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Conciliar Theology: A Report

Thomas A. Langford

(This is a recounting of the theological discussion in the Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission at The United Methodist General Conference, April 26-May 6, 1988. The report hopes to inaugurate the committee's desire that ongoing theological discussion in The United Methodist Church might be stimulated.)

The Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission was constituted to engage in theology. It had received the report of the Study Committee on Our Theological Task which was proposed for inclusion in the Discipline. A study report is to the General Conference as a Presidential study commission (for instance on the stock market) is to Congress. Once the report is completed it is turned over to and becomes the property of the General Conference. The conference may do with the report what it will.

General Conference holds the teaching office in United Methodism. It is the final authority and officially speaks for the church. The procedure of General Conference is to refer all petitions to a legislative committee which then brings a report to the entire conference for final action.

The Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission had 90 members. These people understood themselves to be engaged in theology activity as a church and for the church. They were challenged to model how The United Methodist Church actually does its theological work. They were reminded that this was

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a new legislative committee and, therefore, they were part of a new venture; they were commissioned to seek truth and serve the church; the spirit and quality of their work would leave its mark.

The gathered committee came with diverse opinions--some with publicly expressed support for or opposition to the proposed statement. The statement already in the Discipline was approved in 1972. The fruit of the union of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren churches, it was produced by a distinguished team headed by Albert C. Outler. The statement possesses literary style, helpfully interprets the denomination's theological history, is characterized by theological openness, and perhaps made its most lasting contribution by developing the Wesleyan quadrilateral, that is, the interaction of scripture, tradition, experience and reason in theological construction and exploration. (This quadrilateral is Outler's systematization of Wesley's theological sources. It is not found, as such, in Wesley, but it is true to Wesley's interest and intention.) This quadrilateral has become a pervasive and identifying character of United Methodist theology. No one on the committee questioned its importance; the chief issues of the discussion were the balances and modes of interaction in interpreting the quadrilateral.

The 1972 and 1988 Statements

Loyalty to the 1972 statement was strong especially among those who found it to be a proclamation of freedom in theological work. The document uses the word "pluralism" in describing United Methodist theology and many people have found this an endorsement of creative theological activity.

Enthusiasm for the proposed 1988 statement was also evident. The resetting of the role of scripture in the quadrilateral was its chief attractiveness. This new approach was especially clear in the fourth section on "Our Theological Task." It was here that the crux of the debate would center.

A large number of committee members came to the conference convinced that alterations would have to be made in either document if it was to be acceptable for the Discipline.
Their loyalty was more to crucial issues than to either statement.

The 1972 and 1988 statements may be understood as two autobiographical accounts of the same community. To recount one’s life at two points in time inevitably reveals continuities but also different evaluations of one’s experience; so, for instance, one may reevaluate childhood influences, formative friendships or decisive events. This was an underlying, if not fully conscious, frame of reference for the committee’s discussion.

A strong aspect of committee work—and perhaps a chief contribution to its success—was openness and freedom in the exchange of ideas. Everyone could speak to any issue and a high percent of committee members did participate by discussion. Everyone voted on proposed changes. Consistency of position was balanced by respect for other opinions. When votes were taken there was a sense of clarity about options and decisions were accepted as representative of the body’s best judgment. Differences remained and strong argument continued, but steps, as taken, were accepted as foundations for the next step.

Beginning

The first meeting revealed sharp divisions and tension. Members broke into small groups and then were asked individually to list on paper the issues they thought were paramount and which needed to be discussed. These suggestions were to be used to organize the discussion on the next day. The notes came in with exclamation points and polarized declarations. The chief issues were, pro and con, "pluralism" (over thirty references), "primacy of Scripture" (over twenty references), and "Wesley’s Sermons and Notes on the New Testament" as doctrinal standards. Subordinate concerns were "ecumenicity," "denominational identity," and "trinitarian language" (one reference). Positions seemed sharply drawn and held with determination.

Initial discussions bore out the indications. The first shots across the bow were statements of position. "Pluralism" and
"primacy of Scripture" were two sides of the same coin. For some, slogans became theology. For most, the issues would have to be discussed in the context of a written statement with careful attention given to specific language.

An important juncture was reached when the 1988 document was accepted as the statement the committee would refine and perfect.

It was decided to work on the document paragraph by paragraph. After the initial effort, one member favorably commented, "we are working with a Woody Hayes model: three yards and a cloud of dust." Slow, cautious, short, tentative steps were taken. For many, an underlying suspicion remained—would this procedure, in the last analysis, lead to an acceptable statement?

**Section 1: Our Doctrinal Heritage**

The arrangement of the materials in the document proved helpful. Differences were initially engaged over historical material where resolution was easier because of more objective points of reference. Discussion of Section 1 revealed basic consensus. The most critical issue was the reinsertion, after the reference to the Triune God, of the names, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," (as in the 1972 document). After discussion, it was agreed by a majority of 41 to 39 votes that it is as important to say who God is as to speak of what God does, that is, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Both ways of speaking (of God's person and of God's activity) were retained. Also of importance, a level and spirit of discussion was being established as arguments with theological and rational integrity were presented in a context of mutual respect.

"Pull off a few covers and United Methodists share a great deal in common." This awareness became increasingly clear as the group persistently worked through the sections on "Our Common Heritage as Christians," "Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists," and "Doctrine and Discipline in the Christian Life." The recognition of common roots, shared primary emphases in regard to theological affirmation and ethical mission created the foundation for further corporate agreement.
The document itself is structured in a way that allows for convergence among the diversity present in the committee.


**Section 2: Our Doctrinal History**

Some members expressed uneasiness: would there be attempts to distort our history by reinterpretation or special interest? Discussion of Section 2 drew some issues to sharper focus. In the first paragraph the issue was faced: "What did Wesley intend to include in his sermon on 'Catholic Spirit?'"

The statement said that it allowed "Christians to disagree on matters such as forms of worship, structures of church government, or modes of baptism." How about theological differences? Was theological diversity included in generous Christian acceptance of fellow believers? After debate—and with some fusion of Wesley's perspective with contemporary Methodists'—the committee included the words "theological explorations" in the list. With these two words, accepted by a close stand-up count vote, an important point was established. Subsequent decisions were now, in principle, being formed.

Immediately following, a moment of fundamental historical self-understanding came to the fore. In the section, "Doctrinal Standards in American Methodism," the question was whether Wesley's *Standard Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* were to stand alongside the Articles of Religion and the EUB Confession of Faith. The proposed document did not say so. Pre-General Conference debate had been intense. Richard P. Heitzenrater, a principle author of the 1988 statement had, on investigation of the 1808 General Conference, come to the conclusion that only the Articles of Religion have legal sanction as doctrinal standards. Thomas C. Oden and Robert E. Cushman argued against this conclusion on the grounds that distinctive Wesleyan teaching, the actual practice
of the Methodist tradition and the plan of Union in 1968 made their equal status imperative. Sharp public debate, representing historical and theological argumentation, resulted. Before General Conference, Heitzenrater and Oden agreed to a paragraph which brought the interests together. This was accepted. The committee firmly sided with the inclusion of these two "standards" by deleting the contrary part of the relevant paragraph and inserting a paragraph to state clearly the status of the Sermons and Notes and then added these to the outline in "Section 3--Our Doctrinal Standards and General Rules."

(A major procedural matter must be noted. Two of the chief writers of the 1988 document were present as observers, Richard P. Heitzenrater and Thomas W. Ogletree. The committee, in an exceptional expression of good will and collegiality, invited both to participate in the discussion in order to interpret the document and help to keep coherence of subject and style in the refined statement. Both men participated in a helpful, non-defensive manner. They and the committee deserve commendation for the way they worked together. The committee understood it was responsible for decisions about the statement but it wanted to make informed decisions. The two consultants kept issues of larger context and specific reference before the committee and even made suggestions about the wording of changed passages.)

It should also be noted that a change was made in Section 3 from "Foundational Documents" to "Standards of Doctrine." This represented a difference which strengthened the core of United Methodist theological identity.

Clarifying and making-firm the doctrinal standards was seen by many as a major strength of the new statement.

Section 4: Our Theological Task

The most controversial part of the document was now faced. All of the issues converged in Section 4. Had the preparation of working through the first three sections provided enough common ground to make agreement possible on this final part? We entered the discussion without certainty. With the controver-
sial issues directly before us, could agreement be found? Could there be acceptable unity within our obvious diversity?

The first sub-head, "The Nature of Our Theological Task," engaged the issues. The first two paragraphs were inverted and rewritten and then an entirely new paragraph was placed before them. The present opening paragraph--written in committee--is of basic importance because it put primary emphasis on grace and hereby relates to a central theme of our tradition and sets the stage for the ensuing discussion.

To understand what was happening, it is necessary to understand a basic distinction between doctrine and theology made in the 1988 statement. The title of the entire statement, "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task," indicates this distinction and the first paragraphs of Section 4 made it explicit. One way of illustrating this difference is to say that doctrine is like a house that a religious communion already inhabits. It represents a communal agreement about what is essential to and characteristic of their faith. Theology, or theological exploration, is the proposal of blueprints for extending the house. Often individually drawn, these blueprints represent creative efforts to suggest new construction which will make the home more welcoming or adequate. Such theological exploration must be free and newly suggestive, but it must also be brought back to the doctrinal community for its consideration; for acceptable new construction must "fit onto" the existing structure. To extend the illustration, which the statement by extrapolation suggests--but only suggests, for this illustration is not in the text--Jesus Christ is the foundation of the house and scripture is it vestibule or entry hall.

The discussion of the theological task (for now the document moves in a strict sense from doctrine to theology) centered on the issue of freedom of theological investigation and the acceptance of diverse theological perspectives by our denomination. The reordering of the initial paragraphs and the insertion of a new paragraph on contextual and incarnational theology were indications of an open and learning spirit. This section merits careful study because of its content and the change in emphasis.

The interaction of parts of the quadrilateral became the next
major issue and the matter was sharply debated. A motion was made to insert a paragraph on the interrelationship from the 1972 document to complete the three line paragraph which concluded the introduction, just before "Scripture." In this reused paragraph, Scripture is reaffirmed as primary, but the point of departure for theological exploration may be any one of the quadrilateral sources. "What matters most is that all four guidelines be brought to bear in faithful, serious, theological consideration." The motion passed, again with a count vote. The dynamic interplay within the complete quadrilateral was reinforced. This was a critical move in shaping this part of the document.


The Primacy of Scripture

The primary place of Scripture in the quadrilateral was affirmed in both the 1972 and 1988 documents. What was in debate was the understanding of primacy and the role of Scripture (which was a secure place in each of the doctrinal standards) in theological exploration. In what sense is Scripture primary? As the new introductory paragraph to the section on "Scripture" (prepared by a team that struggled to say a great deal in one paragraph) makes clear that the Living Word, Jesus Christ, has true primacy, and that Scripture possesses first place as witness to Jesus Christ. Further, Scripture is God's word as it is interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hence, Scripture stands at the point of intersection where the Word of God is conveyed through its words as they are illumined by the Holy Spirit. In this role, Scripture is "the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine."

In the discussion of "Scripture" one issue was debated in Committee and again on the floor of the Conference. An amendment was offered to insert the words, "Scripture contains both authoritative witness to the word of God and expressions of human and cultural limitation." The argument made for this inclusion was that it represents an honest statement of where United Methodism is in regard to its understanding of
CONCILIAR THEOLOGY

Scripture. Opponents argued that as a matter of pastoral concern we should not have such a statement in this document since it opens issues in the current debate about biblical infallibility and could confuse as easily as clarify our church's position. In the committee it was also argued that the latter part of the paragraph put textual criticism positively, "We draw upon the careful historical, literary, and textual studies of recent years which have enriched our understanding of the Bible." The amendment did not carry in either arena.

The role of the Holy Spirit is made clearer in the revised document (for a lively doctrine of the Holy Spirit prevented the United Methodist traditions from moving to biblical literalism or infallibility). This emphasis is reinforced by extending the phrase from the EUB Confession of Faith to include the words "To be received through the Holy Spirit..." and by emphasizing that tradition, experience and reason are significant as they "become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit."

Tradition and Experience are basically unchanged, with only the insertion under Tradition of the words "witness to God's special commitment to the poor," and in Experience a sentence from the 1972 document is reused to end a paragraph, "All religious experience affects all human experience; all human experience affects our understanding of religious experience." Reason is brought to more equal status than the 1988 statement suggested, principally by deleting the sentence, "Although not itself a source of theology, reason is a necessary tool." The interaction of the quadrilateral was now stated to the satisfaction of the committee.

Independent captions were given by the committee to Tradition, Experience and Reason, hereby assigning them clear and explicit importance. This represented a concession by those who had argued for distinct emphasis on the primacy of Scripture.

Under "the Present Challenge to Theology in the Church," a new paragraph on the global character of United Methodism was added to affirm our theological interdependence with world Christianity and with United Methodists from other cultures and diverse experiential backgrounds. Delegates from Great Britain, continental Europe, and Latin America made sig-
significant contributions. There were leaders from the signees of the "Houston Declaration" and the "Pacific Declaration." There were delegates from both local churches and general agencies. Women and ethnic minority persons made strong contributions. This was a representative body of world United Methodism.

Finally the Ecumenical Commitment paragraphs were rewritten to express more precisely the permeative and persistent ecumenical commitments of United Methodism.

The conclusion was unchanged.

The Vote

The committee had completed its work. What had started with a sense of clear differences and tension had changed into mutual respect, willingness to understand, suggestions for acceptable changes and building upon committee judgment. A common project had evolved.

Most important, clarification of the importance of doctrinal standards in United Methodist self-identity had allowed for endorsement of free and responsible theological exploration.

The committee voted. On the first three sections the vote was 75 for, 4 against, and 2 abstentions; on the fourth section the vote was 73 for, 5 against and 2 abstentions.

A nice touch of goodwill and ownership of the document was expressed by fifteen persons--lay and clergy--who volunteered to stay after the legislative committee adjourned and type a clean copy of the statement. They did this under the leadership of the Committee Secretary. The last of these volunteers left at 1:45 a.m. Through this effort the document was submitted to the *Daily Christian Advocate* the next day for publication.

Presentation To General Conference

In presenting the committee's work to the plenary session of General Conference, the chair made the following comments.

"This theological document is the result of a significant process within our church and within this General Conference. "The history goes back to 1968 with the establishment of a
theological study commission at the time of merger. The document produced for the 1972 Discipline carried the explicit hope that theological inquiry would continue to be characteristic of our emerging quest for United Methodist identity within our larger Christian heritage. The 1984 General Conference decided it was time to take up that discussion again and attempt to update the Discipline's theological statement.

"The document presented to the legislative process of this General Conference was a result of broad consultation, intense debate and a growing awareness of lines of convergence among the various theological perspectives within our church. In the end, the document was presented by the Study Committee with an unanimous recommendation.

"The Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission represented the church engaged in serious theological discussion, impressively modeling how United Methodists do theology and reflecting in some ways Wesley’s conviction that Christian conference might be a means of grace. By the end of the week our group voted concurrence on a revised document with a more than 90 percent positive vote on each of the four petitions. This is a remarkable accomplishment.

"The document presented to you by the legislative committee maintains a significant degree of continuity with the present statement in the Discipline, while making major changes to reflect the church’s desire for further clarification and continued development.

"As to continuity, Scripture, tradition, experience and reason are reaffirmed as sources and criteria of our theological endeavors. Second, Scripture is affirmed as the primary authority among these sources while pointing out that our theological inquiry might start from any of them. Third, Wesley's Sermons and Notes, along with the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, are recognized as the established doctrinal standards of United Methodism. Fourth, commitment as a church to ecumenical engagement is affirmed.

"By way of clarification, the proposal first reorganizes the material in Part 2 into four clear sections: Our Doctrinal Heritage, Our Doctrinal History, Our Doctrinal Standards, and Our Theological Task. Second, the document submitted to you
makes a crucial distinction between doctrinal affirmation and theological exploration. Doctrinal affirmations provide an identifiable anchor for our denomination. Theological reflection entails critical and constructive inquiry of a wide variety of perspectives. Third, the document you have before you incorporates into the substance of the statement itself a variety of viewpoints that display our unity in diversity.

"By way of development and enrichment, the proposal expresses increased recognition of the centrality of our encounter with God's love in Jesus Christ. And second, it highlights themes such as God's work in creation, our responsibilities for evangelism, and our historic recognition of the problem of systemic evil.

"That our committee could draw this together was an unusual achievement. Among other things, it means that our church has the possibility of leaving this General Conference with a voice that is common among us while also recognizing that there are differences among us.

"A young minister was an observer of our committee. He came up after one session to comment, 'Since seminary,' he said, 'I have heard of conciliar theology. Today I have witnessed it.' We covet this experience for the entire conference. For in our committee there was honest argument, intense goodwill and, withal, gracious encounter over issues of fundamental importance.

"The result of that process has not, of course, issued in a perfect document. While the statement exhibits a certain carefully developed balance, it also maintains some tensions that characterize our Wesleyan and United Methodist heritage. As such, this is not a statement simply to comfort the church. It is also a challenge to our church. The intent is not to offer a final consensus but rather to call the church to continuing theological exploration within a context of doctrinal identity." (Daily Christian Advocate, May 5, 1988, p. 520)

No textual changes were made from the floor. Trust of the committee and its work seemed a strong factor. The question was put and the statement was supported by 95 percent of the delegates. The church had found a common voice. It was, as one
person on the floor said, "A miracle."

It was further moved that new paragraphing be provided to make the document more readable and that the Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission became a standing committee of General Conference so that continuing theological work would be a part of General Conference activity.

An expressed hope was that this statement will allow the church to be more confident about the things it holds in common and more free about what it needs to explore.

Our theological effort continues. The United Methodist Church as a whole is encouraged to study the statement in the *Discipline* and to participate with a whole heart in theological discussion.
Toward a Recovery of Theological Discourse in United Methodism

L. Gregory Jones

The 1988 General Conference of The United Methodist Church overwhelmingly adopted a new statement on Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task. Such overwhelming support was not expected by many people during the time leading up to General Conference. After all, the report of the Committee on Our Theological Task\(^1\) had mobilized considerable opposition because of its perceived rejection of "pluralism" and excessive emphasis on "the primacy of Scripture." John Cobb wrote an article in the April 16, 1988 issue of *The Christian Century* entitled "Is Theological Pluralism Dead in the UMC?" The faculty of at least two United Methodist seminaries, Methesco and Wesley, adopted resolutions opposing the committee's report, and numerous other groups and individuals circulated papers and letters urging rejection of the committee's report.

The overwhelming adoption of the new statement was the result of painstaking work by the legislative committee that perfected the report from the Committee on Our Theological Task. Under the guidance of Chairperson Thomas A. Langford, a theologian at Duke University, the Faith and Mission Legislative Committee worked to find ways to retain emphases of the

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1972 statement within the framework of the 1988 statement. The final document sent to the floor of the General Conference was "nothing short of a miracle," as delegate Dale Dunlap was quoted by news media as saying. Dunlap noted that the statement appeared to forge a compromise between the proponents of "Scripture first," and those devoted to "pluralism." Indeed people across the theological spectrum indicated that they were pleased with the statement as it was adopted by General Conference.

Thus on the surface it would appear that all is well with United Methodism's understanding of its theological task. In addition to the significant accomplishment of diverse and conflicting political forces being satisfied with the statement, there are substantive reasons for endorsing it as well: for example, the statement retains and strengthens our ecumenical focus in the doing of theology, it clarifies some important issues about our doctrinal standards, and it contains an important distinction between doctrinal affirmations and theological exploration.

Unfortunately, even with these strengths, it is not clear that all is well with United Methodism and our theological task. I mean this not merely in the sense that some have interpreted the new statement, and its emphasis on doctrinal clarity, as being solely the result of an attempt to push the denomination to the right. Nor do I mean that all is not well merely in the sense that the new statement contains within it the dangers and problems associated with any "compromise"--that is, people will find in it what they want to find, as is already evident in the widely divergent construals of how Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are interrelated in the new statement.

My concern is that, even if the overwhelming support of the General Conference statement reflects genuine consensus about our theological task (including the interrelationship of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason) rather than a compromise that conceals significant disagreements, it is not clear that the United Methodist Church currently has in place the kinds of practices, habits, and dispositions necessary for fostering theological discourse and fulfilling our theological task. Put differently, while I think the General Conference
statement has considerable strengths and is an improvement over the 1972 statement, a statement on our theological task can only be as good as our practice of doing theology; and our practice, so I want to suggest, needs to be reformed and improved.

However, reforming and improving our practice of theological discourse is going to require more than just "doing better." It is not simply a matter of publishing more or better curriculum material, nor is it simply a matter of increasing the number of groups involved in doing Bible studies such as the Disciple study—though both of those would help. Our problems are more intractable than a pragmatic "more and better" solution will cure.

What I want to suggest in this essay is two-fold. On the one hand, we need to recover and foster the development of genuine Christian communities in which the connections between the realities of people's lives and the church's theological discourse are brought more closely together. Hence in the first section of this essay I will explore the contexts of theological discourse in the church. On the other hand, we need to develop a more coherent understanding of "teaching authority" in the church so that the theological exploration and discourse of Christian communities may be tested to ensure that the received gospel will continue to be presented authentically. Hence in the second section I will explore the task of presenting the received gospel authentically.

The Contexts of Theological Discourse in the Church

The General Conference statement affirms that the nature of our theological task is both individual and communal. It states that it is "a feature in the ministry of individual Christians," and it requires the participation of all Christians—lay or ordained. It further states that our theological task "unfolds in conversations open to the experiences, insights, and traditions of all constituencies that make up United Methodism," and that such dialogue belongs to the life of every congregation as well as across the whole church.
There is much wisdom in such observations, and it is certainly true that theological reflection and discourse is a personal task for all Christians and that such discourse occurs in and through communities. The difficulty and danger of these observations is not so much with the rhetoric as with the social realities of modern Western societies.\(^6\)

In the General Conference statement the contrast between the individual and community is intended to represent a complementary relationship. That is to say, on the one hand our identity as persons is constructed in and through the communities of which we are a part, and on the other hand that our communities are comprised of persons who each bring unique histories, insights, and gifts to the community. But in the social world in which those of us in the so-called advanced countries live, that complementary relationship has been sundered into a bifurcation in which the choices are individualism and collectivism.

This point has been made with considerable power by Alasdair Maclntyre in his book *After Virtue*. Maclntyre argues that every culture has within it a stock of "characters," types that furnish people with a cultural and moral ideal and that morally legitimate a mode of social existence. Maclntyre argues that in modern Western societies there are three such "characters," namely the Rich Aesthete, the Manager, and the Therapist. The Manager represents the collectivist realm of bureaucratic relationality, whereas the Rich Aesthete and the Therapist represent the individualist realm of private feelings and values. As Maclntyre puts it:

\[
\text{The bifurcation of the contemporary social world into a realm of the organizational in which ends are taken to be given and are not available for rational scrutiny and a realm of the personal in which judgment and debate about values are central factors, but in which no rational social resolution of issues is available, finds its internalization, its inner representation in the relation of the individual self to the roles and characters of social life.}\]
What is important to note is that in such a view there are two modes of social life available to us: one in which the free choices of individuals are sovereign, and one in which the bureaucracy is sovereign precisely so that it may limit the free choices of individuals.

A similar analysis is provided by Martin Buber. Buber notes that "individualism sees man only in relation to himself, but collectivism does not see man [i.e., human beings] at all, it sees only 'society'. With the former, man's face is distorted, with the latter it is masked." Buber argues that in either case, the human person (who exists, as person, only in relationship) is eclipsed. Hence Buber speaks of the need "to smash the false alternative with which the thought of our epoch is shot through—that of 'individualism' or 'collectivism'."

MacIntyre's and Buber's analyses have considerable relevance to United Methodism and the task of fostering theological discourse. On the one hand, if—as the General Conference statement claims—theological discourse is a task that is both individual and communal, and if such communities have become impoverished in a society whose choices are an individualism of private feelings and values or a collectivism of bureaucratic rationality, then our theological discourse will be similarly impoverished. On the other hand, MacIntyre's argument connecting the stock characters of our culture to the alternatives of individualism and collectivism suggests that the church must abandon its ties to those stock characters if it is to foster the development of communities capable of substantive theological discourse.

I will return to these problems and issues below. At this point, however, I want to return to United Methodism to suggest how MacIntyre's and Buber's analyses may help us understand the controversies surrounding discussion of the 1972 and 1988 statements. One of the reasons many people were dissatisfied with the 1972 statement was that its endorsement of "pluralism" lacked any accountability which would prevent such pluralism from becoming a lazy tolerance of individualistic theologies. As I heard one United Methodist minister say, "I became a United Methodist because you can be a United Methodist and believe whatever you want." Such a view does
not reflect the substance of the 1972 statement, but perceptions of rampant individualism and a lack of accountability were factors leading to calls for a new statement.

However, when the final draft of the 1988 statement was published, its appeals to "the primacy of Scripture" (language also contained in the 1972 statement) were perceived by many people to be an invitation to collectivist proof-texting and the silencing of creative theological exploration. Few people, if any, actually rejected the notion that Scripture has primacy in the doing of theological reflection. What they were really objecting to is the way in which such a notion is used by people in our society.

What I am suggesting is that, while there are real differences between the 1972 and the 1988 statements, and while I think the statement passed by the 1988 General Conference represents a marked improvement in the understanding of our theological task over the 1972 statement, the way in which the discussion and debate about the statements proceeded was less a reflection of what was written in the texts and more a reflection of the kinds of fears which result from the absence of genuine community. People feared either an individualism which undercuts authority and accountability or a collectivism that invites proof-texting and stifles exploration and creativity. Thus it is quite possible that, unless we recover the kinds of communal contexts necessary for theological discourse, the General Conference statement will rapidly develop many of the same kinds of liabilities the 1972 statement was eventually perceived to have.

What is needed in United Methodism, then, is a recovery of the kinds of communities in which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Scripture can be properly read and interpreted and in which theological dialogue can be fostered. In addition to noting the communal dimension of theological discourse, the General Conference statement rightly notes that we "properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community." That affirmation, however, may be construed in various ways depending on how community is defined. I want to highlight two such construals as a
way of pointing to a description of the kinds of Christian communities we need to be fostering.

One interpretation takes "the believing community" to be basically a descriptive term, designating any gathering of people who understand themselves as in one way or another "believers." In such a view, there are numerous Christian communities in Western society. For example, each local church is a believing community and is part of larger believing communities (the largest of which embraces all believers as "the Christian community"). The believing community is thus understood as a given, a reality which is always there and from which theological discourse and the reading and interpretation of Scripture proceed.

The difficulty with such a construal is that it is not clear what foundation there is for theological discourse. Put bluntly, such "communities" can exist in an individualistic and/or collectivist society such as ours, but they often do so at the price of failing to embody an alternative to the destructive forces of individualism and collectivism. Such "communities" often fail to have enough goods in common to create the contexts where genuine conversation is possible and disagreement is intelligible. Indeed in our society such "communities" are often better described, in a term used by Robert Bellah and his colleagues, as "lifestyle enclaves"—places where people go (often, in MacIntyre's terms, for "aesthetic" or "therapeutic" reasons) to find people like themselves, but lacking the substance of community.¹¹

This first option entails what might be called a "minimalist" conception of community. Conversely, there is a second way to construe "the believing community" in more substantive or "maximilist" terms. In this view the emphasis is not on the givenness of community, but rather on the recognition that community must be achieved through particular practices, skills, and habits. In our particular circumstances, it also involves the recognition that genuine community is a rare and fragile achievement.¹² It is to recognize that in the absence of the achievement of Christian community, we may not be able to read Scripture well and we may not be able to embody wise judgment about theological issues.
How, on such a view, is this kind of community constituted and achieved? Such a question cannot be answered with a ready-made checklist of do's and don'ts. Even so, I want to provide a few clues that point in the direction of an answer. For "the believing community" in which Scripture is properly read and theological reflection and discourse are conducted is not just any "community," but a community marked by distinctive characteristics.

First, achieving Christian community entails a willingness to engage in shared practices and disciplines: learning to pray, fast, read Scripture and celebrate the sacraments together; learning to care for one another's needs, ranging from the material needs of food and shelter and money to the personal needs of trust and affection; learning to be willing to be forgiven and reconciled and in turn to practice forgiveness and reconciliation.

Second, and closely related, achieving Christian community entails a refusal to be captured by the dominant images and ethos of the wider society: a refusal to let the alternatives of individualism and collectivism characterize our relations with one another; a refusal to construe community in terms of managerial effectiveness and efficiency, therapeutic satisfaction, or aesthetic enjoyment; a refusal to accept the notion that life is about "looking out for number one" and "pulling your own strings."

Third, this refusal to be captured by the dominant images and ethos of wider society has as a correlative notion the recovery of biblical and theological notions of community and discipleship: recovery of the Pauline emphasis on the diversity of gifts within a unified Body and the Johannine emphasis on discipleship as morally transformative friendships; recovery of the notion that in order to find your life you must first lose it; recovery of the notion that discipleship entails a cruciform life, a life patterned by the cross of Christ.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Christian community is marked by the recognition that the achievement of Christian community comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit. That seemingly odd statement is intended as a reminder that Chris-
tian community is at the same time a gift of the Holy Spirit and an achievement that requires the development of particular practices, habits, and dispositions which enable that community under the Spirit's guidance.

Such claims undoubtedly sound far too utopian and seem to be far too stringent for an understanding of Christian community. After all, even if I am right that we need to see community less as a given to be presupposed and more as a good that must be achieved, isn't it hopelessly utopian to describe that achievement as contingent on all of these factors? Perhaps. But then again, perhaps not. For while the cultural circumstances for us are quite different, I would point to two different (though in some ways quite similar) examples where Christian community has been achieved through practices, habits, and dispositions such as I have been describing: the Wesleyan class meetings in 18th century England and "base Christian communities" in 20th century Third World countries.

It is not my purpose here to attempt to identify the similarities and differences between class meetings and base communities. Nor do I mean to suggest that we ought to try to replicate either class meetings or base communities in our own cultural context. Rather I am suggesting that the patterns of these examples can stimulate our imagination for the task of recovering and developing practices, habits, and dispositions for the achievement of Christian community in our society.

How can these examples stimulate our imagination? Among other things, we can see exemplified the achievement of Christian community in the power of the Holy Spirit even in the midst of societies where communities have become either impoverished or nonexistent. We can discover the close interrelationship between people's lives and their theological reflection about what kind of people they should be and how they should live. We can discern patterns whereby people study Scripture together in the context of tradition, reason, and experience--neither for the purpose of extracting proof-texts nor for isolating particular verses and/or books as the "real" message of Scripture--out of the recognition that Scripture forms and shapes the identity of the community and the people who comprise that community. We can observe people holding
each other accountable for their theological reflection and for their Christian discipleship. Perhaps most importantly, we can discover in the achievement of Christian community a receptiveness to the Holy Spirit and a seriousness of purpose about discipleship in the service of Jesus Christ that informs and enlivens their theological discourse.

There is another, different way in which both Wesleyan class meetings and base Christian communities can stimulate our imagination. When these kinds of communities are achieved, they bring into close interrelationship the theological reflection and discourse of laypeople, ordained clergy, and theologians. Such communities make claims on the time, energy, and services of the ordained clergy and theologians—not only as teachers of the Scriptures and the faith, not only as those who attempt to clarify the Church's witness, not only as those who are set aside to reflect critically about important issues facing the church, though these are all important tasks—but also as participants who are expected to learn from the theological reflection of the people.

In the United Methodist Church we often separate people into two groups, the laity and the clergy, and the laity often express the sense that the clergy don't take seriously their vocation to think theologically. Moreover, the United Methodist church has not been sure what to do with theologians. Beyond being somehow grateful to have them, the church is on the one hand unsure whether theologians should be ordained and on the other hand suspicious that they are too far removed and abstracted from the church and the church’s mission.

Both of these are problems whose origins and causes are complex. They stem in part from United Methodism's lack of a coherent ecclesiology, something that has beset us from the very beginning of Methodism as a church (which is not, it is important to note, the same as the beginnings of the Methodist movement); but perhaps both problems would be ameliorated if we took seriously the place of the Holy Spirit in understandings of Christian community. Such a recovery of the centrality of the Holy Spirit for the achievement of Christian
community is not alien to the United Methodist tradition. Drawing on the significance of the Wesleyan class meetings, Albert Outler has insightfully suggested that United Methodism has within its history the "makings of a pneumatological ecclesiology with immense import for the world Christian community."\(^{13}\)

Even so, the problems associated with the interrelationships between laity, ordained clergy, and theologians are not resolved simply by the recovery of pneumatological communities where all are invited and expected to participate in theological reflection. There is also the question of the teaching of the church, which has to do with the testing of theological explorations in relation to the truth of the gospel, particularly as manifested in our doctrinal affirmations. To that question I now turn.

**Presenting the Received Gospel Authentically**

In the first section of this paper I argued that the seeds of a recovery of theological discourse are to be found in the General Conference statement's affirmations about the individual and communal dimensions of that discourse, but that what is needed are reorientations of our lives that would make the achievement of community possible. When it comes to the task of the teaching of the church, however, the General Conference statement is not as helpful. It does clarify issues of doctrinal standards and their difference from the task of theological reflection and exploration, but it is (perhaps unsurprisingly) rather silent on the means by which we test that theological reflection and exploration. The only explicit reference to teaching authority in the section on "Our Theological Task" is as follows: "Conferences speak and act for United Methodists in their official decisions at appropriate levels. Our conciliar and representative forms of decision-making do not release United Methodists as individuals from the responsibility to develop sound theological judgment."\(^{14}\)

In one sense the General Conference statement is not to be faulted, for it accurately reflects United Methodism's official understanding of the question of teaching authority and teaching office: official decisions are made at the various levels of
conferences, and in the absence of a decision-making context it is up to each individual to develop and exercise sound theological judgment. But about these matters considerably more needs to be said.

First, a great deal hangs on what we mean by "conferences" and how their activities are to be described. For John Wesley, Christian conference encompassed a variety of guises (including the band, class, and the annual conference) and was one of the means of grace. Moreover, it is important to note that in John Wesley's time the annual conference functioned as the magisterium of the church—expressing, as the General Conference statement suggests, a conciliar understanding whereby theological judgments require the consensus of the community through its representatives.

In our day, however, the General Conference functions as the magisterium of the church (still operating within a conciliar understanding), and the guises in which "Christian conference" occurs are not bands or classes but Charge, District, Annual, Jurisdictional, and General. Such conferences are increasingly preoccupied not directly with theological discourse but with managing the institutional needs of the church. When theological issues are discussed, it is usually done only in the context of making a specific decision about the business of the church. As Dennis Campbell insightfully argues,

Questions concerning hymnal revision will bring forth rulings on the language of the Trinity, or petitions concerning ordination will bring forth rulings having to do with homosexuality. The result is that important theological matters, which demand and deserve understanding apart from specific application, are dealt with only in the context of a business item which must be resolved with a vote.16

In short, the "Christian conferences" which served as the cornerstone of the Wesleyan movement—bands, classes, as well as annual conference—have become increasingly bureaucratized and concerned with business at the expense of ongoing theological reflection, discourse, and discernment about what should be taught and how we should teach it.
I have already addressed this in part through my suggestion that we recover the centrality of Christian communities such as the Wesleyan class meetings. If Christian conferences, particularly at the levels where the numerical size makes it more feasible (e.g., class meetings, charge conferences, district conferences), were to become genuine communities of theological discourse, we would be well on the way toward addressing substantive theological questions and testing them in relation to our apostolic heritage.

Even so, the question of teaching authority remains. How can the United Methodist church maintain the truth of the gospel for its own life and for the sake of the world? How can the church exercise the apostolic task of ensuring that it presents the received gospel authentically?

Unfortunately, it is not clear that United Methodism has a clear sense about how to answer such questions. Thomas Langford aptly summarizes the situation:

At the present time there is little explicit understanding of how the teaching office ought to be exercised. General Conference has designated power but little competence, sufficient time, or historically formed character to fulfill this task (these comments are not means as personal indictments or ascription of general incompetence, rather they are judgments about the capacity of General Conference to exercise its teaching responsibility).\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, though it is the final authority in matters of interpreting the Discipline, the Judicial Council does not function in a manner that engages theological issues or provides teaching authority. As it stands, the two primary groups authorized for determining theological teaching are not structured to provide the kind of theological reflection and discourse which the church badly needs.

We might expect the bishops to play such a role, since in most episcopal polities one of the bishop's primary activities is as a "teacher" of the church. Such a role of teacher is closely tied to scriptural understandings of the episkopos. But, as Langford notes,
Bishops are spiritual leaders and conference managers. In United Methodism they are viewed as executives in conference affairs; they possess influence of office and person but since they have no vote in General Conference they do not directly participate in judgments about what the church should teach or do.  

In addition, in the disciplinary descriptions about the responsibilities of a bishop, teaching is not included. In "The Nature of Superintendency" (Par. 501) the bishop's responsibilities are listed as ordering the life of the church, initiating structures and strategies for equipping Christian people for service, and administering matters temporal and spiritual--but there is no reference to teaching. Nor is mention made of teaching in the section "Specific Responsibilities of Bishops" (Par. 512).  

It is important to temper these remarks with the recognition that the bishops do exercise a teaching function in their day-to-day activities with boards and agencies at various levels, and they interpret the Discipline in their annual conferences. Moreover, the bishops' pastoral letter In Defense of Creation should be seen as a welcome initiative (regardless of one's position about its substance) to lay claim to a teaching function. Even so, such teaching is neither mandated by the General Conference nor is it generally expected of United Methodist episcopal leadership. Indeed the overwhelming administrative workload and managerial tasks expected of bishops militate against their ability to engage in the kind of theological reflection necessary for exercising a teaching office.  

Some teaching responsibility is placed in the hands of the ordained clergy, though the relevant paragraph in the Discipline (Par. 438) does not explicitly address teaching except in terms of teaching the Bible and instructing candidates for membership. Such indirect references tend to underplay the corporate significance of the church's task of engaging in theological discourse for the purpose of presenting the received gospel authentically. Even more, in practice what is expected of the clergy in our society looks more like MacIntyre's stock of characters (i.e., the Therapist and/or the Manager) than a
person equipped to be a teacher of the received gospel in the parish. 19

Finally, it is unclear how, if at all, a designated teaching responsibility is extended to those who have teaching posts which bear directly on the church's life and doctrine. As Langford notes,

For these persons there is little guidance as to how, in their teaching roles, they relate to the ongoing life of the church or even to their ordination responsibilities. I lift up this matter, for we continue to live with an unstable relation between the general church and its theological schools and between persons who have explicit teaching roles within the general life of the church and their ordination responsibilities. (Other traditions—such as the Reformed tradition—practice ordination to a teaching role. A question is whether United Methodism should consider a similar recognition.) 20

As I indicated in the first section, were the kinds of communities represented by Wesleyan class meetings and base Christian communities to be rediscovered within United Methodism, it would be considerably easier to conceive of the interrelationships between laity, clergy, and theologians than it is now. But even then, the question of teaching authority and responsibility would remain.

To some it might appear that we do not need to specify any teaching authority or responsibility beyond the work of General Conference and individual theological judgments. But if the General Conference is, as Campbell, Langford, and I have all suggested, ill-suited to the kinds of theological reflection and discourse that we need, then in this view all that is really left (beyond General Conference's official decisions) is individual theological judgments. For ecumenical and doctrinal reasons, as well as the unity in the Spirit which is the heart of all Christian community, such an exclusive reliance on individual judgment is inadequate and misguided.

Even so, it might still be objected that the emphasis on teaching is simply a way of denigrating the importance of the laity and trying to impose a hierarchical understanding of
ecclesiology on United Methodism. Some ways of thinking about teaching may have that intent or that effect. But it need not, and the importance I attach to it does not. In the view I am defending, while teaching authority should not--and need not--either denigrate the laity or be a way of creating and preserving hierarchical privileges, it is a collegial and conciliar activity whereby the church tests its theological explorations in relation to the truth of the gospel and seeks to present that received gospel authentically to new situations and new needs.

What, then, might we do to recover some of these teaching dimensions within the life of the church? A first step would be genuinely to recover Christian conference as a means of grace. This would entail setting aside time as a part of every conference's agenda, ranging from the Charge conference through the District and the Annual up to Jurisdictional and General Conferences, for theological reflection and discussion not directly related to resolving a business item before the conference. Some conferences already do this, but unfortunately they are more the exception than the rule.

Second, as a means of furthering the discussion in such conferences, we need to recover the theological vocation of all Christians. In addition, we need to abandon the managerial focus of ordained ministry and the episcopacy in order to place a greater emphasis on the activity of teaching in the church. This means, in part, that bishops and clergy need to be more assertive in claiming such roles; but it also requires rather far-reaching changes in the images we associate with ordination and the episcopacy.

Third, recognizing the demands on people that place constraints on their ability to have the time to deal with issues that are often complex and require careful discussion, it would be wise to establish ongoing theological commissions--at least at the General Conference level, and perhaps also in Annual Conferences--that would be instructed to consider important issues facing the church. The Central Conferences in Europe have established such a theological commission, and it has proved to be quite valuable as a resource in furthering the discussion and consideration of important theological issues. Such an ongoing theological commission could also aid the
Council of Bishops in exercising a teaching role on important theological issues.

Fourth, we ought to rethink the role of those whose vocation is teaching. There is a great deal which might be learned from other polities which practice ordination to a teaching role, and which consequently have specific expectations of those people's contributions to the theological discourse of the church.

In this section I have done little more than identify some problems and issues and then provide some suggestions toward dealing with them. I fully recognize that much more exploration and explication needs to be done, and that some of the issues will require more comprehensive discussions of ecclesiology. But I have no doubt that something needs to be done for a recovery of theological discourse in the church.

Conclusion

Though I have argued in this essay that all is not well with United Methodism with respect to our theological task, all is certainly not lost. We have the resources within our own tradition for recovering the centrality of Christian community, and we can certainly learn much from our sisters and brothers in base Christian communities around the world. Moreover, while we currently have more confusion than clarity about how teaching should be exercised in the church, there are possibilities--both structural and pragmatic--which can be utilized to bring greater clarity. We also can learn from other Christian traditions in clarifying issues surrounding teaching authority in the church. Dealing with the recovery of Christian communities alone is not sufficient, nor is clarifying the question of teaching authority; both are required if we are to be able faithfully to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Along with many other United Methodists, I am grateful for the hard work that went into the development of the General Conference statement. We can learn a great deal from it, and we should let it guide and shape United Methodist theological discourse. At the same time, however, we need to recover the practices, habits, and dispositions necessary for that theological discourse to be fruitful, for our biblical interpretation to be
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faithful, for our theological judgment to embody wisdom, and for our discipleship to be transformative in the midst of a world which knows not God.

NOTES

1. Henceforth the following designations will be used to distinguish the three statements about which I will have occasion to refer: the report of the Committee on Our Theological Task will be referred to as "the 1988 statement"; the statement that was in the 1972-1984 Discipline will be referred to as "the 1972 statement"; the new statement as approved by the 1988 General Conference will be referred to as "the General Conference statement."


3. My claim relates in part to structural issues in the Church, which relate to all of United Methodism, and in part to practices in the Church, which vary geographically and culturally. When referring to practices my comments will apply most directly to the American context, for the situation is somewhat different in both European and Third World contexts.

4. The quotes are taken from the statement as it appears in the Daily Christian Advocate (May 2, 1988), 253-254.

5. It is important to remember that United Methodism extends well beyond Western societies, and indeed some of United Methodism's greatest vitality is currently coming from non-Western contexts. Even so, in the first section of this essay I focus on the problem of Christian community in modern Western societies (something about which we can learn from our sisters and brothers in non-Western contexts), while it is in the second section that my comments are more directly relevant to the whole of United Methodism.


7. Cf. Ibid., 35.


18. I am indebted to conversations with Professor Langford for pointing this out to me. Cf. also *Ibid.*, 21.

19. It is worth noting that MacIntyre's characters are also close to what the Church often expects of its bishops, suggesting that cultural influences are more dominant than either scriptural or theological understandings of clergy and bishops.


21. For some of these suggestions I am indebted to Professor Langford, in conversation and from his instructive essay.
Tradition, Faith, and the Africa University

Temba J. Mafico

The Africa University: Its Unique Role

The establishment of the Africa University is certainly a very generous gift from the United Methodist Church to the whole continent of Africa. The University will provide an academic forum for Africans themselves to rigorously evaluate the role of the church in the future, and to suggest how the church must adapt itself to fully satisfy the needs of this vast continent. It is no longer enough to write books and articles criticizing early missionaries for their blatant disregard of African traditional religion and culture. On the other hand, to regard all African traditional beliefs and cultural norms as compatible with the Christian faith may plunge the church in wholesale syncretism. The mission church, in spite of its imperfections, has laid a firm academic and religious foundation upon which the Africans themselves must now raise the structures of their own church. But the task is not without precedent. The Bible shows how the ancient Israelites utilized their own cultural traditions, as well as those they borrowed from other nations, to worship God, suggesting to Africans several ways they could introduce traditions which are indigenous to the African people to create new forms of worship.

The College of Theology of the Africa University is being established first in order to address these and many other pressing issues relating to the role of the Christian church in

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Africa. Its mission statement unequivocally emphasizes that

The College of Theology of the Africa University is a community of learning . . . committed to excellence in teaching and research; where an understanding of the Bible, its teaching, its transforming and prophetic message, will be central; where students will gain knowledge and understanding of God's mission in today's Africa and the world . . .

This excerpt makes several significant points. To know the will of God in Africa today, the Bible must be studied seriously to grasp its prophetic message, which must inspire those who wish to reform the church. To maintain the integrity of the Christian teaching while at the same time introducing aspects of African traditional culture into it, African theologians must seek divine guidance. Research done at the Africa University will provide answers to many enigmatic questions, for example: How can the Christian church rid itself of the wrapping of Western civilization in order to truly minister to the African people in their traditional milieu? How should the church respond to the fact that, after a century of intensive education, the Africans, in spite of high achievement in the arts, science, technology and theological education, still hold tenaciously to belief in, or fear of witchcraft and sorcery? Foundational subjects, such as the African view of the universe and natural phenomena, the role played by ancestors, the place of grandparents in the family, the rights of the poor in African culture, the encounter between African traditional religions and Christianity, the question of how contextualization of Christianity could be achieved without syncretism, to name a few, will be examined at the Africa University. In the discussion that follows, I will briefly outline some of these religio-traditional issues.

African View of the Universe and Natural Phenomena

There is a major difference between Africans and Westerners in their view of the world and natural phenomena.
For Westerners, the phenomenal world is an inanimate object which can be scientifically analysed. For Africans, on the other hand, the universe with natural phenomena is a being and can only be comprehended as a living presence confronting them with its capricious idiosyncrasies.

Another important difference between Westerners and Africans lies in their approach to inquiry. To Westerners, an object can always be scientifically related to other objects and appear as part of a series or a group. In this manner, science is able to comprehend objects and events as ruled by universal laws which make their behaviour under given circumstances predictable. To Africans, however, objects are unique because they, like human beings, have an unpredictable character. In other words, objects are a presence known only insofar as they reveal themselves to people. It is correct to sum up this by saying that Africans are mythical in their view of the universe. This means that Africans uncritically accept certain beliefs whose truth or reality cannot be scientifically verified. A myth, in this sense, is not as lucid as theoretical hypotheses proposed by scientists. Like religion, a myth claims recognition only by faith. Just as Christians cannot prove the existence of God, heaven, paradise, or of angels, Africans too cannot prove the existence of witches: they simply believe. Without belief in witches and sorcery, Africans cannot explain the source of evil in the world in which God alone is in complete charge.

Africans do not distinguish between visions, nightmares, hallucinations and ordinary dreams. Furthermore, they cannot conceive of symbols as signifying yet as separate from the things (as Westerners would view it) they symbolize. According to Africans, there is a coalescence of the symbol and what it symbolizes. For this reason, a person’s name, a photograph, or a footprint can stand for the very essence of a person and can be used by witches or by diviners to kill, to harm, or to bless a person without his physical presence.

To the Africans, time is not a uniform duration, nor is it a succession of qualitatively different moments. Africans do not abstract a concept of time from the experience of time. Time is experienced in the periodicity and rhythm of human life: from childhood to adolescence; from adolescence to maturity; from
maturity to old age, and so on. Each stage is a time period with peculiar qualities. The transition from one phase to the next creates a crisis for the one concerned and demands the assistance of other members of the community to join in appropriate rituals, particularly for such critical moments as birth, puberty, marriage, and death.

Community Social Structure

We may understand the peculiar world of the Africans by looking at several of its key social elements. I will only briefly touch here on those which are crucial, not only in evangelization, but also in the teaching of theology in an African context. These are ancestral spirits, the role of the grandparents, the African community and social concerns, attitudes toward strangers, and belief in witchcraft.

The Role of Ancestors

The traditional African philosophy of life is based on the community. This community comprises the living and those who are long dead, the ancestors. The dead are regarded as present in their spiritual form among the living. They are believed to be much more powerful than when they existed in the flesh. These ancestors play a very important role in all aspects of the lives of African people because they continue to occupy their places in the hierarchical social structure of the community. This structure begins with the family and stretches out to include the clan and tribe. Africans realize that the existence of human life is a result of a union between the father and mother. This therefore is construed to mean that the parents exist because of the marriage of the grandparents. That being the case, by means of a genealogical chain it could be possible to trace one's connection with the first ancestral grandparents created by and sitting next to God. This is why in services of traditional worship, Africans will be represented by the oldest member of the family. This representative realizes, however, that although he is the oldest among the living of the family, he is nonetheless the youngest in the long line of
those who are before him. In other words, he is too small before God to address him directly. As a result he will pass on the sacrifice to his physically deceased, but spiritually living, parents whom he will ask to pass it on to their parents until it reaches Varikumatenga, "the One-in-the-Heavens," that is, God, who is called by various names all reflecting his benevolent attributes.

Ancestors cannot be bypassed since they are intermediaries between God and human beings. Failure by the missionary church to understand and appreciate the role played by ancestors led to a condemnation of what has been labelled African ancestral worship. African Christian scholars have begun scrutinizing African worship and are finding evidence that Africans do not worship ancestors but worship God through their ancestors in accordance with their highest degree of reverence to him who is the supreme head of the family circle. (Cf. Exodus 3:5, 13 where to the Israelites, God is the God of their ancestors.)

The hierarchical structure is also followed when the family is gathered to deal with family affairs such as marriage. The participants in a marriage transaction sit in a circle originating from the oldest person who, consequently, assumes the presiding role of the gathering. The rest of the members take their seats in a descending order according to age. The elder person will not listen to or receive a message coming directly from any of the junior members of the family circle unless it comes through the person sitting next to him by age, a first born or an uncle.

This same procedure is followed when a chief gathers his advisors to decide a case. In a civil court, status or position would determine who sits next to the chief and who sits at the end of the circle. Though the last person in the circle may be sitting closest to the chief, he cannot speak directly to him but can only do so through his immediate superior, who in turn passes it on to his immediate superior until it reaches the chief from the other end. The chief replies in reverse order. Obviously this way of doing business takes a long time to accomplish. To Africans, however, time is always available to execute business properly. Moreover, Africans believe in doing one thing at a
time. This attitude toward time is prompted by the fact that Africans used to organize their lives according to seasons.

The Role of the Grandparents

The disintegration of the family and the extended family is creating social, moral and economic problems for Africans. Formerly, the role of the grandparents was to play with the grandchildren. They had a responsibility to advise the youths on all matters of ethics, courtship, love, and marriage. At other times they spent time with young people, telling them stories of ancient times, teaching them heroic songs and tales. The grandchildren were also eager to hear what life was like when the grandparents were their age. This arrangement prevented many of the social problems which are now being encountered in a modern African family. The grandparents in effect operated a day care center, and did the job very well because they loved their grandchildren. Although they had deteriorated physically, they had not lost their usefulness to society. Because of their respect for the grandparents’ advisory role to the children, Africans, even nowadays, would not dream of sending their parents to old people’s homes where they will feel both lonely and neglected by family and society. Africans did not require a psychiatrist’s services because the traditional family structure had a way of dealing with stress, loneliness, sickness, and death. Thus, the traditional African family organization provided a structure for worshipping God, for dealing with youth, old age, and related social problems. Africans regard God as the patron of the family. As such he must be respected as the most senior member and guardian of the community. Therefore to approach him by any form of worship, one must follow the family procedure.

Family Responsibilities

There are certain social responsibilities in Africa which were required of family members in order to please God. These concerns included the care of aging parents. In ancient Africa there were no pension plans or life insurance. The parents were
The Shona people have a saying, Yakakura ika amwa mwana, "It grew old and lived on the milk of its child." The reason why ancient Africans could not keep a barren wife becomes self-evident when one realizes the role children played in the family. The male children were responsible for taking care of their aging parents. Moreover, the sons would be able to give their deceased parents proper and decent burial. The daughters, on the other hand, once married, ceased to belong to their parental family. Therefore they no longer had the capacity to help their aging parents. This explains why ancient Africans preferred sons to daughters, an attitude evident in the Old Testament (Abraham) and in texts of the ancient Near East, particularly in the Canaanite myths (Cf. Matthew 15:4-6).

Community Responsibilities to the Poor

The next community concern that echoes biblical teaching is the extension of courtesy and hospitality to the poor of all types (widows, orphans, and those who were disabled) and to strangers. There were no inns or hotels in ancient Africa, but there were dangerous wild animals such as lions, hyenas, and leopards. In search of food, or in search of work, strangers would seek shelter at night. African ethics required that one offer the strangers some shelter and food.

When harvesting crops, it was a traditional custom that one must deliberately leave some ears of corn, some grain, beans, and so on, for the poor. In the same way, when planning a party, one was to cook more food than the family and invited guests needed in order to feed several of the poor who came uninvited. This customary norm also applied to weddings and Christmas festivities. Whenever there was a famine in the land, the poor would outnumber the invited guests. To help to take care of the poor was a good thing—hence the Shona saying; Mupfumi ndimambo, "the rich person is a king." In ancient Africa it was the responsibility of the king to see to it that the poor of his land were fed and also were protected against exploitation. If society failed in its social responsibility toward the poor, God was expected to intervene for them and punish the evildoers.
The Shonas have a saying: Vadzimu vanoona, "The ancestors see." The African belief is that once the ancestors see injustice, they report it to God who immediately executes justice by punishing the guilty person in his lifetime, and not in the world to come. God's punishment took several forms. He could mysteriously transfer the wealth from the unjust rich to the poor victims of injustice. Alternatively, the ancestors would be so hurt by this injustice that they would withdraw their protection of the wicked. Thus the transgressor would be thrown out of the family circle, immediately becoming exposed to the dangers of evil spirits and witches.\textsuperscript{12}

\section*{Christianity and Traditional Religion}

The African belief in witchcraft is a very important subject which must be researched and addressed if the context for theology in modern Africa is to be understood.

My long experience working as a pastor of the United church of Christ in Zimbabwe has convinced me that the greater number of Africans who converted to Christianity and who passionately and openly confess Christ as their only Lord and Savior, are still limping with two contradicting religious opinions. In practice, they live two lives: one as Christians on Sunday mornings and the other as ardent followers of their traditional religion for six and a half days of the week; one as Christians when life is going well and the other as observers of traditional religious practices whenever they are faced with life's predicaments. Since life on earth ends with the bewildering ordeal of illness and death, most African Christians (especially if they are afflicted by long illnesses such as cancer, arthritis, and other chronic diseases) become completely traditional in their inner beliefs. The questions that arise are: How can the Scriptures and theology be taught to Africans so as to become the good news which can drive away fear and superstition? Is now not the time when African theologians should seriously, objectively, and empirically scrutinize their long and rich cultural and traditional heritage to see how it could enhance the dissemination of the good news of Jesus Christ? It should be unequivocally stated that to Africans God the Creator
of the world coexists with forces of evil which defy God's authority. Therefore, as Christians many Africans will affirm belief in the Almighty God, the only power in control of the world, while at the same time maintain their traditional religious beliefs in the existence of evil powers such as witches, sorcerers and wizards which they claim to have discarded.

It should be stressed that Africans do not make a distinction between the sacred and the profane. The teaching of Christian theology in Africa should take this fact into consideration. It is therefore impossible for Africans, in spite of educational achievements in science or in the arts, to ignore their traditional religious beliefs even when they conflict with Christianity. For example, an educated African with a Mercedes-Benz car and an executive house in a middle-class, suburban area will often go "home" to visit his relatives. There, in the country, he is brought down from the ivory tower of the elite to the "real" world conceived in terms of African traditional cosmology. By threats and counsel, the urban dweller is warned that if she does not take immediate traditional and religious precautions to safeguard her job, business, or health, she might soon lose everything she has worked for so hard. Many African Christians are consequently made to realize that there are certain religious traditions and customs which are immutable. These practices may relate to witchcraft, divination, sorcery and magic, which must be observed rigorously and unquestioningly because they are the way things have been done by all members of the clan or family throughout all generations.

The life of an African is therefore governed by many considerations, for example, protection against witches and their mysterious witchcraft. Belief in witches and witchcraft answers a very vexing problem of evil in the world.

To explain the source of evil in the universe, to explain why the loving God should snuff out an innocent child, or why an adult who is the family's only support should die, witchcraft offers a plausible explanation.

The question often asked after death or an accident is not
how it happened, because the process is clear to everyone, but why the accident occurred at that point in time. Why should two cars collide at that particular spot and why should mine get the worst of the head-on impact, causing a fatal injury to a relative? This is the question which defies rationale. In this case, only a charge of witchcraft on a jealous neighbor or relative satisfies the inquiry.16

Christian theology in Africa may never make a lasting impact until teachers and evangelists confront the real African in his or her religio-cultural milieu. In other words, the gospel as preached and taught to Africans must also relate to their fear of witchcraft, sorcery, and magic. To teach that witches do not exist, when illness and death believed to be caused by them exist, will never convince Africans to wholly abandon belief in witchcraft. What evangelists confronting Africans must do is to acknowledge that in the African world, be it real or unreal, witches, demons and sorcerers do exist.17 The evangelist must then declare that he is bringing good news, a protection against witches. He must categorically assure the believers that the Holy Spirit, whom the believers would receive, forms a protective wall against witches, sorcerers, and demons (cf. Mark 16:18). This good news should be accentuated with the words: "fear not" or "be not dismayed." These words were repeatedly said by Jesus to the Jews who, during his time, harbored cosmological views similar to those of Africans today.18 Africans therefore require tangible proof or signs that Christianity really works and the Christian God truly lives.19 In their religio-traditional milieu, diviners are able to demonstrate the working of their craft. They even give their clients talismans or amulets to protect them from harm or to ensure them good luck. This explains why new religious movements are mushrooming in the hundreds in Africa. The Zionist Churches are popular because the prophets can talk in tongues and heal the sick by "holy water" believed to be blessed by God. The Zionist prophets, or those of other independent churches, claim that they can walk on fire and are believed to be able to detect and exorcize witches and demons. Moreover, like diviners, they assure their followers that they will establish a "spiritual" wall around a believer’s residence to keep witches out.
The African Context for Theological Education

It should be clear by now that Africans do not regard traditional religion as a separable element of culture, and that Christian spiritual formation is integrally related to African social values. This means that Christianity cannot be adequately taught to African children and ministerial candidates by means of theoretical formulas which are divorced from example and practice. This is contrary to the generally accepted view in some Western theological seminaries, which do not see a correlation between theory and practice. This is to say, the teachers do not necessarily have to live according to their theoretical moral teachings. The Africans will, on the other hand, find it very hard, if not impossible, to accept theology that is not practiced by its disseminators. It is doubly true to Africans that "actions speak louder than words." For that reason, Africans are unable to grasp a theological lesson unillustrated by the life and enthusiasm of the tutors.

It is significant that this African attitude to learning is supported by biblical teaching. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses admonished the Israelites to seriously live their faith before their children in order to increase their children's interest and curiosity. Their religious actions were to provoke their children to ask the question:

What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you? Then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers.' And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.
It should be noticed that liberation history of Israel was not theoretically affirmed or taught, but was re-enacted, that is to say, it was recited and dramatized by those who were teaching it to their progeny. Interesting enough, Africans have says which succinctly convey the point I am making. One of the axioms reads: Chitiyo kuenda mudzani kuona ndimai, "To hide away from the rapacious eagle the chick learns from its mother." The English reflect the same idea in the proverb: "Like father, like son." In other words, people characteristically learn by example of their family's older members.

The foregoing discussion reveals some of the reasons why the teaching of spiritual formation presents many challenges to the future faculty of the Africa Theological College at Mutare, Zimbabwe. When those challenges are met, there is no doubt that this college will be of very high quality not only in Africa, but also in the world. Portions of the Mission Statement of the Africa Theological College that are based on the African religious culture demonstrate this vision. The statement, among other things, stresses these two points:

1. The faculty should live their theological affirmations in order to teach their students by theory and practice.

2. The biblical message, which is the basis of Christian spiritual formation, clearly shows that effective teaching is by example and not by theory alone.\textsuperscript{21}

To reinforce the point, the introduction to the curriculum of theology stresses that

While the courses of instruction will follow the formal structure of Bible, Church, and World, a feature of this curriculum will be an emphasis upon \textit{developing a community of learning and Christian growth}. Students and faculty will participate in colloquia or seminars in which issues of church life, personal understanding, and social awareness will be explored. It is anticipated that these seminars will provide opportunity for the formation of a ministry of the African Churches that is confident, articulate, informed, and
relevant.\textsuperscript{22} (italics added)

In the fourth paragraph community life on campus is underscored:

As far as possible, the instruction will be inter-disciplinary to reflect coherence and the need for community among teachers and students. Community worship will be at the center of the life of the school. (italics added)

Because the Theological College of the Africa University is not isolated from the African context, paragraph five requires the Christian community to be ecumenical:

The curriculum, while respectful of the United Methodist history and tradition, will be broadly ecumenical in character and emphasis.

The task of choosing adequately trained faculty with a vision for the future, a faculty committed to laying a firm foundation for the theological college, based on the laudable mission statement and preamble of the curriculum, a foundation of academic excellence upon which future generations can build is, in my opinion, the greatest challenge facing us today. According to entrenched African tradition, the dean of the theological college sits at the head of the family circle made up of faculty and students. In that position, the dean is expected not only to lead an exemplary life, but also, without exception, to enforce the college code of ethics forged by the community as a whole. The dean of the theological college should shun the sins of nepotism, tribalism, regionalism, and sexism. To succeed in this formidable task, the dean must constantly seek the guidance of God.

The second challenge that confronts the entire Africa University is that of finding the chief executive. This person must be African enough to realize that community unity and cooperation are his or her strengths, and who will also remember that African kings, chiefs or leaders were expected to be astute and firm in their judgment. Because of the traditional
African leader's fairness to all his people, his decision, arrived at after serious deliberation by the chief and his advisors, was final. In other words, the chief executive, like the deans of various colleges, must be a community leader, a "team player" with an exemplary lifestyle in academics, ethics and good leadership. The chief executive must be a person with a capacity to resist the temptation of quick expansion before the university is firmly established on sound academic and financial ground. He or she should be the guardian of the university's uniqueness, which is expressed in its unwavering desire to produce highly trained African leadership of great merit and moral fibre. This university must always regard the realization of this noble dream as its great commission and a challenge which it must strive to meet head-on at any cost.

We now have the plans for a great and unique university which, if realized, will be capable of training leaders for churches and nations of Africa, leaders who will have integrity and vision. I am quite confident that the Lord who has led us thus far will surely guide us through what, at this moment, seem to be formidable challenges. God will grant us wisdom to establish the Africa University on a strong African cultural foundation so that future generations will grasp our vision and gain inspiration to confront new challenges which will surely present themselves.

NOTES

1. The collective name "African" comprises three sociological categories of people. The first group is composed of people who have earned a good education locally or from overseas. They have good jobs, cars, and live in executive homes in urban areas. They often visit their relatives back "home" in the countryside. The second group is made up of migrant workers, most of whom have two houses. They regard their city home as a temporary home. It is their country home, no matter how poor it may be, which they regard as their real home. The last group is completely rural. These are peasant farmers with little or no education at all. What these three categories of Africans have in common is their cultural heritage, i.e. customs and religion. The country group is the guardian group of African religious traditions and culture. To minister to the Africans adequately calls for the church to recognize these classes of Africans and for the church to meet their varying needs.

The Africa University will be located at Old Mutare, Zimbabwe.
is divided into two distinct ethnic/language groups; the Ndebele (whose lan-
guage contains "click" sounds) in the south and the majority Shona in the north
(whose major cities are Mutare and Harare). Thus the Africa University will
be located in Shona territory. While my observations apply to most Africans,
I will use Shona terms and expressions (for which there are Ndebele counter-
parts) throughout this article. Although such ethnic distinctions are worth
noting, they should not be overemphasized: I myself am Shona, but have a
Ndebele name.

2. Unlike former days, the so-called witches—to be distinguished from witch
cults in developed countries—are no longer killed in Africa. According to the
legal code which African governments have inherited from the preceding
colonial regimes, charging anyone with witchcraft is now an offense punishable
by law. This has raised a very heated debate in Zimbabwe involving sociologists
and theologians. There are those who strongly believe that witches do exist
and that they should voluntarily admit their crimes. Others feel that these
individuals are megalomaniacs who should be sent to psychiatrists for therapy
rather than to prison. At any rate, Africans no longer revere these so-called
witches nor do they advocate their persecution. Witchcraft charges now appear
to serve a sociological function, that is, acting as a means of venting frustra-
tions.

3. The term "Westerners" is very broadly used. In a narrow sense, I am
referring to people in developed countries who have become scientific in their
orientation. Granted, there are many people in the West who are like Africans
in their view of the universe and natural phenomena.

4. See H. Frankfort et al., The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). This is an excellent book on the
ancient Near Eastern view of the universe which compares very closely to the
traditional African cosmological view.

5. However, Africans could distinguish between ordinary dreams (to pass
the night) and vivid dreams in which the ancestors and God were trying to
communicate something. Cf. the call of Samuel, 1 Sam. 3:1-17; Samuel’s
address to Saul at the witch of Endor, 1 Sam. 28:15.

6. The African genealogical chain which links human beings with God
compares to Luke's genealogy which traces Jesus in reverse order from Joseph
to Adam, “who was the son of God” (Luke 3:23-38).

7. In Africa, as it was in the ancient Near East, it was not customary for a
young person to assume a position of authority unless it was accorded to him
by the community with the concurrence of the ancestors. This also compares
with several scripture references in which those called tried to reject God’s call
and commission because, they argued, they were the youngest in their families
or their tribes were insignificant (1 Sam. 9:21; cf. Gen. 29:26).

8. Africans, like the patriarchs of Israel, regard God as a clan deity. To
Africans, though God is high and lifted up, he is still immanent because he is
regarded as Mabota, "Provider of porridge (to his children);" Musiki, "Creator,"
Unkulunkulu, "The Great, Great One." He is seen more as a benevolent God who acts like a father than as the Judge, King, and Lord of the Christians. See also the author's article, "Jewish Traditions and African Religion," Patterns of Prejudice 16 (1982): 19-20. A similar discussion by the author appeared in The Herald, Salisbury, 30 November 1979. In what was known then as a leader article, I published a paper entitled "The Bible and Ancestral Beliefs Have Many Parallels."


10. It was expected of the king in the ancient Near East to protect the less privileged of his land. In Mesopotamia, the reforms of a new king Urakagina, king of Lagash, stress how the distress of the poor had been alleviated. See also Ps. 82:1-8, a text in which God deposed the gods for failure to carry out justice to the poor, widows, and orphans.

11. Ps. 82:1-8; Amos 5:21-26; Prov. 31:9; 14:31; Lev. 19:14; Job 31:15. The Old Testament has many references stressing the society's responsibility to the poor, the widow and the orphan.

12. Africans viewed ancestors in the same way some modern Christian people view guardian angels.

13. To most Africans, "home" is the countryside where he or she was born and grandparents and other kinsfolk live or are buried. The beautiful house in the city is a temporary place where one stays while working in the city. To observe holiday season, many middle class African elite will spend it at "home" in the country. Even though there is no electricity and the amenities may be very simple, rudimentary and unhygienic, an ambiance created by being part of the traditional family circle fills one with relaxation, love, and great joy.

14. Africans, like the Old Testament Jews, are very traditional people. Traditions only change in so far as they must adapt to the new environment. Basically, however, modified traditions must always serve the same functions as did the old traditions. Traditions cannot be traded off or exchanged for new ones no matter how sound or logical the new ones may be.


17. It must be noted that Jesus did not dispute the existence of demons and evil spirits. He even drove them out of possessed people (Mark 11:23-26; 5:23; Matt. 12:43; Luke 9:42). The question whether Jesus personally believed in the existence of evil spirits or not is beside the point, which is that Jesus evangelized the Jews taking into consideration their cosmological viewpoint.

18. See Isa. 35:4; 41:10, 13, 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2; 45:7; 54:4. these are some of the references where Isaiah tells Israel to "fear not." Insecurity breeds irrationality, particularly among an aggrieved people. The New Testament also shows Jesus
teaching his disciples not to fear, e.g., Luke 1:13, 30: 2:10; 5:10; 12:7, 32. See also my article, "Belief in Witchcraft," 130.

19. The Israelites of the Old Testament believed in God not simply because He commanded that they do it, but because he showed his presence among them by signs and wonders (Deut. 6:23-33). Notice also that when Gideon (Judges 6) and Moses (Exodus 3-4) were called, they asked God for signs.

20. To the Africans, as was the case with the Jews of the Old Testament, religion was a way of life, a cultural behavior and not simply an ideal way of life. Jesus condemned those who did not live their faith as hypocrites, e.g., Matthew 15:7; 23:13-36.


22. "Introduction to Curriculum (of the College of Theology)," Africa University, adopted May 7, 1988, paragraph 1.
Women In Ministry: Estrangement From Ourselves

Susan Nelson Dunfee

To address the topic of women in ministry is at once to suggest something very old—yet very new. If we read carefully the stories of the early Christian communities recorded in the Gospels, we discover that women have always been among those who responded to the call to "follow me." And women have served well in our ministries of caring, of teaching, and of preaching. This is a very old story.

But women in ministry is also a very new story. Seminaries which just 25 years ago were filled almost exclusively with men are now boasting that 30-50% of incoming students are women. And although women are still facing difficulties in gathering that first and second call, more and more congregations are affirming that they like having women along with men in ministry.

What does it mean to be a woman in ministry? What is ministry? And what do women bring to the task of Christian ministry?

First let me suggest that our understanding of ministry is informed by the great commandment, that maxim by which we are to live our lives of ministry: we are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's what ministry means and that's what the life of devotion is about—to love God, neighbor, self.

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Secondly, although I would affirm that women bring gifts to the task of ministry that make our ministries especially dynamic, one of the things that women also bring to ministry is a basic sense of estrangement, an estrangement from ourselves, from each other, from all others, and from God. A basic estrangement that has implications for the way we do ministry.

To suggest that we are basically estranged individuals, on the one hand, is not risky at all. Rather it is good theology, reflecting a healthy doctrine of sin. We might remember from the tale of the garden that those first creatures who wanted to be, as the serpent said, "like God"--reveal to us our basic estrangement. As they separated themselves from God, so the whole world suffers a basic estrangement, as women and men are turned against each other in a patriarchal hierarchy, as humanity and nature become enemies, as those first creatures knew themselves to be occupants not of a garden where they could commune easily with God, but of a wilderness in which God seemed so far away.

I am suggesting not merely that women bring that basic sense of estrangement to ministry, but that we bring a different experience of estrangement, one that is characterized not so much by a desire to be "like God" but by our basic experience of feeling ourselves to be deeply related to the world and to others, by our conviction that such relationality is crucial to who we are and to the basic well-being of the world, and by our corresponding concern to care for and nurture those relationships. It is this relatedness, paradoxically, that estranges women from ourselves and others.

Let me tell a few stories to illustrate what I mean. But first, I would add the qualification that although I refer to this experience of estrangement as one that women experience, I am not assuming that it is the experience of all women. I think it is the experience of many women. Nor am I trying to suggest that it is the experience only of women. I am saying that when I hear of this experience, it is spoken of mostly in the voices of women. Sometimes men--especially in ministry--tell me that they identify with this experience. If so, then what I am describing as a basic sense of estrangement women bring to ministry may have implications for some men in ministry as well.
So consider these stories.
Ruth was a feisty, high-spirited young woman. She had driven her uncle's Stanley Steamer when it was the first car in the neighborhood. She was a journalist of some ability. And she dared, as her daughter later put it, to love and marry a man of the "wrong" faith. She was quite someone. But somewhere between the birth of her two daughters Ruth changed: she caved in, lost herself, forgot her own song, became a dependent, fearful woman. Perhaps she was pressured by family and inlaws to be a more devoted wife and mother, perhaps she heard the demands of too many voices, perhaps she lost her nerve. At any rate, Ruth, the feisty, independent young woman became a timid person, giving up any sense of her own interests and career to trail along after her husband on his business trips, afraid to be left alone. As her daughter, Gloria Steinem, tells the story, Ruth had become a different person, a stranger, from the Ruth of her youth. A person so different that Gloria, who only knew the Ruth of shadows and fears, didn't realize for a long time that there had ever been another Ruth; a Ruth who would have sung a different song from the one she knew; a Ruth whose strong and steady song Steinem poignantly sings in her short story, "Ruth's Song, (Because She Could Not Sing It)."

Sheila was a pastor of a small suburban church. She was good at her job. Her sermons, adroitly laced with narratives, were delightful to experience. She was good at sharing people's joys and griefs. She was a master at tactfulness. She would avoid the conflictual statement that might ruffle the feelings of her people. She was able to steer a graceful course around those perpetually annoyed members of her congregation who could take offense at anything. And people loved her; her ministry was successful. Or so she thought until the evening the youth delegate to the session raised a question on a controversial issue and challenged her to enter into a real dialogue, one in which she would have to share her own opinions publicly with the entire session. Sheila, who above all liked to be liked, managed expertly however to avoid entering into the dialogue and sharing her own opinion. She was afraid, she said, of too easily swaying the opinions of others. And, one must not risk a public opinion on such matters. Yet as Sheila so tactfully at first and
then with growing exasperation parried the persistent young delegate, a suspicion began to arise in the minds of the session members and in Sheila herself about her unwillingness to risk what might be an unpopular opinion with them, a suspicion Sheila later confirmed to herself when she shared with a friend that she was not even sure what she believed any more.

Sandy was a 20-year-old college junior who had suddenly been overcome by unhappiness. It all started when she entered a math class entitled "Theory of Numbers" and was told to "imagine a plane of imaginary numbers." What made her unhappy was that she had no desire to imagine such a plane -- and yet taking the course was part of the plan if she was to be a math major and be eligible to teach high school mathematics. Why was she unhappy? As she thought about it, she realized that she was unhappy because math was not really what she wanted to study or do with her life. Why then was she in this course? Why had she registered for college to be a math major? As she sorted out the various decisions in her life, she came to the realization that she was a math major because her parents had wanted her to be a math major, and that she was going to be a math teacher because her mother told her, "There's always a need for math teachers." Good practical advice, yet Sandy had begun to doubt whether or not she could sustain such a career. Did she want to invest her life in something that was practical but which didn't conform to her own inner passions? And, if she wasn't to be a math major, then what was she going to do? And then Sandy made an important discovery. She realized that she had spent so much of her first twenty years of life listening to the voices of others, seeking to please them, to fulfill their demands, that she didn't know what she thought or wanted any more. She didn't even recognize the sound of her own voice. Her life, she realized, had been lived on the periphery of her existence. For as she struggled to discover who she was and what she really wanted, she realized that all she knew about herself was what she saw reflected in the eyes of others.

Losing our song, not knowing what we believe anymore, living life at the periphery of our existence, knowing ourselves, that is, only as we see ourselves reflected in the eyes of others, these experiences all point to what I have called a basic estran-
agement from ourselves. Unable to sing her own song, Ruth became a different person; not knowing what she believed in, Sheila was a stranger to herself; knowing herself only as reflected in other's eyes, Sandy only knew herself from the outside-in, from the masks she wore to please others. These three women had all become strangers to themselves--and, thus, they could only be strangers to those they met, never sharing with others their true song, their own opinion, never reflecting a perspective from the inside-out.

How does this estrangement come to be? Certainly this is a far more pervasive question than can be answered in this short paper. But let me share with you some of my research in the field of women's development.

In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* sociologist Nancy Chodorow asks the question "why do only women mother?" And in her answer--that women mother because only women mother--she gives us a clue to the answer of our question. Women mother, that is, women are concerned with nurturing and with relationships, because they are raised by mothers, by women with whom they identify. This identification, Chodorow notes, goes beyond the "I'm going to be a mommy like my mommy when I grow up" syndrome. This identification affects the way young women experience themselves. Whereas young male children raised by mothers tend to experience themselves as different from their mothers and thus, with the encouragement of the culture, tend to develop an identity, a sense of who they are, apart from their mothers, young girls feel themselves connected to and not apart from their mothers. This connection, it would seem, is a deeply internal one, so that a boundary confusion, or better, a fluid boundary between mother and daughter, develops. Young women have an identity that centers not on apart-ness but on relationships. And they feel those relationships as part of who they are. Thus, Chodorow argues, girls emerge from the oedipal period "with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own" (p. 167). "Growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego
boundaries." She concludes: "The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world" (p. 169). The initial bond with mother, then, is not severed but spins outward in an ever-increasing network of relationships, relationships that are central to a young woman’s sense of who she is.

Drawing on Chodorow’s insight that relationality is a central experience for women, I turn next to the work of Carol Gilligan. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan argues that women’s emphasis on relationality means that we develop our identity, our sense of who we are, in a different way from the normative pattern for identity formation in this culture. Whereas normative identity has been understood to be forged through separation and apartness encompassing three basic stages (and here I am collapsing Erikson’s eight stages into three), intimacy, identity forged through separation ("cutting the umbilical," "severing the apron strings"), and generativity that comes about as the separate individual begins to reconnect, Gilligan argues that women form identity through connection. This means that women’s sense of identity is largely determined by who we are related to.

How does this alternate developmental pattern work? As I characterize Gilligan’s argument, women grow through three stages in our identity development. From an initial stage of intimacy and identity with mother, the young woman passes to a second stage, one I characterize as identity-through-relationship. Chodorow has noted that women feel relationships as a part of who we are and actually tend to feel another’s feelings as part of our own. This second stage is one in which relationships are primary in determining who a woman is. Because relationships are so central to who she is, a woman’s concern in this stage is to keep those relationships intact. And thus she strives to be, above all, a caring individual and judges herself on her ability to keep and nurture relationships. Young women, interviewed in a series of tests by Gilligan, reveal that what they fear most in this stage is anything that might threaten relationships, whether this be career, success, or just plain speaking in their own voice. This is the second stage.

The third, or mature, stage of development for women is one I characterize as identity-in-the-midst-of-relationship. In this
stage a woman begins to find room for herself in the center of her relationships. She begins, as Anne Wilson Schaef puts it, to have a relationship with herself. And this space, this room of her own, becomes a center from which she can hear her own voice. In this stage a woman moves from living at the periphery of her life, concerned with pleasing others and keeping relationships intact, to living from her own center, which she creates by clearing out space for herself. It is from this center, this space in the midst of relationship, that she can speak in her own voice. What is different here from "normative" development is that identity is not forged by cutting off relationships, but by finding room for a relationship with herself at the center of those relationships. From her center she does not disconnect those relationships but rearranges them, finding her own perspective from which to weave the network of relationships that are so much a part of who she is. This, Gilligan suggests, is how women develop a sense of selfhood.

Now, the problem of estrangement as I have described it earlier is not that women develop in an alternative way but that we tend not to fully develop at all. Women in this culture tend to get arrested in stage two, at the stage of identity-through-relationship, where it is relationality that is totally determinative of who we are. We live not from our centers but from the periphery. As one young woman described this stage, it is characterized by feeling a need to attend to voices other than our own. Accordingly, we avoid running the risk of hurting those others by what we feel would be selfish attendance to our own needs. Thus we live estranged from ourselves.

Now if this is what many women experience, let me suggest a few reasons why women get "stuck" or arrested at the point of identity-through-relationship without progressing to the stage of identity-in-the-midst-of-relationship.

First let me suggest that women get arrested at stage two because on the one hand we do care deeply about relationships. Relationships are a part of who we are. Yet on the other hand we have been convinced by our culture that listening to our own voices, attending to our needs, is by definition selfish. In the context of caring for relationships, attention to ourselves is considered selfish not only because it is concern for ourselves,
but also because it is understood to be at the expense of our concern for others. Self and other are counterpoised, placed into an either/or dialectic. Accordingly, attention to ourselves will be done at the risk of relationship. For a woman at stage two, who knows herself through relationship, the thought of caring for herself threatens her with fear on two fronts: the fear of being self-concerned and thus called selfish, and the fear of losing the very relationality that is basic to who she is. It is little wonder then that we are discouraged from caring for ourselves, from listening to and speaking in our own voices.

Secondly, I would suggest that women have trouble emerging from a stage two identity because, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out so many years ago, women are raised to please others. Women are raised to listen to others, to cater to the needs of others, to be presentable, pleasing. My father frequently said of my grandmother, "she always agreed with the last person she talked to." Raised to please, she never challenged anything anyone said. Whether or not she did so in her thoughts, she never mentioned it publicly. And similarly, I remember that as a little girl I was to be pleasing both in my attention to others and in my appearance. I had to wear dresses and skirts to school which were not to get dirty. Having to be pleasing meant for me not only looking presentable, it also meant being constrained from activities such as climbing on the "monkey bars" or playing "keep-away." Dresses don't allow such freedom. Raised to be pleasing, we learn not only that we should be attentive to others and attractive in other's eyes, but also experience a constraint that keeps us from exploring and perhaps discovering who we can be.

Do not misunderstand this last point. I am not saying that being attractive and pleasant are not important. The thrust of my argument is rather that, raised to please, we are in danger of thinking that being pleasing, having people like us, is the most important task of our life. When one is raised to please, one runs the risk of getting the message that what one's life is to be about is living up to other people's expectations. One learns then always to look to others for who one is to be.

Thirdly, and definitely related to the first two points, women tend to get arrested in a second stage of identity because our
behavior is reinforced by the myth of feminine goodness. The myth of feminine goodness is the common understanding both that women are good, and that our goodness is basically lived out as a sacrificial concern to put the needs and wishes of others before our own. Women in stage two, who are concerned primarily for relationship, experience the myth of feminine goodness as a roadblock to development, for it keeps them from ever hearing their own voices.

The myth of feminine goodness can be seen rather graphically in the popular "children's book" by Shel Silverstein entitled The Giving Tree. The book is described on its dust jacket as a "tender story... a moving parable for readers of all ages." It is a story about the myth of feminine goodness; a story of women caring for others regardless of what we ourselves need; a story which reinforces the myth of feminine goodness and the self-sacrificial behavior of women in general.

The Giving Tree is the story of a tree, a tree referred to as she, who lives solely in attentiveness to the needs of a little boy. Her joy in living lies not in the fullness of her limbs, the lusciousness of her fruit, the rich greenness of her leaves, but only in filling the needs of a boy. Only when she pleases him is she happy. (And the boy for his part seems to be concerned only for his own needs, and never for those of the tree.) At first all the boy needs is a playmate, and this role the tree fulfills with great gladness, relishing their interaction. But the boy becomes progressively more demanding. He needs money, so the tree gives him her leaves and fruit to sell. He needs a house, so the tree gives him her branches to build his house. He needs a boat to travel far away, so she gives him her trunk. And finally, he returns to her, a bent, aged and toothless old man (still called boy!) needing only a place to rest, and she offers him herself, her stump, as a seat. Her living in attentiveness to the boy has reduced her to a stump. And through her care for the boy, through her goodness, we are told, she is happy. This is the myth of feminine goodness, that women are truly happy when sacrificing ourselves for others, in denying ourselves, keeping others happy and thus keeping relationships intact. This myth of feminine goodness informs our sense of who we are and are to be, encouraging us to remain at the stage of identity-
through-relationship, discouraging us from being attentive to our own needs, from finding room for ourselves at the center of our being, and from having a center from which to speak to the world in our own voices.

A fourth aspect of what keeps women constrained to the second stage of our identity development is what I call the sin of hiding. To explain this, let me suggest that our understanding of sin is directly related to our understanding of what it means to be fully human. We read in the book of Genesis that humanity has been created both finite (from the dust of the earth) and yet free (enlivened by the breath of God). To be human, then, as Reinhold Niebuhr has written, is to live in the tension of being both finite and free, as both limited and thus to a certain degree determined, and yet free, so to a certain degree able to transcend those limitations. To live with the tension that exists between finitude and freedom is what it means to be human. Sin is how we mishandle the tension. Ideally, through faith in God, the tension is livable. Our sin is that, in the anxiety created by living in such a tension, we opt not for faith in God, but for our own human measures. Traditionally, theology has understood the primary form of sin to be that of pride. Pride is turning from God and turning toward our human freedom. Denying both God and human finitude, persons become gods in themselves. Cut off from others, they pretend to be self-sufficient. But, because they are not God, and because they are finite, the sin of pride results in a bondage from which they cannot free themselves.

The sin of hiding is the polar opposite form of sin, one which has been called woman’s sin by scholars such as Valerie Saiving and Judith Plaskow. Like the sin of pride, it is the sin of turning from God. But, unlike pride, hiding is a turning not toward our freedom, but rather a running away from it. It is the sin of running from our responsibility and freedom to be co-creators of the world, from our freedom to name ourselves in response to God’s call. It is the sin of evading the burden of freedom and allowing someone or something else to bear the burden for us, to tell us what to do, where to go, or even who we are. It is taking refuge in some form of finitude. As Saiving has described it, it is characterized by such terms as "triviality,
distractibility, and diffuseness. "It is the lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence... in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self" (p. 37). It is revealed in an essay written by a college freshwoman who, when asked to write a composition entitled, "Who am I?" wrote the following:

As I sit in my dorm room, the only thing I can think of is becoming Mrs. Peter Johnson. I can picture a small apartment which contains a flowered couch with matching chair, a small black and white TV, and green carpeting through the house. I see myself in a pair of lounging pajamas with a little white apron on, so as not to get dirty. In the oven is a small beef roast with sliced carrots on the sides. The table is set for two with my plain brown Melmac dishes. The coffee is perking as I wait for Peter to come home from work... I'm unhappy away from Peter and until the day I become his wife, I am no one.  

"Who am I? Until the day I become his wife, I am no one." This is the young woman's description of who she is. Yet, at the time of the writing of this essay, her teacher notes, there was as yet no Peter Johnson in her life. Who he is does not seem to matter. He is not present, yet it is he who shall define who she is. She can foresee all the little details, the colors of the upholstery, the sliced carrots for dinner. Yet, until she is Mrs. Peter Johnson, she is no one. The sin of hiding is that she chooses to be named from without, by someone else, rather than name herself from within herself. She chooses to hide from her freedom to name herself. She is a college freshwoman, studying for a degree. She has talents and abilities that she could use to identify herself. She rejects the right to name herself, waiting for the man who shall define himself and in so doing, name her Mrs. Whoever-he-is. She puts herself on hold. She is, of course, choosing to name herself Mrs. Peter Johnson. But the point of the sin of hiding is not the total refusal to choose, it is choosing to allow herself to be named by another person and to live to please that other. It is the choice to be passive. It is the choice to live totally through another person.
because she has chosen not to be someone from within herself, from her own center of being. It is the sin of choosing to wear a mask someone gives you rather than being yourself. And, inasmuch as it is woman’s sin, it helps to keep women from ever relinquishing our masks and having an identity of our own, a center in the midst of relationship.

And finally, if the sin of hiding describes a condition that keeps women from claiming our freedom to be someone from within ourselves, then this sin, and thus the arresting of women in stage two, is further enhanced by a religious tradition that has named the primary form of sin as pride and correspondingly has named the ultimate virtue to be self-sacrifice. As Judith Plaskow has noted “theology, insofar as it focuses on the sin of pride, not only neglects women’s experience, but adds to the pressures that keep women from being ‘women and persons’ by suggesting that self-assertion and the struggle for self-definition are sins” (p. 68). As I read Niebuhr and others who describe human sin primarily as pride, I would argue that they understand pride to be a problem because it cuts people off not only from God but from each other. Centering around themselves in a vicious circle, prideful persons sever relationships with others and then treat them not as subjects worthy of love and respect, but as objects, things over which to have power. Self-sacrifice, Niebuhr argues, is the correct antidote to pride, for it shatters the shell so carefully constructed through the circling of self-concern and opens the person up to, as he states it, live in and for others. But this is not women’s problem, for women, as we have seen, tend too easily to live in and for others. Moreover, our sin is that we find it easier to live in and for others than to live in connection with others from our own center of freedom and responsibility. By naming sin as pride, as self-assertion, the tradition names as sinful what in fact women must do if we are to become full human persons, namely assert for ourselves in the midst of our being a room of our own. And correspondingly by naming self-sacrifice or living-in-and-for-others as a virtue, the tradition both fails to name women’s sin of hiding as sin and encourages women to continue hiding as if it were a virtue.

Having outlined what I mean by women’s estrangement and
the various factors that block women from emerging from that estrangement, let me make a few suggestions about what this means for women in ministry. A ministry which I said initially implies a certain love of God, neighbor, and self.

First of all, this estrangement means that women have a tendency to feel that we should meet every need that confronts us, to care for all. This is a problem because no one can do this, there are too many needs in the world. But without any sense of how to decide which needs are legitimate and which are beyond our abilities to deal with, we face the temptation of being totally caring and giving. This means that the only time we feel all right about quitting is when we have burned out. It seems to me that I hear the word exhaustion bandied about the halls of our seminary a lot.

Secondly, women have a tendency, like Sheila, to want to be nice and pleasing. Thus we risk not knowing what we think. Dare we allow a stray thought to emerge? A thought that might even be inspired of God? That might create conflict or even honest confrontation to surface? And if that thought does emerge, dare we speak those thoughts? Dare we preach that prophetic sermon?

Thirdly, women run the risk of basic dishonesty, not only because we fear to say what we think, but also because we want so badly to please others that we run the risk of not ever admitting to ourselves our own intentions, our own complicity. "I only did this because they would leave the church..." I think often of the "Jimmy Carter passage" of the Bible, Matt. 5:21-48, where Jesus says that not only our killing but also our hating, not only our adultery, but also our lust will get us in trouble. This passage points out the basic necessity that we be honest about our intentions, that we claim our intentions and deal with them as our own, and not as someone else's fault.

We have a story in our family about faults. When my oldest daughter was four we were in a wallpaper store one evening. She had insisted upon bringing with her a small doll. We stayed until closing. On the way home, I heard a little plaintive voice from the backseat moan "we left my doll." I, of course, commiserated and promised to return the next day to retrieve the wayward toy, but reminded my daughter that I had told her not
to bring the doll, that it had been her responsibility to keep an 
eye on it, and that it was her fault that it was left behind. We 
travelled on for a few minutes in silence. Then I heard this small 
voice mutter: "I hate faults!" I hate faults, too. But only when 
we claim our faults do we accept responsibility for what happens 
and only then are we then free to do something about it.

Fourth, estrangement from ourselves suggests a basic 
estrangement from God. Matthew 25 tells us that we meet 
Christ in the faces of the needy ones we serve. But we also need 
to meet God in the still small voice that speaks to us at the 
center of our being. When we live our lives at the periphery, 
always dancing on the outside, how can we hear that voice? 
What space, what quiet, do we offer God?

And finally, women's estrangement from ourselves has im­
lications for women in ministry. As we explore this experience 
of our estrangement from self, others and God, we begin to 
challenge basic understandings of ministry that imply that 
loving God, neighbor and self mean putting the needs of others 
always first. We begin to challenge models of self-sacrifice or at 
least ask how we can understand what is meant by the term 
self-sacrificial love. We begin to wonder if honesty, truth tell­
ing, owning our own complicity, calling other people to own 
theirs, and even anger--are not also works of love, works of 
ministry.

Now all these implications for women in ministry are not 
negative. The final one I think has real possibilities--for when 
women become aware of our estrangement and recognize the 
dangers that threaten our ministry, we begin to look for alter­
nate ways to do ministry, alternate ways to understand the 
great love command to love God, others, and self. This search­
ing for alternate ways of ministry seems to me to offer to 
churches and seminaries a rich resource as we consider, as each 
generation of theologians must do, what it means to be the 
church and what it means to do ministry.

Now let me digress for a moment to tell you about Sara. Sara 
is a senior M.Div. student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. 
As she now looks back on her childhood, she realizes that she 
has spent most of her life taking care of other's voices, a fact 
exacerbated by the fact that her parents' marriage was a
troubled one, so that there was a lot of care-taking and peace­keeping to do. Sara came to seminary soon after college. She has been involved in ministry much of her life and now volunteers regularly at a local women’s shelter. As we pursued in class this basic experience of estrangement, Sara came to realize that the life of estrangement, of living in sole attention to the voices of others at the expense of her own, was the only way of living she knew. And then she began to wonder whether her desire to be a minister was, in fact, a product of her estrangement! That thought shook her up and led her to evaluate why she was in ministry. As a result of her time of self-evaluation, Sara has not left seminary, but she has discovered a new perspective for her ministry. Having claimed space for herself, she was able to see that her ministry had in some ways reflected her estrangement, but that it need not. She discovered that she could like herself apart from the shelter and that what also drew her there was a genuine concern to help. And she discovered a real sense of God’s presence and call in her life. Having evaluated her ministry, Sara now says she feels "less compulsive" about her work, more secure, better able to evaluate the needs and concerns of others, and in general, likes herself and her ministry much better. Listening to Sara share her story, I wondered if such a journey wouldn’t be valuable for all persons entering ministry.

Speaking theologically of Sara’s experience, ministry as estrangement became a form of works righteousness from which she could find little release. Having created the space for herself to hear her own voice and to hear the healing word of God, she then was able to minister not out of a compulsion to fill everyone’s needs, but out of thanksgiving for God’s love and call in her life which turned her ministry into one of joy and genuine concern.

Having outlined the problem and dangers of estrangement, I would like now to explore some of the ways in which women are able to overcome this basic estrangement from self. This discussion has implications for the way in which we as women do ministry... but it also has implications for ministry to women. I do this in the hope that our ministries as women, and with and to women, can be enhanced.
So let me share then with you some ways in which women's basic estrangement from ourselves, others, and God can be overcome. And note that even though I speak of overcoming our basic estrangement, I am not suggesting that all the world's estrangement will be overcome in the process. I am too good a student of Reinhold Niebuhr to take lightly the sense of sin and not to know that even our best efforts are not without flaw. Moreover, even though I speak of overcoming estrangement as if it were a once-and-for-all accomplishment, my experience of such overcoming is more of a fluctuation between our different stages of development. This means, as well, that the dangers for women cannot be disregarded totally once we begin to speak in our own voices. Perhaps we only become better at recognizing them.

First, a woman seems to emerge from her basic estrangement from herself when she becomes aware that there is a disequilibrium that affects relationships when she cares totally for others without listening to her own voice. That is, she becomes aware that she is becoming a stump (to refer to the "Giving Tree") or, as the common parlance goes, a doormat.

But there is perhaps an even more basic awareness that seems to precede the awareness of disequilibrium. For, before a woman can become aware that there is a problem with the disequilibrium in relationship, she must first see the disequilibrium, she must see or feel that she hurts, and she must know that it is important to be aware of how she feels. This suggests that it is also important that women realize that it is not all right to hurt, that pain means something, and that although life is full of suffering and pain, we need not accept all pain as a necessary given.

Now this may seem to be an obvious realization. And yet, for many women such a realization is not easy, for it means becoming aware of much more. This dual realization that there is hurt and that hurting is a problem is also blocked because the culture that manufactures the myth of feminine goodness also manufactures the myth that women who give all the time are happy doing so, that we feel no pain. That there is a basic disjunction between what the culture tells us that we feel, and what we in fact do feel became evident to me once when, on a
church retreat, I decided to have the group act out the story of "The Giving Tree." As the story proceeded, the woman who acted the part of the tree started out with her hands stretched out to the sky. She then became repeatedly constrained. Her fruit was taken from her, her arms were secured behind her back, and finally she assumed the position of the stump, bent over kneeling on the floor with one of the men of the church sitting on her back. As the narrator repeated the litany "and the tree was happy," Nancy, the woman playing the tree, finally screamed out, "I am not happy!" A real woman playing the part of the tree saw through the myth of feminine goodness revealed in the story.

When a woman becomes aware of her own deep hurts she can begin to see the disequilibrium that exists in relationships. Then she can become aware of the need to clear a space for herself in the center, the need to risk rearranging relationships so that there can be that space. Of course, this may not be easy. That's why so many of us find it too threatening to even consider. Not all relationships are that pliable. Sometimes rearranging relationships may mean the severing of relationships or perhaps leaving them for a while. And, when there are no models in the culture that would encourage such a rearranging of relationships, many women simply stay in unhappy relationships or opt for surviving by severing all relationships, neither of which is a happy resolution, neither of which is necessarily a way to overcome a basic estrangement from ourselves.

Secondly, the move from stage two to stage three for women seems to be aided by the recognition that care for oneself is not necessarily detrimental to relationships. That is, whereas the common understanding of the culture may be that care for oneself is selfish and thus threatening to relationships, women progress to stage three when we realize that life is not simply an easy either/or, that life and relationships are much more complex than that. That there are more needs than any one person can possibly meet; that often needs conflict with each other, leaving folks stuck between "a rock and a hard place"; and that, paradoxically, care for oneself often enhances relationships rather than detracting from them.
WOMEN IN MINISTRY

To illustrate, Ann was a young woman very much in love with a minister. Bob, her boyfriend, loved Ann but was also very devoted to his ministry, so much so that every Saturday night, when Ann would have liked to go out with Bob and enjoy his company, Bob insisted on staying in his apartment and working on his sermon alone. Ann felt hurt. But, not wanting to put a strain on the relationship by voicing her hurt, wanting to care for Bob and the relationship, she didn't protest.

However, after months of this behavior, Ann's hurt finally gave way and she had a love affair with a man she later realized was totally inappropriate for her. This activity, when Bob learned of it, hurt him deeply and brought their relationship to the brink of dissolution.

In caring and concern for her relationship to Bob, Ann had not taken care of her own needs to be given some tender loving care. But, and here is the paradox, instead of nurturing the relationship, her denial of herself eventually ended up in creating great hurt or at least hurt for more people than might have been generated had she, out of respect for her own needs, told Bob how she really felt. In this case, caring for herself and caring for the relationship were not opposed, although she treated them as if they were. Her affair did in fact oppose her attendance to her own needs with her care for the relationship.

The breakthrough from estrangement, thus, is connected with a realization that care for self is not necessarily opposed to care for others and that self-assertion need not threaten relationships but in fact may mean communication. When such an understanding of the complexity of relationships and the denial of the simple either/or (meaning either your needs or mine) gains greater credence and popular consumption, then women can be more attentive to our own pain, needs, and voices and be more aware of the disequilibrium in relationships that can then be remedied before we hit the crisis point.

Thirdly, the breakthrough to stage three for women is connected with an awareness that the myth of feminine goodness entails a certain dishonesty. I hinted at this earlier. Seeking to be good and pleasing to others, a woman may submerge her needs. Yet it would seem that our needs do not disappear, but rather resurface in the form of manipulative activity. Thus,
under the guise of being good and caring for others, women are encouraged by the myth of feminine goodness to deny our own culpability and participation in the decisions of life. We see our activity as pleasing others; thus indirectly we seek to control the activities of others. Yet our own activity is discounted as not our fault. . . nothing we can control. Correspondingly, when our dishonesty is revealed, when we can claim our own culpability for what we do, then we can be freed to claim our own activity and to begin to actively participate in the decisions of our own lives.

An example of this activity emerges in Gilligan's study. She narrates the story of an interview with a young woman undergoing abortion counseling. The woman claims to want the abortion to please others. If she doesn't get it, her lover will leave her. It is not really her decision to abort—and thus not her fault. She has no choice.

By patient listening, the counsellor in Gilligan's study was able to expose to the woman her own basic dishonesty. She came to admit that it had been her hope that by becoming pregnant the faltering relationship with her lover would be healed. It was now her hope to save the relationship by having an abortion. She had made decisions informed by her concern to maintain the relationship with her lover. Because her activity was informed by the myth of feminine goodness that reinforces concern for relationship over concern for self and also reinforces the image of women care-givers as good, she was unable to deal with either her own disappointment in the faltering relationship or with her own complicity in the decision to have the abortion. Confronted by the counselor, the woman was brought to an awareness of the complexity of life and of her basic dishonesty in blaming her pregnancy and abortion request upon her lover. She then was able to see that she had more control over her life than she had been willing to admit. The woman was then able to openly make her own decision and take responsibility for the results.

Fourthly, women tend to move from our state of estrangement when we realize that our hiding is a problem. Earlier I described the sin of hiding from our human freedom and responsibility to participate in the naming of the world. The
awareness of the problem of hiding can come from within ourselves when we realize that we are not totally contained within the names someone or some group have given us. When we realize that we have been hiding, playing it safe, we will feel the need to name ourselves.

But this realization is also enhanced when the sin of hiding is recognized as precisely sin; when theologies are written with a sensitivity to the fact that living in and for others is in fact a problem, a sin, for many people. Inasmuch as Christian theology identifies pride and self-centeredness as the sin of humanity, it calls women to confess the wrong sin. By identifying sin and self-centeredness as sin, it discourages women from finding our centers and taking pride in who we are and can be. A theology that addresses the complementary issue of hiding as a problem helps to bring to consciousness what many women already know, but are afraid to act out.

Finally, women are aided in our journey from estrangement by a religious system that values not only the virtues of self-sacrifice and living in and for others, but recognizes other modes of what it means to be a Christian as well.

Karl is one of my students. He is an active advocate in the pro-life movement. Karl came to me, aware that we might not agree, to do an independent study on the issue of abortion. We talked for several hours on the issue before he departed to do his research.

Six weeks later he returned to my office to turn in his paper, and said to me, "I understand why you must take the stand you do, but I just cannot advocate a pro-choice position because, any way I cut it, abortion is a selfish act. As a Christian, I cannot condone such selfishness."

Letting the issue sit for a while, I asked Karl (who is a student pastor as well as a full-time student and father of three young children) how he was doing. He responded that he was doing all right. But then, he said, he got out of the house once in a while and came to school. He was getting stimulation, but his wife was not. As a matter of fact, he said, she was so unhappy that he had decided that, whether they could afford it or not, they were going to have a vacation that summer so his wife could have some relief.
"Well, Karl," I said, "is your wife's need to have relief irresponsible?" "No," he said, "she knows her limits and it is her responsibility to be attentive to them so that she can have some relief." "Well then," I asked, "Is her behavior Christian, to demand some relief?" "Certainly," he said, "I would call it good stewardship." "You mean," I said, "that being a good steward of our needs and abilities is part of being a Christian?" "Yes," he said. "Then," I said, "could we say that self-sacrifice or unselfishness is not the only mode of being a Christian? That sometimes good stewardship, which may mean taking care of oneself, is also being a good Christian?" "Yes," he said to me, adding haltingly "I suppose so."

Now I did not change Karl's mind on the issue of abortion that day, but what I think happened in our dialogue was that we both came to realize that being a Christian can mean being a good steward by being attentive to one's own needs and developing one's abilities as well as being unselfishly concerned with the needs of others. I would add to that now that it may also include truth telling, the admitting of our needs and our frailties, communicating to one another what we really think and feel. When Christians realize and even affirm that being a Christian can have many such facets, then people like Karl's wife, who need to hear their own voices and who need to take time for themselves for a while, may be encouraged to do so-understanding that at times it is even God who calls us to such activity.

Let me tell you about a vision one of my students had. Carol is an attractive young woman who admits to having a history of falling into relationships with men in which her own needs are ignored and in which she often feels taken for granted if not even abused. Carol shared with our class one day that she had been struggling through just such a relationship with a man when she suddenly realized how destructive the relationship had become for her. Anxious to act upon her realization before she could soften her will, Carol jumped in her car to drive to his house. Before she could get very far down the road, however, she was suddenly aware of a vision. The vision was of an angry Christ on the cross looking down at her saying "I suffered Carol, why can't you?" Now such a vision would be enough to stop
many of us in our tracks. And Carol later admitted that had the vision occurred to her a few weeks earlier, she would have turned her car around. What did happen however was that Carol suddenly had not another vision, but the overpowering conviction that that man on the cross speaking to her so disapprovingly was not Christ at all... that Christ would not expect her to stay in such an abusive relationship.

Now I found Carol's story quite amazing and challenging for it reflected that she had come to realize that suffering is not necessarily all that being a Christian is about; that sometimes getting out of abusive relationships, sometimes saying what she felt, were also important aspects of her Christianity. And she also revealed to the class something else... the ability to trust in her own voice that told her that that man on the cross was not Christ.

I have suggested in this paper that many women bring to ministry a certain estrangement from ourselves. I have suggested as well several reasons why women often remain estranged from ourselves, and several ways in which women come to make room for ourselves and find identities not through relationships, but in the midst of them.

But in conclusion let me add that the journey from estrangement from oneself and others that I have spoken about here entails a certain "catch-22," for when we emerge from estrangement, when we begin to clear out a space for ourselves, when we hear our own voices and begin to sing our own songs, it is often accomplished in a strangely halting and stumbling manner.

Like a baby beginning to walk, like a person who tries to write after her hand has been in a cast for several months, like someone learning a foreign language, women who emerge from being strangers to ourselves, who leave behind the masks we wore with no new masks to hide behind, often talk and walk and act strangely. Sometimes women who do this are termed weird or crazy.

So, finally, I would say that women can stop being strangers to ourselves and to others and can emerge from our estrangement when we as a culture, when we as pastors, when we as friends, spouses, parents, begin to value the faltering steps, the
halting speech, and the frail and often discordant sounds that begin to emerge as women among us, perhaps we ourselves, begin to sing our own song.

NOTES

3. Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
12. Carol Gilligan's theory of women's development offers several ways in which the transition out of estrangement, the transition from stage two (identity-through-relationship) to stage three (identity-in-the-midst-of-relationship), may be accomplished.
Dialogue In Depth:  
A Monastic Perspective

James E. Royster

Two of the most pressing needs in the church today are for a deeper spirituality and a broader theology. These needs become apparent not only through a sensitive inspection of the churches themselves but also through an increasing acquaintance with the major religions of the world. The potential gain for both clergy and laity is immense as Christians take seriously the faith and practice of the adherents of other religious traditions. The monastic tradition, in Christianity and in other religions, offers a center, a resource, and a stimulus for developing both a more profoundly contemplative life and a religiously more inclusive stance.

In the latter half of the twentieth century a number of Christian monks have used the expression “dialogue in depth.” The context of this dialogue in depth is the wider ecumenism, what Raimundo Panikkar called “ecumenical ecumenism” almost thirty years ago. In the same essay he also affirmed this depth factor when he noted that “true ecumenism has a contemplative dimension” (p. 783). This expanded and deepened ecumenism represents an application of the central thrust in Christian ecumenicity to the world religions at large. It is an attempt, in other words, to join with the committed adherents of the world’s religions and to first discover and then articulate together both that which unites and that which distinguishes one tradition from another, all in an atmosphere permeated by a profound sense of the Ultimate.

No group of religious specialists has played a more crucial

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role in this wider ecumenicity than have monks. Armand Veilleux, former abbot of a Cistercian monastery in Canada, claims that “all those who are called monks... bear a special responsibility in the interreligious dialogue.” This special responsibility derives from the common meditative or contemplative focus that animates monastic life, whether Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, or other. David Steindl-Rast, himself a Benedictine monk, argues that “monasteries are the ecumenical centers of the future.”

Monks and nuns all over the world speak the same language, as it were. In the things that really matter, they are often much closer to each other across religious boundaries than they are to lay people of their own respective religious groups. This makes monasteries the ecumenical centers of the future, even without any explicit efforts to this effect. The greatest value monasteries offer to our human family today may well lie in the witness they bear to the unity of the human quest for Ultimate Meaning.

Thomas Merton points out that “communication in depth, across the lines that have hitherto divided religious and monastic traditions, is now not only possible and desirable, but most important for the destinies of Twentieth-Century Man.” In our time, among a growing number of monks, the monastic vocation includes a fundamental commitment to dialogue in depth.

This transecumenical dialogue in depth requires a “spiritual practice enabling the individual to attain a level deeper than that of cultural roots,” claims Aelred Graham, an English Benedictine with wide experience in East-West monastic exchange. Dialogue that occurs only at the cultural, theological or exoteric level is inherently limited, unable to penetrate the deep reaches of human experience. Transreligious ecumenicity, to be fundamentally and lastingly effective, “must take place at the deepest level of human consciousness,” according to Father Bede Griffiths, head of Shantivanam Ashram in India. William Johnston, a Jesuit who has spent much of his life in Japan in scholarly and experiential
encounter with Zen Buddhism, believes that participants in deep dialogue must engage “vertical thinking, the supraconceptual grasp of reality without words or concepts or images.” Similarly, in his essay, “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue,” Merton refers to a “‘communion’ beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a ‘preverbal’ level but also on a ‘postverbal’ level.” (Asian Journal, p. 315.) The preverbal level consists of the “unspoken and indefinable ‘preparation,’ ‘the predisposition’ of mind and heart, necessary for all ‘monastic’ experience whatever.” Merton’s postverbal level refers to that place in consciousness where the participants in dialogue meet “beyond their own words and their own understanding in the silence of an ultimate experience which might conceivably not have occurred if they had not met and spoken.” It is obvious that Merton’s approach to intermonastic dialogue was far from simply academic. He not only opened himself to personal change but actively sought it. He believed that it was possible to “learn in depth” from the discipline and experience of other monastic traditions and sought “true self-transcendence and enlightenment... in the transformation of consciousness in its ultimate ground” (pp. 315, 313, 316).

Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda

When Merton visited India on his fateful trip to the East in 1968 he carried with him the name of a French Benedictine who had then been resident in India for twenty years. This monk, Henri Le Saux, or Abhishiktananda as he was better known in India, and Merton seem not to have met. It is perhaps safe to venture, however, that had they met there would have been an instantaneous conjoining at the heart. Both men shared a profound commitment to interiority and silence, and to sensitive exploration of the truth in Eastern religious traditions. Merton’s exploration, however, was prompted primarily by literary sources, and took place for the most part at a distance from the living milieu of Eastern traditions. Abhishiktananda, on the other hand, while delving profoundly into the sacred literature of India, particularly the Upani-
shads, also sat at the feet of two of India's great saints. At the
time of his death in 1973 he had spent a quarter of a century
integrating in heart and, as far as possible, in mind the deepest
spirituality of Christianity and Hinduism. It is, in fact,
doubtful if any Christian monk in the second half of the
twentieth century has taken more seriously than Abhishikt-
ānanda the deep call to discover and explore experientially
the ultimate ground that unites monks of different religious
traditions. To have profound religious experiences by means of
the perspectives and practices of a tradition other than one's
own is to know in one's heart, with experiential certitude and
not simply intellectual opinion, that the Sacred is not confined
to one's own spiritual heritage. One encounters undeniable
'proof' of the non-temporal/spatial nature of the Sacred, and
interreligious relationship or dialogue takes on a qualitatively
new meaning. Abhishiktānanda's penetration of the spiritual
depths in both Hinduism and Christianity provides a revealing
demonstration of transmonastic dialogue in depth.

Born in Brittany, France, in 1910, Henri Le Saux became a
professed monk in 1931, two years after entering a Benedictine
monastery. Four years after becoming a monk he was ordained
to the priesthood. His study in the monastery brought him into
contact with India, its indigenous spiritual heritage as well as
the life of the Indian church. The more he learned about India
the more he felt himself pulled in that direction. Finally, in
1948, he arrived in India and became a close associate to
Father Jules Monchanin, a fellow French priest, who had come
to India some years previously. In 1950 the two of them began
to live a life of simplicity, study, contemplation, and service in
a small hermitage on the banks of the Kaveri near Kulittalai
in Tāmil Nādu. Here they lived as sannyāsīs (renunciants)
while establishing Saccidānanda Ashram, also known as
Shāntivanam, Forest of Peace. In 1957 Monchanin died and
Abhishiktānanda, as he was then known, began to travel more
often and more widely. It was not long until he transferred his
residence to a small, simple dwelling on the banks of the
Ganges near Uttarkāshi in the Himalayas. Here he enjoyed
increased solitude when he was not travelling throughout
India giving retreats, attending conferences, or visiting with
friends of similar persuasion. It was also here that he did much of his writing. Abhishiktánanda suffered a heart attack while running for a bus in the Rishikesh bazaar in July 1973. He later characterized this experience as “an extraordinary spiritual adventure” and wrote in his diary:

Seeing myself so helpless, incapable of any thought or movement, I was released from being identified with this ‘I’ which until then had thought, willed, rushed about, was anxious about each and everything. Disconnection! That whole consciousness in which I habitually lived was no longer mine, but I, I still was."

Never fully recovering from this heart attack, Abhishiktánanda “left the body,” as it is sometimes put in India, on December 7, 1973.

**Experience of Non-dualism**

Abhishiktánanda’s radical disidentification with the body-mind, his ‘Opening’, while lying on the street in Rishikesh was the culmination of his long search into the unifying depth of the Hindu *advaitic* (non-dual) experience and the Christian trinitarian experience. He, of course, had been convinced of the trinitarian truth long before coming to India. And while still in France he had begun to read the Upanishads, a major source of *advaitic* insight. But it was only after meeting Rāmana Mahārshi, a living embodiment of *advaita*, and perhaps this century’s foremost representative of neo-Vedānta, that Abhishiktánanda began to realize the immediate existential reality of non-dualism. No event in the quarter of a century he spent in India seems to have had solastingly formative an effect on him as his meeting with the Mahārshi (Great Sage). And yet, when he sat with the Mahārshi for the first time in January 1949, he was not particularly impressed. When he inquired about this he was advised to relinquish his desire to understand and simply to be receptive and open. His attempts to adopt a more accepting attitude were interrupted when he contracted a severe fever
and was forced to return to Kulittalai. The effect of this encounter with the Sage of Arunâchala, delayed as it was, began to work itself out, both consciously and unconsciously. Referring to "these powerful new experiences which my contact with the Mahârshi had brought to birth," Abhishiktânanda declared, "their hold on me was already too strong for it ever to be possible for me to disown them." Abhishiktânanda met Râmana Mahârshi a second and final time in July 1949. "This time... I did my best not to allow my efforts at rationalization to become an obstacle... and tried simply to attend to the hidden influence." Râmana Mahârshi died in April 1950 but the presence of the Sage continued to permeate the ashram that had emerged around him, as well as Arunâchala, the holy mountain that had served for so many years as the focus of his reflection and devotion. Abhishiktânanda returned several times to fast and meditate in the cells of the ashram and the caves of the mountain, sometimes for extended periods, thriving on the simplicity and solitude. Referring to Râmana Mahârshi and Arunâchala, he recorded in his diary in 1956: "They have become part of my very flesh, they are woven into the fibres of my heart."

Abhishiktânanda’s open and honest approach to the realm of the Spirit not only prohibited him from minimizing the truth and significance of the advaitic experience but impelled him to integrate this experience into his understanding of Christ and the church. He knew the limits of rationality too well to expect a convincing theological synthesis. And yet these limits must not impede serious reflection. “We are not,” he declared, “dispensed from pursuing our inquiries—not so much rational as intuitive—until the formulation of our conceptual thinking at last harmonizes with the mystery which is revealed in our inmost being.” What he sought was an experiential or spiritual integration in the depths, in the cave of the heart, as he often put it, an integration beyond conceptualization but nonetheless seeking ‘intelligible’ form. The reality of his advaitic awareness was so undeniable that he knew that the essential Christian experience could not be different from the essential Hindu experience, the two experiences being non-dual. Any apparent contradictions, he maintained, existed...
“only between the false substitutes which usurp their place, the premature and inadequate syntheses put forward on both sides by those who imagine that experience can be confined within their definitions.”

But only to the person willing to pursue each path to its ultimate end, disregarding all cost, will there be revealed the fundamental non-duality. In his journal in July 1971 Abhishiktânanda wrote:

Whether I will or not, I am fundamentally tied to Christ Jesus and so to the ecclesial Koinonia (communion). It is in Him that the ‘Mystery’ revealed itself to me, ever since my awakening to myself and to the world of men. Since my awakening to depths of myself here (in India), this symbol has become marvellously enriched. . . . I recognize the same Mystery which I have adored from the beginning under the symbol of Christ also under the myth of Narayana, of Krishna, of the Purusha.

But how to convey this deeply known truth! The final decades of Abhishiktânanda’s life are living testimony to successful integration within himself, within his own depths. Out of this depth there emerged formulations which, while by no means proving or rationally explicating the essential non-duality of fundamental Christian and Hindu truth, do testify to authentic experience and, consequently, point in the direction of non-duality. Abhishiktânanda avoided the common mistake that so many Western and even Indian writers make of equating advaita to monism, non-dualism to oneness. He maintained that there always remains relationship in the experience of oneness, distinction with non-difference. He argued for “the incomprehensible duality and non-duality, at one and the same time, of being, of God.” He believed, in fact, that this was the experience of Jesus: “It was a case of non-duality—in the proper sense of the word—between his experience of oneness with, and his experience of otherness from, God his Father.” Thus, “the experience of Jesus includes the advaitic experience, but . . . cannot be reduced to the commonly accepted formulation of that experience.” It was this subtle but fundamental distinction, between oneness and non-duality, that permitted him to
integrate *advaita* with the Trinity. Following are several formulations that convey Abhishiktânanda's conceptualization of his *advaitic*-trinitarian experience.\(^{18}\) These are to be regarded not so much as carefully cogitated theological statements as intuitive flashes from the depths, less reasoned and reflected than inspired and poetic.

[The Trinity is] the *face to face* of the Father and of the Son in the non-duality of the Spirit.

In Indian terms one can very well call the Holy Spirit ‘the *advaita of God*,’ the mystery of the non-duality of the Father and the Son.

In the mystery of God, at the very heart of Being, the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father, alike in the non-duality (*advaita*) of nature and in the threefold communion (*koinonia*) of Persons.

The mystery of the Holy Trinity reveals that *Being* is essentially a *koinonia* of love; it is communion, a reciprocal call to *be*; it is being-together, being-with, *co-esse*; its essence is a coming-from and a going-to, a giving and receiving. All that is, is communion, extending from the Father, the Source of all, to the Spirit, the consummation of all, transmitted by the Son.

**Theology from the Depths**

Abhishiktânanda was concerned about the formation of an “integral theology,” a theology founded on deep spirituality and communion with representatives of other religions. This integral theology must be based on “an ecumenical or transecumenical dialogue,” a “dialogue in depth” between “Christians, men of various religious traditions, and finally with all people of good will concerned with the ultimate.” Only a dialogue in depth avoids “the risk of remaining at the level of kindly attitudes.” The dialogue envisioned by Abhishiktânanda “is not an optional part of spirituality or theology, but an intrinsic component.” He does not believe that spirituality or theology should be adapted to meet the demands of ecumenici-
ty; instead, “the high demands of dialogue and ecumenism precisely oblige us to deepen our theology and spirituality.” As dialogue in depth proceeds with people of other religions our own spirituality will be nurtured and our theology will be re-fashioned. In fact, “dialogue and ecumenism are graces offered to us that we may become Christian in a deeper and richer manner.” Abhishiktânanda believed that no theological system has yet adequately grappled with the fact of other faiths. The traditional theologies have interpreted the gospel from the standpoint of a philosophical system, usually Greek, and more recently tried to accommodate people of other faiths within the system with only minimal alterations. “Dialogue in depth, however,” he argues, “is bound to call for a revision of the system, and it may be anticipated that the shock will be great.”

Abhishiktânanda believed that the only real meeting place between people of different religious traditions is the center of the self, or the guhâ, the cave of the heart, as he was fond of putting it, drawing upon an Upanishadic metaphor. The central theme running throughout his writings is the call to interiority, to silence. In retreats and conferences too his repeated reminder was to go within, to the depths. It might well be argued that the essence of his entire twenty-five year ministry in India was the relentless plea for inwardness. Just three months before his death he wrote: “Anything about God or the Word in any religion which is not based on the deep ‘I’-experience, is bound to be simply notional.” “What’s important ... is to be sufficiently ‘deep’ in order to transcend the letter, which does not mean to reject it. The crucial problems find their solution only in the deepening of ‘self’.”

The truth formulations of the religious traditions are not to be judged by the discursive mind; rather, they are to be ‘interpreted and understood’ in the heart. “There can be no genuine communication between human beings,” he maintained, “which is not first of all communion in the Spirit at the deep level of ‘heart’.” Reminding us of the view of Thomas Merton referred to earlier, Abhishiktânanda claims that “true dialogue originates in the silence of the Spirit, and ends in the same silence.” The conceptual exchange that occurs in the
interval is enriched by the silence. Abhishiktânanda felt, in fact, that without the silence the exchange would probably produce little if anything of lasting value. He seriously questioned the value of "exchanges of words and ideas [in] meetings and discussions" that do not emerge from a mutual penetration of the depths.  

Abhishiktânanda believed that it was only when meeting at this deep level of the Spirit, in silence, that cultural and religious differences, even apparent contradictions, can be dissolved. "Only the flesh creates frontiers;" he claimed, "in the Spirit all can meet." This descent into the domain beyond differentiation, to the ultimate depths, conveys man beyond the realm of symbol and concept and enables him to "experience his unity, his being-together with all, despite or rather by means of differences on the bodily, mental and sociological planes." Interreligious exchange that occurs solely at the personality and cultural level is always threatened by dissension and disruption because, despite the best of intentions, this level is necessarily permeated by the operations of the human ego and temporal change. "The only unity and harmony which has a chance of enduring and of standing up to the ever-recurring assaults against it is the one which is founded on the sharing of our common experience in depth." Dialogue in depth leads to the experiential discovery that "all are one in their origin and principle, diverse and complementary in their manifestations." And this amounts to "the courageous acceptance of both the unity and diversity of God's creation." One then experiences life as essentially "unity in diversity and diversity in unity."  

In fact, whatever the excellence of any dharma [religion], it remains inevitably at the level of signs; it remains on this side of the Real, not only in its structure and institutional forms, but also in all its attempts to formulate the ineffable Reality, alike in mythical or in conceptual images. The mystery to which it points overflows its limits in every di-
The depth experience that is the foundation for interreligious dialogue not only leads to the awareness that no form adequately presents the Absolute, it also leads to the awareness that every form presents the Absolute. “At the level of the soul’s self-consciousness, man recognises both the presence of God, the Absolute, in each of his manifestations, and the impossibility for any of these manifestations to express the mystery of the Absolute in a fully integral manner.” Drawing from his extensive assimilation of India’s spirituality, Abhishiktânanda concludes that “nothing exists that is not the sign of the Lord.” This is true, he maintains, “however little one’s inner eyes may be open and sensitive to the splendour of the mystery.” In his book Prayer, worthy of becoming a classic, Abhishiktânanda asserts that “there is nothing in this universe, or indeed in the whole creation, which is not in itself a revelation, a manifestation of God to man.” And he goes on in this same work to provide a prescription that will lead to the recognition of this “universal theophany”: “There is no doubt that it is by becoming more and more aware of the divine Presence in the secret place of our hearts that we become more and more aware of that same divine Presence surrounding us on all sides.” In a work entitled Guhāntara, which has not yet been published in its entirety, Abhishiktânanda sets forth poetically something of his own mysterious discovery of the universal theophany.

O my Beloved, in order to give me your grace, why have you hidden yourself beneath the lineaments of Shiva, of Arunâchala, of Ramana the Rishi and of the naked wanderer Sadâshiva?
Is all this your divine sport?
You assume every form as you play with us, for it is your wish that we should seek you beyond all forms!
For in the whole world there is no form which is not yours, which does not conceal you from the ignorant and reveal you to the one who knows!
Abhishiktânanda, through his own integral experience of Christian and Hindu spirituality, came to realize that every being and every event is a revealing/concealing theophany of the Absolute. And this fundamental truth, he concluded, “is the very foundation for a pluralistic . . . theology.”

The pluralistic theology envisioned by Abhishiktânanda is, of course, one based on an inclusive dialogue in depth, a dialogue not only between adherents of the world’s religious traditions but one that must eventually include humanists and atheists in so far as they are committed to the search for ultimate meaning. Abhishiktânanda thus eschews a negative motivation that is sometimes espoused in the call to dialogue, namely, to prepare a united defense against forces opposed to religion. His spirit of inclusiveness does not allow for the erection of what he would regard as temporal barriers. He is equally opposed to dialogue based on the least common denominator, a dialogue that is essentially reductionistic, that ends in what he calls “minimalism.” Nothing is to be gained by reducing the richness of God’s varied manifestations. Unity is to be discovered in the depths, in the domain of the Spirit, not at the level of necessary and desirable multiplicity. For these same reasons depth dialogue is uninterested in “an easy syncretism.” Dialogue in depth stands, quite obviously, in diametrical opposition to interreligious discussion that does not proceed beyond the intellectual level. In addition to his own direct experience with the limits of a purely intellectual approach to interreligious discourse, Abhishiktânanda met too many Hindus who were repelled by such an approach for him to hold any confidence in this form of dialogic encounter. The dialogue in depth that he pursued and championed also had nothing to do with exceptional states of consciousness or other-worldly visions and trances. “These phenomena,” he claimed, “have nothing intrinsically spiritual about them.”

**Principles of Dialogue**

Growing out of Abhishiktânanda’s stance on dialogue in depth are several attitudes and perspectives that materially effect the actual process of dialogue and consequently the
outcome or effectiveness. With a terseness born of experience he indicates that “equality among partners... is the first prerequisite in a dialogue.” Any hint of superiority will undermine all hope of genuine understanding. Mutuality is the key. “It is through dialogue that spiritual riches will be mutually shared,” he claims, “in complete disinterestedness on the part of the giver and humility on the part of the receiver, whose roles are likely to alternate continuously in the process.” Dialogue in depth is a process of “mutual donation.” “Not donation of anything one has, for the meeting is at the level not of having, but of being. It implies the mutual donation of what is the most essential to both.” Mutuality is fundamentally an I-Thou relationship. It implies recognizing the other’s Thou-ness as equivalent to one’s own I-ness. This means accepting one’s partner in dialogue as “a subject like myself, a source, an absolute, a universal centre. The other becomes someone with whom I relate at the very level of my self-awareness, to whom, paradoxically, my own self-awareness is open.” This mutual recognition of a common I-ness implies sharing common experience in depth. And here, in terms of human experience, we meet perhaps the most radical and far-reaching challenge of interreligious dialogue in depth.

Each partner in dialogue must try to make his own, as far as possible, the intuition and experience of the other, to personalise it in his own depth, beyond his own ideas and even beyond those through which the other attempts to express and communicate them with the help of the signs available in his tradition. For a fruitful dialogue it is necessary that I reach, as it were, in the very depth of myself to the experience of my brother, freeing my own experience from all accretions, so that my brother can recognise in me his own experience of his own depth.

This level of mutuality obviously requires extensive assimilation of another religious tradition, long periods of time in the company of the sages and saints of the tradition as well as careful study of and reflection on the tradition’s sacred books and spiritual texts. Abhishiktánanda saw this study and reflection
as a kind of internal dialogue in preparation for the person to person meeting.  

Abhishiktânanda identified humility and love as the two dispositions of the heart most essential to dialogue. “It is in the spirit of . . . love and humility, commanded and first exemplified by Christ, that Christians have to approach all their brothers.” The actualization of this spirit will, of course, take many forms. One very practical form, however, is that of the *epoché*, bracketing out one’s own belief structure, holding in abeyance one’s own convictions so that an open and unbiased mind is prepared for understanding the faith formulations of one’s partner. Applying the *epoché*, Abhishiktânanda claims, is “the essential precondition of any true dialogue.” Without it we tend to either judge our partner’s views as deficient or twist them to fit our preconceived notions. And in neither case are we practicing love or humility. “A temporary suspension of the consideration of our own tenets, convictions and opinions” allows us to hear our partner on his terms, thus to understand him in terms of his own self-understanding. The one who would be effective in depth dialogue must become “a pure transparency, a pure receptivity, so that he can understand the point of view of the other, [and also so that he can] . . . convey his own point of view as far as possible in the very categories of the other.” Practicing the *epoché* in no way implies a forfeiting of one’s own faith. It is, in fact, only on the basis of sound faith that one is able to bracket out personal perspectives. Strictly speaking, it is not faith itself that is held in abeyance but one’s intellectual formulations of faith, i.e., one’s beliefs and convictions. In spite of the genuine attempt, however, to practice mutuality, love and humility, and to apply the *epoché* there will be occasions when it is impossible for partners in dialogue to come to a common understanding. “When a difference of opinion cannot be bridged at the conceptual level,” Abhishiktânanda declares, “both parties instinctively look for a higher and deeper insight to which their opposing ways of expressing themselves are only partial approximations.” Until that insight dawns, mutuality, with all it implies, continues to mark the relationship between the dialogic partners.
The supreme value of interreligious dialogue in depth lies in the process itself, in the shared realization of a common life in the Spirit. In addition to this unmanifest and immeasurable value, implicit in all that Abhishiktānanda indicates about depth dialogue, there are additional benefits that emerge for the individuals directly involved, as well as for the historical traditions they represent. On the personal level, according to Abhishiktānanda, there is much to be gained in terms of psychological clarity and freedom. “Is not dialogue in depth the best means to free us from false identities and personal alienations, to discover our true self?” he asks. He believes, in fact, that real dialogue is “no less disturbing to our false securities than is a course in psychoanalysis.” Man is not truly free until his conscious identity coincides with his deep nature. Until then he tends to remain a slave to his defenses, insecurities, and complexes, identifying “himself with superficial—even if deep-rooted—knots of his psyche.” Abhishiktānanda sees this entire process as the result of fear and notes that “fear is absent when faith is fixed on the centre of our being.” Dialogue in depth calls, of course, for just such a centering. And because true dialogue is a process of self-integration it clearly contributes to health and wholeness. Furthermore, Abhishiktānanda continues, “dialogue helps man to free himself from all structures superimposed on him by his culture.” In dialogue one comes to see the relativity of all cultural forms.

While man’s psychic and spiritual natures are not to be confounded, neither are they unrelated. Increased freedom and purity in the one is manifested similarly in the other. If dialogue in depth is conducive to psychological health, how much more does it facilitate spiritual growth. Abhishiktānanda claims that interreligious dialogue becomes most worthwhile when “it is accompanied by openness to one another and when both sides accept the fact that each has something to receive and learn from the other, not merely at the intellectual level, but with regard to his inner life in the Spirit.” Drawing from his own deep experience with Hindu spirituality,
Abhishiktânanda declares unambiguously that “the self-awareness of advaitic experience is the highest human experience.” He goes on to say that for the Christian this experience must be “taken up, redeemed and transformed by the Holy Spirit into the very experience of divine sonship which was the foundation of Jesus’ personal self-awareness, and which he imparted to all those who give their faith to him.” Drawing from his own deep advaitic-trinitarian awareness, Abhishiktânanda avows that by “penetrating deeper and deeper into . . . [one’s] own soul and nearer and nearer to the Spirit who dwells in it, . . . [one] will share in a living manner in the experience of Jesus himself, of being both one with the Father and from the Father.” Indeed, Abhishiktânanda’s entire life is convincing evidence of the extent to which dialogue in depth facilitates spiritual realization.

At the level of the religious traditions themselves, dialogue in depth carries within itself the potential for increased balance. Participants may discover in the tradition in which they are in dialogue features comparable to their own tradition but in more developed form. They are then in a position to contribute to the development of these features in their own tradition. This does not, of course, refer to the incorporation of specific symbols, myths, rites, doctrines, etc. but rather to the fundamental experience and orientation that gave rise to the particular forms in the first place. Abhishiktânanda believed, for example, that Christianity might achieve a more viable balance by learning at least two things from Hinduism. First of all, it might extend its sense of universality and catholicity in order to become in both profession and practice as comprehensive and inclusive as Hinduism. Second, it might rely less on nāma-rupa, name and form, i.e., the level of manifestation as opposed to the level of ineffable experience. In other words, more emphasis might be placed on the development of spiritual qualities and less on conformity to traditional external patterns. While one might question Abhishiktânanda’s particular selection of features of comparative strength in Hinduism, these do illustrate the manner in which dialogue can contribute to what might be called interreligious cross-fertilization.
According to Abhishiktânanda, “the only principle of inter-religious dialogue is truth.” We have surveyed Abhishiktânanda's approach to truth, and seen something of what he himself regards as truth. Because truth is, from his perspective, changeless in itself though varied in its manifestations, humans necessarily have different conceptions of truth. Much of the dynamism that characterizes the religious traditions and interreligious discourse springs from these very differences. Abhishiktânanda's approach to religious pluralism is not only non-dogmatic but entirely open in terms of what may grow out of transecumenical dialogue. He regards interreligious dialogue in depth as a force contributing to the formation of the emerging future. “The results,” he claims, “will be something quite new and inconceivable beforehand.”

NOTES

9. Profound spiritual change sometimes manifests itself in physical symptoms even before any conscious, much less conceptual, awareness occurs.
18. Eyes of Light, p. 118; Saccidananda, pp. 95, 104, 135.
21. The Eyes of Light, p. 146.
22. Saccidananda, p. 194.
23. The Eyes of Light, p. 59f.
27. Further Shore, pp. 25f.
29. The Secret of Arunachala, p. 56.
42. Saccidananda, p. xiii.
God and the Heroic Prophet: Preaching the Stories of Elijah and Elisha

Richard D. Nelson

The framers of the Common Lectionary clearly favored the words of the prophets over reports of their actions. However, a few prophetic narratives were included, and the majority of these deal with the careers of Elijah and Elisha. The lections for the summer of Year C, for example, include two such narratives: 1 Kings 17:17-24 (Elijah revives the widow’s son, Third Sunday after Pentecost) and 1 Kings 19:14-21 (Elijah is recommissioned and recruits Elisha, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost). All told, there are about a half dozen narratives about these two figures scattered throughout the three-year cycle of pericopes. They are often linked in the lectionary with similar narratives from the gospels, in which Jesus parallels these two prophets in healing a leper, dealing with a poor widow, encountering a storm, or raising a widow’s son from the dead. In this, the lectionary follows the lead given by the Lukan Jesus, who compared his own prophetic mission to that of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24-27).

Prophetic Legends

From a form critical standpoint, the narratives about Elijah and Elisha are usually labeled prophetic legends, a term clearly open to misunderstanding by the uninitiated. “Legend” desig-
nates a story told about a religiously significant person or place with the intention of edifying the hearer. The audience may be urged to see the prophet as an exemplary figure whose conduct is to be imitated (1 Kings 19:20-21). The prophetic office may be held up as one to be respected (2 Kings 2:23-25; 8:3-6) or obeyed (1 Kings 17:10-16; 2 Kings 1:9-15; 5:10-14). The power of a prophet's word or deed may be celebrated to inculcate a sense of awe and wonder (2 Kings 2:19-22; 4:38-41, 42-44). In each case, the key to seeing these stories as legends is their edifying purpose. The hearers' conduct or attitude is improved when the tale is told.

The term legend grows out of the medieval practice of reading (Latin legenda from legere, to read) edifying stories about the saints in monasteries. But legends transcend Christianity and even religion as a whole. Legends told about Krishna and Mohammed can be found in any comparative religion textbook. Stories we tell about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln have precisely the same purpose and character as religious legends.

Designating a narrative as a legend does not necessarily impugn its historicity. For example, some legends told about St. Francis of Assisi are conceivably based on historical fact (selling cloth from his father's warehouse to rebuild the church of St. Damian) while others presumably are not (levitating in prayer). Washington never chopped down his father's cherry tree, but Lincoln certainly walked miles to return a borrowed book. Legends may avoid the supernatural (the call of Elisha in 1 Kings 19:19-21) or revel in the miraculous and magical (the floating axe head of 2 Kings 6:1-7). Decisions about their historicity must be made on grounds other than that of form critical genre.

On the one hand, the world of legends is not our world. Water parts miraculously. Bears charge out of the woods at a prophet's curse. Iron floats. Food multiplies by itself. The preacher who glosses over such problematic details risks losing credibility. Yet other things seem as contemporary as today's evening news: drought, famine, religious fanaticism (1 Kings 18:28), vicious warfare (2 Kings 3:24-25; 8:12), economic distress (4:1), conflicting religious and political loyalties (5:18). Here the
preacher may find opportunities to link the antique world of prophetic legend to the modern congregation.

Outside of the Elijah and Elisha narrative complex, prophetic legends are also found in 1 Kings chapters 13, 14 (Ahijah), 20, 22 (Micaiah), and 2 Kings chapter 20 (Isaiah). Prophetic narratives in which interest is focused less directly on the person or office of the prophet (those about Samuel or Nathan, for example) are usually not designated prophetic legends. First person call narratives and reports of visions or symbolic actions also fall outside this category.

Prophetic legends inadvertently reveal a good deal about the early history of the prophetic movement. Among other things we discover that these prophets sometimes prophesied in groups (1 Kings 22:6), sometimes lived together (2 Kings 6:1-2; contrast 2 Kings 4:1) and ate meals together (2 Kings 4:38). The members of these communal associations were known as the "sons of the prophets." Elisha is described as a leader of such a group, while Elijah was remembered as operating alone.

Legends about Elijah and Elisha would have been told and retold among such groups in order to remember with awe and wonder their heroic predecessors. For example, 2 Kings 2:1-12 (Transfiguration B), a legend about Elisha's inheritance of Elijah's power and office, would provide Elisha's disciples a sense of vocational identity and authority, a sort of apostolic succession. In Elisha's ability to use his prophetic "father's" mantle (2:12-14), the sons of the prophets could discover a continuity of office which transcended the discontinuity of passing generations. At the same time, remembering and retelling narratives of prophetic power would bolster the reputation of their own office and the respect accorded their own prophetic words by the lay populace. Where such stories circulated and were believed, no prophet was likely to be jeered at for a bald head (2 Kings 2:23-24) or denied a free meal (1 Kings 17:11)!

At a later stage, these legends about Elijah and Elisha were written down, gathered together into a larger whole (a legend cycle), and focused on the conflict between these two prophets and the contemporary kings. Elijah, the champion of Yahweh, victoriously opposed Ahab and Jezebel the champions of Baal.
His legitimate successor Elisha was less directly concerned with royal affairs, but nevertheless played a military and political role in the life of Israel. He eventually initiated a successful coup against the dynasty of Ahab. When the legends were collected together under this rubric, their original purpose was transformed, and they became a call to Yahwistic loyalty and a negative commentary on the policies of Ahab's house.

Finally the Elijah and Elisha narratives were used by the Deuteronomistic Historian to illustrate the infidelity of the kings of the Northern Kingdom and (in the final, exilic form of the history) Yahweh's constant warning and admonition of Israel through Yahweh's "servants the prophets" (2 Kings 17:23).

In interpreting the Elijah and Elisha narratives for preaching and teaching, it may prove helpful to focus on certain major themes which run through them, link them to the gospel memories about Jesus, and connect them to our life today. While they do not exhaust the riches of these stories, three themes do permeate the whole complex: the word of power, the gift of life, and the call to faith.

The Word of Power

Prophetic legends often intend to demonstrate that the prophetic word is a word of power, and as such is to be respected and heeded. In 1 Kings 17:8-16 (Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B), Elijah's word (17:14) is not the message from God we have come to expect from the classical prophets. Rather it is a powerful report of what is going to happen. Although a messenger formula ("thus says the Lord") authorizes the prediction, God is actually spoken of in the third person. Here the prophetic word brings the reality it predicts into being and seems to come close to being an incantation or magic formula. This is quite clearly the case with 2 Kings 2:21, 4:43, or 13:17. A similar focus on the power of the prophetic word is present in 2 Kings 7:1-2, 16-17. Sometimes the prophet's own words (as distinct from the "word of the Lord") directly effect the wonderful deed, as in 1 Kings 1:10, 12.

In contrast, 1 Kings 17:17-24 emphasizes the power of
prophetic prayer. Here, unlike the situation in the previous narrative, Elijah takes a proactive role as the initiator of prayer, and the Lord responds. The story ends with the woman’s confession about the truth of the word of the Lord Elijah speaks. In other words, the power of his prayer word proves the truth of what God speaks through him as prophet. The answer to Elisha’s prayer of 2 Kings 6:17 has a similar role in creating belief, and the same can certainly be said of Elijah’s prayer for fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:36-37, compare 39). Sometimes prayer is overshadowed by quasi-magical actions, as in the case of 2 Kings 4:33-35 (compare Mark 7:33-35). Yet the story of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-14, Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B), intends to make it clear that a prophet’s power is from God and not any magical hocus-pocus (5:11, 15).

The Gift of Life

The conviction that God offers life in the midst of death is central to the biblical witness (John 5:21; Romans 4:16-25; 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 42-44). This theme is strongly present in several stories about Elijah and Elisha. For example, in both 1 Kings 17:8-16 and 17-24, the problem is death and the resolution is life mediated by a prophetic miracle.

In 1 Kings 17:8-16, God gives life through the power of God’s word and the grace of human interaction. Death overshadows the setting in the shape of drought and famine (17:1). The issues of food and water, providence and life have been introduced by the previous raven story (17:2-7). The woman swears by the God who lives that she and her son will die (17:12). The woman herself is presented as a most inadequate source of support for Elijah (17:9). Minimalistic language (a little water, a morsel of bread, a handful of meal, a little oil, two sticks, a little cake) underscores this point. The crowning irony is that Zarephath is deep in Baal’s territory (Sidon), but Baal is supposed to be a god of good crops and sufficient rain! Yet according to the mythology of his own worshipers, Baal is dead during the dry season. In contrast, it is Elijah’s God who lives (17:12) and has the power and will to give life in the form of food. The narrative emphasizes the sufficiency of God’s gift of life by the
repetition of 17:14 by verse 16. The life-giving plenty described there provides a sharp contrast to the deadly minimalism of 17:10-13.

God gives life in the midst of death even more dramatically and directly by acts of resurrection (1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 4:18-37). Modern scruples as to whether these two boys were actually clinically dead are beside the point. They are described as being firmly in death's grip as it was understood by the ancient Hebrews. Other miraculous gifts of life are recounted: nurture in the desert (1 Kings 19:4-8, Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B), pure water for a thirsty city and army (2 Kings 2:19-22; 3:17, 20), financial support for a debtor who faces slavery (4:1-7), a son for the barren (4:11-17), cheap food for those dehumanized by famine (6:24-29) in a besieged city (7:1, 16). It is significant that Naaman's cure from the living death of leprosy is described in terms of a renewed childhood (5:14).

The Call To Faith

The word of prophetic power and God's gift of life occur in the context of human faith, and one intention of prophetic legend was to increase hearer's faith in the prophet and the prophet's God. One way to do this was to have an exemplary character in the story pass a "faith test," that is, obey what on the surface might seem a bizarre or dangerous command. The widow of Zarephath, for example, does so through her death defying obedience to Elijah's request (1 Kings 17:15). Naaman passes a similar test after the intervention of his servants (2 Kings 5:10-14). In the story of 2 Kings 4:1-7, the woman's faith is demonstrated by her willingness to follow Elisha's odd instructions.

In 1 Kings 17:17-24, as the widow's son moves from death to life, his mother moves from unbelief (17:18) to faith (17:24). At first she blames the prophet for her son's death, for his presence has focused God's attention on her house and caused God to remember sin that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. The narrative ends with her vigorous and exemplary confession of faith, into which those who hear or read the story
are expected to join. Israel's exclamation of faith after fire from heaven dramatically demonstrates God's power (1 Kings chapter 18) is an example of a similar plot direction. Israel moves from silence (18:21) through agreement to the trial (18:24) to a wild acclamation of faith (18:39).

The surprising twist in the Naaman story (2 Kings chapter 5) is Naaman's conversion to Yahwistic faith (eliminated from the lectionary pericope, unfortunately). The basic rationale offered for his healing is explicit: so he will "know that there is a prophet in Israel" (5:8). Because he does not yet know this, the Syrian general reacts to Elisha's command to bathe in the Jordan with angry refusal. Finally convinced by logic (not faith), he obeys and is healed. His healing changes everything. He has been "converted" to Yahweh's universal lordship (5:15). He now uses subservient language in addressing the prophet "your servant," (5:15, 17, 18) whereas formerly he had claimed superiority (5:12). Based on the idea that a god was tied to a home territory, Naaman asks for some dirt from Israel so he can worship his new God at home (5:17).

The story goes on to explore the effects of faith on the competing loyalties of ordinary life. Does his new found faith mean the end of Naaman's responsibilities to his human lord (5:18)? Are compromises to pure faith possible? Dangerous overlaps in multiple loyalties threaten every hearer, ancient or modern. Which compromises are possible? Which are betrayals and apostasy? here neither Elisha nor the narrative offer rigid guidance, only an open ended "Go in peace" (5:19). Naaman receives neither approval or judgment. He is simply sent forth to live the life of faith as best he can.

1 Kings 19:9-18 looks at the call to faith from the perspective of doubt. Elijah attempts to resign his prophetic office in despair. Fleeing Jezebel, Elijah hides in a cave, sure that he stands alone and in mortal danger (19:10). God commands him to come out, and passes by with the traditional natural by-products of theophany: storm, earthquake and fire (19:11-12). Yet these fail to induce Elijah to come out. Only in the calm following the theophanic storm (19:12b) does Elijah emerge, but he is still repeating his despairing litany of woe (19:13-14). The burned-out prophet can see only the worst side of the
situation in his ego-centered lament (the Hebrew grammar of 15:10 and 14 emphasizes the "I"). Wind, earthquake, and fire have not made any difference.

Yet God refuses to accept Elijah’s resignation and revives his faith by revealing the good news that the prophet does not stand alone, but within a believing community (19:18), and by giving him a new series of tasks (19:15-17). God’s command here is both commission and promise. Jehu will defeat Baal (2 Kings 10:28); Elisha will continue Elijah’s mission. Even vicious Hazael fits somehow into God’s overall plan for the future (2 Kings 10:32-33). A renewed sense of purpose and the assurance of God’s future reinvigorate Elijah’s faith. This faith expresses itself in obedience to God’s assignments, ones which take the prophet far from his protective cave. Fearful flight has been transformed into a purposeful quest directed by God.

1 Kings 19:19-21 plays out the theme of the human response to God’s call to faith in yet another mode. Elisha asks for a chance to say good-bye to the past before following Elijah. Elijah’s answer is deeply ambivalent. Is Elijah simply giving permission: “What have I done to prevent you” (NEB)? Or is this some sort of rebuke like that of Jesus in Matthew 8:22 and Luke 9:60, 62? Whatever its precise implication, Elijah’s words permit the narrative to hold judgment on Elisha’s response open (compare Elijah’s words to Naaman, 2 Kings 5:19). Elisha does go back, but to offer a communion sacrifice of his oxen, an act which marks a narrative break with the past, in the same way that “they left their nets” (Mark 1:18) does for the called fishermen.

2 Kings 2:1-12 reflects on the faith which authorized Elisha to inherit Elijah’s prophetic office. Elisha claims loyalty to his master (“I will not leave you,” 2:2) and proves it by trailing after him on a pointless journey. He asks for a double share of his mentor’s spirit (2:9), the portion of the eldest son (Deuteronomy 21:17). He passes a series of faith tests, first by his grasp of the need for silence and then by the proper answer to the test of the last request (2:3, 5, 9). Finally his fidelity is rewarded when he passes the ultimate test of seeing (2:10, 12) and literally inherits the mantle of Elijah (remember 1 Kings 19:19!).

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When interpreting prophet legends, there are two important
guidelines to keep in mind. Focus on God and be sensitive to
narrative technique.

First, keep the focus on God. God is the central actor in these
stories, not the prophet. It is God's word of power which gives
life and calls to faith. These legends focus on the prophets, to
be sure, but they remain transparent to God's purpose, word,
and deed. The God who acts in these stories is a God who is in
control, even to the point of being the author of famine (1 Kings
17:1) and military defeat for Israel (2 Kings 5:1, compare 1 Kings
19:15 and 2 Kings 8:12). This is a God who both kills and brings
to life (2 Kings 5:7, compare 1 Kings 17:18, 20). Yet the good
news is that this God who is totally in charge remains ultimate­
ly on the side of life.

This God is also ultimately on the side of Israel as the nation's
secret defensive weapon. That is what is meant by Elisha's cry
at Elijah's ascension (2 Kings 2:12): "My father! The chariots of
Israel and its horsemen!" This same accolade is applied to Elisha
at his own death (2 Kings 13:14). Yahweh, acting through the
prophets, was Israel's defense against the chariots of Syria. 2
Kings 6:15-19 and 7:6-7 are two stories which tell of the defen­
sive power of God's chariots and horses.

Nevertheless, the God of the prophetic legends remains a
universal God, one who gives life to a foreign woman and health
to an enemy general (Luke 4:24-27). This God wants to be
known by all (2 Kings 5:8) and calls even foreigners to faith (1
Kings 17:24; 2 Kings 5:8, 15).

Most of all, this is a God who lives (1 Kings 17:12), who is not
static, but operates on the cutting edge of change. God over­
throws governments (1 Kings 19:15-16; 2 Kings 8:13; 9:1-3),
defeats armies (2 Kings 3:18-19; 6:18-19; 7:6-7; 13:14-19), brings
both drought and rain (1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-45). Change is not
random but purposeful, meaningful, and thus bearable. These
stories point especially to the continuity of the prophetic office
as something that transcends change. This is one implication
of the legend of Elijah's ascension.

Second, treat these narratives as examples of the
storyteller's art. Each prophetic legend is a plot, a movement from problem through complication to resolution. Sensitivity to how stories are told is an indispensable requirement for reading these narratives competently.

For example, careful reading shows that 2 Kings chapter 2 does not really focus on whether Elijah will ascend or how this will take place. That information is given away in the very first sentence. Properly understood, the story is about Elisha, and the narrative tension centers on whether Elisha will really be Elijah's successor. Will he see Elijah's ascension and thus inherit the office (2:10)? The aimless journey and the talkative sons of the prophets serve as complications which slow down the narrative and increase the dramatic tension. Resolution comes only when Elisha does see and takes up the mantle (2:12-13).

In the Naaman story, we encounter a cast of stereotyped characters common to storytelling the foreign ruler who learns a lesson, the poor but good-hearted servant girl, the clownish king, the greedy assistant. The narrative problem is set up in the first verse. How will the tension between God's favor for Naaman and his terrible disease be resolved? Will his leprosy be cured and if so, how? The plot begins to move towards resolution through the servant girl's advice and is further advanced by Naaman's lavish gift, which seems sure to get results. Things are complicated, however, first by the comic interlude of the king's misunderstanding, and then more seriously by Naaman's own angry objections. Once more the servant class intervenes to keep the plot on track. Finally, Naaman's cleansing provides resolution for the original narrative problem, but also leads on to new complications for Naaman (5:15-19) and Gehazi (5:20-27).

Treating a prophetic legend as story means looking for typical story elements. The exposition gives the background and setting. The narrative problem sets up the tension which must be resolved. Complications add interest and slow down the action. Matters come to a head in the climax, from which a solution to the narrative problem flows, and a denouement or aftermath wraps up any loose ends and brings the story to a close.
Treating a prophetic legend as story also means that instead of seeking historical or psychological explanations for a detail, one seeks to understand how it functions to advance or complicate the plot movement. To stay with the Naaman legend, Elisha’s refusal of Naaman’s present (5:16) provides an opportunity for Naaman to ask further favors (5:17-18) and serves as the link to the Gehazi sequel (5:20). It would be a mistake to try to understand his refusal on the basis of the historical practice of the prophets (contrast 1 Samuel 9:7-8 and 1 Kings 14:3) or Elisha’s superior nobility!

The Gospel Connection

Many narratives about Jesus are form critical cousins to the prophetic legends of the Hebrew Bible, in part because the church’s intentions were similar to those of the sons of the prophets: to edify hearers with memories of a religious figure held up as one to be respected, obeyed, and regarded with awe. Thus Jesus gives food, heals lepers, and raises the dead like the prophets of old. Regarding the Elijah/Elisha legends in conjunction with their lectionary partners from the Gospels often suggests new perspectives for reading both texts. For example, when 1 Kings 17:8-16 is paired with the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44), this highlights the prophetic legend’s character as an example story of a widow who acts on faith at the risk of her life.


Again, there is a lectionary link between the angel’s feeding of Elijah on the way to Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 19:4-8) with John 6:41-51, a discourse on Jesus as the bread from heaven. Both texts find a common denominator in their reference to the gift
of manna in the wilderness, direct in John, oblique in 1 Kings 19:8, and in the theme of God’s nurturing providence.

A much stranger coordination of texts takes place when Elijah’s recommissioning as prophet (1 Kings 19:9-18) is read alongside Matthew 14:22-33, Jesus walking on the sea and stilling the storm. Issues of faith and doubt are present in each, along with the coming of Divine Presence in the vortex of violent natural phenomena. Perhaps the lectionary framers simply latched onto the concept of the stillness that follows the storm (1 Kings 19:12 and Matthew 14:32). A comparison between the reactions of Elijah and those of Peter and the disciples could prove to be a fruitful exegetical direction.

On the other hand, 1 Kings 19:14-21 and Luke 9:61-62 seem to fit together naturally. Those whom Jesus called to follow make requests much like that of Elisha, but Jesus’ response is more radical and less ambiguous than Elijah’s. The impact of the two narratives is about the same, however. Committed disciples cannot have second thoughts. Both texts call forth that sort of faithful commitment which overrides the claims of other loyalties. Contrast this rigor with the latitude permitted Naaman!

The ascension of Elisha (2 Kings 2:1-12a) is paired with the Markan transfiguration story (Mark 9:2-9). Jesus is authenticated as the divine Son by a numinous event, just as Elisha was confirmed as Elijah’s prophetic successor. Yet it is really the disciples who, as witnesses to the scene, form the parallel to Elisha. In contrast to Elisha, however, who saw and responded properly, the hapless Markan Peter fails to grasp the implications of the event. Elijah appears as the representative of the prophets because the legend of 2 Kings convinced later generations that he had never tasted death.

When read together, Mark 1:40-45 and the Naaman story explore the relationship of faith, healing, and obedience. The Markan leper comes to Jesus with an exemplary faith, and out of pity Jesus heals him with a touch. The leper is then commanded to visit the priests and to be silent, but he disobeys. Naaman, by contrast, comes to Elijah without much faith, eventually obeys a command given as a precondition for healing, and is cured for a missionary purpose. In the Kings narra-
tive faith is not a precondition for healing; healing creates faith. God's favor is the very first item in the story. Yet obedience, at least, is required. By contrast in Mark, faith comes first and excites pity, but Jesus' stern charge is totally ignored! Comparing these two narratives at least prevents the reader from imagining that either represents the only possible pattern for the interplay of obedience, faith, and healing.

We who preach from the stories about Elijah and Elisha become part of a process which began when the oral traditions about these two were being developed and handed down. This process is reflected in one of these tales when the king of Israel begged Elisha's servant Gehazi, "Tell me all the great things that Elisha has done" (2 Kings 8:4). A narrative about Elisha restoring the dead to life then motivated the king to perform an act of justice (4:5-6). The sons of the prophets, the collectors of the legend cycle, the Deuteronomistic Historian, and the gospel writers all reused these stories to bring them alive for a new generation of God's people and to utilize their power to evoke faith in the God whose powerful word gives life in the midst of death. Now it is our turn.

For Further Study

Book Review


In our naive moments, many of us think violence is something happening to other people in other places. We are, granted, becoming more aware of domestic violence and the violence occurring frequently in our communities. These random incidents, however, we easily dismiss with a convenient “blame the victim” interpretation. “They should not have placed themselves in a potentially violent situation,” we think.

At this writing details concerning the American downing of an Iranian jetliner are still coming over the wire services. It is estimated that 290 people were killed in what the US military describes as a “terrible accident.” Paul Harvey has cynically commented that the tragedy was staged by the government in Teheran, a comment which only underlines the fact that this massive loss of life may simply become more fodder for the propaganda wars.

The point of relating this news story, coupled with a similar incident (the Soviet Union shooting down a Korean Air Lines jet) is that no one is immune from violence. The family living room and the plush seat of an airplane are both places where people face the possibility of violence. We now live in a world where the first response to any problem is to use force. Our choices may be either to change or accommodate.

Walter Wink addresses this problem of violence and offers an appropriate Christian response. Though his thinking is directed to the specific institution of apartheid and the Christian nonviolent response to apartheid, the principles he poses are ones which have universal application. Describing the system of apartheid, Wink says in his note to South African readers:

> Nonviolent militant action is crucial in the encounter with the principalities and powers, for they are never simply the
outer forms of institutions, structures and systems, but also comprise the interiority or withinness of these outer forms their spirituality. The apartheid phenomenon of South Africa is by no means identical with its present leaders, or the police or the military forces, or the bureaucratic apparatus. It is also the ethos of racism; the legitimation of the ethos by a theology which, through the manipulation of Scripture, has deliberately and knowingly advocated injustice; the mentality of the *laager* ("circle the wagons and fight to the last"); and the willingness to resort to inconceivable levels of violence to preserve privilege. Fundamental change in such a setting will require both structural and spiritual transformation. Neither by itself will be enough. (p. viii)

The remainder of Wink's book is developed around these themes of non-violence.

*Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way* is Wink's theological response concerning the spiritual change necessary for South Africa. Also implied is the need for structural change, but Wink leaves that for later reflection. The most difficult task he tackles first. This is Black South Africa's frustration with nonviolence. In fact, the whole of chapter one is devoted to the justification of violence. He addresses this concern, while pointing out that nonviolence does not necessarily mean pacifism or passivity. Many white South African Christians advocate nonviolence, he thinks, but this support appears to be for the purpose of retaining the *status quo*. Also, this position of nonviolent support brings with it the air of religious respectability. Wink notes that in a similar circumstance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

> to maintain one's innocence in a setting such as that of the Third Reich, even to the point of *not* plotting Hitler's death, would be irresponsible action. To refuse to engage oneself in the demands of *necessitas*, would be the selfish act of one who cared for his own innocence, who cared for his own guiltlessness, more than he cared for his guilty brothers. (p. 9)

Thus, Wink ends the opening chapter by acknowledging three attitudes toward nonviolence with regard to the apart-
heid system in South Africa. First, blacks are frustrated by this nonviolent method of change which has often been misdefined as capitulation. Even Gandhi, the great practitioner of nonviolence, was himself in South Africa for twenty-one years! Wink does not, however, understand nonviolence in these negative terms. He will devote the balance of his book to the positive resources nonviolence provides. Second, the legitimate governing authorities only seem to call for nonviolence on the part of Blacks. All the while, from Wink's perspective, these same authorities have no qualms about escalating violence to serve their own interests. Third, white South Africans advocate peace, but we might say this is an advocated peace with little justice for the vast majority of the citizens. Having dispatched the negative elements of nonviolence and having the South African context framed, Wink now moves to some constructive considerations.

Two obvious alternatives face South African Blacks in their response to apartheid. One of these alternatives is to fight. Wink characterizes this choice as consisting of revenge, violent rebellion, and direct retaliation. For reasons upon which he will later elaborate, Wink does not see this as a viable choice. The other alternative, an equally poor choice in Wink's estimation, is that of flight. This alternative is pictured as submission, withdrawal, and surrender. In a bit of dialectical thinking, Wink proposes a third alternative. He calls this alternative Jesus' Third Way. It is a theological alternative to either method of flight or fight. There are distinct advantages to Wink's method which his following chapters bring to life. Wink intends to show how Jesus' Third Way can succeed where other methods have failed on both pragmatic and theological grounds. Using illustrations from the Christian Scriptures, the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Saul Alinsky, Wink reveals how confrontation with evil by direct nonviolent means is not only more effective long term, it may also elicit more courage from its practitioners than does violence.

Finally, in closing Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way, Wink says, "Visions have a way of creating new possibilities" (p. 75). Though the author might be too humble to say, what he has done in his little book is give people
an alternative method for change which is neither surrender
or violence. Those who have successfully used nonviolent con-
frontation to change injustice might attest, this is a method
calling forth the best from both sides in any conflict. Non-
violence, understood as Jesus’ third Way, is a uniquely humane
approach to human problems of peace and justice. Walter Wink
has given those locked in the struggle concerning apartheid
some challenging new options upon which to meditate. He has
also granted to all who daily face conflicts with violence and
human rights a creative and Christian method to “contend with
the principalities and the powers.”

David Mosser
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