

A Religious Revolution of Love and Service

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A few years ago, I read a column by Tom Ehrich in which he considers the current religious scene. He began remembering a book written by Phyllis Tickle in 2008 called “The Great Emergence.” It seems more prescient with each passing year. Tickle’s primary thesis is that every 500 years, the Christian church goes through a major upheaval in which it needs to rethink how it lives and speaks in the world. She uses the charming image of the church holding a giant rummage sale every 500 years.

She asserts that the church is currently going through the fourth such upheaval. Like previous such moments, this is a time of transition and reformation.

The first came around the year 500. Early Germanic tribes swooped from the north, marched into Italy, and brought the Roman Empire to its knees. As they destroyed Rome, they also tried to wipe out its religion. Christianity, however, went underground. In abbeys like Iona, and monasteries established by leaders such as St. Benedict of Nursia, monks painstakingly copied the Scriptures as well as civilization’s great writings. One of the major effects of this monastic culture was to save Western civilization itself.

The second upheaval came around 1000 with the “Great Schism.” The Western church (based in Rome) and the Eastern church (based in Constantinople) fought over doctrinal issues. Each also desired greater political power, with the result that both the Pope and the Patriarch excommunicated each other. That split endures to this day between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

The third upheaval, the Protestant Reformation, comes from around 1500. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Thomas Cranmer, and various other leaders broke away from the Roman church to form their own churches. This religious reformation went hand in hand with the growth of nationalism and colonialism as Western European powers discovered new lands and claimed those lands for themselves. The split from the Roman church allowed kings and princes to end the dominance of the Pope in western European politics.

One of the enduring effects of the Reformation was an enormous growth in the number of different denominations or branches of the church, which persists to this day. Christianity wears so many different faces that it’s difficult to speak of a single “Christian movement” today. There is a vast chasm between Christianity in the West and the booming churches of Africa and Latin America. The church in Europe has virtually collapsed, and in North America, there is a relentless decline in institutional Christianity.

Tickle calls this age the “Great Emergence.” Diana Butler Bass calls it “Christianity after Religion.”

In his column, Ehrich notes that conservative Christians blame outside forces such as secular humanism and atheism for the decline of the church. They claim there has been a determined attack on faith. Subsequently, the conservative right has become increasingly militant in its demand that society return to its Christian roots. This is one of the factors at the heart of the expansion of Christian nationalism, fostered by social conservatives who want to find a way to turn the clock back to some idealized golden age, which never truly existed.

Obviously, I am not one of those social conservatives. Along with many others, I call myself a progressive Christian. We don’t look to a golden past but strive instead to look forward as we seek new ways of being Christian in the world, ways that are marked by compassion, hospitality,

and an inclusive welcome for all people. We reach out into our society with a call for justice, peace, hope, healing, and above all, love.

As Tickle noted, this is the fourth such “rummage sale” in the life of the church. It’s difficult to see right now where the road may lead, since we are in the midst of the transition. It will become clearer as we keep working at it. But Ehrich notes that two things have already become clear.

“First, Christianity in North America is being freed from its own roots. Roman Catholics in the pews are straining to find why Rome and the pope are relevant to their faith needs. Mainline Christianity is moving beyond the captivity of white, middle-class, property-owning, optimistic serenity. Conservative Christianity is discovering that right opinions lead nowhere, and a combative countercultural stance merely makes its proponents seem angry and judgmental.

“Second, Christianity no longer controls the flow. Its ideas no longer shape cultural dialogue. Its leaders no longer command broad respect. Its buildings no longer draw people in by simply opening their doors. Churches’ stubborn clinging to Sunday worship stopped working decades ago.”

Ehrich points out that people are not turning away from Christian faith because the faith is being attacked from the outside, but because it is collapsing from the inside. “The world changed—as cultures, economies, and political systems always do—and the church thought it could stand still and avoid offending pillars and pledge payers.

“Meanwhile, people began finding their own pathways to God, their own languages for accessing God, their own ideas about life’s purpose, and their own forms of faith community.”

Stuck with inherited buildings they can no longer afford, with traditions that no longer resonate outside the bubble, with members graying and aging and pews emptying, some church leaders seem ready to consider change, while others hunker down.

Most will change too little and try to circle the wagons. But some will look outward and be moved to compassion by a world lost in pain and dysfunction and by lives being captured by a consumerist mindset which does not and cannot satisfy. Those who see what’s happening more clearly are seeking new ways in which the church might serve and love our world.

“It’s an exciting and hopeful time. Faith communities brought to their knees by changes beyond their control will land in exactly the right posture: to confess, submit, pray, and serve.”