



The Post-Christendom Church in Rural Communities

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IF THE CHURCH HAS NO FUTURE AT ALL, CLEARLY IT HAS NO FUTURE IN RURAL America. I have long been interested in the church's future, especially now that Christendom is past.¹ How will this look in rural communities?

I. A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

A recent issue of *MacLean's*, Canada's weekly newsmagazine, presented as its cover story a piece entitled, "*Jesus at 2000: Christianity struggles to reinvent itself for the next millennium.*"² Normally, *MacLean's* manifests little interest in religion.³ But the year 2000 is news (for the moment), and since it's only the year 2000 be-

¹Those who wish to pursue my own analysis more deeply should consult: *Has the Church a Future?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1988); *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

²*MacLean's*, 29 November 1999, 60-71.

³In fact, I often call it *Time*-without-a-religion-section. Typically, *Time*, the very same week, published as its cover story an extensive and highly positive account of "Jesus at 2000," 6 December 1999.

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If the church is to be effective in rural communities, it must set aside nostalgia and become an agent of memory and hope, resistance, perspective, and mission (rather than expansion).

cause the sometime-regnant religion of the west imposed its own chronology on our civilization centuries ago, even the most blasé of secularists have to pay a little attention to “Jesus” and “Christianity,” along with Y2K.

But is that what church people are doing, struggling to reinvent Christianity? In the post-everything world of popular journalism, the idea that Christians today are trying to rediscover their God-given identity and mission is not likely to suggest itself. If that world sees the churches scrambling to find a way into the future, it can only assume that Christianity is trying to recover its “market,” just as financial houses and automobile manufacturers do all the time.

While some forms of Christianity on this continent certainly do seem to be bent upon recovering the glories of Christendom after a slump, many of us are highly suspicious of such an ambition. Reinventing *Christendom*, with its worldly triumphs all intact, can surely not be regarded as a faithful Christian vision after Auschwitz. What we need to recover is a vision of Christian existence and mission that was lost precisely because the churches were too intent upon gaining influence and prestige—too keen to market their “product” in ways attractive to the political and economic interests with which they had covenanted. Christianity has tried the way of power and glory far too long already; it is high time for us seriously to attempt the way of suffering love (*agape*). The great theologians as well as the great Christian activists throughout the twentieth century have shared a common goal: re-forming of a church that has sought conformity *with* “this world,” through its trans-formation by the Spirit of the One whose love *for* the world led him to a cross (Rom 12:2). Which is where real love for the world regularly leads. Those of us who have been moved by such a vision do not see ourselves as “inventors” of anything. At best, we are copiers—shameless imitators of the invention of Another. If only we could become better at being copy-cats!

In one respect, however, *MacLean’s* got it right: something must be done if Christianity is to progress very far into the next millennium. It is not necessary to agree with everything Bishop Spong writes to see his dictum “Christianity Must Change or Die” as good plain speaking in the best American tradition.⁴ When even jaded journalists take notice of how bad the ecclesiastical status quo has become, Christian congregations that are still playing at business-as-usual must be wakened from their slumbers.

The following data from *MacLean’s* ought to sound an alarm for complacent church folk:

- while 87% of Canadians told the 1991 census takers that they are Christians, only 20% actually go to church weekly [and I would say that’s high, at least for urban and rural churches]
- only 12% of the age-group 15 to 24 attend church with any regularity

⁴John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

- there are only 48 Roman Catholic seminary students in the entire country this year [there were 445 twenty years ago]
- 30-40% of congregation members in larger urban centers are absent on Sundays because of retail openings, shift work, and sporting events
- the Anglican church closed 526 “mostly small rural churches” between 1992 and 1994

These data may be more dramatic than U.S.-American religious statistics. The United States is still a “religious” country by Canadian standards. But in this respect, at least, Canada, like Europe, may be a better indicator of the shape of the future than is the United States, where the Christian religion is still playing (but for how long, and how deeply?) the role of “culture religion.” Where the once main-line churches in the United States are concerned, the quantitative status of denominations is only a little less dramatic than figures like those quoted above. And when questions of *quality* are added to the computation of the statisticians, they provide the wherewithal for much soul-searching on the part of the best spiritual leadership in the American denominations.

II. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RURAL CHURCH

One of the items cited above will have particular significance for those on both sides of the international border who are involved in rural ministry: the Anglican church closings—a reality by no means limited to Anglicans. Shannon Jung and his colleagues quote the Glenmary Research Center in Atlanta to the effect that “at least 40 percent of the people in rural America are unchurched.”⁵ The “depression” and “powerlessness”⁶ experienced by so much of rural North America generally is reflected in the exodus from country and village churches and the despondency of many who remain in them. The life of rural communities, which used to be centered in the church, is now more likely to be centered (if it is centered at all) in “school (especially sports)”⁷; but in all probability the “center” will have disappeared altogether in the age of electronic globalism and of the ubiquitous automobile, which whisks country folk off to the nearest city at the drop of an impulse.

It is particularly troubling that relatively few of us are left who have first-hand remembrance of how different rural and village life once was. I grew up in a village before the age of television, before everybody had cars, before the whole population of the country, prompted by the hucksters of consumerism, began to dream vulgarized middle-class dreams. The churches in my village *were* the center: the center of worship, certainly, but of nearly everything else too. There was no sharp distinction between school and church: school concerts were often held in church buildings, and vice versa. Church organizations and clubs abounded, and for every age-group. Sunday school attracted most of the children of the larger area—and

⁵Shannon Jung et al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 16.

⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

⁷*Ibid.*, 30.

the “children” stayed until they were twenty or thirty years old. Or seventy or eighty! Both sets of my grandparents were farmers, proudly caring for small mixed farms. “Agrobiz” was unheard of; so was the genetic manipulation of the food supply. The farmers worked together and played together. They were close to the land and close to one another.

In the space of half a century, that whole way of life has vanished—or nearly so. My grandfather’s farm, together with the farms of all his neighbors, is now a big hole in the ground—property of an immense cement-manufacturing enterprise. Driving along the road beside the hole, it is very easy to become nostalgic for the life that used to people that place. What has replaced it, even when it is more attractive than a great ugly limestone pit, can often seem by comparison terribly bleak, lonely, joyless, inhumanly fast, and, for many, frightening.

III. A DIFFICULT TRANSITION

The question such reflections raise for serious Christians is: How shall we make this difficult transition into a millennium that promises to witness greater and greater victories of the kinds of changes that have already challenged so deeply that rural way of life, including its Christian component? I shall present here only four observations that could serve as discussion-starters.

1. *Memory and Hope*

There is no point trying to live in the past, no matter how nostalgic one may be about some of it. But there *is* a point in remembering that past; and in fact if it is not remembered, there will be a concomitant loss of hope for the future. The building blocks of hope are always salvaged from the ruins of history; and when we forget the slow and painful evolution of our hopes as a civilization (think, for example, of the concept of democracy) we lose the capacity to renew and inculcate hope in people, especially young people. We are already suffering from so much historical amnesia that the many attempts at inspiring churches and communities with “vision” are usually hampered by a lack of substance and credibility. Such visions become superficial and promotional because their backers cannot count on a knowledgeable receptivity in the minds and spirits of those for whom they are intended. If we are going to go forward into the unknown territory called third millennium, whether as churches or societies, we shall have to acquire an informed and usable past.

In this respect, churches are in a position (if they will assume it) to become *centers of recall* for the communities in which they exist and which, in many cases, they have greatly helped to shape. And within churches, those whose age and/or acquired knowledge have enabled them to possess some depth of understanding concerning the past have an obvious vocation—one that is far too seldom drawn upon. What would it mean for the future of country and village parishes if the elderly, instead of being shunted to one side or made recipients of well-meant condescension, were treated as stewards of historical consciousness?

2. *Resistance!*

A community that is really aware of the best dreams of its own past, like a church that is informed about the Bible and the better traditions of the faith, will not be victimized by the kind of technological and economic fatalism that has seized hold of our whole civilization and threatens to destroy us. The nineteenth century taught people to think “Progress” (capital P) inevitable; the twentieth century has taught us to consider all technology Progress. It isn’t. Big holes in the ground are not better than the beautiful farms they swallowed up, nor are the sprawling cities for whose “advancement” (all that cement!) the holes have been dug. “Globalism,” so-called, is not to be confused with ecumenicity, and the internet is not the salvation of the race.

As I wrote this article, thousands of deeply caring people, some of them Christians, were in the city of Seattle protesting the arcane machinations of the World Trade Organization. That, if we are still in touch with the prophets of ancient Israel, is more like providence than anything likely to emerge out of the information revolution!

Recently, I asked a friend, “What do you consider the most important twentieth-century lesson for us to carry into the next century?” He answered at once: “Resistance!” He is a German, now an octogenarian. As a youth, though he voted against Hitler, he joined the army and fought in World War II. Through bitter experience, he has learned—as have many of his contemporaries—how vital it is to be vigilant, discerning, and resistant of what may seem, on the surface, beneficent and true. Protestantism had its genesis in that kind of vigilance. But sometimes one feels that Protestants (protest-ants) have forgotten how to *protest*. The forces that call for Christian resistance today are more subtle, and therefore less visible, than noisy racist ideologies, though these still abound. What threatens not only rural life but all life on the planet today has more to do with economics than it does with crass political posturing like that of Hitler or Stalin. And, as the richest of earth’s peoples, we North Americans, collectively speaking, are for the most part on the receiving end of the material goods of the reigning economic system. It is therefore doubly hard for us to name and to resist that system, even when significant numbers of our own people, as well as institutions like rural churches, suffer from it. Even many of our best denominational and ecumenical pronouncements manifest a conspicuous ambiguity at this point. Our critiques almost always stop short of radical protest against the tyrannous economic globalism that rides roughshod even over national governments.

I have an uneasy feeling that an example of what I mean is present in the otherwise very commendable volume, *Rural Ministry*. Surely a paragraph like the following *ought* to lead to far more strident resolves than are entertained, finally, in that study:

We should work for an economy and a politics where the worship of God can flourish. This is a call to identify false gods and idolatrous moral directions. It is

especially hard to do in a culture that often [*often* only?] endorses values that are at variance with Christian concerns for the common good, the well-being of the disadvantaged, and the health of all creation. When short-term privatized profits and individual advantage are the ascendent values, the preservation of a society with the freedom to proclaim and live out Christian values is absolutely vital.⁸

Bravo!—except for that timid “often” that takes the cutting edge off the whole critique. But what practical forms of resistance and quests for alternatives would this lead to if it were taken seriously? Wouldn’t the churches have to become less precious about the line of demarcation between religion and politics?

3. *Perspective*

The exodus from rural churches, which is different only in detail from the exodus from urban churches, has been very badly interpreted by the churches themselves. The impression has been created—both explicitly and by neglect—that this departure from the “faith of the fathers” is something quite new and that it represents a failure of verve, nerve, and imagination on the part of individuals (especially clergy) and denominational leadership. I do not want to excuse anybody, least of all the leadership of the denominations; but it is high time that the churches achieved a better perspective on this whole phenomenon.

It is *not* new. It has been under way for at least two centuries—ever since the enlightenment of the eighteenth century, noticeably. Christianity, which by a fluke of history (not necessarily divine providence!) became the official religion of empire in the fourth century, has been being displaced from that high cultic office for a very long time—turfed out of the center by secular humanism, by religious indifference, and (more recently) by the surge of other religions in the formerly “Christian” west.

This process, which certainly has some unfortunate aspects, should not and need not be considered by serious Christians to be, as such, unfortunate. I suspect there is more of God in the disestablishment of Christendom than there was in its establishment. Christianity has a far better chance to become authentic (by which I mean, to become what the Bible and its own best traditions mean by “church”) in the third millennium than it usually managed to be in the second. Precisely because it is no longer automatic—everybody’s religion at birth—it will have the chance to be genuine. It may now more often become the occasion and locus of *second* birth. The losses that the churches are experiencing are only losses of externalities, inessential things, quantifiable things like money and numbers of people and buildings and influence in high places. Paradoxically, this kind of loss is absolutely necessary if we are ever going to discover the real treasures of our faith. The symbolism of death and resurrection applies here too.

Many concrete consequences follow from such a perspective. I name two:

⁸Jung, *Rural Ministry*, 27.

First, let us stop blaming one another. Stop blaming the pastor or the organist or the elders. Stop blaming the people who don't come to church any more. Stop blaming yourselves. Try to achieve a working historical perspective: the humiliation of the church in Smithville is part of a whole, immense historical movement—a movement in which, if we have enough faith and imagination, we can certainly discern purpose. Second, those communities of faith that are most conspicuously affected by this great change, as many rural churches are, are in many ways the fortunate ones. Unlike the “successful” congregations that are nearly always found in middle-class suburbs, where people are trying desperately to hold on to the American dream, the little churches that find themselves struggling for life have got close enough to death to become really thoughtful. And thought, as human history demonstrates with great regularity, rarely accompanies “success.”

4. *Mission, not Expansion*

We have got to make up our minds, as Christians: Is what we are after a continuation of Christendom (which means the dominion of the Christian religion; the transformation of as much of the world as possible into a “Christian” world), or are we ready to try something new—and very old? Sixteen-odd centuries of Christendom have conditioned all of us to answer with the first alternative: we want more and bigger and better editions of Christendom. Some of us want mega-Christendom. We want to expand, to take over everywhere, to convert the whole world. We can all trot out Bible verses that seem to make that kind of thing a sacred mandate. The Great Commission! To be sure, political correctness has of late made us a little conscious of the *incorrectness* of the put-down of other faiths implicit in this idea. But we have been at it so long we hardly know any other approach, even when we have come to realize, as we must, that any actual implementation of such a mandate would entail horrendous violence in our already-violent little planet.

The idea of Christian expansion (read, if you like, “growth”) is so deeply inculcated in us that even the most sensitive among us allow that idea to creep in by the back door whenever we talk about the Christian “mission.”

But for biblical faith, mission does not mean expansion, whether territorial or statistical. There is precious little interest in numbers in the Bible. Even the book called *Numbers* isn't about numbers. Jesus, as someone wisely put it, did not say, “Count my sheep,” he said, “Feed my sheep”! If there is any numerical assumption in the New Testament, it is that there will likely only be a few “laborers in the vineyard” (and, as at least one of Jesus' parables suggests, many of them will be complainers). “Will there be any at all?” Jesus once asked. If anything, the Bible has a preferential option for small (to coin a phrase)—or, to put it another way around, the Bible has an immense suspicion of big. The concepts of election and discipleship, as well as Jesus' many metaphors about the kingdom (salt, yeast, light, a little city on a hill), all suggest one commanding idea: a minority that does something important for the majority.

That is what mission is all about: a disciple community that itself experiences

enough of the love of God to know that that love is directed towards the whole world—whether or not the world ever realizes it. At bottom, the only difference between church and world is that the church knows something about the world that it doesn't (or won't) know about itself: that it is greatly loved. It is the mission of the Body of Christ to live that love in the world—and, *when the time is right*, to explain to the world why it does so. The rural church that stays put, gets down to brass tacks, sloughs off its dead “religious” baggage, and lives God's love right where it is will be salt and yeast and light, no matter how unimpressive and unsuccessful it is by marketplace standards.

If in the immense and uncertain future that stretches out before us as persons and communities of faith we discover a little better than we have done in the past how to *be* Christians, we will not spend too much time and energy worrying about all the people who aren't. We'll be too busy taking care of them, and of the planet they and we inhabit. ☩