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Frontiers of Faith: Religious Pluralism and Our Common Future
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What a great pleasure it is to be here this evening and speak in honor of Krister Stendahl, one of my great teachers and mentors. As is fitting in thinking about the legacy of Krister Stendahl, I want to talk about the dynamism and the turbulence of religious life in today's world. As we open the morning papers or turn to the television or internet for news and commentary, it is clear that religious communities, religious ideas, religious fanatics, and religious faith are part of the fast-moving white-waters of the global scene today. All of us need to know more and think more deeply about the powerful currents of religion—no matter where we live, no matter what we do, and no matter whether we are religious or not. And we need to think about how we deal with religious difference, both in our societies and in our communities of faith.

I have titled the lecture "Frontiers of Faith," because religious faith—whatever it is that gives energy, meaning, depth, and vision to our lives—is always dynamic. It is that energy that constantly pushes us outward toward the frontiers and toward the future. In the life of faith, we are always pioneers, and the moment our vision becomes captured by the past, we lose our relevance to the world in which we live. Krister Stendahl was a pioneer in so many ways. He looked forward, to see the critical role that women must play in the churches and in society. He looked forward to see the critical need to rework Christian thinking in relation to the Jewish community. And he looked forward in advocating for more robust interfaith work in the churches and in society.

Krister Stendahl also did what great teachers and mentors do for those who come after them: he opened doors to unexpected and life-transforming opportunities. He created a generation to follow. Pioneers do not go alone, but open paths for others to travel with them and follow them.

The path of my own religious and intellectual life has been shaped by the thought of Krister and the doors he opened. He not only led Harvard Divinity School during my first decade at Harvard, but he moved in worldwide circles as a cosmopolitan Biblical thinker engaged in the work of the World Council of Churches, especially in Jewish-Christian relations.

After the catastrophe of the Holocaust, he knew how urgently Christians needed to move into a new era relationships with the Jewish people. He *also* knew that Christian relations with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists would define the years ahead and needed urgently to be addressed. It was into this world of intense interfaith dialogue at the global level through the World Council of Churches that Krister brought me as a younger colleague and as a collaborator.

I was invited as a young professor to a theological consultation in Thailand, explicitly tasked with shaping guidelines for Christians living in communities with neighbors of other faiths. Of course, Krister had given them my name and in so doing opened the door to a significant part of my life. When that extraordinary consultation took place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I had my first encounter with the Global Krister: a figure known in churches literally around the world and admired for his edgy Biblical teaching, his trenchant wisdom, and his dry wit.

So began some fifteen years of intensive on the ground work in the theological, ecclesiological, and political trenches of ecumenical and interfaith work in the company of Krister (and sometimes Brita too) and a wide circle of Christian thinkers –Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, living in dozens of countries, all pushing and coaxing their communities toward more positive engagement with neighbors of other faiths. Along with Krister, the people I encountered in this work reshaped my intellectual and spiritual world. The intensity of our work together created a strong network of people who labored long together. We usually met at the invitation of churches in places where relations among neighbors of many faiths were part of daily life, and often tense. We met in Trinidad, where conscripted laborers from India –Muslim and Hindu alike—were now in their third generations in an island culture far from their homelands. It was not unlike diaspora cultures of Hindus and Muslims in South Africa, Mauritius, and Malaysia, and the minority Christian communities that had been missions travelling in the wake of Empire.

At Mt. St. Benedict Abbey in Trinidad we hunkered down for a week to actually write the *Guidelines on Dialogue* from the rich discussions at Chiang Mai, *Guidelines* that were then approved by the large Central Committee of the WCC and translated into dozens of languages, articulating anew for Christians in our time the urgent importance of inter-religious dialogue for life together in a shrinking world of real religious difference.

A few years later at our working group meeting in Matrafured, Hungary, Krister led us through the first draft of "Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish Christian Dialogue," summarizing in clear words how Christians today in some 300 Protestant and Orthodox churches understand the "richness and vitality" of Jewish faith and life, articulated through years of mutual listening and questioning.

Then, at a small retreat center in Baar, Switzerland in 1990, we gathered to ascertain just how far we had come on this path. What could we all say that grew out of the religious encounter? We said, "We find ourselves recognizing the need to move beyond a theology which confines salvation to the explicit personal commitment to Jesus Christ." We said, "We affirm unequivocally that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of other living faiths." We said, "Our recognition of the mystery of salvation in men and women of other religious traditions shapes the concrete attitudes with which we as Christians must approach them in interreligious dialogue."

This is work and thinking that would never have become so central to my own life's work were it not for the doors opened by Krister Stendahl.

Migration and the Changing Neighborhood.

But something began to happen in those same years. While we were laboring in multireligious cultures elsewhere in the world, thinking about issues for Christians living in communities with neighbors of other faiths, our own nation was gradually becoming more and more multireligious. This was true not only of the U.S., but also of the nations of Europe, as a new era of migration began to change the demography of our own homelands. It didn't happen all of a sudden, and it is not surprising that those of us whose work in colleges and universities did not sit up and take notice until the 1990s when the children of what has been called the "new immigration" came to college. Their parents were among the first to take advantage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act that opened the door to a new wave of immigration from Asia and other parts of the world.

America, as you know, is often called a nation of immigrants, for with the exception of the Native peoples, everyone in America came from somewhere else, and in my case all of my ancestors came from here in Sweden. All were Swedish Lutherans and their first communities in the U.S. were places where the Swedish Lutheran church could be the first-home for new arrivals. My great, great grandfather came, as he put it, to "help Lincoln in the fight against slavery," but arrived too late to join the Union army. On the other side, my grandfather came to work in construction and my grandmother came with her brothers and found work as a maid. The Swedes fared well enough in their new home.

But the 19th century brought resistances to open immigration. There was a flood of Irish and Southern European Catholics; there were Jews from Germany and eventually Eastern Europe. This stretched the tolerance of the new republic. There was overt prejudice. Some began muttering about "too many Jews" or "too many Catholics." Signs in shop windows in Boston read "No Irish Need Apply." On the West coast, Chinese men who came as workers to seek their fortune in the gold mines or in the building of the railroads fared even worse. Chinese exclusion laws were passed in 1885 and unspeakable violence ensued against the Chinese who stayed and tried to settle in the American West. Each passing decade brought new and increasingly discriminatory federal and state legislation barring immigration from Asia and prohibiting land-ownership and citizenship for those already here.

America was called the "melting pot," but its assimilative energies did not include everyone. Following World War I, immigration from Europe as well was halted for decades. But by the 1960s, the U.S. was in the throes of a civil rights movement that developed three legislative pillars: the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Immigration and Nationalities Act, all passed in 1964 and 1965. As then Attorney General Robert Kennedy put it, "As we are working to remove the

vestiges of racism from our public life, we cannot maintain racism as the cornerstone of our immigration laws."

Some of those first post-1965 immigrants were graduate students already studying in the U.S. who opted to stay in the U.S. Others were economic migrants, looking for a better life. Some were political refugees, and still others were refugees from the war in Vietnam and Cambodia. Individuals came. Family members came. Families settled down. They brought not only their political and economic dreams, but their faith --their Qur'ans and prayer mats, their Bhagavad Gitas and Lotus Sutras. Eventually their children, the best and brightest, came to college, and by 1990 they were in my classes: Hindus who had grown up in Pittsburgh, Muslims who had gone to youth leadership camps in Chicago, Jains who founded the Young Jains of America, Sikhs who went to Sikh summer camps in California, young Vietnamese Buddhists who in the company of enthusiastic Euro-American meditators. My own teaching and research as a professor of comparative religion began to change.

Did we, did I, know these new neighbors? Not really. Although I was a professor of comparative religion, I did not. I had never been to the consecration of a Hindu temple in India, but now one was being built in the suburbs of Boston. I had never been to prayers at a mosque in India, but now I was invited to Friday prayers in Quincy. I drove to a Cambodian Buddhist temple in a former Methodist Church in Lynn. I went to a celebration at a Jain Temple created out of the sanctuary of a former Swedish Lutheran church in Norwood. The only thing my Swedish Lutheran grandparents would have recognized there was, perhaps, the glass chandelier. There were white marble meditating images of the *tirthankaras*, the ford-makers, the spiritual pioneers of the Jains, across the front where the altar would have been. And so began a research project, The Pluralism Project, to document and better understand the new religious landscape of Boston, then other cities across America.

Student researchers who worked with the Project were themselves pioneers in the discovery of a new religious America. We began to document this amazing new religious landscape: the mosque with its minarets rising from cornfields outside Toledo, the Hindu temples in Wilmington, Delaware, on a hilltop south of Atlanta, in Pearland south of Houston, in a western suburb of Nashville. We saw dozens of Islamic Centers in Chicago and Houston, urban and rural Buddhist centers in North Carolina. In Fremont, California, Muslims and Methodists bought property together and began to build side by side. That was in the early 1990s, and we said to ourselves: someone should be paying attention, someone should study this year after year. In a great many cases, all across America, that someone -- a student, a professor, a volunteer researcher-- has been affiliated with The Pluralism Project.

In his inaugural address in 2009, President Barack Obama spoke of our "patchwork heritage." He said, "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and

Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth." This is an achievement. It is also a challenge.

How are "we" the people of the U.S. coping with this new level of religious diversity? What are the new challenges we face in the workplace, in our local governments, in our neighborhoods, and in our national life? This is a question that is not ours alone, of course. As the nations of Europe have also experienced new immigration—Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Buddhists—how have the issues of our life together begun to change? In a few minutes, I would like to return to these questions. But first, there is another aspect of American religious life that it is important to think about as we attempt to understand the complexity of faith—and interfaith—in the U.S. That is the dynamism, the constant change, of the face of religion in America.

The Dynamism of religion in America

Let me pause here for a moment and say something about the energies and the dynamism of religion in America. This is an assessment of religious difference that springs not so much from America's deep commitment to human equality across and in spite of differences. Rather this is an assessment of religious difference that springs from America's deep commitment to religious freedom and, more broadly, freedom of conscience.

We in the United States have a reputation among Western nations for being somewhat zealous in our avowed religiousness. I know this is surprising to many Europeans who are puzzled at the intensity of religious discourse in the U.S. Why is it that Americans seem still to be "believers" and that religious discourse and argumentation is part of our public life?

As candidates vie for votes and political office, they sometimes talk about their religious background, a fact that astonishes many in secular Europe. God is asked for blessing as a routine benediction to presidential addresses. There are prayers at the opening of legislative sessions and at the inauguration of presidents and governors. Increasingly, there may be prayers not only from Christians and Jews, but from citizens of other faiths as well.

At the same time, the U.S. is also avowedly secular, but in a special way. The U.S. is secular not because it is non-religious, or because the people are non-religious, but because the state and its constitution is officially non-religious. There is no established religion, no state religion. The U.S. was, after all, colonized by settlers from the religious wars of Europe, where state religion was taken for granted, and fought about. Those who came to America sought religious freedom, mostly freedom from the political regimes of Europe that imposed a state religion. On the other hand, we should remember that they sought religious freedom for themselves. Others were not welcome. The Puritans of Boston, for example, ran Jews, Catholics, and Quakers out of town. They did not, at the outset, understand

religious freedom as the basis for a society that would embrace people of faith different from themselves.

But when independence had been achieved, however, the question of how religion would be dealt with in an American Constitution was debated. Our founding fathers, like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, argued that the state is not a good judge in religious matters. I can't exercise my freedom of conscience unless you can too. Thus, the famous and critical principle of our Bill of Rights states: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.* No state religion. Free exercise of religion. This is a blueprint for religious diversity.

Those who wrote these words could not have imagined the religious diversity of America today with our Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu citizens. Nonetheless, the sturdy principles of free-exercise of religion and the non-establishment of religion have stood the test of time as America's religious diversity has broadened. America's religious diversity today is a direct result of our commitment to religious freedom. America's secular humanist traditions are also a product of the freedom of conscience built into those Constitutional foundations. Freedom of religion is also freedom *from* religion of any sort. When we say, "We the people. . ." that is who we are.

It was astonishing enough to do away with state support of religion, but as amazing to many observers was that without state support, such as was rendered to the state church in Germany, Sweden (at that time) and England, religion did not fade away, but flourished. It was a free market, and this free-market economy of faith has characterized American religion ever since. Within a few decades after the American Constitution was promulgated, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, travelling in frontier America, wrote of his astonishment at the energy of religion in America. There is much to ponder in his classic work *Democracy in America*, for he came to America as an outside observer in the wake of the French revolution. He wrote:

On my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention, and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.

It was this that fascinated Tocqueville about America: that political freedom did not mean that people abandoned religion. Rather, the spirit of freedom seemed to promote the flourishing of religion.

It is this very dynamic religious competition that has given the U.S. its wide variety of Protestant denominations. Not just Lutherans, but Evangelical Lutherans, Missouri Synod Lutherans. Not just Baptists, but six or seven kinds of Baptists. Independent churches galore. Religion is a voluntary matter, a matter of choice. No one will build or maintain your religious center or raise money for your pastors and bishops unless you do.

If we fast forward to the late twentieth century and the new era of immigration after 1965, this same dynamism and this same spirit of voluntarism has enabled Hindus and Muslims to put down roots, create and maintain communities, and raise money for new buildings, schools, and expansion projects. The spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom are, even now, marching in the same direction. It has also reassured those immigrants who are fed up with religion and would like to leave it behind, that they are free to do so.

Commitment to human equality and to freedom of conscience have been the twin engines of an energetic and diverse religiousness in America. To outsiders, America sometimes seems like the wild west of religious life, as Americans embrace, reject, and experiment with religions old and new. I have used the phrase "Frontiers of Faith" in my title, so let me now try to give you a sense of what I mean by these new frontiers in America today by focusing on three points.

First, the very shape of religious identity is changing. True, America still has a pronounced majority of Christians –over 75%, which includes Evangelical, Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Historic Black Churches. Nonetheless, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist groups now are counted in the Pew survey, although together these groups make up less than 10% of the population. Among the most interesting and important findings of the 2010 study was the following that "the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion."

During this past week, the Pew Survey released another study that it dubbed "Nones on the Rise," indicating that one in five American adults (19.3%) do not identify with a specific religion. That is an increase from 15.3% only five years ago. In the under thirty age bracket those who list "none" as their religious affiliation is even higher, one in three. This may be reassuring to those of you who worry about the excessive religious energy of America, but for many in the United States this comes as alarming news!

The unaffiliated are not necessarily atheist, although some are. Among them are the many, mostly younger people, who describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." Many describe themselves as "humanist." They take values seriously, as is evident in two of the recent books published by young leaders in this group -- *Good without God* and *Faithist*. At Harvard, the Humanist, Atheist, Faithist group has its own "chaplaincy" and a growing number of students. And the Atheist/Humanist/Secular Chaplaincy is also active in the interfaith community on campus, clearly understanding its own non-theist humanist stance as, nonetheless, religious.

One more thing about religious identity: As more and more people encounter the religious "other," we observe the growing phenomenon of multiple religious

identities. Globally, we know that the new "geo-religious" reality of our world reveals a world map today that is not color-coded by culture or religion, but is increasingly marbled with the colors and textures of the whole. So, too, the landscape of our nations. The U.S. census has had to increase its categories of racial and cultural identity to include people who identify as mixed race and who check off boxes indicating several races. This includes the standard Asian American, African American, Hispanic American, and Native American, but this only gestures to a far more complex reality. And just as the racial complexity of America is changing, so is the "landscape within." Our own religious life and that of our neighbors is increasingly complex, although the U.S. census assiduously avoids questions about religious identity.

Our students and colleagues, even we ourselves, may be Christians who read the Bhavagad Gita, Jews who practice Buddhist meditation, or atheists who are devoted to the health benefits of yoga practice. From our research in the U.S., we know that there are Cambodian Buddhists in Boston who attend church on Sundays and keep a Buddha altar at home, Hindu families in Tennessee who celebrate Christmas with a tree and gifts and have a Jewish son-in-law. There are Christian-Jewish married couples that somehow balance two traditions. How do we describe and understand these border-crossings in our midst, in our families, in our minds, and in our selves? Speaking as religious persons, how do we describe ourselves to ourselves? As Christian-Buddhists? As Jewish yogis?

As a Christian who has read and re-read the Bhagavad Gita, this Hindu spiritual text is now part of my own inner life. I cannot push a spiritual "delete" button when I think about matters of life and death or about conflicting ethical choices. The Gita comes quickly to mine. Should I choose my family, my religious duty, my community duty? How does Arjuna's dilemma help us? Our inner landscape is re-shaped what we read and study. My students do not leave the Bhagavad Gita or the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism in some locked closet of the mind while they go on with their lives of work and faith.

Our religious identities are also shaped and made more complex by the people who come into our lives. Alex, a young man from Arkansas, a devout and evangelical Methodist, arrives at Harvard College as a freshman and finds that his roommate, Ben, is a devout orthodox Jew. Ben is the first up every morning. He straps on his *teffilin* and does his morning prayer in his room. Every single day. Alex comes from what he had considered an active church life, but he had never really encountered this kind of daily devotion. The friendship of Alex and Ben develops throughout their college years, visiting each other's homes, attending a common Passover Seder. How does Alex think about this encounter when his congregation reads aloud the passion story on Palm Sunday? Does he recoil when "the Jews" are said to shout out "Crucify him!" Does he wonder anew about the history of Jewish-Christian relations?

Today many people, especially in the west, who have lived within fairly coherent religious worlds now encounter other religious worlds. Whether through reading, personal experience, or friendship, they find images, texts, teachings and ideas of value. Belgian scholar Catherine Cornille has collected the contributions of several Christians in her volume *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. In her introductory essay, she puts the question this way:

In a world of seemingly unlimited choice in matters of religious identity and affiliation, the idea of belonging exclusively to one religious tradition or of drawing from only one set of spiritual, symbolic, or ritual resources is no longer self-evident. Why restrict oneself to the historically and culturally determined symbols and rituals of one religious tradition amid the rich diversity of symbols and rituals presenting themselves to the religious imagination? Why search for answers to the fundamental questions of life in only one religion when so many alternative proposals by time-honored traditions are readily available?

These are questions that arise commonly today in the west, where individualism and choice is taken for granted, even in matters of religion. They are frightening for some, and that fear sometimes creates a thicker and stronger cocoon around one's own religious community. But times have changed almost everywhere in the world. When my grandmother, Anna Nordquist, left Sunne in Sweden to come to the U.S. in 1914 *the* book of spiritual significance was the Bible. That was it. It was the only book she brought with her. That is no longer the case for me, her granddaughter, just one hundred years later. My life-world is different. My experience is different. And my faith, as a Christian, is different.

A recent book by a friend and colleague, the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter, now the Tillich Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, is entitled *Without the Buddha I Could Not be a Christian*. It is a careful, faithful, and theological account of the significance of the Buddha and of Buddhist teaching for him as a Christian, who describes himself as a Buddhist-Christian. The title alone makes our point: the religious identities of Americans today are increasingly complex.

Second: There is Energetic and Multisided Religious Advocacy in the Public Square. The new religious reality in America is marked by growing and diverse forms of religious advocacy groups that raise the concerns of their religious community in the civic and public sphere. There have long been national organizations like the National Council of Churches, the Anti-Defamation League, weighing in on national affairs and controversies. Now they are joined by a new range of national groups. The Muslim Public Affairs Council holds briefings for members of Congress, participates in State Department hearings on Muslim civil rights, and runs internships programs for young people working on Capitol Hill. The Sikh Coalition works with the National Transportation Safety Board to negotiate discriminatory screening at airports and lobbies members of Congress to end racial

profiling. The Hindu American Foundation brings Hindu student interns to work and learn about the processes of government in the nation's capital.

The spectrum of advocacy is not only wide, but also combative. In just the past few weeks, the controversy over notices in the New York subway system gives evidence of this spectrum. The far-right advocacy group Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA) posted ads in the subway with the words, *In Any War Between the Civilized Man and the Savage, Support the Civilized Man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad.* The MTA at first rejected the ads, saying they violated the prohibition on demeaning language. When taken to court, the judge said the MTA had violated the first amendment free-expression of the group, SIOA, led by Pamela Geller.

Immediately, a religious coalition formed to counter the ads. The United Methodist Women unveiled their own ad that read: *Hate Speech is Not Civilized. Support Peace in Word and Deed!* "We needed to be present with a counter voice, we need to stand for the work of peace, and to say that free speech should not be used recklessly or in an inflammatory way," said United Methodist Women General Secretary Harriet Olson. That same week, last week, the heads of 15 American denominations sent a letter to every member of Congress calling for "the immediate investigation into possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act which respectively prohibit assistance to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations and limit the use of U.S. weapons to "internal security" or "legitimate self-defense." The letter created an immediate crisis in official Jewish-Christian relations, and Jewish organizations pulled out of long-standing dialogues in response.

In an election season as that in which we in the U.S. are now so deeply enmeshed, the activism of religious communities seems to bear out Tocqueville's sense that religion is "the first of political institutions." While religious communities with non-profit status cannot endorse candidates and cannot hold campaign events within their premises, they are energetic in the agendas they pursue and free to speak their minds on the issues. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) has organized a nationwide voter registration drive with a Get Out the Vote Toolkit for Islamic Centers. The group is officially non-partisan, but they have published a Presidential Voter Information Guide with positions of the candidates on major issues. The "Creeping Shariah" website calls it a Hamas-funded initiative. Meanwhile, 17% of registered voters still think Obama is a Muslim. Meanwhile, the "Your Voice, Your Vote" campaign of the Muslims is spreading across the country.

The Sikh American Legal Defense and Education also has a 2012 voter registration drive. In an open letter to Sikhs, SALDEF wrote: "You can do a lot in your own community to empower Sikhs across America. One of the easiest things to do is encouraging people to vote. Why should you? In 1923 the Supreme Court said Sikh Americans could not become citizens. We could not vote and were denied a voice in our country. Today, we have the right to vote, the right to share our voice and determine the direction of our nation. By voting, we can influence the decisions

our elected officials make which impact our rights. Increasing the number of Sikh Americans registered to vote is one of the best ways to build and strengthen our community's voice, presence, and political capacity."

In the "wild west" of religious freedom, some of the most difficult issues have to do with those who exercise their freedom by igniting the fires of outrage. Witness the sole Florida pastor, Terry Jones, who announced he would burn 200 Qur'ans on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. He gained immediate international coverage and ignited violence half a world away in Afghanistan. And witness the hopelessly amateur short film released on YouTube by an American claiming to be a Coptic Christian, depicting the Prophet Muhammad chasing women around his desert tents. In many countries, individuals are silenced or prosecuted for their crazy and insulting ideas, for outrageous criticism of the state, the president, or the faith of another. In America, they are not. Here, the solo perpetrator of stupidity is constrained only by counter-arguments of fellow citizens.

Third, there is a multifocal and broad Interfaith Movement. My third point concerns the energy of the interfaith movement in the U.S. When Krister Stendahl and I were working on interfaith dialogue at a global level in the 1980s, there were only two major urban interfaith councils –in Los Angeles and in Metropolitan Washington D.C. There were perhaps a dozen chapters of what was then called the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Over the past thirty years, the interfaith landscape has become more extensive and varied with each year and today has an astonishing presence in hundreds of cities. Very few such initiatives are Christians and Jews alone. They are Abrahamic –Christians, Jews, and Muslims—and most interfaith initiatives involve Buddhists and Bah'ais, Sikhs and Hindus.

As for the unaffiliated, the humanists and atheists, it is an astonishing fact of today's interfaith landscape that many are eagerly involved in a local interfaith initiative. Last year, during the Occupy Movement, our "Faitheist," commentator, Chris Stedman, wrote "Occupy Interfaith! Why Millennials, Including the Irreligious, Need to Care About Religion." He said of his visit to Occupy Boston, "As an interfaith activist working to mobilize people from diverse religious and nonreligious backgrounds toward cooperation, it was an inspiring sight. The collective commitment to work together and give voice to the disempowered was a testament to the power of uniting people from different backgrounds for a common goal. Like the interfaith coalition that led the American Civil Rights movement, there was a recognition that success will require respecting the many different reasons people come to the table."

A "movement" is not an organization. It has no single center, but is constituted by a common energy and commitment to build better relations between people of different faiths. A multitude of interfaith groups have sprung up because the very soil of society is changing. Some initiatives focus on learning and understanding through dialogue, and others that join together in addressing

common social concerns. Today the interfaith movement represents a new cultural consensus: that better interfaith relations can be intentionally cultivated to shape a better society. And better interfaith understanding and relations is critical –even for people who are not religious.

While my own work in interfaith relations began at the global level, I am now convinced that the most significant religious and interfaith encounters in today's world do not take place between Dalai Lamas, Popes, Archbishops, and Swamis, but in the neighborhoods of our immediate world. Most of us don't get a chance to be bridge builders to world peace, but we do have the opportunity every day to build the bridges of relationship and understanding that make a huge difference at the local level. As few years ago, the faith communities of Plano, a suburb of Dallas, got together for a blood drive. "We can't bring world peace, but we can sure make a difference in Plano if we work together."

What are some of the ways in which people as citizen and as people of faith are finding one another across faith communities in the new world cities? What are some of the ways in which they have created new structures of relationship, and a new urban interfaith infrastructure? This is, in a social-cultural sense, what Robert Putnam calls the "bridging capital" of today's cities. For the last two years, the Pluralism Project has done a study of twenty cities in the U.S. to map out the kinds of interfaith initiatives they have developed.

In Louisville, Kentucky, a whole city celebrates an annual Festival of Faiths. It was launched in 1996 by citizens of Louisville and supported, at first, by the Cathedral. Over the years, it has become a major weeklong civic event to highlight and better understand the religious communities of Louisville. It includes citywide events, with speakers, breakfasts, dinners, and arts performances. One year, the speaker might be Mary Evelyn Tucker, who has launched a major initiative on the world's religions and ecology. There might be an Israeli-Palestinian youth choir on tour, or a Sufi singer. The week of programming includes a Passport to Understanding program that extends that week into a year of visiting one another's places of worship to learn first-hand about religious communities other than their own. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, and Bah'ai centers will all be hosts to visitors during the upcoming year. Chandrika Srinivasan of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky told us that she has experience positive changes in the Louisville community because of the Festival. "I have lived in Louisville for ten years," she said, "and people are more respectful of others because of this event." The Louisville festival packaged its approach so effectively that other cities –like Greenville, South Carolina and Kansas City, Missouri-- have replicated it.

In Houston, Texas, Mayor, Bill White, was instrumental in launching another kind of initiative, the Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues. As mayor he had seen the faith communities of an increasingly diverse Houston mobilize to respond to Hurricane Katrina in 2006. Yet what seemed to be omnipresent in the news about religion was religious violence and tension. He had seen that there is much more to

be said than that. And so, he helped launch the dinner dialogues with the active support of the Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston and the new center for the study of tolerance at Rice University.

The dinners take place in people's homes across the city. Guests can register on the Internet and hosts agreeing to provide a simple, nutritious vegetarian meal for about ten to twelve people. The first year, there were twenty dinner parties on the designated night. The dinner table discussion is launched with a stack of cards that ask questions about one's own faith, not to be answered as an expert, but as an individual. These are questions only you can answer. Here are some samples: Faith sometimes changes as we grow older. Are you the same spiritual or religious person you were ten years ago? Where do you see acts of compassion in the world around you? What do you pray for, and how do you understand it if prayer is not answered? What is the role faith or spirituality in your life at work? Many faith communities believe that there is one message God wants us all to hear. Do you believe that? What is that message from your perspective? Many religions speak of miraculous events that seem outside our normal experience. Have you experienced such a miraculous dimension? Today, as in the past, people of faith are persecuted for what they believe. What would you do if your faith were forbidden?

A moderator is present to facilitate the discussion. People may attend a dinner dialogue group with one other person, i.e. a spouse or friend. Otherwise, the members of the groups are strangers to one –a Sikh and a Muslim join Christians and a Baha'i in a Jewish home, for instance. In a dinner at the home of a Muslim woman, the host said, "The most memorable part of the evening for me was when someone talked about the fear they have of Muslims. I've never seen myself in that way. Confronting our fears slows us to begin the process of understanding each other." "It's one thing to read about Islam," said one of the participants. "It's quite another to sit down to dinner together and talk." A Houston researcher studying the project said that 57% of the participants had never been involved in anything like this before.

The first round was a huge success. People were literally and figuratively hungry for this kind of sharing, without agenda. By the second round of dinners in late November there were dinners in seventy-three homes, with nearly 800 people participating. By the third year, the Dinner Dialogues had expanded to nine other cities. These were not the big coastal cities, but Oklahoma City, Chicago, Raleigh-Durham, Harrisburg PA, Syracuse NY, Greenville, SC.

In Omaha, Nebraska, our researchers focused first on Project Interfaith, Omaha's Community Mosaic Video Project. Those who started the Project began by using social media from Twitter to Facebook to YouTube. Their goal: "To Tell Omaha's Story, One Story at a Time." Volunteers from different religious traditions were paired up and provided with a flip cam and a set of questions: "How do you identify yourself spiritually and why? How welcoming do you find our Omaha

community for your religious or spiritual path? What is a stereotype that impacts you, based on your religious and spiritual identity?

These questions led to open-ended reflections. The interview teams visited businesses, community centers, and different places of worship in Omaha -- the Nebraska Zen Center Heartland Temple, the Islamic Center of Omaha, the Omaha Atheists. Today, their interactive website has some 700 videos. Beth Katz who helped launch this project expressed her own surprise at this success. "Oh my God. This is happening in Omaha, Nebraska! This can happen anywhere. And that's exactly what we need. Because for this to really be a sustainable movement, it has to happen everywhere."

That's not all that's happening in Omaha. Temple Israel, the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska, the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture have joined together in a Tri-Faith initiative, purchasing a former country club property, a country club that fifty years ago did not admit Jews to membership and making plans to create a common campus and build their own centers, side by side. In 2006, the three groups signed a Memorandum of Understanding expressing their intentions and their confidence. In the works are three faith centers and, eventually, a common building that will house interfaith activities and educational initiatives. As one local writer put it, "Change won't happen overnight but nothing happens if we don't do anything. By building their houses of worship together, the congregants of the tri-faith group are making a long-term commitment to being neighbors and interacting with each other regularly. For many, many years. Yes, they will continue to have difficult discussions -- but they will also have the opportunity to celebrate together and share each other's traditions." ¹

One final example. In Syracuse, New York, InterFaith Works of Central New York describes its mission as a coalition that "wills and works to affirm the rich diversity of people who comprise the human family of Central New York. We aspire to create a community in which: The beliefs held by people of faith, traditional and non-traditional, are honestly and openly explored; Ample opportunities are provided to recognize, affirm and honor the different life expressions, which, taken together in their rich variety, unite human beings." Among its projects, InterFaith Works goes to work with refugee communities in Syracuse --from Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, and Iraq.

Syracuse is cosmopolitan in the way that so many cities now are, with a new diversity that spans the globe. There, shortly after 9/11, a Presbyterian woman, Betsy Wiggins, brooded about rumors that Muslim women were feeling unsafe leaving their homes. She contacted InterFaith Works, and then the local Islamic center, and then Danya Welmon, a Muslim woman involved in the center and

¹ Susan A. Buffett, "Coexistence is Within Reach," Huffington Post online.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-a-buffett/omaha-tri-faith-initiative_b_1154257.html

women's affairs. Betsy and Danya met for coffee in Betsy's kitchen. They talked for hours. Each invited nine friends to meet, and before long Women Transcending Boundaries was born. The group kept meeting, and kept growing. In their discussions, they took hold of critical issues including the alarming arrests of local Muslims in upstate New York, the impending war in Iraq, and their own life cycle issues --birth, marriage, and death. Now, over a decade later, they have a mailing list of over 500 women, and they have begun to look beyond Syracuse as well, linking their local concerns to those of women around the world and raising money for a school in Pakistan, for Women for Women projects in Afghanistan.

Reflections on Diversity and Pluralism

Diversity is a powerful fact of the world in which we live today. In every society, "we the people" has become more complex. We are more aware of the global dimensions of our local worlds. "We" as global citizens do not exist in and for ourselves alone. We are inextricably interconnected, for better or for worse, by thousands of daily airline flights, by fiber optic cable and satellite television, by ideas and movements, by remote detonators and human smart bombs. Ours is a world simultaneously more polarized and more interconnected than ever before.

But diversity alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is one way of appropriating and engaging our differences, creating through relationship a vital web of connection. There are other responses to difference as well. Most common is acquiescing in the isolation of difference. Most difficult is the rejection of difference.

Our diversity has also posed questions of religious or theological truth that come up for some of us. They were some of the same questions Krister and I and our WCC colleagues were thinking about in the 1980s. Now our local Methodist and Lutheran churches in the U.S. think about them too. Do we think of our faith as exclusivist, that our religion is true, exclusive of all others? Or are we inclusivists, believing that our religion is true, but our faith somehow includes others who fall within the providence of the one we call God, as we articulate and think of God? And what of a pluralist understanding, that there are clearly many ways that religious life has been lived, and religious truth has been perceived, that our task is to find the borders of our own faith as the places we encounter our neighbors, not places we erect walls against them. Perhaps truth is greater than us all and it is a kind of epistemological arrogance to believe that we have found it all, and circled the wagons around the one we call God.

Krister's theological language was all his own, with his quirky way of putting things.

He would say, "When God gets to the oval office and asks for a print out of salvation statistics, he does not ask how many people have become Christians, but has there been any progress toward the reign of justice and love?"

He would say, "Faith is not a zero-sum game, that if others have faith, there is somehow less for us. That is not God's spiritual economy."

He would speak of what he called "Holy Envy," meaning to recognize in the religious tradition of another what is beautiful, to rejoice in that beauty, even to envy it, but not to somehow claim it for oneself."

He would say, "The Gospel is not for spiritual imperialism. In God's eyes, we are all minorities."

He would say, "There are no adjectives in heaven. No Muslim, Christian, Jewish."

Our theological and our civic conversations are not the same, but the parallels are important. For "we" as Americans, or Swedes of many faiths and of none, are challenged to think afresh about our identity. We are challenged to create one society, one nation, out of our differences. We as Christians, as Jews, as Muslims are also challenged not just to understand one another, but also to understand ourselves anew in the encounter with one another.

First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with that diversity. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. In this new world of religious diversity, pluralism is not a given, but an achievement. In the world into which we now move, diversity without real encounter and relationship will increasingly difficult.

Second, pluralism will require not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is simply too thin a foundation for a world of religious differences. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fear that underlies old patterns of division and violence. In the world into which we now move, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

Finally, pluralism is not simply relativism. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. In the world into which we now move, it is language we all will need to learn.

