

The River of the Water of Life: The Challenge of Pluralism In an Interdependent World

Steven C. Rockefeller

First of all, I extend congratulations to those of you who have completed your graduate studies for the degrees of Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry. Over thirty-six years ago, I received my M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and went on to pursue doctoral studies. I regard my theological education as one of the great blessings in my life. What extraordinary and wonderful traditions we are part of, extending back into ancient Israel and classical Greece and beyond. In addition, today our religious understanding is enriched by an explosion in the knowledge of world religions, including indigenous traditions. It has been enormously exciting to be part of the unfolding of religious consciousness as a teacher and scholar in the final decades of the 20th century.

Each of you who are graduating have become new links in a chain that joins past, present, and future. Your task is to preserve, improve, and transmit to the next generation the traditions that sustain and guide us. It is at once a joy and a great responsibility. You enter careers as ministers, teachers, scholars, and social and environmental activists at a time when the need for faith, wisdom, love, and compassion has never been greater. People are hungry for vision and liberating truth, and our world desperately needs healing and renewal. The challenges and opportunities before you are great.

You have chosen as the theme for your graduation service, "Religious Leadership in a Pluralistic Age," and I would like to reflect with you on this topic. The title of my remarks is "The River of the Water of Life," an image found in the concluding pages of the Bible, which contain an eschatological vision of a new Earth. ¹ The Biblical author imagines a holy city in which the separation of heaven and Earth, the sacred and the secular, and the human and the divine has been overcome. The presence of God pervades the whole community. In addition, this holy city enjoys the security, beauty, and harmony of the Garden of Eden. In the heart of the city is "the spring of the water of life," and "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal," flows through the city. All are invited to "take the water of life as a gift." It is the free gift of God. "On either side of the river is the tree of life . . . and the leaves are for the healing of the nations." ²

In each generation the fundamental task of religious leadership is to find "the spring of the water of life" and to help make "the river of the water of life" to flow through the middle of our villages, towns, and cities so that all people are equitably nourished by it and the greater community of life is protected and sustained. Building pluralistic societies locally and a pluralistic civilization globally is fundamental to making "the river of the water of life" to flow through our communities. This afternoon I want to consider the elements of a responsible pluralism and the spiritual significance of pluralism.

The very essence of social, cultural, and religious pluralism is relationship and community in the midst of diversity. Here lies its spiritual as well as social significance. Genuine relationship, involving communication, communion, and community is "the water of life." Building a pluralistic society is a way to overcome the separation of the sacred and the secular. It is a path to an ever-widening sense of personal identity, leading to union with God, the spiritual center of the larger whole to which we all belong.

With the thought that the heart and soul of pluralism is the spirit of relationship and community in the midst of diversity, I want to suggest to you that a Christian pluralism today means new forms of religious consciousness that involve a sense of planetary interdependence and a democratic-ecological spirituality. It is useful to begin with a few comments about the current global situation.

As the dawn of a new millennium approaches, humanity is on the threshold of a new stage in its evolution and historical development. The term "pluralistic age" is one way of conceptualizing the transformation that is underway. There is also talk about a post-modern era, a new information age, and an ecozoic era. The important point is that something new and different is taking place. Major forces are moving humanity from one historic era into another.

In the half century since the Second World War, the colonial period has been terminated, the Cold War has come to an end, and communism as an ideology has been abandoned. Under the impact of science, technology, and trade, our world is characterized by rapid change and increasing interdependence. Our interdependence is ecological, economic, social, and political and also cultural and religious. Communications and transportation systems and world trade are creating the structures for a new global civilization.

It is very unlikely that the trend toward increasing interdependence will be reversed in the next century. It will probably intensify, even though the forces of globalization, some of which are harmful to many people, often produce a backlash, generating fragmentation socially and politically. The future of humanity and of life on Earth depends on how we shape the interdependent world that is emerging both locally and globally. Will it be a world governed primarily by current patterns of economic globalization that benefit a minority of the human family, widen the gulf between rich and poor, disrupt local communities, destroy cultural diversity, and degrade the environment? Or will it be a world that honors justice, secures human rights, ensures equitable human development, empowers people, promotes gender equality, respects cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, advances cross-cultural and inter-religious cooperation, protects Earth's ecological systems, and establishes peace? The latter scenario contains the promise of a new liberating planetary civilization that promotes the flourishing of diverse human communities and ecological systems. Such a civilization is struggling to be born. It would be a realization of the ideal possibilities that emerged with the scientific, technological, and democratic

revolutions that have been such powerful forces in the modern era, fueling humanity's dreams of universal freedom, justice, and peace.

Every great civilization has produced its own distinctive form of religious consciousness. The great world religions have each emerged as the predominant religious expression of a particular civilization. Now a new planetary civilization is emerging. It, too, will give rise to a new and distinctive form of religious consciousness, and the emergence of this religious awareness is essential to the full development of this new planetary civilization. I do not believe that this means a new religion. It does mean the transformation of all the religious traditions so that they become religions imbued with a consciousness of planetary interdependence, respect for life in all its diversity, and commitment to global community. In and through this process of religious transformation, each religious tradition has an opportunity to realize in its own distinctive way the ideal of a fully developed religion that promotes individual spiritual fulfillment, social justice, ecological well-being, and world peace. One basic challenge to religious leadership in the twenty-first century is to give expression to this new religious consciousness within the different religious traditions.

This new religious awareness, which is pervaded by a sense of global interdependence, is fundamental to the spirit of a vital Christian pluralism. We can deepen our understanding of the ethical and spiritual values associated with pluralism by clarifying further the meaning of the term.

The word "pluralism" has a variety of meanings, several of which are directly relevant to our topic. First, the word "pluralism" can be used simply to refer to the condition of being plural. In this regard, we can speak about the plural nature of our world, referring to the reality of difference and diversity. The larger universe of which we are a part is a 14 billion year evolutionary process of constant change, involving seemingly infinite differentiation. On Earth the cosmic process of differentiation is manifest in a dazzling display of biological and cultural diversity. In addition, every individual is unique. There is nothing new about cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, but today we are more aware of it. Under the impact of the forces of globalization and immigration flows, the fact of cultural and racial diversity has become inescapable and almost everyone encounters it on a daily basis. Furthermore, there is today a wider appreciation of the basic human need to belong to a particular human community with its own language, art, and other traditions and of the social breakdown that results when local cultures are disrupted.

When we speak of a pluralistic age, however, we mean something more than the fact of diversity. In social, political, and religious discussions, the concept of pluralism frequently is used to refer to a set of ethical values and attitudes that individuals and communities may adopt in response to the reality of cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic diversity. Pluralism in this ethical sense has developed historically as an expression of moral or spiritual democracy. At a

minimum, it means tolerance and respect for human rights, including especially freedom of religion. In America, it also means a firm commitment to the separation of church and state.

A pluralist in the full sense is someone who goes beyond tolerance. A pluralist respects and values diversity and promotes communication and dialogue across all boundaries of culture, religion, race, class, and national origin. A pluralist trusts that in the midst of all our diversity and disagreements, we are part of one human family and one Earth community, that we are beings born for relationship, that we can grow as persons and find fulfillment only in and through creative communication and cooperation, even when we are deeply divided in our interests and goals. A pluralist believes that a wise person is open to learn from everyone, including our enemies.

A pluralist is committed to the art of dialogue as a practice that enriches both self and other. Dialogue is essential to the building of community and "a world that works for everyone," to use a phrase of Buckminster Fuller. Dialogue involves mutual truth seeking. One seeks to explain one's own culture and faith and to deepen one's own self-understanding while also listening with openness and a spirit of sympathy to the other. The goal is not total agreement. The goal is mutual understanding and the building of a real relationship with the other. John Dewey spoke as a pluralist and the prophet of a democratic global civilization when he stated: "We have to recognize that furtherance of the depth and width of human intercourse is the measure of civilization; and we have to apply this fact without as well as within our national life." ³

A further goal of dialogue is cooperation in addressing human needs. Humanity's ecological, social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual problems are interrelated, and many of these problems are regional or global in nature. At all levels they can only be addressed with holistic thinking and integrated problem solving. Cross sectoral, inter-religious, cross-cultural, and international collaboration is required.

Shared values and goals are a prerequisite for effective cooperation and collaboration. Clarifying common values through critical inquiry and experimental evaluation and articulating the principles of a global ethic are, therefore, another important objective.

In this regard, pluralism does not mean an uncritical moral relativism that accepts blindly diverse moral and religious beliefs regardless of their social and ecological consequences. Being a pluralist requires balancing commitment to one's own tradition with openness to the different, critical thinking with respect for the other.

The kind of social and political pluralism that I have been describing should be seen as a middle way between the extremes of authoritarianism and cultural

imperialism on the one hand and tribalism, extreme multiculturalism, and social fragmentation on the other. It endeavors to balance and integrate the values of unity and diversity, of stability and freedom, that are often in tension or outright conflict. Pluralism involves the never-ending challenge of sustaining diversity without sacrificing the common good.

The adoption of pluralistic attitudes and values by the religions in their relations with each other is essential to world peace. Religious belief becomes dangerous when it is held in a spirit of dogmatic absolutism and with the assumption that one's own tradition exclusively is in possession of the truth. Even the idea that other traditions have some truth but only one's own is inclusive of the full truth easily engenders arrogance and imperialistic ambitions. In contrast to the exclusivist and inclusivist positions, a pluralist recognizes that no tradition possesses the absolute truth in a fixed and final form.⁴ All traditions are historically conditioned, and their understandings of the divine are partial.

The reality of God is a mystery, a dazzling obscurity as one mystic put it, that transcends human understanding. God is not a being among the other beings in the universe, and God cannot be turned into an object that we can analyze and know as we do other things. Our conceptions and images of God are symbols and metaphors pointing to a mystery that we cannot grasp but that may grasp us at the deeper center of our being.

God may transcend the grasp of the rational intellect, but it is best not to imagine a complete dualism of God and the world. Devotion to a god who dwells outside the world can too easily be misused to justify hate and violence. Better to imagine God as the depth dimension of reality, the immanent deeper source and center of the larger whole. Better to imagine that one enters relationship with this mysterious immanent God primarily in and through responsible, compassionate, and loving relations with persons and other life. Better to believe that no one can maintain a relationship to God when they pursue cruel, abusive, and exploitative relationships with people and other living beings. Thinking of God as the immanent Eternal Thou, who can be encountered primarily in and through I-thou relations with the beings that make up the world, is the best way to prevent theistic religions from contradicting their own moral values in their relations with each other and non-believers.

When the heart of pluralism is defined as relationship and communion in the midst of diversity, it becomes clear today that pluralism does not stop with openness to cultural, racial, and religious diversity. The spirit of relationship and communion must also be extended to the larger community of life and to the greater universe of which we are a part. New relationships of respect and care with plants, animals, and ecosystems are part of the meaning of a pluralistic age. A sense of belonging to the cosmos with its evolving galaxy is part of a pluralistic spirituality.

The practice of pluralism can be a rewarding spiritual practice. For example, Jane Addams, who established Hull House in Chicago over a hundred years ago as an embodiment of moral democracy with a strong pluralistic spirit, put it simply. She explained: "As the acceptance of democracy brings a certain life giving power, so it has its own sanctions and comforts. Perhaps the most obvious one is the curious sense which comes to us from time to time, that we belong to the whole, that a certain basic well-being can never be taken away from us whatever the turn of fortune."⁵ My own experience, most recently with the international Earth Charter project, has confirmed for me the truth in Jane Addams' words.

Each of us needs to find our own Hull House where we can bring to life the spirit of pluralism, the spirit of reciprocal relationship and global community, in a local setting and in institutions that build bridges of understanding and cooperation across boundaries of nation, culture, and religion. In this way we open the channels of "the river of the water of life."

We, of course, must each find the springs of the water of life if we are to help make the river flow. Those well springs are found in the kingdom of God and we enter the kingdom or community of God in and through purity of heart. As we labor to restore and renew the ecological and human communities of which we are a part, each of us must do the work necessary to clear the pollution out of our own minds - the delusions, prejudice, and anger. Therefore, it is essential to find and pursue the spiritual disciplines that work for you.

God needs each of you to do in the world what only you can do. The world needs your talents and love. I add my best wishes to those of your family and friends as you continue on the path of your careers.

¹ I thank Professor Barbara Rossing for calling this passage from the Book of Revelation to my attention. See Barbara Rossing, "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for Earth's Future," in *Currents In Theology and Mission* 25 (1998), 487-497, and in *Christianity and Ecology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

² Revelation 21 and 22, especially 21:1-6 and 22:1-2, 17.

³ John Dewey, "German Philosophy and Politics," (1915) in *The Middle Works of John Dewey 1899-1924* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), vol. 8, p. 203.

⁴ For a very helpful discussion of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in religion, see Diana Eck, *Encountering God: From Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

⁵ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 276.

