not with me is against me” was said in response to the vehement unbelief Jesus encountered in the Pharisees, who charged Him with driving out demons by the power of demons, which led Jesus to warn them against committing the sin against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22–32; Mark 3:26–30; Luke 11:14–26). In the second statement, by contrast, John acknowledged that the man was driving out demons
in Jesus’ name, but his criticism was that the man was “not one of us.” In His reply, Jesus shifted pronouns from “us” to “you,” suggesting the man may have had a relationship with Jesus the disciples were unaware of. Yet in spite of not belonging to the exclusive company of the Twelve, this unnamed man not only acted in the Savior’s name but at least once was able to do a miracle the Twelve could not do.\(^\text{16}\)

We like to believe that the issues separating us from other Christians are always purely doctrinal in nature. One must wonder, however, whether sometimes our attitude toward Christians of other church bodies is shaped more by the fact that they are “not one of us” than by clear differences of teaching. Ecumenical can be a good word, too (should this surprise us?), and there is something wonderfully ecumenical about Luther’s explanation of the Third Article: “The Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”\(^\text{17}\)

The warnings of John Philipp Koehler, professor almost a century ago when our seminary was in Wauwatosa, seem to have been addressed to our current church life. With our emphasis on justification and faith, Koehler noted, it is to be expected “that among us doctrinal presentation receives emphasis” in our preaching and teaching. But legalism can infiltrate among us “in the form of bragging about orthodoxy.” That happens when emphasis in our teaching shifts “from faith to correct faith.” This “bravado of orthodoxy,” as Koehler labeled it, “feeds on the factious spirit which opposes the ecumenical spirit.” The result is traditionalism, which “has lost the spirit of the gospel.” As we discuss what we believe with a Christian of a different denominational stripe, we should proceed “from the assumption that the other person probably means the right thing, but either expresses himself incorrectly, or even expresses himself differently than I.”\(^\text{18}\)

How refreshing his advice compared to the tendency we may discover in ourselves, to say little about the many areas in which we agree with other Christians and to focus instead like a laser beam on our presumed areas of disagreement. True ecumenicity, said Koehler, recognizes and fosters the “sensibility of the one true invisible church.” In practice, the ecumenical spirit (again, this is Koehler)

consists in this, that I find joy in the fact that someone else believes in the Lord Jesus, no matter in which fellowship I meet him, and that I can do nothing else than acknowledge him and also in that way my Savior and, as there is opportunity, foster this partnership in salvation in the truth. When I meet anywhere someone who believes in the Lord Jesus, then what interests me above all else is that he so believes, and that through faith he is a child of God and a member of the body of Jesus. I will express as much in emphasizing the things that unite us in faith and not, by finding fault and criticizing, mainly emphasize the things that separate us.\(^\text{19}\)

In the 1950s, when the Wisconsin Synod in its great debate with the Missouri Synod was compelled to reexamine and delineate its fellowship principles more precisely, our synodical fathers wisely recognized the distinction between those who are weak in their understanding of Scripture and willing to receive further instruction, and those who refuse to accept further testimony but cling to unbiblical beliefs and practices. The uniquely WELS nomenclature of weak brother and persistent errorist, though unfamiliar to most other Christians, accurately reflects Romans 16:17–18. God calls
us to separate from those who habitually cause divisions and place obstacles in our way that are contrary to the teaching we have learned.

Significantly, the “Essay on Church Fellowship” in the WELS Doctrinal Statements of 1970 never mentions one’s denominational membership as the only or even the primary criterion for determining whether someone is a weak Christian or a persistent errorist. The essay proceeds from the Una Sancta— the one holy Christian church— to expressions of church fellowship, to weakness of faith, to persistence in error. The statement rightly recognizes that “this Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers” and that the faith of all Christians is “marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another.” The essay does not say that membership in another church body provides sufficient evidence by itself that one is a persistent errorist. Instead, it says, “We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it.”

One of the times we are called upon to consider how we relate to non-WELS Christians is when they arrive at our school or church door. The entire question of how to address non-WELS students in our school enrollment policies and activities— even so-called “spiritual” activities— seems somewhat misplaced. The real question seems to be, are we willing to allow “weak Christians” to join us in praise and service to God? Our schools include full curricula of classes in biblical studies, practical Christianity, Christian teaching, comparative religious studies, and church history. Some non-WELS students are obviously committed to the particular doctrinal stands of their church bodies and are unwilling to examine or change their stance even when confronted with scriptural testimony in our classes. But many others— in my experience the majority of non-WELS students, at least on our campus— are not committed members of their church bodies. By enrolling in our high schools or our college, and by being aware of our doctrinal position, they demonstrate their willingness to learn and submit to the theological viewpoints that our schools and our church body profess.

It is not always easy to determine whether a student is a weak Christian or a persistent errorist. Wouldn’t it be uncharitable of us automatically to assume that all members of other church bodies are persistent errorists— particularly when their actions reveal they are willing, even eager, to learn more about what we believe? Evangelical practice requires us to consider other factors besides the denominational membership of such people. Assuming that such students are weak Christians, not persistent errorists, we follow the practical implications expressed in the Essay on Fellowship: “Weakness of faith is not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an encouragement for practicing church fellowship more vigorously to help one another overcome our weakness of faith. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak.”

Compared to our fathers a half century ago and more, it seems to me that we may be more inclined today to place a greater emphasis on the separation principle of our church fellowship teaching and practice, and a correspondingly lesser emphasis on the weak Christian principle. Also, we seem more inclined today to regard a person’s denominational membership as the most important— perhaps even the only— criterion for what he or she believes and for whether we may regard him or her as a persistent errorist or a weak Christian. To look beyond denominational membership, and to try to ascertain the spiritual state of the individual member of another church body— once considered an
evidence of evangelical practice—seems today to be more routinely denounced as selective fellowship.

All this occurs at a time in which we are experiencing a significant decline in denominational understanding and commitment. More than three decades Peter Berger noted that “religious ex-monopolies,” as he called them, “can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client population. Allegiance is voluntary and thus, by definition, less than certain.”22 Harold Coward goes farther, calling the majority of people today “illiterate of their own religion as well as the religion of others.”23 Julia Mitchell Corbett even calls ours “a postdenominational religious culture.” Distinctions between various Protestant and Catholic Christians “are not as central to religion in the United States as they were in earlier decades.”24

The same phenomenon occurs on college campuses, including those with denominational religious affiliations. James Burtchaell’s 1998 book The Dying of the Light documented the widespread loss of religious identity in America’s Christian colleges and universities since the 1960s. Reporting on faculty members’ dwindling sense of religious commitment as well as students’ diminishing respect for religious authority and alarming lack of knowledge about their faith, Burtchaell issued a wake-up to those interested in the future of Christian higher education.25

Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, in their study Religion on Campus,26 reported on four unidentified colleges and universities. One, a large state university, and the only strictly secular school in the study, had only about 10 percent of its student body involved in organized religious activity on campus. More indicative is what type of religious activity in which those students were involved. Many religious organizations have submitted to student demands that they cut back on formal worship in favor of support groups, retreats, and community service events. At times it became difficult to detect any distinctive religiosity in these activities at all. At the other three colleges, all religiously affiliated, the authors noted that spirituality, rather than participation in organized religious activity, comprised the major theological presence on campus. While students at several schools attend church in varying degrees, many talk about their “personal relationship with God” as something largely separate from their religious community and particular denomination.

Efforts to teach religion in the classroom became “even more muddled. In some instances, it is permissible to teach about all religions as long as none is presented as superior.” At the Catholic school there were numerous non-Catholics among the faculty, representing “a wide spectrum of religious belief.” Two-thirds of students taking classes in the theology department reported that “their professor did not advocate any religious perspective.” While professors teaching Christianity feared they would be considered too biased in their presentation, professors of other religions (usually hired to instill diversity within the student body) have no such qualms about proclaiming the truth of their religions.

In such a religious environment in congregations and on campus, is it reasonable to assume that denominational membership can still be considered a reliable barometer of the content and depth of people’s spiritual sensitivities? I recall the comment of a veteran pastor more than two decades ago, upon hearing of the confusion that existed among the clergy of various Protestant and Catholic denominations in a local community. “I had no idea things were so complicated for you young guys,” he said. “Nobody teaches what they used to teach anymore. I just pray that the Lord give these false prophets a generous measure of His Holy Spirit so that they teach their false doctrine correctly.”27 That’s one way to look at it. Another might be to regard this age of declining denominational loyalty
Different World

as an unprecedented opportunity to share what we believe and to embrace others in lives of integrity and service.

The challenges of an increasingly diverse world

One profound difference in the world our sons and daughters will live in (and live in already) is the influence of postmodernism, which is characterized by “an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge” and “a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles.”

According to Barna, adults among the Generation X group reject—by a staggering 78 percent—the very existence of absolute truth. This has resulted in what Eugene Peterson refers to as being “unwell in a new way.” There was a time when ideas and living styles were initiated in the adult world and filtered down to the youth, Peterson observed. Now, movement has been reversed: lifestyles are generated by the young and pushed upward. Clothing fashions, hair styles, musical tastes, and moral attitudes adopted by young people are zealously exported to the adult world—and the adult world is only too eager to be converted.

Further, postmodernism has abandoned the expectation of inevitable progress. “Postmoderns have not sustained the optimism that characterized previous generations,” evidencing instead “a gnawing pessimism.” Modernism attempted to bring structure and predictability to human existence, to arrange society so that certainty, orderliness, and homogeneity became expected. But because modernism appears to have failed to deliver, postmodernism brings with it an existential insecurity. It has privatized our fears, leaving each individual to a “do-it-yourself” escape. The social world becomes for the individual “merely a pool of choices.”

Another difference in our world is increasing multiculturalism and universalism. John Hick, in Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion, described his personal pilgrimage from what he called “Christian exclusivism” to full-blown religious pluralism. Hick became a Christian during his first year at law school, supported by Christian friends who were “more or less fundamentalist in their beliefs.” At first he found this conservative form of the faith “awesomely demanding and irresistibly attractive,” and for almost two decades he remained “fully convinced of the truth of the basic doctrines of Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement” as he had originally learned them. All that time he had “virtually no contact with other religious traditions—neither Judaism and Islam, nor the faiths of Indian and Chinese origin.”

By the late 1960s, however, Hick began to encounter new Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities as well as a long-standing Jewish population in Birmingham, England. A frequent visitor in Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, Sikh gurudwaras, and Hindu temples, Hick came to conclude that although the vocabulary and rituals varied from one faith to another, “from a religious point of view basically the same thing [was] going on, namely, human beings [were] coming together within the framework of an ancient and highly developed tradition to open their hearts and minds to God.” Whether Adonai of the Hebrews, or Allah rahman rahim the merciful God of the mosques, or wáh gurur the Sikh Father, Lover, Master, and Great Giver, or Hinduism’s Vishnu, Krishna, Rama, Shiva, “all agree,” Hick came to believe, “that there is ultimately only one God” who was simply being encountered in different ways within varying traditions.

It was not so much new thought as new experiences that drew him to religious pluralism. Many Christians who have had contact with other world beliefs have arrived at what Hick calls the same “implicit belief.” They operated “on the unstated assumption that these other faiths are
independently valid and authentic religions”; no attempt is made by these Christians to convert newcomers “and apparently [they have] no sense that this would have been a religiously appropriate thing to do.” Yet in church on Sundays they continue to join in worship, singing hymns and hearing sermons that express the traditional Christian conviction that no one comes to the Father except through Christ Jesus (John 14:6) and that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

In time, however, Hick found this alternative unsatisfying as well. He has now moved to “a pluralism which sees the other great world faiths as authentic and valid contexts of salvation/liberation, not secretly dependent upon the cross of Christ.” Each religious tradition has its own scriptures, traditions, and practices. “Muslims, Hindus, and the rest are not anonymous Christians, nor are Christians anonymous Muslims.” In order to adopt this view, Hick concluded that the accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus cannot be read as historical occurrence but must be reduced to “a metaphorical rather than a literal idea.” While these Christian themes may contain great value, they must be understood as figurative rather than literal presentations of a type of “truth.” Although Hick and others like him may have maintained saving faith for themselves—“I have myself been formed by the Christian vision of God as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus as reflected in the Gospels,” he insists, “and continue to be most at home in this”—yet by reducing the work of Jesus to one mythological version of the big story, Hick has undermined the objective reality of the Christian good news.

Hick’s narrative is startling in its honesty, and instructive for the realistic picture it offers of the inevitable outcomes of such thinking. Many others are saying similar things. Aurelio Arreaza, in a recent article in Innerself, wrote that “for our own good and regardless of circumstances, we must develop a private and personal relationship with the harmonizing being or force we call God. Thereafter, we can enjoy the benefits and rituals of one or more religions, accepting what sincerely feels right and rejecting what does not.”

Some predict that in the not so distant future “people will recognize only one universal religion.” While assuming many different forms, “the same mystical faith (i.e., the Truth) will underlie each grouping,” regardless the label it chooses.

Hick’s comment, that he shared “the common ecclesiastical assumption that the whole human race ought to be converted to Christianity” as long as he experienced “virtually no contact with other religious traditions,” and that his journey toward inclusivism and then pluralism began when he found himself in “active comradeship” with adherents of other world faiths, might lead us to conclude, “Build the walls higher.” Historically, the Wisconsin Synod has developed and maintained its doctrinal distinctiveness by remaining separated from its surroundings, accomplished first through exclusive use of an immigrant language, maintenance of parochial schools, and resistance to secular forms of higher education. As those barriers have fallen, we may hope to spare our children from increasing multicultural and postmodern fascination by quarantining them from the world.

That approach, however, is both impossible and impractical. Probably all of us here have heard and many have told the old story about how government treasury workers spot counterfeit currency. They are trained, the story goes, not by looking at counterfeit money but by intensely studying real money. The obvious implication—though often spelled out as well—is that we best prepare people for a world infested with false theologies, not by helping them become better acquainted with those false theologies, but by indoctrinating them so thoroughly in the truth that they will never be fooled by anything false. Is this story accurate even on its surface? Does anybody know if this is really how treasury agents are trained? Its application seems even more doubtful. Just as St. Paul was familiar
with the false theologies challenging his new churches— both Greek and Hebrew in their origin—and just as early Christians were compelled to understand Marcionism, Arianism, and others in order to refute them, we must become more familiar with competing faiths and philosophies.

As dangerous as it is to be ignorant of them entirely, it is just as harmful to belittle or misrepresent them. The Western mind may never “get” Eastern religious thought, but it would be dangerous for us to dismiss Hindu and Buddhist thinking with flippant remarks such as, “How can anyone believe something so foolish?” (Have we forgotten how foolish the cross is to human reason?) There are attractive elements in world faiths. The Buddhist insight that all sufferings in life arise from unfulfilled cravings, and its advice to remove such cravings by adopting a simpler lifestyle, may strike many young people as a healthy alternative to the seemingly relentless materialism of the West, including western Christianity. The sensitivities of Naive Americans for the beauty and sacredness of the land may sound more spiritual and less doctrinaire then the often mean-spirited debate of Christians over minute points of their “God talk.” And after three centuries littered with episodes of white racism and oppression against people of color, can we appreciate why young African-American men in particular come to reject Christianity as a “weak” religion that condoned white slave holders to own their black ancestors, and why they view Islam as a more genuinely universal faith?

C. S. Lewis said somewhere (in Mere Christianity, I think) that one of the first things he had to get over when he became a Christian was the idea that other religions were “all wrong.” Given the natural knowledge of God and the law written on people’s hearts, should we be surprised to find elements of truth in other faiths? Were some mythologies of other cultures— the desire for a return to a primeval golden age, or stories of the annual death and resurrection of a god— hints God left in other cultures of His great future redemption in Jesus? Tacitus, Suetonius, Cicero, Virgil, Aeschylus, and “The Annals of the Celestial Empire” of China all contain predictions of a great ruler to come one day from the Jews. Paul was being complimentary— at least to a degree— when he told the Athenians, “I see that in every way you are very religious,” and we may have yet to fathom everything he meant when he said about their ancestors (and ours), “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:22, 31).

Diana Eck of Harvard has said, “If you know [only] one religion, you don’t know any.” As we learn about other religions, we will inevitably come to a better understanding of our own. Others also call their god “merciful,” “compassionate,” “loving,” but I can find nowhere in any other world faith anything comparable to the Christian concept of grace. In Hinduism exists a rigid principle of cause-and-effect extending back through uncountable lifetimes to explain every event and circumstance in the universe; wrote Huston Smith, “The law of karma is never suspended.” Buddhist Bodhisattvas may indeed be believed to provide help for humans struggling with the problems of life” by postponing their own achievement of nirvana, but they do so through living exemplary lives in order to gain merit, and they can help others by sharing their merit so those others can attain merit of their own. Jains “reject the idea that a divine power from outside can help the soul,” but must gain ultimate release from the bondage of life’s desires through meditation and renunciation. Confucianism “has generally believed that the basic nature of humankind is good” and that the noble ideals of life are enforced by “no belief in divine rewards or punishments after death.” Islam announces mercy, love, and forgiveness, yet it “frowns on claims to certainty of salvation,” and Muslims concerned about the next life try “to send on ahead for [their] future existence such deeds as will merit the pleasure of [their] Lord.”
But we can never finally do battle with postmodernism and multiculturalism on a purely intellectual plane. “Nearly everyone working with a postmodern audience,” wrote Paul Kelm, “emphasizes the need to demonstrate the claims of Christ by genuine love and moral integrity, in small enough settings that people can ‘experience’ the truth of Christianity before they confront its truth claims cognitively.” Genuine Christian love creates an apologetic “not merely argued but felt, not merely heard but also seen.”

Stanley Grenz ends his Primer on Postmodernism with a chapter entitled, “The Gospel and the Postmodern Context.” In it he asserts that truth in the postmodern context is processed more relationally than rationally or propositionally. A Generation Xer who mirrors postmodernism will say, “Let me see it in your life before you tell it to me with your words.”

Which, it turns out, is pretty much what Paul wrote to Timothy: Watch your life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4:16). The order is no accident. We think: faith first, then works; justification leads to sanctification. But our lives are the first thing others see, and if they don’t like what they see, they will never stick around to listen to our truth. So too, writing to Titus, Paul urged young and older men and women—and particularly those trapped in slavery—to do good and to be good, so that no one will malign the word of God, and so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us, and so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive (Titus 2:1–10).

People don’t expect us to be perfect, but they can identify with us when they can see we are real. Our struggles may be sizable, but our certainty is far greater, lying outside ourselves and yet amazingly within us as we live in Christ. The saints are sinners who have been declared not guilty, but the saints are also sinners who keep on trying. “This life,” Luther said,

is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal, but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.

References

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15 The Lutheran Hymnal (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 13.


17 The Third Article; David P. Kuske, Luther’s Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English (Milwaukee: WELS Board for Parish Education, 1982), 5.

19 Koehler, "Gesetztlich Wesen," 247-48; emphases in the original.

20 Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (Milwaukee: WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations, reprint 1970), 16, 32, 42; emphases added.

21 Doctrinal Statements, 33; emphasis added.


26 Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, Religion on Campus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); see especially the authors’ conclusions, 275–95.

27 The veteran pastor’s comment was made in response to a paper by James A. Frey, “What the Reformed and Catholic Churches Teach Today Concerning the Lord’s Supper and Baptism,” (Southwestern Conference of the Michigan District, 15 September 1981).


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