IDENTITY AND ENGAGEMENT IN A DIVERSE WORLD: PLURALISM AND HOLINESS IN 1 PETER

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At the outset of her provocative book, published in 1991 under the title Prisoners of Men's Dreams, Suzanne Gordon raises serious questions about the women's liberation movement in America since the late 1960s. She suggests that too many women today are mired in a refashioned feminism and male-defined marketplace that confuse equality with success on male terms. She writes, “Our emphasis on the value of relationships, interdependence, and collaboration sought to balance work with love, hierarchy with healing, individualism with community.” Instead, she observes, feminists were wooed away from those original commitments in order to become “prisoners of men’s dreams” (3). Nowadays, Gordon insists, too many women see as the goal of their liberation being “treated as a man’s equal in a man’s world,” with the result that in this new, equal-opportunity feminism, “the ultimate goal is traditional American success—making money; relentlessly accumulating possessions; capturing and hoarding power, knowledge, access, and information; grasping and clinging to fame, status, and privilege; proving that you are good enough, smart enough, driven enough to get to the top, and tough enough to stay there” (7-8).

Women, Gordon notes, “have entered the male kingdom—and yet, we have been forced to play by the king’s rules” (4). To change the metaphor, we might say that transformative feminism has too often and too easily found itself genuflecting before the “Golden Rule”: Whoever has the gold, makes the rules.

Why do I rehearse these indictments on the feminist movement from Suzanne Gordon, herself a feminist bent on revitalizing that earlier feminist vision? It is because her assessment of the progress of feminism in the last third of the twentieth century serves as a telling parable for Christians in an increasingly diverse world, where the measures of our faithful witness are too often and too easily taken according to canons and criteria alien to Scripture and the Creed. This is a world

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where public discourse is supposed to be shaped by what is common to us, not peculiar; where the distinctives of our faith are expected to be kept hidden under a bushel or at least left home each morning when we strike out into the public world to buy groceries, elect presidents, extract $20 bills from the ATM, or join in the fund-raising activities of the Booster Club. The Christian movement has its own emanating, transformative vision; what has been its progress?

Everywhere around us we find evidence of the new spirituality. Increasingly pervasive in our world, this new spirituality reflects the age that birthed it, a “new age” without criteria of authenticity, without accountability to a community or a tradition, a kind of spiritual soup over which no master chef supervises and with respect to which no recipe could ever be formulated or repeated. In such a world Christian allegiances and practices have become increasingly privatized or regarded as esoteric or sectarian. Attempts at crossing the grain of social convention are met with applause when it contributes to presidential rhetoric or is consistent with a publicly defined common good—when, for example, the church downtown is recognized as a shining star, one of a thousand points of light. But, just as easily, attempts at crossing the grain of public convention can be damned as imperialistic and colonizing. This is especially true when who we are, what we do, and what we profess are explicitly grounded in our faith in Yahweh, the One God, whose character and purpose are definitively revealed in Jesus Christ.

The truth, of course, is that the pluralism we experience with the unfurling of the new millennium is no pluralism at all. The evidence for diversity is transparent and manifold; the diversity of our world defies categories: religious, social, ethnic, nationalistic, political, racial, economic; urban, suburban, rural, town and country; access to the developments of the industrial or technological or information ages; and more. But diversity is not pluralism, and today we clearly have the former without the latter. The promise of pluralism was that persons of diverse traditions and commitments would be able to live side-by-side. However one views the promise of a society characterized in this way, I am more concerned here with the question of Christian identity and faithful engagement in an allegedly pluralistic world—that is, a world that espouses the value of coexistence but which actually generates and promulgates strong sanctions against “difference.” In developing this concern, I want to reflect briefly on the potential contribution of 1 Peter to this discourse.

It seems almost intuitive that the world we face today has important points of contact with the world of the first century, the world within which 1 Peter was written and attracted its first audience. The religious pluralism of Roman antiquity is often emphasized; is their pluralism not like ours? In reality, the world in which many of us live today is very much like that experienced by Christians in East Asia Minor to whom Peter addressed this epistle, but perhaps not in the way one might expect. Although a certain level of tolerance was expected and practiced in the ancient Mediterranean world, this tolerance had its limits and, in particular locales one finds significant restraints on acceptable socio-religious behavior. This is true in our own world. Much more pressing, however, is the reality that, within the Roman Empire, one finds an all-pervasive understanding of “the way the world works,” which was by definition a religious narrative that shaped life in all of its dimensions. The ethics of patronage that characterized relationships of all kinds in the Roman world underscored the importance of status and located all persons—
irrespective of religious commitments or purity or family heritage or ethnicity—withina
web of obligation that had as its focal point acts of reverence to the gods and goddesses
to whom the emperor and, thus, the empire owed its success.

In such a world, acceptance within one’s community and status within one’s social
world were grounded in conformity to accepted norms, living according to the rules of
the household over which Caesar was head. Everyone had a place, and everyone acted
according to his or her place—this was the glue of the Empire. The pluralism of Rome
could be stretched only so far before those who did the stretching found themselves out-
side the community, residing in a state of ostracism, suffering, and shame, boycotted from
normal social intercourse. In such a world, Peter envisions an audience that has embraced
a different set of norms—that lives as though they belonged to another household, one
headed by God the Father (1 Peter 1:1-2; 1:13-2:10). If “glory” or “honor” (dovxa) was
the fundamental social currency of the Roman world, Peter’s audience seems to have
experienced bankruptcy. How could this be? How can persons who have been born
anew to a living hope experience life so far removed from the winning side of history?

Undoubtedly, the historical distance between those Christians to whom Peter addressed
his letter and those of us who today take and read it is immense. In all manner of consider-
ations—habits and food and dress and education and work and family life and more—a ver-
tiable chasm separates our day-to-day worlds from theirs. Theologically, however, the dis-
tance is not so great, provided that we are ready to embrace 1 Peter as a letter addressed
to us. Are we not “the elect who are sojourners of the diaspora” (1:1)—whose lives are to
be characterized by faithful wandering, a journey in which we face the continual threat of
assimilation and the challenge of carving out the character of Christian faithfulness?

My point is that the pluralism of our world is also false, that there are deep-seated sto-
ries that inform our lives and that too easily provide the grid by which we read and shape
how we embody the faith of our ancestors. Pluralism assumes cohabitation of diverse
commitments, but in our world we find world-shaping stories that are so totalizing that
they throw up walls against the biblical narrative. For Peter’s audience, those guiding nar-
ratives had to do with Roman conquest and the ethics of obligation and status; the house-
hold of Caesar depended on these formative stories. We have our own versions, our own
life-forming, grand narratives, such as:

• “The little engine that could”—if only it worked hard enough and kept pushing
and kept pushing, it could conquer that mountain.
• The promise of “unrelenting progress”—a kind of social and religious and political
Darwinianism that has long been integral to the nation’s self-consciousness, and
which is expressed in the church through one of our hymns: “For darkness shall
turn to dawning, and the dawning to noonday bright; and Christ’s great king-
dom shall come on earth, the kingdom of love and light.”
• “I did it my way” or “Be all that you can be” or “We give you what you want
when you want it”—a portrait of life expressed in search for selfhood that, almost
invariably, leads to radical individuation, as if to say that maturation comes as we
learn “to give birth to ourselves.”
Biblical visions of the church and of Christian faithfulness are often wedded to that other vision, the American dream: Anyone can be a winner! Find the right formula! You can rule the world! I can determine my own destiny! And so around coffee tables at denominational meetings, for example, some pastors beam with news of growing churches, larger buildings, and more expansive budgets, while others stare at the ground, embarrassed at their failures. After all, measures of faithfulness more congruent with faithfulness to Yahweh are hard to place into statistical tables in an annual report—as Leviticus 19 has it: family and community respect (vv. 3, 32), religious loyalty (vv. 3b, 4-8, 12, 26-31), economic relationships (vv. 9-10), workers' rights (v. 13), social compassion (v. 14), judicial integrity (v. 15), neighborly attitudes and conduct (vv. 11, 16-18), distinctiveness (v. 19), sexual integrity (vv. 20-22, 29), exclusion of the idolatrous and occult (vv. 4, 26-31), racial equality (vv. 33-34), and commercial honesty (vv. 35-36).

The fundamental question that 1 Peter raises in a context like this is, Whose guiding narrative, whose grand story do we embody? Is it the ethics of obligation and status? Is it "the little engine that could"? Is it a millennial vision that promises either doom and gloom before The End or a kind of Darwinian evolution of the church? Or is it the narrative with which 1 Peter opens: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in accordance with his great mercy has begotten us anew for a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, for an inheritance imperishable and uncorrupted and unfading kept in heaven for you who are guarded by God's power through faith, for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3-5)? Is it the narrative by which Peter wants to measure all dispositions, all commitments, all allegiances, all behaviors: “To this very thing you were called, because Christ also suffered on your behalf, leaving you a pattern so that you would follow in his footsteps...” (2:21-25)? Suzanne Gordon castigates the modern feminist movement for its imprisonment to “men’s dreams”; would Peter not reflect in wonder at how easily the church in America has become tethered to American dreams?

What is the form of Christian engagement in the world, according to Peter? If we were to embrace his message as our own, what form would our faith, our practices, our lives take? What would we learn from this New Testament letter, the primary focus of which is Christian life in a non-Christian environment?

Let me address these questions, first, by drawing attention to two possibilities Peter does not support. First, Peter does not insist that what the church needs is a new theology for a new day in new circumstances. Second, Peter does not envision a sectarian stance in which the church articulates its identity and mission in terms fundamentally antagonistic to the larger world.

Since the onset of historical criticism, one of the charges repeatedly brought against this letter is that it has no distinctive theology. We find easy points of contact between 1 Peter on the one hand, and Paul and James on the other. In modern scholarship, then, the contribution of 1 Peter has been downplayed if not simply dismissed. I want to suggest that what has been a problem for critical scholarship is actually a strategic theological move on the part of Peter. The challenges of pluralism outside the church provide for Peter an occasion for reflecting on and articulating what is common ground within the church. Challenges to the church from the outside provide the occasion for solidifying the
church's roots in the ancient purpose of God, drawing out the continuity from Israel of old to the contemporary life of God's people, and remembering that the primary orientation of faithful life is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, the rhetoric and message of 1 Peter is nothing but traditional, as Peter explores the significance of the old stories of Israel, interpreted now through the pivotal events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and emphasizes the common ground of the faithful as they look for places to secure their feet in the struggle for faithful witness.

If Peter is not concerned to weave a new theology, nor is the stance he supports a negative response to the world-at-large. A century later, it is true, Celsus, one of the most important of Christianity's critics, would insist that Christians were so fascinated with rejecting what is common to all people that he believes they would cease to want to be Christian if all people embraced their faith. From his perspective, Christians drew their identity primarily in negation of the world. Peter's negative injunctions, however, are biographical in texture: Do not live the way you used to live! More pervasive as a ground for Christian faithfulness is the positive example of Jesus Christ and the call to be holy before God. That is, Christians are to take their marching orders not by negating what the world has to offer but by embracing the ways of Yahweh! They are to be a different people because they serve a different God.

The identity of Peter's audience, and of those of us who embrace Peter's letter as Scripture, is set out in the letter's opening and recalled in its closing (1:1; 5:13): We are people of the diaspora, sojourners, aliens. These terms would potentially invoke a variety of images, especially (1) the temporal nature of the experience of diaspora in which the people of God are depicted as a journeying people (e.g., 1:3-12); and (2) the possibility and threat of assimilation and defection. Also self-evident is Peter's identification of his manifestly Christian audience (cf. the threefold reference to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ in 1:2) with the ancient people of God. This is that the believing community to which he addresses his epistle is Israel. Indeed, Peter collapses the historical distinction between Israel of old and his own audience in the service of theological identity.

Understood by way of analogy with Israel's own history, the concept of "diaspora" might lead one to imagine that Peter's audience has shared with ancient Israel the experience of exile, forcibly removed from their homes. This is manifestly not the case. Those believers to whom Peter addresses this letter have not been drawn into a new geographical space, but have rather been born anew within the space they had previously inhabited. They belong, but they do not belong. As Miroslav Volf helpfully observes,

**Christians do not come into their own social world from the outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the insiders who have diverted from their culture by being born again.**
Who, then, are Peter’s “exiles” and “aliens”? They are not “Jews” living among “Gentiles” in the expected sense of these terms, as though the author were concerned with their ethnic or nationalistic status. Attempts to find in Peter’s descriptive terms a reference to his readers’ “economic status” founders similarly on a problem of category. One’s social status was a product of numerous, intersecting considerations, relative income or access to the means of production being only one of them. In fact, there is no basis within the letter itself for suggesting that Peter’s audience occupied any rung on the ladder of economic measurement other than would have been characteristic of the broad spectrum of people living in Asia Minor, sans persons of the ruling elite.

Who, then, are Peter’s “exiles” and “aliens”? These are people whose commitments to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become the victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproachment, scorn, vilification, contempt. In the larger world, status was achieved via conformity to dispositions that had become so conventional that they were largely unspoken, taken for granted; noncompliance and other forms of social distinctiveness were valued negatively. Rich or poor in economic terms, born into a good family or bad—these and other factors paled into insignificance in the case of the readers of 1 Peter, whose reborn allegiances and transfigured practices distinguished them from Roman society. Previously, they had participated in the mainstream of Greco-Roman society, but now their lack of acculturation to prevailing social values marked them as misfits worthy of contempt. First Peter thus articulates how best to relate to a society set against those allegiances, attitudes, and actions that are consistent with God’s agenda.

Let me attempt to sketch plainly what I have already suggested about Peter’s take on the nature of the church in the world. Peter demarcates the identity of God’s people in three ways. First, he takes the positive route of characterizing his Christian audience in relation to God’s call to holiness. He thus locates the Christian vocation squarely in the context of God’s call upon Israel since, in order for Israel to fulfill its mission of being Yahweh’s priesthood in the midst of the nations, they were to be “holy”—that is, “different,” or “distinctive.” This was not at root a call for segregation, but a model of engagement; to make a difference in the world of nations, Israel was to be different—in the words of C.J.H. Wright, “recognizably, visibly, and substantively different, as the people belonging uniquely to Yahweh and therefore representing his character and ways....”

Second, Peter adopts a negative stance vis-à-vis the former life of his audience. Peter does not engage in invective rhetoric against “the world at large,” as though Christian identity and behavior were fundamentally defined in oppositional terms over against non-Christians. Nor does Peter imagine that his readers can simply wipe the slate clean, so to speak, as though they could erect a new moral and political world from the ground up, a world that would be more conducive to or even reflect Christian faithfulness. Nor does he counsel retreat from the world, as though the demands of holiness might necessarily be parlayed into patterns of isolation. We are, Peter insists, called to work out the nature of holiness as aliens in this world, where we are here and now. We anticipate with hope that “imperishable, uncorrupted, and unfading inheritance kept in heaven” (1:4), but this, this time and this place, is not it. Hence, Peter insists on a conversion of our moral imagi-
nations and deepest allegiances manifest in our character and practices—even if this involves suffering injustice precisely because we repudiate violence by refusing to “repay evil for evil or insulting for insulting” (3:9).

Hence, although it is true that Peter’s identification of his readers as the chosen people of God comes with it a warning against the dangers of falling into forms of behavior that would jeopardize the future promised them by God, it is also true that Peter is able to conceive of alternative, more faithful ways of being in the world. This is because of Jesus Christ, who makes possible a holiness of identity and engagement.

Hence, thirdly, Peter points to the work of Jesus, which for him is effective both in the generation of this new people and for modeling the way of life expected of us. Ultimately, Christian identity and practice are not defined negatively vis-à-vis those who reject the ways of Yahweh, but positively in relation to the way of Jesus Messiah. Indeed, the logic of Peter’s christology is grounded in and oriented toward the new lives of those who are enabled and called to follow Christ. For this reason, Peter devotes significant attention to the redemptive and exemplary journey of Jesus through suffering and death to his exaltation. The passion of Christ, Peter affirms, was both atoning and exemplary: “…Christ suffered on your behalf, leaving you a pattern so that you might follow in his footsteps” (2:21).

What, then, is the nature of Christian presence in a non-Christian world, in a world of so-called pluralism, in a world that is increasingly unfriendly to the claims of the church? From Peter’s perspective, the answer is not one of reciprocal animosity; we are not against the world. Nor is the answer one of withdrawal from the world where we might create within our carefully constructed walls a new and holy club. Our status, according to 1 Peter, is that of aliens within this world, whose alien status rests in the experience of our having been born anew and our living new lives within this social space. We do not work out our identity and sense of mission in an exercise of negating the beliefs and behaviors of others; if we are different from the world, it is not because we set out to be so, but rather because our lives rest ultimately in a God who is different. We are that people, not simply new persons, but a new people, collectively, corporately called to a living hope that recognizes the transient nature of this age and is therefore enthusiastic about the world kept for us by God. Do we embrace the God who raised Jesus from the dead? Do we find our home in the grand narrative of God’s ancient and eternal purpose, manifest in the Old Testament and revealed in the advent of Jesus? It is here that we find our identity and vocation of missiological engagement.

NOTES
1. This essay was delivered in an earlier draft during the Fall 1999 Theta Phi Lectures at Asbury Theological Seminary.
6. Cf. Troy W. Martin, Metaphor and Composition in 1 Peter (SBLDS 131; Atlanta: Scholars,
e.g., pp. 144-61; among others, Paul J. Achtemeier notes that 5:13, with its reference to Babylon, forms an inclusio with the opening verse (1 Peter [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996] p. 354). Closely allied, as Reinhard Feldmeier notes, is the metaphor of “alien” (Die Christen als Fremde: Die Metapher der Fremde in der Antiken Welt, im Urchristentum und im 1. Petersbrief [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992].


8. Cf., e.g., Martin, Metaphor and Composition, pp. 150-61.

