



The Emerging Twenty-First-Century Christianity

We are transitioning from one age in Christian history to another that is just forming. We need open analysis and clear-eyed awareness of where we are as a faith, as organized bodies within that particular faith, and, ultimately, as individual souls being formed by those bodies and that faith.

Many of us feel a sense of urgency that is closer to exhilaration than anxiety. We stand on the threshold of *something*, and we are gathered here in prayer and consultation in order that we may discern and act faithfully.

We need a common base from which to do our work. To do that requires our describing the circumstances, both ecclesial and societal, in which we presently are, as well as those toward which we seem to be moving. For many, this is already familiar material. Indeed, much of what I am about to say every one of us already knows or has observed, and though some of us may not have juxtaposed the pieces in quite the way I am about to do, all of us have heard with increasing frequency such catch phrases as post-Enlightenment, post-rational, post-Reformation, postliterate, postmodern, postdenominational, post-Protestant, et cetera, et cetera.

A couple years ago, Episcopal bishop Mark Dwyer said that to understand where we are just now and what we are entering into, one first has to understand that about every five hundred years the church feels compelled to have a giant rummage sale. We are in the midst of one of the five hundred “years,” and although the bishop’s quip may be funny, it is also deadly serious and clarifyingly accurate.

The Great Reformation

While the recovering academic in me is ever and always skittish about recurring cycles or patterns that are too pat, this one happens to hold not only water but also our future. If one goes back five hundred years from right now, one hits the Great Reformation of 1517. Of course, the Great Reformation did not begin on October 31, 1517, with ninety-five theses nailed on the door of the church at Wittenberg. In general, most historians will say that the Great Reformation, like all other such mighty upheavals, had a peri-reformation, or period of mounting pressure, that led to the explosion for which those ninety-five theses have become the objective symbol. In other words, dating the Great Reformation as an event of October 1517 is a kind of cultural convenience or intellectual reduction that simply names the date at which matters finally arrived at their tipping point, and everybody knew it.

It actually began in the latter decades of the fourteenth century when there were three well-armed popes running around southern Europe, all claiming the See of Rome, all ravaging the countryside with and for their respective armies, and all trying devoutly to do each other in. It was very, very difficult to persuade laity that any single one of such men was indeed the vicar of Christ or, for that matter, that any of them should have been. In other words, by 1400, there was the beginning of the breach in the dam, though the wall would not admit itself to be entirely broken for another hundred or so years.

The Great Schism

If one goes back five hundred years from 1517, one hits 1054 and what is known as the Great Schism. This

occurred at a time in which Rome and Constantinople, that is, Roman or Western Christianity and Orthodox or Eastern Christianity, declared each other in gross violation of true doctrine and the one, true faith and, on that basis, excommunicated each other, effectively determining that Roman Christianity would be the form of the faith that would dominate and shape Europe for the next five hundred years.

500 CE

If one goes back five hundred years from the Great Schism, one hits—logically enough—500 CE, and here one can pick as a defining point any of several possibilities. Some of my colleagues stretch the point a bit and name 410 because it was the year when Rome’s walls were successfully violated for the first time by the Lombards and their barbarian hordes. Or one can pick 451, when the Council of Chalcedon drummed Oriental Christianity out of communion with Rome and Constantinople, thereby determining that only Roman and Eastern Orthodox Christianity would be acceptable in the West for the next five hundred years. Or one may point, as definitive, to the year 480, when the Roman senate dissolved itself in recognition that there was no longer any imperium or city to govern, and Rome officially fell; or to 520 or thereabouts, when a man named Benedict wrote a Rule that was to become the undergirding for the monastic or medieval Christianity that was the overt expression of the melding of the then dominant traditions and their evolving ecclesial reordering; or one can even stretch the point to approximately 540 when another man, this one named Gregory and eventually—naturally—Gregory the Great, was born, for it was out of Gregory’s genius as pope of Rome that Roman Christianity would come to Britain, and it was by it that Anglicanism would be shaped.

The Great Transition

If one goes back five hundred years from all of that, one of course hits the Great Transition. That is, one hits the changing of the eras, the birth of Our Lord, the destruction of the Temple and, with it, of priestly Judaism in 70 CE. And if we were a good Jewish audience, at just this juncture some rabbi would remind us that if we go back five hundred years from the changing of the eras, we hit 500 BCE or the Babylonian captivity and the destruction of the first Temple and what some scholars call the time of the Great Transformation. And, the rabbi would

continue, if one goes back five hundred years from the Babylonian captivity, one hits the end of the age of the Judges and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty and line out of which the Messiah was to come.

All of which seems not only to militate for the accuracy of Bishop Dwyer’s observation but also to support its expansion to suggest that there seems to be a cyclical pattern in Judeo-Christian tradition and in the societies influenced by or born of it. It would seem, in other words, that there is a pattern of sorts within which it takes us about five hundred years to institute new ways of being, enthusiastically establish them as being sturdy as well as valid, and then over the following couple or three centuries to so institutionalize them that we elaborate, encrust, and finally embalm them with the accretion of both our fervor and our silliness. At that point, there is no hope for either religion or society save only to knock the whole bloody carapace off ourselves and start over again . . .

. . . except! Ah, behold the “except” here.

. . . except that you will note, I hope, that within all that Christian history, none of the overturned forms or presentations of the faith has been obliterated. Each, in its turn, rather has only lost hegemony—lost pride of place—to some emerging new form. Each also, as it lost pride of place, has had to drop back and seriously reconfigure and rethink itself, but each has survived in its new or reconceptualized form. Thus, Roman Catholicism did not cease to exist in 1517; it simply reconfigured and did such things as convening the Council of Trent or founding the Jesuits or removing simony, all of them responses and reactions. In the same way, Eastern Orthodoxy could hardly be said to have ceased simply because it was driven out of the Western experience for a millennium in 1054. Or that Oriental Christianity ceased to be after 454, or that the influence of the presbyters and the early church fathers ceased when their form of church lost hegemony with the fall of Rome and of Mediterranean stability to monastic Christianity.

No, each time what was gives way to what is becoming and then, in due time, reconfigures and continues to function as a member part of what, each time, is always a larger Christianity that is more geographically and demographically expanded. Thus when we say in 2007 that we in North America are post-Reformation, post-denominational, and post-Protestant, what we really

are doing is acknowledging, however unwittingly, that we perceive at some greater or lesser depth of analysis that the institutionalized presentations of Christianity—and especially of Protestantism, the newest kid on the block—those institutionalized and established forms of our faith that have informed roughly the last five hundred years, are no longer sufficiently viable to sustain the whole of the living church either now or over the five centuries ahead.

Religion—and let us be honest about this—religion is a social construct. It is the breath and soul of the society or culture in which it exists, just as surely as the sociopolitical-economic milieu in which it exists gives religion its physical and objective form. Not one of those things can be extracted from the others any more than the human agents in each sphere of reference can ever be independent of those in the others. That is to say that we no more came by our current upheaval in terms only of religion and of religious events and issues than did any of the upheavals of the past result purely from religious stresses and shifts. Quite the opposite. Each upheaval has been occasioned by, as well as accompanied by, factors that coexisted with it in the world of its time.

For instance, as the printing press enabled ordinary citizens to read the Bible for themselves and thereby to discover that all was not quite the way that church and priest had taught, so have the Internet and the World Wide Web caused a huge upheaval—an excitation, an acceleration—in ordinary citizens' ability to communicate with one another on matters of belief and faith. Likewise, they have allowed us to delve for ourselves into how things were seen and understood across the centuries, as well as into how they are seen by others across the present world, and this only to find once again that things may not really be, or ever have been, exactly as we have been told and of course—of inestimable importance—to discover that we need neither priest nor diocese nor hierarchy nor architecture nor debt nor system to be vibrant, living, connected community in service to Our Lord.

As surely as in the last peri-reformation the fiefdom gave way to the duchy and the duchies to the configurations and alliances that were to become the nation-states, so in our time the nation-state is losing hegemony to globalization, and loyalty increasingly is to humanity and/or shared community more than to national identity.

As part of the context of the Great Reformation, the notion of tribe, either geographic or biological, gave way as the basic unit of society to the concept of the nuclear family, and now the nuclear family is giving way to the domestic group as normative, be that a single-parent home or an extended family or a same-sex family or an affinity family or a common-table community or whatever.

Where once blood and land had been the basis of power for the centuries of medievalism, so their loss of authority and the rise of cash and a middle class as the bases of power informed, tripped, and were reflected in the Great Reformation. Just so in our recent time, technology and information, not cash or class, have become the bases of power and control and advancement.

And as surely as three armed popes simultaneously claiming to speak for God made folk question the clarity and authority of any one of them, so too has the presence of Protestantism's pathologic divisiveness. First, fundamentalism's doctrinaire rigidity and then, for the last quarter-century, politicized evangelicalism's hyperbole have driven belief if not to death then to new life elsewhere in some more credible ways of being servant to, and child of, God.

As surely as the rise of individualism or—if you prefer, an awareness of oneself as John Smith instead of John of West Whatever Village somewhere—as surely as that shift into claiming a self led to the drive toward unmediated contact with God, just so surely has the resulting Protestant excess of emphasis on individualization—and especially North American Protestantism's excessive valuing of individualism—led to a suspicion among us of any and all things that act either from the top down or with reference to none other than the actor. More important, it has also led to a yearning for discernment from within a praying community.

As surely as the realization that the cosmos was not flat and layered leveled the theology and ecclesiology of the Roman Church, just as surely the Great Reformation's founding cry of *sola scriptura, scriptura sola*—"Scripture only and only Scripture" . . . no more pope, no more magisterium, only what Scripture says and only what each man or woman reads for himself or herself as priest to himself or herself . . .

. . . just as the realization that the cosmos was not flat and layered leveled the theology and ecclesiology of the Roman Church, then, just as surely the Great Reformation's founding cry of *sola scriptura, scriptura sola* has been leveled by Darwin and Einstein and Heisenberg and Hubble and Penrose and thousands of other brilliant minds like theirs working to reveal to us the mechanisms of the physical world.

So too, just as Descartes's argument that he thought and therefore knew that he was defined humanness to the relative satisfaction of the last four hundred plus years, now has the coming of intelligent machines, of computers that can outstrip in calculation the limits of the human brain, of nanotechnology, of credible discussions of singularity, of all these things made us suspicious enough of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* to refer to it now as the Cartesian error. More to the point in popular conversation, however, is our unavoidable recognition that the mind is a product or function of the brain, and the brain is an organ of the body, subject to all the caprices, chemically transmitted and mediated responses, and mutual dependencies of any other part of the human body, leaving us with a curiously inadequate explanation of exactly what consciousness is and where it comes from or goes to. Having lost consciousness as the *sine qua non* of human definition, we find ourselves once more, and for the first time in four centuries, unable to say exactly what a human being is and/or to define in any kind of legally or religiously satisfactory terms exactly what is and is not human.

The Great Emergence

Now this list of parallels between now and five hundred years ago can go to more than three dozen discrete items, but there is, I hope, little need for that here, for I trust the point has been made that we are in reformation for very good and highly demonstrable reasons. I should also mention here that while it is too soon to know exactly what history will say of us and our time of upheaval, my personal money is on the probability that ours will be called the Great Emergence. And as surely as Luther despised and despaired of being called a Reformer and the movement of which he was a member-leader being referred to as the Reformation, just so surely some of the member-leaders of the emerging new Christianity despise and despair of being called emergents or of the movement's being referred to as the Great Emergence. Alas, it is not always

given to us to name that which we are, but when we hear, for instance, references to a man named Brian McLaren, we should be aware that we are hearing references to the Martin Luther of whatever this new thing—this third-millennium Christianity—is, be it in time known as the Great Emergence or as something else.

Moreover, by whatever name is assigned it, our current reformation or transformation is of a pattern with those that have preceded it. Always in these hinges of history, to use Thomas Cahill's term for them, always there is one central question, and that question is Where is the authority? Or, put another way, in what now, and where, does the authority exist that can determine for us what truth is? If the Great Reformation as the religious part of a total cultural upheaval cried, as it did, "No more Pope, no more magisterium" and asserted only Scripture and Scripture only as the residence of authority and as understood by the individual believer or company of believers acting in concert as their own priests, so too our times cry "No more idolatrous use of Scripture without the use of reason and progressive revelation and no more arrogant individualism as independent usurper, diviner, and authority."

Where we shall finally decide authority rests is not yet entirely clear. Not only is it too soon for any of us to be sure about that, but also it is true that the "Where is the authority?" question in our case has two concomitant and informing questions attached to it like leeches. Namely, whatever we name as our source of authority for the next round of human history must be able to render up a religiously satisfying and culturally workable definition of humanness and, almost as important, a palatable and mutually acceptable theology of religion.

As we work our way forward toward the resolution of these things and through our out-of-joint times, some of us—most of us, in fact—within the Protestant tradition will indeed find ourselves drawn ever more strongly to the centrifugal force of the center, of the new emergence, of the coming new shape of Christianity that is being referred to frequently as the new rose in recognition that the rose was the symbol and sign five hundred years ago of the Great Reformation. Others of us, both as individuals and as parishes and even dioceses, will find ourselves filled with righteous and highly understandable anger and/or anxiety that the center is breaking out from the rest of us and daring new things—daring to

challenge *sola scriptura* and hierarchy and the certitudes of doctrinal statement. Those of us who are so inclined will drop back and regroup into small but vocal conservators of the faith as delivered to us by the last reformation. God bless and keep that part of us, for that very business of resisting acts like ballast to prevent the whole of us from capsizing while we shift cargo in the midst of turbulent seas.

And some of us—not the majority, certainly, but a healthy number of us—will know ourselves drawn as people and as parishes and congregations, as whole dioceses and synods, to the business of reconsidering what it was that energized and roused and infused with glory our forefathers and foremothers in the Protestantism that was the expression of the last or Great Reformation. Diana Butler Bass calls this process “re-traditioning,” as each Protestant body begins to consider where best it can and will function over the coming years.

In addition, while the North American experience is distinct, it is not an isolated experience. Rather, North American Christianity and/or North American Protestantism function now within three spheres simultaneously and inevitably. First, we must be true to our own cultural heritage and imperatives. Second, we must be true to—indeed, we cannot escape—the fact that the West has undergone and been irreparably formed by rationalism, enlightenment, and the technological, scientific, and political advantages that those tsunamis brought with them. Third, we must be true to and responsive to the ineluctable fact that Christianity is a global religion and no longer a Western one, that in fact, as Philip Jenkins and others have so dramatically shown us, there is another—perhaps even second—Christianity emerging that may or may not be able to merge with, absorb, and/or be absorbed by our North American and/or British-influenced emergence. That is to say, two-thirds-world Christianity now trumps in sheer human numbers and perhaps in passion and certainly in land mass Western Christianity while at the same time working from a vastly different cultural, historical, and intellectual base.

In past times of reformation, the dominant new force in Christianity in the West has simply drummed out those non-Western cohabiters that would not comply, as was the case in the 450s when the Oriental church was sent packing at Chalcedon and again in the 1050s when Eastern Orthodoxy was forced to hunker down outside the walls of Western culture. That won’t happen this time—or it will happen, and it will be the West that will be forced underground to await its time of return and acceptance when another reformation rolls around. What two-thirds-world Christianity has to say to us and the counsel it can give us, if we choose to hear, could be like a kind of golden road stretching down through the coming decades into third-millennium Christianity. May we hear these words well and wisely.

And now, on that note, one last observation, but I think a pivotal one. Ours is the first time in Western—or even human—history when the body of Christ has moved through an era of reshaping, reforming, redefining within the context of mass communication, instant engagement, and unfettered, often unvetted, information. We, unlike those who have gone through similar reconfigurations before us, have the new and singular opportunity of, and tools for, discerning what is happening and of prayerfully guiding our own processes with intelligence as well as faith and thinking hearts. Unlike our forebears, we can discern and act together in an intentional, authentic, and unified way, but first we must define who “we” are, what discerning is showing, and just how “together” we want to be and with whom each of us feels called to be. That, simply put, is why I believe we are here and what we are here to do.

May God bless us in these endeavors and make of this a holy convocation.

About the Writer

Phyllis Tickle, for many years contributing editor in religion to Publishers Weekly, the international journal of the book industry, is frequently quoted in such sources as USA Today, Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, PBS, NPR, and the Hallmark Channel. Tickle is an authority on religion in America and a much-sought-after lecturer on the subject.