

E PLURIBUS UNUM: PLURALISM, NOT SAMENESS

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A talk delivered on August 8, 2017 at the North American Interfaith Network Convention

in San Diego, California

I got to thinking about the theme for this year's NAIN conference, "Harmony, the Journey to One Heart." I thought about just what harmony meant. And especially, I thought about what kind of "one" one heart means. I reflected on these issues in the current political climate in the US today. So it seemed to me that I might discuss the journey to one heart in the light of the motto of the US, "E Pluribus Unum"—out of many, one. The kind of one I will be talking about is not a one made up of sameness. Rather it is a one made up of variety and difference. Pluralism, not sameness. I would like to introduce my approach to the journey to one heart with some citations from my own faith tradition, the Swedenborgian Church:

"A form makes a unity more perfectly as its constituents are distinguishably different, and yet united"¹

(Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence* n. 4)

"In the Christian world, doctrines are what distinguish the churches; and from them people call themselves Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, or the Reformed and the Evangelical, and by other names also. It is from doctrine alone that they are so called; which would not be at all, if they would make love the Lord and charity toward the neighbor the principal things of faith. The doctrines would then be only varieties of opinion respecting the mysteries of faith, which truly Christian people would leave to everyone according to his [or her] conscience, and would say in their heart that one is truly a Christian when he [or she] lives as a Christian, or as the Lord teaches. Thus from all the differing churches there would become one Church; and all the dissensions which exist from doctrine alone would vanish; yea, the hatreds against one another would be dissipated in a moment, and the Lord's kingdom would come upon the earth."²

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. Translated by George F. Dole, West Chester. Swedenborg Foundation, 2002.

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Secrets of Heaven*. Translated by Lisa Hyatt Cooper. West Chester. Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

(*Heavenly Secrets* n. 1799)

“It is plain that the church of the Lord is not here, nor there, but that it is everywhere, both within those kingdoms where the [Christian] church is, and out of them, where people live according to the precepts of love.”³

(*Heavenly Secrets* n. 8152)

“God flows into every human being with all God’s divine love, all God’s divine wisdom, and all God’s divine life.”⁴

(*True Christianity* n. 364)

Often in interfaith organizations we look for things we all share in common, and, indeed, sometimes even try to force harmony. But why try to find things we can all agree on? Isn’t it better to recognize our differences, and to affirm one another in our differences? Isn’t it better than forcing commonalities we may not share? It is one thing to **say** that there are differences among different religions. It is another to **tolerate** differences. I want to **affirm** differences. As Emanuel Swedenborg says, “A form makes a unity **more perfectly** as its constituents are distinguishably different, and yet united” (Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence* n. 4). In interfaith relations, our “constituents” are indeed “distinguishably different.” The constituents would be our various religions, and the way we believe and practice is “distinguishably different.” But Swedenborg’s important claim is that a form makes a unity **more perfectly** when the constituents are distinguishably different.

In this talk, I will be affirming differences, rather than commonalities. Moving beyond mere toleration, I will be celebrating and honoring differences as a best practice in interfaith relations. In celebrating one another’s faiths, I affirm each individual’s belief system and practice. You can’t have

³ Ibid.

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. Translated by Jonathan Rose.. West Chester. Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

interfaith without distinct faiths. Interfaith is more perfect when individuals feel free to bring their own distinguishably different religious practices and beliefs to the whole.

Spiritually:

How often have I heard, “All religions say the same thing.” “All religions are the same.” “There are so many commonalities we share.” “We believe that, too.” I think back to my days in divinity school. When I was in divinity school, we tried to come up with a prayer that everyone could participate in. In order to do so, particularities were eroded. For instance, Jesus’ name was taken out of the prayer, in order to include non-Christians in the interfaith prayer. Given the goal of the prayer, this is understandable. But why make something we can all agree with? Isn’t it better to recognize our differences, and to affirm one another in our differences? True listening, in an I-Thou relationship, will hear and honor the other with all the differences between self and other, will not be actively waiting for something they can both agree on. As I will show below, diversity in religion is a good thing. E Pluribus Unum—even in religion, out of many we can be one.

Socially:

“Why don’t they adopt our ways?” “They all stay in their own communities.” “It is in their own best interests for minorities to adopt the ways of the majority race and culture.” I spent most of my life in my birth Country, the United States of America. When I was growing up, I was taught that the US is a “melting pot.” Differences will meld into a lukewarm kind of sameness. Words I heard were, “assimilation,” “enculturation,” “adjusting.”

I now live in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The catch-word in Canada is “pluralism.” The social ideal in Edmonton is affirmation of the different cultures that have immigrated to the city. We pride ourselves on being open, inclusive, and accepting of other cultures. So in Edmonton, the American motto, E Pluribus Unum still applies well—out of many, one.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

So how much do we share? Can we say that there is an overarching principal that we all hold in common? Can we say that there is one God, the same God we all believe in, with different names? I'm not so sure.

There was a philosopher of language by the name of Jean-Francois Lyotard whose discussion about meta-narratives seems germane to my talk today in ("The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge," Manchester University Press, 1984). A meta-narrative is an overarching narrative, or shared story, or world-view, or shared belief system. Lyotard asserts that today, society has fragmented so much that there is no shared world-view, or meta-narrative. In Lyotard's language, unifying meta-narratives have fragmented into "pragmatic valences specific to its kind" (xxiv). So we all know only a specific world-view, or narrative. We are so fragmented from one another, that Lyotard even says in some places that, "to speak is to fight" (10).

This understanding of fragmentation is true of nationalities, social structures, and interfaith gatherings. I am claiming that we do not share much, as far as religions go, nor as far as our cultures go. And again, turning to Lyotard's system, we do violence to our differences when we try to force commonalities that may not be there. Lyotard writes,

"Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion, as Jurgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games (xxv)."

What I take from this quote is that in our discussions with one another we need not look for commonalities. Put a little stronger, we should not try to look commonalities.

As in science, religious tenets tend to claim universality, or what Lyotard calls the "pretention to universality" (30). And they should. Religion is supposed to be ontological; it is supposed to explain the whole created order. Religions describe the way the universe is and how it came to be; what our place is in it; and other grand ideas that are true for everyone. Religion is supposed to describe God and God is about as universal as you can get.

It's the same God—right? There's only one God. Well, I'm not so sure we can say even that. I'm not so sure we would want to say that. As an example, my God is Jesus Christ. But in my understanding of Judaism, and, I think, Islam, there can be no image of God. And as a Human form,

Jesus is an image of God for Christians. Further, the Greek Orthodox Church goes so far as to say that if God is incarnated in Jesus, and has a Human form, then we can paint pictures Jesus. So we have the tradition of those beautiful Orthodox ikons. This could never be the case in Judaism or Islam. Don't we do violence to our unique valences, our particular belief systems, if we were to claim that my Jesus is the same God as the Muslim Allah?

I don't mean to suggest that we must be divided, due to diversity. What joins us is a willingness to enter into dialogue. In interfaith relations, I think that dialogue plays a central role. But not dialogue that seeks consensus. How will I learn about Islam, for instance, if I listen only for similarities between my religion and Islam? Won't both of our interests best be served if we honor one another in our differences, as we dialogue?

But for dialogue to happen, a safe space will be important. I believe that dialogue needs to take place in what Martin Buber calls an I-Thou relationship. Where the other is treasured in a loving relationship. The willingness to engage the other, to enter into an I-Thou relationship with the other, to use Buber's term, may be a way to maintain constructive relationships in the failure of an overarching meta-narrative. I can honor and respect a Muslim prayer and a Muslim praying without myself becoming a Muslim.

THEOLOGICAL SOURCES

The Tribal League Period

There are Biblical references that affirm E Pluribus Unum—out of many, one. I think of the Tribal League Period in ancient Israel. There is that one line from Judges, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In the Tribal League Period, there was no central power, such as a king. There were tribal clans—each distinguishably different one from another—who were united by ancestry and by shared worship of Yahweh. In the Tribal League Period, the binding force socially was also the binding force theologically. That binding force were the laws of Yahweh, especially as we find them in the Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23:9).

The twelve tribal units were distinct one from another, yet united by their common adherence to the God Yahweh and Yahweh's Laws. But the distinctness of each tribal unit, and, indeed, of each individual who "did what was right in their own eyes" was remembered throughout Israelite history. This loose confederation of tribes was considered by some to be a kind of golden age for Israelite governance politically, and for Israelite theopraxis. They didn't need a central organizing power like a king, didn't want a king. From the point of view of the elders in Israel, when kingship did arise, it was seen as a departure from the ideal society. In fact, it was even seen as a rejection of Yahweh Himself as king over the tribes, "The LORD said to Samuel . . . they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Samuel 8:7). When King David assumed the throne, he was careful to receive a blessing from the elders of all twelve tribes. In fact, he was anointed twice—once by the ten northern tribes (2 Samuel 4:3) and once by the southern tribes (2 Samuel 2:7). The memory of the pluralistic period of the twelve tribes remained even during the time of the kings. The ideal government for ancient Israel was the pluralism of the Tribal League period—not that of Israel's great kings, not King David nor King Solomon.

In the Epistles of Paul

"E Pluribus Unum" is in the Christian Scriptures, too. We have a powerful image of it in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In an extended metaphor, Paul uses the image of the human body to show diversity in unity. The human body is a unity. But the body is made up of distinguishably different parts. There are the foot and the hand, the ear and the eye. So, for Paul, we all have distinct, different gifts that we bring to the whole. Some are healers, some possess wisdom, some have strong faith, some can work miracles, some speak different languages, some translate. There are many gifts that the Spirit of Christ gives to individuals. But there is only one Spirit—that of Christ. There are many different gifts, but each gift holds an important place in the Body of Christ.

Paul wrote this letter to plead for church harmony. The threats of squabbling, factions and dissensions were real in early Christianity. That is the other side of pluralism. For by affirming diversity, the threat of fragmentation and even fighting and war are real possibilities. But as I suggested above, an I-Thou relationship in which differences are celebrated, the other is honored and respected,

can hold us together in unity despite our diversity. Or, as in Paul's time, the unifying Spirit of Christ can hold together different expressions of Christianity.

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, 12:1-31:

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many

members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”⁵

Swedenborg’s Idea of Heaven: The Greatest Human Form

Swedenborg builds on Paul’s imagery of the body—the one body made up of diverse parts. For Swedenborg, heaven is arranged in the Greatest Human Form. Our individual human bodies take their form from the Greatest Human Form, or heaven. It is heaven, the Greatest Human Form, that holds our atoms and cells together and inspires our minds with truth and our hearts with love. For instance, angels who live as the heart are loving; angels who live as the eyes are brilliant, or wise; angels who discern spiritual qualities are as the nose; those who are as the ears are obedient; and so on with all the organs of the body.

So Paul’s metaphor of different parts in the body of Christ becomes a spiritual reality in Swedenborg’s vision of heaven. By means of symbolism, heavenly affections and world-views are given a place in the Greatest Human Form

⁵ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

E Pluribus Unum for Swedenborg is seen in the countless individual societies in heaven that correspond to parts of the human body. And for Swedenborg, the variety and diversity of heavenly affections and ideas make for a perfect whole. Pluralism of emotions and thoughts make for a better whole than sameness ever could—if it were even possible.

Since heaven in its entirety does reflect a single individual, and is in fact the divine spiritual person in its greatest form and image, heaven is therefore differentiated into members and parts like a person, and these are given similar names. Angels know what member one community or another is in and say that this community is in the member or province of the head, that one in the member or province of the chest, that one in the member or province of the genitals, and so on

*(Heaven and Hell, n. 65)*⁶

Further still, heaven is where the Lord is recognized, trusted, and loved. The different ways he is worshiped . . . —do not cause harm but bring benefit, because they are a source of heaven’s perfection. . . . a perfect whole is formed from a variety of elements . . . when a whole does arise from a variety of elements, and the elements are in a perfected form in which each associates with the next in the series like a sympathetic friend, then it has a perfect quality. Heaven is, then, a single whole composed of a variety of elements arranged in the most perfect form; for of all forms, the form of heaven is the most perfect.

(Heaven and Hell n. 56).

Jain Parable and Theological Reflection

Three blind men encountered an elephant for the first time. Each man felt only one part of the elephant. When they asked one another what the elephant was like, each had a different description. The man at the trunk said, “This creature is like a thick hose.” The man at a leg said, “This creature is like a tree trunk.” The one at the elephant’s stomach said, “No, it is flat like a wall.”

⁶ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. Translated by George F. Dole, West Chester. Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

All three men were right. The elephant trunk is like a hose; the leg is like a tree trunk; the stomach is like a wall. The only problem is that each man didn't have the whole picture of the elephant.

It seems to me that this story captures the place we all are in our differing religions. We are all of us finite. Since we are all finite, our religious systems are finite. But God is infinite. No one of us has the whole infinite story about God.

And reflecting on the elephant story, our differing articulations of religion can all be right. In the religious sphere, we can indeed claim that our religion is right. And simultaneously, we can affirm that other religions are right, too.

No one of us has the whole elephant. And this pluralistic understanding of religions holds for the practice of religion as much as it does for belief systems. For instance, from what I have learned about Hinduism, ritual has a more prominent place in it than it does in my religion, as does the power of language in Hinduism. Regarding ritual, in Hinduism, worship can take the form of lighting a fire for Agni, or smearing clarified butter on a Shiva linga, or bringing sweets or flowers to a temple and receiving back other sweets. And regarding the place of sacred language, in some forms of Hinduism, passages or phrases or even a single word from the Vedas are chanted over and over as worship. This is because the universe was created by the very same poetic meters that the Vedas were written in. So reciting phrases or words from the Vedas brings the very power that created all things into the worship experience. In my own Swedenborgian religion, understanding theology and expressing our understanding through healthy emotions, true thinking, and ethical behavior are primary modes of worship for Swedenborgians. So cognition, emotion, and service to our fellows are the main means of worship for Swedenborgians. We have little ritual and no real mantras. And these days we don't follow much of a religious calendar, which does play a significant role in religions like Judaism. Some of the most significant aspects of Judaism are festivals which are to be observed according to the sacred calendar. If I am not mistaken, even readings from the Hebrew Scriptures follow the sacred calendar. As a Protestant, I think that belief plays a vital role in religion. But for other religions, ritual, chants, and the sacred calendar may matter more than belief—or at least as much. We may indeed have

different beliefs, but belief itself may not play as vital a role in some religions than it does for others of us.

This leads up to the point I am making about perfection consisting in variety. Since no one of us has the whole elephant, we have a better picture of the whole elephant when we have multiple perspectives. The greater the diversity we have among different faith traditions, the greater vision of the whole elephant we will know.

Thus interfaith works best when there are strong articulations of different faiths. It does not work as well when participants in interfaith profess a kind of hybrid faith made up of many faiths. I am not sort of Buddhist, sort of Hindu, sort of Muslim, sort of Jewish, sort of Swedenborgian. Over the years, I encountered all the different religions that I have encountered as a Swedenborgian. I come to interfaith gatherings as a Swedenborgian. An open-minded Swedenborgian, certainly. A Swedenborgian who is a seeker, certainly. A Swedenborgian who is a life-long learner, certainly. But a Swedenborgian.

So, then, what do I do with other religions? What do we do with other religions? What are we doing here? Largely, I dialogue. I want to hear other religions from believers and practitioners or other religions. I did not say, “I hear about other religions.” I want to hear the religions. And I want to hear the religions in their integrity. I do not listen to my Muslim fellows with an ear for doctrines that sound like Swedenborgian doctrines and then celebrate how much we have in common. I want to hear Islam as a Muslim experiences it. And I reflect on Islam as I hear it from a practicing Muslim. One initial reaction is to say, “Now I have heard another facet of the infinite God.” For that, I celebrate the religion and person of the religion that I have been hearing. Sometimes I want to think or practice in the ways I hear. Sometimes I remain in my Swedenborgian mindset and hear the other as a differing friend. And sometimes, I incorporate what I hear into my own religion. Then my own vision of the infinite grows a little greater. So my encounter with the religion of the other can be different and respectful; and it can also be different and mind-expanding.

My own understanding of religion has grown through my exposure to other religions. For instance, I deeply appreciate religious observance that emphasizes ritual, like what I have found in Hindu and Sikh services. I have been moved deeply by the iconography—the vivid colors and the

imagery—that I experienced in a Ukrainian Catholic Church in Edmonton. My own beliefs have expanded through exposure to different faith perspectives—the different doctrines and different emphases and, in fact, foreign concepts. My understanding of what religion can be has grown even when I haven't incorporated the other into my own world-view.

But I am suspicious when I hear a person say that interfaith is their religion. I'll say again, I'm not sort of Buddhist, sort of Hindu, sort of Muslim, sort of Jewish. There was a time when I thought I was. But as I look back, I had no living personal faith during that time period. I think that Robyn Lebron, the co-presenter with me, will be exploring the ramifications of interfaith in her presentation, so I won't say much more about it now.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Never, I think, has the world needed the kind of approach to “E Pluribus Unum” that I have been talking about. The recent posture of the U. S. president is narrow, uninformed, and xenophobic. And it would seem that the example he sets is spreading in US culture. It seems to me that religious hate crimes or hate language are now more prevalent than they had been in previous administrations. Even up in Canada. May I go so far as to suggest that they are disapproved of less vehemently than they had been in the past? However one feels about the current president, I can't recall a president who has engendered such division and intolerance. Now, more than other we need mutual understanding and the affirmation of difference. Now, more than ever, we need interfaith gatherings like NAIN, the Parliament of the World's Religions, and local movements like Poway and the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action.

I think that we need to be evangelists. We need to spread our gospel—our good news—that people of different faith traditions, nationalities, and cultures actually benefit from diversity. That diversity perfects community; it doesn't weaken our social cohesiveness nor water down our personal religious perspective.

I'll conclude with a story from my life. I recall my upbringing in an all-white suburb of Detroit. I remember spending our Saturday afternoons mostly leaning against my neighbor Don

Range's car telling jokes that didn't even make us laugh. Growing up in this white suburb bored me to no end.

I can contrast that community with the vibrant cosmopolitan city of Edmonton, Canada where I now live. When I first got there, I noticed different groups of people in a Starbucks speaking different languages—Chinese, Lebanese, African languages, and, of course Canadians talking in English. In Edmonton, I have taken classes in Tai Ch'i at Ji Hong Tai Ch'i Academy. I am currently undergoing acupuncture treatments by a doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine. I enjoy eating Vietnamese food, Indian cuisine, perogies, pad tai, burritos, molcajete, lasagna, and hamburgers chez McDonald's, among many other options that Edmonton has to offer. We have ethnic festivals like Heritage Days in the summer, or City Centre festivals that honor a different nationality each week-end. City Hall itself celebrates a different faith tradition each month with a launch and display which remains up all month.

My musical interests are also ecumenical, too, you might say. I first heard Sikh sacred music at a temple to which the Edmonton Interfaith Centre was invited, as one of our bi-monthly Interfaith Explorations. And I heard the same genre at a convenience store where a young Sikh was piping his sacred music through the store intercom. Soon after, I downloaded from iTunes some Sikh music, and a friend of mine from India gave me one of her Sikh CD's. Of course, now that I am going to the acupuncture clinic, I downloaded some traditional Chinese music. And from a jazz musician who befriended me in Detroit City, I developed an affinity for Latin music which I have also downloaded a considerable amount of. As good as they are, I wouldn't want a diet of only the Beatles, and certainly not "Yummy, Yummy, Yummy I got love in my tummy."

Much of my interfaith work has been in the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action. I have been a board member for about 7 years, vice president for 2, and president for another 2. The Edmonton Interfaith Centre will be hosting NAIN 2018 in the wonderfully cosmopolitan city of Edmonton where I now happily reside. From the boring, homogeneous life I knew in the all-white suburb of Livonia, Michigan, I now live an exciting and fulfilling life in the multi-cultural city of Edmonton. And through the interfaith work I have participated in in Edmonton, I discovered NAIN. And it is a delight to be a member of NAIN and an honor to be here with you all today.

