

REINVENTING CHURCH

By

Wade Clark Roof

It's a very interesting – and challenging – idea: reinventing church. The notion of reinventing church can also mean many things, and depending on your ideological leanings responses to the idea will vary. Theologians and Bible scholars are likely to be suspicious of the undertaking. The church is called to be the church, they say, which is true of course, but that doesn't quite satisfy sociologists who ask: "But what does that look like?" So there is treasure in the earthen vessel, as the Apostle Paul said, but vessels come in many shapes, and sometimes they crack and must be replaced.

And it is also the case that religious institutions go through cycles: they begin usually in outbursts of evangelical zeal, take institutional form, and over time settle into routinized patterns. John Wesley of course worried about this possibility. Sociologists of religion have documented the pattern time and time again, especially within Protestantism. H. Richard Niebuhr, the Yale theologian, called attention to what he called the second-generation problem: the first generation is caught up in a new burst of enthusiasm and conviction; the second generation is born into it without having that original experience of conviction. Since Niebuhr's time sociologists have documented this pattern of institutional cycles time and time again, especially for Protestants where there is so much emphasis on personal religious faith.

But rather than wring our hands about such seemingly inevitable trends, we should ask about the role of human agency in such matters. To what extent and in what ways, can people control the destiny of a religious institution? The word bantered about so much today is reflexivity--- how is it that we can be reflexive, or self-aware and deliberate about taking some degree of control over the direction an institution takes. Religiously speaking, being faithful involves in part a continuing responsibility for shaping, or reshaping the church.

Reflexivity encourages a sense of monitoring and reevaluation – a bridging of the gap between the past and the future. A seminar leader I once heard said:

Our interpretation of the present is seen through the lenses offered us by our past and hold us captive there, for better or worse, unless we become conscious of our past, critique it, accept parts of it and reject what is outmoded.¹

Who might have said that? A New Age guru talking about the transformation of consciousness? An organizational consultant from the Peter F. Drucker Foundation defining the shape of tomorrow's organizations? No, these are the words of a Catholic sister at a conference on the spiritual formation of the church. Far from being an option, many insist today that reflexivity must be built into religious institutions as a self-monitoring process in order to assure adaptation and survival.

Looking at the religious scene today, clearly there is much critical reflection now occurring within organized religion. As all of us here know, the religious landscape in the United States today is deeply divided and pulled in opposite directions – toward a resurgence of dogmatic, fundamentalist truth claims on the one hand, and toward innovative efforts at reforming faith and structure to fit the twenty-first century. The dogmatic, fundamentalist reaction is fueled by rapid social and cultural changes and a loss of religious authority in the modern world not just in the United States but globally. This movement assumes a defensive posture. It seeks a return to absolutes, to belief that there is only one way to salvation, and to the restoration of traditional authority and a hierarchical transcendent order. It responds to people's insecurities with certitude and strong epistemological claims. It seeks a return to literal, foundational principles in a world threatened by a loss of foundations.

Yet despite all the noisy rhetoric, fundamentalism is a backlash to a world shaped by the Enlightenment reasoning, by science, by religious pluralism, by rapid social and cultural change. The world cannot be turned back to some earlier, seemingly better time, nor should people of faith want it to be. People of faith are forward-looking.

So back to our fundamental question: What would be the proper shape of the church in the United States in early twentieth-first century?

What is the proper shape of the vessel in which the treasure is contained? The Nazarene Church emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and was shaped by religious forms existing at the time and dating back of course to the early Wesleyan Movement. It is a product of a particular time and circumstance, and we should not reify that particular form of religious practice or church as if it were for all time. Sociologically speaking, there is no church for all time---there are churches for varying times, places, and circumstances.

In thinking about reinventing church, I'd like us to focus on the process of reflexive thinking, or conversations people of faith should have about their traditions and institutions. Let it be clear that I have no design of the new vessel to propose, but I do have some thoughts about the types of conversations the church in the 21st century should be engaged in. I shall speak of four types of conversations.

I

The first conversation is with religious tradition. In his book, After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that we must carry on an argument with our traditions: what it means to live within them and by them. The point is that "lived tradition" is an on-going process of re-enactment of symbol, belief, story, practice, and image. Re-enactment does not mean duplication – it means reaffirmation – reaffirmation of the treasure but in changing, appropriate vessels.

"Every continuation of tradition is selective," write Jurgen Habermas, "and precisely this selectivity must pass through the filter of critique, of a self-conscious appropriation of history."² His phrase – "self-conscious appropriation of history" – is a good statement about reflexivity. To argue with one's tradition is to be aware that tradition at any point in time is a product of a particular social and historical circumstance. It is to be aware that tradition – like the vessel in which the treasure is stored -- is a human product reflecting the age in which it is produced, and thus subject to human limitation. One argues with tradition in order to adapt it to one's new circumstances. This is what makes tradition open and dynamic, a living body of collective wisdom. Using quite different words, theologian Paul Tillich had much the same thing in mind when he spoke of the "Protestant principle," or the idea that radical faith in God calls for on-going critique and evaluation of faith practices and institutional structures.

Nowadays the toolkit metaphor is often used: a religious tradition is like a toolkit with its diverse set of beliefs, stories, symbols, rituals, images, and world-views. Just as you select from the toolkit what tool you need to fix a particular mechanical problem, people of faith engage in a process of selective appropriation from our past, we reinterpret stories, beliefs, practices to fit the times in which they live. Sociologist Ann Swidler, who proposed the toolkit analogy, also draws attention to “strategies of action,” or to the fact that we must engage tradition by actively re-appropriating it. Tradition is not something out there, it is within us---in our deliberations, our actions, our decision-making. She also distinguishes between “settled” and “unsettled” times. Jackson W. Carroll summarizes her distinction as follows:

In settled times, culture provides materials from which people construct broad, well-established strategies of action that become traditions that anchor and integrate their lives. The strategies or traditions are like well-worn paths that one travels to get from here to there. One does not have to stop and think about them. Even when people do not always act in the ways that their traditions dictate, their lack of consistency does not call the traditions into question. They continue to be taken for granted as right and inevitable. They are accepted as authoritative even when they are not fully followed.

In contrast, in unsettled times, older cultural patterns are found wanting and are jettisoned. Entrepreneurial leaders draw from the cultural tool kit to develop and create new meaning systems, new cultural styles, new strategies of action to meet the challenges of unsettled times.....ritual changes reorganized taken-for-granted habits and modes of experience.³

It might be helpful to place the discussion of the Church of the Nazarene in this context. A product of early twentieth century, this Wesleyan movement arose in a time when “the well-worn paths of tradition” were better able to prescribe a course of action grounding life in a meaningful whole. But we now live in a time which is surely more unsettled. Religious habits once associated with a sacred, transcendent dimension of life have lost much of their sustaining power. Strong religious identity institutionally formed and sustained over the life course is not as common as it once was. The marks of

holiness – particularly in dress and personal behavior – are not as clearly defined as they once were. These were all strategies of action fitting a more stable time, when the community was more intact, when the boundary distinguishing the sacred from its surroundings was better demarcated, and when social institutions exercised greater control over people’s lives. But with the rapid change and detraditionalizing influences of contemporary life, people experience a less tightly bounded world and with it a great deal more personal unease, and not infrequently a sense of metaphysical homelessness.

So what does all this mean for the Church of the Nazarene today? How do you appropriate tradition for our time? What are the marks of holiness fitting to our time? The church always exists within a space defined on the one hand by tradition, and on the other, by freedom in the spirit. “If we must choose between following well-worn, customary, and cherished paths of church practice, however faithful they are to the gospel narrative, and embracing culturally sensitive innovations that also appear to have gospel integrity, then let our choice be on the side of freedom,” writes Jackson Carroll.⁴ I think his formulation is a good one. He goes on to say, “To do this requires breaking the “but we have always done it this way” mentality that infects both members and leaders alike, not only about beloved local traditions but also about those that have come down to us from the history of the church---music, worship styles, organizational practices, and so forth. It means refusing slavish adherence to these traditions in favor of a process of reflective discernment in which we examine our cherished practices in the light of post-traditional realities.”

There is the related question: Should the church assume a bold posture or a humble posture? This is a challenging issue. Already we have noted the appeal of fundamentalist faiths with respect to the hunger for certainty. We can understand this hunger for certainty and absolutes, yet we must ask – in the advanced modern, or post-modern world -- to what extent are such definitive answers possible. Those questions were raised pointedly with the recent tragedy in South Asia: how could a good God allow so many people to die in a natural disaster? The truth is, we don’t know. And the very fact that we protest against God in the face of evil and tragedy—as Miroslav Volf recently noted – presupposes our own struggle with belief in God. Our anguish, our troubled spirits, our struggle with belief in God---that easily gets lost in fundamentalist answers. Many people today, I propose to you, are in a very real sense in doubt. There is uncertainty as to exactly what to believe. Growing numbers of Americans think that it may be possible to

believe but do not necessarily affirm belief – people Peter Berger has described as “uncertainty wallahs.”⁵ What distinguishes the religious climate we live in today, in part, is not the wholesale rejection of belief, but rather a hunger for belief. But not necessarily for fundamentalist belief, but for a more humble expression of faith based as Berger says on “epistemological modesty” – a faith that recognizes that there is so much we do not know, that relies not upon some particular, and seemingly closed formulation of truth but instead accepts doubt as part of faith and life. Both Berger and I speak about the large moderate middle of our society that is drawn to neither religious extreme – neither to the religion of sure answers nor to secular despair and indifference.

II

A second conversation a church in a reflexive mode must carry on is with the larger religious environment of which it is a part: Where does the Nazarene church fit within the religious economy of contemporary America?

One way of thinking about this is to look at where it stands in relation to the Wesleyan tradition. Is it following in a path similar to the United Methodists? Some 40 years ago this denomination and other mainline Protestants began to suffer serious membership losses. Those losses have continued up to the present. Will Nazarenes face the same in the years ahead? If no, then why not? What makes your church different? If you think maybe yes, then are there interventions in church life and practice that might minimize those stagnating trends out in the future?

Another way of thinking on this issue would be: What defines Nazarene identity over against other Protestant traditions? What other churches are you like? What churches are you not like? For a long time, of course, conservative Christians have been quick to say they are not like those mainline Protestants, and to point out the beliefs and behaviors which make them different. But what happens when in the course of an institution’s evolution, it begins to lose its original distinctiveness—that is, when the lines between it and other faith traditions are more blurred?

Or let us ask this same question about Nazarene identity in relation to that new, rapidly growing religious sector that thinks of itself non-denominationally. These are the churches that drop the denominational label,

emphasizing instead a more generic style of Christianity – the mega-churches, the community churches, the Calvary Chapels, Vineyard Fellowships, and the like. How does a church like the Nazarenes arising out of the Wesleyan tradition emphasizing holiness see itself in relation to this so-called “New Evangelicalism” or what Don Miller has called “new paradigm” churches?

It is a complicated question. On the one hand, vast numbers of Americans across many churches and denominations as we all know identify themselves as born-again Christians. They are bonded in faith despite their differing churches. Nazarenes are among them. But what are we to make of these new churches, almost all of them large, growing megachurches? Some commentators are beginning to criticize these avant-guard churches. They say they are selling out to the culture – putting too much emphasis on growth at the expense of commitment, and accommodating the culture to the point of risking traditional religious identity. In his book aptly entitled The Transformation of American Religion, Alan Wolfe writes as follows:

Talk of hell, damnation, and even sin has been replaced by a non-judgmental language of understanding and empathy. Gone are the arguments over doctrine and theology; if most believers cannot for the life of them recall what makes Luther different from Calvin, there is no need for the disputation and schism in which those reformers, as well as other religious leaders throughout the centuries, engaged. More Americans than ever proclaim themselves born again in Christ, but the lord to whom they turn rarely gets angry and frequently strengthens self-esteem. Traditional forms of worship, from reliance on organ music to the mysteries of the liturgy, have given way to audience participation and contemporary tastes.⁶

Elsewhere in his book Wolfe speaks of “salvation inflation,” arguing that by making faith so easy to accept, too simple and failing to address complexity, evangelical Christians have watered down its significance. Back to the question I raised: How do Nazarenes see themselves in relation to these popular religious trends? Should you embrace your denominational heritage, or play it down in a society where fewer and fewer Americans know much about denominational cultures?

Yet another take on this same issue, that is, the conversation a church should be engaged in, is a conversation with America. Historically the American churches of all major denominations have affirmed strong symbols of national solidarity and helped in mobilizing deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals. But what should be the church's response if nationalism becomes an end unto itself? Can the church assume a more critical, prophetic role and call the country into question? What about the prevailing myths of national innocence and that we are the millennial nation whose mission it is to carry Christianity and democracy to the world? Richard Hughes has a point when he says that we Americans tend to imagine ourselves as "unmarred and unblemished by evil, guilt, and sin."⁷ Hence, Hughes says, Americans are "quick to forget the tragic dimensions of this nation's past, along with the guilt this nation—like all other nations—inevitably bears." Separate identities as church and nation must be maintained, which means that we must be conscious of priorities. I am always reminded of the words on the tower of the Yale University campus: "For God, for country, for Yale." The early founders of that university had reflected on the priority of their commitments. How are we to order ours?

III

A third conversation relates to the increasing religious pluralism of the country – made very visible in 9/11. Pluralism encourages, indeed requires, norms of tolerance and acceptance, which was relatively easy in the days when a Protestant hegemony was intact. It becomes more strained as the power base shifts: the Protestant proportion in the nation is on the decline. Just this past summer the National Opinion Research Center announced that Protestants now number only 50 percent of the total population. Protestants continue to exercise disproportionate power and influence within the culture, but we are entering into a new phase of religious pluralism.

Diana Eck's book *A New Religious America: How a Christian Nation Became the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* makes the point – calling us to recognize the growing presence of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and of our expanding pluralism—implying with her title we are no longer a Christian nation. We are the world's most religiously diverse nation. But in sheer numbers, ours is still a highly Christian country – roughly 80 percent of the total population.

Much is misunderstood about the impact of the post-1965 new immigrants to the country. Migration to this country has made the country more, not less Christian. Latinos from South and Central America are largely Catholic, and immigrants from Asia bring their own versions of Christianity to these shores. Ironically, they return with indigenous styles of Christianity quite different from what Christian missionaries from this country carried to them a hundred-and-fifty years ago. More than anything else, this is the sign of a globalized world.

A significant aspect of the new pluralism is occurring within Christian communities—both Catholic and Protestant—as their range of racial and ethnic constituencies expands. Christian growth in this country is mainly in the non-white sectors, which means that Christianity in the United States is less and less a white person's religion. This de-coupling of race and religion is an important point both demographically and symbolically, and bears important implications for religious identity. The WASP – the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant – is slowly vanishing. Warner Sallman's image of a mild, somewhat sentimental Jesus with blond, Nordic features, so popular for generations of white Protestants is becoming an historical relic. Emerging is what Stephen Prothero calls an "American Jesus," imaged in many differing ways and reflecting our ethnic and religious diversity.⁸ The face, or should we say faces, of Protestantism is changing. Much the same can be said for Catholicism as an influx of Latinos begin to take prominence over older Euro-American religious styles.

Important, too, notions of pluralism in recent decades have changed throughout the country. It used to be that our challenge was that of extending tolerance to those who were religiously different. Increasingly, the challenge is move beyond tolerance – to create an open and more inclusive society without regard to faith traditions, "positive pluralism," as Diana Eck calls it. This greater openness to religious and cultural differences results in part from our commitment to pluralism as a social value, and also from the growing numbers of inter-faith marriages. Both trends of course clash with an exclusivist theology and older images of a crusading, monarchical God. We must ask: in face of these rapid demographic, cultural, and religious changes, how should we image Jesus and Christian teachings? The challenge for those of us who are WASPs will be to discern how much of the faith we hold is couched in our own cultural traditions, and how can we

accommodate a more richly textured and diverse Christian community, recognizing that styles of belief and practice are changing.

IV

A fourth conversation has to do with a growing split in modern American culture—that is, the split between religion and spirituality. Theologians may consider this a false split, but the fact is that ordinary Americans now use this language as in “I am spiritual but not religious.” Whether false or not, such rhetoric arises out of a distinction now made between the inner world of belief and outer institutionalized modes of religious expression. In its most radical version, it is a free-floating, self-focused type of spirituality, quite popular with the better educated classes, the so-called “new class” of knowledge workers, and the younger generations. Among these constituencies there is a radical turning inward, a search for truth in personal experience, a quest for the authentic self. For these spiritual seekers, the transcendent collapses into the imminent. In its strongest form, the self is elevated to the level of the sacred. God and self become one.

Listening to the testimonies of these spiritual seekers, we discover that they seek a sense of wholeness – of balanced relationship with others, with the environment, with the “other”—the one who is unlike you but may have something to teach you. We still live in a Cartesian world that all too easily separates body and spirit, nature and supernature, work and leisure, man and woman. Reclaiming the body is crucial, and especially the female body – which is something for a tradition steeped in Wesleyan holiness to reconsider. Also, for these people there is much appreciation for the shared spiritual experience of all humanity: suffering, death, breast cancer, crisis, tragedy, those experiences which often provoke us to cry out in Job-like anger, doubt, and despair. Not surprisingly, the small-group movement has grown so much in the past decade: people want to share experiences, and often across the boundaries of religious traditions. If we listen carefully to the spiritual seekers as they share with one another, there is critique of the church as too male dominated, too clergy dominated, and as an institution too turned in upon itself.

For seekers, as well as for many young believers raised within religious traditions, institutions all too often seem stifling. Spontaneity,

freedom of expression, and direct access to the sacred – all are rallying cries of the New Spirituality. “Whatever” is its watchword; meaning is found wherever it can be found, cobbled together if necessary from a variety of sources, and is certainly not to be restricted to a single faith tradition. It may be as some commentators claim that such spirituality is self-absorbed and hollow, yet we must ask: What does this movement of being spiritual but not religious tell us about this widespread search for wholeness and rediscovery of enchantment and mystery in a world that has largely become disenchanting and de-mystified?

Further, let us not reject this trend as that simply of a radical few. In a survey of 1150 people in North Carolina and California, Jackson Carroll and I found that 66% ---two-thirds --- agreed that a person should arrive at his or her own religious views independently of any church or religious group. Seventy-three percent of those ages 18-34 were in agreement. Many of you will remember Sheila, the person mentioned in Robert Bellah’s Habits of the Heart some 20 years ago. Sheila has many kin—inside and outside the churches.

In the modern, post-traditional world in which we live, Americans especially honor their own conscience in matters of belief and morality. They think for themselves. They may be mindful of what their churches hold to be true, right, and faithful, but they insist on being the final judges. Note all the attention bloggers are getting today – these people who write their personal commentaries on the Internet, often with religious or spiritual content. And what is interesting is that people exercise such freedom of choice and interpretation—often independently of a church—yet still think of themselves as good Christians. The best evidence of this comes from surveys on Roman Catholics in this country. Upwards of 90% of Catholics who say they disagree with positions taken by the church on various issues will also say they are good Catholics.

This holds more broadly, of course. What I am suggesting is that there is broadly-based democratizing of access to the sacred occurring in our time. The authority of the church has greatly diminished; people insist upon their own judgment. This is not just true in religious matters: it is true in medicine and law as well. People want second opinions, people go to the Internet and gather information about their health issues and legal complications, and often disagree with their physicians and attorneys. In advanced modernity, people are exercising their own agency more---

thinking of what is best for themselves, making moral and religious decisions that seem right to them, assuming responsibility for their own inner well-being.

Let's put this free-floating spirituality in larger context. Robert Bellah is fond of saying we have two dominant languages in our culture: one is this language of the individual on his or her own journey, which is private and focused around personal concerns; the other is the language of community, that which is shared and describes collective experience.⁹

The question then becomes: how is the church to engage contemporary culture? How is to engage the individualistic, self-focused language? How can the church both address the spiritual hunger of our time while at the same time tell a collective story about religious and spiritual life? What would be the proper blend of individual and collective language? Therein lies the challenge. If the spiritual and the religious are out of joint, as many Americans say, how might the two be brought together. For many Americans, it may not be possible: the rupture in our culture between secular, therapeutic language and the traditional language of the church is too great for a meaningful reconciliation. Yet for others, reconciliation is possible. Whatever else the church is, it is a community in conversation, engaging its tradition and the world around it. One must hold the Bible in one hand, and a newspaper in the other, as the old saying goes. The challenge is to reach out and engage the language of the other – including both the religious and the secular other.

Conclusion

As I said earlier, I have more questions than answers. But maybe that isn't so bad a situation. It is a good thing to recognize our limitations in matters of such gravity. It also underscores what I have been saying all along about reflexivity, or the need for an open and reflective approach to life and faith. We should never forget that we see through a glass, darkly.

Those of us who profess faith, in whatever tradition, ought to keep ourselves open to the possibilities. Faith – like life – has its challenges. We seek, and sometimes find, but always we must seek. Let me close with a

slight paraphrasing of a quote from Peter Berger written several decades ago:

There are times in history when the drums of God can barely be heard amidst the noises of the world. Then it is only in moments of silence, which are rare and brief, that their beat can be discerned. There are other times. These are the times when God is heard in rolling thunder, when the earth trembles and the treetops bend under the force of his voice. It is not given to us to make God speak. It is only given to us to live and to think in such a way that, if God's thunder should come, we will not have stopped our ears.¹⁰

¹ Quoted in Wade Clark Roof, "Religious Borderlands: Challenges for Future Study," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1998, 37 (1): 1-14.

² Peter Dews, ed., Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jurgen Habermas (London: Verso, 1992), 243.

³ Jackson W. Carroll, Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), p. 28.

⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵ Peter L. Berger, "Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty," The Christian Century 26 (August 1998), p. 783.

⁶ Alan Wolfe, The Transformation of American Religion (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 3.

⁷ Richard Hughes, Unpublished Paper, 2004.

⁸ Stephen Prothero, American Jesus (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁹ Robert Bellah et. al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1980), p. 172.