

Religious Pluralism, On the Ground and in the Pulpit

The president of one of America's great flagship theological schools, Union Seminary, has put to paper and to the theological public a vision of Christian faith in a multi-religious world that he and Union have begun to articulate over the past several years. It is a vision that takes as its starting point the new context of theological thinking in the wide world of human religious life, and it is broad enough to put Union in a new position of leadership. The vision statement of the faculty calls for radical imagination --to imagine Christian theological studies in the midst of and engaged with a great global city where "the pluralism of faith communities is integral to theology itself."¹ In his article, Hough situates himself as responding to the "distortion of Christianity, resting on an exclusive claim by some Christians that theirs is the only 'true' religion."

One of the most important questions in our world today is how we understand and negotiate religious difference in a world in which all of us now live together in greater proximity than ever before. This is a civic question that people of all faiths face as citizens, especially in the multi-religious societies of a complex global world. But it not only a question of getting along peaceably and cooperatively in civil society. There is also a theological question here, and that is the one to which Hough devotes his energies. Theological questions interrogate our self-understanding, as we examine the claims and certainties of our faith in this new multi-faith context. Theological questions emerge from the soil of this new context and push us to think about our own faith, not as an isolated system of ideas, but in the give and take of our relationship to others.

Today more than ever it is crucial that we think and speak clearly about the relation of Christian faith to other faiths. Christian theology has always developed new vitality with each new challenge as Christian thinkers have wrestled with the expansion of scientific knowledge, the rise of the social sciences, and the ideological claims of nationalism. Today, one of the great challenges is that of religious diversity, about which all of us know exponentially more than we did one hundred, fifty, or even ten years ago. Our new awareness comes to us in a multitude of books, through newspapers, television, and electronic media, and above all in the marbling of the world's religious traditions in our own culture. Our multi-religious context will, indeed, help Christians toward a new theology, as our relations with people and communities of other faiths become a living reality in our lives. We need to move toward a new and more expansive theology, for we all have new responsibilities now --as theologians, as church leaders, as educators, and as participants in multi-religious societies throughout the world. To Hough's mind, the arrogance and ignorance of much publicly articulated Christian thinking does no good service to the Gospel.

Joseph Hough begins his essay where he must --as a liberal thinker schooled in the Protestant tradition of the Reformation, interpreting and wrestling with Calvin and Barth, and drawing inspiration from the radical

¹ "This Seminary, This City," Union Theological Seminary website, 2001.

monotheism of H. Richard Niebuhr. To work through and yet beyond that tradition is important for students of theology as we think about the legacy of Christian attitudes toward other religious traditions.

My own starting point is different. I begin theological reflection as a Christian scholar who is also a trained historian of religion. I begin in Christian communities like my own that are living and worshipping in multi-religious societies. Calvin, Barth, and Niebuhr had their own theological concerns, but among them was not the problem of religious pluralism. As they thought and wrote, this question was not on their minds. They did not think about Christian faith in a world in which the Vedas and Upanishads, the Qur'an and the Lotus Sutra, are understood by people of those tradition as revelatory. They were not thinking about the theological interpretations of Ramanuja, who tried to articulate the simultaneous supremacy and accessibility of God. Nor were these theologians thinking about the Buddhist philosopher Santideva who tried to articulate the awakening of consciousness in a way that had no God-referent at all. I do not blame my theological predecessors for the things they did not think about, but I do cast about in the world of theological thought today looking for Christian theologians who think and work dialogically, in intellectual relationship with those of other faiths.

There are, of course, some theological thinkers who work this dialogical terrain. I think of Catholic theologians such as Raimundo Panikkar, a pioneer in this work, and Paul Knitter, who has made clear that the theology of religions and liberation theology go hand in hand. There is Jacques Dupuis, who writes out of years of living and working in India, and among my generation there is Frank Clooney who brings his work as a Sanskrit scholar and Catholic theologian to the task of careful comparative theological conversations across religious boundaries. Among Protestants, I think of two fellow Methodists, Kenneth Cracknell, a British theologian who did pioneering work in interfaith relations in the U.K. and Wesley Ariarajah, a Sri Lankan theologian who makes new theological thinking accessible to "Bible-believing" Christians clearly and persuasively. And there are many others, including those former Claremont theologians Joseph Hough mentions explicitly --John Hick and John Cobb. Encouraged as we are to see the move into this dialogical terrain, still we must ask to what extent these theologians are studied as part of an essential theological curriculum today? And to what extent are their voices heard and interpreted in the public theological venues of our churches?

Today, it is our responsibility to amplify these voices and to bring this range of new theological thinking into our seminaries and churches. Most people understand at some level that the one we call "God" is not captive to "our religion." We sing in our hymns that the love of God is beyond the measure of our minds. We pray in our prayers that God is the one "in whom we live and move and have our being." And yet, sometimes Christians are in danger of thinking that we are the only ones who have thought about God and the questions our God-language raises. It is the challenging vocation of theologians is to think systematically and deeply about the ways in which we use our God-language and to articulate the faith of the community in the living context of

each new age. Those of us who are Christians today have questions that Calvin and Barth did not even raise, let alone answer. To think coherently about a Christian understanding of God in our time means looking beyond our own religious tradition to the many ways in which equally thoughtful and intellectually rigorous people of faith in other traditions have addressed it. Then we will, perhaps, see how much we share and what is distinctive in our own faith.

My own thinking about Christian approaches to religious pluralism takes a very practical starting point, shared increasingly by pastors, priests, and theological educators. We visit our Hindu colleagues in their new temple in the suburbs. We accept the invitation of our Muslim neighbors to break the fast with them in Ramadan. We talk to our students and friends whose experience with a Buddhist meditation teacher has grounded them in a way they have not ever experienced in church. We witness the forgiveness and generosity of Sikh or Vietnamese Buddhist neighbors in the face of assault or arson attacks. Our very engagement with people of other faiths in our communities becomes foundational for our theological reflection. The Gospel, at least in my reading, is not in the first instance about ideas. It is about relationships that transcend the boundaries of tradition, ethnicity, and social standing. It is even about transgressing the boundaries, restrictions, and legalistic constructs of one's own tradition, just as Jesus did, to reach out to strangers and outsiders.

Theological education today has new opportunities and responsibilities for engaging with people of other faiths as an integral part of the theological curriculum. Students and faculty alike can make a point of cultivating new relationships, becoming immediately and experientially aware of other faiths in the communities in which we teach and study. And it certainly goes without saying that the context of ministry in today's world has changed radically with the marbling of religious life in American society today. Now, more than ever, we need an educated ministry able to lead us into relationships with neighbors we do not know and about whom we may have partial and stereotypical views. Clergy are on the frontlines of public education. Sunday after Sunday they are in the pulpit speaking to the concerns of the world and of the community. Are we preparing them sufficiently for this important role?

I would like to pose four questions, think of them as sermon titles, that I would like theological students to be able to address. They are questions that may not have definitive answers, but require clear thinking. And they require coherent public discussion in the very forums in which pastors, priests, theologians, and educators speak. We cannot evade such questions by taking refuge in the vagaries of theological method, though unquestionably theological methodologies will inform how we respond to them. They are questions that arise out of the very heart of our culture, questions on the minds of people in our churches, and even moreso on the minds of people who are not in our churches. They are blunt and demanding questions. They require biblically grounded theological response. If I were setting a course for theological preaching, I would start with these four sermon titles based on the case-studies of our world and ask

each new theologian to wrestle with them and think through how he or she would address them in public preaching.

1. Where was God on September 11?

We could, of course, mistake this for what is, by now, a clichéd question, but it thundered down upon us like the crashing towers of the World Trade Center. Every theological student should be prepared to articulate what he or she would have said to a congregation in the pulpit on Sunday September 16, 2001. "Where was God on September 11?" was the question in the streets and on the lips of people who never think about "theology." It is a deeply theological question, rough-cut as it is. People of every faith and none lost their lives. People of every faith took refuge in their faith, or questioned their faith, or even lost their faith. The God-question was instinctively relevant.

How do we think about the one we call God in the midst of a catastrophe of this magnitude? God language was profusely invoked in the days following September 11. Very likely "God," spoken in many languages, was on the lips of those who died --Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu. And very likely "God" was also on the lips of those piloting the planes. God was invoked in the prayers of those who stood in shock, who watched, and who grieved. People's questions about God came to the surface in blunt and bewildering ways. Do we blame God? Do we say that God grieves too and suffers in the midst of this history? Do we give thanks to God that we or our loved ones escaped? Do we say this is God's will? Or God's punishment? What understanding of God is evoked when we say these things?

The responses we heard from Christian pulpits and publications in the weeks following September 11 covered a wide range of theological thinking. There was Bishop T.D. Jakes in Dallas, for example, who assured his congregation that "we will grab the horns of the altar and fight, because God's grace will give us the victory." There was a touch of the crusader in his cry that "God is gathering America together!"² We also remember the astonishing claim of the Reverend Jerry Falwell on Pat Robertson's 700 Club that God had lifted his veil of protection because America was tolerating abortionists, homosexuals, and pagans. What are the implications of their thinking? Were they thinking that God a god who cares especially for America? Who uses this occasion to bring us together? Or to punish us? Should theological opinions of the sort Falwell uttered be simply ignored, left to stand without challenge? Or should they be publicly disputed? How representative of Christianity do bellicose or retributionist theological views come be in the minds of those of other faiths if they are not challenged by other Christians?

The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who was at Trinity Wall Street near the World Trade Center at the time the planes struck, was asked the God-question on the dust-covered streets of New York the day after the tragedy. "What do you say?" he wrote in his short meditation, *Writing in the Dust*,

² Bishop T.D. Jakes, "Awake from your Slumber," in Beliefnet, ed., *From the Ashes: A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America*, New York: Rodale Inc., 2001, pp. 1-8.

"The usual fumbling about how God doesn't intervene, which sounds like a lame excuse for some kind of 'policy' on God's part, a policy exposed as heartless in the face of suffering? Something about how God is there in the sacrificial work of the rescuers, in the risks they take?"³ But no, our theological principles are tested in the complexities of history. As he puts it, "God always has to be rediscovered. Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren't yet words. . ."⁴

Theological thinking is one of the hardest of public vocations. It requires the pastoral skill of listening deeply to what others have to say, including Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and whole-hearted secularists. In Chinese Buddhist temples prayers were lifted for everyone in the name of Amida Buddha.

Great and compassionate Buddha!
For the many that lost their lives,
And for the many that were injured.
Buddha, we pray for you to please bless them.

In Islamic centers and Hindu temples people gathered for prayer on behalf of all who died, just as they did in churches and synagogues, in Union Square Park and at the makeshift shrines of a thousand doorways. Theological thinking requires understanding the new dimensions of our questions, even as we grope for answers.

For those of us who are Christian, theological thinking requires that we reach deep into to the heart of our own tradition. Can we bear witness to God's presence even in the midst of rubble and death? Can we reach for connection with neighbors and with strangers, even in the midst of violence and fear? Can we discern what loving our enemies means, not only when we are strong and confident, but when we are hurt and angry? Can we plumb the very depths of the twisted steel cross standing at Ground Zero and courageously explore how deeply humanity and divinity are united, and how deeply we are yet estranged?

2. Is Allah God?

In the months following September 11, there was a spate of public pronouncements about God and Allah, especially among exclusivist Christians. The television ministry of Pastor John Hagee carried an apocalyptic series called "Allah and America," featuring our own warrior God, girded for battle with Islam. A prominent cabinet officer and member of the Assemblies of God church said to a conservative radio commentator that "Islam is a religion where you send your son to die for God, but Christianity is a faith where God sends his son to die for you."⁵ The Reverend Franklin Graham insisted that Muslims worship a "different God than Christians." Allah, he said, is not God. He later said, however, that he had no time to study Islam, busy as he is with the work of his

³ Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, p. 7.

⁴ Williams, p. 8.

⁵ See the website of the Arab American Institute: <http://www.aaiusa.org/pr/release02-08-02.htm>; Also articles in *St. Louis Today*, February 12, 2002 and the *Washington Post*, February 20, 2002.

own ministry. In an interview with Kim Lawton of the *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, Graham said, "Many people after 9/11 said that 'The Muslims, they worship the same god we do, they just have their way to God. Christians have their way to God. But it's the same God.' No, it's not. Now they recognize Jesus, but they don't recognize his deity. They've even taken excerpts out of the Old Testament and New Testament, and thrown it into the Qur'an, to sprinkle a few Bible verses throughout to give it validity. But the Qur'an is not the word of God. The Holy Bible is God's word."⁶ Taking a page from this theology, the Rev. Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, insisted in the summer of 2002 that "Allah is not Jehovah." But just who is Allah, then? Not God at all? A different God? Are we working here with an implied polytheism? Or with competitive monotheisms? Is it impossible for "their God" to be "our God" because "our God" includes Jesus and theirs does not?

There are many things Christians should find not only disturbing, but perhaps blasphemous, in the theological views propounded by conservative extremists. Many liberal theologians might insist these views do not deserve a response, so literalist and positivist are they in their use of God language. But, alas, the voices of America's most tribal Christian pastors are heard around the world by our Muslim neighbors and the voices of a more liberal Christian response are not heard at all. It is not enough to ignore the theological cudgels of the Christian right. So, to our theological students I say, "How would you address the question, 'Is Allah God?'" What would you need to know to respond to their characterization of the faith of Islam? Where would you turn in our Christian biblical and theological heritage to think about this question? Who would you read or talk to in the Muslim community to try out your own views? And, by the way, once you have explored our "Abrahamic" traditions, is Krishna god?

3. Can we Pray Together?

Many of the large, public memorial services held in the weeks following September 11 were interfaith services and none attracted as much national attention as the service in New York's Yankee Stadium for the families of September 11 victims. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu representatives offered prayers from their respective traditions. Many people, including those in the national television audience, were clearly moved by the event, as was a participating Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, the Reverend David Benke. As he looked out on 20,000 people holding the pictures of their lost loved ones, he referred to everyone there as "sisters and brothers." He said simply that "God is love," and asked each person there to take the hand of a neighbor and "join me in prayer on this field of dreams turned into God's house of prayer."⁷

⁶ "Franklin Graham on Islam," Interview with Kim Lawton, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week549/news.html#top>

⁷ <http://www.ad-lcms.org/Assets/News&Events/DrBenke/Response.htm>

Reverend Benke closed his prayer in the name of Jesus, which no doubt made some non-Christian participants uncomfortable, but from them there was no protest. The protest came, rather, from his own church. They charged him with "an offense both to God and to all Christians." The church suspended Benke, the leader of its Atlantic district, for participating in the service and demanded that he apologize "to the Lord and to all Christians" for praying on the same platform with "pagans." The event wrongly signaled, they said, that "all religions pray to the same God." Equally offensive, however, was "to give the impression that there might be more than one God."⁸ The only satisfactory conclusion seemed to be that there is only one God, and that God is ours, as we, a single denomination, have understood God. No one seemed to wonder if the one they call "God" just might be elusive of such captivity and expansive enough to receive the prayers of all people.

Perhaps this is just another case of extremism. After all, the Missouri Synod is a small Lutheran denomination, well known for its theological conservatism. Even praying on the same platform with Methodists and Catholics would be rejected as "unionism," and to join in a service with people of other faiths was outright "syncretism." But the charges and Benke's response to them make interesting reading as we think in pastoral and theological terms about the question of interfaith worship. In his long written response, Benke felt he even had to defend himself against the charge that, as he prayed, he addressed everyone present as "brothers and sisters." He wrote in his own defense, "Brothers and sisters is not a term uniquely owned by the Christian church. In point of fact all human beings are children of Adam. We have a common human ancestry that makes us all brothers and sisters. . . NOT to make the primary human connections at a time of civic, national, and global tragedy would be a great pastoral error. In the same way, NOT to invite all to understand the love of God anew as a Tower of strength during a time of crisis by failure to participate would have been a tremendous error of pastoral judgement."⁹

So, can we pray together? If so, how do we pray together? Can we pray authentically, and invite those of other faiths to participate in our prayer? Can we pray authentically even when Hindus, Muslims, or Native Peoples are lifting their voices in prayer? Do we listen in, so to speak, on the prayers of our neighbors? Or do we pray along with them? What is authentic prayer anyway? These questions are not merely theoretical. They are theological questions that

⁸ <http://www.ad-lcms.org/Assets/News&Events/DrBenke/BenkeSuspension.htm>
The text of the indictment reads, in part: "Three allegations against Pastor Benke deal with his alleged violation of the First Commandment. By President Benke's joining with other pagan clerics in an interfaith service (no matter what the intent might have been), a crystal clear signal was given to others at the event and to thousands more watching by C-Span. The signal was: While there may be differences as to how people worship or pray, in the end, all religions pray to the same God. . . . To participate with pagans in an interfaith service and, additionally, to give the impression that there might be more than one God, is an extremely serious offense against the God of the Bible. . . . In discussing this same allegation of violating the Second Commandment, Pastor Baseley writes that Pastor Benke's "acts could not have been of the Spirit because they were a sin against the Second Commandment. Instead of keeping God's name sacred and separate from every other name, it was made common as it was dragged to the level of Allah."

⁹ <http://www.ad-lcms.org/Assets/News&Events/DrBenke/Response.htm>

come up "on the ground" in communities across the country and around the world. In the U.S., for example, we might plan or participate in an interfaith service on Martin Luther King Day or Thanksgiving Day. This is a great theological practicum. What do we do, and how do we understand what we are doing? No where do we more deeply interrogate our theological self-understanding than in interfaith prayer. So, what do you think? Can we pray together?

4. Who is My Neighbor?

Let's say you were a pastor in Columbus, Ohio when, on December 30, 2001, the Islamic Center in central Columbus was vandalized. As Muslims arrived at Ohio's oldest mosque on E. Broad Street for their prayers that morning, they found a mess, with "water pouring from the ceiling, light fixtures hanging precariously from the walls, and copies of the Qur'an scattered throughout the building."¹⁰ What would have been your immediate response? Whom do you call? What do you do? What will you say to your own congregation that next Sunday? And when you are asked to speak at an interfaith gathering held outside the vandalized mosque, what will you say to them?

Columbus has changed markedly in the past decade. A new Bharatiya Hindu temple was recently dedicated in the suburb of Powell. The Jain community offered an invocation and prayer for peace in the Ohio state legislature shortly after 9/11. There are new Christian neighbors as well -- Vietnamese Catholic, Chinese Christian, and Hispanic Pentecostal congregations. And there are several Muslim communities whose issues have come to the public eye from time to time. For example, two years ago, Muslim employees at the Columbus area Value City Department Stores petitioned for time off to perform their daily Friday prayers. In the Ramadan season following 9/11, the mayor of Columbus and the superintendent of schools attended, for the first time, an *iftar* fast-breaking meal at the end of one of the days of Ramadan fasting. Columbus, like many American cities, is also beginning to address new questions of interfaith relations. The Interfaith Association of Central Ohio has been in business since 1985 when the city came briefly to world attention as the site of the first summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. Today, Tarunjit Singh, a Sikh leader of the Association, says "What September 11 did was to bring this grass-roots interfaith movement to the attention of the community at large."¹¹

There is no context of ministry in the United States where hate-crimes will not tear at the fabric of civic life and threaten to erode fragile relationships of trust and care. In Columbus, hate crimes that seemed to express religious bias more than quadrupled in the year after September 11. The police department attributed it to 9/11. "It caused a lot of dislike toward the Islamic community. We saw a lot of property damage and a lot of threatening situations."¹² Across the

¹⁰ "Islamic Center Ransacked," *The Columbus Dispatch*, December 31, 2001.

¹¹ "After Attacks, Dialogue Grew Among Faiths," *The Columbus Dispatch*, September 6, 2002.

¹² "Columbus Hate Crimes Increased After 9/11," *The Columbus Dispatch*, December 9, 2002.

country there was seemingly a bolder climate for the unfettered expression of bias. As American security systems went into overdrive, Muslims and Sikhs in Columbus and elsewhere felt more and more insecure. Racial and religious profiling went hand in hand with wide-ranging detentions, searches of homes and businesses, and arrests. How do you as a Christian religious leader speak about the neighbor and the stranger in this context of fear and even paranoia?

It is heartening that in Columbus, the record of response to the December hate crime was immediate and sustained. By January 1, 2002, the First Congregational Church and Congregation Tefireth Israel had offered space for Muslim worship and for the full-time Islamic school that had been housed in the mosque. By January 4, there was a large interfaith gathering around the Islamic Center. The mayor and the Rotary Club were vocal in their support. Christians, Jews, and Sikhs came forward, and Muslims were encouraged by a well-attended interfaith rally. The local paper reported, "Ahmad Khair of the East Side attends another mosque, the Muslim Community Center on Oak Street. He took his 10-year-old son, Dave, to the rally to view the desecration of holy objects and to witness the support of Christians, Jews and Muslims. 'People who try to perpetrate hate bring people of different backgrounds together,' Khair said." ¹³ It did seem to bring people together, as Tarunjit Singh put it, and during 2002, Muslims, Jews, and Christians launched a project to build a Habitat for Humanity house as a way of learning about one another more deeply and experientially.

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It is certainly is time, now, for Christian theologians in the academy and in the pulpit to address in pioneering ways the intellectual and spiritual realities of a world of many faiths. It is time to remove the blinders that have constricted our vision and to stop imagining that we, as Christians, are alone in the universe of faith and in the world of theological reflection. It is time to stop imagining that God observes the boundaries we set and to think afresh about what Christian faith and commitment really means in a world of many faiths. And, of course, it is time to stop bemoaning the dwindling of the so-called Protestant mainline churches and ask whether this is because of the bankruptcy of liberal theological thought or because liberals have been all too timid the face of these new challenges. Everywhere Christians are yearning for the bold new leadership that will be necessary for peace-making and bridge-building in a deeply divided world.

More than forty years ago, the Indian philosopher S. Radhakrishnan lamented, "In many theological institutes both in the East and in the West, students grow up in profound ignorance of other religions."¹⁴ In the decades since, not nearly enough has been done to remedy this situation. But it is a credit to Union that Joseph Hough has set forth to address it in his own context. After

¹³ "Worshippers of Several Faiths Protest Attack," *The Columbus Dispatch*, January 5, 2002.

¹⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, *Fellowship of the Spirit*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961, p.1. The published lecture was given in Sanders Theater at the inauguration of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University.

all, his immediate neighbors, Barnard College and Columbia University have between them some of the finest scholars of religion in the country. Serious study of and dialogue with the world of many faiths is, as Hough puts it, "not a threat to a vital faith in Jesus Christ. It is rather testimony to the enormous creativity of the one God who is made known to us Christians in Jesus Christ as the God who lives and acts in total freedom." Radhakrishnan, a devout Hindu, presumed as much. "It is the task of great universities," he wrote, "to push forward the frontiers of freedom not only in outer space, but in the human soul." On these frontiers of freedom, we will find the space for Christian theological renewal.

