

## **The Context of American Christian Life**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This brief paper is an attempt to provide a common narrative of self-understanding for a conversation amongst American Christians about the Nature and Mission of the Church. It is a very brief survey without significant illustrations for the purpose of focusing a self-understanding of the state of Christian life in the United States of America. This short piece is not designed for scholarly precision. Its purpose is to inform a common conversation. Toward this end, the primary focus is upon recent trends in American culture that are grounded in the fertile soil of American history that impacts our faith traditions. A brief survey of our structured legacies in America and the legacy of our spiritual movements is listed at the end of the document.

### **THE AMERICAN CONTEXT**

#### **CURRENT AMERICAN TRENDS**

The landscape of Christianity in the United States of America is greatly influenced by trends in the spiritual and cultural life of our people. While these trends impact our individual communions in unique and particular ways, all American churches are impacted in some way by the trends we shall name. As a consequence, any shared American understanding about the Church needs to be framed by the common experience that we share as a consequence of these current trends.

#### **Consumerized**

In the first instance we must acknowledge the impact of our consumer culture on the life of our churches. Some of our traditions are more resistant to this trend than others, but every American has been shaped by a culture of choice and the individual ideal. Consequently the people who participate in our churches bring a particularly strong sense of individual conscience to their spiritual endeavors. Some observers have questioned how much individual distinction exists in a culture where choice is often funneled into binary options by dominant cultural and economic forces. However, the impact of this dimension in American life is a consumerist ethos that is commonly experienced by congregants and leaders alike.

#### **Entrepreneurial**

In light of the trend named above, there has been a growing appreciation for entrepreneurial leadership within churches across America. Congregants and supervisors alike are apt to

reward leaders who risk the loss of some cherished habits in pursuit of ministries that expand the impact of churches in some measurable form. Whereas some cultures place a high premium upon conformity, Americans celebrate initiative and resourcefulness. While charismatic leaders have long influenced churches, the virtue being most adored of late is a spirit of selfless abandon in pursuit of organizational achievement.

### Event Driven

The spirit identified above has focused our ministries around impact events that gain wider attention than ordinary routines of the individual communities we share. To some extent, this trend may align with the annual events and seasons of our liturgical communities. However, the event driven trend in our culture causes such occasions of significance to be framed with an eye toward the impact and attention that an event can garner. Often great energy and resources of spiritual communities are invested into events designed to gain cultural attention in the marketplace of ideas.

### Service Oriented

In recent years, many of the events that draw the attention of the public eye have centered on a range of service opportunities. A cultural awareness of American blessing and abundance fosters a spirit of public service that is easily aligned with our inheritance of Christian charity. Consequently the charity of our churches is increasingly joined with civic efforts and even initiatives of other faith communities. While such civic events are often calendared at odds with Sabbath observances, our churches have largely embraced this service impulse in a way that has enriched our congregations and the communities where they witness.

### Collaborative

While we can easily name the distinctions of faith that divide us, a spirit of collaboration in the service of others regularly becomes a uniting force amongst our churches. Such associations often bear fruit in other forms of collaboration that foster dialogue and greater understanding. This trend toward collaboration is consistent with our culture that is discovering higher levels of productivity an innovation whenever structures of bureaucracy or hierarchical uniformity are diminished. There is a growing expectation of collaboration and partnership in our culture that has been challenging traditional forms of authority within our churches.

### Decentralized

Our society has fostered a growing appreciation of all things local. Even successful corporate gathering places are at pains to highlight a belonging to various local histories and habits. A collaborative spirit is celebrated as long as it does not represent a centralization of power or authority. America has long celebrated the distribution of authority amongst its states, municipalities, and notably, its schools. Today the flattening of authority is often viewed as a virtue of authentic transparency. It is notable that our nation elected a President who constructed his political base from a history and network of local community organization.

### Viral

A particular genius of President Obama's political campaign was its ability to uniquely master the technique of viral marketing. This trend of targeting products and ideas to go viral is entering a new dimension in our society wherein individuals feel empowered to influence events through a focused engagement of the possibilities perceived as part of social networking. When compared to the rest of the world, our nation by far has the highest per capita exposure to the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Such exposure has increased the potential for viral impact of culture by our spiritual communities. In many ways this trend amplifies a continuing American fascination with immediate outcomes.

### Violent

We confess that while our great ideals seek after peace and abundant life, we are daily beset by a plague of violence and death in our cities, in our media, and in our imagination. On September 11, 2001, deadly violence was uniquely and emblematically brought upon us. In subsequent years, we have had to confront the subject of terror in many personal ways. Historically, the expanse of the American landscape has given room for those with resources to live in isolation from personal injury. Yet the advent of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has brought grief to every community as death and injury returns to even the most idyllic of settings. In our world of global media, we are more cognizant, (often defensively so), of the way that crime and punishment in our society is perceived by the world at large. We remain quick to demonize and seek vengeance. Our recent painful self-reflection has done little to bring harmony to the balance of life and death in our society.

### Secularizing

Finally, we must acknowledge the continuation of a secularizing trend in our culture. Yet this acknowledgment does not mean Americans are lacking in a spiritual impulse. What it does

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

reflect is the fact that Americans' continuing search for meaning and direction is: growing weary of membership centered faith communities; confronted by a growing interfaith dimension in their culture; developing an increasing sophistication in its appropriation of knowledge about world religions in origin and practice; "de-churched" by negative experiences of Christian communities and their leadership. The American culture has been shaped by the Christian inheritance of concern for social and personal welfare. In turn the American culture is now influencing the shape and structure of our religious life.

### Summary of Current Trends

All of these trends impact the cultural and spiritual landscape of America and consequently touch our faith communities to varying degrees. Our conciliar response to the Nature and Mission of the Church paper will reflect a religious life that has been shaped by these trends in contemporary spiritual life. We gather as disciples of Jesus Christ in a society whose trends are: Consumerized; Entrepreneurial; Event Driven; Service Oriented; Collaborative; Decentralized; Viral; Violent; and Secularizing.

### OUR CULTURAL LEGACY

These current trends are formed on top of a cultural legacy of innovation and change that is more particularly robust in our young nation than in many other nations of the world. We emerged as a nation with vast natural resources that engaged the bulk of our population with an agrarian pattern of living. This legacy has sustained a cultural imagination that idealizes the land and those who work it from sea to shining sea. This ideal remains, even though this land was scarred by the way in which people were forcibly transported and enslaved to till the land in its vast reaches. Soon America industrialized its economy and shifted the character of its workforce. Our agrarian impulse was swiftly challenged by an immigrant population being drawn to possibilities for employment in the burgeoning industries of our nation.

As industries centered their efforts in places that could easily bring goods to market, the population of our nation began a steady shift from farm to city. Thus while our spiritual lives are still influenced by agrarian dreams, the culture of America has been forged in the diverse vitality of its urban centers. As these urban centers developed, the bucolic impulse of our nation morphed into suburbs that provided homes and an American Dream for millions of citizens. The suburbs also served to create divisions of socio-economic distinction that reinforced the worst of our racial and ethnic prejudices. Often the suburbs provided the workforce for an increasingly global corporate marketplace. As the global economy has diversified, the needs of the workforce have shifted to require the skills of those fortunate

enough to receive education from amply endowed school districts in our suburbs. In contrast our urban centers are often neglected, juggling scarce resources despite an occasional influx of young adults or cultured retirees settling in isolated pockets of our cities.

The society that we inhabit is a literate society framed by generations of Americans committed to the dream of higher education. This impulse to literacy has left a legacy engaged with the written Word in scripture that is a distinctive of our nation. Yet we now have graduated generations of Americans that have been trained in visual comprehension. The emotional content of visual communication as perfected by our heavily marketed society is quickly appropriated by our people and is increasingly expected in our worship lives together. With the advent of personal computers, smartphones, and various web intelligences our culture assumes a high degree of technical proficiency as standard. While expectations vary according to the age of Americans, it is understood that all sectors of public life are demanding the expense of higher technology. Such change is consistent with a culture that is captivated by the notion of human progress and possibility – a self-confident fascination that has often led to a consequential neglect of the persistence of sin.

This cultural legacy that we have briefly surveyed has set the stage for a dimension of our American legacy that we have yet to fully comprehend. This is the dimension commonly called Social Networking. The advent of this dimension of American life is being felt in the realms of education, business, government, and also most certainly in the world of our spiritual life. The newest spiritual movement – the Emergent Church - in American Christianity has fully embraced this dynamic of our social life in a way that has fostered dialogue across traditional dividing lines that had long not been crossed. Reflecting upon this dimension of American life, Jürgen Moltmann recently suggested, “You cannot have the Eucharist in a virtual church” because it lacks the “near senses” we first experience as a child.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the advent of social networking is transforming many of our notions of community in place and time.

### **AN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN LEGACY**

The current trends in culture and cultural legacy on which they rest are engaged with the legacy of the various faith traditions represented in our conciliar response. As American Christians we are shaped by the legacy structured by our faith traditions yet we also are impacted to a greater or lesser extent by the currents of many spiritual movements that cross our structured boundaries. The nature of our conciliar response will reflect the outcome of our ecumenical

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<sup>2</sup> The Emergent Theological Conversation, Libertyville, Illinois, 9/11/09.

endeavors to strengthen our common ties that can be affirmed across the bounds of such structures and movements.

## STRUCTURED LEGACY

The Americas were first discovered by Christians who claimed territories in the name of Royalty but also in the name of God. As such portions of our land still house missions first established by Roman Catholic evangelists who shared the gospel in America long before the pilgrims first set foot on the shores of New England. With that fact as prologue we can name the fact that the largest single branch of American Christians today is the Roman Catholic Church. Along with the various traditions of Orthodox Christianity, these Christians participate in religious structures born of the ancient church and have been sustained throughout the centuries by a continuous line of Episcopal authority and liturgical practice. While America can point to a legacy of Spanish missionaries and the establishment of the Maryland colony, the majority of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians arrived in waves of later immigration, first from Europe and then from Latin America and other parts of the world.

Despite the relative size of the Roman Catholic Church, the majority of American Christians identify themselves as some kind of Protestant Christian. The Protestant Christian origins of America derive largely from the British Isles. The established Church of England sustained a legacy of Christians in the Episcopal Church. The heritage of the Protestant Reformation broadened and found expression in the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed and Congregational traditions that were established early in American history. This Reformation Protestant heritage formed the base for a protestant work ethic that shaped the ethos of our nation from its inception.

In addition to the churches of the Protestant or Magisterial Reformation, there came to America's shores pilgrims seeking solace and relief for their religious conscience. Their inspiration was often drawn from spiritual streams whose source was the First or Radical Reformation. The Puritans, for example, were the first Christians to shape colonial life by their desire to live a life purely guided by the will of God on display in Holy Scripture (the "Law of the Gospel"). There came also Baptists, Moravian, Mennonites, Amish, and other immigrant churches that were born of the First or Radical Reformations<sup>3</sup>. The impact of these movements is profound. Today, the largest group of Protestant Christians in America call themselves Baptist and while we can point to an enduring legacy of the First and Radical Reformations, the structures that derive from these legacies have tended to be decentralized and more

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<sup>3</sup> [http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news\\_file/22.pdf](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/22.pdf), World Alliance of Reformed Churches: Consultation on the heritage of the First and Radical Reformations, 1986.

congregational than churches formed either as Ancient Faith churches or framed by the Magisterial Reformation.

Shortly we will consider the spiritual movements that have fashioned the shape of American Christianity in such a significant way. Yet before we depart from a consideration of the structured legacy of our churches, it is necessary to identify the legacy of our many vibrant American-Born churches. The Non-Conformist movement of the Puritans fostered the development of the Religious Society of Friends. The Great Awakenings established a revival tradition in American spiritual life that continues to this day. The Methodist movement widely influenced American religion and produced an outcome of established Methodist churches. The Stone-Campbell Restoration movement gave birth to Christian Churches, some of which came to be considered a part of the Mainline tradition.

The term “Mainline Churches” has to encompass a range of Protestant churches that served to support a Protestant collaborative ethos in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These churches included both churches of the Protestant and Anabaptist Reformation as well as many American-Born churches named above. The ecumenical movement of Christianity in the United States was significantly shaped by the participation of these “Mainline Churches” throughout the past century.

Beyond the Mainline churches, the Pentecostal movement has dramatically impacted American spiritual life. This movement has grown in powerful ways throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has impacted many faith traditions and also generated Pentecostal church associations and denominations.

It is impossible to talk about Christianity in the United States of America without identifying the profound impact made by the Baptist tradition upon the religious landscape. This tradition has deep roots in the Puritan and Anabaptist heritage but also was shaped by the Great Awakening and to varying degrees by the fundamentalist movement. Its manifestations are various and participation in ecumenical relationships is diverse according to leadership. However, it must be stated that the impact of and response to the Baptist tradition can be clearly seen throughout American culture.

Finally, when speaking of American-Born churches it is necessary to identify the way in which the legacy for many of our churches was shaped by the racial or ethnic segregation of our nation. Churches served to sustain a sense of identity and belonging for countless immigrant communities as they arrived from foreign shores. Yet the deepest and most profound segregation of our churches has been along color lines. The affront of slavery divided the

American church and produced a legacy born of pain. Yet even out of this pain, cherished spiritual gifts have come to enrich life and story of American Christianity.

## SPIRITUAL LEGACY

On American soil, movements that cross lines of tradition and theology have shaped the spiritual life of Christians. Often these movements have been structured into distinct faith communities. However, frequently, these spiritual movements continue without institutional structure, even though they ordinarily have a clear and discernible message or point of view.

The Puritan movement served to motivate and inspire the ethos of Protestantism throughout the inception of our nation and into the framing of the national psyche. The Puritan experience served to root much of the American spiritual experience in a profound sense of personal piety. The industrious spirit of the Puritans shaped the character of a Protestant work ethic that has proven to be an enduring legacy of American Christianity.

The first and second Great Awakening and subsequent revival movements reshaped the character of religious life in America by affirming the individual experience of Christians and empowering their voice and witness for service into ever expanding horizons for the American spiritual landscape. This movement served to strengthen calls for repentance and personal piety. However, it also empowered the call of conscience to confront a broad range of injustices that afflicted American society. These movements served to “democratize” American spiritual life in terms of its leadership and its patterns for worship and learning.

The fundamentalist movement has dramatically shaped the character of American Christianity across denominational lines. The Niagara Bible Conference of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century coined the term when describing the fundamentals of Christianity that were summarized in 1910 by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church as being five fundamentals: Inspiration of the Bible; Virgin birth of Christ; Atoning death of Christ; Bodily resurrection of Christ; and the Reality of Christ’s miracles. This distillation of the faith into simple and straightforward propositions mirrors an American cultural trend named by many Europeans who would define Americans a “headline people.”

As the nation industrialized and immigrants working in urban centers flooded the populace, another movement spread across American Christianity. The Social Gospel movement sought to express the gospel in tangible ways to improve the life and living conditions of the most destitute in society. This movement was often inspired by a post-millennial instinct and came to be warmly embraced by the mainline traditions of Christianity in America. In recent years, this movement has inspired many evangelical Christians that have a passion to serve and reach



the poor. The Social Gospel movement served to inspire many programs and structures of liberal Christian traditions.

A counter movement to fundamentalism has existed in American Christian spirituality that has been variously known as modernist, liberal, or progressive. This movement embraced a contextual approach to the faith and to the study of scripture. It embraced the insights and contributions of careful academic scholarship. The structural leadership of mainline Christianity and ecumenical bodies of the American church has been greatly influenced by the spiritual movement.

It would not be possible to speak about the American Christian experience if we did not identify the profound impact of our immigrant heritage upon the shape of our spiritual life. Slavery left a segregated imprint upon the worship life of America. Consequently much of the American spiritual life has been fed by a unique history of the African American experience that transcends boundary lines of structured traditions. Many of our traditions have been greatly shaped as repositories of ethnic heritage and culture. The rapid growth of Latino and Asian communities in recent years has brought a character to the faith that is commonly shared across many of our traditions.

The Civil Rights movement is an activist expression of an American civic imagination that is fueled by our spiritual heritage. While Americans can properly be criticized for our penchant for civil religion, the Civil Rights movement has been a powerful force for justice whose spiritual roots can be found in a broad cross-section of organized religious life. While this movement can trace its spiritual lineage to African-American churches, the inspiration of the Social Gospel movement and progressive Christianity placed a claim upon the originators of this movement.

The Charismatic movement of Christianity has spread across many traditions of our spiritual life. This movement emphasizes the gifts and movement of the Holy Spirit within the contemporary church – not just in the experience of the earliest church. The Pentecostal movement that traces its origins to the 1906 Azusa street revival is a related part of the Charismatic movement that has born fruit in new church traditions and has rapidly spread across the globe.

The Evangelical movement has been widely influential across our various traditions in America. Its emphasis rests upon the need for spiritual conversion associated with the experience of being born-again. While there are many emphases held in common with fundamentalism, the Evangelical movement draws a wider range of adherents. It holds a missionary impulse to

share the gospel that comes to be expressed in a range of engagements with society in politics and social action.

The Church Growth movement developed in the 1960's out of a desire to share the gospel with people who were spiritual "seekers." The movement quickly learned to apply business principles that sought to reach target audiences with the gospel message presented in a manner that would be clear and compelling. The mega-church phenomenon in the United States is largely attributed to the seminal work of the Church growth movement. The size and scope of these "mini-denominations" has reframed the character of American spiritual life to be more focused upon individuals and congregations than on denominations and issues.

The Emergent and Emerging Church movements are part of a relatively new spiritual movement that is now reaching many Christians that have been "de-churched" by the manner and approach of various traditions and movements in the past. It is shaped by the emergence of a "post-modern" society in which there is broader understanding and acceptance of various points of view and experience. A particularly interesting dynamic of this movement is its ability to make use of the new phenomenon of social networking. Consequently communities of faith are being formed that are either non-geographic or accidental by neighborhood coffeehouse. This movement is loath to define leadership but many of their most prominent writers have been engaged on occasion in formal ecumenical dialogues.

## **SUMMARY**

The American Christian context has been greatly influenced by a range of spiritual movements that are uniquely able to flourish in the plural and tolerant society we share. These movements have been born of a range of traditions and are often reflective of trends that are taking place in our society. The American Christian experience has many points of common contact shared across our traditions. As a consequence, any shared narrative about the Church from an American perspective should reflect that common experience.