

Catholic and Evangelical: Christianity in the Twenty-First Century

The Jews then said, "You are not yet fifty years old, yet you have seen Abraham?" Jesus replied: "I tell you most solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I am." —John 8:57–58

AS THE THIRD Christian millennium approaches, the most important fact about the Christian religion is its extreme bifurcation, what is usually called "polarization."

A quarter of a century ago this was not apparently the case. At that time it seemed as though a modified kind of liberal Christianity was destined to triumph in all the churches, the center point moving a few degrees one way or another from denomination to denomination. While students of the subject were aware of the continued existence of "reactionary" kinds of religion which accepted no compromise with modernity, they assumed that such groups were merely cultural remnants, doomed to die within a generation.

Nowhere has modern sociology proven itself less perceptive than in its assessment of religion. Many sociologists in effect pretend that it does not exist, apparently because it scarcely exists in the world with which they are most familiar—the academy. But even those sociologists who devote themselves to its study have tended to discourse knowingly and complacently on the ways in which modern culture simply dooms traditional kinds of faith, and consequently forces

religious organizations to accommodate cultural change. (Inexplicably, American sociologists have constantly repeated the claim that urban industrial society undermines religious belief, although the history of the great American industrial cities completely disproves that thesis.)

Around the middle of the 1970s observers capable of seeing what was there, not merely what they thought should be there, noticed that some of the "reactionary" forms of Christianity were not declining but growing, and that in fact it was the liberal churches consciously trying to adapt themselves to modernity which were losing members. Significantly, this was perhaps first discovered not by a "disinterested" social scientist but by an official of the liberal National Council of Churches—Dean M. Kelley—possibly a case of an executive noting with dismay the way in which rival firms were increasing their "market share."¹

Today it is commonplace to suggest that the "mainline" churches can no longer claim that designation, and are in danger of sinking to minority status among American religions, while the "evangelical" or "fundamentalist" churches are growing both numerically and in terms of boldness and self-

confidence.

The reason for this was explained by Kelley in 1973—what people seek from religion is primarily a meaning for their lives. Thus if a church seems to admit that it has no wisdom which is not available elsewhere in the culture, there is little reason to keep belonging.

But the pattern of decline and growth in church membership is complex. As liberal denominations lose members, the disaffected do not necessarily join more conservative groups; often they merely cease attending church at all. They have, in the words of the late Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike, “graduated” from the church. There is some evidence that, as people move from more conservative to more liberal denominations, they do so simply on their way to complete secularization.

Sociology, as well as some theology, has also misunderstood the situation in seeing the church as fighting a rearguard action against a secular culture, the difference between conservative and liberal churches being mainly between those who wish to charge head-on and those willing to make periodic strategic retreats.

On the contrary, it is arguable that the culture at large is more religious than are the liberal churches. Many people with no church affiliation seem to believe in miracles of various kinds, for example, even in the power of the stars. During the 1970s the United States did not become a secular desert, as conventional wisdom had predicted, but actually a kind of religious tropical jungle, in which there was no creed or ritual so bizarre that it did not find adherents. Tolerance for such wild growths is also greatest in precisely the most self-consciously avant-garde areas of the country, such as California.

The liberal churches are actually themselves among the principal agents of secularization. Consider the case of a religiously illiterate, theologically confused individual who has never been active in a church but decides to join one. As a typical product of the culture he probably thinks that supernatural events

do sometimes happen. He regards the Bible as essentially a biography of Jesus, and thinks of Jesus as some kind of god-man. When such a person becomes involved in church life, however, he will be told by the clergy, in ways both explicit and implicit, that these beliefs are at best naïve. Many of the clergy in liberal churches conceive of their mission as precisely that of stirring doubts in those they think of as being complacent, the very people whom traditional Christianity identified as “believers.” If it were not for the liberal churches, the United States would in fact be a far more religious society than it is.

How liberal Christianity came to this situation is complex, involving practically the entire intellectual history of the West in the past two hundred years. The Protestant churches, first in Europe, then in the United States, committed themselves in the nineteenth century to maintaining as far as possible a harmonious rather than a combative relationship with the secular intellectual world. Modern “mainstream” Protestantism has long taken its cues from the universities and, following the “cultural revolution” of the 1960s, has automatically extended its antennae to receive messages from every other source that in some sense can be called “progressive.” For liberal Christians one of the highest imperatives is precisely the acceptance of social, cultural, and political change. Part of that imperative is skepticism itself, so that the modern liberal Christian does not merely experience anguish and unwelcome doubt, as his Victorian ancestor might have, but runs to meet it, and accuses himself of infidelity insofar as he fails to doubt. This skeptical notion of truth-seeking is in direct opposition to Jesus’ “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The result is that the liberal churches now have little to say which “modern man” is interested in hearing, but this has produced remarkably little soul-searching on the part of church leaders. The analogy

with business quickly fails, because today's religious executives show almost no willingness to change their product in order to win back dissatisfied customers. It is a tribute to their tenacious fidelity to those principles which they do have that they are apparently prepared to see their churches sink into oblivion rather than acknowledge that their love affair with modern culture has been a disaster. (Again, it is not always the case that former customers of the liberal churches have taken their business elsewhere; often they have simply concluded that they do not need the product at all.)

But the crisis of liberal Christianity goes much deeper than is usually recognized, so deep that it is doubtful if its direction could be reversed even if its leaders wished to do so. Liberal Christianity is just on the edge of its final crisis of self-identity, a crisis whose outcome has in fact long been decided.

This is best seen in the major preoccupations of the liberal churches today—social and political change, feminism, and the non-Western world.

There are many degrees and kinds of "liberation theology." However, at its core the "social Gospel" has always insisted that the validity of Christian teaching for modern times is established by only one criterion: whether it helps or hinders the movement towards "justice," as understood in political and economic terms. Thus, particular beliefs and practices of traditional Christianity are retained or discarded not according to whether they are deemed to be true or false in themselves but according to the way in which they fit the struggle. Marx's claim that religion is the opiate of the masses is broadly accepted, and any faith which points its adherents towards the supernatural realm is automatically held in deep suspicion. Even if the Gospel is affirmed as an ally in the cause of justice, it is reduced to merely that—an ally. Pride of place automatically goes to secular movements better equipped than the churches to force social change.

Feminism is merely a particular instance of this social Gospel. Perhaps even more than political radicals, feminists are ruthless in their evaluation of every reality according to its potential for harming or helping their movement. Extreme feminists have rejected Christianity completely, as inherently "patriarchal" and hence irredeemable. More "moderate" feminists content themselves with revising the Gospel at will—deleting, rewriting, reinterpreting, all for the purpose of making it into a feminist document.

While knowledgeable Westerners are generally aware of the various crises which confront Christianity, such as those precipitated by Marxism and feminism, they tend to be less aware of a crisis which is even more fundamental—the missionary crisis, unnoticed because it takes place far away. Along with Islam, Christianity has always been the most aggressive of all the great world religions. A Christianity which is not missionary is no longer Christianity. Yet all over the world Christian missionaries are suffering profound crises of conscience and self-confidence, believing that they no longer have the right to convert non-Christians and that in doing so they are simply agents of Western cultural imperialism.

Each of these crises is precipitated by the same fact—the Gospel itself is no longer taken as absolute, as the word of God according to which every other word is judged, but is itself subjected to judgment and criticism from other sources. For the liberationists the ultimate truth is social equality of a radical kind. For feminists it is the assertion of "womanhood" against a "patriarchal" culture. For self-doubting missionaries it is the modern dogma of cultural relativism, according to which no culture can be permitted to "impose" itself on another.

It is this last position which most tellingly reveals how deep the crisis runs, since it is of the essence of the Gospel that it claims to be above all cultures and not the artifact of any. (Almost all Christians now agree that Christianity should not be

spread throughout the world in exclusively Western forms. But distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate kinds of cultural adaptation is extremely difficult.)

Although Christianity has long been identified with the West, it was not of course originally a Western creation at all. To the Romans it must have looked like yet another in the endless procession of strange new religions from the Near East. If Western Christians now "impose" their beliefs on Asians and Africans, their European ancestors suffered those same "impositions" during the first millennium of the Christian era.

But the willingness to subject the Gospel to criteria outside itself is not something which has simply occurred, and it is not motivated merely by the desire to be fashionable. Rather it is inherent in the whole enterprise of modern liberal Christianity. Its roots are in the nineteenth-century decision to treat the Bible as merely a historical document, to be studied and evaluated like any other historical document. Over a period of a century this has robbed it of almost all teaching authority, except where its teachings seem to coincide with what "modern man" happens to believe anyway. If there is little that can be known for certain about "the historical Jesus," then obedience to his teachings is at best a conundrum and possibly quite futile. (It is noteworthy that the critical method as applied to Scripture has produced far more corrosive skepticism about its meaning than in the case of almost any other ancient document. If anything, the tendency of modern scholarship has been to reaffirm the essential historicity of ancient texts once dismissed as fabulous.)

Every liberal church contains movements pressing for the reaffirmation of orthodoxy. However, liberalism is triumphant in those churches not merely because of the will of their leaders, or because it has been entrenched for decades. Rather the logic of the entire history of modern Protestantism dictates that result. The liberal churches have no basis for reaffirming the truth of classical Chris-

tian doctrine even if they should wish to do so. Because of decisions made long ago, and merely played out in their endless ramifications since that time, the liberal churches have nothing else by which to guide themselves except the "signs of the times." To return now to the classical idea of divine revelation would be to turn their backs on commitments made as long as a century ago.

The historic gamble of liberal Christianity was the hope that, by making strategic concessions to the skeptics on certain "inessential" Christian beliefs, such as miracles, it would be easier to protect those which were deemed necessary, for example, the divinity of Christ. Instead history has proven the reverse—the more concessions that are made, the more will be demanded. The same methods which dictate that Jesus did not actually feed 5,000 people with a few loaves and fish dictates also the conclusion that his tomb was not empty on Easter morning. That in turn rests on certain allegedly scholarly assumptions that call into question practically everything which Scripture teaches.

If Scripture is indeed a fallible human document, then Christianity's historic claims to unique truth are indeed arrogant and presumptuous. The final end of liberal Christianity comes when it begins to move definitively outside the Western orbit in a systematic way. At that point it no longer finds it possible, or even desirable, to affirm that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God in history. Such a belief can only be seen as a human "discovery" dictated by the culture which has been so thoroughly shaped and molded by a religion which, rejected in the land of its birth, by a series of historical accidents found a home in Europe.

What liberal Christianity now offers is no longer the choice between relatively more or less diluted forms of Christianity, as it has done in the past, but the choice between Christianity and other religions. Liberal Westerners can now in good conscience call themselves Christians only in the sense that they are heirs to a particular cultural tradition, and they have

some loyalty to that tradition, in almost exactly the same way that they retain some sense of loyalty to the country of their ancestry.

The liberal Christian now affirms the name of Jesus only because it has been thrust upon him by his culture. He is a Christian in the same sense that he is a Minnesotan, without necessarily making a judgment about any other state. But in the end even this is too much, because modern life offers abundant opportunities to learn about the religions of other cultures, a task which falls on the liberal as a moral imperative. Once this task is shouldered, remaining a Christian is an arbitrary act, which perhaps suggests a certain personal rigidity. Why not, as some Westerners have asked for years, make the spiritual effort to become a Buddhist or Hindu?

Ultimately, liberal Christianity must see all religion as simply the mythic ways in which human beings have chosen to understand the deeper meanings of existence. There is no "irruption" of the divine into human affairs, except as glimpses from nature or history. Although Christianity took its historic stand on the bold claim that it was a historical, not a mythological, religion, the liberal view is that all religions are mythological and that historical claims are either dubious or unimportant. (Thus whether Jesus' tomb was empty on Easter is dismissed as insignificant to the "spiritual event" which was the resurrection.) Religions can perhaps be ranked according to the apparent depth and breadth of their mythologies, but such an enterprise is tentative at best.

What, then, will happen to the liberal Christian churches? In a literal sense the very name "Christian" will soon become an embarrassment in such circles, since it has about it the ineradicable odor of "triumphalism." The liberal churches will probably go on calling themselves Christian, but with frequent disclaimers that such a designation is to be understood in "non-exclusive" ways. Here and there certain Christian church buildings have already accommodated themselves to

pagan altars, and such practices will probably become almost required in liberal circles.

The liberal churches will thus readily transform themselves (the process has been going on for decades) into all-purpose spiritual communities, which exist to help people find meaning wherever they can—in social activism, in various kinds of psychotherapy, in programs of self-improvement, and finally in many kinds of mythopoetic attempts to grasp the meaning of existence. No pride of place will be given here to the Christian "myth," and in fact liberal clergy will recognize an obligation to give more than equal time to other myths. Those who still find the Christian "myth" the most meaningful will be a dwindling group that is seen as merely the remnant of a dying tradition. What effect all this will have on the membership of the liberal churches cannot be foreseen; conceivably it could lead to an increase.

The Catholic Church fits into this scenario only with difficulty, and Catholicism today can be understood only by understanding it in the way knowledgeable people have understood Anglicanism since the time of the Oxford Movement—as made up of diverse and often opposed groups, each claiming to have authentic understanding of the true meaning of their faith.

Thus there are groups within Catholicism (including a very high proportion of its theologians and other intellectuals, possibly a majority of its active nuns, a good many priests, and even some bishops) who have no other agenda except that of "catching up" with liberal Protestantism, and who are embarrassed that, a quarter of a century after the Second Vatican Council, liberal Protestants are still outpacing liberal Catholics.

There is a battle of monumental significance going on for the soul of the Catholic Church, a battle in which, as is always the case at momentous turning points in history, the majority of those affected have only a dim understanding of what is at stake. There is, however, one

difference between Catholicism and Anglicanism in this regard—the papal office, which makes possible final and definitive pronouncements as to what the Church believes, in a way which cannot occur in Anglicanism. (This has a practical correlate in the authority of the pope to appoint bishops all over the world, and thus to transcend the vagaries of “the local church.”)

Both nonbelieving Americans and conservative Christians have reasons for thinking of their society as a secular one, which in many ways it is. But a dispassionate study of the reality also leads to the conclusion that the United States is one of the most strongly religious countries in the Western world, with the forces of secularization balanced by forces of religious revival.

The historical reasons for this are not altogether clear. In part it has to do with the remarkable fact that, in the world's most advanced industrial nation, the working classes on the whole remained very religious, as they were becoming less so in Europe. Perhaps the variety of churches in the United States provided something for every religious taste, offering abundant alternatives to those who found a particular denomination unpalatable. (Thus Methodists could become Episcopalians as they moved up the social ladder, while the Episcopal Church never loomed as a dominant social institution, as did the Anglican Church in England.)

At the deepest level, nevertheless, religious fervor seems to be bred into the American bone, a reality which goes back to the earliest days of the European settlement. Such religious fervor is like petroleum deep within the American soil—erupting (or oozing forth) repeatedly and unpredictably, often revealing deep reservoirs long after practiced eyes had pronounced the well dry.

The evangelical revival was something which had been going on quietly and unnoticed for decades after conservative Protestants lost their battles for control of most of the major denominations during the 1920s. What made the phe-

nomenon noticeable was the sudden appearance, in the mid-1970s, of a highly visible and aggressive kind of evangelicalism, that aggressiveness called forth to a considerable extent precisely by the progressive secularization of society.

From the time of the romantic revival of the early nineteenth century, the most notable religious conversions tended to be of the “high church” variety—Anglicanism, occasionally Eastern Orthodoxy, most often Catholicism—which offered believers a faith based on a stable and objective order, including hierarchy, tradition, ritual, dogma, law.

Such religions were by no means empty of the possibilities of intense personal experience, as in Catholic mysticism. But their claims did not rest there but rather on the reality of an order independent of experience.

In its clearest and most effective expression, Roman Catholicism offered first of all a systematic intellectual account of itself, proportionate to the capacity of the believer—from grammar school catechisms to the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Its teachings were carefully and philosophically formulated. Where their meaning was in doubt, there was an organized hierarchy said to possess infallible powers of interpretation. Divine grace was accessible tangibly, even physically, in the sacraments. There was a sometimes intense and transforming experience of the sacred in the same tangible ways—especially the liturgy. The spiritual and the material were wedded through powerful religious art. Finally, what was expected of the believer was set forth clearly and in some detail in a series of laws and rules.

Viewed from one perspective, such a system could appear narrow, legalistic, and brittle; viewed from other perspectives, it looked to be what it claimed to be: a vital synthesis of the abstract and concrete, the objective and subjective, the divine and human. Its critics, and especially its Catholic critics, have never addressed the irony that it was precisely this system which attracted a constant procession of intellectual converts from the time

of John Henry Newman, and that its most brilliant modern intellectual flowerings, from the sixteenth century through Jacques Maritain, Christopher Dawson, and others whose influence reached its peak in the 1950s, was in many ways because of, and not in spite of, the elements modernizers have sought to expunge.

During the 1960s this system seemingly began to unravel and, with some exceptions, it has ceased to be the beacon to converts which it once was. The reasons for this are complex. The Second Vatican Council, while an intellectual success in its goal of synthesizing tradition with innovation, can be viewed as a psychological failure. For many Catholics, especially priests and nuns, its chief message seemed to be that traditional teaching was wrong and that they should now commit themselves unhesitatingly to change, a message church authorities have counteracted with only partial success.

But there was a deeper and as yet little understood reason for this seeming collapse of the "high church" tradition. Arguably, its plausibility depends on a relatively stable, structured kind of society in which the rightness of things in their appropriate place is intuitively understood.² For all its newness and fluidity, the United States prior to about 1965 was such a society, at least compared with what has come after. The great cultural crisis ca. 1970 was nothing less than the systematic denial of legitimacy to all existing social arrangements, a psychological revolution of almost unprecedented scope. Given the sudden collapse of the "plausibility structure" of the larger society itself, the weakening of that of organized religion was almost inevitable.

But the prophets of secularization were wrong, and the collapse of the political movement called the New Left was followed by a new cultural movement which was open to, among many other things, religion, so long as it was not religion of the "high church" kind. Many social radicals could look benignly on this

development because it seemed to be another blow struck against Christianity—the new religiosity was promoting various faiths which Christianity collectively designated as pagan, even as it further undermined Christianity's own claims to authority. What such observers did not bargain for was the evangelical revival, a phenomenon which has not been confined to Protestantism, since Catholic, Anglican, and even Eastern Orthodox versions of Protestant pentecostalism have been among the most vital movements in those denominations over the past twenty years.

What both evangelicalism and most of the pagan religions have in common (for all their deep and unbridgeable differences) is that they offer the believer a faith which is immediately satisfying in a personal and emotional way and which does not necessarily rest on anything more than the believer's deep subjective conviction of its truth. The expressions of such faith are to a great extent intensely personal and subjective, and even when the religion prescribes objective forms of expression (Buddhist mantras, for example) their value is measured almost entirely by their subjective impact on their devotees.

To a considerable extent modern evangelicalism represents one more expression of a recurring phenomenon in the history of Christianity—the desire to expunge all the collected "debris" of tradition and return to an original, pure, and above all simple kind of Christianity. In its extreme forms it is found among people who are intensely pious but seldom bother to attend church (some are parishioners only of television preachers), through local congregations which see no need for any denominational affiliation, to highly organized denominations which feel little need for dogma, sacrament, or moral law.

The Catholic Church survived the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in large measure because of its deep popular roots—the common people were only slightly affected by the corrosive skepticism of the upper classes, and the Revo-

lution's systematic attempts to destroy the Church succeeded mainly in creating inspirational martyrs. Thus in 1815 it was possible to begin the work of rebuilding on a still very solid popular foundation.

Ironically, except among Catholics whose faith was already well formed before 1965, it is its popular base, even more than its elite, which Catholicism has now lost, due to the pervasive secularism of the mass media and the public educational system and to the virtual collapse, in many places, of the Catholic educational system. (Where it has not collapsed institutionally, it has often lost its reason for being.) A living and largely inarticulate Catholic tradition tends now to be a very splintered thing. On the other hand, there are still intellectual converts who in effect read their way into the Church, then have trouble finding a concrete manifestation of the Church that Newman and others described.

Evangelicalism, however, retains its own popular base, and even seems to extend it. The secularism of the media has been to some extent disarmed by the unselfconscious simplicity of many evangelicals—politicians, athletes, criminals, entertainers, businessmen—who take every opportunity to proclaim publicly how “I found Jesus,” or “I was born again.” Thirty years ago, not only secularists but also many “high church” Christians found such witness embarrassing and even repulsive. Now it is an accepted part of the nation's public culture.

It has been argued that this is potentially a “Catholic moment,”³ succeeding the collapse of “mainline” Protestantism, during which that church, by virtue of its size, its traditions, and its view of the world, has the ability to seize the initiative in defining the direction of American culture. But despite signs of recovery in Catholicism, ranging from Pope John Paul II to local charismatic communities and relatively obscure religious orders, the Catholic Church is at present simply too divided, and its members too confused and demoralized, for it to seize such a moment. The Church's recovery will,

even under the best of circumstances, require several decades, and it is unlikely to be achieved without greater internal strife than it has already experienced. It is also unlikely to be achieved until large numbers of liberal Catholics decide that their continual presence in the church is pointless. (This, for example, seems the only way in which the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood will ever be finally resolved.)

Thus the immediate Christian future seems to belong to the evangelicals (including evangelicals belonging to “high church” denominations) who flourish in the midst of an intellectually and spiritually chaotic society because they offer strength and certitude at the only point where many people feel they can find it—within themselves. When all objective reality seems chimeric, the self alone becomes a likely place in which to find truth.

But if the evangelical spirit were merely that, it would readily become the kind of antinomianism—the rejection of all authority, especially restraining authority—which has also been a recurring phenomenon in the history of Christianity. This has not happened, mainly because it is precisely the spiritual chaos of the larger society that the evangelicals find appalling.

Their remedy to potential antinomianism is the classic Protestant one of “*sola scriptura*,” the Bible alone, and the more militant evangelicals have entered the public arena as the opposite of antinomians: They believe Scripture contains a precise blueprint for every aspect of living.

As they become more sophisticated and informed about social and cultural realities, however, they tend also to become aware of the inadequacy of this. The Bible, for example, does not mention abortion and, if the practice is to be condemned under the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” it becomes necessary to explain why Christians are not required to be pacifists. Thus it becomes necessary, little by little, to edge towards speculative theology, in which the human sciences

have legitimate roles to play, just as the "high church" tradition has always recognized.

So also with regard to belief. Fervent affirmations that "Jesus is Lord" begin to seem incomplete when it is apparent that liberal Christians are prepared to use them in consciously equivocal ways. The classical tradition of dogmatic formulation thus also begins to seem relevant.

Finally, the intensity of a purely subjective mode of worship inevitably starts to wane, leaving the believer with the challenge of crystallizing his spiritual experiences in some permanent form. Hence liturgy.

By no means are all evangelicals moving in this direction. Some in fact are merely retarded liberals, who seem fated to replay all the mistakes made by liberal Catholics after the Second Vatican Council. But on the whole the future of Chris-

tianity, at least in the United States, seems to promise a core of believers numerically smaller and more sharply delineated from the larger culture, even as the liberal churches begin to acknowledge to what degree they are Christian only in a residual sense. There is a new possibility, too, for synthesizing authentic Catholicism and authentic Protestantism in a kind of ecumenism scarcely dreamt of by those earnest liberals who in the past have claimed that movement as their own property.

—James Hitchcock

¹Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York, 1972). ²For an analysis of the pattern see Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York, 1970). ³See the book of that title by the Lutheran social critic Richard John Neuhaus (New York, 1988).