



“The Other Is Given”: Religion, War, and Peace

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WHO IS THIS “OTHER” OF WHOM WE MUST SPEAK IN SPEAKING OF RELIGION, war, and peace? What reality is so “given” that we must speak of it in order to address how we may seek peace in our time?

I. RELIGION

In identifying the other, we may well begin with religion. Religion is a “given” we dare not ignore if we are to seek peace in our time. I need to make two points in order to get before us this first sense of my claim that “the other is given”: (A) How is religion “other” for us? and (B) Religion is indeed “given.”

A. The presence and power of religion in this time is surprising. It is not what we have been led to expect. Rather, the demise of religion has been predicted for decades—indeed for centuries. Already in the early years of the last century, August Comte spoke for many when he spoke confidently of how humankind would naturally develop through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and finally the scientific. Popular thought has also assigned the predicted demise of religion perhaps more to science than to anything else. This was a science spelled with a capital S and might not represent very well what many people actually working in the sciences could recognize in their work. Television personalities representing that Science have perhaps encouraged the popular expectation,

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as when astronomer Carl Sagan speaks in explaining the universe of "saving one step" by deleting any reference to God.

In speaking of this expectation that religion would wither and die, we are speaking about a very broad phenomenon: the burgeoning world of the modern, reaching back in different ways to figures like René Descartes and David Hume. Descartes is usually celebrated or scorned as the father of modernity, beckoning toward a method by which certainty would be reached through the clear and distinct ideas of the human consciousness. But perhaps Hume's confidence in raw, and therefore reliable, sense data has had more actual influence in constructing the modern world. Yale historian Peter Gay pays tribute to Hume in these words:

Hume makes plain that since God is silent, man is his own master; he must live in a disenchanted world, submit everything to criticism, and make his own way.¹

I will return in Part III to this interpretation of the modern world as organized around a more rationalist or Cartesian side and a more empirical or Humean side. Different though they are, they both seem to divide up reality with rather little room left for religion. In any case, for many decades we have been encouraged to understand that religion is dying, that only superstitious folk inclined to magic would still have anything to do with religion. Early in this century, Walter Lippmann spoke of the acids of modernity,² empiricist philosophers echoed Hume in complaining about the lack of sense-perception verification for religious claims, and Freud invited us to think about the time ahead for religion as "the future of an illusion."

Many of us recall how, overtly or subtly, we have been encouraged to suppose that to be a truly "modern" person, a person of sophistication and understanding, we would have nothing to do with religion. Or that religion could remain as a ceremonial accompaniment to an essentially secular life. In any case, religion as a real factor in the world would soon go the way of the dinosaurs.

Under that assumption, if one were to turn to the subject of world peace, there would surely be no need to deal with religion. With this understanding, anybody claiming to speak of religion as a given with which we must somehow reckon would certainly seem to be speaking of something quite other than what was expected.

B. But my first claim is this: this other, religion, is emphatically a given for us. Believers could well appropriate Mark Twain's line: "The rumor of my death is vastly exaggerated." People simply do not seem inclined to jettison all talk of the transcendent. According to Harold Bloom, the literary critic,

The United States of America is a religion-mad country....*The People's Religion* by George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli (1989) polls the nation and discovers that 88% among us believe that God loves them, 9% are uncertain, while only 3% say that

¹Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Knopf, 1966) 418-419.

²Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

the Lord's affection for them is nonexistent. But then 94% of us believe in God and 90% pray.³

Bloom is focusing on the United States, which he sees as a special case. But the Allensbach Poll in West Germany found that 70% there believed in God and only 13% did not. In Great Britain in 1990, according to the *Sunday Times and Telegraph*, three quarters of the population believe in a "supernatural being."⁴

What am I saying in making this first claim that religion is a given in our situation? Do I actually suppose that I can make the point that all we need to do is to "get religion" in some form or other and we will have world peace just around the corner? No, I do not believe that religion magically holds the solution to all today's threats to world peace. My first point is simply this: As we seek to work for peace in our time, *religion is a given*, and now I must add: *for good or for ill*. This might be other than what we moderns expected, but it is given for us.

It is given for good or for ill. Perhaps what is most dramatically evident is that, when it comes to matters of peace, religion often works for ill. One only has to name places of conflict to have religion come into one's mind: Northern Ireland with Catholics and protestants, the middle East with Muslims and Jews, India with Hindus and Sikhs – the bloody list goes on and on. How much has religion been a factor in the dark record of ethnic cleansing of one sort or another? I want to claim religion as a power for peace. But surely honesty requires us sadly to acknowledge that it often functions as a force for war. Yet, the point is not mainly to lament and repent. If we can understand just how religion has come to work on the side of war, we can seek to reverse that dynamic and make the given of religion work for peace.

II. GOD AND THE CREATURE

What is going on in the linkage of religion and violence? As a Christian theologian, perhaps the best thing for me to do is to look at that sad linkage in my own tradition. There is a verse in the Hebrew scriptures that can help us do that: "The zeal of Thy house consumes me" (Ps 69:9). A Jewish voice can help me exegete that verse:

The fierce spirit of war and hatred is not of course entirely due to religion. But religion *has* made a *duty* of hatred. It preached crusades against Mohammedans and forgave atrocious sins to encourage indiscriminate slaughter of Greek Orthodox as well as of Mohammedan populations. It also preached crusades against Albigenses, Waldenses, and Hussite Bohemians....Cruel persecution and intolerance are not accidents, but grow out of the very essence of religion, namely its absolute claims. So long as each religion claims to have absolute, supernaturally revealed truth, all other religions are sinful errors.⁵

³Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 37.

⁴See Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 45.

⁵Morris Cohen, "The Dark Side of Religion," in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Harper, 1964) 289.

I do not believe that Cohen is exaggerating. Consider the Christian identification of Jewish people as "Christ killers." St. John Chrysostom, an early Christian preacher so known for his eloquence that he was called the Golden-Mouthed, says this regarding the Jews:

The Jews have assassinated the Son of God! How dare you take part in their festivals...you dare to associate with this nation of assassins and hangmen! And what would Chrysostom say to Jewish people? O Jewish people! A man crucified by your hands has been stronger than you and has destroyed and scattered you!⁶

Christians have followed what Chrysostom believed was their Lord's example of destroying and scattering. It is well known that in his last years Martin Luther turned against the Jews. In 1543, he published *On the Jews and Their Lies*, where he says:

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?...I shall give you my sincere advice:
First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them...
Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed for they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues...
Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings...be taken from them.⁷

There is more advice, but this is surely enough! What is going on in this linking of violence and religion? I am reminded of Albert Camus' "Reflections on the Guillotine," where the same connection is identified: the religious person believes that he or she acts for God. And who is God? God is the one who gives and takes away — blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21)! Is it such a long stretch to suppose that death becomes one weapon in the arsenal of faith?

The horrible record is there. It must be owned up to, even repented of. But I want to argue that this linkage between religion and war is a wrong reading of the logic of Christian faith. I will not claim imperiously to speak for other religions. Clearly, there are resources there to work for peace; I think of Buddhist teachings of compassion, for example. But Christianity has been and is a large part of the problem and, I am arguing, must be a significant player in moving toward a solution to the threats to peace in our time. In a way what follows is an internal self-criticism, a call for reform by an adherent of the Christian religion. But I trust that anyone interested in peace and recognizing that religion is a given — any such person, Christian or not — will be interested in how what I am calling the "logic" of Christian faith can serve peace and not war.

In making my critique of the linkage of Christian religion and war I can return to my theme sentence: "The other is given." I mean this: What is given to us *through* religion is decidedly other than the human response by which we take up arms to destroy our sisters and brothers. What is given is a relationship to and with

⁶Malcolm Hay, "Europe and the Jews," in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, 354.

⁷*Luther's Works* 47:268-269.

God, but we do not become God in that relationship. To take Cohen's statement again: to claim to possess the absolute and to act for that absolute against others destructively is wrong precisely because the absolute is other than we are. To take the language of the pulpit: Christians have every reason to recognize that "God is God and we are not." The Christian can cite the Old Testament, hearing the prophet Isaiah speak for God in these words: "'My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways,' says the Lord" (Isa 55:8). Or she can cite no less an authority in the New Testament than St. Paul, who in his second letter to the Corinthians speaks of the gospel in this way: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7).

So, on the Christian reading of things, it is crucial to distinguish the claim of being in relation to God from any claim—explicit in deed or implicit in attitude—to be God. God remains God in this relationship. In the relationship, the other is given, but still as other. We do not possess God. Thus Elizabeth Johnson, the distinguished Roman Catholic feminist theologian, claims the word "spirit" for God but at the same time speaks of "God being more unlike than like anything we know in the world as spirit."⁸ Johnson is not alone in saying this. She cites Augustine's insight that if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God, and Anselm's argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and Aquinas's working rule that we can know that God is and what God is not, but not what God is, and Luther's stress on the hiddenness of God's glory in the shame of the cross, and Simone Weil's conviction that there is nothing that resembles what she can conceive of when she says the word God.⁹ As to Luther, he taught us not to worship anything other than God as absolute. Lutherans have reason to apply that teaching to Luther himself, when we read his late writings on the Jews. God is God and we are not. Indeed, one of the principal themes in the Christian understanding of sin against God is the subtle claim to be God, to take God's place.

So, my second point is this: the otherness of God warns us against confidently claiming that in making war we act for God. But in speaking of God as other we must move delicately. Obviously, if God is simply the wholly other—to take Rudolf Otto's famous phrase—we would have no functioning religion at all. Wittgenstein would seem to be right in saying "of that which we cannot speak we should keep silent."¹⁰ I am not going to argue that religious folk should keep silent. I must finally make a positive argument, if I am not to keep silent. I must argue that God, while verily other, is given in such a way that we can indeed act for God. What we are really talking about here is the question Langdon Gilkey has phrased

⁸Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 131.

⁹Ibid., 7.

¹⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922) statement 6.54.

as he emerges from the contemporary science/religion wars: Is a non-fundamentalist form of Christianity possible? I believe it is. I hope it is.

There are four steps to this theological argument:

1. There is a God – one God who is over all the heavens and the earth. This God is the creator of all things, of all people.

2. Yes, this God is creator of heaven and earth, who in creating seeks a relationship with that which is other than God. Thus humankind, in particular, made in God's image, can be said to be made for relationship.

3. This God, our creator, turns us creatures toward each other. The book of Genesis puts it so: It is not good to be alone (Gen 2:18). Karl Barth, perhaps the leading protestant theologian of this century, put the point this way: "*Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch*" ("one person is no person"). We say a third time: by the creator's will, the other is given.

4. Thus, the faithfulness of any action that claims to be acting for God may fairly be tested by whether it truly connects the actor with and counts for the other creatures. The First Epistle of John puts it clearly enough:

"Those who say 'I love God' and hate their sisters and brothers, are liars; for those who do not love a sister or brother whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 John 4:20)

Now, in this little outline we are getting at what can link all of us humans together in the quest for peace – for shalom, for wholeness. The logic of Christian faith roots the principle of difference, of otherness in none other than God. There is much more that Christian theology could say here. For example, in the Christian reading of things, God already knows relationship within Godself – we talk of Trinity. And the God who exists in relationship creates that which is not God in quest of relationship. Eberhard Jüngel puts it this way:

God *aims* in himself at what is other....God in his own becoming is aiming at the becoming of creation...he is overflowing being, and his overflowing being is the expression of his grace....In the eternal Son of God, who himself was not created, but comes eternally from God, the Father, in this Son of God coming *eternally* from God God aims at the man who *temporally* comes from God.¹¹

There is striking consensus among a number of authors currently writing on the doctrine of the Trinity that the economic Trinity (the Trinity of God's work in the world) *is* the immanent Trinity within God's own self.¹² There is not, beyond the chances and changes of this world, a more real God "upstairs" somewhere. Thus Jüngel boldly links life within the eternal God with life between God and temporal being, and in that linking brings all of us creatures together as beings made for relationship.

Christian faith roots the principle of difference, of otherness, in none other than God. The logic of Christian faith suggests that when Christians recognize that

¹¹Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 384.

¹²Cf. Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) for a book-length arguing of this point.

God is God and they are not they will begin to find that the relationship which is given turns them toward each other in the quest for peace. This truth is not the private possession of theologians. Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary-General of the United Nations during the turbulent mid-century period, could write: "In the One you are always at home."¹³ The Creator God wills difference and turns creatures toward each other. That insight is not the private property of the guild of theologians. Vaclav Havel, the Czech president and playwright who led the 1989 "velvet revolution" against communism, speaks of a "turning toward Being" that opened his eyes.¹⁴ The Nobel committee has chosen to recognize others who displayed such insight, people like Nathan Soderblom in 1930, Albert Schweitzer in 1952, Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964, Mother Teresa in 1979, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1984, and Nelson Mandela last year.

These two points (what is happening when religion is a force for war and how religion can be a power for peace) together derive from the truth that the other is given. Human beings are not very good at being God. If, in their zeal to act *for* God, Christians slip into supposing they act *as* God, they may, not surprisingly, bluster against other human beings whose presence may threaten to remind them that they are creatures. When they try to be God, they get the God thing wrong and so they turn against the other. When they stop trying to be God, recognizing that the Other is given – in the first sense – they can turn toward the other who is given in the second sense, for they know with Hammarskjold that "in the One you are always at home." Or in Havel's language, in "turning toward Being" they can turn toward human beings. They can become seekers of peace.

But not peace at any price. There is a "just war" tradition. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was involved in the plot to kill Hitler. But one who truly follows the just-war tradition is seeking peace. There is a great danger that we will seek to draw upon the just-war tradition to try to justify violence as a holy war. Recall the conditions that must be met before a decision to go to war is considered justified:

1. The war must have a just cause
2. The war must be waged by a legitimate authority
3. The war must be formally declared
4. It must be fought with a peaceful intention
5. It must be as a last resort
6. There must be reasonable hope of success
7. The means used must possess proportionality to the end sought

And then in the actual conduct of the war three other conditions:

1. Noncombatants must be given immunity
2. Prisoners must be treated humanely
3. International treaties and conventions must be honored¹⁵

¹³Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings* (New York: Knopf, 1964) 154.

¹⁴Vaclav Havel, *Letters to Olga* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

¹⁵For this listing, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 214-215.

I appreciate Walter Wink's concern that the just-war tradition is regularly called upon to justify violent action that simply fails in the face of these criteria. He relates such misuse of just-war criteria to what he calls a "myth of redemptive violence" prevalent in our culture:

Violence is the ethos of our time. It is the spirituality of the modern world....Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem mythic. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. It is embraced by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives.¹⁶

Wink goes on to speak of how children are catechized in this myth in our culture:

From the earliest age children are awash in depictions of violence as the ultimate solution in human conflicts....I refer to a new wave of ever more brutal comic books, video games, and home videos. Recently I spent an hour browsing through a mall comic shop, examining such fare as *The Uncanny X-Men*, *Swamp Thing*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Warlock Five*, *The Avengers*, *The Spectre*, *Shattered Earth*, *Scout: War Shaman*, *The Punisher*, *Gun Fury*....Likewise the video nasties, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *The Evil Dead*, or *Zombie Flesh-Eaters*.¹⁷

So, it seems on Wink's analysis, we are not only capable of turning religion into violence; we can make violence into a religion. In Cornel West's description of the current situation in the United States,

the most striking feature of contemporary American society is its sheer violence and brutality. Civic terrorism pervades the streets of our cities. Sexual violation and abuse are commonplace in our personal relationships. And many of our urban schools have become policed combat zones. By the year 2000, much of America may become uninhabitable—that is, it may be impossible to live here without daily fear for one's life.¹⁸

How might we respond, then, beyond simply violently critiquing violence? I turn now to the current pluralistic situation in the world, including specifically the religious situation. Here I will stress the fourth point in the argument outlined above: that the faithfulness of any action claiming to be acting for God is to be tested by whether it connects with and counts for the other creatures of this universe. Perhaps this point has particular pertinence in our situation. Walter Wink thinks so. He writes:

I submit that the ultimate religious question today should no longer be the Reformation's question, "How can I find a gracious God?" but rather, "How can we find God in our enemies?" What guilt was for Luther, the enemy has become for us: the goad that can drive us to God.¹⁹

I am starting back a step from Wink: I am speaking of the "other," the one who is a stranger to me, and I don't want to start with the assumption that the other

¹⁶Ibid., 13.

¹⁷Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁸Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 157.

¹⁹Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 263.

is enemy. My point will be that we are called into conversation — indeed, into religious conversation. That conversation has a life of its own and change will ensue. There is hope in this. As we talk together as fellow creatures we may move toward peace.

III. THE CONVERSATION

We need to talk. We need to talk because there are voices at hand that have not been involved in conversation together — or at least not sufficiently so. I am talking about religious talk, talk about religious faith. Christians have plenty to talk about among themselves, of course. But that won't be sufficient. Discord between the religions is a major factor in war-making, and that won't change without conversation between those religions. And those voices are here. Take Islam, for example. This world faith of 900 million members is the fastest growing religion in the United States. Lawud Assad, president of the Council of Mosques of the United States, says there are more than 1,000 Muslim community organizations in his group alone, some worshiping in basements and makeshift places.²⁰ Or, take Hinduism: in the United States alone there are about half a million Hindus and some 40 Hindu temples and 500 Hindu religious organizations. The number is growing, as is the case for Buddhism. So, we need to talk, because there are new voices to be heard.

This is a time of crisis and opportunity. It is a time of crisis, because the ordering worldview of modernity is eroding at the edges and cracking in the center. It is a time of opportunity for the same reason: because of the eroding and cracking of the ordering worldview that dictated the expectation that religion would soon go the way of the dinosaurs. I referred earlier to Descartes' confidence in the clear and distinct ideas of the human consciousness, to a rationalist stream in modernity. And I referred to David Hume's reliance upon the raw sense data — a reliance echoed in a conception of empirical science as an absolutely objective discipline that would deliver unadulterated truth. These two, a rationalist and an empiricist strain, may have seemed to compete, but in a way they both organized their sense of reality around the ordering notion of self and world. It is this structure, self and world (or subject and object), which seems to be eroding and cracking.

Lawrence Cahoon speaks of the "expansion and radicalization of subjectivism" by which so-called transcendental capacities and features (God, state, monarchical authority, the unity of the self, and ultimately the concept of transcendental reason) "were gradually reinterpreted as either purely subjective factors, the products of wishes, illusions, perspectival limitations or as the effect of objective determinations of the subject, the product of environment and conditioning, biological factors." And so, he observes, subject and object categories were

freed to be universally and radically applied, unencumbered by God or reason

²⁰Russell Chandler, *Racing toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 184.

or any other trans-subjective factor....It becomes impossible to conceive of subjectivity and objectivity as being independent existences *and yet* as being interrelated, mutually involved.²¹

I began with an implicit criticism of modernity for the expectation that religion would soon pass away. But the splitting apart of the confident self/world structure of which Cahoon is speaking does not yield so salutary a state either. I am particularly troubled about how the expansion of subjectivism results in something I would call "the collapse of the world into the self," and I agree with Cahoon that this does not leave the self unchanged. As for the collapse, consider only two examples: science and philosophy. As to science, we have come a long way from a Humean appeal to hard sense data. The challenge now is to rescue any reliable principle of falsification at all. Perhaps the most influential chapter in this story was the publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn emphasized the controlling role of the scientist's highly historically conditioned choice of a particular "paradigm" or research program.²² This emphasis lives on now, three decades later. Thus Mary Hesse, who writes in Cambridge, England, with its history of Nobel prizes in biochemistry, notes that data cannot be detached from theory, "for what count as data are determined in the light of some theoretical interpretation."²³ Or on the methodological level one might cite Paul Feyerabend's evocation of "anything goes" as opposed to serene reliance on something called "the scientific method."²⁴

Is there not in this understanding of science a rhythm one might call the collapse of the world into the self? Similarly, one of the most influential books in philosophy in recent decades is Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I reckon the classic metaphysicians, and even a twentieth-century philosopher like Alfred North Whitehead, were trying to mirror nature. But Rorty's proposal is to emphasize the role of philosophy as "edification." The discipline of philosophy seems to collapse back into the self's passion.²⁵

One could cite other developments in other areas. In ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre has laid bare the collapse of any agreed-upon framework for moral deliberation—the kind of deliberation needed in negotiating for peace. When we meet in political caucuses or even in, say, the Parent Teacher Association, we talk past each other, for we function at best with fragments of diverse moral frameworks. MacIntyre's recent book titles tell the story: *Beyond Virtue* (1981) and *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (1988). Or we could cite Robert Bellah and his titles *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and *The Good Society* (1991). Bellah and company continue to point out the ravaging effects of various forms of individualism. Here is a typical emphasis:

²¹Lawrence Cahoon, *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture, and Anti-Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1988) 193.

²²Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962).

²³Mary Hesse, *In Defense of Objectivity* (London: Oxford University, 1973) 280.

²⁴Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: NLB, 1975).

²⁵Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1979).

If the self is defined by its ability to choose its own values, on what grounds are those choices themselves based? For...many...there is simply no objectifiable criterion for choosing one value or course of action over another. One's own idiosyncratic preferences are their own justification, because they define the true self....The right act is simply the one that yields the agent the most exciting challenge or the most good feeling about himself.²⁶

I am not suggesting these developments of eroding and cracking the self/world structure are simply ominous. They do provide some breathing room for a person choking in a room filled with either pre-modern incense or modern industrial fumes. They suggest that we are freed and so free to talk together. We *can* talk. But they also suggest how urgent the situation is: we need to talk. Our situation in this time is at once one of crisis and opportunity. I rather like Mark Kline Taylor's description of our situation as facing a "postmodern trilemma." Taylor calls upon us to (1) acknowledge our tradition, (2) celebrate plurality, and (3) resist domination.²⁷ We might alter the verbs somewhat, but would we not agree that we need to work at all three tasks together? Clearly we need to affirm tradition, as that sustains community. For, as Larry Rasmussen puts it:

Conscience and conviction are a matter of community. The word *conscience* comes from *con-scire*, "to know together." Conscience is the ethical compass of character, and character is formed in community, as moral convictions themselves are....Community, whether in strong or weak forms, is the matrix of the moral life itself.²⁸

But simply to acknowledge tradition and to exult in community risks collapsing the world into the tradition familiar to the self – a form of provincialism, drawing the wagon train around one without any real engagement of the other, the other who is given for us. But simply to celebrate plurality veers toward relativism. Or, to take the third leg of the trilemma, how is one to resist or even define domination without the informing resources of tradition and plurality?

In the religious sphere, collapsing the world into the self translates to the privatization of religion. Perhaps we can no longer credibly claim that religion is going the way of the dinosaurs. People just don't seem prepared to jettison all talk of the transcendent. But what we can do, as it were, is to send the religious soul to his or her room. We seem to have translated the biblical not to "pray openly to be seen by others" into "whatever you do don't talk about religion publicly." That faith is personal is one thing; to make religion simply private is quite another. And it leaves a potentially powerful force for peace out of our lives together. Contemporary authors as different politically as Stephen Carter and Cornel West come together to lament religion's inadequate presence as a public force in our society.

²⁶Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 75-76.

²⁷Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).

²⁸Larry Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 12.

Carter, professor of law at Yale, noting the apparently contrary evidence that many politicians end every speech with "God bless you," comments acerbically:

But having lots of public religion is not the same as taking religion seriously....In truth the seeming ubiquity of religious language in our public debates can itself be a form of trivialization – both because our politicians are expected to repeat largely meaningless religious incantations and because of the modern tendency among committed advocates across the political spectrum to treat Holy Scripture like a dictionary of familiar quotations, combing through the pages to find the ammunition needed to win political arguments.²⁹

And West, of Princeton, breaks ranks with Malcolm X for neglecting black religion in the effort to change the state of African Americans in this culture. West recognizes a truly distinctive power in black religion, a power he finds particularly in that religion's "cultural hybrid character in which the complex mixture of African, European, and Amerindian elements are constitutive of something that is new and black in the modern world."³⁰

West later draws this religion's distinctive power into a prescription for action, speaking of the change agent as a "jazz freedom fighter," who promotes individuality in order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group, yielding a kind of critical and democratic sensibility.³¹

Larry Rasmussen seems to describe our situation well:

[Religion] is sufficiently privatized that often we do not know the religious and moral convictions of the people we rub up against all the livelong day. They may dress like us, share our funny accent, and chuckle at the same ethnic jokes, but we will not know whether they are Catholic charismatic, soft New Age, Buddhist, utterly secular humanist, deep ecologist, or pious Lutheran. And we will not find out until there is some casual or intimate setting and conversation in which they choose to share what they normally do not.³²

In the face of this, I urge a wide-ranging and yet deeply grounded conversation of faith. There will be settings where the conversation will be more appropriately *about* religion. But in becoming knowledgeable about religion I hope there will be attention given to the truth claims *of* religion. Study about religion is clearly valuable. But we must join as well in the conversation of religion. I hope for a genuine meeting of persons who do not wear identical eyeglasses as they seek to see the ultimate meaning of life. After all, it won't be much of a conversation if those who come together are carbon copies of each other. Nor will it be a true conversation if they deny real difference, saying, "I don't believe anything; you don't believe anything: Let's talk!" We need a deeply grounded religious conversation.

Certainly we get nervous about this. Given the sad record of religious conflict, how can we have any hope for such a conversation? In the second section of

²⁹Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic, 1993) 44-45.

³⁰Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993) 101.

³¹*Ibid.*, 105.

³²Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments*, 104.

this essay, I made an effort to develop under four points a Christian ground for being turned toward the other. May not that argument, rooting the reality of difference already in the Creator God, also offer a modest ground for hope? Would it not indeed seem likely that the one Creator of all would leave some witness in every culture (Acts 14:17)? John Cobb, reflecting on his experience in actual religious dialogue, offers some observations which I find encouraging at this point:

Most of the great religious traditions teach a certain humility with regard to human understanding of reality in its depth and fullness. Hence they discourage the tendency, present in all, to identify ideas that are now possessed and controlled with final expression of all important truth.

So the base is given in that common recognition of finitude. And it is possible to build on such a base. Cobb continues:

As the great religious traditions become more aware of one another, there is a tendency for some mutual appreciation to develop among them. They acknowledge that they learn something from mutual contact. They may claim that what they learn is to value neglected aspects of their own traditions, for in this way they can maintain the tendency to claim the perfection of their own sacred sources. But in fact the understanding that emerges is not the one that obtains when only their own tradition is studied. Some adherents are willing to acknowledge this.³³

Cobb, of course, grants that no guarantees are available in such conversation. He knows well enough that what he calls “fundamentalist self-isolation” is available in every tradition. But he is glad to welcome to the conversation anyone who will come. That seems right to me, and I specifically want to add that in this religious conversation—the conversation *about* and *of* religion—the agnostic and the atheist have an important role to play. How so? Perhaps the boundary between faith and unfaith is not always completely clear. There is a certain convenience for believers to be able to define themselves over against the angry and unambiguous village atheist. But what is to be done with someone like the physicist I. I. Rabi? Rabi writes of growing up and, in a manner, leaving the family’s faith:

So we reached a sort of *modus vivendi* where at home I conformed to everything. I didn’t try to persuade them of anything else. They would have really suffered from that. They didn’t ask very much what I did outside. So I was a good son in that respect. I have a great respect and a great feeling for those things. It’s part of a culture, a way of life, an outlook. Sometimes I feel I shouldn’t have dropped it so completely—I’m talking about the way of life. There’s no question that basically, somewhere way down, I’m an orthodox Jew. In fact, to this day, if you ask for my religion, I say “Orthodox Hebrew”—in the sense that the church I’m not attending is that one. If I were to go to a church, that’s the one I would go to. It doesn’t mean I’m something else.³⁴

Neither atheists nor agnostics are simply one thing. Believers need to seek connection with such folk. In such connection, needed critique of religious abuses can be

³³John Cobb, “Beyond Pluralism,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. G. D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990) 86-87.

³⁴Cited in Jeremy Bernstein, *Experiencing Science* (New York: Basic, 1979) 45-46.

heard and transitions to new understandings can be fostered. To the person who does not make a claim to faith, I say: we need to talk; your witness is needed in this conversation.

So, we need to talk; we can talk. How shall this wide-ranging and deeply grounded conversation proceed? Roger Fisher and William Ury, who were involved in the Camp David accords, stress how important it is to focus not on positions but on interests.³⁵ The interest best identified in the religious conversation for which I am calling would be "human interest." Clearly that interest will not exclude the atheist or agnostic. In speaking of human interest, I do not mean to exclude the earth. Clearly, that we all depend on this planet for survival itself underlines our common human interest in a most fundamental kind of way. To focus on the telos of human interest should not strike the Christian as confining, if she remembers Irenaeus' maxim: "*Gloria Dei vivens homo*" (the glory of God is the human being)—the whole human race, every individual person, fully alive. We seek the cessation of violence and the promotion of human flourishing. Or, one could put the interest more succinctly: we seek peace.

Within that interest there will be plenty to talk about. A document like the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) will help us specify the interest. So will the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966). We will speak together about faith and from our commitments with such a telos as our interest.

Two final questions must be asked: (1) Is not such conversation for peace too difficult, too risky? and (2) How can we hold out any realistic hope that such conversation can make a real difference? To the first, I must say: Yes, to talk together about our ultimate commitments, our deepest passions is difficult, confusing, and risky. That peace work is difficult should not come as any great surprise. Think of the workers for peace who have known the insides of jails and prisons: King, Gandhi, Havel, Mandela. Their names are known, but they name a multitude whose names we do not know. But these, named and unnamed, did not and do not suffer without hope. We can have hope also for even our modest efforts at conversation. Such conversation remains ambiguous, but, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "Ambiguity is not absurdity."³⁶

The scale of our conversation is apt to be rather small, but I recall hearing the Norwegians who were so active in getting the PLO and the Israelis together—a husband and wife team, by the way: Mona Juhl and Terje Rod Larsen—speaking of how crucial personal contact and the use of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) were in this effort. The personal touch actually mattered. I recall hearing African expatriates speak of the process of democratization as their only hope for getting beyond warfare between tribal realities. How small was the recent election

³⁵Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

³⁶Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948) 129.

in South Africa? How small a matter is it as we talk together and then enter the voting booth, or attend our precinct caucus?

We are tempted to think the task too difficult or our contribution too small. So I close with one more quotation, a rather long one by Stephen Toulmin, a former physicist who has written extensively in the history and philosophy of science. In this passage, pondering what will be most effective in our postmodern world, Toulmin invokes the image of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. He recalls Gulliver shipwrecked on the island of Lilliput, the land of tiny human creatures, not six inches tall. He is a giant to them, of course, but when he awakens in the morning, he is tied to the ground by many bonds. Here is Toulmin's application of Lemuel Gulliver and the Lilliputians:

In a moment of cynical joviality Josef Stalin once asked: "How many divisions has the Pope?" The fact is that...moral challenges are *never* answered by displays of force. The day that Amnesty International takes possession of a machine gun, let alone an atom bomb, its ability to gain a hearing and influence events will be at an end....Lilliputian organizations cannot compel immoral rulers to apologize on their knees...but they do subject rulers who refuse to mend their ways to damaging embarrassment in the eyes of the world. If the political image of Modernity was Leviathan, the moral standing of "national" powers and superpowers will, for the future, be captured in the picture of Lemuel Gulliver, waking from an unthinking sleep, to find himself tethered by innumerable tiny bonds. Finally, on the transnational level, let us not forget Lilliput. Local communities and unrepresented groups need the means of self-expression and protection; and nonviolent ways of drawing attention to their needs are more persuasive than those of murderers by night. When antinuclear demonstrators march with candles through the streets of Leipzig, when prisoners of conscience bring General Pinochet's torturers into public scorn, when women's organizations speak for their fellow-women in fundamentalist states, they question the nightmare side of the Modern inheritance, and challenge the moral authority of absolute, centralized nation-states. In this resistance, the candles, voices, and other tools of the powerless seem of little help....But in the long run, we have seen power and force run up against their limits....The name of the game will be *influence*, not *force*; and in playing on that field, the Lilliputians hold certain advantages.³⁷

As we turn toward each other to talk, to speak about and from religious conviction toward the telos of human flourishing; as we do this, we will surely feel Lilliputian enough. But have you noticed that a good conversation has a life of its own? It has a way of going its own way – beyond the calculation and control of the participants. This seems the rhythm of life, and I find it a hopeful beat, for in the conversation the other is given. ⊕

³⁷Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990) 197-198, 208.