

The Magnificent Vision of *Shalom*

Summer Social Gathering

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On this, another social gathering, I want to say what a pleasure it has been to be with you on these summer evenings, and to thank you for giving me an opportunity to reflect on my life and ministry from the perspective of my retirement. For the first time in that two-year period, I have been stimulated to think about my journey from the deep Christian formation of my childhood and youth to the unabashed posture of a critical thinking intellectual of open and liberal mind and spirit.

That is the identity I would claim for myself.

Critical Thinking - We live in a cultural period named Post-Modern which is a designation that means simply "after the Modern," and conveys the fact that we don't really know what to call the present. Post-Modern thinkers criticize the Modern Period - the Enlightenment over-confidence in human rationality to master the Mystery of reality. However, one of my best teachers, Hans Küng, wrote in one of his earlier works that the one mark of modernity that we must never lose is *critical rationality*, the exercise of human intelligence, of human reason, in the pursuit of the human project.

Intellectual - I remember so vividly the Sunday the great New Testament scholar, Bishop Krister Stendahl, preached at Christ Community and spoke at the Perspectives hour. He said, "I am an unabashed intellectual." I loved it and began at that point to own the designation for myself. There are intellectuals and there are intellectuals, and I have no illusions about being in the "Intellectual Big Leagues." Nonetheless, I do value the life of the mind, the world of ideas and the intellectual probing of new frontiers of the human experience. Being a pastor first of all, I did not have the luxury of the scholarly life of reading, reflection and writing. Yet, in the tasks of preaching and teaching, I was always fascinated by the intellectual task of understanding - understanding the biblical story, the theological tradition and their application to ongoing human experience.

Of Open and Liberal Mind and Spirit. My last presentation traced my movement to a liberal posture - liberal of mind and spirit.

Let me pick up the story there, reminding you that being liberal is not a position, but a posture. It is not a creedal position or even a religious commitment, nor is it a political platform. It has to do with the open mind operating with critical

rationality that engages religious/cultural/moral and political issues, seeking understanding in order to forge commitments and action intended for the enhancement of the human situation - ultimately for creating a global community rooted in love, marked by grace - in a word, the realization of the Hebrew prophets' magnificent vision of Shalom - peace as total harmony.

The Vision

The vision of Shalom - of a new creation - comes to expression in various prophetic writings in the Hebrew tradition. I refer you to two, one from Isaiah, the great 8th century, B.C.E., prophet, in Chapter 11, which begins with the idea of "a shoot" from "the stump of Jesse," and Chapter 65 of Isaiah, a writing from a later prophet during the Exile looking to the Return. We need not debate the conception of God as the sovereign of history, nor the fact that the vision was not realized in the Exile's return and which, in the present violent chaos of the Middle East, seems farther from realization than ever. The vision ends:

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

There was in the human mind and heart over two and a half millennia ago such a vision. I find that most remarkable. It remains a dream in the human breast while our whole understanding of cosmic reality and the action of God in history has been radically transformed. That transformation has come about by the emergence of the scientific breakthroughs through the empirical method, applied by critical reason to the study of the natural world. And that transformation has been fought at every new breakthrough by religious authority and, unfortunately, such fighting still marks much of the religious world.

Such opposition is futile and fruitless and has caused much of the intellectual community to write off the religious community as hopelessly benighted. In the epic struggle of science and religion, there have been scholars on the scientific side who have claimed more than their empirical investigations can justify, denying the whole realm of religious mystery and experience. One such is Francis Crick, who, in his *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, writes,

The astonishing hypothesis is that "you," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: "You're nothing but a pack of neurons ..." The scientific belief is that our minds - the behavior of our brains - can be explained by the interactions of nerve cells (and other cells) and the molecules associated with them, (p. 3, 7)

Crick claims this position stands in contrast with "The religious concept of a soul, and puts science in a head-on contradiction to the religious belief of billions of human beings alive today."

"A head-on contradiction ..." indeed, and it rages still. But, is that impasse the only possibility? I contend it is not and will attempt to offer an alternative possibility. In doing so, I do not claim to be proposing something new and original, but rather, what many scholars both in science and religion have proposed.

The Wonder of the Cosmos

The scientific endeavor is never finished, but what we have learned about the natural world takes our breath away. We stand in wonder and awe before the unfolding of the cosmic dance - an unfolding we are told that has been in process for over 13 billion years. And space! Can we begin to comprehend the thought of an expanding universe of billions of light years, of billions of stars and galaxies and, some would claim, parallel universes? Mind-boggling beyond my capacity to take in.

At its best, the scientific enterprise continues to probe, recognizing, as the great Einstein claimed, it is probing Mystery, with each new breakthrough bringing forth fresh questions, creating models, carrying on experiments which bring forth more data that, in turn, call for new paradigms. It is a wonder-full drama with no necessity to threaten religious reality, although certainly necessitating adjustment of ancient forms of religious belief.

To resist the ongoing march of scientific discovery, as indicated above, is futile and foolish and it robs one of the freedom to revel in amazement at the natural order into which our lives are woven. Rather, in my experience, it is inspiring to take in the natural world to the extent possible and then re-think the possibilities of religious response in light of *what is*.

So, where are we? We have a marvelous vision of Shalom from the ancient prophet, expressed in a worldview and conception of God which the natural sciences and historical consciousness make necessary to revise.

Let me attempt to portray the ongoing development of human understanding by reminding you of my own journey which I think many of you have traversed, as well. That journey consists of three stages:

The Pre-Critical

The Critical

The Post-Critical

In my first presentation, I told you of my whole academic experience through high school, college and seminary which left me in a *pre-critical stage*, unable and unwilling to think critically as I held to and taught the biblical story in terms of the ancient biblical worldview. I was defensive of that worldview, took it literally, and was threatened by all knowledge to the contrary. But, alas, finally I could no longer deny that my deeply formed and very rigid understanding of the biblical paradigm could no longer be held with integrity. In the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson,

*Our little systems have their day,
they have their day and cease to be.
They are but broken lights of Thee,
and Thou, O Lord, art more than they.*

It must be obvious that being deeply formed in a pre-critical mindset in a world exploding with data that could not be incorporated into that pre-modern understanding of God, nature and history put one in a very uncomfortable position - constantly threatened, always on the defensive and wondering what the next breakthrough in the sciences might reveal. Finally, my "little system" broke and I was ready to open myself to the best of human knowledge and understanding. Intellectual honesty, I realized, was also a spiritual matter. I wanted to know the truth and tell the truth to the extent that was possible for me.

Thus, I entered the next phase of my life and ministry - the *critical phase* - a phase that lasted for me about thirty years, during which I was preaching and teaching, thinking, reading and writing. My move into the critical stage was never marked by a "loss of faith" or a negative spirit over against my Christian faith. During those three decades, I was being a pastor and living out of a deep faith that was undergoing considerable revision, but never overthrown. I lived out the experience that Gary Dorrien, in his *Making of the American Liberal Theology*, documents. I find his definition of the Liberal movement and his high valuation of it precisely my experience. He defines the Liberal movement thus:

In accord with my concept of it as a movement that began in the late eighteenth century, I define liberal theology primarily by its original character as a mediating Christian movement. Liberal Christian theology is a tradition that derives from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Protestant attempt to reconceptualize the meaning of traditional Christian teaching in the light of modern knowledge and modern ethical values. It is not revolutionary but reformist in spirit and substance. *Fundamentally it is the idea of a genuine Christianity not based on external authority. Liberal theology seeks to reinterpret the symbols of traditional Christianity in a way that creates a progressive religious alternative to atheistic rationalism and to theologies based on external authority.* (Vol. I, p. XXIII)

It took me a long time to work out the question of biblical authority and I can trace the gradual movement in my understanding. But, the mediating function of the liberal approach was obvious to me, once my infallible, inerrant scripture eroded and my conservative biblical paradigm collapsed.

I spent the Fall Term in 1983 at the University of Michigan with Professor Hans Küng, who was deeply engaged at the time in his work on paradigm change in theology. A book of great impact, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), by Thomas S. Kuhn, had, in the words of one commentator, made clear that

science is not the steady, cumulative acquisition of knowledge that is portrayed in the textbooks. Rather, it is a series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions ... in each of which, one conceptual world view is replaced by another ... The book was enlarged in a second edition in 1970. Küng charted the course of paradigm shifts in theological development from the earliest centuries much as Kuhn did for the unfolding scientific worldviews in which he showed how, in the scientific revolutions, one worldview is replaced by another. Kuhn documented how the scientist takes the data available and builds a model or a paradigm. Further data comes to light that doesn't fit into the prevailing paradigm and it is resisted, but finally more data is accumulated and the prevailing paradigm is rejected, its data and the new data of discovery are combined into a new paradigm that can accommodate all the data available at that time.

Küng documented a similar movement in theological conception except, in the religious community, there were always groups that perpetuated a given paradigm despite the ever-evolving knowledge of the cosmic story and scientific understanding. Out-of-date worldviews are manifold in religious worldviews.

But, this is where the Liberal movement comes in - no longer willing or able to deny the explosion of knowledge provided by the natural and social sciences, the liberal Christian thinkers were open to scientific breakthroughs and, with continuing commitment to their Christian faith and experience, sought to distinguish the faith from the worldviews in which it came to expression. Thus, there was revision of much biblical conceptuality and the faith that came to expression in the ancient worldview was set free from the ancient forms in which it was expressed. This was the mediating function of the liberal movement - the use of critical reason to understand the data of scientific discovery and the discernment of Christian faith that was wrapped in now outdated worldviews that had to be abandoned in light of new discovery.

This process which marked the Liberal movement and continues to be its finest gift to Christian faith is a process I have gone through, as indicated above, and let me acknowledge it is scary and sometimes painful. One wonders if one's faith will dissolve, leaving one without the source of one's meaning, hope and comfort. And, it can be costly! Hans Küng, in 1983, had just learned that the German Bishop, Joseph Ratzinger, presently Pope, had passed on Rome's decree that the theology courses Küng taught at Tübingen would no longer be credited for those studying for the priesthood. To read Küng's *Memoirs* is to realize the risk one takes as one seeks to bring one's Christian understanding into accord with one's understanding of the knowledge available in all the disciplines of human learning.

Yet, once one sees one's faith as distinct from the conceptual framework in which it first came to expression, and once one opens one's mind to the knowledge of the natural and social sciences, there is no "going home." And so one must move through the Critical stage, testing everything, ruling out no question, claiming no privilege of "the eyes of faith" in one's inquiry.

The *Critical phase* is both necessary and dissatisfying for one deeply formed in the conservative biblical paradigm as I was. It is an anxiety-ridden experience; one wonders where one will end up. But I was fortunate in that I had time to read and think and write sermons. And, I took a cadre of folk with me in Wednesday evening classes where we probed the questions and read significant scholarly works. And along the way, there were cumulative experiences. I've already mentioned the semester with Küng. And, in the early 90s, the exposure to the Jewish community, involvement with the Jewish-Christian committee, and the inter-faith experience was very significant for me.

Perhaps the most significant endeavor for me was serving on the Board of Editors of *Perspectives*, a journal of Reformed theology intended to stimulate theological dialogue in the Reformed Church. In the writing of several essays, I began to focus the new understanding I had been gaining in my reading and reflection. In these years 1985-95, I brought into sharp focus the results of my critical inquiry of the previous years post-Europe. I won't trace the development of my thinking here, but simply point out that by the mid-90s, the Muskegon Classis challenged my theological position, determining I was outside the pale of Reformed theology and, with the congregation, I moved out of the RCA to independency.

I experienced freedom - a freedom I did not know I did not have while engaging in my critical testing of my theological understanding while still in the ordained ministry of the RCA. Now I was finally free to follow the consequences of years of critical investigation. Declaring our independence in 1996, by 1999 I had moved into a *Post-Critical stage*. But, before I go there, I must mention that my understanding of the nature and function of religion was changing.

This change came about as I got involved in inter-religious dialogue, as well as experiencing firsthand the deeply religious life of one who called himself a Religious Naturalist - Dr. Duncan Littlefair. I saw in him the celebration of the wonder, miracle, joy and glory of life, lived out in a life of worship and the wonder of all creation and the human being. These concrete life experiences were life-changing for me. I wonder if we ever really change, if we are ever transformed in any other way than through encounter and concrete experience. I had to re-think the phenomenon of religion itself, all knowledge to the contrary.

One of the significant scholars whose work we studied was Gordon Kaufman, who had recently retired from Harvard. His *In Face of Mystery* was a great "revelation" for me, especially his claim that religion is a human creative construct. Tracing the development of the human from earliest beginnings, he showed how the religious dimension developed and I found his explanation compelling. I came to understand how religion played a significant role in human development, beginning within clans and tribes as the means to explain the natural phenomena experienced, to seek security and harmony with the Ultimate Mystery, eventuating in 800-600 BCE in the great religious traditions that arose simultaneously in what is called the First Axial Period.

Informed by such an understanding, I came to see religious truth, not as a series of creedal propositions containing absolute truth, but as sacred story lived out in

life-forming fashion through prayer, ritual and moral living. The story was celebrated in music and sacred dance and worship. And, as Karen Armstrong has claimed, at the heart of all the great religions is the call to compassion.

Understanding the nature and function of religion thus, I realized exclusivism was a hangover of tribalism and, for me, the theology of religion pointed to pluralism as the only reasonable conclusion.

This, too, was freeing; with absolutism and exclusivism removed, I was able to go back to my own story, the biblical story and my Christian faith - no longer needing to defend or convince or argue, but simply search out again its depth and meaning, its wisdom and its teaching as to the meaning of human existence before the Face of the Sacred Mystery we call God.

I had entered fully the post-critical stage where I could see the whole grand story and tradition as for the first time - and loving it now, not as the only way, truth and life, but as my way, my truth, my life. No need now to prove anything; rather, I could live fully in the human world, open to the wonder and miracle of the universe, trusting that all Being was grounded in an Ultimate Mystery that was the creative, enlivening source of all that is. An Ultimate Mystery who is life-giving, as seen in the cosmic drama that has been emerging with life to the point at which the human can trace the process of billions of years and stand in awe of it all, giving voice in praise and adoration.

Emergence has become a key concept for me as I survey the whole cosmic drama - the gradual unfolding of the universe issuing, at this point in the process, in creatures such as we are. Emergence I understand as a model I create in place of the ancient Genesis story with its profound mythical story, and I propose emergence because I can hear all the data available from cosmology in its present state and see it as the emerging reality that has come to this point without feeling any threat to my religious being. In other words, I can receive the latest and best knowledge and then think about it religiously in terms of my biblical story. And here I find a fascinating point of connection.

In John's Gospel the prologue begins *In the beginning was the Word ...*

In Greek, "word" is *logos*, a philosophical term that points to the divine intention in Creation. The prologue reminds us of Genesis 1:1, *In the beginning God...*

And then in verse 14, *The word became flesh ...*, a reference to Jesus as the human incarnation of the Divine Intention.

Then in verse 18, an interesting statement, *No one has ever seen God*, followed by the claim that Jesus, the Word made flesh, has made God known.

This, of course, is the Christian understanding of Jesus as the embodiment of God in human being - *The Christian understanding of Incarnation*. God become Human.

Translating that into Emergence conceptuality, I would say that the cosmic process emanating from the Creative Source, the Ultimate Mystery, has evolved to a point where that Infinite Mystery emerged in human form.

Stating it differently, the Infinite is now revealed in finite form - the human - and the human, in the image of the Infinite, is the emergent form of that Infinite Ground - thus, the deep yearning for God in the human being.

This whole idea is given a further and profound development in the First Epistle of John, chapter 4. In verse 7, we are called to love one another because love is from God, and "God is love." Then the phrase from the Gospel, 1:18, is repeated, *No one has ever seen God.*

But, then a significant development of the idea of incarnation is added:

If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

A few lines later, the same claim is made.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

If we put all this together, we have a theological model which is in harmony with an emerging cosmic drama whose Creative Source, God, is understood as Love and whose presence in the cosmos is experienced in human love, the human being the embodiment of the infinite creative Ground of Being. The cosmos becomes conscious in the human and love is the highest expression of cosmic reality - love that gathers all into harmony, the only possibility for Shalom, the ancient prophets' vision.

And where do we see such love lived out? In our biblical story, we see it concretely come to expression in Jesus, in whom the cycle of violence was broken, who counseled, "Love your enemies," and whose non-violent resistance to imperial power and political expediency brought him to the violent death by crucifixion. Jesus, who was true to his own teaching as he died, prayed

Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.

Other religious traditions teach and encourage positive human values and contain profound insights, having guided generations in their respective "ways." I need not denigrate another tradition. I need not claim I have fully grasped the deepest insights of the biblical story, nor claim I have embodied the way, the truth and the life as it came to expression in Jesus. But, it is enough for me that that story, that life in which I have been nurtured, which I have preached, challenges, inspires and enables me to realize my full humanity. And I believe that in that "Way, Truth and Life" lies the hope for a human future - the realization of the vision of *Shalom*.

References:

Francis Crick. *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, 1994. Scribner reprint edition, 1995.