

God's Tapestry

*Reading the Bible in a World
of Religious Diversity*

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Preface

Some years ago I received an unexpected phone call from my mother. She was clearly agitated and thought I would share her concern, a theological concern. She was agitated about the language that had been used in fashioning a prayer to God in a study book that she and other women in her congregation were using.

Now let me say a word about my mother before I go further. Most of her life she was a reasonably reliable and consistent church worker. She did her share of teaching children in the church school. She cooked an untold number of casseroles and washed millions of dishes for the endless church socials that she helped to organize and attend. For many years she sang in the choir, listened to myriad sermons (some good, many more only so-so), and watched the clock, eager to get out at least a few minutes earlier than the other Christians heading for the Sunday specials at the local eateries. For some years she was an elder and served as clerk of the session of the small congregation to which she belonged. She did not think of herself as particularly “smart,” but you could count on her if you were in need. In other words, my mom was a rather typical Christian woman who spent a great deal of time in or around her church.

But back to her phone call. The issue was a prayer in which feminine metaphors were employed to describe God’s love for Israel. Wombs, labor pains, and nursing at nurturing breasts were used in a prayer to God. When Mom and her Bible study friends read this prayer, the explosion was not pleasant. And not surprisingly, an unofficial “denominational” publication circulating widely in her congregation fanned the fire of my mother’s zeal to denounce perceived heresy.

It took me several minutes to get her calmed down enough for us to talk reasonably. When I did, I asked her to read the offending prayer to me. As she did, I recognized the clear influence of Isaiah. I said, “Hey, Mom, that language is straight out of the Bible.”

She said, “It is not!”

I said, “Yes it is!”

“Is not!”

“Is too.”

Finally, I asked her to get her Bible and we had a long-distance Bible study of some selected verses from the book of Isaiah:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I [God] have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;
I will gasp and pant.

Isaiah 42:14

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.

Isaiah 49:15

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom.

For thus says the LORD:

I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm,
and dandled on her knees.

As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

Isaiah 66:10–13

After she had read those verses, there was a long pause, and then she said, “When did they put that in there?” “It’s been there all along,” I replied. “Well,” my dear mother continued in a somewhat subdued tone, “why didn’t anyone ever tell me?”

“Why didn’t anyone ever tell me?” That is one of the questions that prompted this book. There are so many misconceptions about what the Bible does say and doesn’t say, so much ignorance among otherwise well-educated, capable people. In my experience, the people in the pews are often well ahead of the clergy when it comes to the matters that really count in the way we order our daily lives and structure the communities in which we live. Their attitudes are usually based on what they recognize from their own experience of life. But they need knowledge about the support the Bible can offer and encouragement and permission from their leaders. They often think that what they believe must be heretical or offbeat, since no one assures them otherwise.

Leaders, official and unofficial—pastors, church school teachers, youth leaders, officers, every serious follower of Jesus Christ—need to be informed on important issues and then speak clearly to those who look to them for guidance. Gender language is but one of numerous concerns we should address, but we need to do it in light of what the Bible actually says. For too long too many have claimed to speak the “truth” on the basis of faulty or little knowledge of the Bible. “Why didn’t anyone ever tell me?” is a question that my mom should not have had to ask!

The Issue to Be Addressed

In this book “diversity” is the issue that will be explored. Political correctness is not the driving pressure. Rather, we seek theological clarity about how to deal with the realities of diversity we encounter in our communities: our schools, our workplaces, our political parties, our markets, our recreational facilities. Diversity is all around us: gender differences, racial and ethnic communities with a variety of languages, a wide divergence of social arrangement. Such differences are very much a part of our local and especially our international worlds. Any aspect of diversity is worthy of careful consideration, but

this book will address one particular matter, the reality of religious diversity.

The Structure of the Discussion

Setting the stage for our explorations will be done in part 1. Diversity among religions and religious communities is obvious. But only in recent decades have most Western Christians come into direct, personal contact with people of other religious traditions. What are we to make of these “others”? Do we ignore them? Persecute them? Try to “persuade” them that they are wrong? Christians have at times related to non-Christians in all these ways. In Europe and North America, the numbers of Christians and individual congregations are declining. In Africa, Asia, and parts of South America, however, large numbers of people are becoming “Christian.” This increase in numbers is in many instances taking place in parts of the world where Islam is also rapidly growing. Conflicts are taking place now, and more are quite likely unless we can find a way theologically to understand the “others” without making them “our enemies” or the “enemies of God.” The issue must be addressed at the individual level as well as the community level. Such concerns will be explored in chapters 1 and 2.

Methodology is not often very interesting to nonspecialists, but it is important to give some indication of how the Bible is being studied and interpreted in light of new findings that will be claimed. While we will not spend an undue amount of time on this topic, some explanation is necessary. Contextual interpretation is most needed. This involves a careful study of the biblical passages in question. It also requires an engagement with the contemporary, multicultural communities in which most of us live. Chapter 3 will be devoted to this important matter.

The Bible in itself is composed of a wide variety of diverse materials and viewpoints. There are many valid ways to consider who God is and what God is up to. In light of the picture drawn in part 1, questions concerning the “truthfulness” of non-Christian religions are important for many contemporary Christians. For centuries the church has taught that faith in Christ was the only way to relationship with God. But is that what the Bible teaches? Important questions need to

be raised about prior teaching by the church on this matter. Some key passages in the Bible need to be reconsidered. In light of what the Bible has to say, is there a better approach? This will be the focus of part 2. Chapters 4 through 8 will be devoted to this exploration.

Finally, in part 3, attention will turn to what may be some of the next practical steps that might be taken so that my mother's question need not continue to haunt me/us. What has been done to better understand other religions? What kinds of cross-cultural and interfaith exchanges have been helpful? Particularly with respect to Islam, how do we overcome the deep-seated suspicions and ignorance among many Christians and Muslims concerning one another? Already Christianity and Islam respectively are the number-one and number-two religions in the world so far as numbers go. How can mutual understanding and cooperation be fostered? Or is destructive, divisive confrontation the future for Christians and Muslims? What is to be learned from interaction with other religions as well? Chapters 9 through 12 will take up these questions.

The Aim of This Study

In summary, this book to some extent intends to explore the religious diversity in our world with open eyes and listening hearts. It is hoped that a reconsideration of some key biblical passages will assist in a reorientation that I think is crucial for the church to make. Finally, some concrete suggestions for engagement with others will be offered. The desired outcome is encouragement to listen to all the "mothers" in our congregations who are asking some simple, straightforward questions about the content and meaning of our precious Bible and who deserve honest responses to their concerns.

PART 1

A New Context

Opening Our Eyes

Chapter 1

A New Game

Some years ago the reality of diversity hit me squarely in the eyes and ears. I was in New York City and had to transfer from one airline to another. I took a shortcut and walked across the parking lot reserved for taxicabs servicing Manhattan's LaGuardia Airport. In that short five-minute walk from one terminal building to another, I encountered a new world, at least to me. There was an array of people who spoke at least thirty different languages, with English as a very second—sometimes fourth or fifth—language for almost all of them. This group of cab drivers, consisting of people from who-knows-how-many lands and ethnic backgrounds, each with their own distinctive clothing, hairstyles, and so forth, was milling about waiting for the next fare. Such an experience can be mind-boggling—and sometimes unnerving—particularly for those of us from the hinterland who do not regularly encounter such difference and diversity in large numbers “up close and personal.” It certainly was for me.

To be sure, New York City is atypical. It is not like most other places in the United States. Nonetheless, with New York City we see a microcosm of our world. What we see there gives us a glimpse of the diverse context in which we live. In 2001, for instance, the schoolchildren of New York City actually spoke some 140 languages when they began their educations. For a large number of them, English was new. Of its some 8.2 million inhabitants, approximately 37 percent, well over 3 million, are first- or second-generation immigrants. New York City has unarguably the largest and most diverse population in the United States. At least 170 languages are reported to be spoken there. That is surely extraordinary to most of us. But in fact that

represents only a small portion of the world's estimated 6,912 different tongues! If one wants to begin to understand the potentials and problems that the diverse character of our world presents, New York City provides an excellent place to start.

And what about religion in this diverse world of ours? In New York City, based on the 2000 census, about 40% are Catholics, 30% Protestants, 13% claiming no religious affiliation, 5% Jews, 3.5% Muslims, and 1% Buddhists. In terms of the estimated numbers worldwide, the picture looks somewhat different. Worldwide there are approximately 2.1 billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims, 1.1 billion secularists, 900 million Hindus, 394 million Chinese traditional religionists, 376 million Buddhists, 14 million Jews, and 179 million members of other smaller religious communities.

Some years ago Diana Eck of Harvard University, who has done incredible work in mapping the religious landscape of the United States in the past fifteen years, interpreted the worldwide data in a way that made things easier for me to comprehend. She wrote:

If our world were a village of a thousand people, who would *we* be? The World Development Forum tells us that there would be 329 Christians, 174 Muslims, 131 Hindus, 61 Buddhists, 52 Animists, 3 Jews, 34 members of other religions, such as Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is, and 216 would be without any religion. In this village, there would be 564 Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80 South Americans, and 60 North Americans. And in this same village 60 persons would have half the income, 500 would be hungry, 600 would live in shantytowns, and 700 would be illiterate. (Eck 1993, 202)

In considering the worldwide figures, while they are only estimates, several things should be noted. First, the term "Christian" includes *all* those who claim the title (Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Monophysites, Latter-day Saints [Mormons], Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Quakers, some indigenous African "new" religions, etc.). The largest groups within the "Christian" category are Catholics and Pentecostals. Further, not all those designated "Christian" would agree that all others belong. Second, the actual population figures among the Christians

of Asia, Africa, and South America, in comparison to Europe and North America, are growing dramatically. Already the preponderance of Christians live in the Southern Hemisphere, not the Northern Hemisphere, as we in the United States have so long taken for granted. Thus, the view of the “world”—particularly the religious “world”—as many North Americans experience it, except in places like New York City and perhaps Chicago and Los Angeles, is skewed. Third, the largest increases in religious affiliation are among Christians (mainly Roman Catholics and Pentecostals, not the mainline Protestant churches) and among Muslims (mainly Sunni, though the Shiites get more attention in the press these days). Indeed, it has recently been reported in the press that, worldwide, Muslims now outnumber the Roman Catholics, the largest single Christian group.

Whether we like it or not, however, we increasingly find ourselves, in this country in the twenty-first century, in a unique situation. The United States is now the most religiously diverse country in the world. While still predominantly “Christian,” other groups are growing steadily. This is well documented by Professor Eck, who with the help of numerous others has gathered the evidence of the extraordinary proliferation of religious communities across the United States that has occurred in the past twenty-five or thirty years (2001).

Immigration has clearly been a factor in the emergence of significant non-Christian communities in the United States, but so has “conversion.” Many of those with no religion and some, perhaps born into Christian families but not engaged by their churches, have joined non-Christian groups. Now, “they,” who believe differently than “we,” are no longer on the other side of the world. “They” live across the street. “They” work alongside us. “They” send their children to the same schools that “we” do, struggle with dress codes, and wonder what it means when public officials (and others) insist that this is a “Christian” nation. Indeed, “they,” like us, do all the things that citizens do.

And guess what? My personal context, and I suspect yours as well, has changed! I mean really changed! Political, economic, sociological, ethnic diversity is now the *rule* rather than the *exception*, right where I live. This is very important to recognize and important to appropriate into my efforts to understand and interpret the Bible, and anything else for that matter. The world is considerably smaller,

metaphorically speaking, than it was at the time of my birth. In the religious sphere, for instance, when I was growing up, “others” in my part of the world consisted mainly of Baptists, Methodists, Church of Christ, a few Pentecostals, and the Roman Catholics, who were mysteriously different from all the rest. (Of course, as a Presbyterian I was actually one of the “others,” but I didn’t know it!) As one who is theologically aware, I have to acknowledge and account for this diversity.

Where I now reside, in a city in the Midwest with a population of just under a million, I live as neighbor to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Baha’is, Hindus, New Age believers, a large variety of Christians, and many other people who consider themselves spiritually sensitive and aware, though they do not belong to any organized religion. And of course, there is a very large group of neofundamentalists—to be encountered, by the way, in almost every religious tradition—who regularly express their conviction, if not their desire, that all the rest of us “others” will spend eternity in a rather uncomfortable place.

My/our situation has indeed changed. It may not be as radically different as that of a newly arrived immigrant or someone who has for generations been “left out” because of prejudice and oppression. But it is different, and requires me/us to recognize how it is different. Perhaps most obvious, I can no longer automatically operate—on the basis of social privilege—as part of the “establishment.” As a Presbyterian I am clearly part of a distinct minority. In fact, as a member of the so-called mainline churches, I am in a group that is losing influence and social “power” daily.

Worldwide, Christians still constitute the largest religious group, but we are divided into so many subgroups that we certainly can’t act as one on any matter of significance. As in the first century (as we will consider later), diversity among Christians and among religions is the norm, not the exception. And I belong to a minority, not a majority, at least as far as the wider world is concerned. All too often Christians have taken Jesus’ teaching about being present where two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20) one step further than was probably intended, to mean that each such “group” should start a new denomination. In my own tradition there are more than two hundred separate churches/denominations that call themselves “Reformed” and belong to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. So much for Christian unity!

The point of all this is that diversity, within the church and with the many other religions in the world, is now a fact of our existence, whether we fully recognize it yet or not. As Christians, sooner or later, we are going to have to deal with it. We can continue with the traditional exclusivist approach that considers all other expressions of religion outside our own to be wrong. Or we may take a more open, inclusive position that allows that while we consider our approach “best,” we nonetheless acknowledge that others do have some measure of “truth” in their religions. Or, with some, we might adopt an even more “radical” view, a pluralist position, and consider all religions of value and all religious people as those from whom we might have something to learn. In *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love* (2005) I explored these options and came down somewhere between the second and third. That discussion will continue in this volume because it remains a critical issue.

In his book *The World Is Flat*, Thomas L. Friedman wrote about two context-changing events for those in the United States and the wider world as well. On November 11, 1989—11/9 in Friedman’s symbolic shorthand—the fall of the Berlin Wall occurred, a very positive event from Friedman’s point of view and that of the West in general. And on September 11, 2001—9/11—the fall of the Twin Towers in New York City was broadcast by live TV around the world, clearly a very negative event, which shattered public confidence in many places. Friedman used these events metaphorically to reflect on the role of imagination in dealing with the new economic and trade realities he saw emerging:

There are two ways to flatten the world. One is to use your imagination to bring everyone up to the same level, and the other is to use your imagination to bring everyone down to the same level. (2005, 447)

Those of us who are fortunate to live in free and progressive societies have to set an example. We have to be the best global citizens we can be. We cannot retreat from the world. We have to make sure that we get the best of our own imaginations—and never let our imaginations get the best of us. (448)

He then turned more specifically to religious imagination:

Religions are the smelters and founders of imagination. The more any religion’s imagination—Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Muslim,

Buddhist—is shaped in an isolated bubble, or in a dark cave, the more its imagination is likely to sail off in dangerous directions. People who are connected to the world and exposed to different cultures and perspectives are far more likely to develop the imagination of 11/9. People who are feeling disconnected, for whom personal freedom and fulfillment are a utopian fantasy, are more likely to develop the imagination of 9/11.

Friedman was in no way suggesting that the difficulties of dealing with people and cultures radically different from our own are imaginary. Rather, he was challenging those of us in places of leadership to make positive use of our imaginations in finding appropriate and useful ways of helping our people understand and adapt to the new diversity that is changing our world, both internationally and locally. Religiously as well as economically speaking, the world is becoming “flat.” “Pluralism” is not just a “politically correct” term. It is a reality that we must learn to deal with economically, sociologically, and theologically. And if history repeats itself, our theological struggle may well be more difficult and more divisive than our economic and sociological ones.

Once again we reflect on the work of Diana Eck:

The story of the new religious America is an unfinished story, with both national and global implications. The chapters of the story are still being written in cities and towns all over the country. Whether the vibrant new religious diversity that is now part and parcel of the United States, will, in the years ahead, bring us together or tear us apart depends greatly on whether we are able to imagine our national community anew. And the fate of a vibrant pluralism in the U.S. will have an important impact on the fate of religious pluralism worldwide. The ongoing argument over who “we” are—as religious people, as a nation, and as a global community—is one in which all of us, ready or not, will participate. (2001, 385)

Yes, who we are as a religious people is very much up for grabs. If we are to move beyond the current status quo, two things are critical. First, we will need to revisit our foundational document, the Bible, in the light of our new context. With open eyes and minds we need to reconsider if and how the Bible can help us as we approach

the issues of diversity and pluralism. The religious diversity so prevalent in the first centuries of our tradition, a topic we will consider in the next chapter, has much to teach us. We will do well to explore different interpretative methods and consider alternative understandings of passages we have long treasured. Sometimes this will mean unlearning what we have been long taught. At other times (and probably more often!) it will mean learning what we never knew. The reconsideration of cherished traditions is never easy, but it seems more and more an imperative if we are to respond faithfully in our new situation.

A second issue is equally critical. We must find the will and the medium by which to educate our people about our new historical context. We may be able to find a new approach to the Bible and to theology, but unless we can communicate the results to our people effectively, not much can change positively. The upheavals of the changing landscape of our world are upon us, and so also is our experience of the contemporary religious diversity that is increasing so dramatically within our communities. We have too often been reluctant to talk with one another about our own personal experience of God for fear of sounding “weird” or “religious,” but the varieties of our experience as Christians among Christians and as compared with others who are not Christian are important to consider.

Changes are taking place. The issue is how we will respond. Will we turn them for the good of our communities or not? Can we helpfully respond to the questions my mom posed or not? We really won’t know until we try. One verse from Psalms is worth remembering as we proceed:

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
 And all the families of the nations shall worship before him.
 (Psalm 22:27)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the character and extent of religious diversity where you live? How does that compare/contrast with the diversity described in this chapter?

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2. According to Thomas Friedman it is critical that religious leaders constructively use their imaginations to refashion the religious interpretation of life for the twenty-first century. Why? What are some of the possibilities?
3. Why (according to Diana Eck) is it important to struggle with the “vibrant pluralism” that is gaining expression in the United States? What are some of the ways this might begin?