On Tuesday, April 16, the Hein-Fry lectures were delivered to the Luther Seminary community by the Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes. Gomes is an ordained American Baptist minister and is the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University.

The lectures marked Gomes' first visit to Luther but not his first experience of an ELCA seminary. The Hein-Fry lectures are delivered every year at each of the eight seminaries of the ELCA. For Gomes, Luther was the third in a series of four lecture sites, with Philadelphia, Gettysburg and Southern rounding out the half. The other four seminaries received the Hein-Fry lectures from Barbara Lundblad, Joe R. Engle Associate Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary (New York).

During his time at Luther, Gomes preached at our regular chapel worship— with Harvard alum and MDiv Junior Erik Gronberg serving as assisting minister—and delivered two lectures. Delivered under the Hein-Fry heading "Biblical Preaching in Babel," the lectures were titled, respectively, "The Death of a Paradigm" and "A Matter of Trust and Imagination."

After the second lecture, Gomes took time to answer several questions from a capacity audience in the Chapel of the Incarnation. During the resulting mad dash to the airport, Gomes agreed to chat with The Concord.

The topic put forth by the Hein-Fry committee—"Biblical Preaching in Babel"—begs the question of postmodernity. While the term has become ingrained in our parlance, most of us couldn't define what "postmodern" actually is and aren't really sure if its such a good term in the first place.

"It is not possible to talk about this as post-Christian because there's never been a Christian age."

Gomes doesn't think so. "It's a good term like 'the Middle East' is a good term but it depends on where you're starting from," he said. "The terms 'the Middle East' and 'the Far East' refer to the relation of those places on the map to the foreign office in London. Perhaps they are not the most accurate way of describing things."

And, as Gomes pointed out, to call something "postmodern" involves a contradiction. "The term 'postmodernity' is inevitably a modern term," he said. "There's no way you can be post-modern and even call it 'postmodernism'."

Furthermore, the term—and others like it—don't seem all that useful in the first place. "That kind of distinction is lost on 99% of the public," he explained. "I find I get much more attention in these kinds of lectures when I say, 'It is not possible to talk about this as post-Christian because there's never been a Christian age.' Now, that gets people's attention, especially in the church."

Whatever it's called, many Christians see our new postmodern reality in a negative light. "It seems to me that one of the assumptions built into the lecture description this year—whoever decides what the Hein-Fry is going to be—is that postmodernity is a problem. At a level it is, but I decided that I wasn't going to accept that as the definition," Gomes said. "I really think it's a tremendous opportunity."

During the brief question and answer session that followed Gomes' second lecture, one person asked for Gomes' thoughts on the status of committed homosexual relationships in the Christian community. His response indicated the sort of ethical and theological reflection possible in this new, postmodern "Babel."

Acknowledging that such discussions are "very problematic," Gomes also noted that there is a "kind of untidiness, dangerous, innovative, adventurous about all of this." This adventuresome spirit, he thinks, means that the church is going to take risks, including the faithful risk of being wrong.

"We need to be more open to process and to the Spirit," he said. "What one hopes in this great untidiness is that we will be untidy in the right direction."

According to Gomes, neither his racial identity nor his sexual orientation have caused him hardship during his life and career. "It would be very fashionable to say that they did, that I overcame tremendous odds and huge obstacles and clawed my way to wherever I am, but I disappoint many people when I say I can't say that," he laughed. "I lived a very privileged upbringing in New England. Someone once jokingly said—and I don't think they meant it a kindness—that I am an 'Afro-Saxon.'"

While Gomes' family was conscious of race, it was not their primary concern. "My
Letter(s)

Where Lies Your Heart?
Thank you, Robert, for your straightforward and most needed words to us regarding Palestine vs. Israel. The saddest part of all this is that most Americans don't remember, and probably never gave any attention to, the situation that has been going on in Palestine for the past 30+ years: occupation. That means, folks, that they (Palestinians) are being held hostage in their own homeland by another country (Israel) under military duress. They cannot form a military force like the one we have or like the one that is holding them hostage. They have no way of fighting against what they think is inhumane or unjust. Yet we as a nation stand behind the country who invades and holds hostage a people that has been given eminent domain within their own borders. We do not look at the deaths of innocent Palestinians with the same horror as we do the deaths of innocent Israelis. How is that possible?

A young man I know told me it was so stupid for the suicide bombers to be fighting a losing battle. "Why don't they just give themselves up? Why don't they surrender and call it quits?" And I replied: "Let's say the U.S. military is destroyed, unable to protect us as a nation from the invader. Would you walk out of your house with your hands up and surrender without a fight?" You see, I knew what his answer would be, because he has told me how he would, in such a situation, fight to the death. He looked at me, and a look of understanding crossed his face.

Does it not matter to us that a people is being annihilated in the last two weeks? Does it not matter to us that one country is laying waste the entire infrastructure of another, and killing as many men, women, and children that they can as they go? Does it not matter to us that soon there will be very little left of "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" and the other little towns in Palestine? Does it not matter to us that the land of Jesus is being destroyed yet again, but this time by the Israelis? Again, Robert, thank you. Speaking out as you do is not always easy, but prophets come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and ages.

SISTER RACHEL MUELLER
Deaconess Candidate-MASR

Notes from the Parish Nurse
Lydia Volz, Parish Nurse
in partnership with Lyngblomsten

This month we celebrated the new life bought for us by Jesus' passion, and we also recognize World Health Day. Today there seems to be no lack of information related to health or any other topic.

The challenge before us now seems to be to judge the information and how to decide what to do with it. We can trust in the Lord to help us discern: "I will give you a wise and discerning heart" (1 Kings 3:12). It is estimated that 12% of adults rely on the Internet for meeting their religious needs and this is expected to grow to 20% by 2010 (Current Thoughts and Trends, 1999). I would like to share some thoughts on Health and the Internet.

There is a great amount of health information available on the Internet, but some of it is incomplete, misleading or inaccurate. One can find information on health and wellness and specific diseases, find out more about health organizations and resources, talk with others with similar concerns and/or participate in on-line support groups and see and/or purchase health related products.

A word of caution is needed: Publication on the World Wide Web is not proof that the information is reliable or valid. The following questions can serve as guidelines for judging the quality of health information on the Internet.

• Is the main purpose of the web site? Is it to provide accurate information and resources or is it to sell a product?
• Are there credentials of the authors? Are they recognized experts?
• Are there references for their claims? If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!
• When was the last time the site was updated?
• Are there ways to contact the authors for more information?
• Do they offer any on-line support groups moderated by professionals?
• Do they increase your ability to use health care resources or replace your current health care provider?
• Do they keep your information confidential?

Several recommended sites are:

- www.mayoclinic.org
- www.cdc.gov/health/diseases
- www.nih.gov
- www.familydoctor.org

If you have any health related concerns, please contact me. I would be happy to work with you and share resources I have. May the Lord of All Life and Wisdom richly dwell in your home and family.

"Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours" (1 Sam. 25:6).

The Concord • 2
What Have We Been Smoking?  
Advice on the “Post-Christian” Era

6:45am and the phone is ringing. Somebody’s died. I thought about getting up, but getting up would have disturbed the delicate balance of kids and cats that is our bed at 6:45am.
I’m not on call for CPE. I’m only a pastor-in-training. They’ll still be dead when the alarm rings in 30 more minutes.
I stayed in bed.
When we finally got up—all of us, of course—I was surprised that whoever had called hadn’t left a message. Maybe it wasn’t that important.

+++ The day before, the phone had rung unexpectedly and an unexpected voice had come through: “Is this a La Leche League volunteer?”
I’m not but my wife, Carrie, is. LLL is an organization for mother-to-mother support for breastfeeding mothers. Carrie, as a League Leader, is on call duty this month for their cities-wide help line. She didn’t realize this until the calls started pouring in.
Of course, I didn’t remember any of that at 6:45am.
But then the phone rang again. I overheard Carrie acknowledging her office as League Leader. Well and good.
But as I stood there, brushing my teeth, I heard her say something about something’s effect being “similar to alcohol…” I remembered thinking, “That’s a little different from calls I’ve overheard.”
A little while later, Carrie stuck her head in the bathroom and said, “Two things: 1) I just remembered that I’m not supposed to be dealing with every call—I just have to pass them on to their local leaders. And 2) that was a young mother of a two-month-old who smoked some pot last night and was drinking too… asking me if I thought she’d hurt her baby.”
She tried not to be disparaging. And as a League Leader, Carrie couldn’t say anything that wasn’t in her handbook (which, by the way, acknowledges that marijuana contains a rather mild drug not dissimilar to alcohol in its effects on breastmilk).
But she and I agreed: this young mother had made a poor decision. Maybe she should’ve asked for advice before she smoked up. +++

Such is also the situation of our church, the Christian community in North America: we’ve gotten ourselves bombed out of our wits; we’ve been knocked up by more than a few would-be suitors; and we’ve been irresponsible with the gifts we have been given for the nourishment of the world. Is it any surprise that we found ourselves at the end of “Christendom”?
This shift of power has been a preoccupation of many of our brightest public critics and theologians.
Douglas John Hall began describing the effects of what he called the ‘disestablishment’ of Christendom in the early 1970s. At first, Hall’s ruminations centered on North American dissatisfaction with the empty promises of technology. (It is worth noting that these thoughts about the end of a technological age came about just prior to the rise of the personal computer.)
A little later, in the ‘90s, Barbara Brown Taylor said it like this: “As best I can figure, the Christian era ended during my lifetime… By the time I reached high school, God was dead.”
The first calls went out in the early hours, during the dawning of this new day… and hardly anyone answered. Those that did were sent back to bed.
In modernity, the church still influenced culture, if only in an indirect way. And we were happy with our share. We either preserved our place in the public sphere through our silence—developing an elaborate sub-theology of ‘quietism’—or gladly sequenced ourselves in little enclaves, waiting for the end of the world. It’s been the Sadducees and the Essenes all over again.
But—and this must be understood—we were happy with our share. Instead of keeping abreast of shifts in culture, instead of anticipating and actively engaging civil Christianity’s loss of its death-grip on western culture, we became complacent. Now, we’re waking up to the fact that we have hardly any influence at all—on either individuals or their culture. +++
But now, talk of the “post-Christian era” or the “post-modern church” is all the rage. As we stumble around in the glare of a threatening new sun, the calls have come again.
And this time, we have more than enough people willing to offer their advice. The discussions focus on generations shifting and paradigms crumbling. And there’s plenty of blame to go around. We also get all sorts of starry-eyed, rose-colored predictions of a happy future for the church. Neither of these seems to be appropriate responses to this, what is potentially our second “great awakening.”
The diametric opposition of our campus’s two most recent lecturers—Ravi Zacharias and Peter Gomes—illuminates our problem: we are left holding the bag of modernity.
In America, liberal Christians are caricatured by their capitulation to Enlightenment critiques of Christianity. To put it in other language, liberals are best known for “selling out” the foundations of our faith so we can “just get along” with the culture.
In all of their efforts to flee from its effects, conservatives also haven’t escaped the grip of modernity. They are too easily caricatured by their rejection of the “world,” the evil spawn of the Enlightenment that dared shuck off the hull of Christian public life. That rejection provides the negative impetus for that dangerous buzzword, “fundamentalism.” As conservative Christians seek to reengage the world, fundamentalism has understandably lost its allure.
In it all, we are caught in the position of either defending modernity or reacting to it. In either case, we’ve wed ourselves to what can best be described as a ravaging, secularizing force.
And so the question must be asked: if we have wed ourselves to modernity (or any cultural epoch), either negatively or positively, what happens when modernity withdraws and fades? (Isaiah 40:8)
Any advice?

The Concord • 3
Coming to the Table...Joining the Discussion

My last name is Strommen, as was quoted in one of the articles dealing with the issue of homosexuality, but I would like to represent a different side of the family.

I don't remember deciding I like boys as a little girl. I have even looked at twenty women over the years and wondered if I could ever be socially raised to be attracted to them. I realized I couldn't.

What I do remember learning was how to have a loving relationship and what God wanted in those relationships—love, mutual respect, monogamy, and communication. God seemed to have a plan for human life that involved relationships such as friends, parents, children, relatives. We need them to live and thrive.

Surely God created man and woman to have children and be in love, but that is very biologically oriented. Love and respect and relationship come in many forms and I believe when we are all with Christ we won't need to worry about male female gender distinctions.

I have grown and learned more about the Bible and theology. I have been amazed at the various Bible thumping and idolatrous usage of certain verses against homosexuals. I could go into many Biblical arguments at this point but I will simply say that we often view these delectable verses from twelfth century American viewpoints.

I also feel we have misinterpreted the original message of these passages and have been raised in a society that interprets them poorly. Even if you want to argue that Paul believes same-gender sex is wrong, how is this man the ultimate authority on God's view of homosexuality? What about respectful relationships between same-sex people?

Do I not believe homosexuals are raised on could ever be raised to prefer a particular gender nor could they go through a "boot camp" to fix them. If that were so, teach me how not to be narcissistic or daydream about other men. Is there a boot camp for all of our sins?

If we want to focus on sin let us please focus on that which destroys and harms human life. I can't see how two women or men in a loving relationship surrounded by supporting friends and family and even church is against God's will for relationships. I think heterosexuality rape, date rape, incest, pornography, child pornography, abuse, etc. to be the behaviors we should focus on. These are learned or created by life situations and can be somewhat reformed.

Also, these oppressive and destructive behaviors are barely mentioned in the Bible and I'm sure God has an opinion about them. God created us to love and care for each other. A heterosexual person who chooses not to marry is not more destroying God's plan for families that any gay couple.

We need to realize what God intended for humanity in terms of life, not biology. We have to focus on the larger issues of life and stop creating judgment and even hate. That is sinful in itself.

We are all sinners. The Bible judges us all and frees us all. All of us. I could not start being attracted to my same or opposite gender even if my salvation depended on it. But it doesn't.

I am freed from the sin I was born into by Christ; we all are.

SiriAnna Strommen Campbell
MDiv Junior

I have enjoyed many of the articles I've read in The Concord of late, seeing the opinions of my fellow seminarians as both controversial (always interesting) and courageous (always inspiring).

I have read with particular interest these recent articles on the issue of homosexuality, and I have decided to respond to one of them, written by my brother-in-Christ, Ben Branson. In the article you shift in one point to a more "pastoral tones," and it is to this sense of care that I turn my attention.

I thought it most curious for you to point to the creation story in God setting up "as authorizing pattern for marriage and family between a woman and a man." I have read the creation story many times and have yet to read of Adam doing a tax and live a white, fully-ordained priest. Where, exactly, is the marriage in this text? Is it before or after they eat of the forbidden fruit? Perhaps it is, when they are hiding from God, naked and ashamed, that they both turn to each other and say, "Let's dress up and hire a DJ and order a really big cake! Then God won't be angry anymore!"

The other text cited is Philippians 2:1-13, one of my very favorites! It is a text about love. As you so rightly point out, Ben: A text about putting others first and living in service to them. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit; but in humility regard others as better than yourselves," is included in those beautiful verses. Is this a model limited to marriage? Is this a model calling us as servants to all of God's creation? Could it be that as Christians are called to love our neighbor, even our gay neighbors? Could it be that as Christians are called to consider our lesbian neighbor to be better than ourselves? Why limit this model of living in service to God to marriage? I don't see it. Nowhere in this text does it refer to even a union between a man and a woman, much less a marriage.

Marriage is included in this call as service; yet this call is certainly not limited to only marriage. As a single person, I like to think of myself as included in the creation story. I like to think of my little family, which includes my two children, my ex-husband, and a childhood friend (the last two who are actively and cooperatively raising these two precious children with me) as a family that is blessed by God. And I like to boldly proclaim that I am indeed a God-inspired constraint to love and serve them as a man and a woman are called to serve each other in marriage.

God works in and through many relationships, and our sexuality, though it plays a role within our relationships, is such a small part of living a life in service to one another, just as Christ serves us. And not once in this Bible does Jesus use the pastoral model for caring for individuals that you have set up in your article, Ben. "When I find that someone is homosexual, I plan to offer them pastoral care and possibly a referral to someone who has expertise in transformation ministry," this is your clearly stated plan. If only life were that clear.

If only ministry would adhere to your idea of, "I will only bring this issue up once," Wouldn't ministry, then, be so much easier? Why would we ever farm our fellow human beings out to receive transformative ministry when we hold within our grasp the One who transforms all of life? Why would we engage only once in a conversation with someone who suffers from us and then "pray for them" and let God deal with them? If only we could see these kind of simple ground rules for ministry and ignore Philippians 2:1-13.

If only we could ignore our own life and the life of others and turn it to God and war with people, indeed regarding them as the creation story informs us, as created children of God. And we are called to listen non-judgmentally to their suffering and their stories, to uphold them in their struggles and help to give them hope when the dogmas and the limitations of our human understandings lead them down roads that seem to separate them from God.

We are called to have many conversations with them, being willing to pray, with them as God works through us and them for the mutual edification of us both. In this way we live in service to them and they live in service to us. And perhaps most importantly we are called to look into the faces of our parishioners and not see their sins, just as we hope and pray that when they gaze upon us we will see less sin and more a fellow servant of Christ.

When we look upon their faces and see their sexual orientation, the number of times they have been divorced, the person of the opposite sex they are currently living with, the hatred that has infused their relationship with their parents, the underage drinking, the lying, the cheating, and the stealing...we undermine the gospel message itself.

In the grand scheme of things, Ben, it doesn't really matter whether you or I think hetero-sexual behavior is a sin or not. When asked, we will give our differing opinions and hope for the best. What matters is whether our behavior towards someone we fundamentally disagree with will point the way to a closer relationship—indeed a transformative relationship—with Christ or not. And I can guarantee that one conversation, a prayer, and a dismissal of the person into God's hands won't do the job. Not by any stretch of scripture.

Theresa Brownson
MDiv Senior
Harry Potter: The Fifth Evangelist?

by Daniel Ruef
Staff Writer, The Concord

The next time you're home sick with bronchitis, why not revolutionize evangelism for an entirely new group of people? Evelyn Weston, MDiv Senior, may not choose to put it that grandly, of course. But that's pretty much what she's done.

During J-Term she was unable to leave her home or even speak because of bronchitis. Confined to her bed, she picked up all four Harry Potter books and proceeded to devour them within a week. Intrigued about the next book, Weston went online to search for information. Incredibly, this incoherent journey would soon transform her life.

Today she's ministering to an unlikely group of over 1,000 Harry Potter fans across six continents.

What Evelyn found in her initial search was MuggleNetForums.com, a division of the wildly popular MuggleNet.com site, which concerns itself with all things Harry Potter. (“Muggles,” for those uneducated in Harry Potter-speak, are humans with no magical abilities.) She tapped into plot descriptions; character discussions; and even “off topic” forums that tackled any and all type of philosophical and political conversations. Weston eventually decided, somewhat uncertainly, to add her comments to a forum issue she was interested in.

But in order to participate she had to have a screen name. “Maybe it came from God,” shrugs Weston, after considering why she made her particular choice. She ended up with a moniker that would begin her present ministry: Hogwarts’ Chaplain. (“Hogwart’s is the name for Harry’s school in the series.”)

Within a couple of days she began to receive private notes from forum members inviting her into religious conversations. The first off topic discussion she was asked to participate in was entitled “Why are we here?” Rather different from whether or not an immobilizing spell is ethical in cases of bad dancing—this was a serious philosophical and spiritual discussion.

At this point Weston asked herself, “What is God doing with this?” She dove in and participated for the rest of J-term, answering questions, becoming more involved in religious discussions, and generally having a fantastic time.

Seventeen days later she was feeling much better and considering how her journey on MuggleNetForums might be compromised by classes during spring semester. She notified the forum of this difficulty. Immediately an atheist member stepped forward out of concern for her absence and what that might mean for the group.

The answer: Weston was made a “Prefect” of the forum.

The forum’s hierarchy is, not surprisingly, based on the structure of Hogwarts’ School. There is a Headmaster, Professors, Prefects, Students—even a Minister of Magic who performs the technological wizardry to keep up the site. Weston was now a Prefect, which meant she officially became a respected member of the forum. She would now provide some support to other forum members in terms of thought organization and maintaining a spirit of open and respectful discussion.

Never before in the history of the forum was a member appointed to Prefect status so quickly.

After this appointment, says Weston, “the ministry really took off.”

While most of the members are Christians from various denominations, Weston dialogues with Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Wiccan folks regularly. There are also many atheists and agnostics whom have shown great appreciation for Weston’s presence.

Most of these folk have never heard the Gospel,” says Weston. For the first time, through the Harry Potter forum, these members can ask honest questions like, “Who is Jesus?” Weston says one benefit of the forum is a certain degree of anonymity—those who are nervous or angry with Christianity feel more freedom in posing difficult questions. These queries range from the introductory to the extremely developed, says Weston, “I just entered into discussions with a woman who wanted clarifications on atonement theory.”

At this point everyone should know the story about Harry Potter and the allegations of the books spreading the influence of Satan to our children... well, actually, to everyone, since everyone seems to be reading them. For Weston to be welcomed as a declared Christian in this public space was quite significant.

She has been useful to those youth who write in after being told by their church that the books are satanic or anti-Christian. “It’s helpful for me to discuss these positive aspects,” she says.

Weston has found no evidence of ritual

Wiccan religion in any of the books. If anything, they reflect an underlying Christian foundation. J.K. Rowling, the series’ author, was herself raised as a Christian, has just been married by a Christian clergy member and has stated the books were not written with any particular religious belief in mind.

Weston’s experience has had the added benefit of witnessing the initiative and articulation of youth who run the forum. “The site’s creators were 15 year-old boys,” she says.

One of the “Professors” of the forum, a twelve-year old girl, “is incredibly mature and articulate. It’s almost shocking to witness the level of respect and education in the youth who maintain the discussions,” asserts Weston.

While answering questions about faith in itself a ministry, Weston

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Rogness (Peter) Elected Bishop of St. Paul Area Synod

The Rev. Peter Rogness was elected to a six-year term as bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod of the ELCA April 21 at the synod assembly April 19-21 at Concordia University, St. Paul, Minn.

Rogness, 56, currently serves as bishop of the ELCA Greater Milwaukee Synod. He became bishop of the synod in 1988, and was re-elected in 1992 and 1996. Rogness' current term ends this summer, but because of term limits in the Greater Milwaukee Synod constitution, he is not eligible for re-election.

Rogness was elected on the fifth ballot for bishop with 267 votes over the Rev. Susan E. Tjornehoj, assistant to the bishop, Saint Paul Area Synod, with 210 votes.

Born in 1945 in Mason City, Iowa, Rogness grew up in St. Paul.

He earned a bachelor’s degree in history and philosophy in 1967 from Augustana College, Sioux Falls, S.D., and a master of divinity from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, in 1972.

Following his ordination in 1973, Rogness was pastor at Wellington Park Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, 1973 to 1975, and Hephatha Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, 1975 to 1985.

In 1985 he was elected bishop of the Southern Wisconsin District of the former American Lutheran Church. Rogness served in that role until he was elected bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod when the ELCA was formed in 1987.

Rogness and his wife, Geraldine, are the parents of four children and have one grandchild.

HP and God

Continued from page 3

has taken it to a level of actual Internet worship. For example, she hosted an entire Easter liturgy on the forum. There were hymns, scripture readings and a sermon written by Weston. Confession and absolution and even interactive prayers were included.

“Some members responded with their own prayers in their native languages, which were not English,” Weston added. “It was a time of fellowship.”

Weston has also done serious pastoral counseling online. “I have done confession and absolution by email with an individual,” she states. “She’s told me I can tell anyone about it. It was a real conversion experience for her.”

To her delight, Weston received a message that one of her atheist friends had prayed last week “for the first time in his life.”

Weston was the only person he told on the forum, and, while he says he is still an atheist, he is opening himself up to other possibilities.

“1 see this as a real outreach ministry,” says Weston, “and it also challenges me to articulate my own faith and recognize the broad spectrum of Christianity.” Weston tries hard to answer questions fairly in light of this diversity, but more often than not she is always asked the bottom line question: “But what do you believe?”

It seems clear that Evelyn early on established a major tenet of pastoral counseling with this diverse and exciting group: Trust. Through the respect of her own faith and the faiths of others, she has shown that the light of the Gospel can shine in the most unlikely of places.

Could Weston have ever imagined this is where her pastoral training would lead?

With a smile she says, “Only God could think up a crazy idea like this.”

Hein-Fry Thoughts

Continued from page 1

family eager to maintain what Dr. duBois always called the ‘double-mindedness’,” he elaborated. “We lived in two worlds all the time, so I was always in some sense bi-cultural. But the Black culture of New England is very different from the Black culture of New York or Chicago or Alabama.”

Gomes’ family was “scandalized” when in the summer of 1968 he accepted his first teaching position … in Alabama at the Tuskegee Institute. “This was like saying I wanted to go to the moon; or today, to say I wanted to spend a year in Afghanistan,” he said. “I think part of the instinct was that I needed to take some initiative toward finding out other ways of being Black in America. Tuskegee was the first thing that came along.”

Race has not been an obstacle Gomes has had to overcome. “The sexual thing is equally hard to speak to in terms of ‘suffered and sacrificed, lost and won’,” he said.

He does not often reference this facet of himself in many arenas. “The reason my identity or orientation is known to anyone other than me is because I saw an abuse of Scripture, from my point of view, which involved homosexuality and I felt that my own case was one that was a counter-argument to a bad argument that was being used to a very bad end at Harvard,” Gomes explained. “I didn’t do this because it was my autobiographical moment to shine in the sun.”

That his sexual identity is public has not always been enjoyable. “One of the prices I’ve had to pay is thereafter being identified, first as a homosexual and then as something for something else,” Gomes lamented.

“Hence, anything anyone has on their list about homosexuals—pro or con—gets filtered into my experience. And that I resent. ‘I resented being characterized by my race or place of origin. The only thing I would want to be characterized by is the fact that I am a Christian,” he continued. “But that seems to be of very low account in this culture.”

Gomes’ public disclosure of his sexual orientation has shaped the last decade or so of his career. “I came out, as it were, in 1991 and I wrote The Good Book in 1995,” he said. “The period between 1991 and 1995 was a period of very intense focus for me—what is the relationship between the church and homosexuality, between the Gospel, the Bible as I understand it?

“Why is it that the people who have been the most unpleasant in all of this have been the most religious people and why is it that the people who have been the most supportive and encouraging of me have been the people who have despised religion?” he added. “That was the problem I decided to reckon with. The result of that was The Good Book.”

Gomes wrote The Good Book in response to the growing reality of the church’s biblical illiteracy. “I wrote it because my experience has been that the church was learning less and less about the Bible and young preachers were afraid to communicate what they learned in Bible 101 because they thought it would undo the faith of the faithful,” he said. “We had a whole generation of people who knew nothing about the Bible. And the only people were talking about the Bible were the fundamentalists who, in my view, knew all the wrong things.”

The reader-friendly, preacher-friendly approach of The Good Book is continued in Gomes’ sequel, The Good Life. “It puts together the Western virtue tradition in a Christian context,” he said. “I couldn’t have Bill Bennett being the only one writing