

Building Bridges across Meaning Systems: Creating Democracy with Christianity and Islam in a Post-Darwinian World

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Abstract

Religions like Christianity and Islam have excelled at building meaning systems that have helped their members ground and interpret their daily lives, create and maintain a personal and corporate identity and morality, and negotiate the chaos of living. For centuries, these religious traditions were so strong in some cultures that they dominated all other meaning systems. The processes of democracy and the forces of secularization, however, have broken this dominance in many nations, leading some countries to overreact by attempting to eliminate religious perspectives from discourse in the public sphere. Achieving civility and democracy in today's world will require a new moment in both government and religion. Democracies need a more sophisticated understanding of the nature and purpose of religions, and a realization that humans cannot "compartmentalize" their religious meaning systems while addressing civic issues. Meanwhile, religions like Christianity and Islam need to build stronger traditions of tolerance and respect for the religious and secular other. Religions need practices and methodologies for building bridges across the broad diversity in their own ranks, while simultaneously spanning divisions with other religious traditions and meaning systems. Intelligent, in-depth dialogue, cooperation and collaboration between meaning systems is a necessary foundation for 21st century democracy.

I. Introduction: The Human Quest for Meaning

Humans need meaning in their lives and are constantly in search of it. Part of this search is focused on understanding the physical world, naming it, and understanding its causes and effects, in order to feel more secure and master the art of daily living. But, humans also crave a deeper meaning to existential questions like: Who am I? What is the purpose of my existence? Why did the universe come into being? Of all the goods in the world, which have the most value? What is right and wrong behavior in my relationships with others, with nature and the cosmos, and with God or a Supreme Being, if I believe one exists? These questions are all linked to a search for ultimate meaning, or as the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich called it, issues of "ultimate concern."¹ Tillich defined such concerns as those we embrace with an "ultimate seriousness," or an "unconditional seriousness."² Through the centuries, religions have excelled at creating complicated, yet usually accessible, systems of meaning³ that answer or respond to

¹ Paul Tillich. (1957). *Dynamics of Faith*. NY: Harper & Row, 1; Paul Tillich. (1967). *Systematic Theology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1:12.

² See: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=538&C=598>. Martin Marty and Jonathan Moore explain ultimate concern in a clearer fashion: "What do you finally live by? For what would you be willing to die? For you, what is the Big Deal, the Whole Ball of Wax! What guiding principle organizes and infuses your life with meaning? The answer is your ultimate concern. It may or may not relate to God or gods. By itself, it is not necessarily religion, but all religions will make metaphysical claims about the nature and purpose of reality. The most important of these claims corresponds to one's ultimate concern." Martin E. Marty and Jonathan Moore. (2000). *Education, Religion and the Common Good*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 9-10.

³ This paper will use the term systems of meaning or meaning systems synonymously with worldview. The general sense intended for both terms is captured well by the philosopher Huston Smith: "minds require eco-niches as much as organisms do, and the mind's econiche is its worldview, its sense of the whole of things (however much or little that sense is articulated). Short of madness, there is some fit between the two, and we constantly try to improve that

questions of ultimate concern, as well as other deep meaning questions facing humanity. At the higher-level mystical experience in many religions, the traditions create practices and an environment in which one can live relatively comfortable in the open-endedness of many of these questions.

There is, of course, also a dark side of religion, which ran afoul of post-Enlightenment critical thinking and the growth of democratic principles. Some of this darkness includes: a too frequent use of fear to control others; a blindness to its own shortcomings, especially in relation to the exercise of power; a tendency to absolutize perspectives on an issue and demonize and repress other perspectives; and a penchant (in some traditions) for promoting a moral ideal without nuance or proper contextualization, with no apparent concern for the human suffering created by some believers' unrealistic expectation to achieve the ideal in every situation. In addition, religions can frequently form their believers to react to other meaning systems as threats to truth and good, and can create communities that can even rationalize behaviors against others that are in direct opposition to the fundamental teachings of the faith tradition itself.

As the so-called secularization thesis⁴ gained popularity in the previous century, when religions began to lose their political power in democratic nations, many thinkers fixated on the negative aspects of religious organizations and their meaning systems. They believed in the inevitability of science eventually answering all the questions of humanity, and predicted the imminent demise of religion. Thomas Woolston (1670-1731) expected the death of Christianity and the triumph of modernity by year 1900. In 1780, Voltaire said religion only had a 50-year lifespan, and Thomas Jefferson predicted in 1822 that young people of that generation would abandon more primitive religions and embrace the more enlightened faith of Unitarianism before the end of his life.⁵ As late as 1968, Peter Berger suggested religious believers would only exist in small sects by the 21st century, huddled in resistance to a growing, worldwide secular culture,⁶ and until 1994, the American Psychiatric Association classified strong religious belief as a mental disorder.⁷

Unfortunately, for the prognosticators of doom, by the end of the 1990s, fundamentalism was clearly on the rise worldwide, and many cultures were experiencing a resurgence of interest in spirituality. In 2000, the BBC conducted a "Soul of Britain" survey, finding that although the population in Great Britain was becoming less interested in organized religion, the number of people believing in the existence of a soul had increased over two decades. In addition, the majority of those answering the survey did not believe science could answer questions of meaning.⁸ As Gerhard Robbers, a professor of political and religious studies at the University of Trier in Germany put it:

fit. Signs of a poor fit are the sense of meaninglessness, alienation, and anxiety that the twentieth century knew so well. When the fit feels perfect, the energies of the cosmos pour into the believer and empower her to a startling degree. She knows that she belongs. The Ultimate supports her." Huston Smith. (2001). *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 26.

⁴ This thesis, popular in social sciences beginning in the mid- and late 19th century maintains that religion as a social force, and a meaning system, is ultimately doomed. The thesis maintains that as human political liberty and scientific knowledge become more pervasive religious zeal will decline proportionately. Charles Taylor's (2007), *The Secular Age*, is one of the magisterial works on this complex topic. (Cambridge, MA:Belknap Press).

⁵ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. (2000). Berkeley: University of California Press, 57.

⁶ Peter Berger. (1968). "A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion," *New York Times*, April 25, 3.

⁷ Starke and Finke, 69.

⁸ The "Soul of Britain" was a study commissioned by the BBC. The results inspired a nine program television series. See: <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/6829>

Religion—for good or bad—is reasserting itself as a force in Europe. The period of secularism is coming to an end. A new landscape is emerging.⁹

The same patterns have emerged in the United States, a nation more religious than most others in the developed world, and many other countries around the world.¹⁰ Throughout the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, the academy, popular literature and the media took a renewed interest in religion and spirituality. In 1999, even Berger recanted his position and acknowledged religion was still vigorous throughout the world.¹¹

This has been, no doubt, disappointing news for those who distrust or hate religion in all its forms. Some of those detractors would like the world to believe that religious formation only warps and distorts, twists and deforms human consciousness. Religious belief and practice, they will say, creates neuroses and psychoses, promotes hatreds and suspicions of the unknown and the other. The exhibits of proof for their position include any person or group who has performed an evil act in the name of religion—Crusaders, Inquisitors, terrorists, racists, pedophiles, manipulators of the weak and the vulnerable. There is no denying the rampant presence of religious charlatanism. A religious worldview can lead to horrendous actions and irrational conclusions about what constitutes the good life, and what constitutes moral or immoral behavior. But, this is only half the story. Over the centuries, religions have given billions of humans the meaning, purpose and guidance needed to live in a harsh and dangerous world, and to raise future generations with the hope, vision and discipline to pursue something greater than what currently existed. The sense of awe and wonder underpinning a religious worldview, particularly its mystical aspects, has encouraged many to develop their minds and explore the cosmos, contrary to the attestations of those disliking religion. Religious worldviews have also provided incubators for the formation of some of the highest human ideals, including cultivating and nurturing the human potential for compassion and justice. People having their consciousness formed in religious traditions have created universities and schools, hospitals, and social services. They have served on the front lines tending the sick in plagues and disasters and embraced those deemed unlovable by cultures. They have lobbied long and hard for legislation to further social justice and civil rights, and served as protectors of the marginalized in society. To suggest that religion has brought only bad things to the world is as uninformed, if not as dishonest, as asserting that science has only brought to the human race weapons of mass destruction and mind-numbing entertainment technologies.

Meaning systems, religious or otherwise, have powerful motivational potential for both good and bad, especially when they touch upon issues of ultimate concern. This power alone should convince leaders in democracies of the need to learn more about how such systems of

⁹ Church-state relations across Europe heading toward ‘new landscape’, WorldWide Religious News (WWRN), <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=23618>, accessed on May 30, 2009.

¹⁰ For a good exploration of the enduring power of Christianity in the world, for instance, see: Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹¹ Peter Berger (Ed.). (1999). *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center. Neither Berger nor his contemporary critics of religion could foresee the re-birth of fundamentalism on a global scale from the 1970s through the 1990s. Given the history of the foes of religion in the 18th-19th centuries, it is interesting to consider the similarity of the atheistic arguments of scholars such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, with those of previous generations. Alistair McGrath has suggested the recycling of arguments is a sign of the unraveling of the atheistic meaning system. See: Alistair McGrath. (2006). *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*. NY: Galilee Doubleday.

thought and feeling develop and change in citizens. The philosopher John Hick suggests that one of the most important distinctions for beginning to understand meaning systems is to realize humans “live in expanding circles of meaning which exhibit stability and yet also continuous change.”¹² Meaning systems help us define our place in the world; because life is constantly changing, the systems need to adapt frequently and often quite quickly.

Hick identifies three tiers of meaning: empirical, which recognizes what is there in reality; moral, which guides us in our behaviors; and religious, the level embracing the mystery of life with awe and wonder. At the empirical level we use our conceptual resources to find (and build) meaning in the world. Some of these concepts are almost universal, such as the mental representations we make for water, a tree, or the earth. But, many of the concepts creating meaning in our world emerge from only from culture. A knife and a fork, for instance, are meaningful to those of us living in cultures in which these implements have an understood purpose.¹³ In Hick’s typology, the religious level is “the ultimate horizon in the expanding circles of meaning.”¹⁴ This level has the potential for changing the meaning of everything else. Unlike many other meaning systems, religions emphasize pathways to an experience of ultimate meaning.¹⁵

II. Anchoring Religious Meaning Systems in the Brain and the Environment

There is a general assumption in brain research that all forms of learning have a neurological correlate. In other words, whenever we learn something, specific neural connections are made in our brains.¹⁶ In light of this finding, our meaning systems are almost unimaginably complex neurological realities. A hint at this complexity is demonstrated by one learning study using cats. The felines were trained to recognize a geometric shape that was marked on a door behind which researchers had placed food. Imaging of the cats’ brains as they learned to open the door to get to the food showed five million cells distributed throughout the felines’ brain were engaged in this singular learning-related response to a simple geometric form.¹⁷ It is unclear what all those activated cells represent in the cats’ minds. Perhaps these five million cells were connected to memories of every meal the cats ate, or every time they saw a door or crossed through one. With each learning experience more neurons are connected to one another, even as these synaptic connections are in a constant state of reorganization, pruning and new growth. A meaning system, especially those touching on ultimate concern, would have billions of cells engaged at any moment, in a dense lattice of connectivity throughout different regions of the brain.

Over centuries of experimentation, religions like Christianity and Islam have excelled at

¹² John Hick. (2006). *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 140.

¹³ Hick, 140.

¹⁴ Hick, 142.

¹⁵ Willigis Jäger. (1989). *Search for the Meaning of Life: Essays and Reflections on the Mystical Experience*. Liguori, MO: Triumph Books.

¹⁶ This neurological principle began with Donald Hebb’s assertion in 1949 that if two neurons repeatedly excite one another their communication with one another becomes more efficient, and their connection strengthens. This resulted in a saying: “the neurons that fire together wire together.” There was not a great deal of proof for this assertion at the time, but Eric Kandel devoted his Nobel prize-winning research to demonstrating that this connectivity of neuron cells is a neurological underpinning of development and learning. See: Joseph LeDoux (2003). *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, 79-82. NY: Penguin.

¹⁷ Bruce E. Wexler (2006). *Brain and Culture: Neurobiology, Ideology, and Social Change*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 23.

building “meta” physical meaning systems¹⁸ that employed and integrated the tools of stories, personal and group ritual, music, and art. Some religious institutions speak of “forming” practitioners into a worldview, a meaning system building confidence in the practitioners’ place in the world and their relationship to others, God, and the cosmos, not to mention the fragmented aspects of their own personalities. (Sometimes this language of “formation” can sound dangerously like programming, and indeed some have used religion for this purpose. However, parents, teachers and anyone who interacts with another actually have a formative effect on the other, an effect that seems to occur even in our brain tissue through neural connections.) The religious worldview has a moral compass integrated into the system, with the intent of helping believers negotiate the rough and inconsistent terrain of human life. To outsiders, religions often look simplistic, but in reality they are a highly sophisticated system for transforming the structure of the brain of believers, building neural connections that impregnate on-going learning about the world with associations focused on questions of ultimate meaning. One of the reasons religion still exists in the modern world is because religious leaders of the past devoted substantial energy and resources to the religious education of the young, impacting the youngsters’ meaning systems while the brain was developing. But, this is only the first half of the story.

Maturing in any meaning system results in the anchoring of a worldview in the neurons of the young, but as neuroscientist Bruce Wexler argues, the young shaped by an environment one day grow up and come back to challenge and change the environment that once shaped them. According to Wexler’s research, the formed person emerges in adulthood with the power, and the “neurobiological imperative” to begin exerting influence on the environment so that it matches the internal structures of the individual.¹⁹ We fight to keep our external environment in line with our internal structure, and to keep other influences out. This is a reversal of the relationship between the individual and the environment. Over the remaining years of the young adult’s life, the inner world becomes increasingly less flexible, and skill sets develop for actually accomplishing the imperative of changing the world. Wexler believes this neurobiological imperative is one of the reasons the human race has had such rapid cultural evolution, compared to the development trajectories of other species.

Religions are still around, contrary to the predictions of detractors in the past, because religions “form” people in quite effective ways, and believers then grow up to change the religion to fit a new generation’s particular twist on the system of meaning. In many religions, the job of the theologian is to stand at this generational nexus and to re-think the religious tradition for the contemporary practitioner, putting the religion in dialogue with different philosophical or religious meaning systems, other academic disciplines of knowledge, as well as the surrounding culture and current events. The already mentioned Tillich was one such thinker, as was Rabbi Abraham Heschel and the Dalai Lama. Roman Catholic German theologian Karl Rahner is also a good example of this kind of theologian. Rahner saw the human condition as a “graced search for meaning.”²⁰ He constantly challenged his religious institution to change its

¹⁸ The religious educator, Jerry Larsen, has suggested that the brain creates six “metaphysical” models from sense experience: models of identity, community, values, history, the future, and the cosmos. Religious meaning systems have significant impact on helping believers shape these models, but it is the cosmological model – what powers animate the world and what is ultimately important – that is the most distinctive role of a system built on religious faith. Jerry Larsen (2000). *Religious Education and the Brain: A Practical Resource for Understanding How We Learn about God*. NY: Paulist Press.

¹⁹ Wexler, 210-211.

²⁰ Geoffrey B. Kelly (Ed.) *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

understanding and articulation of the Catholic tradition, as well as its institutional practices; for instance, he suggested declericalizing the institution, creating more ecumenical and interreligious conversation, and developing a regular, intense and authentic conversation between the church and the world. In his work, Rahner believed his primary job was to explore what he referred to as the unthematic, precognitive, and prereflective human “orientation toward the ineffable mystery”²¹ that presents an unlimited horizon underpinning existence. The shorthand description of this task is that he felt the compulsion to explore the concept and experience of God. But, Rahner’s maturation experiences through World War I and II shifted his understanding of his religious tradition in such a way that it convinced him the concept of God itself had too much baggage to be used in serious meaning conversations with secularizing cultures. Rahner wanted to change the way people thought about spiritual experience and he hoped to enlarge people’s awareness of the horizon of their consciousness. Its roots, he believed, drove them toward absolute fulfillment—a fulfillment that could only be achieved in communication and relationship with the Transcendent.²² Because of theologians like Rahner, religiously-informed worldviews remain effective systems of meaning, even within the context of the challenges of modernity.²³

The forces of modernization have required theological scholars of each generation to return to the headwaters of their religions in search of both the most important insights and the most appropriate methodologies for making those insights relevant to contemporary people.²⁴ Modernity has had many effects on religions like Christianity and Islam, but a growing variety of alternate systems of meaning have resulted in the need for faith traditions to revisit continually the interpretive framework of their own belief system. In revisiting the interpretive framework, using various tools of analysis (many borrowed from the social sciences), and coming up with differing conclusions about how to translate the meaning system into a contemporary idiom, many religious communities have fractured into internecine feuds, often along the fault lines of ultimate meaning questions and answers – and the methods for exploring those questions.

Meanwhile, as religious traditions have had to change in response to modernity, so the advancement of the understanding of human thinking has forced science to mature in its naïve Enlightenment understanding of the powers and limits of human consciousness. For instance, the days of regarding the pursuit of scientific truth as value-free are long gone,²⁵ as is increasingly the belief in a human power of universal reason that rises above cultural influences

²¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated William V. Dych (NY: Seabury Press, 1978), 53.

²² Kelly, 35.

²³ It is important to note that given the growing competition of meaning systems, the passing on of religious meaning systems to subsequent generations has become increasingly problematic for religious traditions with theologians reconstructing traditions in dialogue with culture, such as Rahner. As the system becomes more complex, creating popular forms for children and less educated adults poses enormous challenges to religious organizations. See: John Westerhoff. (2000). *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Peabody, MA: Morehouse Publishing.

²⁴ Theology in the 21st century has been shaped by this quest for new understandings of old religious insights. In Christianity, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, and liberation theologians like Rosemary Ruether, Mary Daly, Jon Sobrino and James Cone are all examples of theologians seeking to find new ways of speaking of ancient truths. I am not in a position to speak for the history of Islamic theology, but Tariq Ramadan is a good example of a comparable academic project in the Muslim world. See: Tariq Ramadan. (2009). *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁵ This is, of course, one of the major critiques of the post-modern movement. The debates on quantitative vs. qualitative research explore many of these issues.

or the energies of “irrational” emotion.²⁶

III. Circling the Wagons in an Age of Globalization

For tens of thousands of years, many cultures in the world lived in isolation creating what Jane Goodall has termed cultural speciation,²⁷ self-contained realities with little challenge to basic assumptions about the world and its meaning. For two or three hundred years, beginning perhaps in the 16th century when forces of globalization began, many emerging democracies remained theoretically open to a diversity of systems of meaning. But, in fact, until relatively recently most nations gave special status to one system.²⁸ This favoritism allowed for a unifying template for building a cultural or societal meaning system and the necessary structures and civil rituals for creating a common life. Nation-states, in effect, built their cultures on the bones of religious meaning systems. Instead of a state sponsored religion, in the U.S. a generalized Protestant culture provided the foundation for the civic meaning system.²⁹

Because of the growing diversity of voices and meaning systems in democracies, many nations have been trying to divest themselves of the trappings of their once hegemonic religious meaning systems. Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, the U.S. began taking intentional federal steps for separating political institutions from that influence.³⁰ The openness to other worldviews, unfortunately, has resulted in a backlash of culture wars. These wars in the U.S. are the logical consequence of the United States failing to address the methodologies and incremental goals needed to move a culture from a preferred meaning system to an official openness to a multiplicity of systems. But, as the nation has attempted to open itself to other meaning systems, many groups have chosen to withdraw into their own cultural ghettos. For instance, every year, somewhere between 4 and 5% of the population in the U.S. move from one county to another, about 10 million a year,³¹ for a total of nearly 100 million over the past 10 years.³² This mobile population moves for all kinds of reasons, but they have increasingly

²⁶ See Antonio R. Damasio. (1994) *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. NY: Avon Books; Candace B. Pert. (1997) *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine*. NY: Touchstone.

²⁷ Jane Goodall (1999). *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*. NY: Warner Books.

²⁸ A notable exception to the hegemonic meanings systems of the Middle Ages is, perhaps, the Andalusian culture that thrived in the late 8th to 12th century in Spain. See: Maria Rosa Menocal. (2002). *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. NY: Little, Brown & Company.

²⁹ Bellah, Robert, “Flaws in the Protestant Code,” *Ethical Perspectives: Journal of the European Ethics Network*, 2000, 7 (4); Bellah, Robert, “Religion and the Shape of National Culture,” *America*, July 31-August 7, 1999, Volume 181, No. 3.; Bellah, Robert (1985), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. New York: Harper and Row, 1985.

³⁰ Between the writing of the U.S. Constitution in 1789 and the 1940s, few Supreme Court rulings touched on church and state issues. In 1948, however, in *McCullum v. Board of Education*, public schools were no longer allowed to give student release-time from normal class periods to attend religious instruction. The majority opinion suggested that “in the relation between Church and State, ‘good fences make good neighbors.’” In 1962, *Engale v. Vitale* no longer allowed prayer in public schools, and in 1963, the Supreme Court ruled Bible reading unconstitutional in the case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*. These federal rulings began a concerted effort to break the influence of a generalized Protestantism on U.S. culture and replace it with a religious pluralism. See: Martin E. Marty and Jonathan Moore. (2000). *Education, Religion and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion’s Role in Our Shared Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 40-41.

³¹ Bill Bishop. (2008). *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. Bill Bishop, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Bishop, 45.

³² Bishop, 5.

settled in places surrounded by people who think the way they do and share the same values and politics. Bill Bishop calls this returning to a tribal consciousness, with neighborhoods, churches, volunteer groups, civic groups all reinforcing the local meaning system.³³ He calls these communities of “like-mindedness,”³⁴ or “communities of interest,”³⁵ a substitute for the old demographic differences of age, education or income.³⁶ Added to this phenomenon of physical relocation are the social networking tools on the Internet that allow like-minded people to find one another in a search for what Bishop calls the “comfort of agreement.”³⁷ Sites like tribe.net allow people to find their own “tribe” and create a virtual community of like-mindedness.³⁸ Having a significant dimension of a population retreat into narrow communities of belief is having consequences. By the early 1990s, Americans were becoming less tolerant of the give and take of compromise, and many people displayed a more difficult time compromising or listening to others’ opinions.³⁹

Ronald Brownstein has tracked this polarization into the American political arena and has reported on the “scorched earth opposition” strategies that have resulted.⁴⁰ Both the Democratic and Republican party seek to “impose its will” on the other, and increasingly ascribe to “either-or” approaches to solving the nation’s biggest problems, rather than seeking “both-and”⁴¹ solutions. The reigning strategy is to inflame the differences that separate Americans rather than to build shared priorities and values.⁴² Brownstein believes these political strategies have carried the nation into an “age of hyperpartisanship,” diminishing the U.S.’s ability to resolve its conflicts and solve its problems.⁴³ To break out of the stalemate, he recommends the nation embrace a “boundary-shattering agenda,” with principles and methodologies to guide new kinds of conversations, especially when the moral norms of certain meaning systems limit a person’s or group’s ability to compromise.⁴⁴

The election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president in the United States has encouraged some to conclude that U.S. culture is moving beyond its polarization. However, this conclusion is far from certain at this point.

IV. Preparing Democracies for Contact Zones in the Modern World

Mary Pratt has called a place of meeting between two meaning systems or worldviews a contact zone, a “space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations.”⁴⁵ She notes that in history these contact zones have usually resulted in one group coercing the other, establishing relationships of radical inequality or degenerating into intractable conflict. Given the power religious meaning systems have over people, and the fear and anxiety-producing societal and cultural turmoil that is occurring

³³ Bishop, 6.

³⁴ Bishop, 12.

³⁵ Bishop, 35.

³⁶ Bishop, 13.

³⁷ Bishop, 160.

³⁸ See: <http://search.tribe.net/?query=tribe.net>.

³⁹ Bishop, 189.

⁴⁰ Ronald Brownstein. (2007). *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America*, Ronald Brownstein, NY: Penguin, 7.

⁴¹ Brownstein, 10.

⁴² Brownstein, 12.

⁴³ Brownstein, 20.

⁴⁴ Brownstein, 389.

⁴⁵ Mary L. Pratt. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, London, 6.

throughout the world in light of dramatic political, economic and social changes, contact zones present a real danger of creating the kind of clash of civilizations Samuel Huntington warned about in the mid-1990s.⁴⁶

As the world shrinks and worlds of meaning collide into one another, a tribal system of meaning will become increasingly insufficient for meeting the challenges of the times. In the future, religions and democracies will need a more sophisticated understanding of how systems of meaning provide a sense of purpose and place in the world, as well as new methodologies for crossing our meaning boundaries in ways that invite greater understanding of the other. Leaders will need to feel comfortable and competent when they enter contact zones. But, they will also need to begin to shape their cultures so their people have the same capability, feeling safe in their own system of meaning, but remaining open and unthreatened by a world with many meaning systems.

V. Creating a Place for a “Game of Conversation.”

Creating contact zones will require the development of a skill that David Tracy⁴⁷ has called the “game of conversation.”⁴⁸ This “game” makes room for argument, but moves participants beyond confrontation, debate and exam in order to engage in a process of questioning that can transform conversation partners by helping them find similarities with others in what they already experience and understand.⁴⁹ But, these are not easy similarities, but rather what he refers to as: “real similarities-in-real-differences.”⁵⁰ This is achieved through the use of “analogical imagination,” a mental capacity that he identifies in Christian theology with any discussion of God, since all concepts are analogical and as accurate of the reality of a Divine Being as it is inaccurate. Using analogical imagination, Tracy envisions a joint seeking of order and harmony in the differences that exist between people and groups by their common struggle to find a “focal meaning,” or a “prime analogue for understanding the ordered whole of an originally pluralistic, conflictual, chaotic reality.”⁵¹ In his game of conversation, Tracy’s participants realize their reflective conversation is actually a second-order language, an interpretation for a first-order experience; and it is in this space between experience and interpretation that real similarity-in-real-difference can be found. In seeking these similarities-in-differences, new insights can emerge between divergent positions. At times, one side will convert or moderate its position in light of the “manifestation” of truth they hear in the other position.⁵² In other cases, a new synthesis between positions may develop for both parties. If disagreement is not overcome, according to the rules of the game, the conversation partners can still leave with a greater sense of clarity about the true nature of the disagreements and a lessened sense of “otherness.” This is a complex and difficult process that is not easily replicated.

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to

⁴⁶ Samuel P. Huntington. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 321.

⁴⁷ Tracy, D. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987,

⁴⁸ Tracy, 41.

⁴⁹ Tracy, 10.

⁵⁰ David Tracy. (2002). *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. NY: Crossroad.

⁵¹ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 409.

⁵² Tracy, *Plurality in Ambiguity*, 28.

argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.⁵³

The human race stands at the cross-roads between one era and another, as profound of a social, cultural and political transition as humans have faced at any time in history, including the tumultuous years of the Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific or Industrial Revolution. At one level or another, most thoughtful people recognize the need to begin new conversations about our common life. The outspoken atheist Sam Harris calls for such a conversation in his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*:

One of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the twenty-first century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns—about ethics, spiritual experience, and the inevitability of human suffering—in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. We desperately need a public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty. Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we (culturally) accord religious faith.⁵⁴

Harris wants a “truly honest and open-ended conversation about our place in the universe and about the possibilities of deepening our self-understanding, ethical wisdom, and compassion.”⁵⁵ The problem is he wants everyone at the table but religious believers, who coincidentally have erected the most enduring meanings system on the planet. To read Harris and his fellow atheists, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, one might think that religious believers are incapable of such conversations, and would become an impediment to others having important dialogues about our systems of meaning, our ultimate concerns, and how we might live in peace with justice in a world of so many differences and competing interests.

In actuality, religions are not only capable of such difficult discussions, but have initiated programs and templates for such conversations. Shortly before his death, the late Catholic cardinal of Chicago, Joseph Bernardin, attempted to inspire a movement that is known as the Common Ground Initiative.⁵⁶ The organization has the mission of getting conservative and liberal Catholics to sit down for deep value discussions to build understanding so they might address together the more serious concerns of the world. Similar initiatives are occurring across different religious meaning systems, as well. Gustav Niebuhr has explored the interfaith dialogue and collaboration that happened throughout the U.S. in the months after the Trade Tower terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2005.⁵⁷ Because religion is neuralgic in many areas, perhaps some of the most effective programs are those without religious affiliation. One of the more developed methodologies for having these kinds of difficult conversations is found in the Public Conversations Project (PCP). Founded in 1989, the PCP is designed to guide and train individuals, organizations, and communities to address conflicts relating to values and worldviews in a constructive way. PCP has helped communities address hot-button issues like

⁵³ Tracy, 19. For those who follow the thought of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, an interdisciplinary thinker who eventually concentrated his intellectual energies on human consciousness and the process of conversion, Tracy’s rules for the game of conversation are a variation of Lonergan’s transcendental imperatives: Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.” See Bernard Lonergan. (1972). *Method in Theology*, NY: Seabury, 231.

⁵⁴ Sam Harris. (2008). *Letter to a Christian Nation*. NY: Vintage Books, 87.

⁵⁵ Harris, 107.

⁵⁶ The National Pastoral Life Center describes the initiative on the following website.

<http://www.nplc.org/commonground/about.php>.

⁵⁷ Gustav Niebuhr. (2008). *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*. NY: Viking.

abortion, homosexuality and faith, biodiversity, the use of animals in research and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵⁸ PCP's manual, *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides*, provides a detailed manual for facilitating controversial conversations. Without giving a shameless plug to religion, it is worth noting the manual was developed with assistance of a religious entity—the Jewish Dialogue Group (JDG) of Philadelphia.⁵⁹

While it is comforting to know Tracy's game of conversation is occurring, on a more long-term global basis the human race is going to need a new conceptual framework for understanding how meaning systems are formed in human development, how they mature and rigidify and when, and perhaps most importantly, how the human person reacts to changes in these systems of meaning. How are new values and concepts assimilated? What effect does it have overall on the meaning system? As religions have known for centuries, meaning systems can change, and change dramatically over a short period of time. Religions call it conversion or transformation, and religious literature has more than enough examples, from Buddha to Paul of Tarsus. It only takes two weeks for a neuron to grow new axons and dendrites, and the change can occur suddenly; and it is now known that neuronal change can take place in a matter of hours, almost as if an experience triggers a "functional circuit." Eric Kandel found that every change in the environment (internal or external) causes a rearrangement of cellular activity and growth.⁶⁰ "Competitive behavior, environmental influences, education, or even a rousing sermon," Newberg claims, "can trigger a rapid rewiring of circuits."⁶¹

Science in some ways is catching up with some insights religions came to by intuition centuries ago, and as this happens the findings of science and the experience of religions could provide democracies with important data on how to manage a world with meanings systems crashing into one another. But, such guidance will come through intentionality. Religion, the sciences and democracies have had little common ground. Creating a new framework for understanding meaning systems, especially aspects of ultimate concern, will require a Tracy-like dialogue in a three-point contact zone—theology, science, and government. Since the first two dialogue partners—religion and science—are complex enough, let us address them first.

A breakthrough in understanding meaning systems will require a disciplined conversation between insights gathered from the theological exploration of the phenomenology of religious meaning systems (one of the projects of Rahner and theologians of his ilk) and the findings of scientific research on the dynamics and structures of the brain and mind's creation and transformation of meaning systems. Such a discussion is a faith-science conversation, along the order of the one begun in the modern era by William James,⁶² but with the possibility of much greater sophistication due to advancements both in the study of the mind and the brain, as well as theological and religious studies.

This new order of faith-science dialogue is necessary because although religions like Christianity and Islam have excelled at creating complex meaning systems addressing ultimate concerns, it is fields such as cognitive science, the neurosciences, developmental psychology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology that are opening new vistas of understanding about the

⁵⁸ The Public Conversations Project. See: <http://www.publicconversations.org/main>.

⁵⁹ *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides*. Watertown, MA: JAMS Foundation, iii. See also the Jewish Dialogue Group, which began to help Jews speak more effectively about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other difficult issues. See: <http://www.jewishdialogue.org/>.

⁶⁰ Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman. (2009). *How God Changes Your Brain*. NY: Ballantine Books, 15.

⁶¹ Newberg and Waldman, 104.

⁶² William James (1958). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*. NY: New American Library.

dynamics of human meaning making and posing some of the most exciting new questions.⁶³ Religions have created meaning systems over centuries by observation and experimentation, but few theologians have the tools for critiquing the human “meaning factory.”⁶⁴

Biological, neurological and social sciences have many different perspectives for analyzing the inner world of the human meaning-making factory, and all have relevance for a faith-science conversation. Cognitive scientists have hypothesized a series of operations for creating meaning that are part of the brain’s hardwiring, a “cognitive architecture” that includes capacities for information processing, such as sensory systems like hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling and touching, and central operational systems like thinking, attention, memory, learning and language.⁶⁵ What is the relationship between these brain functions and meaning systems? More specifically, how do these capacities and operations create meaning systems and make use of them?

Social and emotional learning researchers stress the emotional and social capabilities of the inner world, such as the capacity to relate to others, take note of one’s own inner affectivity and others’, establish altruistic goals, develop compassion, stand up for what one believes in, and maintain hope in difficult times.⁶⁶ Meaning systems provide a background framework for all thinking and such systems are tied deeply to emotionality. Since emotion is accessed much quicker than analytical thought and often subconsciously, the question is begged: what role does emotion play in forming meaning systems and drawing forth a sense of meaningfulness?

Gerald Hüther, who is the head of the Dept. of Fundamental Neurobiological Research at the psychiatric clinic in Göttingen, Germany, maintains that most humans think of the brain as a thinking organ, when it is actually much more of a “social organ.”⁶⁷ The consequences of this for creating meaning systems are profound. Hüther maintains humans get a kind of “genetic blueprint” of meaning from our ancestors,⁶⁸ and this blueprint is turned into a completed house through building neuronal connections with sensory-receptors. The more densely connected the brain, the more accurate its picture of what exists in the external world.⁶⁹ This means the longer the period of development or maturation, the more the brain can anchor “individually acquired,

⁶³ One of the more unique areas of study has been Steven Mithen’s exploration of the origins of music in the age of Neanderthals. Mithen’s integration of neuroscience, acoustics and archeological insight suggests new areas of research on the role of music in building human meaning systems. The insights have profound implications for religious music’s role. See: Steven Mithen. (2006). *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁶⁴ This metaphor is borrowed from Methodist religious educator Jerry Larsen (2000), and his book, *Religious Education and the Brain*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 20-34.

⁶⁵ Neil A Stillings, Steven E. Weisler, Christopher H. Chase, Mark H. Feinstein, Jay L. Garfield, and Edwina L. Rissland, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 16. There are many books explaining a cognitive science approach to the inner world. Steve Pinker’s (1997). *How the Mind Works* is one of the best. NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

⁶⁶ Peter Salovey and David J. Sluyter (Eds). (1997). *Emotional Development and Emotional Intelligence: Educational Implications*. NY: HarperCollins Publishers; Reuven Bar-On and James D.A. Parker, (2000). *The Handbook of Emotional Intelligence: Theory, Development, Assessment, and Application at Home, School, and in the Workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. This issue is addressed in great deal in research on the limbic system. See: Joseph LeDoux. (1998). *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life.* NY: Simon and Schuster; Antonio Damasio. (1999). *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. NY:Harcourt.

⁶⁷ Gerald Hüther, translated by Michael H. Kohn. (2006). *The Compassionate Brain: How Empathy Creates Intelligence*, translated by Michael H. Kohn. Boston: Trumpeter, 2006, 13.

⁶⁸ Hüther, 18.

⁶⁹ Hüther, 37.

complex perceptions and experiences” in the “neuronal connectivity.”⁷⁰ The close and prolonged emotional bonding developed between parents and children results in a “breathtaking increase in the mental, emotional, and social capabilities of the clans.”⁷¹ Love, particularly empathy for others, serves as a “program-opener-upper.”⁷² Humans strengthen their “inner bond” with each other, and in the process develop a greater sense of self as a group, create a common narrative that holds their clan together, and become a unit that could move more confidently and effectively into the world. Religions have known this intuitively for centuries, which is why they develop close knit communities and expend great energy developing practices and rituals that promote a communitarian ethic that result in strong relational networks. In our globalizing world how shall the social dimensions of building a meaning system work? Can we remain open to the world and its influences as we are developing and building the sensory-receptor and neuronal connections needed for maturity? If close-knit social bonding is necessary, at what age and in what dosage can a young person begin to engage other meaning systems without hindering their full development? What kind of balance will be needed between supporting our meaning systems and encountering those of others as the world’s systems of meaning become accessible?

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson’s work on the connection between language, the body and thinking offers a profound challenge to Western society’s understanding of thought, especially post-Enlightenment approaches and descriptions of reason, meaning and understanding. They assert that the foundation of our thinking is contained in metaphor, allowing the human mind to associate concepts with bodily experience, and thus to embody meaning. Among other things, once we learn a meaning or conceptual system we are seriously limited in our thought patterns because the system is “neutrally instantiated in our brains and we are not free to think just anything.”⁷³ If it is true, many of our understandings of meaning systems are fundamentally flawed. Reason, freedom, morality, altruism, empathy, and the spiritual life and spiritual experience all may require substantial re-thinking, which will have huge consequences for religious and scientific meaning systems, not to mention the government’s approach to meaning systems in the law.⁷⁴ As new discoveries are made about the processes of thinking, how will religions re-interpret their own traditions? How will science? Do these models of human thinking offer a common ground for faith and science to meet each other around the phenomenon of our growing into our meaning systems, rather than discussion of the systems themselves?

As a last example, clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson’s careful work on proposing a thesis on the role myth plays in mapping meaning provides keen insight into how our stories help to serve as a guide for our many experiences of death and chaos and resurrection and new

⁷⁰ Hüther, 47.

⁷¹ Hüther, 56.

⁷² Hüther, 79.

⁷³George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, NY: Basic Books, 5; Mark Johnson. (1987). *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. For a correlation between Hüther’s research and Lakoff and Johnson, see Lakoff’s theory of the role parental nurturing and modeling plays in shaping the meaning system of children vis-à-vis political persuasion. George Lakoff. (2002). *Moral Politics: How Liberal and Conservatives Think*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. See also: George Lakoff. (2008). *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain*. NY: Viking.

⁷⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, 553-568.

order.⁷⁵ What guidance does this research provide to religions as they attempt to engage contemporary listeners with ancient narratives? In their current form are the ancient narratives meeting listeners at the level of meaning? Which stories and myths from the past seem to resonate the most deeply with the ears of this time in history? For those who seem to think that scientific inquiry is the only way to acquire relevant and meaningful knowledge, what myths drive their worlds of meaning?

A sustained faith-science conversation following Tracy's rules of engagement around issues of meaning, especially with psychologists and anthropologists, is likely to occur with difficulty. As Francis Collins, the director of the Human Genome Project, notes, the more noisy members of both sides of the faith/science divide are calling for the other side to have no voice in the public sphere.⁷⁶ Collins, a physician and chemist, is a former atheist who became a person of faith through the direct result of the meaning questions he began asking himself as a young intern who watched his patients wrestle personally with the mystery of sickness and death. There is a war of meaning systems and the major combatants are precisely those people in both science and religion who see no room at the conversation table for the other. But, moving to détente and beyond to conversation and even synthesis is possible. When he came to realize that the tools of science would not help him understand a God who existed outside the natural world,⁷⁷ Collins opened his mind to "spiritual possibilities," and wondered if a "war of worldviews" would consume him.⁷⁸ It did not, and he and many associates in the sciences have managed to harmonize a scientific and religious worldview.

Despite the media perception at times, the magnitude of the tensions between the religious and scientific meaning systems is often over blown. A survey in 2007 of 1,646 academics from 21 of the top universities in the United States revealed that 6 out of 10 biologists, physicists and chemists interviewed said they believed in God.⁷⁹ Scientists still believe in God at the same levels as they in 1914.⁸⁰ In 1969, the Carnegie Commission conducted a massive survey of more than 60,000 professors—about one quarter of the college faculty in America. The study found that social science professors are substantially less religious than those in the "hard sciences." But, social sciences majors do not become less religious in their schooling. They enter the field less religious than the general population when they begin graduate school.⁸¹ The two fields most closely associated with regarding religion as something for primitive minds—psychology and anthropology—are the real towers of unbelief.

However, even within these fields it is important to remember the conclusions of James Byrne after researching the role of the Enlightenment in creating tension between religion and science:

One important factor which will become apparent is that it is not always scientific discovery or the personal views of scientists which caused conflict with religion,

⁷⁵ Jordan B. Peterson. (1999). *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. NY: Routledge.

⁷⁶ Francis S. Collins. (2006). *The Language of God*. NY: Free Press, 160.

⁷⁷ Collins, 30.

⁷⁸ Collins, 31.

⁷⁹ E.H. Ecklund and C.P. Scheitle, "Religion Among Academic Scientists: Distinctions, Disciplines, and Demographics," *Social Problems* 54 (2007): 289-307.

⁸⁰ Starke and Finke, 54.

⁸¹ Wuthnow, Robert. 1985. "Science and the Sacred," In *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, ed. By Phillip E. Hammond. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 187-203.

but rather the philosophers and writers who took scientific theories or achievements and interpreted them to suit their own polemical purposes.⁸²

Because democracies are left with the hard work of creating an environment for meaning systems to live peacefully alongside one another, the faith-science conversation will need to add a third dialogue partner—government. Developing new insights into the operation of meaning systems has the potential for giving government new tools to promote and assure the democratic process. The government’s involvement in anything dealing with religion, however, also invites the risk of clashing with doctrines of secularism. Consequently, such a tripartite dialogue would require some new understandings of the church-state relationship as a necessary prerequisite.

VI. Addressing the Blind Spots in Faith, Sciences and Democracy

There are, of course, a number of factors that a game of conversation with faith, sciences and democracy will have to keep in mind if the world’s meaning systems are to find new common ground and minimize the tensions in contact zones. There are traditions of distrust and hostility toward one another in both religion and science, and both faith and science meaning systems have historical blind spots that impede conversation. Democracies also have limitations in their ability to encourage a faith-science conversation or learn from it.

As our worlds of meaning collide in contact zones, religion, sciences and democracies we will need new “paradigms” of their respective worldviews and meaning systems. We know from the tracking of paradigm development and change by Thomas Kuhn that such paradigm shifts will be difficult for those in religion, science and government. “Normal or paradigm-based research”⁸³ allows for the study of issues at a more intense level.”⁸⁴ As scientific research continues in a slow and uneven process and as new discoveries are made there is an effort at “conceptual assimilation” into the old paradigm, trying to explain it in light of the existing paradigm. When this begins to become impossible the crisis caused by new problems that cannot be solved with an existing paradigm leads to a process of transition to a new paradigm. In this new paradigm, which is often invisible because of the slowness of the evolution, the scientist, in many ways, is in a new world—seeing things that were always there, but were not noticed, awakening new questions, new problems to solve and even new methods of studying problems.⁸⁵ The best thing to move this new conversation along is for theologians like Tillich, Heschel and Rahner to keep asking their questions and sharing their insights with scientists like Newberg, Peterson, Lakoff, Johnson, and Hüther, and to continue asking their questions of their colleagues and sharing their research across disciplines. I would suggest that religions, sciences and democratic forms of government are all currently in a transition stage to new paradigms. If meaning systems become a serious part of the acute issues needing attention, a tripartite conversation will happen naturally.

Overcoming Internal Impediments to a New Conversation

For Christianity, a serious impediment to these kinds of conversations is rooted in the ancient theological discipline of apologetics.⁸⁶ This branch of theology is rooted in 1 Peter 3:15:

⁸² James M. Byrne (1996). *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 150.

⁸³ Thomas Kuhn. (1986). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 25.

⁸⁴ Kuhn, 122.

⁸⁵ Kuhn, 111-135.

⁸⁶ Because over the centuries Christian apologists developed a reputation sometimes for arrogance, sloppy

“Always be prepared to give a defense (apologian) of the hope that is in you,” which comes from the Greek root verb, *apologia*, meaning to defend, to justify, to answer, to account for, or to defend.⁸⁷ Christianity matured in an environment hostile to its ideas, and early theologians spent much of their energy trying to defend Christian understandings of God, nature, human relationships, the nature and purpose of the person from attack. In some areas of Christianity, the apologetic tradition has resulted in theologies of exclusivism that obsess on the boundaries between “us” and the “other.” Theologies of exclusivism have enormous blind spots, but perhaps the most destructive is the tendency to move from the natural need for religious identity to an “idolatry of identity.”⁸⁸ The fixation on identity makes the true engagement of the other in conversation a virtual impossibility since the other is often demonized.

Just like humans, religious meaning systems have a fight or flight defense system, and the stronger a religion is attacked, the more its defensive mode is likely to engage. Most religions have within their meaning resources, however, elements of the tradition that accommodate a more vulnerable engagement to those outside their meaning system. It is up to each religion to cull its history and tradition to find these dimensions. For instance, one of the earliest apologists of the second century, Justin the Martyr, explored the ways in which God might have chosen to make self-communications or revelations to nations and people living outside the biblical realm. Justin’s famous concept, the *logos spermatikos* (seed-logos or seminal word), opened Christianity to the idea that God could speak to humans, in limited ways, through the philosophies of different ages. The concept literally planted a seed of openness to other cultures that would be given growth in different eras, especially by forward thinking missionaries.⁸⁹

Like the Christian religion and its apologetic past, the history of science has significant challenges in the way of a constructive conversation between faith and science around a common exploration of the ultimate meaning systems of humans in a democracy. As mentioned earlier, the chief antagonists in the historic tensions between religion and scientific learning have been found in the social sciences. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke⁹⁰ and Daniel Pals⁹¹ have tracked the beginning of a sophisticated attack in Western societies on the nature of religion by intellectual leaders like Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. This is a deep strain of the social science tradition.

But, just as a religious meaning system like Christianity has Justin the Martyr’s *logos spermatikos*, so does science have an alternative positions toward religion. Beginning in the 1950s, intellectuals like Gordon Allport, who coined the term “intrinsic” religion, and suggested a person could be religious and civilized, there have been more some social scientists positing a more positive approach to religion. The secularization thesis, which suggested religion reached its high point at the end of the 18th century and has been in steady decline since that benchmark,

scholarship, weak arguments to prove the superiority of Christianity, and a self-righteous triumphalism, the term has often been replaced in the 20th century with terms like, “missionary theology” or “fundamental theology.” Conservative Christians, however, have begun recently to start using the word again. See: Avery Dulles, “The Rebirth of Apologetics,” *First Things* 143 (May 2004): 18-23.

⁸⁷ A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. (1957, 1979). F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Eds.) Chicago: The University of Chicago; See article, Apologetics, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. (2003). Washington DC, Catholic University of America.

⁸⁸ Carol Keller. (2004). *Post-Colonial Theologies: Diversity and Empire*. Atlanta, GA: Chalice Press.

⁸⁹ Justin the Martyr. (1997). *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁹⁰ Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 9-10.

⁹¹ Daniel L. Pals. (1996). *Seven Theories of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press Pals, 124-157.

now has serious social science critics. David Martin⁹² and Andrew Greeley,⁹³ a well-known Catholic sociologist, have challenged the premises with solid data. The questionable nature of the thesis opens up new opportunities for religion-science conversation.⁹⁴

Lastly, if theologians and scientists are to begin a new conversation around ultimate meaning systems, this difficult and complex conversation is going to require a number of things from the democratic state. First, it will require cultural encouragement. The game of conversation requires a place for discussion and after several centuries of disagreement, if not open hostility, between the religious and scientific communities, there is little incentive to begin an extensive new dialogue. Governments seeking to begin a new chapter in its engagement of the psychological, social and cultural forces of religion will need to encourage conversation, perhaps with funding, but certainly with finding ways to constructively disseminate findings. Given the law in many democracies, this will require a reinterpretation of the common understandings of the relationship between church and state.

Creating a space in democracy that makes room for religious meaning systems is a complex issue that is nation and culture specific. In Europe, there has been a great diversity in the relationship, from the church-sponsored Anglicanism of Great Britain to the staunch secularist approach of Turkey. But, this ground is shifting quickly.⁹⁵ Since the resurgence in fundamentalism, particularly its violent forms, finding a more workable relationship between church and state is already a growing concern in many nations. As unlikely a candidate as China has even become aware of the contribution religion can make to political harmony, if not economic productivity,⁹⁶ and the nature of the understanding is undergoing dramatic change.

Although the relationship between church and state is different in every nation, many countries have been influenced by the metaphor, “wall of separation,” the church-state principle attributed to Thomas Jefferson from his letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802. The courts and scholars have never had unanimity as to the thickness and height of Jefferson’s wall, although in the past few decades many have seemed to assume that the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary generation in the U.S. believed in a strong and high wall of separation. This position no longer has the support it once did.⁹⁷

An additional problem in many democratic nations, particularly the U.S., is the nearly complete privatization of both religion and conscience due to a narrow focus on individual

⁹² David Martin. (1965). “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization,” In Julius Gould (Ed.) Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.

⁹³ Greeley, Andrew M. 1972. Unsecular Man: The Persistence of Religion. New York: Schocken Books.

⁹⁴ The decline in church attendance in Europe is often quoted to support the secularization thesis. But, more careful recent studies have shown that the numbers of Europeans attending church services had been low for centuries prior to the beginning of the modern age. Many prominent medieval historians have come to question the “myth of past piety,” and whether an “Age of Faith” really existed. (Starke and Finke, 111-135); The failure of the secularization thesis to prove itself historically is not just a Christian phenomenon, either. Studies show Muslim commitment seems to have increased with the forces of modernization. In addition, Asian “folk” Religions, like Shinto, though projected to decline after WWII, remain strong in participation. John Nelson. (1992). “Shinto Ritual: Managing Chaos in Contemporary Japan.” *Ethnos* 57:77-104.

⁹⁵ Worldwide Religious News, “Church-State Relations Across Europe Heading Toward ‘New Landscape,’” Dec. 7, 2006, <http://www.wwrn.org/sparse.php?idd=23618>.

⁹⁶ David Aikman (2006). *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Balance of Power*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing.

⁹⁷ Jack N. Rakove, “Beyond Locke, Beyond Belief: The Nexus of Free Exercise and Separation of Church and State,” *Religion, State, and Society: Jefferson’s Wall of Separation in Comparative Perspective*, Robert Fatton, Jr., and R.K. Ramazani (Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 42.

rights.⁹⁸ Group identities, which are essential to most religious meaning systems, have been largely ignored. In reaction, many religious communities are retrieving their corporate differences and demanding that these are publically recognized and respected. In the U.S., rabbis are fighting to place menorahs in public places; Muslims are demanding the right to wear their distinctive garb; evangelicals want to place the Ten Commandments on court steps. In Europe, Muslims are fighting to retain the rights to wear head scarves in France and facial veils in Holland; Christians are demanding reference to the Christian heritage of Europe in the European constitution. Each of these efforts is expressing a desire for recognition of things that the culture would like to privatize.⁹⁹ The lack of recognition is driving many groups into their own corporate identity,¹⁰⁰ which is sure to create bigger problems for democracies in the future. Adam Seligman recognizes a need to return to more ancient understandings of human identity:

What is called for is not a simple return to Christian sources, but rather a reengagement with traditions, including those well beyond the Christian, in order to go beyond the current impasse of post-Christian (i.e. secular) political categories. Such an engagement may in fact bring us to very new ways of understanding how a constitutional secularism could come together with a heteronymous morality, in a manner not rooted in the workings of individual conscience. This, as I see it, is the only real way of beginning to address the problems of religion and secularism in today's global order.¹⁰¹

Liberal and modernist ideas about the self and the interaction between selves will have to become reconceived in more ancient traditions of human identity,¹⁰² if substantive conversations on meaning systems will ever occur.

VII. Public Policy Implications of Creating Contact Zones for Meaning Systems

I believe creating contact zones in a democracy for frank, high-level discussions about differences in meaning systems, particularly among religious meaning systems and how they co-exist in a democratic culture, will require educational, social and political support.

First, as a primary force in developing meaning systems, religion must become a more intelligent part of the public educational system. Despite the saturation of religion in the culture of the U.S., there are strong indications that an intelligent treatment of it in education is not happening. In a survey of public school textbooks in North Carolina, Warren Nord¹⁰³ found the complexity of education law on teaching religion meaning systems has had the result of most high schools eliminating the subject from the history, science and economics curricula, and a similar study found the same pattern in college textbooks. The absence of treating religious questions and meaning systems as irrelevant encourages a modern secularist meaning system and understanding of religion, says Nord, and is really its own form of indoctrination. The complexities of the relationship between religion, politics and law,¹⁰⁴ as well as the media's

⁹⁸ Adam B. Seligman, "Secularism, Liberalism, and the Problem of Tolerance," *Religion, State, and Society: Jefferson's Wall of Separation in Comparative Perspective*, Robert Fatton, Jr., and R.K. Ramazani (Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 102

⁹⁹ Seligman, 104

¹⁰⁰ Seligman, 105.

¹⁰¹ Seligman, 106.

¹⁰² Seligman, 107.

¹⁰³ Warren A. Nord. (1995). *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

¹⁰⁴ A good treatment of this complexity, though dated, is found in Stephen Carter. (1993). "The Culture of Disbelief:

rather consistent misunderstanding of the dynamics of religion,¹⁰⁵ makes an intelligent treatment of issues of religious faith absolutely essential for an informed citizenry. A complicating cultural issue in the U.S., and at the root of much of the cultural warring between conservative religious forces and science is the prevalence of scientism, a philosophical position embracing the wonders of science and the scientific method as an ideology.¹⁰⁶ While philosophical neutrality on meaning systems is probably impossible, Nord argues for fairly treating religion in the subject disciplines in which it has been a legitimate historical, social or political force.¹⁰⁷ Second, because disciplined conversations on issues touching upon meaning systems is a complex skill, the educational system needs to make conflict resolution theory and methodology a part of the K-12 educational system.¹⁰⁸ This is essential in a world in which meaning systems can no longer avoid one another. It is curious that some leaders in the conflict resolution field are beginning to borrow from the meaning systems of religious traditions, speaking of the importance of moving beyond mediation to reconciliation and forgiveness, and referring to the path of moving through conflict as a spiritual journey.¹⁰⁹ Third, academics have busy lives and are unlikely to have the time to jump start complex interdisciplinary conversations. Universities and foundations need to fund efforts specifically targeted at doing meta-analysis of various models of meaning systems. It is particularly important to develop research projects that study those individuals and groups that cross the boundaries of meaning systems with skill and sophistication. Here are just a few of the questions that could direct research: How was their own meaning system developed? How did they learn to make room for other systems and to not see them as a threat to their own? How do they assimilate elements of other systems, if they do, and what does this do to the meaning system they received as youth? How did their community of identity accept them after they began crossing borders with other systems? By studying those who have this capability, a great deal will be learned about formation of meaning systems, but also how to encounter other

How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion. NY: Basic Books. His book suggests that religions offer a perspective or orientation on life that is needed in the struggle of democratic discourse: "... it is the process of the quest for meaning, the group search for sense and value that is central to the religious task ... religions, for all their arrogance and sinfulness, can often provide approaches to the consideration of ultimate questions that a world yet steeped in materialistic ideologies desperately requires. This is particularly true for religious traditions that contemplate eternity." This perspective, among other things, reminds humans that rationalizing an acceptance of separating the means from the ends always ends in tragedy. Thus, "... it is vital that ... religions struggle to maintain the tension between the meanings and understandings propounded by the state and the very different set of meanings and understandings that the contemplation of the ultimate frequently suggests." (Carter, 273).

¹⁰⁵ Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, Roberta Green Ahmanson. (2009). *Blind Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Marshall, et al.'s book brings journalists, political scientists, public policy experts, and religion writers to analyze the media's misunderstanding of major stories because of a fundamental lack of knowledge about the dynamics of religion.

¹⁰⁶ Huston Smith defines scientism as having two corollaries: "first, that the scientific method is, if not the only reliable method of getting at truth, then at least the most reliable method; and second, that the things science deals with – material entities – are the most fundamental things that exist." Smith continues: "These two corollaries are seldom voiced, for once they are brought to attention it is not difficult to see that they are arbitrary. Unsupported by facts, they are at best philosophical assumptions and at worst merely opinions." Smith, 60.

¹⁰⁷ Nord has written a primer for this kind of integration throughout the curriculum. Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes (1998). *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

¹⁰⁸ Religious meaning systems can offer insights for building a secular educational curriculum that goes beyond conflict mediation to actual reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission held after the ending of apartheid in South Africa is a working model that might suggest a new system. See: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa. See: <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/>.

¹⁰⁹ Kenneth Cloke. (2001). *Mediating Dangerously: The Frontiers of Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 87-125.

systems at this moment in history. Universities need to create spaces to encourage “creeds to be at war intelligently,” to coin a term from John Courtney Murray, a Jesuit who played a prominent role in Roman Catholicism’s official shift in focus toward democracy and pluralistic thought at the Second Vatican Council.¹¹⁰ Fourth, democracies need to develop a much more sophisticated understanding of the separation of church and state. Conferences, like the one held in Prague, which produced *Religion, State, and Society: Jefferson’s Wall of Separation in Comparative Perspective*, are essential to understanding the new terrain democracies are entering as the world’s meaning systems collide.¹¹¹

Francis Collins found his religious conversion required him to seek a “harmony of worldviews”¹¹² and an inclusivity of positions. Democratic societies need to accomplish a similar project on a grander scale. We have all left our tribes, and try as we would like to return, there is no going back. As our meanings systems engage one another, Collins offers us wise counsel based on his experience:

So let us together seek to reclaim the solid ground of an intellectually and spiritually satisfying synthesis of all great truths. That ancient motherland of reason and worship was never in danger of crumbling. It never will be. It beckons all sincere seekers of truth to come and take up residence there. Answer that call. Abandon the battlements. Our hopes, joys, and the future of our world depend upon it.¹¹³

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¹¹⁰ John Courtney Murray (1964). *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. NY: Sheed & Ward.

¹¹¹ The Prague conference was called after the Bush Administration made the Jeffersonian separation doctrine a requirement for the interim constitution in Iraq. Such conferences can surface the new legal issues arising.

¹¹² Collins, 198.

¹¹³ Collins, 233-234.

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