The Hedgehog and the Fox in the Church:
Prophetic Witness in a World of Religious Pluralism

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The "Allen and Dottie Miller Lecture" is designed to be a lecture on mission and peace, but so often mission has often been experienced as something which undermines peace and creates conflict. Because of the association of Christian mission with Western imperialism and colonial expansion, and the tremendous injustices committed against other peoples, cultures and religions in the modern missionary movement, there are many who do not want to even use the word mission any longer. And yet, mission is at the heart of who we are as Christians. We have a gospel that we are called to share, and we need to reclaim lost ground.

And so, what we need today is a *new language* and *new practices* of mission that can name the wrongs of the past and open up new ways for embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ. How can Christians speak of prophetic witness in a world of religious pluralism? This is the question I will explore, and I will do this by drawing on a famous essay by Sir Isaiah Berlin, written in a vastly different context. Berlin wasn't interested in Christian theology, but his work speaks to many of our concerns.

I

In 1953, Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) wrote an essay on Leo Tolstoy's view of history entitled "The Hedgehog and the Fox."[2] This became one of the most influential essays ever written on Western intellectual history, and it is still in print today. Berlin takes his point of departure from an obscure philosophical fragment that has been attributed to the ancient Greek poet Archilochus:

"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

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[2] Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and The Fox," *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelley (London: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 22-81. The original title of the essay was "On Lev Tolstoy's View of History." See Berlin's letter to the editor of *The New York Review of Books*, 27:15 (9 October, 1980).

There is no certain interpretation of this sentence. The fragment may mean no more than that the fox, in his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one sure defense. But Berlin reinterprets the fragment to elaborate a basic intellectual distinction between foxes – people fascinated by the infinite variety of ideas and the ways of ordering them, people who see truth as plural – and hedgehogs – people who relate everything to one all embracing view of history, and make their mark by drawing on one key concept. The hedgehog and the fox, the one and the many, the specialist and the generalist, monism and pluralism. This distinction cuts through individuals as well as the systems they created. Thus, Berlin identifies Aristotle, Balzac, Goethe and Shakespeare as foxes, while Plato, Dante, Proust and Nietzche are all hedgehogs. The Enlightenment was an age of hedgehogs in all fields: Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations,* Darwin and natural selection, Marx and class struggle, Freud and the unconscious. Our post-modern age, if it can be called that, favors the foxes, at least in institutions of higher learning.

Berlin conceded that the dichotomy between the hedgehog and the fox, if pressed, becomes "artificial, scholastic and ultimately absurd," but he went on to argue that the distinction is a good starting point for further intellectual investigation, especially when you consider a complex figure like Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy, according to Berlin, was by nature a fox, but he believed in being a hedgehog. His gifts and his talents, his genius as a writer lay in being a fox; but he believed that the hedgehog, with one overarching view of history, was the morally superior option. Tolstoy was at his greatest in his novels when he described the subtle undertones of human existence, these barely perceptible little differences that make living so full and colorful, with a wide range of emotions and feelings. He did not believe, however, that this was what reality was all about, and so he insisted on the need for a view of history based on one fundamental truth.

Tolstoy, like other Enlightenment figures Berlin considers, developed a "belief in a single, serene vision, in which all problems are resolved, all doubts stilled, peace and understanding finally achieved." The content of Tolstoy's vision is not what concerns us, but rather the claim is that Tolstoy was a fox masquerading as a hedgehog. There have been other such figures in Western intellectual history – foxes who thought the vision of the hedgehog was morally superior – and they were tragic figures because they wanted to simplify the complexities of history around a single and ultimately unworkable concept. In contrast, and this is important for my remarks here this morning, there has never been even one figure who was by nature a hedgehog, and believed that the fox was the morally superior option. There has never been, according to Berlin, an intellectual figure with a singular vision who felt the need to expand it into a pluralist vision.

Sir Isaiah Berlin later claimed that he did not imply that the fox was superior to the hedgehog. The hedgehog, after all, is the one who generates the big ideas. Still, it was clear that Berlin ran with the foxes, in the world of politics and ideas. He spent most of his life criticizing monist and all embracing philosophies and ideologies of all kinds, believing that we can live with incoherence, without "a seamless whole," because this is the necessary outcome of human freedom. This does not lead to relativism, according to Berlin, for two reasons. First, the discovery of a pluralist universe is a real discovery; it indicates that certain things are not combinable. Second, the human freedom which gives rise to these visions is itself valuable, for it leads to human flourishing. As a "hedge" against this, is Berlin's insight that across the range of human difference, there is a "minimum common ground" which, does not lead to harmony, but does not have to lead

to violence either. As we shall see, this is important for what we will have to say about prophetic witness in a pluralist world.

II

I have not been able to discover if anyone has ever applied Berlin's thesis to an analysis of theology and religion, or mission and peace, but it is not difficult to see where this might lead. Christianity, by its very nature, is a religion of hedgehogs. So too are Judaism and Islam, all single-minded Abrahamic traditions. I am not sure where I would put Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism in this categorization. However, indigenous religions of all kinds, as well as Daoism in China, are religions of the foxes.

Among the theologians, it is also easy to contrast the hedgehogs with the foxes. Most of the Biblical writers were hedgehogs, with the singular exception of the wisdom tradition. St. Athanasius was a fox who could bring many things together; Nestorius was a hedgehog who insisted on one way. St. Augustine, like Tolstoy, may have been a fox masquerading as a hedgehog, but I don't want to go there. Dogmatic theologians are all hedgehogs, but so too are heretics; synthesizers tend to be foxes, but so too are people of uncertain belief. Luther ("Here I stand") and Calvin, Barth and von Balthasar all were hedgehogs. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Rahner, Hans Kung and Paul Tillich were all foxes. Among contemporary contextual theologians, we have both hedgehogs and foxes, but I better not name them, or I'll really get into trouble. Hedgehogs are very clear about their theological method, foxes tend to be fuzzy. Hedgehogs beget foxes, who discover the importance of nuance. Foxes give birth to hedgehogs, who react against the poverty of liberalism.

(In mainline North American seminaries these days, the foxes run wild. Biblical studies used to be a field for hedgehogs, but now it belongs to the foxes. The same is true of history, as we moved from church history to the history of Christianity, and certainly of theology. Ethics may still be the domain of hedgehogs, but I am not sure. Pastoral theologians, except those fixated on a central figure like Freud, are foxes. People who teach mission tend to be hedgehogs, but we are beginning to see some cracks.)

Different Christian traditions may also be described in terms of whether they are dominated by the singular vision of the hedgehog or the plurality of the foxes. However, individuals and communities within those traditions vary a great deal. The Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, and the Evangelicals are with the hedgehogs; liberal Protestants and (surprise, surprise) Pentecostals are with the foxes. Among Protestants, the Reformed tend to be hedgehogs, and the Anglican-Episcopal tradition (with a comprehensiveness embracing the high and the lazy, the low and the crazy, the broad and the hazy) is fox-like. The Presbyterians are all mixed up, and the UCC – well, I better leave that to you.

The hedgehog and the fox is a metaphor. I don't want to stretch it too far, for I am only using it as an intellectual peg to hang a more basic argument. Applied to the world of religion and theology, I am not so interested in describing a dichotomy between two different approaches to reality and theological discourse, as I am in exploring the possibility of prophetic witness in a pluralistic world. Prophets are hedgehogs and pluralists are foxes, but it is not so simple as that. Now remember that Berlin maintained that there has never been a figure in Western intellectual history who was by nature a hedgehog, but who believed that the fox had chosen a better way. Our faith in Jesus

Christ compels us to be prophets, but living out that faith in the world today demands that we come to terms with religious pluralism. We have to do what Berlin thought was impossible.

Berlin's idea of the hedgehog and the fox helps us to explore the question of how Christian churches can speak prophetically in a world religious pluralism, so that the inherent singularity of a prophetic vision does not undermine the necessary ambiguity of religious pluralism. I want to argue that we are called to speak with prophetic clarity on such divisive issues of war, economic injustice and sexual orientation, even as we pursue *intra*-religious dialogue and *inter*-religious engagement in relationships to others.

Pluralism without prophecy is to settle for an insipid middle way: "all cats look gray in the night," nothing is worth fighting for, I'm OK, you're OK. Prophecy without pluralism assumes the rightness or superiority of our own tradition or confession, and it can impose our will or our vision upon others. Christocentric positivism, Jesus Christ, take it or leave it, my religion right or wrong (but it is never wrong). We need both the sharpness of a prophetic vision and the messiness of the pluralistic embrace in order to negotiate and cross boundaries as we engage in mission and work for a peaceful and more just world.

I am saying more than the need for a "both-and" solution. I am suggesting that we need a new way of speaking prophetically as we relate to others who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. We need to develop a *new language* that combines the prophetic and the pluralistic, and embrace *new practices* that are true to our faith and open to the insights of others.

III

Let us begin with a *new language*, for we are in need of new ways to speak about our rootedness in Christian faith and our relatedness to other religious communities. We must recognize that historically, Christians involved in mission have not been good at relating to or speaking about other religious communities. Christian mission has too often become a means for conquest and colonization. The "Great Commission" became the watchword for mission in a previous age, and "making disciples" became a means to domination. I am not trying to write off the missionary movement, for I am part of that tradition, having served as Presbyterian missionary in China for 23 years. What I am saying is that we need new ways of speaking about our faith in relationship to others.

Several years ago, Dr. D. Preman Niles delivered this lecture, and he also spoke about Christian mission and religious pluralism. Niles has developed an understanding of Christians as "the people of God among all God's peoples." He introduced the idea in a mission roundtable organized by the Council for World Mission and the Christian Conference of Asia in Hong Kong in 1999. This formulation marked a point of departure in a consideration of the Christian religion in relation to other religious communities.[3] "The people of God among all God's peoples" is a spatial paradigm of Christians living in harmony in the midst of people of other faiths. It developed out of the experiences of

[3] See Preman Niles, "Toward the Fullness of Life: Intercontextual Relationships in Mission," unpublished paper (April, 2002), pp. 5 ff. Niles develops his ideas further in *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

Christians who live as minority communities in Asia, alongside other established religious communities. To speak of Christians as "the people of God among all God's peoples" emphasizes the identity of Christians in the Biblical tradition ("the people of God") and the relatedness of Christians to the broader religious world ("among all God's peoples.")

Theologically, "the people of God among all God's peoples" implies a receptive plurality of religions and a diversity that is intended by God and which can be related to Trinitarian faith. "The people of God among all God's peoples" is a distinctively new way of speaking of a "differentiated consensus" a "reconciled diversity" in discussions among religions. It underscores the importance of Christian distinctiveness and prophetic witness, but also theological openness and religious pluralism. Similarly, Christian theologians from different traditions have described a religious plurality intended by God and based on our understanding of the Trinity.[4] This represents a movement beyond a Christocentric approach to other religious traditions that has dominated theologies and missiologies until very recently. Hedgehogs are becoming foxes.

To speak of Christians as "the people of God among all God's peoples" helps us identify ourselves with the community and religious life of those around us who are not Christians, and so embrace the "fullness of life" in diverse community expressions. It also enables us to speak out as the people of God in situations where we need to take stands for justice and peace and the mission of the church, often alongside brothers and sisters in other religious traditions. Prophetic witness and the acceptance of pluralism are both required.

Because we are the people of God, we can be prophetic. We can only be faithful to our faith and tradition by addressing the situations of injustice that we encounter and that we are often a part of. Because we people are among all God's peoples, we can be pluralistic, and in so doing, we can see that other religious communities also have their prophetic visions, and their word for us.

The General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches meeting in Accra in 2004 made use of this language in order to address the situation of our churches in mission. In the mission section report, Accra spoke of mission as engagement with other religious communities. Engagement is not a form of conquest and colonization. The term engagement is used rather than dialogue, because it implies historic encounter and interaction, and not just talking about something. Allow me to quote from the Accra mission plenary report, for it too speaks of the prophetic and the pluralistic in a way that can help us move forward:

> Reformed churches have not developed an adequate approach to religious plurality, and yet our churches increasingly find themselves in multi-religious contexts demanding new responses. Mission and dialogue are both needed, but we also need new forms of inter-religious engagement to address issues of inter-religious conflict.
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> Christians are disciples of Jesus who are the people of God among all God's peoples. All over the world, Christians are living in the midst of people from other religious communities, and our

[4] For example, S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Gavin d'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000); Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll: Orbis,1973).

> churches must be engaged with them. In our encounter with people of other faiths, we witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as we learn from and listen to others' unique religious teachings.
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> We need to develop processes of contextual discernment in relating to other religious communities. This involves interfaith listening and programs of sharing and exchange. In a world of globalization and Empire, we need interfaith solidarity in mission so we can work together on issues that affect us all. In our attempts to understand interfaith solidarity, theologies of life in fullness will complement more traditional theologies of salvation.[5]

Listen to what is being said here: the importance of inter-religious engagement to address situations of conflict; witnessing to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as we learn from and others' unique religious teachings; interfaith listening and solidarity so that we can work together on issues that affect us all. We cannot choose between the prophetic and the pluralistic because they belong together. We are hedgehogs who must learn to think like foxes. We need a language that helps us develop new ways of speaking about faith and mission that names and rejects the wrongs of the past; embraces what is good, and true and beautiful in all religions; and responds in new ways to the challenges of prophetic witness.

IV

Responding to the new challenges suggests that we need not only new language but also *new practices*. Let me suggest an approach to such a practice by beginning with a passage from Luke's Gospel.

> Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere. (Luke 9:1-6)

One of the most important Biblical images of mission is hospitality: the Old Testament urging us to welcome the stranger; Jesus and his disciples sitting around a common table; Paul discussing the need to build up the household of God. The church never would have spread across the ancient world if it were not for the hospitality that was extended to and by the early church. Hospitality not only suggests the form of mission, but also something about the nature of the message of the early Christians.

Jesus' message is one of radical hospitality. The account in Luke about the sending of the twelve is probably the closest we have to the original words of Jesus (as these were transmitted by Q). Jesus tells his disciples to go and take nothing with them. The implication is that the disciples were not living in poverty, and that if necessary, they could have come up with the bag and the bread, the money and the tunic that were needed for the journey. In fact, the disciples who left everything did so in a way that allowed

[5] The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 24th General Council, Accra, Ghana, "Mission Section Plenary Report," 10 August, 2004. The report can be accessed at: www.warc.org. (check website)

them to reclaim their own resources when necessary. The point of Jesus' telling them to bring nothing is that in announcing the kingdom and bringing healing and wholeness to the people they encounter, the disciples are to rely upon the hospitality which is offered to them by those who accept their message and ministry. This suggests a kind of give and take in their missionary task.

Jesus himself traveled around with followers who had given up possessions and a settled life in exchange for a life on the road, a life in which the message and the mission to which they had committed themselves made all the difference in the world. One of the criticisms of Jesus that we read in the New Testament is that Jesus ate and drank with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes (Luke 15:3 *inter alia*). At my church in San Francisco, we have this carved on the communion, displayed for all to see, because we want to emphasize that all are welcomed to Jesus table, and that there are no purity requirements. This is a message of radical eucharistic hospitality.

Jesus and his disciples seemed to have nothing, and yet they lived in great abundance. It is a paradox. How could they do this? Who was paying the bills? New Testament scholar John Koenig argues that the manifestation of abundance was part of what drew people to Jesus.[6] Wherever he and his disciples went, they invited others to share in their food and drink and conversation. Since they were without resources themselves, they must have been provided with the things they needed by others. Koenig concludes that this was because those who were helped by their ministry of teaching, healing and community life responded to them by offering material support for the group, and at times, this support may have been quite plentiful. One again, we have a give and take situation where nothing is imposed in the presentation of the message, but where space is created for hearing about the kingdom and healing the sick.

The disciples went out preaching the message of Jesus Christ and the reign of God. Their message was embodied in following Jesus, preaching, teaching and healing. What Jesus offered was new life in fullness, and this message attracted quite a following, both in Jesus' time and in the life of the early Church. The Eucharist became a Christian practice that helped form the Christian community, and this too was an expression of radical hospitality. Whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or women, and (we might add) straight or gay, all were welcomed in the feast of the new community.

Both then and now, the question could be asked, who is hosting whom and why? Who is host and who is guest? There is a material and a transcendent dimension to the exchange that takes place. The disciples offered one thing and received another, but both were necessary for the community. Christians do not have a monopoly on hospitality, then or now. As with so many practices in the early church, hospitality for emissaries or apostles had a Jewish basis. We read about this in the Old Testament. Whatever is characterized as hospitality in the New Testament must be among other things the first-century "church's" version of Jewish practice. Hospitality and welcoming the stranger is present in all cultures and religions. Christians can both teach and learn about hospitality in our relationships with others.

The early disciples stayed in the homes of those who welcomed them, and these became the bases they established in mission. If they were not welcomed, they would not

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[6] John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

find ways to buy property and set themselves up regardless of what the local people thought of them. No, they were to move on to the next village.

The radical hospitality of Jesus, I want to suggest, offers a way of practicing prophetic witness in a world of religious pluralism. It is hedgehog like faith with fox-like practice. Hospitality is a means of transforming and renewing mission so it is no longer part of a project in which churches seek to conquer the world for Christ. The hospitality of mission means that we are called to be God's guests and God's hosts on behalf of the world, wherever the church finds itself. Hospitality suggests a universalism without an overview, a generalization that cannot be imposed, an absolute that can be discovered only in particular encounters. Hospitality is important in all cultures, and it is a practice that challenges a world of globalization and exclusion. There can be no generalized theology of hospitality, no preconceived notions about the relationships that may emerge, no distinctions of any kind. The boundaries that exist will continually be crossed in mission, in the practice of being hosts and guests, hedgehogs and foxes.

I have been a recipient of Christian hospitality more than most people, and I have tried to extend the same hospitality to others. Anyone who has been a missionary, or who has visited Christians in other parts of the world, knows how important such hospitality is. As a missionary, I have been a guest, and I have received hospitality from churches I have been related to. These churches have taken care of me and my family; they have fed and housed us, they have cared for us when we were sick, they have stayed with us when we were lonely, they have corrected us when we made mistakes. *(Puding, Guizhou Miao story here, if time)* We need to extend the hospitality of Jesus in our own congregations for those who are strangers in our land, or for those who have been marginalized in our societies.

At the end of his book *The Modern Theologians*, David Ford says that we should celebrate the first years of our new millennium by being guests and hosts:

> A theology under the sign of hospitality is formed through its generous welcome to others. It has the host's responsibility for homemaking, the hard work of preparation, & the vulnerability of courteously offering something while having little control over its reception. It also has the different responsibility of being a guest, trying to be sensitive to strange households…risking new food and drink. Ideally, habitual hospitality gives rise to trust and friendship in which exchanges can plumb the depths of similarity, difference and suffering.[7]

If this is true of theology, it is even more true of mission, or at least of a mission that seeks to promote peace and reconciliation in a world of pluralism. Hospitality is important because it creates the space where we can be both guests and hosts. It is not exclusivist and imposed on others. It is not oriented toward correct doctrine but towards appropriate practice. Hospitality in mission means that we are related to everyone, but we are not in control of all that happens. Everyone is welcome, everyone has a role to play. Hospitality involves face-to-face encounters, not generalizations about people or even worse, "people groups." There is instead a kind of mutual indwelling, a theology of the image of God in people, of God's love, of the Spirit of Christ that is itself universal and always particular. This is the meaning of incarnation. Christians involved in mission, need to make endless improvisations, for we cannot predict things in advance.

[7] David Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, OUP, 2nd ed.

Relationships of hospitality are very different from other forms of relationships that are common in our world. They are based on love, not power; on mutual welcoming, not exclusion; on seeing in one another the image of God, not upon preconceived notions of what it is that God naturally ordains. How is this played out in mission?

- *By being hosts*: This means creating welcoming communities and congregations; the joyful worship of God; welcoming people on the margins of society; recognizing the other as other; welcoming the stranger in whom we see the face of Jesus. Congregations and communities involved in the mission of hospitality will naturally grow, unless something gets in the way.

- *By being guests*: This means risking ourselves in strange and unfamiliar surroundings; responding to calls for help from our neighbors in situations around the world; taking part in short mission trips and visits; serving in churches far away from our homes; opening ourselves to others in different forms of encounter. Being guests in mission also means knowing when to leave.

Hosts and guests, the prophetic and the pluralistic, he hedgehog and the fox

V

I have described one way of speaking about a new approach to prophetic witness in a world of religious pluralism ("the people of God Among All God's peoples"), and I have suggested that the recovery of the practice of radical hospitality of Jesus is a means to give substance to this language. Other theologians are developing a new language along similar lines, when they speak of "negotiating and crossing religious boundaries," or of other religious traditions as having "suggestive possibilities" for our own. There are new practices being developed as well, for example, mission as prophetic resistance against Empire or mission as inter-religious solidarity. Time does not permit elaboration of these ideas, and in any case, you have been patient with me for 45 minutes already.

At the height of World War II, T. S. Eliot wrote what might be called a Christian commentary on the times in which he lived. I know of Eliot's anti-semitism, and I know that he became a reactionary defender of Anglo-Saxon culture. But he was a great poet, and his words can still speak to us.

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of things shall be well,
> When the tongues of flame are enfolded,
> Into the crowned knot of fire,
> And the fire and the rose are one.[8]

In this poem, T. S. Eliot drew on the singular vision an 14th century English mystic (Julian of Norwich) that enabled him to see a world in which the contradictions were

[8] T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 48.

finally resolved. He may have been a hedgehog masquerading as a fox, but I doubt that Sir Isaiah Berlin would agree. Still, these lines are suggestive for our own times.

We have hedgehogs and foxes in our churches, and we need an *intra* religious dialogue as well. The hedgehog likes to curl up in a corner, sure of his own defense, yet ever ready to speak a prophetic word. The foxes look for a point of entry, a way to take the offensive, and affirm that truth is plural. When the hedgehogs are on the march, the foxes often run to their lairs, for they will live and fight another day. This is a flexible and well chosen response, but unfortunate nonetheless, for we need the wisdom and insight of the foxes. We also need the steadfast witness of the hedgehog, despite his or her stubborn orneriness. Prophetic witness and an acceptance of religious pluralism are not usually found together, and so we have to find ways of putting them together.

All of this suggest an asmmetry in our approach to mission, a certain messiness in the way we do things. Things are not neatly tied together, not yet anyway, although they may be one day. The fire and the rose are one, and so too the hedgehog and the fox. Mission, God's mission, is not "Come, join the church, be like us!" But rather, "Let us follow Jesus, and discover together where God is leading us". To be sent out with this mission and this message requires a prophetic voice and a servant spirit, as we listen to what God is saying to the churches.