

On Monday afternoon I had the opportunity to participate in a clergy panel discussion on “religious diversity” at the Florence Bain Senior Center. The event was sponsored by a group of Howard County employees that was never completely clear to me, and I was joined on the panel by folk representing Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Mormons, Methodists, even as I represented Baptists and CBF.

I found the handout that set the stage for the discussion to be quite helpful, and I want to include several paragraphs from it here for your consideration. I believe all of this comes from Diana Eck's *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*:¹



“The plurality of religious traditions and cultures has come to characterize every part of the world today. But what is pluralism? Here are four points to begin our thinking:

“First, **pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity***. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tension in our societies.

“Second, **pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference***. 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 too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotypes, the half-truths, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

“Third, **pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments***. 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.

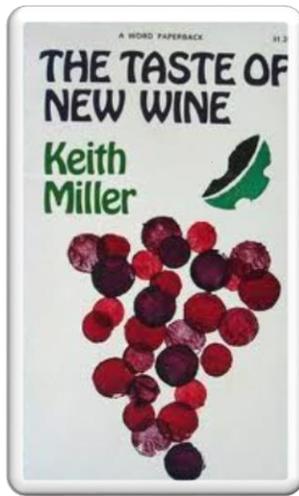
“Fourth, **pluralism is based on dialogue**. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the ‘table’ will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table . . . with one’s commitments.”

Isn't that good? That sounds to me like what we have been trying to do—and doing—at The Meeting House for many decades now. It also sounds like several paragraphs I re-read last week from Keith Miller's culture-shaping book, *The Taste of New Wine*:²

¹ Diana Eck, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (Columbia University Press, 2006); www.pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_to_pluralism.

² Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine* (Waco: Word, 1965).

“At last I understood what [Karl] Barth meant when he said about the [Christian] Message: ‘I am glad I did not invent it, and hence it is not my responsibility to defend it. My only task and privilege is to tell you that God Himself said so and says so until this day.’”³



On Sharing the New Wine: “If and when your friendship with someone grows (and it so often will if you love him [*sic*]), and he acknowledges sometime that his life is not complete, *then* very naturally and simply you may want to tell him how you came to a realization in your own life that it wasn’t what it should be and how that realization caused you to turn to God. Tell your friend what God did, not to make you *good* (Christ was pretty clear about his attitude toward men claiming goodness. See Mark 10:18) but to make you *basically more joyful*.”

“And if you are not basically more joyful *regardless of the many new problems you have as a Christian*, then you had better take a close look at your own relationship with Christ. You may have missed something very important in the Gospel yourself. . . . And since you are not selling anything, you do not have to be anxious. We Christians are the only people around who claim to have an eternal life; and yet in our urgency to *convince* people, we reflect nothing but anxiety and tenseness.”⁴

I like such commitments to pluralism as these. I am much in favor of “energetic engagement with diversity” that “actively seeks understanding and dialogue across lines of difference,” not in a spirit of lowest-common-denominator relativism or syncretism, but being committed to being “at the table” with our own faith commitments clearly and joyfully affirmed in those encounters.

I pray that your day and your week may be joy-full indeed!

Dave

Postscripts:

1. Please remember that **Dr. Neville Callam**, General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, will be our preacher on Sunday morning. Don’t miss this blessing!
2. Also, please remember that our **Quarterly Business Meeting** will follow that service in the Chapel.
3. I hope you were able to watch “**The Bible**” on *The History Channel* from 8-10 p.m. last Sunday night. I thought it was nicely done, and there are four more installments to come. It will also be available on DVD the series is complete. While the presentation did seem to try to be faithful to the text, that also means that the program is not appropriate for young children.
4. It’s hard to believe that it’s been that long, but my **Dad** was resurrected seven years ago today, and today I wrote the last check to close out my **Mom’s** estate. The generations transition from one to the next . . . and we thank God.

³ Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (Harper & Brothers, 1961).

⁴ Miller, p. 96.