Competing for Space in the World: Evangelism and Narratives of Pluralism
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1. Introduction

Pluralism can be understood as *the story we tell about plurality* – the way we construct its meaning for us, evaluate it, and thereby habituate our practices, institutions, and social patterns within it. This paper identifies ways that narratives of pluralism habituate the practice of evangelism in three different U.S. contexts: the nation-state (and in particular the military), the marketplace, and the academy. The paper explores how evangelism, when habituated by pluralism as it is constructed within these three contexts, becomes an attempt to compete for space in the world, thereby distorting it as a Christian practice. In all three contexts, a unity is imposed on plurality that possesses a remarkable capacity for shaping the Christian social imagination and thereby habituating evangelistic practice in ways that are essentially competitive and implicated in an ongoing colonialist dialectic of identity and difference (cf. Tanner).

My concern with religious pluralism is not confined to the typical, rather abstract questions about the uniqueness, unsurpassability, or finality of Christ, the nature of salvation, or the status of religious truth claims, though these questions all have their place, especially in discussions of evangelism. It instead begins with the way pluralism is actually narrated and constructed in particular cultural contexts and then seeks both to trace how evangelism is shaped by that context and how it might be reimagined. At the conclusion of the paper, I draw on Wesleyan resources for posing a counter-narrative of religious pluralism that habituates the practice of evangelism in rather different directions. Christian evangelism is the non-competitive practice of bearing faithful and embodied witness rather than an attempt to produce converts by securing the credibility or helpfulness of the good news. Shaped ecclesially through distinctive social practices, evangelism is pacifist in its logic, and enacted aesthetically as the offer of beauty rather than as an exercise in positioning the good news within a "religious" marketplace.

2. Pluralism in the U.S. Military

The relationship of religious pluralism to the practice of evangelism in the context of the U.S. military is hardly an arbitrary association since evangelism and religious pluralism are so frequently narrated as threats to one another within that context. The military chaplaincy, moreover, has become the turf on which that contest gets played out. More so than any other public space of its size and influence within U.S. culture, the military is deliberately constructed as a religiously pluralistic environment with considerable attention given to accommodating diverse religious practices as long as that accommodation does not adversely affect military readiness. The military is an extraordinary environment in this regard since far more than other pluralistic contexts such as public schools, prisons, or hospitals, it brings together persons from across the U.S. and from a variety of backgrounds and requires that they depend on one another very closely. This it does, however, under the canopy of the big tent of America's civil religion, an amalgam of nationalism and consumerism, in which individual and group religious differences are preserved, but only to the extent that they contribute to, or at least do not thwart, the larger projects of the nation-state.

Today, at least 175 denominations and religious traditions are represented among U.S. military personnel and served by chaplains representing those groups (Hansen, 16). The number of Muslims in the military has grown rapidly since Operation Desert Storm and may now even be as large as the number of Jews (Eck). While it is difficult to gauge precisely the religious diversity in the military since personnel are under no obligation to report their affiliation or preference, Department of Defense data and other recent studies (Hunter and Smith; Segal and Segal) show that the military is about 20 percent Catholic, 15 percent Baptist, and 30 percent other Christian. The remaining 35 percent includes the fully 25% who are reported as having "no religious preference" or as "unknown" and a minority of other non-Christian religions.

While it was not at all uncommon for chaplains in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to be nondenominational, eventually ordination credentials within a Christian denomination were required, and today a formal denominational endorsement is necessary or some such equivalent from a religious association or fellowship of churches recognized by the Department of Defense. Christians, Jews, and Mormons have been commissioned as chaplains for some time now, but in 1994 the first Muslim was commissioned, in 2009 the first Buddhist, and in 2011 the first Hindu. Much has been made recently of the fact that declining numbers of Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant chaplains has produced a situation in which the number of Evangelical chaplains is disproportionately large; and this representation has certainly shaped the way pluralism is constructed, contested, and defended within the military, especially in relationship to the practice of evangelism. In the 1950's the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) endorsed the role of Evangelicals in the military because it was "a ripe harvest field" for evangelism. As Chaplain Barbara K. Sherer observes in her study of Fundamentalist chaplains in the military, the NAE was also concerned that Evangelicals not allow the predominance of Catholic chaplains to stand unchallenged. In the words of the NAE at that time, "Evangelicals must not fail the proportionately large number of men in the armed forces who are anxious that the New Testament Gospel be preached, and a real evangelistic work be carried on by our chaplains" (cited in Sherer, 7).

According to the Department of Defense, 33 percent of chaplains identify themselves as Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, or a member of a denomination that is in the NAE while only 3 percent of enlisted personnel and officers so identify (Townsend, 2011a). The Air Force reports, moreover, that 87% of those seeking to become chaplains are enrolled at evangelical divinity schools. Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, which has its own endorsing arm, is now reported as training one out of every five Air Force chaplain candidates studying at an evangelical seminary (Townsend, 2011b). The disproportionately high number of evangelical chaplains, therefore, is not likely to change soon. On one hand, of course, Evangelicals (including Fundamentalists as a subset) typically exhibit strong support for the United States and its military and do not communicate the kind of ambivalence, if not outright opposition, to war one finds among some members of Protestant mainline denominations. Since 2003, Gallup polls in the U.S. regarding the war in Iraq have consistently shown that church-going Protestants were most supportive, with Catholics less supportive but still more supportive than non-Christians or those with no religion at all. Those self-identifying as "Born Again" or "Evangelical" had the highest rates of support at about two-thirds. For a number of reasons that are outside the purview of this paper, Evangelicals have less of a problem adopting the motto of the Army Chaplains Corps, *"Pro Deo Et Patria"* ("For God and Country"). The problem, however, is that Evangelicals and Fundamentalists also tend not to be the most comfortable with religious pluralism. As the numbers of evangelical chaplains in the military has increased, the context that was once described by the NAE as a harvest field has now become something more like a minefield.

That the pluralism which characterizes the U.S. military has been constructed and nurtured in the context of the discourse of freedoms and rights should not be surprising given the particular way that religion is positioned in relation to the state in the U.S. As early as 1818, the constitutionality of the chaplaincy was challenged by Primitive Baptists under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or preventing the free exercise thereof"). More recently, the chaplaincy was challenged in 1985 by two Harvard Law School students who argued that the chaplaincy in effect put Congress in the position of establishing religion. The Second Circuit Court ruled that the Free Exercise Clause of the same amendment "obligates Congress, upon creating an Army, to make religion available to soldiers who have been moved to areas of the world where religion of their own denominations is not available to them."[1] As conservative public policy scholar Hans Zeiger writes in defending the chaplaincy, "Far from an establishment of religion, the chaplaincy is an essential bulwark of religious liberty."

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[1] Second Circuit Court of Appeals, Katkoff v. Marsh (755 F.2d 223, 1985), cited in Drazin and Currey, 199.

The Court went on to describe the chaplain's context as "a pluralistic military community." But it is precisely this pluralism that poses significant challenges for chaplains who are required to minister to all service personnel while at the same time representing their own faith tradition. In 2010, at the order of Congress, the three branches of the military service merged their chaplain training schools into a single multi-faith education center in Fort Jackson, SC.[2] During their training, chaplains receive just four hours of training on the pluralistic context of the military and the constitutional basis for the chaplaincy with another 20 hours on topics that apply directly to ministry in a pluralistic context (Sherer, 20).

While the "free exercise" rights of military personnel are ultimately the basis for legitimating the U.S. military chaplaincy, other justifications have been given, such as their roles in the maintenance and support of troop morale, their ever-evolving and expanding role in other aspects of military operations and advising, and their function as a "social conscience" within the military – though the latter is necessarily muted by the very nature of the fact that all chaplains are commissioned as officers. According to Hansen,

> As officers, chaplains are not supposed to comment on national policy. It is axiomatic that a secure democracy must have armed forces subservient to civilian leadership which makes it wrong for the commissioned military hierarchy to dissent. If chaplains seem to assent to unholy actions, it's not necessarily because they are dependent on the military for their livelihood or compromising to protect their careers. More likely, it is because they understand that the prophetic voice, whether grounded in civil religion or religion proper, is muted by the necessary depoliticization of the professional officer corps. (31)

Of course, Hansen also notes that self-selection yields a chaplain corps that is "safe to have around." Clergy with pacifist leanings or who find it more difficult to serve God and country simultaneously tend not to volunteer. The long history of the chaplaincy (going back at least sixteen centuries) demonstrates that the kind of chaplains who end up in service find it quite natural to employ religious faith as a means of blessing and validating the military operations of the nation or empire it serves.[3]

One of the unique and evolving features of the military chaplaincy in the U.S. context related to religious pluralism is the way chaplains are increasingly being called upon to play the role of cross-cultural and inter-religious mediators and liaisons, thereby placing a greater demand on their capacity for tolerating religious diversity. Chaplains are frequently called upon to work with diverse faith communities in foreign countries, to advise their commanders in areas where they can be useful tactically – for example, in reducing inter-religious tensions that complicate military missions – and to improve and inform perceptions of persons outside the U.S. According to Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Dr. David Chu, "Whereas in the past, chaplains would probably be called upon to function as practitioners in their individual faith traditions; in the future, they will increasingly be called upon to be consultants and advisors . . . to their commanders on the precepts of other world religions." According to Chu, endorsing denominations must therefore embrace a certain degree of pluralism: "their conceptual picture of ministry must clearly depict a very pluralistic mindset reflecting pluralism in their own ranks and in the world in which we function" (cited in Zeiger).

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[2] "The center has 'worship training labs' so instructors can discuss diverse faiths, with items brought from the various military schools. Golden icons line the walls in a small Greek Orthodox chapel; a Muslim prayer room is outfitted with prayer rugs and copies of the Quran; and a handwritten Jewish Torah is kept inside a wooden ark, alongside Sabbath candles and Seder plates to show how Passover is celebrated. Susanne M. Schafer, "Interfaith School for Military Chaplains Dedicated," *USA Today* (May 7, 2010). http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/-religion/2010-05-07-chaplain-school_N.htm#.UThhS48KMT0.mailto. Accessed March 7, 2013.

[3] See for example the fine collection of historical essays in Doris L. Bergen, *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

Military chaplains also have an important civic role. Chaplains participate in military ceremonies outside of the chapel, such as installations, dedications, memorials, public holiday observances, or collective prayers on the eve of battle. But while these are generally not understood to be religious in a formal sense, as Zeiger puts it,

> Nowhere is civil religion both created and celebrated more than in the Armed Forces; nothing is more hallowed to Americans or to war veterans than what Lincoln called 'these honored dead.' The Chaplain is a guardian not only of his particular faith, but of the common American faith – in democracy, liberty, and justice.

Civil religion does not generally enter the picture in most discussions of religious pluralism. But civil religion is probably the most influential and powerful of them all because of its pervasiveness and its default privileging, especially in the context of the military. As Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle argue, "nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries. . . . It happens that nationalism also satisfies many traditional definitions of religion, but citizens of nation-states have religious reasons for denying it" (767). They go on to ask,

> If nationalism is religious, why do we deny it? Because what is obligatory for group members must be separated, as holy things are, from what is contestable. To concede that nationalism is a religion is to expose it to challenge, to make it just the same as sectarian religion. By explicitly denying that our national symbols and duties are sacred, we shield them from competition with sectarian symbols. In so doing, we embrace the ancient command not to speak the sacred, ineffable name of god. That god is inexpressible, unsayable, unknowable, beyond language. But that god may not be refused when it calls for sacrifice." (770)

The kind of pluralism that we find constructed within the military, then, is one narrated by the discourse of modern liberal rights and freedoms coupled with a default civil religion that respects and tolerates religious diversity but positions and domesticates that diversity for its own ends. It is within this complex pluralistic context that recent battles over evangelizing in the military have arisen; for if it is true that the chaplaincy exists within a pluralistic military community to ensure that all soldiers are able to practice the free exercise of religion, it is also true that chaplains who do not embrace this pluralism or who at least cannot tolerate it and cooperate within it, pose a threat to the constitutional ground on which the chaplaincy stands (Drazin and Currey, 10-11). One of the ways chaplains have dealt with this problem is by trying to maintain an almost impossible distinction between 'evangelism' as referring to efforts to convert those who are not affiliated with a religious body, which is permissible, and 'proselytism' as referring to efforts to convert those who are affiliated, which is not permissible. A "code of ethics" written by a private association of religious bodies that provide chaplains to the military called the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces (NCMAF) until recently contained the following statement, "I will not proselytize from other religious bodies, but I retain the right to evangelize those who are not affiliated." Naturally, there is plenty of grey area here since some atheists and freethinkers have their own associations and do not necessarily think of themselves as unaffiliated, nor would they tend to welcome evangelism directed their way even if they were unaffiliated. The code was never an official directive of the Defense Department, but it was regularly handed out at chaplains schools until 2005 when the Air Force was sued on the basis of a growing number of charges of religious discrimination, bias, and intolerance at the highest levels of the Air Force Academy, along with charges of anti-Semitism, preferential treatment for Christians (and Evangelicals in particular), the promotion of prayer, and high pressure among cadets to convert to evangelical Christianity by senior cadets, faculty, and staff.

Though the current version of the NCMAF covenant no longer retains the word "proselytize," it is clear from studies on the chaplaincy and interviews with them that the principle is still widely accepted. As Hansen observes, however, "the difficulty with the self-imposed prohibition against proselytization

isn't so much whether there should be one but the fact that chaplains don't agree on what *proselytization* means." This produces situations in which some chaplains are seen by others as overstepping the line but justifying themselves because they do not see themselves as proselytizing but instead evangelizing or, to use another favorite word, "witnessing." Add to this the views held by some evangelicals that certain Christian groups are not really Christians in the first place and one can readily see that U.S. culture wars are very much alive and well within the pluralistic context of the military.

Insofar as religious pluralism is narrated by the discourse of rights in the context of the military, we find that, on one hand, atheists and non-Christians sue the military because they claim to be discriminated against, forced to participate in public prayers, blocked for promotions, and systematically have their religious freedoms violated. Evangelicals, on the other hand, sue the military because they claim their first amendment rights to evangelize and to invoke the name of Jesus in public prayer is curtailed. Because of the way pluralism is constructed in the military, it should be no surprise that the chaplaincy has become an increasingly litigious environment with some Evangelical chaplains challenging the way the promotion of pluralism within the military restricts what they see as their "fundamental right, constitutionally protected by the First Amendment, to evangelize or proselytize both in the military and among foreign populations" (Whitt, 53).[4] In other words, not only does the discourse of freedoms and rights narrate the kind of religious pluralism we find within the U.S. Military, it also narrates the way evangelism is practiced within that context by chaplains whose ministry is performed at the intersection of the Constitution's Establishment Clause, on one hand, and its Free Exercise Clause, on the other. The peaceful, corporate, and embodied offer of Christ that, like Christ, empties itself of power and privilege is transformed into a highly individualistic and competitive practice in which the evangelist not only demands a right to evangelize but calls on the state to secure that "right," revealing just how habituated to state-sponsored pluralism the practice of evangelism can become.

In his book *Migrations of the Holy*, William Cavanaugh argues that "the kinds of public devotion formerly associated with Christianity in the West never did go away, but largely migrated to a new realm defined by the nation-state" (1). In a nation without a common good or transcendent *telos*, "plurality," says Cavanaugh, "is not simply a promise but a threat, one that must be met by an even greater pull toward unity." What is the source of that unity? "It can only be that the nation-state becomes an end in itself, a kind of transcendent reference needed to bind the many to each other" (47). The state then becomes a kind of savior, "the deus ex machina to be invoked whenever crisis hits" (2). The state colonizes the political imagination of Christians and thereby "defines the boundaries of a unitary common space and promotes the common good within that space" (3). That common good, however, is narrated in terms of freedoms and rights possessed by individuals *qua* individuals. Positioned as individuals in direct

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[4] Most controversies that arise in relation to religious pluralism in the military have to do either with the practice of evangelism or to the insistence by some chaplains on praying in the name of Jesus not only in worship services but in official ceremonies that necessarily include non-Christians. In 2006, Capt. Jonathan Stertzbach, an evangelical field artillery chaplain, gave an interview to *The Washington Times* in which he discussed his being asked by a brigade chaplain to pray at a memorial service for a fallen soldier but to "modify" his prayers to begin with, "Please pray according to your faith as I pray according to mine," and to end with "in Thy name we pray." He was allowed to add, "and in Jesus' name I pray" (Druin). Stertzbach was allegedly removed from his chapel for speaking to the *Washington Times* about the incident. Without commenting directly on the case, Martha Rudd, spokesperson for the Army, said, "There are some people who are uncomfortable with pluralism. . . . And if a chaplain is uncomfortable with that, he or she should find a ministry outside of the military." In 2010, the House rejected an amendment to the Military Construction Authorization Act proposed by Rep. Michele Bachmann to allow military chaplains to close their prayers "according to the dictates of the chaplain's own conscience" – in an effort to lend support to those Christians who wish to pray "in Jesus' name" at public, non-religious military events. Other cases could be mentioned in this connection such as that of Navy chaplain Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, who has made a cottage industry out of his being discharged for "daring" to use the name of Jesus in public prayers (he was actually charged with "disobeying an order" for attending a rally in front of the White House dressed in Navy uniform).

relation to the state without the mediating institution of the church, the loss to Christians is nothing less than their identities as members of the body of Christ. Cavanaugh puts it this way,

> In the absence of shared ends, devotion to the nation-state as the end in itself becomes ever more urgent. The nation-state *needs* the constant crisis of pluralism in order to enact the *unum*. Indeed, the constant threat of disorder is crucial to any state that defines its indispensability in terms of the security if offers. Pluralism will always be a crisis for the liberal state, and the solution to the crisis of pluralism is to rally around the nation-state, the locus of mystical communion that rescues us from the conflicts of civil society. (53)

Evangelical chaplains who assert their rights to evangelize or pray publically in Jesus' name become venerated as saints and put on the speaking circuit in evangelical churches. But as Cavanaugh notes, "religious and lethal devotion to the unity of the nation-state itself is assumed to be a normal part of one's civic duties" (55). As evangelism is converted into a competitive practice, it is likewise shorn of its prophetic character within the discourse of a pervasive civil religion through which the nation-state imposes its own "salvific" unity onto plurality.

3. Consumer Culture and the Commodification of Religion

Evangelism is also habituated as a competitive practice within the context of consumer culture as the marketplace enacts its own unity through the dynamics of commodification and consumption. Within the marketplace, pluralism is narrated as a value in and of itself because of the preoccupation with choice that is at the heart of consumer formation. Religion is far from an exception to the rule; indeed religious traditions have proven themselves especially susceptible to the processes of commodification as their leaders, beliefs, and institutions are disciplined for the market, and their symbol systems, practices, narratives, and material objects exploited for marketing purposes. Vincent J. Miller in *Consuming Religion* points out that commodification has two important and interrelated consequences for religion – and, I might add, for how pluralism is constructed by the marketplace.

> First, elements of religious traditions are fragmented into discrete, free-floating signifiers abstracted from their interconnections with other doctrines, symbols, and practices. This abstraction of elements from their traditions weakens their ability to impact the concrete practice of daily life. Deprived of their coherence with a broader network of beliefs, they are more readily put to other uses, as shallow signifiers of whatever religious sentiment we desire. The second consequence concerns practices. When abstracted from their conditions of production – that is, from their communities of origin – practices are deprived of their links to the institutional and communal setting in which they shape the daily lives of religious practitioners. (3-4)

So, for example, we find the images of the Dalai Lama or Gandhi in Apple computer advertisements with the tagline "Think Different." Moses and Jesus action figures now surface in a child's toy chest alongside the Little Mermaid or Mr. Potato Head. The popular "Coexist" bumper sticker is a microcosm of the kind of pluralism constructed by consumer culture. All religions are made equal by consumerism, but not because they are multiple paths leading to the same goal or culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality, as pluralistic theologians have hypothesized. Rather, equality within consumer culture means that religious symbols, narratives, and practices are equally capable of being consumed as disposable commodities – to use Miller's words, as "things to be played with, explored, tried on, and, in the end, discarded" (6). As Miller emphasizes,

> The problem here has to do with the context and framing of religious discourse, not with the content of the discourse itself. I'm confident that Luke can out-narrate A. A. Milne. He is not, however, given the chance because the context of consumer culture does not construct the relationship between the two as conflict. We are certainly incited to choose, but choices are not

exclusive. Choose and choose again. Jesus, Pooh and the Lion King as well. *Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Hakuna Matata!* (6)

In consumer culture, religious pluralism is constructed by imposing onto the plurality of religions the unity of the marketplace. According to Miller, this is accomplished through two interrelated dynamics whereby, first, "traditions are pillaged for their symbolic content, which is then repackaged and recontextualized in a way that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political consequences" (84). To be sure, the kind of religious pluralism coordinated by consumer culture is one that values and makes space for religious traditions, especially in relation to their symbolic imagery, so that we appear to be offered a vast retrieval of traditions – a "divine deli" as John Berthrong has termed it. Simultaneous to this valuation and retrieval, however, is a second process of abstracting what is marketable from those traditions and then dismissing their more demanding and exclusive dimensions such as doctrine, institutions, and the social patterns by which the traditions inform the daily practice of life.

> On the one hand, there is consumer capitalism's insatiable hunger for marketable stuff, which creates a world where everything is transformed into a commodity that can be brought to market, exchanged, and consumed: selves, others, culture, religion. On the other hand, we witness a great hollowing out. Exchange demands interchangeability, equivalence. . . . Rough edges must be smoothed. Objects must now function outside of their original contexts. (Miller, 77)

The kind of pluralism I am describing here is precisely what one finds in the now clichéd claim by Westerners to be "spiritual but not religious." That spirituality is fed via an unprecedented exposure to pluralism through the internet which, as Wade Clark Roof remarked over a decade ago, accelerates "the simultaneous rise of both fundamentalism and eclecticism." Given the multiple truths one encounters on the Web, says Roof, "either you go the fundamentalist route, and say, 'By golly, we are right,' or you develop a consciousness that the world is a complex place, so it makes sense to look around at what else is in the marketplace" (Leland). For those suspicious of absolute truths, a spirit of eclecticism prevails as they cobble together their own unique or 'designer' spirituality from a variety of religious traditions.

In the case of religion, this can take place at the level of artifacts such as prayer beads, jewelry and pendants (such as the crucifix), tattoos and other body markings, dress, statues, action figures and toys. But it can also take place at the level of practices, liturgies, narratives, and music, such as Gregorian chants, yoga, or Tantric sexual practices. What is important is *how* the religious traditions are retrieved, engaged, and employed within the logic of the marketplace, a logic that lifts the practices, symbols, and stories of those traditions out of their original contexts. By eroding the coherence of the traditions and disconnecting them from practices, not only is their capacity for forming the daily lives of consumers undercut, but the traditions themselves are coopted by the dominant values, assumptions, and practices of the wider culture (such as, for example, the "therapeutic paradigm" [Miller, 91]). There is some important work that gets done here that should not be written off as merely shallow or narcissistic, especially insofar as religion begins to show up in new places and new leverage is discovered for calling into question longstanding and oppressive religious monopolies. Possibilities are also opened for the mediation of religion by new kinds of people and for creative experimentation in religious practices (Miller, 76-77). But while exposure to diverse religious traditions is heightened in consumer pluralism, the capacity for those traditions to pose a serious challenge to the status quo is diminished as is a sustainable commitment to those traditions. Consumer culture may render a religious tradition more accessible but our relationship to that tradition remains one of "shoppers" and "consumers" who engage that tradition as a disposable commodity, with a diminished capacity to inform and sustain the concrete practice of life.

Of course, there have always been plenty of ways that religious traditions have been fragmented, rendered incoherent, or disciplined by other structures so that their capacity for challenging the status quo is eroded – for example, by imperial power, racism, and sexism. There is no good reason to pretend that religions have in consumer culture met their first or greatest challenge. It is also true that the process of lifting practices, symbols, and beliefs out of their traditional and communal homes is not just due to the

demands of the marketplace, but also in part to urbanization and advances in communication and travel that produce a freedom from particularity that is also a rootlessness. But it is worth noticing not only the way the dynamics of commodification create a pluralism by reducing the value of religious traditions to their exchange value by "hollowing them out" so that they are equivalent and interchangeable, but also the way religious traditions themselves have become habituated to that pluralism by incorporating the dynamics of commodification and consumption into their own practices. So, for example, when evangelism is undertaken as a competition for space within this pluralism, it finds itself shading out particularities that are too exclusive or strange in favor of a more generalized spirituality or vague religiosity that, to use Miller's language, "smoothes rough edges." Houston-based evangelist Joel Osteen is one of the more exaggerated versions of this principle. Still, with an average weekly attendance of over 40,000, his approach to evangelism as pastor of the largest church in the U.S. is worth noticing. According to Osteen,

> I think that the biggest proof of spiritual growth is when we have to keep building bigger and bigger churches to hold all the happy people. We have a slogan here at Lakewood: "If you're happy enough, people will know where you go to church." Jesus often spoke through smiles and that is what we are all about. We don't need to confuse anyone with doctrine or theology. That is for old people. If our people are anything like me, if I were to preach a sermon based on good solid theology, they would only walk away with headaches.

Admittedly, televangelists like Osteen are something of a slow-moving target when critiquing the dynamics of fragmentation, abstraction, celebrity, spectacle, etc., by which religions are commodified and disciplined for the market. But those dynamics have a far wider reach than television sets and megachurches, and they manage to shape even the most mundane and local dimensions of religious life so that they are available to religious and other shoppers for consumption. We live in a culture of conversion, and as the self is likewise understood in commodified terms as something to be constructed and reinvented in terms of marketplace logic as essentially consumptive, the practice of evangelism is but one more offer of conversion alongside those from physicians, psychologists, and other self-help experts who specialize in the task of better marketing ourselves.

According to Miller, "consumer 'culture' is not, then, merely a particular set of ideologies: for example, believing that driving SUV's, having plastic surgery, or watching *American Idol* are good and worth pursuing. It is primarily a way of relating to beliefs – a set of *habits of interpretation and use* – that renders the 'content' of beliefs and values less important" (1). It is not the content of the beliefs and values that matters, but the way they are engaged or put to use. It is because of this that capitalism has been able to absorb its own critique and that marketers do not fear those who reject the values of consumer culture in the name of, for example, simplicity, environmental resilience, or the dangers of commercialization. Marketers instead embrace the critiques and find new ways to position their products as "green," "organic," or as contributing to a more "simple lifestyle." As Miller puts it, "Consumer culture seems endlessly capable of turning critique into a marketing hook" (2).

4. Pluralistic Theologies of "Religion"
There are important similarities between the two kinds of pluralism I have just described and pluralistic theologies of religion developed from within the context of the academy. Postcolonial and other critics have highlighted the way pluralistic theologies continue to be implicated in colonialist paradigms and modes of discourse that diminish or occlude difference in favor of transcendent unities or abstracted commonalities that end up domesticating and commodifying religious traditions. Colonialist discourse is uneasy with difference and with the other *as other*; it therefore constructs its 'Others' by insisting on sameness, uniformity, and identity in essential values, beliefs, and norms, and it does this by presuming to speak from a neutral vantage point that pretends to comprehend a totality. As Kathryn Tanner puts it, "Commonalities, which should be established in and through a process of dialogue, are constructed ahead of time by pluralists to serve as presuppositions for dialogue; pluralists thereby close

themselves to what people of other religions might have to say about their account of these commonalities" (2). By focusing on commonalities, argues Tanner, pluralists end up diminishing the extent and importance of the differences among the religions. What is more, they end up "hiding the particularity of their own perspectives by claiming to form generalizations about the religions of the world from a global outlook (2)."

Even the use of the word "religion" itself participates in this dynamic, and is notoriously difficult to define. Its usage to cover traditions of thought and practice as diverse as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and civil religion already enacts a meta-narrative that is employed for the sake of comparison and evaluation. As John Milbank has said, "it is clear that other religions were taken by Christian thinkers to be species of the genus 'religion', because these thinkers systematically subsumed alien cultural phenomena under categories which comprise western notions of what constitutes religious thought and practice. These false categorizations have often been accepted by western-educated representatives of the other religions themselves, who are unable to resist the politically imbued rhetorical force of western discourse" (176). Alister McGrath goes so far as to claim that "it has never been shown that the different world religions share a common subject matter" (112).

Even if McGrath's claim is overstated (though I am not sure it is) and despite the condescending nature of Milbank's remark about western educated representatives of other religions, it is hard to deny Milbank's further claim that "the terms of discourse which provide both the favored categories for encounter with other religions – *dialogue*, *pluralism*, and the like – together with the criteria for the acceptable limits of the pluralist embrace – social justice, liberation, and so forth – are themselves embedded in a wider Western discourse become globally dominant" (175). As McGrath reminds us, the very assertion that all religions are responses to the same ultimate reality is not so much a claim about the insights of the various religions as about the all-knowing pluralist. To make this point, McGrath reminds his readers of Lesslie Newbigin's compelling insight in this regard:

> In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant. . . the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions. (9-10)

Kenneth Surin argues similarly in his formidable contribution to Gavin D'Costa's volume *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, which was a response to the volume edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. For Surin, the writings of pluralists and inclusivists like John Hick, William Cantwell Smith, or Karl Rahner pretend to occupy a "global space" that "effectively incorporates and thereby dissolves, the localized and oppositional 'spaces' of people like peasants in Malaysia" (195). Pluralistic theologies are but a new form of colonialism that has supplanted the "gaze of Europe" with a "global gaze" that views the diverse practices, beliefs, and texts of the various religions of the world "in what can only be described as a placeless and deculturated kind of way" (196). Surin remarks that "the Cantwell Smiths and Hicks of this world are seemingly a new kind of subject, one that is universal or global in the way that the McDonald's hamburger has become the universal or global food" (196). While this global gaze "obviously represents a deep and powerful liberation from the constraining ethnocentrism of previous understandings of the relationships between the religions . . . . it systematically overlooks the real relations of domination and subordination which make it impossible – politically – for Malaysian peasants or Bolivian miners to reverse or repudiate this gaze" (196).

Just as consumer culture lifts religious symbols, beliefs, and practices from their original context and positions them alongside one another in such a way as to disguise their irreducible differences and just as military culture affirms religious plurality while positioning it under the larger canopy of civil religion through the discourse of freedoms and rights, so also in pluralistic theologies we find, in Surin's words, the "democratization" of "difference" in which "non-European others are still different of course, but now they are merely different" (198). In other words, pluralistic theologies trade in the same dynamics of fragmentation, abstraction, and exchange whereby genuine difference is diminished in favor of more global but ultimately colonialist paradigms of evaluation. Pluralistic theologies then become, as Francis Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, "an expression of a Eurocentric market economy in which ideas, including religious ideas, are reduced to commodities" (279).

What is remarkable is the way contemporary Christian attitudes toward evangelism in pluralistic contexts accept these constructions of pluralism despite their very different responses to it. At one extreme, the Christian exclusivist interprets other religions to be rivals to Christianity and their adherents in need of conversion. At the other extreme, the Christian pluralist interprets other religions as oriented toward the same ultimate goal but along a variety of different paths, so that evangelism is not only unnecessary; it is misguided and arrogant. But both extremes accept "religion" as an overarching genus of which individual religions are species, and they compare the religions in terms of generalizations about what all religions share in common, casting those commonalities largely in soteriological terms. The exclusivist understands Christianity to be the only true way to salvation; the pluralist understands the various quests for salvation to be complementary. But both extremes understand the different species of religion to be doing pretty much the same thing, and the practice of evangelism is thereby confined to staking out a place within the limited social imagination of the overarching pluralist narrative presented to it. The exclusivist narrates pluralism as an assault on the singular and exclusive truth of Christianity and so performs evangelism as a competitive practice focused on confession of absolute propositions that necessarily contradict the absolute propositions of other religions. The pluralist affirms the interchangeability and equivalence of the religions, inevitably substituting dialogue for evangelism. Both adopt as their starting point the establishing of commonalities on the basis of generalities that include the ethnocentric privileging of their own traditions, and both fail to recognize the extent of the diversity among religions, separating the cultural form of a religion from a distilled, essential content.

5. Evangelism and the Competition for Space in the World

In his profound book *Christ on Trial*, Rowan Williams explores the various accounts of Christ's trial in each of the four gospels. What surfaces in those accounts, especially in the gospel of Mark which highlights Jesus' silence before both the Sanhedrin and Pilate, is the way he stands outside the structures and languages of power by which he is being judged and how little leverage he has in that world. Says Williams,

> . . . the world Mark depicts is not a reasonable one: it is full of demons and suffering and abused power. How, in such a world, could there be a language in which it could truly be said who Jesus is? Whatever is said will take on the colouring of the world's insanity; it will be another bid for the world's power, another identification with the unaccountable tyrannies that decide how things shall be. Jesus, described in the words of this world, would be a competitor for space in it, part of its untruth. (6)

To say with Williams that Jesus is not "a competitor for space" in the world is not to say that he is distant or removed from that world, but rather that in his life the way humans map their social relations through customary dichotomies, unities, and pluralities is being redrawn. As Williams puts it, he "threatens because he does not compete . . . and because it is that whole world of rivalry and defense which is in question" (69).

One of the great challenges of bearing Christian witness in pluralistic contexts is the way narrations of pluralism impose conditions that constrict the social imagination of Christians such that they can only

imagine their witness from within the terms of those pluralisms. Evangelism then becomes a competitor for space in the world and, to use Williams' words, "part of its untruth." The pacifist logic of evangelism as an offer of good news that empties itself of power and privilege is transformed into a logic of competition and production that claws at the levers of power and so lays claim to truth as a possession. As Williams notes, quoting from Anita Mason's novel *The Illusionist*: "There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue" (6).

The challenge for Christians is to bear witness to the good news in ways that make it a present and habitable possibility for others without contradicting that good news in the very act of speaking it or offering it. As Williams puts it, "the challenge remains, to re-imagine what it is for God to speak to us as God – not as a version of whatever makes us feel secure and appears more attractive than other familiar kinds of security. For if our talk about God is a religious version of talk about human safety, the paradox is that it will fail to say anything at all about salvation. It will not have anything to do with what is decisively and absolutely not the way of this world" (15). Christians have often felt the need to secure the validity of the good news on the world's terms and by laying claim to structures of truth, power, and legitimacy that would shore up its credibility or attractiveness. But if the good news to which Christians bear witness is both a gift, on one hand, and a summons, on the other, then that witness neither *needs* to secure a place in the world for itself nor *could* it secure a place without at the same time deforming it.

I close this essay by suggesting in broad stroke how a Wesleyan understanding of grace might help in avoiding the competitiveness of other unities and how it might provide the inner dynamic of an evangelism that is robust while at the same time a practice that embraces difference and accepts plurality without seeking to conquer it through a prior epistemological unity and the kind of apologetics that flows from it. To be sure, Wesley may be read as imposing a unity onto plurality, but that unity turns out to be a very different kind of unity from that which surfaces in the three contexts previously mentioned. Grace, for Wesley, is the prevenient, immediate, and universally available offer of healing, salvation, and liberation in every human context. Grace may be said to be "supernatural," but since, for Wesley, no person is born in an un-graced state, the distinction between natural and supernatural is purely academic. We are all born graced and no one could even so much as exist whatsoever apart from God's grace.

Though prevenient and universal, the operation of grace is nonviolent for Wesley. God is immediately present to all and works by "every moment superintending everything that [God] has made; strongly and sweetly influencing all, and yet without destroying the liberty of [God's] rational creatures" (*Works*, 4:43). God's will, initiative, and power are asserted emphatically here, but not in a way that controls, negates, or overrides human liberty. For Wesley, God is

> willing that all [humans] should be saved yet not willing to force them thereto; willing that [humans] should be saved, yet not as trees or stones but as [humans], as reasonable creatures, endued with understanding to discern what is good and liberty either to accept or refuse it (1964: 450).

As Wesley says, every part of God's wisdom is "suited to this end, to save [us] as [humans]: to set life and death before [us]; and then persuade, not force, [us] to choose life!" (450)

The operation of grace in human life is, therefore, resistible and irreducibly plural. What is "vulgarly called 'natural conscience'," according to Wesley, is to be found "at least in some small degree, in every child" and "in every human heart" (*Works*, 4:163). This universal conscience is a "discernment of the difference between moral good and evil, with an approbation of one and disapprobation of the other, by an inward monitor excusing or accusing" (163). It is, moreover, "not only in all Christians, but in all Mahometans, all Pagans, yea, the vilest of savages" (163). At the same time, it is precisely because conscience is the product of multiple influences, including God's grace, that there is a remarkable variability in the human response to grace. Michael Lodahl writes,

> For Wesley, . . . the human conscience is a *con-fluence*, a flowing together: there is the influence, the inflowing, of all our experiences, education, and relationships; there is also the inflowing of God's own Spirit to quicken, to address, to call, to convict. In practice, indeed in reality, these

influences are inseparably intertwined. We find this notion particularly clearly in Wesley's sermon "On Conscience," where he points out that the term's etymology is "to know together with" another. He takes this "other" to be God – but *not* "none other than" God! Hence, on the one hand he rejects the phrase "natural conscience" because "properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift of God, above all [God's] natural endowments" [3:482]. On the other hand, conscience "is that faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions, and of their merit or demerit. . . . But this varies exceedingly, according to education and a thousand other circumstances" [483]. (201)

Though the story of God's prevenient, revealing, saving, and sanctifying grace provides for Wesleyans a fully comprehensive framework through which they interpret human existence and describe reality, that very story should lead them to expect – and even to embrace – the plurality of responses to grace that we find in diverse religious traditions. Or at least the Wesleyan has no a priori grounds for rejecting other faiths as intrinsically sinful, idolatrous, or in error. The first and most important thing to be said about other faith traditions is not that they are deficient, but that they are different.[5] That difference may even be so radical in some cases as to warrant the assessment that they are not all responding to the same religious object or moving toward the same religious end.[6]

Wesleyans instead have every reason to stand humbly in the presence of other faith traditions, encountering them on their own terms as much as possible and engaging their adherents in an ad hoc manner that presupposes the historicity, particularity, and distinctiveness of each tradition in every meeting of their respective positions.[7] Wesleyans possess no metaphysical high ground or historical-experiential foundations on the basis of which they might argue for the universal superiority of Christianity and thereby persuade persons to become Christian. They have only the particular story they have been given, the particular savior to whom that story points, and the particular community which attempts to embody and enact his good news. But interfaith dialogue does not require such sure foundations anyway, despite the fact that within modernity both dialogue and apologetics are frequently imagined as possible only from within some supposedly wider, neutral, and more universal and all-encompassing horizon greater than any one religion and on the basis of which they may all be compared.

It is only after careful study, respectful dialogue, and a close and sympathetic attention to the rich particularity of a religion's stories, practices, and way of life, that one can begin to understand a religion in such a way as to make judgments about its commensurability with Christianity or what the good news might mean in the context of that tradition. Taking seriously religious differences in this way does not prevent Wesleyans from finding God at work in the lives of non-Christians. In fact, given the comprehensiveness of the story they have to tell about grace, they should expect this. But a Wesleyan *inclusivism* is not at all like its liberal counterpart, for which other religions are essentially saying and doing the same thing as Christianity, albeit anonymously or implicitly. It is by fully admitting rather than attempting to deny or disguise the material difference of Christianity from other religions that both dialogue and evangelism becomes possible. Indeed, I should like to think that what Lesslie Newbigin says

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[5] As James McClendon says, "what Christians call 'salvation' is *not simply another word for* what Hindus call deliverance (*moksha*), or simply another word for what Buddhists call release (*nirvana*). This is so because the contents of religion are not typical experiences to which the religions just happen to have given different names. 'Salvation' in Christian terms is not just any experience of success or religious attainment, but is having a share in the liberation and healing associated with the rule of God Jesus proclaimed. Salvation is exactly the 'success' that comes when in faith one shares the practices and convictions of that new rule, and to intelligent outsiders, that may seem more like failure than success!" (2:422).

[6] Cf. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

[7] On this point, see John Howard Yoder, "The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective to Interfaith Dialogue," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 242-61.

of dialogue as "a part of obedient witness to Jesus Christ" could be said for that whole of Christian witness itself:

> But this does not mean that the purpose of dialogue is to persuade the non-Christian partner to accept the Christianity of the Christian partner. Its purpose is not that Christianity should acquire one more recruit. On the contrary, *obedient* witness to Christ means that whenever we come with another person (Christian or not) into the presence of the cross, we are prepared to receive judgment and correction, to find that our Christianity hides within its appearance of obedience the reality of disobedience. Each meeting with a non-Christian partner in dialogue therefore puts my own Christianity at risk (1995: 182).

A Wesleyan approach to evangelism in the context of religious pluralism takes seriously the universality of grace, and it also takes seriously the nonviolent nature of grace as a gift along with the unavoidable acceptance of historical relativity, particularity, and difference. At the same time, despite the fact that the operation of grace is irreducibly plural given what Wesley describes as "a thousand other circumstances," a Wesleyan approach to pluralism does not shrink from commending its truth to others as good news even while it seeks repentantly to receive correction from others. Evangelism within a Wesleyan framework is uninterested in competing for space in the world or triumphing over other faiths in a market of crowded options. In one sense, the good news of Jesus Christ can never be at home – its truth will always be strange and out of place – a news that risks distortion the moment it is spoken. In another sense, its place in the world is already secure . . . in derelict mangers and abandoned leper colonies, among the poor and those tormented by demons, at weddings with friends and dinner in the houses of known sinners, at the foot of the cross and the door of the tomb.

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