



## **The 2011 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture Faith † Introduction**

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The church's call to tend the soil of adolescents' faith is a joyful yet daunting task. We long for young people to develop a durable faith in Christ that sustains and empowers them to "seek first the kingdom of God" in a world where consumerism reigns, change is rapid, the economy is uncertain, and people of other religions are our neighbors. We want young people to engage such a world, fully knowing that they are beloved children of God and that life in Christ is a worthy adventure.

The theme for the 2011 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture is "Faith". These lectures consider what evangelism and interreligious dialogue look like in our postmodern context and examine faithful ways to engage religious pluralism. Eboo Patel addresses the complexities of raising children in their own faith tradition while living in a religiously diverse world. Rick Osmer discusses how important both Christian evangelism and interreligious dialogue are to the Church today as it seeks to live the gospel in a religiously diverse culture. May the ideas and stories shared here spark conversation around these topics in your own community and empower you in your ministry.

Faithfully,

Dayle Gillespie Rounds  
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry  
Princeton Theological Seminary

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### **2011 Lectures**

Eboo Patel	American Muslim Child
Richard R. Osmer	Evangelism in an age of Religious Diversity Interreligious Dialogue in an Age of Diversity



## Evangelism in an Age of Religious Diversity † Richard R. Osmer

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Last Easter, I was sitting with a seminary student at our church's annual Easter brunch. As we talked, I asked her where she went to college. "I went to a small liberal arts college in Missouri," she answered. "Did you have many non-Christian friends during college?" I asked. "There is a large Vietnamese community near the college," she replied, "So there were a lot of Buddhist students. A lot of my friends were also post-Christian and many described themselves as post-evangelical. They were raised in conservative churches, but were now exploring other forms of faith. They were tag-lining religions like Buddhism." "What do you mean by tag-lining?" I asked. "Well, they might tag-line Buddhism on Facebook but that didn't mean they were practicing Buddhists. It meant that they had learned something about mindfulness in one of their classes and were trying to learn how to become more centered through meditation or to live mindfully in the here and now." The conversation continued until it was time to go to worship.

This brief conversation illustrates nicely two of the challenges facing contemporary American churches. On the one hand, they find themselves in a mission field that is increasingly diverse. Their context is composed of the members of other religious communities, former Christians who are seekers, and many people who only know about Christianity through the popular media. How might we think about evangelism in this context of religious diversity? On the other hand, American churches find themselves as never before—in a society in which non-Christian religions are an increasingly important part of public life, including Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and many others. In this context, Christians have much to learn about working with the adherents of other religions to deal with problems in their schools and neighborhoods, as well as state and national governments. How might we think about interreligious dialogue in this context of religious diversity?

Too often today, American churches approach evangelism and interreligious dialogue like opposing magnets. The closer one magnet comes to the other, the further it is pushed away. Affirming the importance of evangelism pushes away valuing interreligious dialogue. Affirming the importance of interreligious dialogue pushes away valuing evangelism. This "opposing magnet" approach is unfortunate, for *both* of these ministries are important to the mission of the church in the contemporary American context. In the present lecture, I begin by exploring this context and invite you to think about evangelism.

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## 1. Three Dimensions of the Contemporary American Context

### *The Historical Context: Interweaving Christian Mission and American Destiny*

America as a society has a long history of interweaving the church's mission and American destiny. Indeed, this began before America was even a nation. The English Puritans who colonized New England believed that God had sent them on an "errand into the wilderness," as the great historian of American Christianity, Perry Miller, once put it.<sup>1</sup> They left the old world and travelled to the new with a sense of being called by God to establish a community based on Christianity that would serve as a model for the rest of the world. The Puritan preacher John Winthrop expressed this idea with the image of a city on a hill. God had sent the Puritans to build something special and exemplary. They were to be a light to the nations, building in the American colonies a society that fulfilled the promise of the Reformation and the mandate of Scripture.

By the time America became an independent nation following the American revolution, this cultural and religious ideal was deeply embedded in our newly emerging national culture. America's special destiny as a nation was thought to be deeply interwoven with the strength of its Christian churches, which provided a moral and spiritual foundation for America's success as a nation and its role in world affairs. Historians of American history have traced the permutations of this cultural ideal across the life of the nation and into the present.<sup>2</sup> Even today, American presidents end political speeches on matters of national importance by calling on God to bless America. American churches, likewise, continue to define their mission, at least in part, as support of their country's special calling—a calling defined in different ways across the political spectrum but, nonetheless, widely affirmed.

There are many reasons for Christian churches in the United States to pay attention to the historical legacy of interweaving the church's mission with America's special destiny. On theological grounds, they must ask if the church's mission is compromised by this cultural pattern. They must also ask if it is adequate on theological grounds for *any* nation to claim for itself a special destiny in the providence of God. These questions become even more important in light of the second dimension of contemporary America examined here: the rise of religious diversity.

### *American Society Today Is Becoming More Religiously Diverse*

The United States is currently experiencing what is sometimes called the "second wave" of American immigration. The first wave took place between 1890 and 1920. During that period a large number of Roman Catholics and Jews immigrated to the United States from various parts of Europe. The second wave brought 20 million immigrants to the United States from around the world during the last third of the twentieth century. This included millions of people who are Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim. At the turn of the century, it was estimated that the U.S. population had 1.3 million Hindus, 4 million Buddhists (conservative estimates put this number lower), and 2 million Muslims (more generous estimates place this figure at 6–7 million).<sup>3</sup> The countries of origin of the new immigrants had much to do with the rise of religious diversity. This is seen in the following chart:<sup>4</sup>

**Top Ten Countries—Foreign Born Population Among U.S. Immigrants**

Country	per year	2000	2004	2010	2010,%
Mexico	175,900	7,841,000	8,544,600	9,600,000	23.7%
China	50,900	1,391,000	1,594,600	1,900,000	4.7%
Philippines	47,800	1,222,000	1,413,200	1,700,000	4.2%
India	59,300	1,007,000	1,244,200	1,610,000	4.0%
Vietnam	33,700	863,000	997,800	1,200,000	3.0%
Cuba	14,800	952,000	1,011,200	1,100,000	2.7%
El Salvador	33,500	765,000	899,000	1,100,000	2.7%
Dominican Republic	24,900	692,000	791,600	941,000	2.3%
Canada	24,200	678,000	774,800	920,000	2.3%
Korea	17,900	701,000	772,600	880,000	2.2%
<b>Total Pop.</b>	<b>498,900</b>	<b>16,112,000</b>	<b>18,747,600</b>	<b>21,741,000</b>	<b>53.7%</b>
<b>Total Foreign Born</b>	<b>940,000</b>	<b>31,100,000</b>	<b>34,860,000</b>	<b>40,500,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

In the course of a generation, Americans have seen an unprecedented increase in the diversity of major religious traditions in their country. Unlike the first wave of immigration, these immigrants do not live in relatively isolated and homogenous enclaves. They work in middle-class occupations. They live in diverse neighborhoods. Their children go to schools and play on sports teams alongside Anglo children. Mosques, temples, and meditation centers are often close to churches and synagogues. In other words, the adult members of different religions encounter one another in everyday life as neighbors, coworkers, PTA volunteers, and friends. Their children become friends as well. My daughter’s social network in high school included Jews, Hindus, Roman Catholics, and friends with no religious background. Her social network became even more diverse during college.

It is important to recognize that while America has become more diverse in recent decades, it is not the most religiously pluralistic country in the world, as is sometimes claimed. Overall, just under 5 percent of the American population belong to non-Christian religions.<sup>5</sup> Research consistently shows that around 78 percent of the American population identify themselves as Christian. Korea is far more pluralistic with 21 percent identifying with Christianity, 20 percent with Buddhism, and 46 percent claiming no religious preference, though they are often influenced by Buddhism or practice Confucian ancestor rites.<sup>6</sup> India’s population, likewise, is 14 percent Muslim, 4.6 percent Christian, and 2 percent Sikh, along with the Hindu majority.<sup>7</sup> Even Indonesia, with the largest Muslim population in the world, has greater religious diversity than the United States.

While it is important to temper exaggerated claims about the religious diversity of contemporary America, this diversity is an important part of the American context for three reasons. First, it is likely to increase in the future. Immigrant families are larger and have higher birth rates. Immigration policy also makes it easier

for the immediate relatives of recent immigrants to join their families in the United States. Thus the number of adherents to non-Christian religions, is likely to increase in the future.

Second, America currently is in the midst of a transitional period in which many members of the Christian population are uncomfortable with the influx of other religions.<sup>8</sup> For many, this is simply the discomfort that comes with living and working with people who are different. It generates awkwardness in conversation and mutual understanding. But for a vociferous minority of people—around 10 percent of the American population—this discomfort is deeper.<sup>9</sup> They believe that the increased prevalence of non-Christian religions threatens America's special destiny, noted above. They also believe that the increased presence of Muslims will make America more vulnerable to terrorism. The media draws attention to this noisy minority with the unfortunate effect of giving voice to their fears and exaggerating their apparent size. While most Americans deplore the extremist rhetoric and actions of this minority, they *are* uncomfortable with the country's transition toward greater religious diversity.

A third reason might be called the globalization effect. How Americans understand and relate to the members of other religions close at hand impacts how they understand and relate to the members of religions far away. This is particularly important with regard to the perception of countries with majority populations that are non-Christian. If Americans ignore or stereotype the adherents of other religions who live nearby, with whom they work, or whose children play with their own, how can they hope to understand religious communities with whom they have little contact, except through the media?

There are good reasons, thus, for Christian churches to consider the challenges posed by greater religious diversity in their country. Theologically, they will do well to ask about their responsibilities to their new neighbors. The increase in religious diversity, moreover, poses a direct challenge to the legacy of interweaving the church's mission and America's special destiny, noted above. As this diversity grows in the future, it will become less credible for Americans to view the moral and spiritual foundation of American public life exclusively in terms of Christianity. What will take its place and how will notions of the common good be inculcated among a diverse population? The answer to these questions is made more complex by the third dimension of our context examined here: greater diversity *within* the Christian community.

#### *Spiritual Shoppers, Christian Inclusivists, and Christian Exclusivists*

In my description of the diversity within contemporary Christianity, I draw heavily on Robert Wuthnow's *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*.<sup>10</sup> Wuthnow's research draws on a three-year project, which included a new national survey and more than 300 in-depth interviews of individuals and leaders of congregations and organizations located near mosques, temples, and meditation centers.<sup>11</sup> He identified three distinct orientations among Christians: Spiritual Shoppers, Christian Inclusivists, and Christian Exclusivists. Technically speaking, Spiritual Shoppers are *not* just Christians. They relate to a variety of religious communities in different ways. But two-thirds of this group *do* identify with a religious community, most of whom are Christian.

#### *Spiritual Shoppers*

People with this religious orientation represent 31 percent of the American population. They have explored a variety of religious traditions over the course of their lives, like people shopping at different stores in a mall. They are not seeking clear-cut, dogmatic answers, for they believe that God is mysterious and can never be captured by belief propositions. They are seeking intense experiences of the sacred. They value religious

diversity highly because they believe different religious traditions offer varying pathways to God and can enrich a seeker's experience of the sacred.

Wuthnow is clear that Spiritual Shoppers come from a variety of backgrounds, but one factor that stands out among this group is the experience of some sort of trauma during childhood. This disrupted their relationship to established patterns of religious belonging and set in motion the desire to explore a variety of religious traditions. While Wuthnow does not single out divorce, research on the children of divorced families illustrates the impact of childhood trauma on their religious identities. One national study of divorce found that two-thirds of those people who were involved in a church or synagogue at the time of their parents' divorce report that *no one* from their religious community reached out to them—not a clergy person or congregation member.<sup>12</sup> It also discovered that later in life those experiencing parental divorce are less likely to turn to the religious communities in which they were raised to find answers to their spiritual questions. Yet they continue to view themselves as spiritual, and many actively seek religious meanings from a variety of sources.

While divorce represents an extreme case, it does illustrate nicely the possible impact of trauma during childhood on people's later religious orientations. Sometimes, this involves young people's alienation from the church because they believe it provided inadequate responses to their questions. A young person might ask, "Do you mean that my Jewish friend, Kerrie, is going to Hell when she dies? She's the best person I know." Youth pastor, "It's sad, I know, but, yes, that's what Christians believe." The important point is that many Spiritual Shoppers have their natural ties to a religious community disrupted because of some trauma while they are young. They are still seeking spiritual meaning, but are skeptical about finding it exclusively in the religious community in which they were raised.

#### *Christian Inclusivists*

People with this religious orientation represent 23 percent of the American population. They are churchgoers and adherents to Christian beliefs and practices. At the same time, they affirm the truth of other religions. Central to their understanding of the divine is the loving, accepting, and forgiving nature of God. This is the sort of God, they believe, revealed in Jesus Christ. Moreover, they believe that a relationship with Jesus, supported by their church, allows them to move beyond the *experience* of separation from God. Past mistakes, present problems, or anything that might damage a person's relationship with God are obstacles that God is ready to overcome in order to restore them to a loving relationship with the divine and with other people. When pressed to describe their belief that Jesus plays a special role in their own relationship to God and how this fits with their belief in the truth of other religions, Christian Inclusivists tend to speak in terms of personal preference. Christianity works for them, though it may not work for everyone. Hence, they are open to the possibility that the loving God revealed in Jesus may find different ways of reaching out to the members of other religious traditions.

While the background of Christian Inclusivists also, is diverse, two factors stand out. Many people with this religious orientation report having close friends in their congregation during childhood and adolescence. They were anchored relationally in their congregation. They also recall being taught by their parents and the church to treat the members of other religions with respect, just as they were to treat the members of other races and ethnic groups. Acceptance and respect toward other religions thus, was part of their taken-for-granted understanding of Christianity. It was not something they had to discover for themselves later in life.

*Christian Exclusivists*

People with this religious orientation make up 34 percent of the American population. They believe that Jesus Christ is the exclusive source of salvation—the source of healing, moral living, and spiritual vitality in this world and the only way to gain entrance to the next, to heaven. While they acknowledge that some moral truths may be found in other religions, they do not believe these serve as a pathway to salvation. Other religions, thus, should be tolerated in American society and their members not subject to persecution, but they should not be seen as standing on the same level as Christianity in matters of ultimate truth. Along with the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the source of salvation, Christian Exclusivists also affirm the importance of individual conversion, the authority of scripture as the inerrant Word of God, and the centrality of evangelism in the church's mission. Evangelism is emphasized because of the exclusivity of Christ. Unless people enter into a saving relationship with Christ through conversion, they have no hope in the afterlife.

Christian Exclusivists, also, come from varied backgrounds. One factor that stands out, however, is the way they were raised and continue to live in what Wuthnow calls “restricted social networks.” They have strong ties to parents, relatives, and church members who share their exclusivist orientation. These ties commonly include financial and emotional support. This is not to say that Christian Exclusivists do not encounter people of other faiths at work, school, and through the media. Many even have non-Christian friends and acquaintances at work or in their neighborhoods. Their religious orientation, however, remains embedded in social networks strongly linked to family, supportive congregations, and Christian friends—all of whom share their basic beliefs.

*The Impact of Diversity within the Christian Community*

These three distinct religious orientations impact the ways Christians respond to the first two dimensions of the contemporary American context examined above. They are thus important. Take religious diversity, for example.<sup>13</sup> Ninety-two percent of Spiritual Shoppers agree with the statement that other major religious traditions contain some truth about God. Eighty-nine percent of Christian Inclusivists agree with this and 54 percent of Christian Exclusivists. When asked if all religions pretty much teach the same thing, only 14 percent of Christian Exclusivists agree, in comparison to 53 percent of Christian Inclusivists and 68 percent of Spiritual Shoppers. Seventy-eight percent of Christian Exclusivists affirm that Christianity is the only way to have a true personal relationship with God, while only 5 percent of Spiritual Shoppers agree.

We find comparable diversity in response to the legacy of interweaving the church's mission and America's special destiny. When asked if they agree with two statements—America was founded on Christian principles and America has been strong because of its faith in God—68 percent of Christian Exclusivists agreed with the former and 70 percent with the latter. The contrast with Spiritual Shoppers is especially striking. Only 30 percent of them agreed with the first statement and 28 percent with the second. Christian Inclusivists fall in between. As 55 percent agreed with the first statement and 65 percent with the second. The same pattern is evident when asked if they would welcome Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in becoming a strong presence in American society. Forty percent of Christian Exclusivists responded in the affirmative, in comparison to 76 percent of Spiritual Shoppers and 54 percent of Christian Inclusivists.

In light of our focus on evangelism, Wuthnow's findings on two questions about faith sharing are especially interesting. The first asked if it is important for Christians to share their faith with non-Christians; the second, if it is important for Christians to encourage people from other faiths to become Christian. Seventy-six percent of Christian Exclusivists responded affirmatively to the first and 61 percent to the second. In

marked contrast, 29 percent of Spiritual Shoppers responded positively to the first and only 4 percent to the second. Christian Inclusivists, once more, fell in between. Sixty-three percent of this group affirmed the importance of faith sharing but only 29 percent believed it is important for Christians to encourage the adherents of other faiths to become Christian. Apparently, sharing one's faith and inviting non-Christians to convert to Christianity mean something different across all of these orientations, though the difference between them on the question of converting non-Christians is striking.

How might we think about evangelism in an age of religious diversity? Clearly, the increasing presence of religious diversity poses a challenge to American churches, but equally important is the diversity within the Christian community. American churches find themselves in a context both like and unlike that of the early Christian community. Like the early church, they are increasingly surrounded by other religions, a reality that is likely to become more pronounced in the future. But unlike the early church, they are in a context in which many people who were once part of a church are now actively exploring other religious traditions. Many of these seekers feel "burned" by the church. It proved inadequate to their needs and questions when they were young. Many also have questions about the way the American church in the past and present interweaves its mission and America's special destiny. This context is not pre-Christendom; it is post-Christendom. How might we think of evangelism in this context?

## 2. Evangelism in the American Context

### *Karl Barth and Evangelism*

We find help in reimagining evangelism today in the theology of Karl Barth, whom many consider to be the greatest Protestant theologian since the Reformation. I will draw on a section of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* called, "The Awakening to Conversion."<sup>14</sup> Throughout his theology, Barth describes Jesus Christ from the interrelated perspectives of his divinity and humanity. He is the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us; and he is the Son of Man, the true human being who lives a life of covenant faithfulness and obedience. In this section he makes two key points.

First, he says, that Jesus Christ is the true convert. Barth puts it like this, "It is in His conversion that we are engaged. It is in His birth...His baptism...His death on the cross...and His resurrection...that we are risen as new men..."<sup>15</sup> This is counter-intuitive. We usually think of conversion as something that human beings do as they turn away from sin in repentance and turn toward God in faith and obedience. But Christ is sinless; he does not need to convert! While Barth affirms the sinlessness of Jesus, he argues that Scripture portrays him with the pattern of turning away from sin and turning toward God in perfect faithfulness and obedience. We see, for example, Christ turning away from the temptations of Satan in the wilderness and toward a relationship of dependence and obedience toward his Father.

In portraying Christ as the true convert, Barth is emphasizing the representative nature of Christ. In turning away from sin and toward his Father in faith and obedience, he is doing what humanity cannot do for itself. He takes humanity's place, acting in its stead and on its behalf. This stands at the heart of the gospel, Barth affirms. The gospel is the good news that Christ has done what we cannot do, breaking the power of sin and death and offering us the possibility of a new relationship with God as an act of sheer grace.

Barth, then, makes a second point. Human conversion—our conversion—is a participation in Christ's conversion. He describes this with the image of awakening in a key passage, "We cannot...define Christians

simply as those who are awake while the rest sleep, but more cautiously as those who waken up in the sense that they are awakened a first time and then *again* to their shame and good fortune. They are, in fact, those who constantly stand in need of reawakening and who depend upon the fact that they are continually reawakened. They are thus those who, it is to be hoped, continually waken up.”<sup>16</sup> Barth is distinguishing here, Christ as the true convert who is fully awake to God and all other Christian converts who awake and fall asleep, who are aroused and stand up, only to lie down and sleep again.

This also is counter-intuitive. We typically think of conversion as a one-time event. Our imagination is informed by the story of Paul on the road to Damascus and by the long-standing patterns of revivalism in the First and Second Great Awakenings in which dramatic conversions figured prominently. But this is not the whole story in scripture or experience. Consider Peter. When was he converted? When Christ called Peter to follow him? Or was it when Jesus asked his disciples at Caesara Philippi, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter confessed, “You are the Christ...the Son of the living God.” But moments later Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and die, and Peter responded that this must not happen and Jesus rebuked him. Or was Peter converted when he witnessed the Holy Spirit being poured out on gentiles in Cornelia’s household? From empirical research and our own experience, we also know that many people who experience dramatic conversions fall away and are back at the revival again the next year to be converted once more.

Barth’s image of awakening and falling asleep, only to be aroused again, follows from his first point. Christ alone is the true convert; the Son of Man does on humanity’s behalf and in its stead what it cannot do for itself. Our conversion is a participation in his conversion. We are joined to him and wake up from our pride and sloth. But we fall asleep again and are in need of further awakening. It is the office of the Holy Spirit to draw us to Christ and join us to his conversion. It is the mission of the church to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in pointing beyond itself to the gospel, the story of God’s gift of love in Jesus Christ.

### *Evangelism Defined*

Drawing on this part of Barth’s theology, how might we define evangelism? Here is how I would define it. Evangelism is the ministry by which the Holy Spirit uses the members of the church to awaken others to the gospel, to the good news of God’s gracious love toward the world in Jesus Christ. It is less concerned with promoting one pattern of religious experience or gaining new church members than with following the lead of the Holy Spirit in giving witness to the gospel. Three points follow from this initial definition.

First, it is no longer helpful to think of evangelism as directed solely to those “out there.” This follows from the image of conversion as awakening and falling asleep, as an ongoing and necessary spiritual awakening to the one true convert, Jesus Christ. This is a particularly helpful way of thinking about evangelism in the post-Christendom context of contemporary America. As we have seen, this context is one of great diversity. Along with the members of other religions and the “unchurched,” it includes Christians who are Spiritual Shopper, Christian Inclusivists, and Christian Exclusivists. It is not helpful to think of evangelism as directed exclusively to people outside the church, to those “out there” who are altogether different than the good Christian “in here.”

There are many people on the edges of the church who are actively exploring different faiths. Some have been burned by the church in the past. They need to hear the gospel anew. There are many good, conventional young Christians who are little more than Moralistic Therapeutic Deists, to use a term coined by Christian Smith, Kenda Creasy Dean, and others who have studied young people in American culture.<sup>17</sup>

They too need to hear the gospel anew. There are many long-time adult members of the church who have never really confronted their complicity in racism or a consumer culture that is rapidly destroying God's creation. Some are embedded in restricted social networks that prevent them from ever really encountering the plight of those who suffer from racism. Others espouse inclusive ideals but practice a way of life that conforms to the surrounding consumer culture. Adult Christians also need to hear the gospel anew. Christ alone is the true convert. The rest of us wake up and fall asleep. We grow indifferent or apathetic.

We are seduced by materialism, though we go to church every Sunday. The ministry of evangelism must be directed to those inside the church, as well as to those who are outsiders and the many people who fall somewhere in between.

Second, evangelism is dependent on people who are open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is not about offering pat answers or manipulating a single type of religious experience. The sheer diversity of our post-Christendom context makes this especially important. There is no single way of bearing witness to the gospel that will work with everyone. What is needed is openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who will help us recognize and respond to the particular circumstances of those to whom evangelism is directed. Indeed, we must make this point more strongly. If Christ is the true convert, then the Holy Spirit is the true evangelist. It does not rest in our hands to convert other people, to awaken them to the good news of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit alone can do this. At best, we can serve as instruments of the Spirit's work. But we do have the promise that the Spirit will guide us if we are open to this guidance.

In light of our dependency on the Spirit's guidance in the ministry of evangelism, it is helpful to recognize that the church has practiced evangelism in many different ways across church history. In *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, for example, George Hunter reminds us of the way Christianity spread in England and Western Europe through monastic communities who received their impetus from Patrick in the early fifth century. These Celtic monastic communities would settle in "unchurched" areas and practice a rule of life including worship, study, and work. They tried to embody an "alternative way of life, free of aggression and violence and devoted to God's purposes," serving as a model for the community.<sup>18</sup> We find something of this approach to evangelism today among those who are attempting to live in intentional Christian communities in neighborhoods devastated by poverty, the so-called "new monasticism." In *More Ready than You Realize*, Brian McLaren describes the importance of relationships and conversations in our present postmodern context. Evangelism, he argues, is about allowing people "to talk about things that matter—their sense of God, their experiences of meaning or transcendence, their attempts to cope with their own mortality, their struggles with guilt and goodness, their dreams and deepest longings."<sup>19</sup> Good evangelists, he writes, "are people who engage others in good conversation about important and profound topics," which allow them to share their own faith in an open and non-coercive way.<sup>20</sup> In *Holy Conversations*, Richard Peace similarly calls our attention to the spiritual journey that all human beings are on and the importance of Christians learning to share with one another their spiritual journey in Christ.<sup>21</sup> Many Christians, he believes, have lost their ability to talk meaningfully about their spiritual lives, a major deficit in an era in which interest in spirituality has grown even as affiliation with religion has declined. Before Christians can talk with others about Christ, Peace contends, they must first explore what Christ has meant in their own lives, providing them with the language and stories of authentic witness.

None of these approaches to evangelism is the one right way to awaken others to the gospel. Rather, they remind us that individuals and congregations of every age must be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning how best to engage in evangelism. This is especially important in the post-Christendom context of American Christianity today.

Finally, an important implication of the understanding of evangelism offered above is the impact it has on churches. The church needs to engage in this ministry of awakening others to the gospel because it needs to be awakened itself. It needs newcomers and outsiders, not simply to pay the bills or grow in numbers, but to receive afresh the gospel through the newly awakened lives of others. Darrell Guder makes this point in terms of what he calls gospel “reductionism.”<sup>22</sup> Every church—even very good and vibrant churches—embody the gospel in ways that reflect its context. There is no other way for the gospel to take on flesh and bones in a community without this process of contextualization.

Yet contexts change, as ours is certainly doing today. Inherited patterns of church life stand in need of renewal. The church must wake up to the meaning and power of the gospel once again. And it will only do so if it receives the gifts of those people who have been awakened to the gospel through the ministry of evangelism. In the awakening of others, the church itself is awakened to the one true convert, Jesus Christ, in whom it participates anew through the evangelism of the Holy Spirit.

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1. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956).
  2. Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
  3. Robert Wuthnow, *Religion and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 39, 47, 57.
  4. “Immigration to the United States,” Wikipedia, accessed March, 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_States).
  5. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 5.
  6. “Religion in Contemporary South Korea,” Mongabay, accessed March, 2011, [http://www.mongabay.com/history/south\\_korea/south\\_korea-religion\\_in\\_contemporary\\_south\\_korea.html](http://www.mongabay.com/history/south_korea/south_korea-religion_in_contemporary_south_korea.html). The remainder identify with other (often) new religions.
  7. David Briggs, “America is Not No. 1 in Religious Diversity,” ARDA, <http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/>, accessed March 2011.
  8. Further discussion of this point is found in Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
  9. Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges*, 228.
  10. Cited above. The material drawn on here comes especially from Chapters 4–8.
  11. Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges*, 5.
  12. Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of the Children of Divorce* (New York: Random House, 2005), 155.
  13. The statistics cited throughout this section come from Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges*, Chapter 7.
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  16. *Ibid*, 555.
  17. Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
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