

**Seeking Meaningful Discourse Through Disruption of the Center/Margin
Dichotomy**

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Abstract

How can we be in meaningful discourse with persons of different economies, ethnicities, genders, geographies, languages, faiths or no faiths while moving past mere tolerance or acceptance of difference? The purpose of this paper is to delineate ways to *disrupt* the binary of center/margin encounter by redirecting focus to conversation located in liminal space. As persons living in a particular theological (Christian) framework, with variations on its theme, we encounter “other” not by moving to the margin, but by embracing a God who is in the midst of polarities challenging center/margin epistemologies, and co-creating a larger, different space for the sake of each other and the planet. Examples from Wesley’s understandings of economics and also other faith worldviews serve to illustrate the complexity of the challenge ahead.

For as long as I have been alive, the news has been filled with local, national, and international conflict, usually emphasizing two sides: one in power and one seeking to disrupt said power. Use of drones, framed as national security by the sponsor or conversely, for pre-emptive strikes by the “watched,” continues to polarize nation against nation. Demonstrations, military coups, religious extremism, and terrorist violence frighten and kill citizens and provide profits and dominance for weapons-dealers and power-players. Environmental rape, transnational take-overs and monopolies, and worker exploitation all speak to this ever-heightening scramble to acquire and defend power and wealth. And yet deep down, we human beings, and I daresay, the rest of the planet’s creatures, know that we are in trouble. So far, there has been little relief from trouble, with the exception of small pockets where people are seeking a new way forward in the midst of this overarching, polarizing life-conflict. They are persons who forsake extreme views and who live with the courage of creating space for authentic interaction among difference. They are the anti-apartheid/anti-slavery leaders and the women’s cooperatives, they are the quiet investors who support people in need of health care or entrepreneurial efforts through microfinance,

they are the “helpers” who have a different picture for humanity, they are the spiritual leaders and the entrepreneurs who know that our polarized world cannot continue to escalate its polarization. These are the ones upon whom we rely to bring us to new possibilities. To do so, we all must pay attention to the systems and structures that keep us apart, either in center or margin or stuck somewhere in between them. There is much we can do to change these polarizing structures for the sake of all life.

Defining Aspects of the Center/Margin Hermeneutic

Discourse about categories often defined by economists, ethicists, and theologians as “center” and “margin” most commonly pursues discussion of inherited privilege or economic influence (center) as opposed to their absence (margin). We can create a picture: the notion of a center implies the middle of the circle to which all outer rings relate. The assumption here is that a concentration of power and influence radiate outward; the closer one is to center, the more one benefits from its characteristics. The further one dwells from center, the more diffuse the access to power, safety, and influence.

The center/margin relationship likely stems from times beyond historical record, when safety for human beings occurred in villages or small communities that defended themselves against the edges: wilderness external to their enclaves. Primal instinct guarded against the danger of the edges. Much of the animal realm itself still behaves this way; pack animals and water-based birds often protect their young by keeping them in the center of the group or family when there is external threat. Indeed, human beings often mirror this behavior in times of war, where rings of defense protect the village, town or city when threat is imminent.

However, the hermeneutic of the center has long moved beyond concern for safety or even description of placement based on socioeconomic class. The primal center/margin dichotomy in white, western epistemologies often has been perceived as ahistorical, rational, removed from nature and often labeled the “will of God” with emphasis on rational transcendence. Enlightenment thinking continues to assert the most meaningful reality as intellect over experience, cognition over feeling, objectivity over subjectivity, brain over body, Truth over truths, and orderliness over messiness. By inference then, the margin is exiled to historicity, is irrational, unstable, and derivative. For the margin to be worthy of center’s attention, should the margin desire such a thing, it must learn to live as the center does, with the center’s values, beliefs, and rational discourse. If the margin does not learn this lesson, then the center frequently provides an alternative: charity, so that the center benevolently aids the margin while keeping center/margin distance and difference intact. Center/edge schemes are neocolonial by their nature, even when they become less severe by inclusion attempts, as if the God of the center genuinely opted for the margins. The

center is still dominant, setting all the terms by which it “includes” anyone, since the politics and theology it espouses still rely upon center epistemologies.¹

Centers and margins exist in and among all of us, accompanied by tendencies to flatten or minimize difference through theological and ideological abstractions that safeguard the centers.² For example, typical for the Western Protestant Church is its tendency to travel to the socioeconomic margins in acts of missionary inclusion, often to support the perceived unitive center of the orthodox Christian message, Christ’s salvific act on the cross. Current Christian discourses around this center tend to preserve neo-colonial understandings of a God at center who has opted for the margins; the center sets the terms by which it includes anyone into itself. For example, John Wesley implicitly understood the center/margin problem in social holiness terms, namely via economics, when he challenged the Anglican Church’s practices (or lack thereof), regarding the poor. His emphasis on social holiness and its practice among the poor exemplified the notion of preferential treatment for those in focused on the poor, but did not have the knowledge or understanding in his time that alternative systems of power could be developed to challenge the very dichotomy itself.

The late 20th century saw the emergence of myriad contextual theories and theologies attempting to break a grip on the assumption of center/margin dichotomy established by systems such as patriarchal structure or white Western centrality, but often they failed to subvert the hermeneutics of the center.³ Various contemporary approaches to displace, overthrow, or replace a center tend to rely on abstract theological and spiritual notions, sometimes to the exclusion of flesh-and-blood experience. Simply stating that God shows preferential treatment for the marginalized or the “other” ignores the complexity of social holiness to which Wesley’s work points. In fact, to emphasize God’s preference for one group or one context has potential to create enemies of those not in the group, thereby leading to reinforced polarization:

For a deeply political knowledge of the world does not lead to a creation of an enemy. Indeed, to create monsters unexplained by circumstance is to forget the political vision which above all explains behavior as emanating from circumstance, a vision which believes in a capacity born to all human beings for creation, joys, and kindness, in a human nature which, under the right circumstances, can bloom.

¹ Stephen V. Sprinkle, “A God at the Margins?: Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Marginality of LGBT People,” *The Journal of Religious Leadership*, vol 8. No. 2, fall 2009. 63, 78-79. I am grateful to Dr. Sprinkle for conversation about center/margin dichotomy based on a presentation at the Academy of Religious Leadership in spring 2009 (Chicago, IL). I have expanded his assertion about the center/margin problem into a wider issue with alternative suggestions in this paper.

² Sprinkle, 82.

³ Sprinkle, 61.

When a movement for liberation inspires itself chiefly by a hatred for an enemy rather than from this vision of possibility, it begins to defeat itself. Its very notions cease to be healing. Despite the fact that it declares itself in favor of liberation, its language is no longer liberatory. It begins to require a censorship within itself. Its ideas of truth become more and more narrow. And the movement that began with a moving evocation of truth begins to appear fraudulent from the outside, begins to mirror all that it says it opposes, for now it, too, is an oppressor of certain truths, and speakers, and begins, like the old oppressors, to hide from itself.⁴

To be transformational, liberatory approaches to de-centering and de-marginalizing need to be grounded in the lived context of 21st-century religious and economic diversity. Can we develop a notion of space that eschews a center/margin dichotomy, shifting a polarizing system to a life-giving one? Conversations to this end are occurring in various venues of society in our lifetimes, yet one seed yielding this current conversation may have been established by Wesley himself in the 18th century. However, before exploring Wesley's contribution, we turn to the essential hermeneutic shift itself.

Beyond a Center/Margin Hermeneutic

To begin disrupting the hermeneutic of center, along with accompanying margin, we must look at the binary closely. One analogy that helps to do so originates from the experience of one of my former students, Dr. Gail Simonds, who earned a Ph.D. in forestry as well as her M.Div.⁵ Imagine trees in a forest that abut a field. The forest is mature, so there is a cycle of trees that dominate for decades that interchange with other trees slowly coming to the foreground; for example, pine trees cycle with oak trees over time, exchanging dominance as the soil evolves through the cycling. The field has its own cycle of life, with grasses and maturing plants, fires and changes in wildlife. What is most interesting though is the space where the forest and the field meet. This space, verge, realm of transition is full of elements of the forest and the field, and it also is uniquely itself. There exists a mixture of plants and animals from both ecospheres and also from neither. It is the realm of the most activity and the most danger because the dwellers there must know something of, or adapt to, the forest and the field as well as their own habitat. The realm of transition is also the place of

⁴ Susan Griffin, "The Way of All Ideology," quoted in bell hooks, *feminist theory: from margin to center*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984, 162.

⁵ The Rev. Dr. Gail Simonds, as stated in a conversation about center and margin in the classroom, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, spring 2004.

ongoing change some of which can be considered disruption of habitat. And as forest or field evolves and progresses, the location of the realm of transition moves with them. Another name for this realm is threshold, or in many theological, spiritual, and socio-psychological circles, liminal space. Liminal space is by its nature fluid, unpredictable, the “not yet,” with spatial dimension, as illustrated in the forest and field proximities, and temporal dimension, as illustrated in the evolution of forest and field in relation to each other and the connection between them.⁶ In a social and theological sense, continuity of tradition and ritual or social hierarchy is disrupted in this kind of space. There is no center from which all power radiates to margins. There is instead another dimension through which new space is created and evolves.

This analogy bears much food for thought. These liminal spaces are not places that are defined by one descriptor or characteristic. They by their very nature are a locus of activity that is vibrant, dangerous, and always in flux. Therefore, in liminal space, the center-margin becomes blurred/de-centered and de-marginalized. The premise here is that in this space, more than a meeting of two sides or a place of protest of one side against another, there is a dynamic culture of interaction that is not simply representative of the polarities’ characteristics, but incorporates and transforms these characteristics into a new mix. In human terms, these spaces are places where sides (center/margin or polarized ends such as living at a point on the spokes of a wheel), bring something of themselves and yet are strangers, both to the “other” and to the environment itself, immersed in a new milieu. They are spaces where the powerful learn to listen and the powerless learn to speak: a new kind of conversation is born. Simple as such a dynamic sounds, it is not. Severe struggle must occur for life to survive in such an interactive immersion; thriving only begins when minimization or mere acceptance of difference graduates to living in the liminal space as authentic self. Only then can harmony of any substance (spatial) and consequence (temporal) prevail. One step further, when human beings enter this space with intent to engage each other, our authentic selves practice a learning posture, whether by finding voice or attending to ear. The struggle then is to avoid self-protection, defensiveness, the retreat into personal cultural norms of origin, or the need to be “correct,” so that the messy threshold can be encountered as life-giving. Margaret Wheatley critiques polarization:

Living at the extreme consumes enormous resources. We spend energy on justifying our position, on attacking our enemy, on defending our ground, on protecting our position. Or in the case of extreme sports, we devote huge amounts

⁶ For a full discussion of liminality, see Bjørn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology*, vol 2. No. 1, 2009. <http://www.politicalanthropology.org/the-journal-current-a-past-issues/past-issues/172> (Accessed 24 July 2013). 5-28.

of time and resources training and preparing for the ultimate challenge.⁷

She goes on to say that in the midst of our addiction to life's drama, humanity has lost sight of our potential because we no longer meet each other in a sacred way, in liminal space. We instead attempt civil discourse and meeting in the middle. "Some call the middle 'compromise' or 'consensus' - terms which have come to mean failure, mediocrity and loss."⁸ Wheatley is one voice of many that calls urgently for a deep commitment to ending polarization so that we might find a different way forward to alter the destructive acts destroying our relationships with each other and the planet.

For those who wish to move beyond the eons-long center/margin hermeneutic, where "other" is polarized from "the norm" (*me* and *mine*), into a new kind of space, there already is an evolving conversation. The conversation moves into some chaos, then reorganizes itself into more complex conversation, reorganizes itself, and so on. The nature of liminal space then is fluidity that has potential to create a new culture altogether—one that becomes an ongoing movement toward greater depth and complexity over time rather than over-simplified polarization. This ethic of "movement" itself becomes the defining characteristic of liminal space.

Our focus here is on those who do desire such work. At the same time, we also must include a warning: there is a trap waiting in the work of liminal/threshold space. It is called "tolerance," the acknowledgment of difference that gives it a nod without a real desire to move into genuine being with the "other" in solidarity and yet separate, authentic identity.

Beyond Tolerance and Acceptance

Often, the media, the church, the institution of higher education, and the public tote tolerance as the way forward for an integrated, equitable society. Tolerance implies that we "all just get along" and differences are minimized or even denied for the sake of the greater good. A common term in the United States describes this tolerance: the "melting pot." When tolerance is valued and employed, certainly there is less screaming across the gap of extremity, less energy consumed proving one's position, less attention to conflict. Unfortunately, tolerance does nothing to shift the center/margin dichotomy. Those in power have the benefit of tolerating the "other" who is not in power, yet the "other" (the marginal ones), is expected to tolerate the norms and often unconscious prejudices of the "center." Likewise, the margin tolerates the center's view of the "oppressed" especially in the center's approaches to charity. Ethnocentrism, the tendency to view the alien from exclusively one's own cultural or

⁷ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Perseverance*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2010. 47.

⁸ Wheatley, 47.

ethnic perspective, sometimes laced with a sense of inherent superiority, is one example of how toleration keeps one's own worldview entrenched without making room for another. Toleration at best creates an uneasy truce with potential to lull the powerful into a sense that all is right with the world. Toleration at worst reinforces categorical inequities because the requisite "niceness" of tolerance robs "other" of meaningful voice. In itself, tolerance can become a prison of niceness, where there is little overt conflict, but also little change in the polarized presences of center/margin, relegating people back into the problematic, entrenched dichotomy.

Acceptance is one step beyond tolerance in terms of finding the path for genuine interaction along the linear spectrum of center/margin. Acceptance usually requires a deeper level of knowing the "other" in the sense that there is some curiosity about difference. Acceptance though has one foot in the tolerance camp; there may be little incentive to change the hermeneutic of center/margin beyond personal relationships in localized spheres. Should conflict arise at any point, acceptance stances may quickly retreat to tolerance to avoid sacrificing the perceived peace. Such a reaction is almost instinctive in its desire to preserve safety. However, acceptance points in the opposite direction as well. While it has potential to retreat into a tolerance mode at the first sign of trouble, it also has the capability of caring enough about "other" to move into conflict, however painful, and discover difference without retreating to safety, opening new, fertile ground. In other words, acceptance has the opportunity to move into liminal space, where the interaction is fluid, unpredictable, and no longer categorized – which takes courage and perseverance on the part of the participants. To engage each other in this new place, people must learn to progress beyond mere curiosity about "other" toward a will to engage others on their own terms. The promise of new ideas and relationships evolves into immersing in them rather than simply hoping for them. Herein lies the aforementioned messiness and potential conflict, though both the complexity and the discord are of a quality that does indeed move in constructive ways toward a new ecosphere with its own rhythms, purposes, and systems, and ultimately an overarching harmony that is not afraid of difference. Acceptance moves beyond itself to adventure of new space altogether. In this shift comes potential for transformation of relationships among difference, with meaningful disruption of destructive polarization. The center/margin dichotomy becomes less and less powerful, relevant or desirable. It is in the liminal that humanity has its greatest potential to find God's realm, God's purpose for promoting mutual life, health, and love of God and of neighbor.

Disruption, Conflict and Complexity

Finding liminal space as a means to disrupt polarization sounds like a utopian dream. What would motivate those in the center to become respectful listeners and

active learners with persons considered “marginal” in unfamiliar territory? What would motivate the marginalized to trust that such space would indeed make a positive difference despite so much historical evidence to the contrary? To be sure, there will be many who will not wish to engage in this conversation. They will remain invested or stuck in polarized camps or at most travel along the continuum of these center/margin differentials for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is to retain power. Notwithstanding such resistance, in order to weaken systems and structures that keep polarization alive, the conversation in which those in the center participate as respectful listeners and active learners must occur. It will take strong intent for those with power to see a different way forward than the current polarizing reality. Yet, there is a movement afoot where those living in the corporate, religious, or political center are beginning to realize that the scramble to remain there is its own prison. For many, ability to acquire wealth and to influence power-brokers for the sake of gaining power themselves no longer holds the attractions it once did. Persons in this movement are the ones willing to entertain an interactive conversation in new space, liminal space, with persons they may not typically engage. What motivates? An understanding that humanity has nearly reached its limit of extremism and a hope that human beings can become agents that work toward an emergence of something better for ourselves and the earth. Examples of people and groups who know that we are at our limits range from Desmond Tutu’s attempt at change through establishing The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (though the South African government has reverted back to center/margin-thinking again at this time), to women’s cooperatives throughout all populated continents who strive for better living conditions for themselves and their families, to corporate entrepreneurs who focus on creating learning organizations for the sake of creating a new way of being in the world.⁹

Moving into liminal space means that persons not only need to engage in discourse with difference, they need to immerse in a new culture – the space between field and forest, the space where their own culture meets another, where languages and meanings differ, and worldviews and theological stances do not necessarily align. Rather than keeping fragmentation alive, such as we do in the academy with different academic disciplines seen as distinct from (if not superior to) other disciplines with experts focusing on narrow ranges of information and study, or in the faith traditions as we focus on difference rather than mutual learning, we have opportunity to create a new way forward through our interconnection. Unlikely conversation partners form liminal space, where there is fluid thought and immersive learning, for purposes of creating meaning different than external, established norms.

⁹ See Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers in *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group, 2004, for a conversation about the future of the planet and what kind of dialogue will be necessary to move from human propensity toward planetary destruction to a generosity of spirit that introduces new global thriving.

One example can be taken from the scientific disciplines. Learning organization leader Peter Senge and friends explore scientific disciplines' propensity to fragment research into smaller and smaller subjects such as the deconstruction of the atom to study its parts, even though it is a building block of a vast universe. They reference physicists and biologists in their think-tank about learning organizations and systems of communication that draw on ongoing emergence rather than static rules (stances):

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake's theory of 'morphic fields' focuses specifically on the innate potential of living systems to evolve.... Sheldrake believes that the morphic fields of living systems themselves evolve, a process he calls 'morphic resonance,' whereby every embodiment of a living system simultaneously contributes to a larger morphic field and to its evolution. 'Any given morphic system, say a giraffe embryo, tunes in to previous similar systems, in this case previous developing giraffes. Through this process, each individual giraffe draws upon, and in turn contributes to, a collective pool of memory of its species.'¹⁰

Further, Sheldrake connects this morphic field to C. G. Jung's "collective unconscious," which leads us to link our perception to that which we connect within our environment, "making us individually and collectively 'capable of affecting' our larger world 'through our intention and attention.'"¹¹ The significance of Sheldrake's and others' observations is that integration of fragmented disciplines, observations, and belief systems or worldviews, leads to a level of complexity that polarization cannot entertain. Economist Brian Arthur explains:

The movement that started complexity asks, How do things assemble themselves? Complexity looks at interacting elements and asks how they form patterns and how the patterns unfold, patterns [that] may never be finished [because] they're open-ended. This caused some negative reactions: traditional science doesn't like perpetual novelty. Newtonian laws are supposed to be unchanging. But anything complicated and interactive seems to unfold and develop new structures.¹²

To extend the scientific, socio-political and theological arguments to the conversation about disruptive liminal space, we need to consider how reforming understandings of complexity and interconnectedness affect human interaction with each other and the planet. Western science attempts to understand nature by dissecting it and compartmentalizing. Many native sciences attempt to understand how to live together

¹⁰ Senge, 198-99.

¹¹ Senge, 199.

¹² Senge, 198.

in a holistic sense, with attention to relationship and natural systems that promote harmony. Scientists cited by Senge, et al., are beginning to move in this latter direction. The opportunity here for leaders in realms of theology and ethics is to contribute to the conversation by addressing complexity through learning to live in liminal space, a transforming evolution of interaction.

Certainly, disrupting center/margin polarization must move beyond addressing symptoms. For example, reactions to injustice that merely address symptoms can be seen when there are protests about particular leaders' practices, coups, terrorist attacks, racist, heterosexist, and sexist hate crimes, and other untenable or unacceptable situations. Reactions that involve counter-violence, counter-terrorism, legal battles, sanctions, or war may temporarily stop unacceptable behavior, but they rarely solve the problem. Indeed, such reactive behavior tends to foster another round of polarization and center/margin thinking. For example, in U.S. news, the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman situation is a prime illustration of little apparent interest in addressing systemic issues around racism and difference,¹³ while protests and entrenchment further polarize the issue.

The world of science and learning-organization development teaches us that the complexity of liminal space looks something like an immersion into learning, and: "...learning creates new domains of meaning. It shifts our awareness and understanding. We see the world in new ways. What was invisible to us becomes visible, like when you learn a language while living in a different culture and gradually come to 'see' that culture in a new way."¹⁴ This immersion will create its own chaos because it is a creative process rather than a deconstructive analysis. With chaos comes conflict, for it is generally human nature to pursue safety over ambiguity and potential danger. So the more disruptive this liminal space is to the center/margin thinking, the more chaotic it will seem to participants and indeed, to everyone else. And the more chaotic it seems, the more anxiety will rise. With high anxiety comes conflict. With conflict, there is a tendency to move quickly to safer ground rather than living with the conflict in covenant that encourages people to not leave this complex space. Without discomfort and conflict, which feel highly chaotic at times, it is unlikely that persons living in or near the center or margin will authentically engage in complex, challenging conversations about what it means to dwell with difference as growth for

¹³The fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman occurred in February, 2012, in Florida. Martin was an African-American teenager and Zimmerman, a mixed-race Hispanic adult. Zimmerman was the neighborhood watch coordinator for a gated community where Martin was temporarily staying. During a fight, Zimmerman fatally shot Martin, then was taken into custody, treated for head injuries and questioned. He was released due to lack of evidence other than self-defense. Six weeks later, Zimmerman was charged with murder after a great deal of media coverage. After trial in June 2013, he was acquitted on July 13, 2013. Various communities are calling for a deeper look at what happened regarding race and economic privilege in this situation based on a long history of biased verdicts unfavorable to African Americans.

¹⁴ Senge, 168.

everyone. Dwelling with difference means conserving what it takes to survive while being open to creative emergence of what it takes to grow – hence the fluidity of liminal space.

Theological Perspectives

To *eliminate* difference does not create the liminal space of God's and our healing and transformation. In fact, the place where the realm of God fosters transformation is where the differences matter: the humble ear meets the new-found voice. The tyranny of power meets the freedom of not being attached to status or influence or money. The tyranny of powerlessness meets new empowerment. The realm of God celebrates difference, but does not set up God-designated power "over" others even when there are leaders and followers. No one is "under" others in a pre-defined or formerly normative social order. Everyone is "with" each other, even if talents and perspectives and callings differ. We *do* need experts and leaders and followers – but we can wear different hats in different situations. Is not the realm of God the place where wholeness means there is no center or margin, or perhaps better stated, there is one connecting place joined together in the divine life, and that is the good news of the gospel? This gospel is more than simply doing good works for the poor on soup kitchen days or making forays into well-equipped board rooms to plead a cause. This liminal place, this realm of transformation where there is more activity, perhaps chaos, more variety, more diversity of custom, language, appearance, belief, is where the Spirit moves most freely.

An essential aspect of creating liminal space that begins to deconstruct the center/margin dichotomy is to discover and establish shared meaning. Shared meaning often stems from shared context or shared values or both. However, when one operates from a "tolerance" or early "acceptance" mode, one is not necessarily interested in shared meaning.

For religious persons, shared meaning begins with their understandings and experiences of God, YHWH, Allah, Source, or Higher Power.¹⁵ This attention to worldview (understanding) and ethos (experience) is the grounding factor for how people connect with "other" and with the planet. Thus, theology and spirituality are significant factors for how religious persons understand their places in the world. For example, a worldview that understands God as judgmental will likely focus on experiences of judgment and perhaps initiate judgment as God's act of righteousness. A worldview that understands God as relating to people through dreams and mystical experiences will likely focus on the significant of dreams and mystical experiences as prompts for actions in life. A worldview that understands God as present most strongly

¹⁵ I am writing from a Christian perspective, and so will use "God" language throughout the paper for the sake of brevity, while acknowledging that this language is not appropriate for everyone.

in community will also focus on building community as primary experience of God. This list of worldviews is not exhaustive; suffice it to say that each worldview has a hoped-for future and an experience of current reality.¹⁶

Anthony Gittins unequivocally states in *Ministry at the Margins* that it is almost impossible to understand belief systems or theological worldviews without understanding the language of theologies and beliefs.

Through language, people can communicate abstract notions, allusions, values, and expectations. But equally important is this: the very way people come to understand what is, what is true or real, depends very heavily on language. Language is an essential medium through which successive generations come to know what to believe and how to behave, and also what not to believe and how not to behave. Language is not just a vehicle for communicating ideas; the very nature of reality is mediated through language.¹⁷

Language about God gives people a clue about worldview and how religion is socialized and appropriated in persons and further, how it gives people their intrinsic identity in relation to God and to other human beings. The differences, encountered with curiosity and better, anticipation, relegate the center and margin as non-normative. In other words, once persons are open to encountering different worldviews and experiences, often expressed in spoken language, they begin the journey of de-centering or de-marginalizing themselves. Their identities remain important and authentic, complete with necessary boundaries, but not the constituting norm by which others are compared. Theological worldview, and therefore language as difference moves beyond mere literacy into meaning – the starting place for significant interaction in liminal space. Language in the Judeo-Christian realm of which I am a part will serve here as example regarding how center/margin dichotomies are reinforced and also how they can de-valued in favor of a transformative immersion.

To illustrate the complexity of liminal space necessitates for our purposes, a short foray into the worldview and experience of Wesley's theological understanding of connection between center and margin in economic terms, then later in a more difficult area, interfaith terms. First, economics. Wesley scholar Randy Maddox cautions against developing a caricature of Wesley's response to his 18th-century context where some writers paint a picture of abject poverty represented by the masses against a wealthy church. Instead, Maddox claims that Wesley had an economic ethic that had

¹⁶ See W. Paul Jones, *Worlds Within a Congregation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000, for a thorough discussion of theological worlds based in the Christian tradition.

¹⁷ Anthony J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002. 36.

greater complexity: a mix of a socialist ideal of voluntarily sharing goods in community and an encouragement for Methodists to earn and save all that that could (early capitalism).¹⁸ To effect this complex approach toward economics, Wesley introduced a sermon called “The Use of Money,” where he promoted a three-fold rule. The first was to earn, which “focused on enjoining social responsibility in the manner in which one acquires property, capital, or the means of production.”¹⁹ The second was to save, though with an emphasis on self-denial regarding luxuries or idle expenses. The third was to give, accumulating nothing beyond basic needs so that the needs of neighbors also could be met.²⁰ Surplus accumulation was a sin, a deeply spiritual issue as well as a social one.

Here we see the connection between engagement with the poor and spiritual growth, yet scholarship, according to Maddox, since the rise of North American Protestantism, emphasized either personal spirituality (personal holiness) or social ministry (social holiness) as primary concerns for the Christian.²¹ Liminal space for Wesley was the place where spiritual formation inclines and empowers persons to social ministry. Likewise, social ministry or works of mercy continue to form spirituality. Indeed, “salvation” for Wesley was described as “holiness of heart and life,”²² which include works of piety and works of mercy. Love of God manifests itself in relationship with God and also with neighbor. To love neighbor is to serve neighbor, and more than that, to serve stranger and even enemy. Wesley not only preached this ethic, he created structures to enact it including clinics, schools, and loan programs in Methodist classes and societies. These programs, in our current day, might be called systemic work that is the kind of transformational or “saving” work possible in liminal zones. In short, saving work included salvation of souls, but also attending to physical needs. Wesley’s understanding was based on his reading of Christ’s ministry in the gospels, where Jesus spent time healing as well as proclaiming God’s grace for the forgiveness of sins with its eternal dimensions. The interaction of personal and social holiness creates its own liminal space, where persons respond to the gracious love of God by immersing in the plight of the “other,” resulting in continued formation for themselves and others.

Wesley further challenged a polarized class difference. He took on stereotypes of the poor as lazy, “testifying to the legitimacy of their need and the integrity of their efforts to help themselves. This critique served not only to counteract a rationalization

¹⁸ Randy J. Maddox, “‘Visit the Poor:’ John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers,” 60-61, in *The Wesleys and the Poor: The Legacy and Development of Methodist Attitudes to Poverty, 1729-1999*, Richard Heitzenrater, ed. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002. 59-81.

¹⁹ Maddox, 62.

²⁰ Maddox, 62.

²¹ Maddox discusses entire bodies of scholarship that have emphasized social holiness vs. personal holiness, setting them against each other in terms of primary importance. 62-64.

²² Maddox, 65.

of withholding aid by the well-to-do, it also helped the needy to resist the subtle pressures to think of themselves as distinguished by their poverty or as a disadvantaged class. Taking it a step further, Wesley rejected static classifications into the ‘rich’ and the ‘needy.’”²³

Maddox continues to show the significance of the interaction between personal and social holiness by reminding us that compassion itself is hardly possible without some immersion in the experience of others. In the case of ministry with the poor, Wesley insisted that those with some means should visit the sick and the poor rather than sending money.²⁴ Failure to see and hear the “others” experience likely led to lack of compassion. Wesley’s hope was that acts of mercy were not duties, but a response to God’s love that called human beings to become their best selves, what God intended as love of neighbor, stranger, and enemy/“other.”

For Wesley, “true religion” constitutes holiness of heart and life as discussed above, which are defined by holy love. The great commandment, to love God with all one’s heart and to love neighbor as self, is the very foundation of true religion, which then belies complete reliance on orthodoxy (right thought), morality (behavior) sincerity (intention), or formality (religious practices). Without love as the heart’s true condition, these other characteristics alone fall short of true religion.²⁵

This discussion of Wesley’s emphasis on love of neighbor, stranger, and other, based on response to God’s love for us, leads to liminal space where encounter is formative, if not transformative, disrupting dichotomous categories. The theological discussion on economics illustrates one way to disrupt the center/margin problem by co-creating with God new space in which we move together as community. Another challenging discussion that is important for our time is theological worldviews based on different faiths.

For those whose faith-mandate is to invite persons to Christian belief through conversion, there exists a dilemma when called to a mutual space for immersion in interfaith conversation. For some evangelists, non-Christians will always be considered the “others” on the margins, because Christocentric belief is the only center possible; there is fear about de-centering Christ. John Wesley himself is a proponent of this view, while making space for all human beings in the doctrine of prevenient grace. For Wesley, prevenient grace is the inclusion of all people in God’s plan of salvation whereby each human being is constituted in part by the presence of God within him or her. “Prevenient grace is to be understood as the transforming presence of the Spirit who enables all human beings to take responsibility for their own

²³ Maddox, 76.

²⁴ Maddox, 77.

²⁵ Philip R. Meadows, “Candidates for Heaven’: Wesleyan Resources for a Theology of Religions.” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 35. No. 1, Spring 2000. 102.

salvation.”²⁶ Righteous living matters for all humanity, and all humanity has potential to accept God’s grace through justification via repentance and faith.

Philip Meadows underlines the very point of complexity regarding use of Wesleyan theology for creating liminal space as he studies Wesley and John Fletcher, a 19th century vicar and theologian who produced polemical works against Calvinism:

It is important to note that Wesley was not operating with a notion of ‘religion’ that we typically use today. Ours is inherited from the academic study of religions as an abstract category which can be instantiated by different systems of belief and practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that neither Wesley nor Fletcher discuss the saving potential of other religions as such. The idea of ‘true religion’ has specific content, informed by the Christian scriptures, and against which other ways of being religious are evaluated.²⁷

Wesley himself qualifies Christian exclusivism in terms of salvation here in his sermon “On Living Without God”:

Indeed nothing can be more sure than that true Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and the outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth; and this alone is given in morality. But it is equally certain that all morality, all the justice, mercy and truth which can possibly exist without Christianity, profiteth nothing at all, is of no value in the sight of God, to those that are under the Christian dispensation. Let it be observed, I purposely add ‘to those that are under the Christian dispensation’, because I have no authority from the Word of God ‘to judge those that are without’. Nor do I conceive that any man [sic] living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is ‘the Father of the spirits of all flesh’; who is the God of the heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made.²⁸

The point here is that Wesley allows for final salvation of non-Christians based on the belief that God is at work, and that God is the God of all. However, in Wesley’s

²⁶ Meadows, 111.

²⁷ Meadows, 109-110.

²⁸ Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991. 571.

theological worldview, no salvation occurs without Christ, whose death on the cross brings the universal benefit of prevenient grace, a possibility of salvation, to all people.

Because Wesley had little experience with non-Christian peoples and did not have the wealth of understanding about religion that we have today, he reduces other faiths as secondary to Christianity. Scholar S. Wesley Ariarajah addresses the historical nature of Wesley's evangelism by reminding us that we now have a deeper appreciation of context and how different situations and cultures affect the experience of the gospel: "Increasingly, people of Latin America, Africa, and Asia are hearing the gospel in new ways, and in so doing they are also challenging what traditionally has been accepted as evangelism."²⁹ Meadows also addresses context when he contends that we might take Wesley's definition of true religion, focus on the heart and the command to love rather than doctrine and opinion, and open it to our own context. "Love, then, is the highest and most inclusive criterion of true religion, and we may say that truly saving religion consists in the transformation of hearts and lives, and can properly be defined as 'faith active in love,' whatever the *species* of faith" [italics his].³⁰ It is here that the theological conversation begins in the liminal space, whether Wesleyan evangelist or spiritual-but-not-religious. "Reading mission dialogically means taking it as an immediate consequence of God's prevenient grace that other ways of being religious have providential roles in God's mission strategy for the world."³¹

The danger of all conversation in liminal spaces is that we bring our own categories in hopes to reconcile our particularity of truth with the particularity of truth expressed by the "other" to create a universal truth. Meta-narratives are possible in the liminal space, but universality is less so. The most difficult discourse is between faith and non-faith, where mutual defense is the norm rather than conversation. Perhaps the task of immersing in liminal space, where dwellers from different worlds enter, is to address the complexity of our social, political, and theological structures in ways that provide meaningful "true religion," providing the world a breath of fresh air, clean water, based in love, and a different way forward. To do so, there is a process akin to "clearness committees" in the Quaker tradition that can provide a framework for entering and sustaining liminal space, staying even-keeled in the midst of complexity and chaos, thereby disrupting the center/margin dichotomy as mutual discernment moves persons forward in unforeseen ways.

Wesley illustrates for us how to integrate the Christian faith through personal and social holiness so that we respond to the gracious love of God. His words ring true today within a Christian worldview. The complexity of liminal space certainly becomes apparent in terms of economics and formation. The complexity of living in liminal space becomes even more pronounced when we encounter difference that has

²⁹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Evangelism and Wesley's Catholicity of Grace," in Douglas M. Meeks, ed. *The Future of Methodist Theological Traditions*. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Press, 1985. 140.

³⁰ Meadows, 125.

³¹ Meadows, 128.

radically different theological worldviews than our own. Yet, there is a way forward as we focus on human purpose and new spaces, calling forth the positive effects of disrupting polarized worldviews for the sake of humanity and the planet.

Human Purpose and New Spaces

It seems to me that the purpose of the religious conversation in our day is to cast the vision of a society where we break free of the polarized platforms, which are our own self-made prisons. We meet in a place where the barriers are removed, the walls crumble and the diversities intermingle. We move beyond ourselves and our norms, our hermeneutics of center/margin, without losing ourselves or conversely, minimizing difference. Liminal space becomes chaotic but interesting, complex but a point of adventure, disruptive but a new way of connecting. Difference is important for all of our thriving because it is the place where we learn to participate in our own and others' emergence into deeper, more creative human beings with an eye toward healing the planet. The motive is love of God and love of neighbor, and I would add love of planet. The hope is that healing and transformation spring forth from this immersion in liminal space.

To do this work, it is imperative that we see ourselves clearly. What do we look like? How do we think and why? How has context shaped us? What are our prejudices and preferences? What are our affective responses to difference? What works in our interests? How do we protect ourselves and loved ones? What is our greatest fear? Our greatest hope? Who is our God? Spending time observing the world and oneself in it is a necessary act to enter the threshold for transformation with integrity. Whether we come to liminal space from forest or field, we come with habits of mind and heart. Observation about self as agent in a particular context brings a process of conscientization about role, impact, and need that each one of us carries into and out of our social locations.

It takes time to see the self clearly. It also takes a certain level of vulnerability, perhaps openness to feedback from others and more importantly, the "other," which may challenge us deeply. As clarity evolves, we find out how we are related to the world, perhaps not much differently than our initial sense of self, but in a way that brings us at one with the world. The network of dynamics in liminal space incorporates one's context with many others. Realization that these contexts are interrelated and indeed, essential to each other helps clarify one's own presence and also reality in a complex system.

Clarity often means that our habitual sense of self begins to change. Once this shift begins, observations about the world and also about personal context reveal themselves in different ways. To suspend action during this shift is very important. Now comes the time for openness to receiving what comes. Here is where the

“center”-based people immerse into a priority of listening and the “margin”-based people immerse into giving voice as it simply arrives. In time, both have voice and both listen. Suspending action does not mean becoming passive and waiting. It simply means living in the moment, being present to what evolves, or for the Christian, allowing the Holy Spirit to move unhindered. Noticing and being present takes a great deal of work, because our habits lead us to explain and analyze experiences and contexts through our own lenses. Instead, as Wesley might say, we pay attention to God’s transforming work in our own formation and in our relationship with others’ transformation. Liminal space where openness is possible leads to a depth of encounter that cannot be found in any other way. This encounter, this immersion with “other” frees us to expand ourselves beyond our self-imposed limits, thereby opening us to a future that is already emerging as possibility – love and healing of humanity together and human relations with the planet. Complexity is no longer frightening, conflict and chaos are no longer as daunting and disruption brings new freedom.

Clarity first, receptivity second, then we move to co-creativity. This shared creativity ultimately stems from an interconnectedness that is fostered by immersing in liminal space. Such co-creation does not minimize difference; instead, it fosters the gifts of difference with intention to heal relationships that have been broken for millennia. Power becomes mutual, and for people of faith, power becomes connected with the intention of God – love.³² Under no circumstances does polarization of relationship produce love and healing. Therefore, this liminal-space immersion begins to disrupt “otherness” and reconnects difference into interwoven threads finding purpose in the intent to model healing for the world. What greater purpose of love than to heal that which is fragmented to the detriment of all affected? In this space, God’s work is free to move in ways that no human being can predict. Co-creation with God toward a future with God’s intent for humanity to love God, each other, stranger and enemy occurs in space when people are invested in something larger than themselves as well as the wholeness of the “other.” It is here in liminality that we encounter the hope for the planet.

It Can Be Done

A final example serves to illustrate a transformative way that works to break out of the center/margin dichotomy and its entrenched continuum. A township in South Africa, Khayelitsha, established in the early 1980s when persons of color were forcibly

³² This assertion that God’s intention is love stems both from the biblical “Great Commandment” and also from process theology, where human and divine co-creation (with human agency at a lesser level than the divine) is dealt with in depth. For a short summary, see David A. Pailin, “Process Theology,” in the *Westminster Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983. 468. See also authors Marjorie Suchocki and John Cobb for extensive discussions of process theology.

removed from their Capetown neighborhoods under the system of apartheid, is our setting. Students and a colleague of mine traveled with me and met a number of people who described this horrific event; we heard that 80 percent of the population still lives in poverty there, and 50 percent have no running water despite the government's capacity to provide it. Thirty percent of the households are run by young teenagers, having lost their parents to death by AIDS.

While our group was in nearby Capetown, we met two clergy: Leon, white Dutch Reformed minister, leading an affluent suburban church and Xola, a black Pentecostal minister, leading a church with few means in Khayelitsha. For seven years, these men have struggled to counter the issues facing Khayelitsha communities, particularly the stigma of AIDS that leads to no discussion in the churches about its cause and prevention, and also the growing problem of preachers espousing the Prosperity Gospel, which helps ministers get rich and keeps most parishioners in dire poverty.

To have an honest discussion, the two ministers had to learn to trust each other – no easy feat. They had to deal with internal and external racism, political systems, resentment, and notions of charity. They had to spend time with their own parishioners on these very topics. They had significant disagreements and at points, had to walk away from each other. Xola was frank with us in front of Leon; there were times when he still had to work hard to trust a white man. Leon acknowledged this difficulty.

Ultimately, these two ministers are finding a new way forward. The churches are in covenant in such a way that the wealthy, suburban church are asked not to write checks to the poor, township church. There are mutual ministry teams involved in both parishes and in the communities. They have discussions. They plan together and then they work together. They think about physical needs of people in the townships and how suburbia connects with township. They also think about politics. They are beginning to have theological and practical discussions about AIDS and the devastation of a generation of South Africans. They don't always get along. And yet, they have found a liminal space that disrupts the center or the margin or trying to travel in between. They have created a space that is far beyond civil discourse, a space that takes both of their worldviews and contexts and works toward a different future together – slowly, with conflict and chaos for sure, but with hope. In other words, they are taking their relationship away from the linear center/margin continuum to a “liminal space” of mutuality that envisions the realm of God, disrupting and re-forming power dynamics in the process.

Polarization keeps our mutual destruction alive as we focus on keeping the “other” at bay or as we merely tolerate others. There is the threshold, the liminal space to be had. God provides miracle and healing there; we human beings co-create such potential with God. The movement has begun in many circles though it is not yet captured by the media or in public events. Yet, it has begun. Wesley's focus on love

of neighbor is finding new definition on our planet in the twenty-first century, as we find our way into the liminal space of transformation in the dawning of a new age.