Bearing Witness: Traditional Faith in Contemporary Expression
Rebecca Chopp

What Russia Believes In
Elena Stepanova

War and Nuclear Weapons and the Methodist Church
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Fall 1997

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Introduction

About 15 years ago, an anthropologist and rancher named Robert Basso was asked by an elder of the Western Apache to make a map. Not a white man's map, the elder said. There were plenty of those. What they could really use was a map that illustrated how Apache people knew their place and the meanings it held for them. Basso discovered that numerous spots in the Arizona countryside—hills, steep slopes, cornfields, buttes, rocks in streams—had distinctive names, such as "Two Old Women Are Buried," "She Carries Her Brother on Her Back," "Rotten Field," and "Trail To Life Goes Up." These names held stories of things that happened there, where ancestors said words and did things to help people learn how to live a long and decent life. Basso's friend, a wise man named Dudley Patterson, summed it all up for him: "Wisdom sits in places."

A book like this can help us learn greater respect for the Apache people, whose wisdom challenges commonplace views about the meaning of the land. But the phrase "wisdom sits in places" is powerful even if we have only a basic sense of our own rootedness. Every place has its own wisdom, because people associate their most significant experiences with certain locations. Historic battlegrounds have a haunted feeling. Many church buildings seem to belong just exactly where they stand (at the center of everything). And, I suspect, the house you grew up in will always have a slight aura of sacred ground. Basso's research reminds us of the simple truth that you don't really know a place unless you know what happened to the people there.

For much of the world, the history of the place includes an encounter with Christianity. We begin our fall issue with Rebecca Chopp's energetic restatement of the Christian gospel in modern times. For her, the vitality of the faith is best expressed in terms of testimony—in biblical terms, to bear witness. This is a specifically
Christian way of life. Considered in the context of Christian mission, such testimony and the way of life it engenders can either clash or blend with established cultural patterns. But the essence of this new way of being and living has nothing to do with tearing down, undermining, or replacing cultures: it is fresh language for speaking of that which is greater than oneself, ultimate truth. "In its fullest sense," she writes, "the person who gives testimony articulates the truth of that which she has seen, heard, experienced, and endured." Chopp's theology is a great gift for those of us who wish to be followers of Christ in a global church. We are keenly aware that we have much to learn as well as much to offer in cultural encounters. The life we lead as Christians is not one of alienation and scorn for what is merely human. It's just the ordinary everydayness of being Christian, charged with God's love for each other wherever we happen to be.

Our next writers take us to Cuba to observe the growth of Methodism there. Again we hear the themes of vitality and witness, this time with a Caribbean accent. What we see is strikingly similar to the Wesleyan movement in eighteenth-century England: small groups of lay people rededicated to the gospel, engaged in evangelism and social activism. But the Methodists in Cuba have had to overcome obstacles that never existed in England during that time: a socialist dictatorship, satellite status with Russia and social turmoil following the breakdown of that 30-year relationship, not to mention the long-formed, distinctively Cuban traditions. So the local differences in worship and theological expression are natural, and to be welcomed with joy by the rest of us.

In Elena Stepanova's article on religious/philosophical thought in Russia, we are invited into an encounter with what in many ways is a new partner. The worldwide triumphs of Western economic and cultural patterns, in which we have fully exulted in the past decade, have simply reinforced the divisions of history and thought between East and West. Now we hear that the United Methodist Church is making great progress in Russia. Under the circumstances, it becomes a live temptation to regard that progress as due to the natural superiority of the West and its forms of Christianity. An article summarizing more than 1,000 years of Russian spiritual and intellectual history can undo some of that latent triumphalism. To that end, Dr. Stepanova dives right in; Rus' is the old name for the Russian people, and the baptism of Russia to which she refers is the legend of the deliberate choice made by the Russian state to adopt Christianity in its Eastern rather than Western form, based on the observation of the
Orthodox Eucharist by Russian ambassadors: "We do not know whether we were in heaven or earth; upon earth there is no such sight or beauty, we do not know what to say, we only know that there God is present among men and that their service is the best of all lands. We cannot forget that beauty... even so we cannot live here." Dr. Stepanova’s account fully conveys the complexity of mind among Russians, and shows the inner threads of continuity between ages and points of view. For many people, as she points out, a sense of one’s Russian identity goes together with Orthodoxy. But serious questions arise: what form will Orthodoxy take in the twenty-first century? How will the Post-Marxist intelligentsia understand the world? This is the background one needs to approach the Methodist Church in Russia with understanding.

Our final stop is back in the U.S., where the Methodist Church has struggled in the last 50 years on the question of war and nuclear weapons. This is only a tiny pocket of history compared to the giant sweep through the Russian past. But you will hear the voices of American Methodists sharing their hopes and ideals for the church and their country. The backdrop to these statements was either World War II or the Cold War; many of us are deeply aware of the hard choices that had to be made during those times. The confluence of American history and Christian reflection, a classic combination for U.S. Methodists, comes to the fore here.

We end with a pair of good-natured but very pointed articles about church life. The first, by Bill Martin, hits close to home for most of us: the stewardship of our money, and in particular, the tithe. It’s hard to talk about. But Dr. Martin does it with such grace and good sense that we might see ourselves growing more reflective and articulate on the topic. Finally, Warren Carter fusses about the shape of the lectionary during Advent. In doing so he helps us listen closely to the Gospel of Luke to find good Christmas stories for preaching. Talk about scholarship you can use in the months ahead: taking Professor Carter’s exegetical skills to heart, the preacher can thoughtfully oppose secular culture of Christmas.

I bid you strength and vigor in your ministry this fall. Let us support each other with prayer and wise counsel in the months ahead!

Sharon Hels
Am honored to give this Willson lecture entitled “Traditional Faith in Contemporary Expression.” I speak on this occasion as a theologian of the church, by which I mean one whose primary interest is helping the church live out its mission and call to bear testimony of and to God in the world. To assist the church in the art of bearing testimony means helping the church to recognize its concreteness, helping it to reinforce its incarnational activity.

Was there ever a theologian or church man or woman living at the turn of a century who was not anxious in some way for the fate of the church? I am; perhaps we all are. Will the church survive? This is a poor theological question but an important institutional one. Our topic looks at this dilemma in precisely the right sense: in the twenty-first century, what will be the contemporary expression of traditional faith?

We know of course that the church—which has spanned the centuries across cultures and lands—has seen many changes. But our age has new, pressing issues: pluralism, worldwide suffering, tremendous spiritual questions, overburdened individualism, greed, and poverty. These are perhaps especially painful to us in the Wesleyan heritage.

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because of our intense commitments to ecumenicity, social outreach, and piety. Although our tradition has much to offer, many of our churches are struggling, and membership seems to be on the decline. Where membership is growing, many wonder about the real substance of the faith. Where is our vitality? What does outreach mean? What does it mean to be a Christian?

I want to begin with temptations I think we must avoid, temptations that unfortunately shape the way most Christians think about the faith: first, reducing faith to a positivist tradition (empiricism) or, second, emptying the faith of ecclesial form and substance and translating it into individual feelings (psychologism). To escape these traps, I want to propose a third option: the notion of bearing witness (the biblical overtones of this concept are intentional and, indeed, I will argue for the use of more biblical language).

Let me describe further the two temptations—both highly possible at the moment—that face us. The first temptation is the positivist one: to identify traditional faith with a set of ideas or words. This is troubling, and we see it far too often. Positivist Christians reduce the faith to a mere code, a set of indisputable truths. Furthermore, those who assert the code frequently have only a passing acquaintance with it! A bitter fight threatened to erupt in many mainline churches several years ago over the Re-Imagining Conference. The conference and the reaction to it covered many topics, but one of these had to do with the concerns of African-American women that Anselm’s theology of Atonement was being used to bless the contemporary sacrifice of black women in this country. Many asserted a kind of positivist view of this sacrifice—saying that this theory of the Atonement was true regardless of the consequences. Yet the church has never settled on this one code, has never said that only this theory of the Atonement could be used or that it could be used only in one particular way. Indeed, as Tillich once observed, the satisfaction theory of Atonement addressed the sense of the objective guilt of the believer, probably not of God.¹

Last fall I taught a class on the introduction to the study of religion for entering Ph.D. students. The students were all Christians, but we decided that they would read a variety of texts from different philosophical traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, secular philosophy, etc. Of all the books we read, the strangest for those who were new to the seminary was entitled The Resurrection of the Body by Caroline Walker Bynum.² Bynum categorizes at great length the historical
Christian belief in the continuation of the earthly body—including specific questions about internal organs, the decision that fertility is decay, and the belief that those eaten by wild animals would rise with their bodies intact. How could we embrace all of those traditions? The differences in belief within Western Christianity alone are enormous, let alone the differences between Christianity and other religious traditions. So the temptation is to reify selective parts of the tradition, to isolate certain ideas and interpretations and set them up as the correct way.

Furthermore, any single account of the history of Christianity can illustrate that as many seemingly immutable Christian traditions have been set aside as have been preserved. We do not continue many of the beliefs of our foreparents, and much of their testimony is left aside. Still we affirm there is something called a traditional faith. Christianity lives on through its generations, and it does so because of its traditions.

But the positivists—on the right and the left—are captive to modernity in wanting religion to be a set of ideas and not a living faith, to be a correct code and not a relationship to each other and to the Other. Positivism tempts us because it offers as a substitute a glasslike faith that looks strong but too often shatters upon impact.

The other temptation, which I call psychologism, also comes from the modern response. This is the translation of categories and practices of faith into the feelings and psychology of the believer. In this temptation we try to please everyone, to make people feel better about themselves, to relate to where they—as generic humans—are. In my city this means that many preachers use Reader's Digest more than the Bible for their sermons, that Sunday school classes are self-help groups, and that points of theological disagreement are settled with the statement, “Well, that’s my opinion and no one else has to believe it.”

I will never forget an exchange I had some years ago as a young pastor. After hearing my sermon—on what I do not remember—an elderly woman said to me, “That’s okay, pastor—you have your opinion and I have mine.”

This reduction of faith to daily human experience, this translation exercise is troubling, unsatisfying, and even offensive. The faith our mothers and fathers died for, the faith that is given through incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, is not about my own feelings, is not simply about my own well-being.

These two temptations face us in the liminal desert time before the twenty-first century. Shall faith be sets of ideas or mirrors of feeling?
Shall faith be located in me, myself, and I, and in what I say or feel? Or shall faith be a matter of clarity above all, found in correct ideas and submission to authorities?

I think to answer this question—How shall we express traditional faith in contemporary terms?—we may have to move away from these modern categories altogether. I want to suggest a biblical approach, one not so established in correct ideas or a dimension of individual interiority. What does scripture suggest about continuing the witness of God?

**Sending Forth to Witness in John 20**

In the twentieth chapter of John, the followers of Jesus confront a time of challenge. The disciples are fearful—perhaps as we ourselves are today—because of a number of factors: religious centers have lost their power to exert influence, economic chaos reigns, values are confused. The disciples are worried: they have followed this Jesus and the world has received him not. He has been crucified, and everything Jesus told them about the persecution has come true. So they have hidden behind locked doors, trying to figure out what to do. It is at this point that Jesus appears to them, saying, “Peace be with you.” (As several commentators have noted, Jesus is very ironic in John—the surface meaning usually is not the final meaning.) Christ greets the disciples and says to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

This is not the only time in John that we hear this notion of being sent. The response, that of bearing witness, echoes in heavenly and earthly ways. Indeed, the whole frame of this Gospel is that God sends Christ into the world, and as Christ bears witness so does the world. Recall the portrayal of John the Baptist: “There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light” (1:6-7). The Holy Spirit, or the Paraclete, is sent after Jesus’ departure: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:26).

I want to suggest that this biblical image of bearing witness is the fundamental Christian paradigm of the contemporary expression of traditional faith. As you will no doubt guess, I am convinced that there is a distinctive Christian way of life. (I have learned this not only from other Christians but also from my conversations with Jews, Hindus,
and Muslims—just as one learns the distinctiveness of one's own language by hearing the rhythms and idioms of a different one.) But I think that there is not only a distinctly Christian way of life, a holy living, but also a distinctly biblical approach to traditional faith, that is, as John says, the notion of bearing witness.

Bearing witness to Christ is, of course, not a general human act but a specifically Christian practice. Yet bearing witness emphasizes the faith of Christians, faith understood, of course, as a praxis, an intentional way of life. This bearing witness itself must be understood within the greater work of God. For John, we who bear witness are one with God, even as Jesus is one. ("As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us," 17:21.) As Paul Minear has pointed out, this oneness consists of a common vocation or work. Jesus and the Father's works are one, as are those of the disciples. Indeed in 14:12 the works of the disciples are said to be even greater than the works of Jesus. (This means, of course, that traditional faith is still possible!) We can then weave together three theological claims to understand the specificity of Christian notions of traditional faith and contemporary expression: 1) the mission of God's love; 2) the vocation or work of oneness; and 3) the being sent and bearing witness/testimony. The language of mission, vocation, and testimony provide us, I think, with the specificity of how and why theologically we can claim traditional faith in contemporary expression for the twenty-first century.

The idea of testimony as the key to traditional faith in contemporary expression has not been prevalent in dominant Christianity (in the U.S. it has been kept alive largely in some Wesleyan circles and in African-American churches). As philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur has suggested, testimony is not used in modernity because it accedes to neither objective truth nor emotional feeling. Offering religious testimony, the individual undergoes a divestment; she is not there alone in that she is speaking of that which is truer than she herself. The reality of which she speaks in some sense surrounds her, summons her and her community. Testimony is about ultimate truth, not objective fact. Using the concreteness of the journey of
the self, testimony seeks to persuade others of what one has seen or experienced. Testimony is not just confession of what something meant—that is, what it means to me—though it is that to a limited degree. In its fullest sense the person who gives testimony articulates the truth of that which she has seen, heard, experienced, and endured.

To bear witness, to testify, is to give an account through one's life to that which both fills and moves beyond one's life. Testimony is living unto the ultimate truth in and through the everydayness of one's life.

One way to think about traditional faith in contemporary expression, then, is to focus on giving testimony, living one's life unto God, rather than concentrating merely on positivist reductions or relying on psychological expressions. But because testimony is about Christian practice (that is, testimony is about how we enact and perform following God in the world), it is necessary to identify the ways in which we create and cultivate testimony. True testimony is a matter not just of a quick conversion (as valid as that may be to bring one into Christian practice) or even deep existential commitment to God (indeed, true commitment is itself sustained and nourished through Christian practice). Testimony is habituated through practices in which believers enact a specific way of following Jesus Christ. Within these practices, doctrines are taught as the capacities to experience, express, and enact witness. And equally important as practice and doctrine is the mission of Christ, through which all testimony occurs.

Christian Ecclesial Practices

The challenge of traditional faith—from the Bible on—is the challenge of living together in communities. It is exceedingly clear that the New Testament as a whole was formed in, about, and for communities, as Richard Hays has suggested. Or, to cite the Gospel of John again, the superstructure of John has to do with forming the practices of testimony to the light; that is, as God testifies, as Jesus testifies to the light, so now will the generations also testify. This practice is traditional faith in contemporary expression. The tradition teaches us that communities survive and flourish not only by their ideas and expressions but by their rituals. Christians are those who baptize and who feast together, who pray, who meet in worship, who practice caritas in all that they do. Indeed, martyrdom (marturia, bearing witness) is nothing more than the practice of confession, the
ritual of refusing to refute one’s loyalty and trust in Jesus. It includes an idea, but it is more than that—it is a practice.

Practices are socially shared activities that mediate between the objective and subjective, the personal and communal, and the physical and mental. A practice, according to Alasdair Maclntyre, is

\begin{quote}
any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity. . . .
\end{quote}

Maclntyre goes on to suggest that a practice is done to some end, but that it does not necessarily have a product. Practices are embodied and embedded. Communities are, in a real sense, their practices.

William McNeill, in *Keeping Together in Time*, has suggested that persons require belonging to communities and communities in turn require formation through physical gestures.7 The head bowed in prayer—does it not signify that we as a community and I as an individual are not the stars of the show? The water in our baptism—does it not signify that our sins, our separation, are washed away and thus new life is performed?

Our bridge to the past and to the future is through our practices. What continues the faith is neither the correctness of my belief nor the intensity of my feeling but the practices of the church. Indeed, we might define tradition as the historical practices of the faith lived first and always as a community. Modern Christianity has radically separated the body from the mind, located the individual in his or her interior or exterior, and denied and marginalized the role of ecclesial practices. Calvin, Luther, and Aquinas wrote for religious communities and for individuals in communities and for the greater communities.

Several years ago I saw a pastor baptize a child. After the baptism, the parents leaned over to the minister and reminded him that he had forgotten to include the associate, a woman the parents had grown quite fond of. The senior minister of this large United Methodist church called the associate down and rebaptized the baby. The minister truly did not know the fundamental ecclesial practice and therefore he did not know that he had broken the ritual. This wonderful man, the pastor of a large southern church, was trained in...
seminary to focus on the individual. What mattered to him at that moment was how the parents felt. He assumed the church serves the needs of the individual. We must begin our formation of ministers in the context of Christian community rather than adding that context on at the end.

The community has rules, expressions, and visions of love. If we want traditional faith in contemporary expression to exist as a Christian theological expression of bearing witness, then we must nurture communities that are alive with rich practices within which our people can live their lives. Witnessing will be formed through ecclesial practices through which persons can learn the virtues, the habits, the vision, and the space and time of Christian existence.

The focus on practices says to positivists that faith is more than a set of correct ideas and to psychologists that faith is foremost the faith of a community that one is drawn into through the love of Christ.

**Doctrines as Capacities to Witness**

To cultivate Christian practices is to participate in the Logos; it is to know God. Indeed, as Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has reminded us, the early Christian communities understood fellowship, or koinonia, to mean primarily participation in Christ and on that basis Christian fellowship, not vice versa. Far too many Christians view the church as a place where they in their individual faith go, sometimes merely to “hatch, match, and dispatch,” that is, to baptize, marry, and bury. Persons go for fellowship; yet the scriptures (and certainly Paul) would tell us that fellowship is not a generic “getting together” but a fundamental participation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. And that participation forms persons in wisdom, in the Logos, in ways of knowing God.

Ecclesial practices form us in a way of knowing, a way of sensing and feeling, a way of understanding. Indeed the most literal meaning of theology is an understanding of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. One of the most exciting discussions of theology as a wisdom of knowing God in recent years has taken place in the area of theological education. Ed Farley has argued that in Christian tradition, knowledge is not construed as something distant, whether out there or in here (intuitive). Rather, through much of the tradition, including
many different theological expressions, Christian knowledge or theology is a *habitus*, a kind of reflective wisdom.

Theology as habitus, or wisdom, as Craig Dykstra has pointed out, is formed in us through ecclesial practices; it is our Christian knowing.⑪ Christian knowing includes aesthetics, passions, cognition (science), and even the motions of our bodies. According to the traditional witnesses, knowledge itself is the fullness of knowing God. Again, from prayer we know a divestment of ourselves: we bow our heads and fold our hands, we admit lack of control, we give honor to the ultimate, we hold our body in reverence, we receive, we know through the words and expressions of our own hearts.

We must cultivate theology as habitus in all Christians. Lest you think that I am suggesting a pure cause and effect—get the pastor’s hand motion right during the Eucharist and all else will follow—I am not! For there is a holistic relation between Christian practices and Christian knowledge. Charles Wood has suggested that concepts are really capacities and that not having the concepts—creation, justice, pneumatology, and so forth—means not having the capacity to know God in that particular way. For our purposes, not having these doctrines means not being able to produce testimony, to bear witness, because one is “incapacitated,” or lacks, as Jesus might say, the eyes to see and ears to hear. Doctrine means, of course, teaching; and to have received the teaching or the doctrine, according to Wood,

> means to have undergone instruction that equips one with the knowledge and abilities pertinent to being a competent participant in the community and, perhaps, to becoming, in turn, a teacher of others, a bearer of the tradition. ⑫

Alongside the cultivation of ecclesial practices we must stress basic doctrinal knowledge for all Christians. To know the doctrine of creation means to be open to the experience of God’s giftedness, to live with reverence in the daily of life, to know how to witness to current environmental disasters. Doctrines cultivate the wisdom of a community which in turn is shared in bearing witness to God’s mission or work of love in the world. Located in wisdom, doctrines are not just formal terms, a logical structure of ideas (though they are at least that). Doctrines also include the aesthetic and the moral. Doctrines show us a vision—a vision of created order, a vision of the sacredness of all humans, a vision of life redeemed. A popular movie,
Mr. Holland's Opus, demonstrates this well. A girl with fiery red hair can't master playing the flute—she can't get the practice down. Finally Mr. Holland asks her what she likes about herself best; she says it is her hair, for her father says it is the color of the sunset. Mr. Holland tells her to shut her eyes and play the sunset; and out of the flute comes a beautiful sound, the stirrings of real music. It is the same with doctrines. They are not just the notes on a page; they are the images, the horizons, the fire, the love of a father and daughter.

I understand that this way of viewing the tradition may seem odd or even incomprehensible. Modernity has translated tradition either into univocal ideas or as expressions of feeling. Central to this was the work of Ernst Troeltsch, who suggested three basic principles of knowledge: criticism, analogy, and correlation. Modern epistemology, the study of knowledge itself, had two options: 1) empiricism and positivism—just the facts, ma'am—or 2) internal consciousness, be it categorical, transcendental, or intuitive. In the modern mind, ideas and the language that expressed them had to be one thing: language had a univocal character.

To acknowledge the real differences between these views and our current postmodern mindset is important, but we should be careful not to deny the validity of modern expressions. We, no less than modernist thinkers, are limited by our historical condition. Schleiermacher and Barth both resisted certain modern ways of knowing even as, in some sense, each of them ended up locating theology in epistemology rather than in the logic of traditional faith. It may be comforting to know that, historically, church doctrines have had as much to do with action as with propositional assertion. As William Christian has indicated, the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly contains 107 questions. Forty-one questions pertain to the Ten Commandments, and twenty are on the preaching and hearing of the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. Thus, notes Christian, "nearly two-thirds of the questions in the catechism introduce practical doctrines; the answers given propose various courses of inward or outward action as requirements of the Christian life." 12

The Mission of Love

To bring this conversation around full circle, my thesis has been that we must then bear witness to God's love in the world. Furthermore, we must do so in strong communities of Christians who participate in
God's action in the world. The final question—and here I will leap into the arms of the great modern theologians—is not about my community's correctness or my feeling high on Jesus. The final issue is about whether or not my penultimate concerns serve my ultimate concern: Do we have a sense of the ultimate, the love of God, God's mission in this world? Or to use the language of testimony, do we know what we would die for, and thus do we know what we live for?

Our testimony—through our practices and knowledge, through our theology—points back not to ourselves but to God, more specifically to God's love. Again, John is instructive here. The vocation of God is love—love known in the beginning of the world. This work of love includes the creation and preservation of all things great and small, but it is known chiefly in the form of love being crucified for the other. In John's Gospel, the work of love is always for the other and thus points not to self but to God.

I think the most disturbing passage for me is John 15, because it sets forth the full extent of our involvement in this theological vision. Jesus has been speaking of abiding in God, by which Jesus means doing God's work. God, the Master Gardener, is cultivating the vines that bear God's fruit. Then Jesus continues:

_This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because everything that I have made known to you I have heard from my Father._ (vv. 12-15)

The work of God is love, and friends of God love whom God loves, the world, God, creation. John 3:16 has direct bearing on this question. As Jesus was sent to save the lives of those whom God loves, now we are sent.

It is essential to understand that this mission of joy, as Lesslie Newbigin calls it, is actually God's mission. And here I think a return to the dialectic of modern theologians is helpful. Though I could use many of the theologians—Barth, the Niebuhrs, Bonhoeffer—I will use Tillich. They differed about form—these neo-orthodox or dialectical theologians—but not really about this point. We must retrieve the Protestant principle and Catholic substance, and we must learn again...
to be dialectical. And we must do that through the church in the fullness of its practice, cultivating the wisdom of all theologians, in and from the mission of God. In and through that mission we can point to God, giving full witness to the finite, but always and only as it points to the infinite. To say it more historically, we oppose idolatry, including the idolatry of making emotions or epistemology bear the full weight of God or the Other.

You may recall the famous story of Calvin and Saldoleto: after Saldoleto accused Calvin of threatening to destroy the individual salvation of the faithful people of Geneva, Calvin confessed to the accuracy of Saldoleto’s charge. Then Calvin observed that the point of Christianity was not individual salvation but the worship of God. Calvin was not the first to say that salvation was important but salvation is not the point. One’s salvation consists of life lived to and for the Other, to and for the glory of God.

The mission of love is lived out in a proper ordering of actions, behaviors, desires, relations. The Christian life is a patterning, a way of life in Christian communities. But the final goal of this way of life is always to serve the Other and others, through God.

Notes


Phil Wingeier-Rayo and Paul Wesley Chilcote

The Wesleyan Revival and Methodism in Cuba

The Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century, spearheaded by the Wesley brothers, was an effort to revitalize the Church of England. Their rediscovery of the classical spiritual disciplines (both works of piety and works of mercy) was a conspicuous sign of church renewal. The Methodist Church in Cuba in recent years has seen strikingly similar developments. Between 1990 and 1997 church attendance has tripled from ten to thirty thousand, and over 200 house churches have sprung to life. A movement is emerging which is dramatically changing the face of the Methodist Church in Cuba.

The question naturally arises in some minds: Is this a legitimate Wesleyan movement or is it a manifestation of other contemporary forces? After more than thirty years of isolation from its parent body in the United States, has this church retained its Wesleyan roots? Or could it be, ironically, that the Methodist Church in Cuba is becoming more Wesleyan than United Methodism? In this essay we will discuss the characteristics of both the Wesleys' renewal movement in eighteenth-century England and the current revival within the Methodist Church in Cuba.

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Methodist Church in Cuba. We will discuss the similarities and differences between the two and assess the dynamics of the church renewal movement in Cuba today.

Phil Wingeier-Ray and his wife, Diana, arrived in Cuba on October 1, 1991. Before Phil’s first Cuban worship service, his host, Rev. Rinaldo Hernandez, took him to his office and told him that the worship style of the Methodist Church in Cuba was different from the style he was accustomed to in the United Methodist Church. The explanation for this required a little history. In the late 1980s the church had dwindled to a handful of older adults and was left for a whole year without a pastor. A group of young people from the neighborhood, including some who grew up throwing stones at the church’s stained-glass windows, joined the church and enlivened its liturgy. Then the church began to grow and attracted young people from throughout the working class neighborhood of Marianao.

The Annual Conference took note of the fire that was burning in the hearts of many in this congregation and the following June took action in an attempt to extinguish what they feared to be an uncontrollable blaze. They sent one of their most talented young pastors to oversee the congregation. As a third-generation Methodist and seminary graduate, Rinaldo Hernandez should have obeyed his elders and rescued the congregation from its increasingly unorthodox worship style, returning it to its traditional worship style. However, as a young pastor in an aging church, he saw a spirit in these young people that he had not seen in any other church. They were eager to learn more about the Bible, to engage in more church activities, and to visit the marginalized. After a year-and-a-half Rev. Hernandez had come to understand his pastoral duty very differently. “My job here is not to put out the fire,” he said to Phil, “but to orient the fire in a healthy direction.” Today this centrally located church in Havana is representative of the spiritual awakening which has come after more than thirty years of decline in the Methodist Church in Cuba.

The Wesleyan Revival in Eighteenth-Century England

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Church of England was in a state of decline. It had been weakened by two major blows in the previous century: first, in 1662, a large number of clergy were ejected from the Church of England for refusing to use the Book of Common
Prayer. This was the Puritan group to which Wesley's maternal grandfather had belonged. Later in the same century another group of clergy refused to give their oath of allegiance to a new royal family in England. In 1689 these "Non-Juring" clerics, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and a good number of bishops, were also expelled from the church. This double expulsion left control of the church in the hands of compromising conformists who stayed in the safe middle ground and provided little visionary leadership for the church.¹

In addition to these two weakening blows to the leadership of the Anglican Church, the country was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. The mechanization of mass production had begun, and thousands were moving from the countryside to the cities in hopes of finding a better life. Neither the country nor the church was ready for such a rapid demographic change, creating many social problems in urban areas. Inadequate housing, overpopulation, poor working conditions, and alcoholism were just a few of the problems that emerged in the cities. The Church of England, however, had become a church of the affluent and was unconcerned with the plight of the poor. Due to the lack of vision and empathy the leadership of the church made little effort to adapt their ministry to the changing context.

When John Wesley's modest effort for spiritual renewal evolved into a movement in the year 1739, it was his intention not to begin a new denomination but only to reform his beloved church. To his dying day Wesley was faithful to the Church of England and remained steadfast in his opposition to formal separation. "The design of Methodism," observed Samuel Christophers, "as its founder shows, is not to erect itself into a 'new sect,' or to build itself into a complete church fabric; but rather to 'reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land,' and through the world."² As his ministry expanded, however, "church order and doctrine became less important to Wesley than reaching out to 'the sinners in Cornwall, the keelmen in New Castle, the colliers in Kingswood and Staffordshire, the drunkards, the swearers, the Sabbath-breakers of Moorfield, and the harlots of Drury Lane.'"³ As he preached and enlisted followers he organized them into what were known as Societies. "I soon found they were too many for me to talk with severally so often as they wanted it," he confessed. "So I told them, 'If you will all of you come together every Thursday in the..."
evening, I will gladly spend some time with you in prayer, and give you the best advice I can.’ "The important point is that in spite of the growing differences between Wesley’s renewal movement and the Anglican Church, he never advocated separation.

The key to the Wesleyan vision of renewal in both nation and church was holiness. Wesley’s creation of the societies provided accountability in his followers’ journey toward greater spiritual maturity. His ideas concerning small groups—class and band meetings among others—came from the primitive church and the Moravian Pietists and exemplified the ancient tradition of devotion to “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Wesley’s organizational genius was to structure his followers into an institution where they could be empowered, as well as nurtured, in their faith. Although the original purpose of class meetings, for example, was to raise money to pay for the chapel in Bristol, Wesley quickly discovered how these “covenant groups” could be used to promote and encourage mutual accountability. Summarized succinctly in the words of David Watson, the societies, classes, and bands were “structures for discipleship and mission.”

One of the common signs of church renewal is the rediscovery of living faith. This was central to Wesley’s theology and contrasts sharply with the typical eighteenth-century Anglican emphasis on abstract doctrine. The gift and experience of vital faith was the principal emphasis of Wesley’s renewal movement. Scripture was John Wesley’s first language as he grew up in the Epworth rectory, where his parents shared daily devotions and encouraged the reading of the Bible. In fact, it is well known that Wesley described himself as a “man of one book.” It is not surprising that Wesley intentionally shaped his message around focal themes of scripture and his thorough knowledge of the biblical text. In the words of Albert Outler, “Wesley lived in the Scriptures and his mind ranged over the Bible’s length and breadth and depth like a radar, tuned into the pertinent data on every point he cared to make.” The Wesleyan renewal movement was a rediscovery of the living Word as well as living faith.

It was also characterized by the active participation of lay men and women in its leadership. As the societies and class meetings began to spread, Wesley found it necessary to rely upon class leaders in order to nurture his followers toward spiritual maturity. Frequently lacking the support and encouragement of ordained clergy, Wesley was willing to
use lay people who might further his cause. Stressing in his theology that each individual has value to God and that God meets everyone where he or she is, Wesley was able to empower common people for positions of leadership in his movement. These leaders were normally laymen or women, neither ordained clergy nor Methodist itinerant preachers, and very often of humble origin with little or no education. Detailed analysis of early Methodist class lists actually reveals the fact that women outnumbered men by a ratio of 2:1. The role of these class leaders, male and female alike, was extremely important within the life of the burgeoning society structures and in the quest for spiritual maturity among the Methodist people.

The class and band meetings within the Methodist societies were essentially small groups of believers who met together for the purpose of accountable discipleship. These were house groups in which Methodists encouraged one another in the faith. In Wesley’s words, a society was “... a company of men [and women] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the Word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other work out their salvation.” The class leaders would ask the members questions such as, “How is it with your soul?” “What sin have you committed since last week?” “What temptations and victories have you experienced?” “Do you want to keep anything secret?” “Have you God’s forgiveness of your sins?” The purpose of these intimate questions was to hold individuals accountable in their growth toward maturity, or what Wesley often described as “perfect love.” Accountable discipleship led to maturity of faith and holy living: The ministry of the laity, in other words, was absolutely fundamental for the growth and maintenance of the Wesleyan renewal movement.

The Wesleyan renewal movement was also characterized by the rediscovery of classical spiritual disciplines. These include prayer, fasting, the Word (read, heard, and meditated upon), Christian conference or fellowship, and the Eucharist, or Sacrament of Holy Communion. These disciplines are commonly known as “the means of grace.” Liturgical renewal, which conjoins these disciplines with the rediscovery of vital faith is well illustrated in the Evangelical Revival. In Wesley’s case this took the specific shape of a rediscovery of the Eucharist. Wesley encouraged his followers to attend their local Anglican parish churches and participate in their sacramental life, even to the point of exhorting their priests to a more frequent
celebration of the sacrament. It was not unusual, for example in Bristol, for the Methodists to participate in their own early morning preaching service and then walk over to the nearby parish church to receive (or even demand) the Eucharist. The Wesleys reintroduced Love Feasts, Watch Night services or vigils, and opportunities for covenant renewal into the common round of Christian worship. More important than any of these innovations, however, was their rediscovery of congregational singing, especially through the ministry of Charles Wesley. Methodism, it may accurately be said, was born in song, and Wesleyan hymns revolutionized worship.

In addition to these common signs of church renewal there are other characteristics which were unique to the Wesleyan Revival. One very practical ramification of the movement had to do with property. As Methodism expanded, the Wesleys needed places to meet and began to acquire property, such as the "New Room" in Bristol. Wesley invariably called these buildings chapels or meeting houses rather than churches. But he was faced with the dilemma of whether he should register Methodist properties under the provisions of legislation for dissenting congregations, that is, groups not affiliated with the Church of England. Wesley did not believe that this was necessary or prudent because the buildings belonged to societies which professed allegiance to Anglican principles. He also hesitated to register them because this would mean declaring Methodism to be a dissenting church. In the end Wesley gave in, and in 1787 allowed all properties to be licensed as Methodist chapels, still arguing his allegiance to Anglicanism nonetheless.\[12\]

This issue is raised here simply to illustrate how renewal movements frequently push normal church and state regulations with regard to these practical matters.

The Renewal of Cuban Methodism

The Methodist Church in Cuba, like the Wesleyan Revival of the eighteenth century, is also enjoying a challenging moment of change, and some of the parallels are striking. It has been a long and difficult road for Cuban Methodism, however, to get to where it is today. There have been major exoduses of pastors and leaders in the church. The first exodus followed the announcement of President Fidel Castro on the eve of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 which stated that the Revolution was to be socialist in character. The attitude of the
government toward the church at that time was antagonistic, and many people believed that Christianity had no future in Cuba. Of the seventy Cuban pastors, sixty-one left the country in the first few years of the Revolution. This is not to mention the fifty or so U.S. missionaries who were also recalled at that time. As a consequence of lay people leaving the island or joining the revolutionary activities, the total membership of the Methodist Church in Cuba dropped from 10,000 in 1958 to only 5,000 in 1967.13

Only one member of the Methodist cabinet remained in Cuba. Rev. Armando Rodriguez was a district superintendent in Oriente Province, the largest and most isolated district in Cuba. As he noticed that all his parishes were being left without itinerant pastors, he made a historic call to all the young people of his district, inviting them to pastor churches. Many who responded were teenagers who had no theological education or pastoral experience. Rodriguez summoned them to his church and organized a four-day workshop on the basics: how to preach a sermon, how to prepare a Bible study, and how to administer the church. Although the loss of leadership in the church was devastating, these young people felt the call of God. By living in the parsonage and opening the church doors on Sunday, they were miraculously able to keep the church alive. Over the next twenty years the church was able to recuperate some lost ground. Those young people matured and learned how to carry out ministry in the revolutionary context. Some have even been able to go through the four-year seminary preparation. Other new pastors attended extension courses and entered the Annual Conference.

In 1980, however, the opening up of the Mariel boatlift created a second mass exodus, this time of more than 125,000 Cubans. The church was not exempt from this event. Several leaders, clergy and lay, left Cuba at the blink of an eye. The church lost several ordained elders who had sound theological training. One consequence of this second exodus was the fact that there was no one to succeed Bishop Rodriguez. He was forced to serve as bishop from 1968 to 1990, as General Conference continued to elect him until his retirement. In this extremely oppressive environment, the government confiscated the homes of all the “gusanos,”14 and for the church this meant losing several parsonages. The loss of leadership and property resulting from these two important events created a void which the church is only now beginning to fill.

The current situation in Cuba, therefore, is one of transition. After thirty years of very favorable trade agreements with the Soviet Union,
Cuba suddenly finds itself alone. The country is gradually liberalizing the socialist system for private enterprise and foreign investment. The tourism industry is attracting many young people into the city to work in construction, business, or prostitution. It is a time of great disillusionment and moral bankruptcy as well. People were told that the socialist system would succeed, but in the wake of Soviet disinvestment, Cuba is facing a serious economic crisis. The people are looking for something to believe in, someone they can trust. The government is concerned with its survival and has not been able to attend to escalating social problems such as housing shortages, unemployment, and alcoholism, which are exacerbated by the crisis. The church is hurting from a lack of leadership and insufficient theological training and is unprepared for the current crisis facing the nation.

In the midst of this economic, political, and social crisis, a renewal movement has emerged within the Methodist Church in Cuba. As mentioned above, in the late 1980s, the Marianao Methodist Church began to attract many young people. Several other churches also began to grow. Many of these Methodist neophytes are youth between the ages of 15 to 30 who are very enthusiastic about their faith and are willing to travel long distances by bicycle in order to participate in worship. They are very eager to learn more about the Christian faith and request more Bible studies on weeknights. They are converted to Christianity from lives of intense pain, suffering, and meaninglessness, where sex, alcohol, and family problems leave them feeling worthless. The message that Jesus Christ loves them and forgives their sins is liberating. They find an open, loving community in the church that they do not find in their homes. Parsonages and churches become places for young people to meet and experience fellowship when their home life is characterized by brokenness.

After experiencing conversion and new life, the youth and young adults are very eager to deepen their faith. They seek to meet together more often to study the Bible and share their testimonies. These meetings take place in the church, parsonage, or homes of the laity. Sometimes participants in these discipleship groups invite friends, and the small group evolves into a house church. They hold regular worship services in their homes, usually on weeknights so as not to be in conflict with the parent church. Beginning with just a handful of people, these house churches are prospering with groups of 60, 70, or, in some cases, as many as 200, worshiping together on a regular basis.
The lively and informal services consist of reading the Bible, sharing testimonies, singing, preaching the Word, and praying. The messages tend to be hopeful, exhorting the new converts toward faithfulness during times of adversity.

Although the pastor from the nearest Methodist Church may preach occasionally, the leadership of these house churches is almost completely lay. Sometimes they are considered to be missions of the nearest Methodist Church and are assigned a lay pastor to attend to the congregation, and sometimes they are more autonomous and provide their own leadership. Many of the lay leaders are women. A few of these congregations have grown large enough for the Annual Conference to recognize them as fully chartered churches, to purchase a building for them to meet in, and assign them a pastor. Since 1990, the Methodist Church in Cuba has opened no fewer than 200 new house churches around the country. While the original Cuban Constitution strictly prohibited such gatherings outside the “four walls of the church,” in December of 1991 President Castro vowed to make provisions; and in the fall of 1992 new legislation was enacted to facilitate the registration of house churches.

The provisions require that in order for a house church to be legally registered it should: 1) have the permission of the owner of the house, 2) have the approval of each resident of the house, and 3) not be in the same neighborhood as a church of the same denomination. The process of registering all the house churches has been very time-consuming for pastors and district superintendents. And in more recent years some house churches have been closed by the government. Nevertheless, new house churches are being established as new converts feel the call of God to share the good news of Jesus Christ in areas where there is no church presence. In addition to starting house churches, the young people feel the call to minister to the less fortunate. On their own initiative they go calling in hospitals, parks, and boarding schools to visit, sing, and preach. They want to go out and share the love of Jesus Christ with all.

One might think that with the tide of young people into this expanding renewal movement and with a large influx of previously unchurched converts there might be a desire to start their own church. Innovative forms of worship and liturgy, so unlike those of the traditional Methodist Church, would seem to mitigate in that direction. In spite of the fact that these changes do face resistance from the older generation within the church, however, the renewal movement has
retained its place within the existing structures of the church. Ironically the control of the Cuban government creates an impediment to division since it prohibits the establishment of any new denominations in Cuba. Moreover, the movement has shown great love and interest in renewing the Methodist Church in Cuba as a whole.

This movement is characterized by a tremendous faith in God during very uncertain times. Shortages of food and material goods in Cuba have meant that people are working literally for tomorrow’s meal. The changing situation from day to day has meant that young people have little hope for their future. The people who are converted to Jesus Christ are living by faith. Testimonies of the recent converts express gratitude to God for food that was provided in a moment of shortage, or medicine that appeared during a time of illness, or a bus that allowed them to come to church. The renewal movement of Christians in Cuba is characterized by a living faith that is simple and practical.

Another characteristic of the movement in Cuba is a return to the Christian scriptures. For nearly three decades it was very difficult to acquire Bibles. Since 1979, however, the United Bible Society has been shipping thousands of Bibles through Mexico to Cuba. This influx of Bibles has meant that young people have been able to read the Bible on their own. Eager to seek a new foundation for their future, the recent converts study the Bible with great zeal. The worship services allow for the reading of passages from the New Testament, the Old Testament, and Psalms. It is not uncommon in a Cuban worship service for the sermon, expounding these scriptures, to last forty minutes. These are signs that the renewal movement in Cuba takes scripture seriously and is trying to shape the new church around its understanding of the Bible.

Like its early Methodist antecedent, the renewal movement in contemporary Cuba is fueled by the active participation of lay people. Not only are the lay leaders attending to the new missions and house churches, but they are also active in leading the worship services in the main churches. Their participation is crucial to the renewal and growth of the church at the grass roots level. At the annual conference level, however, their participation is somewhat stifled by a structure of power dominated by longtime clergy and lay leadership. Nevertheless, it is exciting to see how the lay people have kept alive many churches and started new missions. Although some have attended some training
classes, very few have had any formal theological training. They begin and maintain house churches in remote areas where there are insufficient itinerant pastors to fill the need. It is really the lay people who have sustained the church in Cuba and who are now energizing the renewal movement.

These lay people seek out a community of worship to nourish their faith in the form of accountable discipleship. These groups are not nearly as systematic as during Wesley’s times, but they offer people opportunities to encourage one another. The house churches serve as one arena in which members of a community can share their testimonies and exhort one another in the faith. This is not an intimate setting, however, where one can be honest about one’s sins and temptations. The lack of freedom of expression in Cuba has been internalized, and this breaks down trust in a public setting. While disciples are willing to share intimately with a neighbor or church member, therefore, they are less likely to place themselves in a vulnerable position in a public service, even in the intimacy of a home.

Just like the Wesleys, these young Cuban Methodists are rediscovering the classic spiritual disciplines. When Phil and Diana first moved into their parsonage in a small town outside of Havana, their local church held only a Friday night Bible study and a Sunday morning worship service. A few months after their arrival a group of five or six youth were converted to Christ and formed the basis of a youth group. One Monday evening when Phil and Diana arrived late from running errands in Havana, a group of youth with Bibles under their arms was waiting for them on their front porch. Realizing that there was no planned activity for Monday night, Phil asked them if he could be of any service. They said that they were reading the Bible together in the afternoon and they had some questions for them. They asked them to wait while they prepared some dinner for their children and then sat down for a thrilling Bible study. Two nights later the scene was repeated with a slightly larger group. These Bible studies became a regular church activity, and eventually they were forced to move from the parsonage to the sanctuary because the group was too large for their living room! This is one illustration of how hungry the Cuban youth are for Bible study.

Prayer is another spiritual discipline which is absolutely central to the renewal movement in Cuba. Prayer is practiced alone, in small groups, and in the context of corporate worship. People feel that prayer is essential in order to be in greater communion with God. On
occasion the leaders of the movement will hold a prayer vigil in which the young people will be encouraged to seek the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, discernment, and teaching. The understanding is that through the spiritual disciplines such as prayer one can seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit which may offer extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.

Fellowship, or conference, as Wesley would have said, comes naturally to the Cuban renewal movement. The Cuban culture in general is very communal and social. Therefore, it is normal that a community of believers would gather together on a regular basis to pray, read the Bible, fast, and break bread together. In addition it is important to have the support and encouragement of fellow Christians, since being a Christian is still despised in the Cuban context.

Of all the spiritual disciplines, fasting was the most forgotten by the traditional church in Cuba. The renewal movement has rescued this Christian practice and made it central in each local church. One day a week each church is encouraged to fast and a fasting service is held at that church either in the morning or at noon to offer the fast to God. These services are very popular with house churches because they are community based and the sanctuary is accessible to the members. Oftentimes, after the house church has culminated their fast in a service of worship, they will break the fast together with some coffee and cake. These practices have awakened the larger church to the importance of this particular discipline.

As a consequence of all these activities, the church is undergoing tremendous liturgical renewal in Cuba. The traditional North American liturgy is being replaced by a more contextualized Cuban worship style. Because paper is scarce, no bulletins are used, making the worship services more free and spontaneous. The old Book of Worship and hymnals having been lost or destroyed, young pastors must rely on what they learn in extension courses, from their own life experience, and from the Bible. It is not uncommon to have two-hour worship services with a "praise session" and the sermon taking up major portions of time. Because so many of the pastors are lay pastors, the Eucharist is not celebrated as frequently as people would like. It is not uncommon, therefore, for some type of "quasi-sacramental" refreshment or drink to be served, especially at the house churches. The people enjoy breaking bread and having fellowship together. It is interesting to note that in the last General Conference local pastors were approved to celebrate communion in their own parishes. In
addition, it is the custom of the Methodist Church in Cuba to celebrate a Love Feast every New Year’s Eve with a covenant renewal service. This is an opportunity for the whole congregation to share a large meal together, usually a Cuban delicacy of roast pig, and then to welcome the new year by renewing their covenant with God and one another.

The worship style of these new converts is enthusiastic. They enjoy modern and uplifting music. Pianos, if they are even available, are usually in disrepair due to termites and lack of use. Popular Cuban instruments such as guitars, tambourines, and bongo drums are quickly taking the place of traditional accompaniment. Cubans, who generally are musical, are attracted to church by the singing. Traditional hymns are gradually being replaced by praise songs which have easy-to-remember verses with much repetition. The worship service has a festive feel. This creates tension, of course, with older members who are used to a traditional style of worship. Sometimes the older members silently protest by not standing up and clapping to the music of the praise time. But their protest is usually short-lived, as they increasingly find themselves among the minority in these gatherings. As in early Methodism, the Spirit is breaking through with a new song.

As in Wesley’s time, these various “means of grace” combine both works of piety and works of mercy. The youth enthusiastically affirm the interrelation of prayer and social service, of vital, personal faith and winsome action in the world. On their own initiative these young Christians reach out to others in hospitals, jails, boarding schools, and private homes. They truly believe that God loves everyone, even the poor and uneducated. Most of their evangelization, therefore, occurs among the marginalized people of Cuban society. While the Cuban government will not allow the church to have its own social service agencies, the church being permitted only to run institutions for the care of the elderly, those within the renewal movement focus their energy on individual works of mercy toward those in need wherever they may be found.

Conclusions

This essay has discussed some important signs of a renewal movement within the life of the church. The Evangelical Revival in
England during the eighteenth century took place in a very different context from the one presently occurring within Cuban Methodism. Nevertheless, there are some very intriguing parallels. Both churches experienced a critical loss of leadership in the years preceding the emergence of the renewal movement. Both movements reflect the uncertainties of volatile social contexts. Although Wesley’s societies, classes, and bands were much more structured and intimate than the house churches in Cuba today, both movements reflect concern for accountable discipleship and serious spiritual formation. Neither movement arose for the purpose of establishing a separate church but with the sole intent of renewing the larger community of faith. Both movements receive their strength by reclaiming the classical spiritual disciplines—by engaging in Bible study, prayer, fellowship, fasting, and in celebrating the Eucharist as frequently as is possible. Using Wesley’s eighteenth-century renewal movement as a guide, even the casual observer will discern the emergence within the Methodist Church in Cuba of a legitimate movement of renewal.

These two movements, however, also have some striking differences. While Wesley stood at the forefront of his movement as a charismatic leader of great stature and wide-ranging influence, in Cuba no one person can claim leadership of this renewal movement, probably for legitimate cultural reasons as well as historical circumstances. Most of the people entering the societies in England were baptized Anglicans, while in Cuba the overwhelming majority of the new people are from atheist or non-Christian backgrounds, with the exception of a few who were baptized in the Catholic Church. Due to Cuba’s isolation in recent years, the leaders of the renewal movement have not had access to classical theological, historical, and liturgical study that might bring them closer to historic Christianity. This stands in stark contrast to Wesley’s knowledge of formative Christianity and his concern for the Methodist people to drink deeply from the wells of Christian tradition. While Pentecostal influence has led many in Cuba to emphasize the quest for extraordinary gifts of the spirit, Wesley pointed out that, although extraordinary gifts of the spirit were biblical, the ordinary gifts were essential in order to exhibit the fruits of conversion.

In conclusion, the purpose of the Wesleyan Revival was to renew the Church of England. The similarities between Wesley’s movement and developments within Cuban Methodism are striking. Today, the central question is, What does it mean to be Cuban and Methodist?
But this is a perennial question, a question with which every Christian community in every historical context must grapple. Cuban Methodists must struggle with the interfacing of a truly Caribbean expression of the gospel which encompasses music and symbols that are meaningful to the people and the connectedness with what Christian communities at every place and time have understood to be essential to the Christian faith. To put it as simply as possible, every faith community must struggle with its history—its received faith tradition which gives it life—and the challenge to make that faith real and meaningful in the context in which it is called to live that faith out daily. The work of our Cuban brothers and sisters in this regard deserves the attention and encouragement of good-willed Christians abroad.

Notes

14. The Spanish word meaning “worm”; used in Cuba to signify traitor or counterrevolutionary.
Since the collapse of the Soviet government in Russia and the new religious freedom in post-Glasnost Russia, many in the West are under the impression that Russia is undergoing a "religious revival" that offers exciting opportunities for Christian mission. It is true that many new groups, as well as some who are renewing their presence in Russia (such as the United Methodist Church), have witnessed growth in their numbers. But missionaries from the West have also no doubt encountered a more complex cultural situation than they anticipated. Traditional images of religion in Russia—including icons, candles, sonorous liturgical music, and onion-domed monasteries and churches—do not automatically convey the nature of Christianity in Russia. Yet it is vital that the history of Christian spiritual thought in Russia be delineated so that, as these missions proceed, we may gain a deeper appreciation for the differences between our cultures and the gospel that brings us together.

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Russian spirituality, which deeply connected with Russian social and political thought, as well as historical traditions, is neither straightforward nor easily grasped. The contradictions and complexities of the Russian spiritual tradition are rooted in the fact that in Russia two streams of world history—Eastern and Western—collide and then interact with each other. As a result, Russians are neither purely European nor purely Asian. Russia is a huge Eastern-Western world connecting two different cultures, and in the Russian soul there is a perpetual struggle between the two sources of origins. The idea can also be expressed this way: Russia is a Christian East which has been influenced by the culture of Western Europe for many centuries. Western culture was absorbed by Russia’s upper cultural level or class, which attached a sense of national origin to these ideals. This is the dynamic that determines the ideas and feelings that can be characterized as “the faith” in Russia.

The Baptism of Rus’

The history of Russian culture starts with the baptism of Rus’ in 988 A.D. However, the fact of the conversion itself did not mean that the traditions of paganism simply disappeared; on the contrary, for a long time there were bright signs of it both in peoples’ memories and in routine life. In essence, beginning with the tenth century, two cultures, “one by day and one by night—were intertwined.” Those who carried the “daytime culture” constituted, of course, a minority: a borrowed Byzantine and Christian tradition had not become common to everyone but was in the possession of a few. Parallel to that Christian “daytime” culture was “nighttime” culture: an original fusion of paganistic beliefs, mythical tales, and superstitions. The confrontation between those two cultures determined the nature of the original Russian spiritual tradition for many centuries, and the hybrid form which developed over time became that special version of Christianity known as Russian Orthodoxy. Those two components of Russian church tradition define the type of faith in Russia.

Rus’ took its baptism from the Byzantine empire, the Christian, Greco-Roman East, whose capital was Constantinople. The “conversion” of Russia by Eastern Christians constituted a shift in Russia’s historical destiny, because it included Russia in a definite and already-formed circle of Byzantine historical and cultural connections.
Through baptism Russia stepped into a lively and creative interaction with the much wider world surrounding its own culture. Of course, we cannot consider the baptism of Russia to be an extraordinary or miraculous event, regardless of the legends that are told about it. Instead it was a complex and diverse process which lasted not just for decades but for centuries.

But the crucial event in that process was not the strict perception of Byzantine culture. Instead, it was the process of receiving rights for Cyril and Methodius to translate the Greek Bible into the Slavic language (which eventually served as the background for literary Russian). The Slavic Bible gave Russia its written language as well. Thus Rus' was influenced by Christian culture directly through its language—which was, fundamentally, not just the development of a distinctive vocabulary but the formation of a way of thinking and the transformation of spontaneous Slavic thoughts and words, along with new concepts such as the Slavic “Logos” and the national soul itself.

The Orthodox Church in Kiev—Rus' of the tenth through the twelfth centuries—was really free, since it had not yet become either national or autocephalous (i.e., self-ruling) but considered itself a part of the Greek Church, and therefore as a part of the whole Orthodox world. On the other hand, there was no one in the State who could aspire to church leadership—the Kiev princes were neither emperors nor autocrats. The circumstances of that relationship between the church and the state, unique in Russian history, changed radically when the capital moved to Moscow.

Moscow, the “Third Rome”

After the overthrow of the Tatar and Mongol yoke in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Rus’ began to gravitate toward a new cultural, historical, and state center, thus forming the Moscow Kingdom. The political centralization of Russian territory and the power of the grand princes of Moscow were reinforced by ecclesiastical centralization. The grand prince of Moscow was crowned as tsar after the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate independent from Constantinople (1589) and the appearance of an idea that Moscow was “the Third Rome.” This idea played a huge and controversial role in the development of the Russian self-consciousness. When the glorious Byzantine empire, which was
the largest Orthodox state in the world, fell, the Russian people started to believe that the Russian Moscow Kingdom was the only Orthodox kingdom in the world and that Russian people were the only true followers of the Orthodox faith. The spiritual status of Christendom which once attached to Rome, and which Emperor Constantine transferred to his new capital, Constantinople, was once more reassigned. Monk Philofei, a spokesman for this theory, wrote: "Two Romes have fallen and have passed away, the Western and Eastern; destiny has prescribed for Moscow the position of the third Rome; and there will never be a fourth." 4

From the beginning, the concept of the "Third Rome" was eschatological and apocalyptic: through the growth of Moscow as the last "earthly" kingdom, one could have presentiment of the end of history. Later official ideology reinterpreted this apocalyptic schematic in a panegyric sense.

If one forgets about the Second Coming, then it is quite another matter to affirm that all Orthodox kingdoms are brought together and combined in that of Moscow, for then the Muscovite tsar is the last, sole, and therefore, universal tsar. Even in its original form, the Third Rome replaces and it does not continue the Second. The task is not to continue or preserve Byzantine tradition unbroken. Byzantium somehow must be replaced or recreated. A new Rome must be constructed to replace the old one which has fallen away. 5

The concept of the Third Rome aided the process of the narrowing the orthodox horizon, resulting in a gradual denial of the Greek tradition. That created the dangerous tendency of substituting the ecumenical church and historical heritage for the local and national one. Influenced by the messianic ideals of the symbolic Third Rome, a serious nationalization of the church took place. In addition, the religious ideas of the kingdom served as a base for the formation of a powerful state in which church began to serve as an official office. The Moscow orthodox kingdom was totalitarian; Tsar Ivan the Terrible, being a remarkable theorist of the autocratic monarchy, taught that the tsar’s duties were not only to govern the state but to save people’s souls as well. The ecumenical ideas of the Russian church had gradually weakened to the extent that the Greek church, which had given orthodoxy to Russia, was increasingly portrayed as having deformed the truth faith. Popular religious consciousness
compared the Greek influence to a wasting disease that aimed to
penetrate and corrupt the only orthodox state in the world. During this
period the persuasion was born that orthodox faith equals Russian
faith, as well as its corollary, that what is not Russian faith is not
orthodox faith.

The Roots of Church Schism

In the seventeenth century, after the Time of Troubles,6 the Romanoff
family came to the throne. Russia returned to the idea of a single
orthodox tsar, responsible for Greek orthodoxy as well. The correction
of "misprints" in theological books according to contemporary Greek
models began during this time.7 The books were being "corrected" to
meet practical liturgical needs. But even insignificant changes to the
liturgical texts provoked rough protest from the common people. The
authors of this church reform (Patriarch Nikon [fr.1652] under the
authority of Tsar Aleksei, father of Peter the Great) did not intend to
return to patristic tradition to revive Byzantinism. But they were
attracted by the solemnity, festivity, and general magnificence of the
Greek religious ceremony, which in their view better conformed to the
liturgies of the sovereign Rus' than did the old Russian liturgy. The
latter was then discredited as false, ignorant, and heretical; and it was
forbidden under threat of terrible penalties. This action perplexed and
offended the people's religious feelings at a time when one of the most
important events in Russian history—schism [raskol] in the
church—was taking place.

It is a mistake to think that the split in the church came about
because of these ceremonial changes or that it was modeled on the
Reformation in Europe. The main cause of the schism was the
people's belief that the spiritual core of Russia, the only true orthodox
kingdom, the Third Rome, had collapsed and that the true faith (Old
Russian faith) had been betrayed. Those who remained faithful to the
earlier tradition (Old Believers, Starovery) thought that the Antichrist
had taken possession of the state and the supreme church hierarchy
(the Antichrist being understood as symbolic, not a "real" person).
From that time forward, one of the dominant ideas in the Russian
spiritual tradition was that of the search for a kingdom based on Truth.

The schism between official autocratic state ideology and people's
consciousness would become a constant theme in Russia as well. The
fatal paradox of this schism was the fact that it tried to preserve some
of the old ceremonies, which it interpreted as a warranty for realizing
the Kingdom of the Earth, the town on the Earth. We can call it a
socio-apocalyptic and theocratic Utopia. With the religious corruption
of Moscow, the third Rome was ending; but according to traditional
belief there was no place for a fourth one. That meant the end of the
sacred Russian history, from which Grace had been withdrawn. This
idea was transformed into a form of practical “Pelagianism,”
preserving old ritual and customs in order to bring on the new age.
The world now is abandoned by God, and it is time to leave it. Thus
the schismatics and old believers left for the woods, deserts, and
frontier territories in order to live their lives absolutely isolated from
the rest of the state.

Peter the Great’s Reforms and the Orthodox Church

The schism struck the first blow to the understanding of Moscow as
the Third Rome. The second blow came from Peter the Great’s
(1672-1725) reforms. In Peter’s systematic reorganizations, church
reform was by no means incidental. On the contrary, that reform was
most logical and guided by principle. It was an experience of state
secularization, which Peter copied from the history of the Western
European Protestant countries.

(Peter the Great) had the psychology of a revolutionary and was
inclined to exaggerate anything new. He wanted everything to be
refurbished and altered until it passed beyond all recognition. He
habitually thought (and taught others to think) about the present as a
counterpoint to the past. . . The great and genuine Russian schism
began with Peter. The schism occurred between church and state, not
between the government and the people. . . In the tension between the
twin anchor points—secular life and ecclesiastical life—the Russian
spirit stretched and strained to the utmost.8

The state’s perception of its own power and self-determination was
changing. On account if its newfound dominance, the state not only
demanded the subordination of the church but also strove to absorb the
church into governmental structure and order. Accordingly, the state
rejected the independence of the church’s rights and authority and
even the idea of church independence, which it called “papism.”
Under Peter’s authority the institution of the Moscow Patriarchate was dismissed and the right to govern the church was given to the Holy Synod, which actually was a government department. The state established itself as the sole and all-embracing source of all authority and law, of all activities and creative acts. The church no longer enjoyed an independent sphere of activity, since the state took over all its privileges. The church was deprived of even its spiritual power, because the state felt and considered itself to be absolute, taking upon itself the complete concern for people’s religious and spiritual welfare. “The clergy became transformed into a peculiar class of state servants and was commanded to think of itself as such a class and as nothing else.” The right to creative initiative even in religious matters was neither left to the church nor recognized as the church’s prerogative. The state saw the church only as an empirical establishment in which the religious life of the general populace was being formed.

According to Peter’s school reform, clergy education implied the teaching of theological discipline in Latin, with theology studied only in the very last year. The transplanting of Latin theological education (which actually came from Ukraine) onto Russian ground created a gap in church consciousness between theological “learning” and ecclesiastical experience. People worshipped in the Old Slavic language, whereas theological books were all written in Latin. Students heard the Bible in international Latin in their classroom but in Old Slavic at church. The domination of Latin was rejected in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, but this painful gap in church consciousness was probably one of the most tragic consequences of Peter’s epoch. The “dual faith” situation was created through the influx of Western cultural ideas embedded in Latin theology. This laid the foundation for a popular distrust and stubborn indifference toward theology, which was under suspicion as a “foreign” and “Western” invention, alien to the Orthodox East and one which hindered and is still hindering expression of Russian religious consciousness. The significance of the educational achievements of Peter the Great in the eighteenth century should not be underestimated. In any case, the cultural-theological experiment was quite important, even if, in the end, Russian theology was left rootless.

Although the reforms of Peter the Great strengthened the Russian state, having pushed Russia toward Western and world Enlightenment, they also increased the schism between the common people and the upper cultural and ruling levels. The Enlightenment took place on the
upper levels of Russian society, among the aristocracy and officials, while common people continued to live with the old religious beliefs and feelings. Never before was there such a large chasm between the upper and lower levels of society as there was in Peter's imperial Russia. Peter's empire, with its Western model of imperial absolutism, hardly implemented the idea of the Third Rome. The religious-messianic idea of the Kingdom was nevertheless preserved in people's beliefs. The people cherished their hopes in the emergence of an ideal leader, a "good tsar" who would save them from their disaster if he had a chance to learn the "truth" about people's lives.

The Spiritual Pilgrimage of the Russian Aristocracy

In the last quarter of eighteenth century, during the reign of Katherine the Great, the ideas of the French Enlightenment, inspired by Voltaire and superficially adapted to Russian culture, were a major force among the upper cultural levels of Russia. But aristocrats and officials alike were influenced even more by the spiritual ideas of Freemasonry. Almost all educated people were Freemasons. They searched there for the true Christianity because of their dissatisfaction with the official orthodox church. Although they did not violate outward piety, they accepted the orthodox ceremony in symbolic terms only, which, for Masons, indicated a step on the way from visible to invisible "inner" religion, from "historical" Christianity to spiritual, or "true," Christianity. Freemasonry rekindled the old dream about the esoteric circle of selected and dedicated people who preserved mysterious legends, the minority who knew the truth as a result of their "illumination."

In Freemasonry for the first time those who would become the Russian intelligentsia realized the duality of their existence and began to strive for integration. The solution, in their view, was this Western mystical-utopian tradition, which had two major components: first, a keen feeling of world harmony and unity, of the world's intrinsic wisdom, and a mystical apprehension of nature. The second component was an acute anthropocentric focus. Philosophically speaking, Freemasonry was a restoration of Neoplatonic gnosticism and an inner reaction against the rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment. Ultimately, its quasi-ecclesiastical asceticism brought
about a heightened awareness of the power of dreams and the imagination.

At the same time Freemasonry exercised its influence on the upper social level, the common people embraced a dreamy and mystical spirit. During this time major Russian sects were formed: Kylsts, Scopcht, Dukhobor, and Molokans. Also, during the time of Katherine the Great numerous colonies and settlements of German sectarians were created in Russia, among them Gersguters, Mennonites, and the Moravians. The majority of these groups also had a tendency toward apocalyptic dreaminess and even Adventism, based on allegorical and "spiritual" interpretations of the Bible.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century, the epoch of Alexander I (1777–1825), was one of the most interesting periods in Russian history. It was an epoch of seeming contradictions: on one hand, the Russian soul completely gave itself over to Europe; but on the other, it was a period of increased national feeling. "It was a period of mystical currents of thoughts, of masonic lodges, of interconfessional Christianity; of the Bible society; of the Holy Alliance, of theocratic dreams; of the war for the fatherland; of the Decembrists, of Pushkin and the flowering of Russian poetry. It was a period of Russian universalism, which had so determining an influence upon Russian spiritual culture of the nineteenth century." It was an era of theocratic Utopia.

Tsar Alexander I himself was interesting. He had an intricate and contradictory personality; he was emotionally excitable and always searching. Alexander did not like power and did not seek it out, but he saw himself as the carrier of a holy idea: the founding of a kingdom of justice on earth. Alexander was influenced by masonry and, like all masons, he was looking for the true and universal Christianity. He did not have deep Orthodox roots—it is known that Alexander read the New Testament (in French!) for the first time on the eve of Napoleon's invasion (1812) and was greatly affected by the Book of Revelation. When he was young Alexander was fond of European Enlightenment ideas, hated slavery, and sympathized with the French Revolution and the Republic. This romantically oriented tsar inspired the idea of a Holy Alliance of European countries, which, in his opinion, was supposed to be a union of people on the basis of Christian universalism. The Holy Alliance was planned as a prelude to a Millennial Kingdom. Eventually on the basis of his project, European governments created a reactionary union against their
people. Alexander’s rule ended at the very opposite of where it had begun: the mystical spirit of romanticism had turned into extreme political conservatism. The spiritual movements of Alexander’s time were of a dual nature. On the one hand, in newly regenerated Masonic lodges, more or less mystically oriented, antimonarchical Decembrists were being brought up (they would stage their first insurrection later, in 1825). On the other hand, the same mystical movement could be politically conservative and even reactionary. Alexander established the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Enlightenment, which was in fact a ministry of utopian religious propaganda. The ministry also served as a new link in the chain of church reforms started by Peter the Great. But there was a difference: Peter’s empire tried to subordinate the church from the inside in the name of the state. Under the rule of Alexander, the state once again considered itself holy and sacred; it claimed religious leadership, thrusting forward its own religious ideas of the ultimate universal Christianity. The Ministry of Religious Affairs was to join, if not unite, all confessions in a common inspiration. The Holy Synod of Orthodox Church became formally integrated within the state administration for “religious affairs” as a special “Division for the Greco-Roman Confession.” Interestingly, the charter of the Temple of Christ the Savior in Moscow, dedicated to the victory in the Patriotic War of 1812, entailed that it be not only an Orthodox church, since devotion to Christ belonged to all Christianity. The role of the Bible Society was dual as well—it was thrust into the community by the government when it was popular to adhere to interconfessional Christianity. At some period of time even these books supporting the Orthodox church were prohibited. The Russian Bible Society, established in 1812, was an autonomous branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Its original task was to distribute the Bible in Church Slavonic, but in 1816 the society agreed about the translation of the Bible into Russian. In 1820 the first Russian version of the New Testament appeared and in 1822 of the Psalter was published. Work on the Pentateuch began at the same time. The distribution of the Bible was launched in order to give every educated person in Russia a chance to discover the Holy Scripture. The activity of the Bible Society was interpreted by many orthodox clergymen as a step away from the traditional, national orthodox faith and as an attempt to replace the “language of faith” (Old Slavic) with
the "language of theater" (Russian). Some of them even were convinced that Old Slavic was the original language of the Bible. Finally, the most extreme clergymen convinced the tsar, Nicholas I, that the Russian translation of the Bible, along with the activity of the Bible Society, was equivalent to the dissemination of revolutionary ideas. Shishkov, the president of the Russian Academy of Science, wrote during this time that, in his opinion, the reading of the holy scripture at home, without the counsel of Orthodox priests, "aims to destroy the true faith, disrupt the fatherland, and produce strife and rebellion." In 1826 the Bible Society was closed, and the work of translation was stopped, not to begin again officially until 1858. The 1875 publication of the completed Russian translation of the Bible, made with the permission of the Holy Synod, remains to this day the standard version of the Bible in the Russian language.

Orthodoxy, Monarchism, and Populism

The beginning of the reaction in 1825, the year Tsar Nicholas I (1796–1855) gained the throne, was caused by the defeat of the Decembrists. The Decembrists were the first Russian revolutionaries, who proposed the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Russia. They were a small group who lacked support even among the educated members of society, much less those who believed in the religious blessing of the tsar’s monarchical power. Rich landowners and guard officers, on the other hand, belonged to the Decembrists because they could not tolerate the poor conditions of the serfs and the large social and economic gap between peasants and all other levels of Russian society. As we have said, during Alexander’s era Russia was filled with secret societies, which existed along with some Masonic lodges, some of which contemplated a riot against the government and the tsar himself. It is interesting that Tsar Alexander tolerated the existence of these societies and even sympathized with them.

The defeat of the Decembrists started a new era in the spiritual development of Russia. First the reactionary ideology and the politics of imperial Russia were strengthened, based on the officially proclaimed principle of “orthodoxy, monarchism and populism” (Pravoslavie, Samoderzavie, Narodnost’). In essence this principle declared that Russia was an exclusively special state and nation,
without any resemblance to the nations of Western Europe. They believed that the best order of things prevailed in Russia and that it was in balance with the nature of religion and true political wisdom.

Europe had its own historical distinctions: Catholicism and Protestantism in religion, constitutionalism or republicanism in government, civil freedom and secularity in society. But Russian official ideology of that time claimed this progress was a delusion which had led Europe toward revolution. Russia, it claimed, had stayed free from those harmful influences and had preserved untouched the traditions accumulated through the centuries. In terms of religious preferences, Russia was in a unique situation: its orthodox confession was borrowed from Byzantine sources, and therefore the most hallowed traditions of the early church were preserved. Russia was considered to be free from those religious disturbances which at the beginning misled the Catholic church, then brought about schism between Eastern and Western Christianity, and finally led to the creation of Protestantism with its numerous sects.

Even domestic life in Russia did not resemble other cultures, since Russia preserved patriarchal values which were almost unknown in Western society. Among them were national piety, complete and unquestioning obedience to government, and simplicity of customs and material needs. Serfdom had to preserve many of these patriarchal features—the assumption was that a good landowner protected his peasants' interests better than the peasants themselves. It was further assumed that the government was established on the basis of a total, detailed, and absolute care for the good of the people. Society was arranged in a hierarchy, the top of which was the leading authority: the tsar. This confidence in the supremacy of Russia served as a correction to the "mistake" made by Peter the Great, who attempted to draw Russia away from its historic path by importing values and ideas from the hostile European world.

Obviously, the ideology of Russia during the reign of Nicholas I was exceptionally conservative. Russia's past and present were idealized, and criticism of any kind was not tolerated. But an independent social idea was born during this time which contrasted itself to the triad of orthodoxy, monarchism, and populism. The participants in that movement became the Russian intelligentsia.
The Russian Intelligentsia

The Russian intelligentsia was a uniquely Russian phenomenon. It would be a mistake to equate the Russian intelligentsia with Western intellectuals, who are for the most part involved in high-level scientific or cultural activities. In Russia one could belong to the intelligentsia without being involved in intellectual activities—or even without being very intellectual. “The intelligentsia reminds one more of a monastic order or sect, with its own very intolerant ethics, its own obligatory outlook on life, with its own manners and customs and even its own particular physical appearance.” 15 The Russian intelligentsia was drawn from different social classes: mostly from the educated part of the nobility, sons of clergy, junior officials, petty bourgeois, and later from peasants. The intelligentsia was united not by a background of privilege but by ideas of social character. The main topic of conversation was the historical place of Russia and its prospects for the future. The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky understood the character of Russian intellectuals very well, characterizing them as “the great wanderers of the Russian land.”

The awakening of Russian social thought through the intelligentsia was a form of protest against the ideology of imperial Russia. After the failed riot of the Decembrists, active political work became impossible. Therefore, politics was transferred to the area of philosophy and literature, the world of ideas and serious discussion. The intelligentsia were completely carried away by their ideas and were prepared to accept exile, imprisonment, or even death for their sake. Their dream for society was unlimited and utterly detached from reality. Their goal was to develop a theory which would transform reality into the ideal. Certain Western European ideas, which had been popular in Russia since the 1820s, were now considered to be religious revelation. Darwinism, a theory of natural history in the West, acquired a dogmatic character among Russian intelligentsia, as if it were a question of salvation for eternal life. Materialism was also a subject of quasi-religious faith, and its opponents were sometimes considered enemies of human freedom. Passion for Hegel’s thought took on a religious character, since it was considered that Hegelian thought might solve some of the problems of the Orthodox church.

From 1820–1840, educated Russians were carried away by classical German philosophy. This philosophy stimulated Russian cultural life and thought for a long time, to the extent that philosophy

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itself became a kind of new religion. The intelligentsia considered the study of Christianity in Orthodox circles to be fit only for the common people. But the passion for philosophy had contradictory results at times: for some philosophy was seen as the road to the church, the road toward religious recovery. For others, philosophy permitted unbelief and even direct theomachism.

The main question that interested the Russian intelligentsia developed from their keenness about German romanticism and idealism: What was the true place of Russia in world history? What fate had God prepared for Russia? By now it was characteristic for the Russian people to think of their country as if it had some special, messianic fate. During the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth, they debated whether Russian development could be a simple repetition of Western European history or if it could be absolutely unique. This historical/sophistical idea emerged in an atmosphere of deep pessimism about Russia's past and present, but a sense of hope and optimism about its future. At that point the religious question reappeared in the Russian sociopolitical consciousness. The difference between the fate of Russia and that of Europe was reduced to a question of their respective religious fates. History itself was considered to be willed by God, an aspect of God's kingship. After 1830 we can observe two major tendencies in Russian social thought concerning the nature of God's kingdom: Slavophilism and Westernism.

Westernizers Versus Slavophiles

The first question for Russia's philosophers of history had to do with the meaning and purpose of Peter the Great's reforms. These reforms had literally cut Russian history into two parts. Was the historical path of Russia the same as that of Western Europe—meaning there was one common path to human progress and civilization, in which Russia in all its particularity demonstrates only its backwardness—or did Russia have its own historical path to take, implying that Russian civilization belonged to a different type altogether? Westernizers accepted Peter's reforms completely and saw the future for Russia in terms of a movement toward the Western example. Slavophiles, on the other hand, believed in a unique Russian culture which arose on the spiritual basis of Orthodoxy and created a special style of life. Slavophiles, however, thought that Orthodoxy should be pure, uncontaminated by
historical forces. They considered Peter’s reforms to have been a betrayal of the historical destiny of Russia.

Westernization and slavophilism are not just two political and historical concepts. They are two separate and opposed worldviews, two competing cultural and psychological directives. The difference was in their distinct understandings of the main principle of culture: Westernizers saw it as a rational product, a result of humankind’s intelligent creativity (following Hegel’s philosophy of law), while Slavophiles saw it as something which grew unconsciously through the people on national ground. Said another way, “Westerners expressed a ‘critical’ and the Slavophiles the ‘organic’ moments of cultural-historical self-definition.” Slavophiles contrasted the integrity of the Christian East to the rationalistic, fragmentary West. (This opposition reproduced a discussion in the West between the left and right wings of Hegelian philosophers, which was concentrated on the problem of the origin of the early church.)

The Slavophiles’ point of view should be examined in light of the Western European philosophical discussion between positivism and idealism. These two philosophical camps offered opposing interpretations of the question of the rise of the individual and the collapse of traditional social structures due to the Reformation and revolutions. Slavophiles gave their own interpretation of this question, offering as an alternative the idea of the coincidence of society with the church. The Slavophiles understood ecclesia to be the equivalent of “peasant community” (Oshchina). The Russian people were considered to be a communal people looking for spiritual, not political freedom. Having granted the “kingdom of this world” to the state, the Russian people, according to the Slavophiles, were the only true Christian people. They had created their own oasis, being “not of this world” in their communal life and internal sense of truth. They alone were faithful to the original patterns of Christianity as set forth in the Gospels. Slavophiles had an antigovernment orientation: they believed that the Russian people had first of all a spiritual and religious vocation. Community, for them, was not just a historical value but a superhistorical, over-historical value. This particular belief led to a controversy about even the formulation of historic and philosophical problems.

Slavophilism was designed to be a philosophy of history, a philosophy of the universal Christian fate. But the pathos of Slavophiles consisted in the abandonment of history. Their ethical
maximalism did not permit them to feel and see the practical difficulties in implementing Christianity in real life. Instead they attempted to isolate “the state” from “the community” —meaning mutual noninterference and complete freedom from one another—in order to create a new ideal society. One could even see it as an attempt to revive the old idea of the Third Rome. The difference with the Slavophiles, however, was that they denied Russia’s claim to have a messianic role in world history, concentrating instead on the peasant community. The Slavophiles represented the intelligentsia, a new cultural group, which had resisted the temptation of “Westernism” but not necessarily all Western views. Ironically, Slavophiles idealized the Russian national background because they had broken themselves off from it, viewing Russian history from the distant standpoint of German romanticism and idealism.

A special place in the traditions of the Slavophiles was given to the problem of Russian Orthodoxy. We can even say that the Slavophiles, in debating this problem, gave birth to real theological thought in Russia, although they were not professional theologians or clerics. They proposed the idea of “conciliarism” (Sobornost’) as the most important quality of Orthodoxy, which was different from the Catholic notion of authority and the Protestant emphasis on the faith of the individual. Conciliarism is “a holy unity in love and prayer,” which was possible only in the church, since each human being is created by the earth, whereas the church was created directly by God. The leader of the Slavophiles, Alexei Khomakiev (1804–1860), believed that faith was not given to a person according to his own discretion, in his or her solitary subjectivity. Rather, the faith was given to the apostolic church once and for all times. The Christian, who was once merely a subjective and morally weak entity (like a Protestant), had turned from his blindness to become a Catholic in the holiness of the apostolic church, to which he now belonged as an indissoluble part. Conciliarism, for Khomakiev, was not mere sociality or cooperativeness. In essence, conciliarism was concerned not with human but with divine behavior: it was God’s Spirit, existing only in the aggregate with the church, that kept church traditions, not the people.

Christian love turned out to be a principle of cognition: it provided knowledge of religious truth. The church is the unity of love and freedom as well. That was a particular epistemological principle, opposed both to church authority and to Western European
rationalism. To conciliar thinkers the truth belongs only to the church, which does not have any external authority above itself and which does not admit any kind of individualism to divide it. But Khomakiov, in proclaiming Orthodoxy to be the only true way of Christian faith, did not mean the Russian Orthodox church in its historical existence. That is why the official church always viewed the Slavophiles' views with suspicion, and Khomakiov's theological works were banned from publication for a long time.

Russian Nihilism

The spiritual atmosphere in the 1860s, the time of Tsar Alexander II, was paradoxical. From one side, the government, a number of liberal reforms took place (above all, the abolition of serfdom). On the other side, that of social thought, this was a time when all previous cultural, and moral and religious values were rejected. The epoch of nihilism had begun. Nihilism was another paroxysm of anti-historical Utopianism with which Russia was so well acquainted. It is a "characteristically Russian phenomenon; in its Russian form it is unknown in western Europe... Russian nihilism denied God, the soul, the spirit, ideas, standards and the highest values. And none the less nihilism must be recognized as a religious phenomenon. It grew up on the spiritual soil of Orthodoxy." 17 It was no accident that in the epoch of nihilism the main creators of social thought were the sons of clergy who had attended Orthodox schools. Nihilism is

Orthodox asceticism turned inside out, and asceticism without Grace. At the base of Russian nihilism, when grasped in its purity and depth, lies the Orthodox rejection of the world, its sense of the truth that "the whole world lieth in wickedness," the acknowledgment of the sinfulness of all riches and luxury, of all creative profusion in art and in thought. ... Nihilism was an individualist movement, but it was also directed against the fullness and richness of life. Nihilism considers as sinful luxury not only art, metaphysics and spiritual values, but religion also.18

Nihilists believed that every effort should be made to emancipate human beings from prejudice and superstition, which included the "common" Orthodox faith. Nihilists asked those who created and used cultural values the question of what their duty might be to the
common people, whose hard work made their cultural privilege possible.

“...nihilism still another trait of the Russian Orthodox type was reflected in a distorted view, the lack of a solution of the problem of culture due to the Orthodox background of Russian mentality. Ascetic Orthodoxy was doubtful about the justifiability of culture; it was inclined to see sinfulness in cultural creativeness.” Russian nihilism was the way out from the evil world; it severed the ties of family and tradition. Nihilism was a moral reflection on culture created by the privileged class and destined to be taken seriously only by that class. In nihilism one can see traditional traits in the Russian mentality, which revealed themselves at the time of the church schism in the seventeenth century. In the 1870s there was a populist movement (Narodnichestvo) among the Russian intelligentsia whose ideal was to “go to the people” (khodeni v narod) to educate them and in turn to adopt their “simple order” of life. The intelligentsia could easily deny their personal goods and went willingly to the gallows when persecuted by the authorities. They believed they were headed for the future, despite the fact that they did not have any hope for themselves either in earthly life or in the life everlasting, which they denied. Populists could not understand the mysteries of the cross; but they were capable of sacrificing themselves, unlike the representatives of the official church at that time. They protested against official morality in the name of the Good, which was attainable by the adoption of the simple life, by throwing off some conditional cultural shells, and by searching for truth in the life of the common people.

Nihilism was a protest against official Orthodoxy. It was an attempt to find a new social truth, which appeared on the basis of Christianity but took a form that was far different from Christianity. The fate of the populist movement was tragic because its adherents not only met with persecution from the authorities but were not even welcomed by the people themselves, who had a different outlook upon life and different beliefs. The outcome was that intelligentsia went over to terrorism. The result of the epoch of nihilism and populism of intelligentsia was the murder of the Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881. It was the tragic climax of the one-on-one combat between Russian authority and the Russian intelligentsia.
Dostoevsky: The Provisions about Humanity

The religious sense and character of Russian life in those days was revealed in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), although the importance of his works and sociopolitical opinions goes far beyond the limits of his own epoch. There is an inner unity in the writings of Dostoevsky; he worried about the same themes for his whole life. If there was one theme that captured his imagination, however, it was the spiritual reality of human existence. Early in his life he discovered the contradictions of human freedom. On the one hand, he saw the meaning of human life in the arena of freedom or creative self-determination. That is why Dostoevsky protected the “self-will” of human beings, without which even humility and obedience were impossible. On the other hand, no one wrote with more power and cogency on the self-destruction of freedom. He showed how the absolutization of freedom could lead to the destruction of a personality and, moreover, how freedom can turn into compulsion and violence. It is dangerous to be free, but it is even more dangerous to be deprived of freedom. Freedom has to be limited from the inside, since pure freedom makes men and women slaves of their own passions or ideas. Dostoevsky did not pity the “oppressed and abused” alone; he believed that anyone who encroaches on another’s freedom or life would perish. That was the destiny of Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment.

The contradictions of human freedom can be solved only through love, but love is possible only in freedom. In “The Legend of the Great Inquisitor,” found in The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky showed the dialectic of freedom and love in portraying the Inquisitor first of all as a victim of unfree love. For Dostoevsky the mystery of the Church, as a brotherhood and love through Christ, was the realization of an indissoluble bond: love through freedom and freedom through love.

In his early years Dostoevsky was tempted by socialistic ideas, but he soon realized the danger of building life from an idealistic point of view. On the other hand, an “organic” point of view based on that of the Slavophiles did not satisfy him either. Dostoevsky was looking for but could not find that ground from which, as the Slavophiles thought, Russian orthodox conciliarism was growing. He was more bothered by the groundlessness (bez-pochvennost’) of the existentialist depth of personality, spiritual groundlessness, and the wandering which were
so characteristic of the Russian intelligentsia. He saw a firmer foundation in the attempt to overcome the schism of human existence, in returning to original integrity, in overcoming the separation of a self-willed personality from traditions, from God, and from faith. Dostoevsky understood and accepted only brotherhood through Christ, which turned a person into one's neighbor. He waited and strove for the kingdom of God on earth, but "he remained a utopian, he continued to believe in a historical resolution of the contradictions of life, he hoped and prophesied that the 'state' would be transformed into the Church." Even in his historical speculations Dostoevsky remained metaphysical, being concerned primarily with the final destiny of humankind rather than with the resolution of social problems. History was for him a continuing revelation in which the question of Christ was resolved. He saw history as the creation of a Tower of Babel, a conflict between human aspiration to become like God and the truth of the Incarnation of Christ.

Dostoevsky did not dislike the West; in fact, for several years of his life he lived in Europe. But he discerned the metaphysical illness of the Western spirit and portrayed this illness as a rebellious desire for freedom from God and a nostalgia for freedom through God. He claimed to have learned a great deal from Western philosophers and writers and considered their thought the second motherland of the Russian spirit. He realized that history inevitably provoked conflict between Russia and Europe and that it was impossible to resolve the Russian Orthodox problem in isolation from Catholic and Protestant Europe. But Dostoevsky saw this as his Christian duty, not historical inevitability. In the West, he believed, the image of the Savior was unfading. The Western world would remain Christian, for there, as it was in Russia, God struggled with the devil on the battlefield of human hearts. In the name of love for humanity, Dostoevsky strove for universal brotherhood and a synthesis between West and East.

Russian literature of the nineteenth century was full of presentiments and predictions about the destiny of humankind and every individual human being. It searched for the truth about the meaning of human life, and it taught how to reach it. Russian literature was born from the purgatory and suffering of mankind and the search for universal salvation. Fundamentally, the motivating force of Russian literature was religious.
Tolstoy and the Justification of Culture

Russian writers, on the whole, did not believe in the stability of civilization or in the solidity of the foundations that hold the world. They were concerned not so much about the literary creativity but about searching for absolute truth; they also began to explore the notion of art and literature as vehicles for social change. In the name of social advocacy, they were even prepared to sacrifice artistic creativity.

The transition from writing to social advocacy is especially clear in the work of Leo N. Tolstoy (1828-1910). Tolstoy lived through a deep personal crisis which made him abandon his writing. But he then began to create and promote a utopian movement known as “Tolstoyism” (tolstovstvo), the members of which were intended to establish the “colonies” based on social equality and common labor. Tolstoy had the temperament of a preacher and a moralist but no prior experience with religion. His social writings feature a kind of moral positivism which reminds one of Stoicism. Even the Christian features of his studies were not taken from the New Testament, which he considered to be a book written many centuries ago by uneducated and superstitious people. “In one of his last essays he offers a highly characteristic method. With pencil in hand, let each person read the Gospels and mark that which he can understand, using red for the words of Christ and blue for other passages. Only that which is marked, ‘that which is completely simple and understandable,’ is essential in the Gospels. And through the power of the unity of reason all of the passages in such a selection must roughly coincide.”

This fits perfectly with Tolstoy’s credo: above all, to believe in the human intellect. His aim was to create a new religion that was in accordance with the development of humankind, a religion of Christ, purified of faith and mystery, a practical religion that would not promise felicity in the future but would provide it on earth.

Tolstoy was a very personal, egocentric writer. He searched for explanations for all of life’s phenomena and all his questions of conscience. He did not want to know any aesthetic or philosophical doctrines. He did not accept historical or theoretical traditions, thinking that they were invented by people to deceive either themselves or others. That is how he arrived at the denial of culture and creativity. Tolstoy was a logical nihilist who moralized. His popularity and influence was evidence of the power of secular pietism.
in the Russian soul. Tolstoy's social-ethical ideas were often at odds with the results of his own moral observations, which tended toward basic common sense and worldly prudence. He considered science and philosophy to be useless verbiage, and he sought relief in the simple virtues of the life of working people. The final state of Tolstoy's nihilism was his rejection of the church, although there was in fact a good bit of fairness in his critique. Tolstoy's followers shared his need to leave history for a pious utopia and take up residence in another world.

Russian Religious Philosophy

The second half of the nineteenth century in Russian social thought is characterized by the conflict between the nihilistic denial of religion, culture, and moral values and the formation of a religious philosophy which considered its main subject the problem of the synthesis of God and man. Having lived through the excitement generated by German idealism, Russian philosophical thought gradually went its own way, which was inseparably combined with religious problems.

Religious themes were predominant not only because of their existential importance for the Russian social consciousness but also because philosophy turned out to be the field where all of the most significant social and personal issues problems were addressed. Actually, theological research in Russia was almost nonexistent or was conducted within the extremely narrow confines of Orthodox dogmatic categories, which put it beyond the concern and understanding of the vast majority of Russian people. The lack of differentiation between philosophy and theology in Russia was also characteristic of Western Europe. It would be correct to say that all Russian philosophy from the middle of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was exclusively religious. In contradistinction to Western European philosophies, however, Russian philosophers did not try to create a logical theoretical point of view. This was due to the inner composition of Russian philosophical thought. The aim of philosophy in Russia had always been to discover, if not an abstract, intellectual truth, then truth as a model of living. It tried to combine simple truth with a sense of fairness, not admitting that the truth could be discovered only by intellectual process, the act of thinking. Neither epistemology nor methodology could shake the prerational belief of
Russian philosophers that comprehension of the essence of truth was possible through the integral life of the spirit. That is why Russian philosophy always sought the transformation of life in accordance with religious and moral ideals. 

Unlike European philosophy, then, Russian philosophy was not in the least bit interested in constructing an abstract, purely intellectual perspective on the world. Russian thought was focused on the internal, intuitive, mystical apprehension of the essence and of its hidden depth, which could be discovered not through logical terms but only through a symbol, an image, which coordinated the power of the imagination with the inner life of each human being. The basis of European philosophy is ratio; Russian philosophical thought, on the other hand, developed on the basis of Greek and Orthodox ideas borrowed from the ancients and so was based on logos. Ratio, rationality, is a human quality and process; logos, the word or inward thought, is metaphysical and divine.

At the same time, Russian philosophy was inseparably combined with reality. That is why Russian philosophy often appeared in the guise of social and religious journalism, which expressed the spirit of the times with all its positive and negative signs, with its joy and suffering, order and chaos. Russian philosophy was practical and aimed to change the order of life and human existence. But those changes were to have been based on an ontological apprehension of the Truth, on the realization of our own existence based on a foundation of Truth. From this point of view any mastery of life is not theoretical but practical. The degree of comprehension depended on the level of willpower. Thus, it was the saints, and not the philosophers, who were to be the masters of human knowledge. 

**The Universal Christianity of V. Solov’ev**

Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900), was the founder of the first inherently Russian philosophical tradition. His philosophical activity began with the belief that philosophy as an abstract theoretical system had run its course and that new philosophy should search for social truth and practical ethics. According to Solov’ev, the limitations of abstract theories were one source of difficulty; but the other was that empirical experience—through which one could surmise truth—was not connected to reality. One had to create a true reality. Of course,
Solov'ev was sure that there was truth in God, but since people did not believe in God they lived without the truth. Therefore, not only their knowledge but their existence itself was false. Philosophy was a way to find the truth that leads to a realization of God's ideas in history, including understanding of the Spirit of Christ.

Solov'ev perceived Christianity as the beginning of history and considered that in the course of history the church of Christ would be fully realized on earth. Furthermore, it is only in the church, in the truth of God's incarnation, that historical creativity receives its full justification. The church is a historical agent; it has a creative mission and vocation in history, and it is itself the only true social ideal. The essence of true Christianity consists of the transformation of the early kingdom into God's kingdom. Therefore, Christianity can only be comprehensive and ecumenical. However, reality truly exists only under conditions of crisis and disorder. The Orthodox faith was no longer considered a unitive principle; philosophy instead is called to rebuild life in its original connections and integrated whole. When Christianity becomes real and people start living in accordance with it, then the need for philosophy will fade. Solov'ev believed that the main reason for the lack of faith and general retreat from Christianity was that Christianity appeared in "false form" in the world when it denied reason. His own "philosophy of unity" strove for confession of the Christian faith by means of creative reason. Religious truth should have the form of reasonable thought. Theology should be put into substantial contact with philosophy and science, and thus we could organize all real knowledge into a system of free and scientific philosophy.

Solov'ev considered history a process of the realization of God's incarnation, when people inevitably moved toward absolute transfiguration and reunion with God. From the Slavophiles Solov'ev inherited the notion that the historical initiative and therefore decisive influence in this process had passed from the West to Russia and that, therefore, Russia should become a worldwide Christian monarchy where universal Christian culture and free theocracy would come true. They would be created on the basis of integral unity of the positive elements of both East and West. The first step in that direction should be a reunion of Eastern and Western churches. The Eastern church possessed the richness of mystical contemplation, whereas the Western Catholic church had supranational spiritual power, independent from government. According to Solov'ev, the basis of the
ecumenical theology should be a union of the state and the church, supported by the moral power of the church. This was a resurfacing of the old idea of the Third Rome, the realization of which Solov’ev saw in the union between the pope and the Russian tsar. That would be a union of the two grand bearers of the two greatest gifts: the Priesthood and the Kingdom. Solov’ev called Russia and the Slavonic people “a new home of David in the Christian world.” At the end of his life, however, Solov’ev came to complete disappointment in his utopian dreams about the ideal human civilization—a free ecumenical theocracy.

One significant aspect of Solov’ev’s philosophy was mysticism, which manifested itself chiefly in the concept of Saint Sophia—God’s wisdom as the fourth hypostasis of the Trinity. This concept was obviously incompatible with classic Christian dogma; it was instead a mystical reinterpretation of the worldwide mission of Russia as the last earthly embodiment of God’s kingdom. Solov’ev was the first who mystically perceived Russia as a symbol of Eternal Feminine, which strove for reunion with God. Therefore, Solov’ev became the precursor of a new stage in the spiritual development of Russian culture which emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century—a period in which symbolism and mystical ideas of Russia’s fate were extremely popular.

In Solov’ev’s theories one can see the blending of different elements of Platonism, patristic traditions and gnosticism, German classical philosophy, a uniquely Russian world-outlook, mysticism, and rationalism. It was Solov’ev, however, who became the creator of an original Russian philosophical system and who laid the foundation for a school of Russian religious and philosophical thought which actively influenced the social and cultural thought of Russia right up to the revolution of 1917.

The “Theology” of the Russian Orthodox Church

For a long time Russian Orthodoxy did not have a theology in the sense in which it existed in Western Catholic and Protestant thought. The only tradition, of Platonism and Greek patristic studies, had been interrupted and was long forgotten. Theological study was brought to Russia from the West, and in one way or another every major phase of Western religious thought—from Tridentine theology to the Tübingen
school—successively entered into Russia’s cultural experience. “However, only dependence and imitation resulted—no true encounter with the West” 23 had taken place. Even in the nineteenth century theology was a “school” science, and it belonged to the curriculum of theological college only; that is, it existed in a formal scholastic environment without any connection to the practice of religious life.

Theology attracted neither the attention nor the sympathies of the wider circles of clergymen and parishioners. At best theology was considered superfluous and at worst deliberately misleading. The majority of believers managed without any theology, for they had a variety of substitutes for it: traditions of olden times, everyday rites, and spiritual reflections. As a result church life, and religion itself, was excessively psychological in its orientation.

This predicament emerged inevitably from the relationship between the Orthodox church and the Russian state. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the church actually was not separate from the state but existed more as a governmental department of “right social thinking.” Since the time of Peter the Great, theology, borrowed uncritically from the West, had only a formal role; and gradually piety slipped back to the lower classes. That was the basis for the break between the church “intelligentsia,” well-educated clergymen who constituted an insignificant minority, and the church “people” to whom belonged the majority of orthodox priests.

By the end of the nineteenth century the Russian Orthodox church was in a deep crisis, for which the Holy Synod itself was in part responsible. The Holy Synod was a state department governing church affairs. The politics of the Synod at the end of nineteenth century were based on the conservative ideology of the idealization of people’s souls, and it was charged with protecting these souls from demoralization by contact with Western rational thought. The people’s faith was considered to be the one “true faith,” which was preserved by the priest when he kept the rites exclusively in their historical form. In keeping with this, there was a fear of excessive education for the clergy, to the extent that an actual ban was placed on the discussion of the truth of the faith. To Russian clergymen it was suggested that theology did not belong to the essence of Russian orthodoxy, or “simple” people’s faith, because the people could easily manage without theological speculation, and they could save their souls more reliably than could the “philosophizing” intelligentsia. Thus faith was moved into spheres of instinctive emotions and pious feelings.
Dogmas were interpreted more in canonical than in theological ways, as the rules of piety, not as a source of live truth. This situation was intensified by the fact that the social status of clergymen distanced them from the cultural society of Russia. Finally the educated classes, the intelligentsia, considered it indecent and improper for them to believe in the traditional form of Orthodoxy. But this break between intelligentsia and common people took place in the area of Christian faith alone; cultural society in Russia from the beginning was infected with unbelief and free thinking. Orthodoxy was left to the common people, merchants, petty bourgeois, and peasants. That part of the intelligentsia who tried to redeem their fault before the people believed they could come back to the church through the adoption of the simple life. In their interpretation, orthodoxy often turned into edifying folklore. By the end of the nineteenth century, another part of the intelligentsia started looking for a new way in religion outside the realm of orthodoxy, in the area of art and literature.

Thus after ten centuries the “daytime” and the “nighttime” cultures were reversed. Orthodoxy was traditionally strong among the people, but since it hardly had any realistic meaning it was transformed into a ceremonial faith. The cultural class, who once created Russian Orthodoxy, strove for another way to be Christian because they no longer recognized the Russian Orthodox church as a genuine repository of the Orthodox Christian tradition.

Communism and Christianity

The Socialist revolution of 1917 radically changed the look of the monarchical Russian empire, transforming it into a totalitarian state in every respect. It was decided, for example, to eradicate religion completely. Although they were unable to do this, the church was deprived of its ability to influence the people for a long time. Ironically, the Soviet government returned to the Russian Orthodox church what had been taken from it since the time of Peter the Great: the formal independence of the church from the state. For the first time in three centuries, a Local Council took place in 1917. This council restored the office of Patriarch and gave the church a chance for self-governance. Although the council took place before the October revolution in 1917, the new state power did not deprive the
church of this privilege. Official ideology, interpreting religion as an “opiate for the people,” proclaimed the faith incompatible with the communist ethos and prohibited, according to the principle of the separation of church and state, any church activity in political life. It admitted religious life only within the church and deprived the church of its congregation, since open confession of the Christian faith had become dangerous.

However, communist Russia and the Russian empire were only apparently opposed. Actually, after the Moscow Kingdom and Peter the Great’s empire, communism was the third manifestation of Russian sovereignty, of Russian imperialism. Under communism the desire for social justice and the desire for state power were still at odds, although the desire for state power was stronger. A centralized and militarized state was formed which was held together by state violence along with an integrated world outlook. In the past, in both the Moscow Kingdom and the Russian Empire people were connected through the unity of religious belief. Now there was a new common faith called Marxism-Leninism, which proclaimed communism as the embodiment of God’s kingdom on earth. Russia was to be the source from which communism would spread all over the world.

The whole history of the Russian intelligentsia was a preparation for communism. Into communism there entered the well-known traits—the thirst for social righteousness and equality; a recognition of the working classes as the highest type of humanity; aversion to capitalism and the bourgeoisie, the striving after an integrated outlook and an integrated relation to life, sectarian intolerance, a suspicious and hostile attitude to the cultured elite, an exclusive this-worldliness, a denial of spirit and of spiritual values...  

Russian social thought had always had a utopian tendency—but in Russia not only philosophers but tsars too were utopian thinkers. Through communism the utopian ideal of a better world on Russian soil showed its exclusive inner power, as Russian Orthodox people, who had humbly endured their fill of suffering fate and who believed in God and destiny, suddenly denied their faith and accepted a new one which had no God but still hoped for the realization of Russia’s messianic role in world history. Official atheism only superficially contradicted the traditional Russian Orthodox worldview. In
communist Russia atheism was merely one component of a new communist quasi-religion.

The Orthodox church found it difficult to adjust to the realities of communist Russia. In the time of the mass repressions in the 1930s, a huge number of clergymen died in prison camps. The ideology of the surviving leadership of the Orthodox church was formed in the early 1940s, when Stalin, seeking a total change of state politics from revolutionary internationalism to the great power of Russian nationalism, decided to reconstruct the Orthodox hierarchy with well-defined functions in the state. That was the ideology of the “patriotic serving,” which offered support for the government and counteracted any domestic instability or Western influence. This ideology had deep roots in the past of the church and society. But it also constituted something absolutely new, since the “patriotic service” of the atheistic state let the Russian church find its place in communist society. Although both church and faith were persecuted, the Orthodox Church remained the only church patronized by the state among that portion of society which was allowed to remain religious (mainly the noneducated populations of small towns and villages). With the help of the atheistic state the Orthodox Church was able to defeat all its opponents, i.e., representatives of different Christian confessions. The church itself lived by the rules that were characteristic of totalitarian societies as a whole.

Religion in Contemporary Russia

The religious frame of mind in contemporary post-perestroika Russia is extremely diverse and intricate. One indisputable achievement of political reforms was the establishment of a democratic principle of liberty of conscience and freedom of religion. The image of religion in social opinion has changed. Now religion is considered as a core of culture, as a repository of morality and spirituality. Obviously, such change is a natural result of the destruction of previous structures of Party-State atheism, which was promptly replaced by earlier suppressed religious confessions which either existed before (both legally and illegally) or newly appeared. But we can hardly interpret this situation as a religious revival.

Unfortunately, in this new historical situation, as it became possible, the Russian Orthodox Church returned to the old imperial ideas of the
unity between Orthodoxy and national traits. In their view the
Orthodox faith was from time immemorial a Russian national
particularity, and the Orthodox Church was the Russian people in its
spiritual aspirations. The hierarchy of the Orthodox Church returned
to its habit of serving authorities in order to obtain privileged status
and to secure the position of the state church, which implied that the
Orthodox church was the only rightful claimant of the entire legacy of
the pre-Revolutionary church. Such recognition was also important to
obtain governmental support in the struggle with competing
confessions.

But the government of contemporary Russia also shows a regard for
the expectations of the Orthodox Church which can hardly be
explained by the sudden religious conversion of top state officials.
One can point to two main reasons for this: one, that state authority
under the conditions of a vacuum of ideology (which appeared after
the demise of the official Marx-Lenin ideology) was in serious need of
an additional source of legitimization, and therefore an alliance with
the state was necessary; and two, that the historical monarchical
instincts of the ruling clique returned, and that from this point of view
Russia needed a single leadership and universal faith to provide state
unity.

Russia has never had deep democratic traditions. During the last
two centuries Russia had lived through the totalitarian supremacy of
"monarchy, orthodoxy, and populism," which then turned into
Communist totalitarianism. Although their ideological tendencies were
diametrically opposed, their psychological dimensions and political
forms had a lot in common. Therefore the strengthening of orthodoxy
today is closely connected with the mood of that part of the population
which protested against democratic reforms and which strove to return
Russia to the status of a world power. Such tendencies have appeared
in public opinion recently. It is interesting that today's "left wing" (or
yesterday's communists) takes the position of "orthodoxy, monarchy
(in its communist form), and populism," and the representatives of the
"right wing," who were also yesterday's communists but more
oriented as social-democrats, insist that Russia follow world (Western)
standards of liberal democracy, meaning liberty of conscience and
neutrality in the religious realm.

As to the level of religiosity in contemporary Russia, one can
assume that the majority of former atheists lost their faith in atheism
and did not gain any other faith instead. Many people who sincerely
identify themselves as Russians and Orthodox do not consider themselves believers and are not actually parishioners of the Orthodox Church. The number of committed orthodox believers is relatively small, as is the number of those who belong to other traditional Russian Protestant confessions. In big cities some new religious confessions, mostly from Western Europe and the U.S., have become very popular. This raises a serious concern for the Orthodox Church, which tries to limit the influence of those confessions, considering their activity as “proselytism” and “sectarianism.” However, the main competition these days is formed not by other confessions but by a very fast growing category of people who consider themselves as “Christians in general.” They do not try to clarify their confessional affiliation or accept church discipline. These people usually have a high educational level, and they do not identify themselves with Orthodoxy, which was traditionally viewed as a faith for noneducated people.

Finally, there is a fairly large group of people who consider themselves to be believers not in God but in supernatural forces. At the same time some of them think they are Orthodox, some are “Christians in general,” and some are atheists. But in spite of their confessional or atheistic preferences these people have a fairly eclectic, undetermined worldview; they are highly interested in Oriental religious studies, spiritism, and modern para-scientific and parareligious mythology (which is formed around parapsychology, UFOs, etc). Of course, the dissemination of this kind of perspective is not a Russian phenomenon but a worldwide one, connected with a global sense of crisis in traditional religious and ideological systems. In contemporary Russia, in conditions of ideological chaos and psychological crisis, the number of such people is especially high. Therefore, one can assume that the general state of religiosity in Russia is developing in the direction of absolute uncertainty. An assumption about a “religious revival” seems to be hasty. Conversion to the faith is an act of intimacy touching the private world of a person. It cannot be simply evidence of a modern trend or a result of a spiritual infection; it is not a way of expressing different sociopolitical aspirations or priorities.

“The history of Russian culture is one of interruptions, assaults, renunciations or enthusiasms, disillusionments, betrayals, and breaks.”26 The spiritual atmosphere in Russia during the centuries-old history of its existence, as we have seen, represents a very complicated conglomeration of various traditions and influences,
mainly deriving from Western European culture and the outlet of Eastern Orthodoxy. When Russia became a huge empire—in the beginning of the eighteenth century—the main dilemma of Russian social thought was the problem of which historical direction Russia would take, a question of two different traditions, Western and Eastern. This problem itself was evidence of a fundamental psychological peculiarity of the Russian mentality, an inferiority complex in the self-awareness of the country which doubted its own right to exist and therefore always looked for an ideal, either in its own past or in a neighboring culture.

The social conscience of contemporary Russia carries the features of the same inherited illness. Modern discussions about the past and future of Russia echo surprisingly old ideas and arguments which were actively discussed over the past two centuries. But today as always the question of what Russia believes is directly related to the question of whether Russia believes in itself. And as always the answer can be found under one condition: that Russia surrender its concept of messianic exclusiveness—of being the God-favored one—and its mirror opposite, the concept of catastrophic victimhood—of being one abandoned by God.

Notes

3. SS. Cyril (Constantine) (827–869) and Methodius (825–884) were brothers born in Thessalonica. They became missionaries to the Slavs and received the title “apostles of the Slavs.” They translated Scripture into the Old Bulgarian “Slavonic” and for this they devised an alphabet, which later came to be known as Cyrillic.
4. Filofei, a monk from Eleazar Monastery in Pskov, sketched this theory in a letter to Tzar Vasilii III in 1510–1511.
5. Florovsky, Ways of Russian Theology, 1:12.
6. The Time of Troubles [Smutnoe Vremia] refers to that period of internal strife and foreign intervention which resulted in utter chaos in Russia in the early seventeenth century.
7. “Book correction is linked with the beginning of printing in Muscovy. The discussion ranged over the ‘correct’ edition of books, services, and texts, which had a venerable history and were known not only in a multiplicity of copies from different
periods but in a multiplicity of translations. Moscovite editors immediately became

drawn into all the contradictions of manuscript tradition. They made frequent

mistakes or went astray, but not only because of their "ignorance." Their mistakes,
mistakes, and confusions often were caused by real difficulties, although they did not

always know and understand exactly where the difficulties lay." (Florovsky, Ways of

Russian Theology, 1:88.)

8. Ibid., 115.


11. The Holy Alliance was presented to Europe by Alexander in 1815. The idea was

for European countries to be guided by the principles of Christian morality. But in

reality only one principle was meaningful to its signatories: that the sovereigns rule by

the will of God and therefore the opposition to them is illegal.

12. Today's reconstruction of the Temple (being destroyed in 1934) could be seen as

a paradoxical symbol of the new alliance of state and Russian Orthodox Church alone.

13. The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded in England in 1804. Its

purpose was the wider distribution, free of charge and "without note and comment,"

of the Bible; and from its very beginning it was interdenominational.

14. The problem of language is still not solved, for the liturgical language of ROC is

Old Slavic.

15. Nikolas Berdyaev, The Origin of Russian Communism (Ann Arbor: University of


18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 47.

20. In his youth Dostoevsky belonged to a revolutionary circle and was once even

sentenced to death, which was changed to penal servitude.


22. Ibid., 179.

23. Ibid., 300–301.

24. The contemporary situation in the Russian Orthodox Church, although it is rooted

not only in the historical tradition but also in the tragic experience of the church

through the period of socialism, is very much the same: "so as not to stray too far

from the reality, one would have to acknowledge that for the majority of those who

visit the Orthodox temples—those who have some reasons to make a step into the

church—not only the mystical depth of the prayer is closed but even the elementary

language of its liturgy is not understood." (Archbishop Mikhail, Russkaya

Pravoslavnaya Tserkovnost' (Russian Orthodox Ecclesia in the Second Part of the

twentieth century) (Moscow: Biblical-Theological Institute, 1995), 8.


ADDITIONAL READINGS:


On Christmas Eve, 1784, Methodist preachers in North America formally broke the British ties which bound them, chose a name for themselves, and formed a democratic and egalitarian church in which local congregations are organized into annual conferences. Annual conferences elect lay and clergy delegates to quadrennial meetings of the denomination’s General Conference, where church law and doctrine are formulated. Since its birth, Methodism in the U.S. has been a popular religion, embracing large numbers of people and seeking to transform North American culture.

Among the concerns that arose after 1945, Methodism spoke out on the issues of war and nuclear armaments. The church spoke frequently and regularly, but it did not speak with a consistent voice. In 1944 the church proclaimed that it was “well within the Christian position when we assert the necessity of the use of military force to resist an aggression...” 2 Over the next four decades the church’s position of 1944 slowly but deliberately changed until, in 1988, the church announced that “war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ” and was not to be used as an instrument of foreign policy. 3 The teachings of the church, defined in its official policy statements,

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changed from acquiescence to the idea of war to a complete rejection of war. The difference was due to the advent of nuclear weapons and the church's new interest in social concerns.

Matthew Carpenter Lee, in his study of North American Protestantism’s response to the nuclear crisis prior to 1970, argued that Methodism “failed to respond coherently or constructively to the moral and political dilemma presented by nuclear weapons from 1945 to 1970.” Lee deftly traced the legislative history of the pertinent sections of “The Social Creed” and the resolutions on war and peace. Lee rightly argued that the church's 1968 position on war was different from its position of 1944. Lee's study is restricted in scope and perspective, but by extending the scope of his study to include two more decades, the trend of that change becomes apparent. The 1960s were a pivotal decade which set a direction for the church's statements on military training, the economy, the military-industrial complex, and conscientious objection. The church directed its opinions of the 1980s more toward national policymakers, particularly in response to the nuclear strategy of President Reagan. Church statements in 1984 and 1988, which clearly opposed the use of nuclear weapons and the current nuclear policy, were a central part of the church's burgeoning social activism.

The Church's Position, 1919–1944

After World War I, pacifism emerged as a quickly growing movement within Methodism. Many Methodists, among them Ernest F. Tittle and G. Bromley Oxnam, were active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist witness founded during the war. Methodists were optimistic that war itself had brought an end to the need for war and that a new program of peace could be sought among nations. “We are determined to outlaw the whole system of war,” the church announced in 1924. Though it spoke against the necessity of war, neither the loyalty nor the patriotism of the church or its members could be questioned. Instead, the church's General Conference pictured a new role for the nation, a leadership role in which the government and the church together would “create the will to peace.” Through the 1930s, Methodism consistently stated its preference for peace, but it began to recognize the potential for another war. The General Conference of 1939 recognized that an “extremely dangerous state of affairs” existed
in international relations that year. It renewed its opposition to the spirit of war which was raging through the world, but the final decision to participate or not to participate in war was left to the individual who was "to answer the call of his [sic] government in an emergency according to the dictates of his Christian conscience." The Methodist Episcopal Church, formerly divided into northern and southern branches, united that year to form The Methodist Church, and the social creeds of the two bodies were harmonized into a single declaration entitled "Our Social Creed." Within the Social Creed the church repeated its support for an army and a navy for police purposes while acknowledging the legitimacy of conscientious objectors.

In this period, ambivalence about war was found in the teachings of Albert C. Knudson, a popular teacher and writer at Methodist-related Boston University. Knudson influenced at least a generation of Methodist church leaders. The intellectual successor to Borden Parker Bowne's philosophical personalism, Knudson eagerly accepted the intellectual challenge of the new scientific worldview and incorporated it into his writings. In 1943, Knudson, a professor of theology and former dean of the School of Theology, offered the capstone to years of scholarship and classroom lectures in The Principles of Christian Ethics.

Knudson's work on Christian ethics was a historical and systematic exposition. In part IV, "Practical Application," Knudson turned to the problem of war and the Christian ideal. War was the same as execution of the penal law. Both used force to defend the state and to establish justice. The need for both was condemned, but neither could be eliminated. Christians were agreed that war was a breach of the Christian ideal, but they disagreed on the possibility of realizing the ideal on earth. Knudson asked if war was inevitable. It was a question which would be asked over and over in General Conference debates. Knudson answered negatively. War was nothing more than another social problem with which the human mind would eventually deal successfully. In the meantime, and under certain conditions, war could be justified. Christian ethics, even pacifist ethics, did not preclude the right of self-defense, either for the individual or for the state. Though war was justified and even beneficial in some instances, the task of the Christian church was to promote peace and an international organization to enforce it.
This ambivalence about war characterized not only Knudson's ethics but also the leadership of the church at large. In the spring of 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt was considering a campaign for a fourth term of office, Hitler's troops were reinforcing their position in Italy, and battle lines were being drawn for the meeting of the General Conference of The Methodist Church. At the conference, pacifist Ernest Tittle introduced the majority report for the Committee on the State of the Church, seeking a reaffirmation of a 1940 resolution on peace and war. The 1940 article was not a statement of pacifist principles because it left open the possibility of a just war, but Tittle supported it because it declared that the church as an institution could not endorse war. The proposed 1944 majority report proudly applauded conscientious objectors, but it offered no prayers for Allied victory. Floyd Cunningham summarized the tone of the majority report: "The report followed Tittle's view that God could never sanction or bless any aspect of life so evil as war."

A graduate of Boston University, then dean of Drew Theological Seminary, Lynn Harold Hough, offered a substitute resolution on behalf of 17 of the 64 active committee members. It began with the question, "Must the Christian Church condemn all use of military force?" Civilization had been attacked by the forces of aggression, the minority report claimed, and "God himself has a stake in the struggle." Intolerable wrongs had been committed and the state and the Christian were duty bound to fight to correct them. The use of military force was a necessity. U.S. citizens were already serving in the armed forces, more than a million of whom were Methodist young men. The minority report asked that God's blessing be upon them and all in the service, and it lifted up prayers for their victory. Support, it claimed, should be given to those who, for the sake of conscience, could not condone the use of force; but their position was not to be misconstrued as the defining position of the Christian Church. After heated floor debate, the minority resolution was substituted for the majority report and in a subsequent vote made the official position of the church. Other resolutions passed by the conference demanded restitution by Germany because it had been the aggressor and severe but "just" and "constructive" terms from Japan. Apparently, Allied victory was never in doubt.

After adopting the minority resolution on "The Christian Church and War," the General Conference was then free to consider changes
to the Social Creed, carried over from 1940. Ernest Tittle again gave the report, which drew primarily from the 1944 Episcopal address. The report was adopted without debate. It was unsatisfactory, the new creed read, "to be told that war is inevitable. It staggers the imagination to contemplate another war with its unspeakable horrors in which modern science will make possible the destruction of whole populations." Though the new creed was prophetic in ways the 1944 General Conference delegates could not imagine, and though it was in some ways contrary to the resolution on war which had just been adopted, the language was "soft" on war. It called war "a crude and primitive force." It bewailed international diplomacy which had failed to prevent war, and it called for an international organization which would make another war impossible. It was not, however, a pacifist statement, nor was it indubitably antiwar. Matthew Lee was correct to write that "most delegates perceived in the [current] war such flagrant violations of Christian principles and democratic codes of conduct by the Axis powers that they believed adhering to peaceful principle was not a legitimate option."

The Church in the Nuclear Age

The article on war of Social Creed would remain unchanged for a decade, but the technology of war was revolutionized. News that atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, was received in the United States with simultaneous expressions of joy and fear. On August 14, 1945, eight days after the bombing of Hiroshima, the nation erupted into a celebration of the end of the war, but the mood was overshadowed by uncertainty and insecurity. North American Methodists became aware that Methodist churches in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been destroyed, and all U.S. citizens became aware that one bomb could kill thousands of persons. "Physically untouched by the war," Paul Boyer wrote, "the United States at the moment of victory perceived itself as naked and vulnerable. Sole possessors and users of a devastatingly new instrument of mass destruction, Americans envisioned themselves not as a potential threat to other peoples, but as potential victims." One of the first contributions to the ethical debate about the use of nuclear weapons came from the Federal Council of Churches on August 9, 1945, after the bombing of Hiroshima but before the
bombing of Nagasaki. Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, president of the council, issued a statement requesting that no more bombs be dropped for fear that nuclear weapons would become an accepted part of the military arsenal. Prominent Protestant clergy sent a letter to President Truman, expressing the same sentiments, and a critical mass of Methodists began to form in condemnation of nuclear weapons.

In 1946 Robert E. Cushman, then a newly appointed junior faculty member of the divinity school of Methodist-related Duke University, wrote an article in which he raised the moral questions about new scientific technology. Professor Cushman recalled a newspaper article from the previous December depicting the war-crimes trial of Dr. Klaus Schilling. A physician, Dr. Schilling had been accused of killing hundreds of inmates of the Dachau concentration camp with his malaria experiments. After his conviction and before sentencing, Schilling had begged the court to allow him to finish the paperwork on his results, in which he believed he had found an antimalarial vaccine. This, according to Cushman, was science at the very end of Baconian objectivity. Schilling was no longer the master of science but was, instead, mastered by it. The day would come, Cushman warned, when atomic scientists—and the world—would be mastered by their science; indeed, the time was then at hand to hold in check the discoveries of science.

Only a few persons were concerned about the moral questions of nuclear weapons as long as the United States alone possessed the atomic secret. From 1945 to 1950, the U.S. enjoyed a virtual monopoly on nuclear power, owning perhaps 300 nuclear weapons while the Soviet Union had none. When the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic device in 1949, the age of "nuclear strategy" began. As soon as it developed weapons capability, the Soviet Union began an ambitious armament policy in response to U.S. nuclear dominance. Though the United States retained a substantial lead in the numbers of nuclear weapons, the temptation to relax was shattered in 1957 when the USSR launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik. To the United States this was a signal that the Soviet Union had perfected rockets capable of delivering nuclear warheads to the North American continent. The U.S. maintained nuclear predominance, but the nuclear gap narrowed as the two superpowers embarked on programs of massive nuclear buildup concurrently with the development of delivery systems—ICBMs and bombers. After 1967 the two countries
displayed relative equivalence in nuclear forces. Each advance by one side was met or exceeded by the other. The two countries built nuclear arsenals large enough to withstand a devastating first attack and still inflict destruction on the other. By the end of the 1960s, the United States was able to deliver more than 5,000 nuclear bombs or warheads and the Soviet Union more than 2,000. Thus, each country assured the other—and the world's citizens—of mutual destruction in the case of war.

While it was building its nuclear arsenal, the United States was also participating in a war in Korea, and Methodism was caught in a bind. The Korean war occurred under the sanction of the United Nations, and because the church had been voicing its support of the UN since its inception it had to support the UN action in Korea. The 1952 General Conference proclaimed that the UN had proved its usefulness long before it took this action, so that regardless of the difficulties the church called on governments around the world to give the UN adequate funding and full support. Indeed, the UN General Assembly, meeting in Paris, had established a commission for disarmament and for that the Methodist conference rejoiced. Simultaneously the church rejected the notion of preventive war and weapons of mass destruction.

Also in 1952, a Board of Social and Economic Relations was created within the Methodist Church to consider programs designed to implement the Social Creed. In 1960 the board was combined with the boards of Temperance and World Peace to form a new board of Christian Social Concerns. The Methodist Church entered the 1960s reorganizing its structure and moving social issues into the spotlight of concern.

Church Teaching in the 1960s

In 1958 a formal decision was made to unite the church of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church. After a decade of preparation, the merger was consummated in 1969; and a ten-million member United Methodist Church was born. The new denomination was very different in makeup than its eighteenth and nineteenth century heritage. What was once a rural church had become an urban church. Seventy percent of the 1960 membership of The Methodist Church lived in urban areas, and the percentage grew rapidly during the decade. United Methodism had to face the social
concerns of its growing urban membership, a membership as ethnically and politically diverse as it was large. Describing the picture, Frederick Norwood wrote:

Leaders of the church were made aware, sometimes rudely, of the diversity which existed within the huge entity of The United Methodist Church. At last minority groups of all sorts, some racial, some national, some social, found a voice and made their presence and influence known. Old assumptions about the unity of Protestant expression had to be revised. Pluralism became a fact of United Methodist life as well as of the nation.

The “sharp crescendo of social strife” was heard within Methodism, and the church matured in its social activism. In 1960 The Methodist Church raised its voice of concern about drug addiction and drug trafficking and about the deluge of “magazines and motion pictures which overemphasize sex to pornographic extremes.” In 1964 the church voiced its support for birth control and population limitations, and it denounced racial segregation and discrimination in the workplace. In 1968 the church established a Commission on the Status and Role of Women and gave tentative approval for abortions under certain circumstances.

Nuclear weapons was one of the church’s social concerns. Delegates to the 1960 General Conference, in a resolution entitled “World Order and International Peace,” recognized nuclear weapons as “increasingly horrible weapons of mass destruction. In a sense, the tool has become the enemy of its maker. The nuclear power that might be our weal has become a weapon.”

The call to disarmament became a major theme of the resolutions of the 1960s. Assured destruction was an aspect of foreign policy and, for the first time, the human race had the power to succeed at it. These weapons were indiscriminate and difficult to control, and the only solution was worldwide disarmament. The United Nations, “the working center of international cooperation,” was recognized as “the most hopeful avenue leading to peace and world order.” A 1964 General Conference resolution included considerable praise for the United Nations, and it declared that the UN programs of cooperation and disarmament should be supported and strengthened.

Disarmament was not enough, though. Other factors, unrelated to foreign policy but related to war and nuclear weapons, became targets...
of concern for the General Conferences of the 1960s. The 1964 resolution “Peace and World Order” took notice:

*For example, the military-industrial complex in some countries [including the U.S.] has developed into a powerful vested interest shared by business, labor, press, colleges and universities, and even entire communities to an extent which generates powerful pressures on political leaders. We call on people involved in defense-related industry to continue to plan for conversion to civilian purposes, and to be willing to accept readjustments and even sacrifices...*

The church reiterated its “unswerving opposition to the principle of militarism.”

The conferences of the 1960s opposed compulsory or universal military training and questioned the ethics of church-related schools which allowed ROTC programs. As U.S. military commitments increased and more people protested the Vietnam War, attitudes toward conscientious objectors also changed. Opinions differed about the individual Christian’s duty to the state, except the duty to prayerfully consider military service. Those considering military service were counseled not to “gloss over the sinfulness of war.” The church pledged to “render every assistance” to conscientious objectors because “non-violent resistance can be a valid form of Christian witness.”

The 1960s resolution, “World Order and International Peace,” was distinctively pro-peace and anti-nuclear weapons. That emphasis prevailed again in 1964 and in 1968. Making peace, considered the true task of the Christian Church, was different than just opposing war. The objective was to “actively and consistently create the conditions of peace.” In 1964 the resolution was rewritten and retitled “Peace and World Order” to signify the shift away from an emphasis on war and toward an emphasis on peace. The revised resolution used strong language to condemn nuclear weapons and war and penitent language to confess that the church had previously “echoed the attitude of the secular institutions of our society instead of sharing God-given spiritual and ethical insights.”

**Church Statements, 1972–1988**

Through the decade of the 1970s, the nuclear dilemma was only one of several concerns which gained the attention of The United
Methodist Church, and rarely did it lead the list. If the concern for nuclear catastrophe did not top the list of social concerns it was because of the perceived willingness of political leaders to reduce the nuclear threat. The Cuban missile crisis of 1963, followed by the rapid expansion of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, created an incentive for dialogue. By 1972, at the height of President Richard Nixon's popularity, the first accords limiting strategic nuclear arms (SALT) were signed at a summit between Nixon and Soviet First Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev. Nixon's policy was based on international dialogue and peaceful cooperation, "a widening, thickening network of contacts between the two great powers." Jimmy Carter, who assumed the office of the presidency in 1977, included among many things in his campaign platform the intention of prudently retreating from the notion of fighting a nuclear war. When President Carter sent a team to negotiate the SALT II agreement, his publicly announced goal was the elimination of all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter eventually withdrew the SALT II treaty from Senate consideration, but he did not withdraw his disdain for nuclear weapons; and the public rested easier.

In spite of the arms limitation treaties, the nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union continued to expand. After his election, President Ronald Reagan increased defense spending by 40 percent over the Carter budget. By 1983, the U.S. had 9,600 nuclear bombs or warheads at its disposal and the Soviet Union had 7,300. Technology had also made nuclear weapons increasingly more accurate and selective. Nuclear warheads were developed with the ability to penetrate reinforced bunkers, and new reconnaissance aircraft and satellites targeted mobile targets. The Reagan administration adhered to a policy of "Peace through Strength" in which three assumptions were central: the United States must be able to wage a nuclear war, even limited nuclear war, in order to make deterrence credible; the Soviet Union was not to be trusted; and while the U.S. had exercised unilateral restraint throughout the 1970s, the Soviet Union had engaged in massive nuclear buildups.

Reagan proposed a nuclear policy with the goals of prevailing in a protracted nuclear war, selecting strategic political targets, and developing defensive space weapons—the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Methodists, who for ten years had been relatively quiet on questions of nuclear weapons, became increasingly outspoken in response to the
change in nuclear strategy under Reagan. Edward Leroy Long, Jr., professor of Christian Ethics at Drew University, discredited the policy of deterrence and questioned the morality of the policy he dubbed “nuclear blackmail.”

The strategy of ending a war by making one of the parties too fearful to continue waging it has given a tremendous impetus to the idea that war can best be prevented by making others too afraid to wage it at all. Terms like “nuclear umbrella,” “massive retaliation,” “mutual assured destruction,” and “instant and total retaliation” became common on the lips of strategists and statesmen and have been employed to make others afraid to resort to aggression.

United Methodist bishops had a long list of criticisms of Reagan’s policies. They were convinced that Reagan’s SDI program was a veiled attempt to build whole new kinds of offensive weapons. They were appalled by increased military spending, which was devastating the national economy in general and the country’s poor in particular. Perhaps most significantly, the perceived threat of nuclear annihilation—a threat given new depth as a result of Reagan policies—cast a feeling of helplessness across society. Persons lived without hope for a future for humanity, and that condition had tremendously negative spiritual consequences.

As a consequence of the Reagan administration’s policy, the question of nuclear arms moved from one of several issues to a position of central importance; and United Methodists made an all-out effort to change or influence public policy. United Methodist Alan Geyer, executive director of the Center for Theology and Public Policy in Washington, D.C., published a book, The Idea of Disarmament! Rethinking the Unthinkable, and an article, “The Churches and Peacemaking in 1984,” in which he turned the nuclear war debate into a critique of the policy “Peace through Strength.” Current strategies of deterrence, Geyer found, were unrealistic as well as morally indefensible.

Retired Bishop James K. Matthews pursued this line in an article, “The Most Pressing Issues before the Church.” The church as a community of believers must literally make peace: “Making concrete proposals for actions for peace is too important to leave solely to the military and political experts.” The church must be involved in the process. It must commit resources to the work of nuclear disarmament.
After two years of study, the United Methodist Council of Bishops in 1986 issued a pastoral letter and document, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace*, requesting that political leaders reconstruct the United States-Soviet Union relationship in such a way as to end the fear of nuclear war. The bishops’ intent was to provide a primary document for use in the study of the nuclear dilemma. Repeatedly the document stressed the bishops’ belief that the nuclear arms race was an issue of social justice. Wealth and resources were being squandered in order to continue the proliferation of arms; the world’s poorest people were being destroyed by the resultant hunger, disease, and violence. Directing their attention to matters of international policy, the bishops suggested policy alternatives. These suggestions included a nuclear test ban, consolidation of existing treaties, and bans on space weapons. The bishops further encouraged local congregations to equip lay persons for “political ministries”—a euphemism for encouraging persons to run for political office.

In a confidential letter written while the bishops were preparing their study, Robert Cushman, then professor emeritus at Duke University, declared his agreement with Albert Einstein, who had said, “. . . everything has changed save our way of thinking and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.” Cushman asked the bishops to use their own influence and the moral persuasion of the church to protest the arms race and to challenge the arms policies of President Reagan. The bishops’ call to action in their letter reflected much of what Cushman had requested.

The bishops’ letter was the most important United Methodist document written in the 1980s. This is not because of the ethical standard it enunciated; it brought together the trends in thinking that were current in the literature. Furthermore, it was not official church policy because only the General Conference can formulate doctrine for the United Methodist Church. Instead, its importance rests in the fact that it was a bold attempt by the bishops to use a muscle of teaching authority which they had not fully flexed before.

In official church statements the General Conferences were also critical of President Reagan and, by the end of the decade, followed the bishops’ lead. In the disciplinary paragraph “The World Community,” the 1980–88 General Conferences maintained that the technological revolution had outpaced humanity’s ability to achieve a stable world and, therefore, presented a host of new problems associated with injustice, war, exploitation, population, proliferation of
nuclear arsenals, and tyranny, among others. The church committed itself to the achievement of a world community. Specifically, it rejected war, believing war to be “incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ.” Rejecting war, though, was not enough. Picking up on a theme developed in the 1960s, the church insisted that “the militarization of society must be challenged and stopped” and that “the production, possession, or use of nuclear weapons be condemned.”

Other resolutions of the conference also supported the Social Principles. Resolutions passed in 1980 established a system for certifying conscientious objectors and a delegation to meet with President Ronald Reagan to ask that he end his policy of draft registration. Another 1980 resolution applauded the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty negotiations. Disarmament was the subject of a long 1984 resolution. The conference rejected nuclear deterrence as a basis for national security, and it sought a “no first-strike” pledge from the Administration.

The long resolution, “The United Methodist Church and Peace,” approved by the 1984 General Conference, summarized the sentiments of the Social Principles. “Peace is not simply the absence of war, a nuclear stalemate or combination of uneasy cease-fires,” it began. It itemized a number of interrelated issues which had to be dealt with concurrently, including disarmament, democracy and freedom, the United Nations, world trade, and military service. The arms race could not be supported, but the work of the UN was. Interestingly, in the section on military service and conscientious objection, the conference included a pledge of support not only to those who refused to participate in war and not only to those who refused military conscription but also to those who refused to pay taxes used for military purposes.

Sections of the Social Principles declared that all governments were responsible for protecting the rights of people, rights which include freedom from slavery, the right to obtain information, and the right of access to education. Individuals must have the right to dissent and to disobey laws deemed to be unjust. The church objected to forced military service and extended its support and care to conscientious objectors. It called on pastors to be available to counsel “with all young adults who face conscription, including those who conscientiously refuse...”

There was another significant addition to the Discipline in 1980. In paragraph 438, under their duties, pastors of local churches were
required "to counsel with members of the church and community as to
the alternatives to military service." A provision of the Social
Principles included this same obligation of pastors. But what did it
mean? What was the counsel that was to be given? In light of the
General Conference's positions on war, nuclear weapons, the draft,
ROTC, the military-industrial complex or militarization, and the
exploitative economy of the arms race, the intent was that pastors
counsel young persons to seek careers other than military service. Par.
75.G of the Social Principles did "extend the Church's ministry to
those persons who conscientiously choose to serve in the armed
forces." Nevertheless, military service was regarded as the exception
and conscientious objection as the rule.58

"We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of
Christ," the General Conference of 1988 asserted, and it insisted "that
production, possession, or use of nuclear weapons be condemned."59
In the face of the nuclear dilemma the General Conference claimed its
responsibility to act. It sought alternatives to war, affirmed the
bishops' pastoral letter, In Defense of Creation, and rejoiced in the
growing challenge to the nuclear threat. The conference set a goal of
world disarmament and sought a "no first-strike" pledge from all
countries until disarmament was reached. Peace, the real goal, would
be realized only through disarmament.60

Conclusions

The church's position on nuclear weapons or war had not always been
so coherent. North American church historian Sydney Ahlstrom found
that Protestantism's unrestrained capitulation to the war spirit of
1917—a capitulation in which U.S. Methodism fully
participated—left the churches disgraced.61 Not wanting to repeat that
lesson, Methodism during World War II produced a few more pacifists
than had the previous war and a couple hundred conscientious
objectors. The war also gave rise to "Christian realists,"62 who
believed that it was the prerogative of the government to make war or
not and the prerogative of the church to raise up faithful persons who
would support the democratic way of life.

Church doctrine at the end of the 1980s was different from the
church's position in the 1940s. Both statements were hammered out in
the midst of battle, though the two wars were very different in nature.
The pro-war statement accepted by the General Conference of 1944 was debated as World War II was heating up, and the creed and resolutions of the 1980s were debated during an intensification of the Cold War. The position which the church took in 1984 and 1988 was strong because of the additional variables: nuclear weapons, nuclear fear, and presidential policies which escalated that fear. The rejection of war was unequivocal, and the pastors’ duty to counsel with those considering military service clear.

Though the Cold War has come to an end, the presence of nuclear weapons is a continuing concern. In spite of treaty limitations, France continues to test nuclear armaments. Analysts suggest that Iraq will soon acquire nuclear capability. Journalists contend that scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory are making plans to detonate full-scale replicas of nuclear weapons on its New Mexico mesa. On these issues the church has been silent. Its position on nuclear weapons, expressed in the Social Principles, was undebated at General Conference while delegates devoted attention to seemingly more urgent concerns.

The church’s opposition to war and nuclear weapons is part and parcel of its support for justice, peace, and equality for all persons in all corners of the nation and the world. The church has taken its stand against war and for peace, but peace is not just the absence of war. Peace is the presence of the conditions of justice. Nuclear armaments prevent governments from working for justice and drain the resources of science. The Cold War arms race prevented the world, especially the scientific community, from addressing the problems of world hunger, poverty, global racism, and civil rights violations. The presence of nuclear weapons threatened not only world stability but also the very future of humanity which nuclear weapons had been designed to safeguard.

Neither did the official doctrine of the Methodist Church set the pace of public opinion nor did it stay abreast of developments in war technology, anticipating moral and social concerns to come. In fact, the position of the church often lagged years behind. The Methodist Church, like other denominations, reacted to issues and concerns, often reacting only after an issue had been at the center of public debate and media attention for a considerable time. Church representatives struggled to formulate policies and positions, just as national policy makers struggled; and church pronouncements, when they came, sometimes lacked consistency or coherence. In spite of
those inconsistencies and momentary equivocations, the trend was a steady progression from a wide acceptance of war toward complete repudiation of war and the use of nuclear armaments.

Notes


2. The Methodist Church, Book of Doctrine and Discipline, 1944 (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1944), par. 2016. Hereafter referred to as Discipline. Locations will be referred to by paragraph, as that is the way the books themselves are arranged.

3. Discipline 1988, par. 75.C.


5. Lee did provide a helpful quantitative study of the experiences and opinions of persons at the level of the local congregation. Importantly, Lee discovered that lay persons in the churches were greatly influenced by the opinions of the pastors and that pastors, in turn, were influenced most significantly by their bishops and seminary professors. We can extrapolate and argue that there is a dynamic relationship of influence among bishops, educators, and church doctrine.


7. Discipline 1924, par. 572.

8. Discipline 1939, par. 1697 and par. 1695.


11. Knudson, Ethics, 222.


13. Discipline 1940, par. 1695.


18. Lee, "American Churches and the Bomb," 57. Lee thinks the Social Creed was clearly inconsistent with the already accepted resolution, but I don’t think the difference is as great as he would maintain. The language of the Creed was not as vehement, but I attribute that to the committee-writing process which sought middle ground.
20. Ibid., 201.
22. Ibid., 200-215. Oxnam, a graduate of Boston, was a student of Knudson, a professor of social ethics and practical theology at Boston. He had also been active with Ernest Tittle in the Fellowship of Reconciliation.
24. Bruce Russctt, Prisoners of Insecurity (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1983), is a simple introduction to the arms race. This chronology is his, pp. 6-22.
26. Ibid., 98.
27. Russctt, Prisoners, 14.
32. Discipline 1960, par. 2022.3 and .5; Discipline 1964, par. 1822 and 1824; Discipline 1968, par. 71.
33. Discipline 1960, par. 2024.
35. Discipline 1964, par. 1823.II.3b.
36. Discipline 1963, par. 2024.5c.
37. Discipline 1960, par. 2024.6 and Discipline 1964, par. 1823.II.9 and Discipline 1968, par. 96.E.2.
38. Discipline 1968, par. 96.E.
39. Discipline 1964, par. 1823.2.
40. The United Methodist Church, Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church, 1984 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 6ff. [henceforth Resolutions], for resolutions on world economics, the access of women to positions of leadership, and aid to developing countries, among other concerns.
42. Mandelbaun, The Nuclear Question, 199.
43. John P. Holdren, "The Dynamics of the Nuclear Arms Race: History, Status,
44. Ibid., 62–64.
46. Beckman, Nuclear Predicament, 106–111.
48. Edward Leroy Long, Jr., "Can We Deter Deterrence?" Quarterly Review, vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 11.
54. Discipline 1988, par. 75.
57. Discipline 1988, par. 74.
58. Discipline 1980, par. 75.G.
59. Discipline 1983, par. 75.C.
The Reverend Priscilla Lydia Pastor is beginning her second year as the minister at St. Paul’s by the Union Hall. It is her first appointment out of seminary. For as long as she can remember she has been called to ordained ministry—after all, with a name like Priscilla Lydia Pastor, what else could you expect? It was a pleasing irony for her that her first appointment was to a church named St. Paul’s, given the relationship of Lydia and Priscilla to the great apostle in the book of Acts, and she has been remarkably happy in her working-class neighborhood.

From her childhood days she has been a tither. Even with a more modest allowance than most of her classmates when she was growing up, she always put the church first. The most natural thing in the world for her was to respond with her 10 percent when her pastor called each Sunday for the ushers to come forward and receive the “tithes and offerings” of the congregation. As she became an adult, she was always glad to be one of the persons who shared a “stewardship moment” with the congregation, telling how tithing had been a blessing for her. If she questioned anything about it, it was simply to
wonder why the minister needed to ask for offerings as well as tithes—everyone ought to tithe!

On forty-nine Sundays of her first year at St. Paul’s—allowing for a two-week vacation and for Laity Sunday—she also has said the magic words, “The ushers will please come forward and receive our tithes and offerings.” But several experiences during this year have raised for her a question which would have been unthinkable in her earlier years and which did not arise even during seminary: Should she drop the word tithes out of her invitation and simply ask for offerings?

The first experience was her superintendent’s retreat for pastors shortly after Annual Conference. The ecclesiastical leader had assigned the Bible studies for the retreat to himself, using the Sermon on the Mount as his jumping-off place. He had taken the words “You cannot serve God and mammon” and derived from them an impassioned appeal for every minister to tithe and get everyone in his or her congregation to tithe. Priscilla caught herself wondering, How did he get from a to b. And before she could stop herself another question surprised her: Doesn’t tithing make it quite easy for people to serve both God and mammon—10 percent for God and 90 percent for mammon?

The second experience had been one of pastoral counseling. A widow of modest financial means had come to her for advice. Her husband, who had died just before Priscilla came to St. Paul’s, had left a secret fund with the instructions that his wife use it to take the world tour she had always dreamed of. The widow’s problem was, Should she give a tithe of the fund to the church? If she did, she probably would not be able to add on the extra stop in Israel, which had also been a lifelong dream.

A third experience had been St. Paul’s annual financial campaign. For the first time in her life, Priscilla saw the total picture of a local church’s fund-raising. She was impressed that the denominational materials stressed the stewardship of all of life, not just money; and she appreciated the fact that when the official literature mentioned tithing it was often seen as a symbol of the giving of one’s whole self to God. And yet there were problems with the resources from Nashville, above all a tendency to quote a variety of Bible verses, especially from the Old Testament, that supported tithing and to ignore anything that might raise questions about it. But more disturbing still were the local church records. Although she found herself thinking over and over, If everybody just tithed, what a wonderful mission the
Church could have three facts in particular bothered her: 1) 32 percent of the church budget went to support her, which meant that when she encouraged people to bring their tithes to the Lord she was actually raising her own salary; 2) the majority of the members who tithed had low incomes, so low in some cases that the thought crossed her mind, *The church ought to be giving to them*; and 3) some of the influential members perceived as heavy contributors were actually giving only a small percentage of what she knew they had to be making. (Of course, in the last case, she did not know how much they might be giving to other charities besides the church, but she did know something about their rather expensive life-styles—she had, in fact, enjoyed some excellent dinners at the expense of the two families who belonged to a relatively modest country club!)

These experiences forced Priscilla to recognize that although she had taken ethics courses in seminary, she had not dealt with the ethics of church fund-raising. Morally speaking, who should be giving money to whom for whom? So, as a good United Methodist, she decided to search for guidance in the denomination's sacred texts: in ascending order of authority, the *Book of Resolutions*, the *Book of Discipline*, and the Bible.

**The Resolution**

A resolution on "A Tithing Church," approved by the United Methodist General Conference of 1988, promoted churchwide tithing with appeals to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Two of the arguments especially disturbed Priscilla, the one from reason and the one from Scripture. The former was bothersome because it provided data showing that in 1987 United Methodists ranked twenty-eighth of thirty denominations in per capita giving. Priscilla wondered what the rank would be if most church members tithed. She knew that even many of her blue-collar worker members could easily contribute more—there were quite a few four-wheel drive vehicles and fishing boats in their driveways!

But the argument from Scripture was the one that really disturbed our pastor because it raised serious problems about the ethics of biblical interpretation. First, the resolution used *The Living Bible*, at times a helpful paraphrase but hardly a reliable translation for official resolution making. Second, the resolution even misquoted *The Living Bible*. Using words about tithing from Numbers and Deuteronomy, its makers changed second person to first: words addressed to Israelites...
as "you" became addressed to Christians as "us." And in quoting the Sermon on the Mount, they weakened the words about not serving two masters by shortening Matthew 6:24. Third, the resolution explicitly stated that God requires "three different kinds of tithes . . . of us." Either its authors assumed that every Old Testament law directly applies to Christians today; or, if they did not make this assumption, they failed to indicate why tithing rules apply and other laws do not. Fourth, the resolution established a causal relationship between tithing and receiving God’s blessings: tithing teaches us to give priority to God "so that" God will bless us. And fifth, the statement simply assumed, just as Priscilla’s superintendent did at the retreat, that Jesus’ words that one cannot serve both God and mammon justify tithing.

Priscilla had been taught all her life to trust her pastors, and as a pastor herself she wanted to trust the ecclesiastical shepherds in authority over her. Yet she knew that one of the petitions, or memorials, that led to this particular resolution on tithing originated in the cabinet of a large annual conference. She had to assume that most if not all of the superintendents and their bishop were seminary educated, and she found it hard to believe that they would appeal to The Living Bible, quote Scripture inaccurately, assume that readers today should accept every biblical injunction without question, accept a trade-off between putting God first and receiving God’s blessings as theologically sound, and support tithing with words of Jesus which do not mention it.

She was aware also of how General Conference works; she had in fact observed one and knew that noncontroversial resolutions are approved without discussion. Who is going to stand up on the floor of the conference or even in a large committee and challenge a resolution in favor of tithing? That would be as unseemly as wondering out loud whether John Wesley really spoke to God every morning! She could not help but wonder if makers of supposedly self-evident resolutions should not use extra care. And, especially if you are going to use the Bible, should you not treat it with full respect: use a sound translation, quote exactly, exegete carefully, keep in mind that its world is not our world, and try to take into account all relevant biblical evidence?

The Discipline

When Priscilla turned from the Book of Resolutions to the Discipline, it did not take her long to examine the references to tithing in the
sections on church administration; again she was impressed, as with
the materials from Nashville, by the wholistic approach to stewardship
in which tithing is only part of a total commitment that includes "time
and abilities," "lifestyle," and environmental concerns. But she was a
bit uneasy with at least three apparent assumptions and with one
repeated statement. The first assumption was that the Bible
automatically supports tithing—again she wondered about all of the
Bible. The second was that gifts should naturally go to the
church—perhaps this assumption is to be expected in a church
handbook, but what if the local congregation has a defective
understanding of its mission? The third assumption and the repeated
statement went together: the assumption was that tithing and
proportionate giving are compatible, and the statement was that tithing
is a "minimum goal." Priscilla wondered about both her poorer and
her wealthier members. Should the former be pushed to see tithing as
a goal at all? At best, would not a small proportion be a more realistic
and more humane expectation? And should the latter really be
encouraged to take years of giving proportionally at less than a tithe to
arrive at a 10-percent goal, which all too easily could be viewed as a
stopping place? Should they not be pushed to look at proportions well
above ten percent?

With all these questions in mind Priscilla eagerly turned to another
part of the Discipline, the Doctrinal Standards. She started with the
General Rules, the guidelines for the early Methodist societies, as a
likely place to find a reference to tithing. But all she found there was
that the class leaders were to take up what the members were "willing
to give toward the relief of the preachers, church and poor." The
reference to "church" puzzled her, since these early rules were for
members of a society within the Church of England, and a quick bit of
research informed her that in Wesley's early rules relief was simply
for the poor. There was no reference to preachers or church. And
there was no mention of tithing. The focus was on the poor, and
people were to contribute what they were willing to give. Perhaps,
Priscilla wondered, the invitation to the ushers should say something
about being willing to help the poor and remind the congregation
about how much of the church's budget actually went for that purpose.

Priscilla now moved on to the Articles of Religion. Again, no direct
mention of tithing, but Article XXIV has words on giving: "Every
man [sic] ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms
to the poor, according to his ability." As in the Rules there is concern

WILL THE USHERS PLEASE COME FORWARD?
for the poor, but the article, taken directly from the Church of England, goes beyond giving what one is willing: give “liberally” and “according to . . . ability.” Perhaps, she now thought, the offering invitation should say something about not only helping the poor but giving liberally.

Article VI, she discovered, also probably has some bearing on tithing, since it deals with the Mosaic law: “Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites does not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.” Priscilla could not help but wonder how the authors of the General Conference resolution would deal with this article—it would be a stretch to fit tithing under moral commandments as opposed to ceremonial and civil law. Certainly there are moral dimensions to tithing, but it was clearly a part of ancient Israel’s “ceremonies and rites.”

Priscilla now moved on to the Confession of Faith of the former Evangelical United Brethren; perhaps this modern creed would provide more guidance than the older articles beside which it uneasily rests. But, alas, no reference to tithing—one would hope for more from the EUBs! But there are words on the responsible use of property “for human good,” “for the manifestation of Christian love and liberality,” and for supporting “the Church’s mission in the world.” Perhaps the offering call should say something about how the church’s mission and its budget are working for human good.

So far the doctrinal standards in the Discipline had not helped Priscilla very much to understand why the rest of the book recommends tithing. But there was one last hope: since 1988 the Discipline states that a collection of Wesley’s sermons and his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament belong to the doctrinal standards.

In the Explanatory Notes she looked first of all at Wesley’s comments on the verses where tithing is specifically mentioned: a saying of Jesus in Matt. 23:23, paralleled at Luke 11:42; a parable about a Pharisee and a Publican in Luke 18; and Hebrews 7, which refers to a story in Genesis about Abraham’s paying tithes to Melchizedek. In his comments on the saying Wesley does not mention tithing. On the parable, he notes that Pharisees often did a double tithe and sees the Pharisee of the parable as being a good person who used
"all the means of grace." Wesley sees Abraham's relation to Melchizedek as showing that "the Levitical priesthood must yield to the priesthood of Christ," with no specific mention of tithing. So it appeared to Priscilla thus far that Wesley might see tithing as either a "means of grace" or as related to the outdated Levitical priesthood.

But before leaving the Notes our pastor decided to check a few passages which discuss wealth. At 1 Cor.16:2 she struck pay dirt. Wesley is commenting on Paul's words: "On the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store according as he hath been prospered, that there may be no collections when I come." Wesley states that even those who have little should give, and he calls a tenth the "lowest rule of Christian prudence." But he then goes on to say it is not acceptable for someone making a hundred pounds to give the same proportion as someone making only one; "I show you a more excellent way," he writes. "Stint yourselves to no proportion at all. But lend to God all you can."

At this point it appeared to Pastor Pastor that maybe it was all right to ask the ushers to receive tithes and offerings, as long as everyone brought at least a tithe and those who were able brought gifts beyond the minimum. Would the standard sermons of John Wesley confirm this impression?

His words in "The Use of Money" are widely known in Wesleyan circles: "Gain all you can, without hurting either yourself or your neighbor....; save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire....;—and then give all you can, or, in other words, give all you have to God." He specifically refers to the tithe by saying, "Render unto God, not a tenth, not a third, not half, but all that is God's, be it more or less..." In "Sermon on the Mount: V" he discusses the Pharisee of the parable again, asking how many Christians give 20 percent to God and challenging them to go beyond the Pharisee "in doing good"; they should give "to the uttermost of [their] power" (IV:12). There is no question that for Wesley many of his followers should give more, some of them far more, than a tithe. Only the words "be it more or less" may leave the door open a crack for suggesting there may be those whose finances are so desperate they should give less.

Priscilla found that other comments on wealth by Wesley in the standard sermons strengthened his direct references to tithing: Don't owe anyone, take care of one's own household first, then "give or lend all that remains," keeping in mind the "household of faith" ("Sermon
on the Mount”: III.12); anyone who tries to make more than what is necessary for family needs “lives in an open, habitual denial of the Lord that bought him” (“Sermon on the Mount”: VIII. 12); most rich people “are under . . . the peculiar curse of God” because they rob God and rob “the poor, the hungry, the naked . . . making themselves accountable for all the want, affliction, and distress which they may but do not remove” (“Sermon on the Mount”: VIII. 25); no thinking person can “possibly serve God and mammon,” for “the contrariety between the most opposite things on earth, between fire and water, darkness and light, vanishes into nothing, when compared to the contrariety between God and mammon” (“Sermon on the Mount”: IX. 14). By and large, Priscilla concluded, the sermons confirmed that Wesley accepted tithing as a starting point but expected most if not all who joined his movement to go well beyond it, even to the point that once they had met basic needs everything else had written on it the names of “God” and “the poor.” Maybe it would be all right if the call for the ushers mentioned tithing, but it definitely should refer to how much of the offering would go for the poor.

The Bible

Above even the Discipline for United Methodists is the Bible, so Priscilla turned at last to look at it directly for herself. First, the Old Testament. She had rejected the General Conference resolution’s careless quoting and its facile application of ancient Israelite tithing laws to modern church people, but a review of tithing throughout the Old Testament convinced her of its significance as a social institution. It might not be too big a stretch to use Old Testament tithing to make the general point that systematic giving is necessary to maintain religious institutions; assuming their missions justify their existence, then they must have financial support.

But she noted too a good bit of flexibility and variety in the Old Testament: a very early law code calls for first fruits without specifying tithes; various combinations of tithes often push the giver well over 10 percent; many tithes go for religious institutions but some for people in need; and Amos condemns the practice unless accompanied “by ethical behavior and mercy towards the poor.” For those at St. Paul’s who take their Old Testament seriously, this broader
picture on tithing might help at least to challenge their rigid loyalty to 10 percent.

But do what she could with the Old Testament, Priscilla as a Christian minister saw the New Testament as decisive. The contrast between Abraham and Melchizedek in Hebrews could suggest that tithing is no longer valid. She was surprised when she realized that Paul does not mention tithing, but she discovered that he has a great deal to say about giving. The collection for the poor at Jerusalem is a driving concern for him, and his reasons for raising it include a reminder that Jesus, “though he was rich, yet for your sakes . . . became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9). Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Macedonians gave joyfully and generously, out of great poverty, as they were able, and “even beyond their means” (2 Cor. 8:3). But at no point does Paul say or imply, tithe. If there is no apparent basis in the epistle readings to support tithing, Priscilla wondered, then what about the Gospels? Can Jesus or the Gospel writers be brought aboard the tithing bandwagon? Priscilla remembered her doubts about how her superintendent and the resolution tried to make Jesus’ contrast between God and mammon support tithing, and she was convinced that Wesley’s stark “either-or” is right. She realized that even if Jesus’ Pharisee in the parable did a good thing when he tithed, he, unlike the Publican, went back to his house unjustified in his relation with God—dim praise, at best, for tithing.

What about the saying in Matt. 23:23, paralleled at Luke 11:42? Here, Matthew has Jesus condemn scribes and Pharisees because they “tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (23:23). The words in Luke 11:42 are similar: “you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God.” Probably drawn from an earlier source, both sayings have Jesus go on to state that tithing should not be neglected. Taken at face value as words of Jesus, both readings say tithing is all right but other matters are more important. Yet Jesus does not seem too far from putting tithing in one camp and concern for justice and love for God in another! At this point Priscilla remembered from her New Testament classes in seminary that words of Jesus were often reworked in the tradition process, and she wondered if the words not to neglect tithing could have been added to a more Amos-like word of Jesus.15

Be that as it may, Priscilla found—not to her great surprise—that her preliminary survey of the New Testament came out close to where
Wesley was: you can make a rather weak case on behalf of tithing, but it is just a small blip on a much larger screen that involves commitment of one's total life and direct concern for the poor.

Conclusion

After her long journey through the sacred documents, Priscilla realizes that not all of her doubts and questions have been completely answered, and she knows there is more study, prayer, and reflection ahead. But her personal agenda and her vision for St. Paul's Church have begun to take clearer shape.

So she resolves that personally she will:
1) go on a spiritual retreat each year, during part of which she will reflect on the commitment of life and wealth by the women for whom she was named.
2) tighten her personal budget so that it more clearly reflects her commitment to discovering and following God's will for her life as fully as possible. (As a result her guilt about raising her own salary will diminish.)
3) avoid judgment of her parishioners with boats and country club memberships until she can make a clear moral distinction between their expenditures and her own need for season tickets at the Philharmonic and for book club memberships.
4) attempt in her teaching and preaching on all matters to approach the Bible and the doctrinal standards asking, "What do they actually say?" rather than, "Where can I find support for what I already know is right?"
5) develop her counseling skills so that when persons like her friend, the widow, come to her for financial advice they can examine together what a life totally committed to God might look like in a particular case. (For some the pilgrimage to Israel might be a necessity; for others, a wasteful expense!)

And her picture of what St. Paul's might look like at the beginning of the third millennium—if the bishop and cabinet will leave her there till then—is also beginning to develop:
1) Its budget will expand to include more and more projects serving people in need, and special offerings to help meet those needs will rise greatly.
2) The arguments for supporting the local church’s budget will focus, without apology, on its ministry and mission.

3) Especially as the church’s budget expands its work on behalf of persons in need, members will include it more and more as a major part of their giving beyond their family expenses, but they will also give directly to agencies which serve the poor and others with special needs.

4) The principle of giving as persons are able will replace tithing as the norm, with the recognition that for some people at certain points in their lives, tithing may be a helpful practical guide.

5) A committee will administer a substantial discretionary fund for persons with immediate needs, including emergency grants and low-interest loans for unemployed church members.

6) The church, with constant prodding from its Church and Society Committee, will actively support organizations that work politically for a more just distribution of the world’s resources.

7) The offering calls will be one of the most creative parts of the worship service, as each week Priscilla or a lay person raises up a different ministry for the poor. In the course of a year, a variety of biblical passages on giving will be heard; local, national, and world concerns will appear; a project in every part of the world will be named; and many different ways of breaking the human family down into groups will be remembered.

8) Most members who live above the poverty line will adopt much simpler life-styles and define their basic needs in such a way that they are giving away more and more and more.

Notes

1. With thanks and apologies to Haldor Luccock, whose Simeon Stylites column in The Christian Century referred, I believe, to “St. John’s by the Gas Station.”

2. I wish to thank Herbert Mather of the Stewardship Division of the United Methodist Board of Discipleship for sending me various official and semiofficial materials. These include his Guidelines for Leading Your Church 1993–1996: Stewardship (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) and a collection of Bible quotations, Because God Gives, compiled by Norma Wimberly (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987).


6. Pertinent data on the resolution’s progress through the 1988 General Conference can be found in the *Daily Christian Advocate* 7 (1988): 282, 336, 394, 552.


8. 1992 *Discipline*, Par. 262.10a.

9. 1996 *Discipline*, Part II.


11. It is likely that many members of the societies were already giving tithes for the support of the Church of England.

12. I have used an 1812 edition of the *Notes* (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware).

13. III.6. References to the standard sermons are from *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1944).


15. The possible earlier source being material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark is often referred to as Q. A recent critical effort to establish a Q text includes the words “these things you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (“The International Q Project: Work Sessions 12–14 July, 22 November 1991,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111:504). So I have to admit that any effort to see them as a modification of Jesus’ words, therefore, is guesswork about a possible stage of tradition before Q. The question of Jesus’ relationship with the Mosaic law is one of the most vexing, and most important, of all the problems in the ongoing ‘quest for the historical Jesus.’
Gospel Lections for Advent and Christmas Eve

In a previous article (see Warren Carter, "The Gospel Lections for Advent: Some Unseasonal Thoughts" Quarterly Review 16 [1996]: 283-90), I suggested that preachers abandon the Advent Gospel lections. I argued that the inclusion of eschatological and John the Baptist material and omission of much of the birth narratives silence the church's Christmas story while secular profits attest an alternative story. The theological shape of the lectionary Advent seems to assume God's absence and a fixed expectation of the Messiah, neither of which is accurate for first-century Judaism. Instead, I suggested preachers preach in December from the narratives of Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2. In the article I make some suggestions for using these rich stories.

However, some preachers are uncomfortable in abandoning the lectionary, so here I will work with the lectionary Gospel texts from Luke. I will try to do what I think any interpreter must do with these selections, engage in a dialogue with the texts, the Christmas season, the scholarly resources, and contemporary church communities. I will be guided by what I think is the central issue for preachers to address during December: What does it mean to be a Christmas people, who live in and out of the story of God's presence among us in Jesus Christ? This is not everyone's story for Christmas. Our society has

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numerous secular alternatives. But it is our story. To tell it and to reflect on its significance for our living and allegiances is vital work for this season.

Luke's Gospel was written late in the first century to shape the identity and guide the way of life of communities of disciples. It is addressed in 1:3 to Theophilus. Theophilus may well have been the writer's patron, but there is no overlooking his significant name, "lover of God," "God's friend," "one who loves God." His name exemplifies what Jesus instructs disciples to be (10:25-28). As a model disciple, he is a representative audience. The Gospel is written, says its author, that he might have security, assurance, and confidence in the matters about which he has been "instructed" (1:4). The verb instructed, could be translated "catechized." Like the noun catechesis, it signifies instruction and initiation into the faith community (Acts 18:25). Like us, Theophilus already knows the story. But he needs to hear it again and again in circumstances of uncertainty and insecurity.

What circumstances? Scholars have suggested that the Gospel addresses several complex issues of discipleship. One concerns the return of Jesus, which late in the first century had not yet happened. Is Jesus coming back as he promised? Are his words and God's purposes trustworthy? The Gospel affirms the present not as a time of disappointed failure or divine fickleness but as a time in which God's purposes are being carried out (1:1). Disciples wait expectantly and live faithfully (12:35-48; 19:11-27). A second concerns the role of Jew and Gentile in God's purposes. Why is Luke's audience mostly Gentile? Why did Israel not follow Jesus? Are Gentiles an afterthought? Has God rejected Israel? The Gospel (and Acts) recognizes human response and the constant, universal, and inclusive nature of God's purposes and of the community of disciples. A third involves social relationships. What part do rich and poor, women and men have in God's purposes and in the community of disciples? While scholars debate this issue, it seems clear that the Gospel affirms an important place in God's purposes for women and the poor. A fourth issue concerns how disciples live in the Roman empire. Is the empire friendly towards disciples? Are disciples a threat to the empire? Are God's ways the same as those of the empire? While some commentators suggest the Gospel is world-affirming and positive towards the empire, I will suggest that the Gospel recognizes considerable tension between empire and the community of disciples. God's ways are not the empire's. Discipleship is difficult, requiring
faithfulness and wisdom. Luke’s concerns, then, involve theological, ethical, socioeconomic, and political issues of daily discipleship, issues that are not remote from authentic contemporary communities of disciples.

November 30, 1997—The First Sunday of Advent

Ps. 25:1-10
Jer. 33:14-16
I Thess. 3:9-13

“Christmas in Perspective”

Prior to the passion narrative (22-23), Luke has situated Jesus in the temple (from 19:47; cf. 20:1; 21:1, 37), where Jesus predicts its destruction (21:6). Some ask him when and with what signs “these things” will happen (21:7). Jesus’ response seems initially to focus on the fall of Jerusalem (21:7-24; 70 CE) but then moves to the coming of the Son of Man (21:25-36). This latter unit has some clear subdivisions: 21:25-28, the signs of the coming of the Son of Man; 21:29-33, its timing (using an analogy with the fig tree and the arrival of summer); and 21:34-36, instructions about watching, praying, and being ready. The coming of God’s reign in its fullness is not to be equated with Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem (19:11).

This is not a Christmas reading. Some commentators on the lectionary texts suggest ignoring a first and second coming and collapsing the two into Christmas. But to do so is to overlook a fundamental structure of New Testament faith. Discipleship is lived between the now and the not yet, the already and the yet to be. The two comings are not the same. And as uncomfortable as mainline churches may be with talk of a second coming (usually in reaction to its misuse by fundamentalists), it does not help to pretend that these scriptures do not distinguish between the two. So what’s a preacher to do, preaching to a congregation surrounded by Christmas decorations, advertising, parties, shopping, etc.?

One approach not open to preachers is to ignore the social and ecclesial context of Christmas. It is on everyone’s minds. To proceed with this text as though Christmas is somehow not in the air sends messages of the church’s irrelevance. It is to leave unchallenged the dominant secular Christmas stories at the very time when our identity...
as a minority Christmas people needs strengthening. Nor do I think the preacher is invited to speculate about the “hows” and “whens” of Jesus’ return (21:8).

I think it more helpful to consider what this eschatological passage might say to us as we look toward celebrating the birth of Jesus in a few weeks. What does this passage about Jesus’ future glorious return call us to be and to do as a Christmas people who live the story of God’s coming to us in the baby Jesus?

Several ways open up to connect Christmas and the return of Jesus (whatever that looks like). One way involves contrast. The birth or first coming occurs as an obscure event. CNN did not cover it. Though Luke links the birth to Caesar’s census, most of the world has no idea that it is happening, or of the significance of Joseph and Mary’s baby. And lying in a manger in a small town is hardly the way to capture the world’s attention. By contrast his return will have cosmic signs (21:25-26) which people cannot ignore. “They will see ‘the Son of Man . . . ’” (21:27). While some will “faint from fear and foreboding,” the community of disciples has nothing to fear: “stand up and raise your heads” (21:26-28)! The signs warn (21:29-33) that God’s reign is near, just as changes to plants signal the arrival of spring and summer. The signs invite readers to be ready, to avoid being trapped by “worries of this life,” and to prepare by watching and praying (21:36).

Watching and praying cannot be understood to mean that disciples live a privileged and withdrawn existence, waiting for our own heaven while the rest of the world goes to hell. Such a reading of eschatological material has nurtured an insulated existence obsessed with timetables for the future but detached from the world’s present pain and struggle. For others, escapist eschatology, focused on the future without any ethical mandate for the present, has been so repulsive that they have abandoned all eschatological thinking. Both are dire misunderstandings of New Testament faith, with terrible ecclesial consequences.

To the contrary, for Luke (and other New Testament writers), eschatological visions are means of engagement, not detachment; of activating hope, not numbing escape; of energizing effort, not passive inertia. Rather than putting disciples to ethical sleep or distracting them with speculation about future events, eschatology walks hand in hand with ethics and active discipleship. The vision of God’s future transformation of all that opposes God’s purposes provides disciples with our present goal and direction. That vision offers an antidote to
the temptations of despair, of not noticing, of being preoccupied, of being indifferent, of feeling helpless or however else we cope with our world’s injustice and evil.

Hence the vision of what God is yet to do in Jesus’ return calls this Christmas people to an active solidarity with God’s world now, in action and in prayer. In so doing we find again the concrete reality of God’s promises of redemption. In the midst of the world’s systemic and personal evil and suffering, we bear witness to what we know, that God has entered this world as a baby in a manger. We interpret this act as a sign that God’s redemptive purposes are under way, that injustice, oppression, inequality and hopelessness are not God’s ways. And in such a world we embody God’s transforming work motivated and directed by God’s future redemption. Here and now, in the light of God’s future, the community of disciples erects signs to God’s redemptive purposes already being experienced in our midst. We live in continuity with this Christmas sign and in anticipation of the completion of God’s purposes. Living in-between the two events, a Christmas people has a mission identity and task.

By starting with contrast, continuity and completion have emerged. The two comings are so different, but they are connected. Christmas is not an isolated event. This text can remind us that what God is doing in this Christmas story does not end on December 25 or when Christmas decorations get packed away and life (heaven forbid) “returns to normal.” The Christmas story points to a way of life which embodies God’s purposes now, a life to be completed only in the fullness of God’s time (whenever, however, whatever). Using this text the preacher can put Christmas in perspective, in the context of God’s cosmic future which shines light on our present. And the preacher can put our lives as a Christmas people in perspective. We live between the past of the first Christmas and the future of God’s completion. We are an in-between people, who know both the painful and destructive reality of this present, sinful world as well as the beginnings, the not-yet, of God’s future. We know the story of Jesus born in a manger returning in glory, to which we bear witness with our words and actions. To that lifelong, communal task of participating in God’s redemptive purposes manifested in the Christmas story and in this text about Jesus’ future return, the preacher might call us again today.
December 7, 1997—The Second Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:1-6
Mal. 3:1-4
Phil. 1:3-11

"From Worship and Womb to Wilderness and Witness"

The lectionary selects the John the Baptist episode for the second Sunday of Advent. The rationale for its appropriateness to this season seems to be that John focuses on the advent of God in the ministry of Jesus, for which people need to prepare.

My view is, however, that this selection is inappropriate. First, it violates the Gospel’s narrative sequence. The John material in chapter 3 follows Jesus’ conception and birth in chapters 1–2, not precedes them as in the lectionary sequence. In the Gospel John prepares people for Jesus’ adult ministry, not for his birth. The dates in 3:1, though not without difficulty, locate the story around 28–29 CE (since Tiberius’s rule began about 14 CE). Some twenty-five to thirty years have elapsed since 2:1.

Second, the lection emphasis on preparation for Jesus’ birth is out of place in Luke’s story. The conception stories in chapter 1 do not include an effort to let everyone know the Messiah is to be born. They focus on John’s parents and Mary, all of whom are startled by God’s surprising actions. It happens without extensive preparation. Even the shepherds are not sent home by the angels to take a bath and change their clothes before visiting Jesus. Rather than preparation, response seems to matter much more.

And third, as with last Sunday, the preacher cannot ignore the fact that Christmas is on everyone’s mind. So if the preacher chooses to work with this text, the same task and question lie before her. What does this passage narrating the beginning of John’s ministry say to us as we look toward celebrating the birth of Jesus in a few weeks? What does this passage about John call us to be and to do as a Christmas people who live the story of God’s coming to us in the baby Jesus?

The names in verses 1-2 offer one clue. They do not just provide background color. They function to keep the real world of political and religious power before the Gospel’s readers (cf. 1:5; 2:1). It is in this real world that discipleship is lived. Yet paradoxically the narrative discloses that this so-called “real world” is not the ultimate reality. These political and religious powers do not have the final control over...
what happens. They do not define reality. In and through and around such structures God's purposes are worked out in ways that are often unknown to them. Luke seems quite suspicious about and wary of this "real world," encouraging his hearers to understand God's purposes and to be shaped by them in their living (see comments on Luke 2:1-14). In 3:1-6, for instance, without the permission or the knowledge of the powerful, John performs God's will, faithful to his commission from conception (1:14-17). God's purposes shape his actions and constitute the determinative reality for this narrative world. So it is to be a Christmas people, to not be deceived by the claims of empire, popular opinion, economic common sense, social givens, and religious structures but to discern and respond to God's presence and purposes in unlikely places and to live accordingly.

The names also put Christmas in a larger perspective (as does last Sunday's eschatological passage). Several of these characters—the emperor Tiberius Caesar and the regional rulers Philip and Lysanias—do not appear again in the Gospel. But Pilate and Herod do. Pilate's claim to fame centers on Jesus' crucifixion (23:1-6, 13-25). He finds Jesus innocent and plans to release him (23:4, 14-16, 20-22). But he gives in to the religious leaders' demand to crucify Jesus. Commentators have made much of Pilate's statements about Jesus' innocence, claiming that Luke distances the Roman official from responsibility for Jesus' death. I am not convinced. As Roman governor, Pilate has power over everyone in this scene, over Jesus and the religious leaders. If he chooses to release Jesus, so be it. But Pilate has no strength of conviction. Verses 23-25 of chapter 23 provide biting commentary: "their voices prevailed"; "Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted"; he "hands Jesus over to their will." He, an agent of Pax Romana, releases an insurrectionist "whom they asked for." This agent of the all-powerful empire is shown to be weak and spineless. And of course the Gospel's readers know that ultimately God's purposes are being accomplished (1:1; 9:22).

And his collaborator? In 23:6-12 Pilate sends the Galilean Jesus to Herod. Herod hopes Jesus will "perform" a miracle but, frustrated by his silence, mocks him and returns him to Pilate. Verse 12 reinforces his alliance with Pilate. Herod and Pilate, former enemies, become friends through this misadventure.

Also prominent are the chief priests. While Annas and Caiaphas are not named again (cf. Acts 4:6), the "chief priests" play important roles
in Jesus' death (9:22; 19:47; 20:1, 19; 22:2), collaborating with Judas (22:4), arresting Jesus (22:52), trying him (22:54, 66-71), and urging Pilate (23:4, 13) and Herod (23:10) to put him to death.

That is, the names in 3:1-2 anticipate Jesus' crucifixion. These characters play significant roles in Jesus' death. Together they use their power to kill him. Christmas leads to crucifixion. To be a Christmas people is to celebrate the birth of, and to follow, one who is cursed, humiliated, and rejected in this horrible death. To be a Christmas people is to take up one's own cross (9:23-26) in a world where one has no guarantees that it will turn out any differently than it did for the master. But his death is not the final word. The worst that the political and religious powers can do is to put him to death. But that is not the end. God finds a way in and through and around such actions. God raises Jesus. God's purposes win out. The narrative places Christmas in a larger perspective, that of Easter. A Christmas people is also an Easter people who know the crucified and risen Jesus and who know that it is, ultimately, God's world.

A third point of entry to this story for a Christmas people concerns God's word (3:2). How "the word of God came to John" is not explained, but several clues indicate the nature of God's word that John will announce. John is identified here not as the "Baptist" but as "son of Zechariah" (3:2). In one sense that identification is problematic. It evidences the patriarchal world in which this text was created. That world, though, does not have to be perpetuated. John is, as any preacher should indicate, also Elizabeth's son. The reference to Zechariah and Elizabeth offers the opportunity to recall John's beginnings in the purposes of God outlined in 1:5-25, a passage not included in the lectionary.

In 1:5-25 the setting is the center of Israel's life, worship in the temple. Its main characters are the elderly, childless couple, the priest Zechariah and Elizabeth, also of the priestly line (1:5). God has interrupted the worship service. Zechariah encounters an "angel of the Lord," Gabriel, who stands "in the presence of God" (1:11, 19). The phrases emphasize that Gabriel is a messenger sent from God (not an angel looking for a bit part in a TV series or a Hollywood movie). He announces that Elizabeth will bear a son (1:13) who, filled with the Holy Spirit, will turn lives back to God and reconcile them with each other as he prepares a people for "the Lord" (1:15-17). The vision leaves Zechariah speechless (and the people anxious, whether out of genuine concern for him or, like us, aware that his delay will mean a
longer service and that the Catholics, Baptists, or Presbyterians will beat them to the restaurants, is up to the interpreter (1:21). Elizabeth and Zechariah, like other elderly childless couples (Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah), know God’s creative power firsthand. God’s word comes true. Elizabeth conceives (1:24); the baby is born (1:57) and named “John” (1:59-64) in accord with the divine will (1:13). Zechariah, who did not initially believe the divine word, regains his speech (1:20, 64), appropriately celebrating the divine will and noting that God’s actions are consistent with God’s word through the prophets (1:70).

This isn’t the only indication of the power and reliability of God’s word in the birth stories. Mary submits to the divine word (1:38), for which Elizabeth blesses her (1:45). Mary notes that God has acted faithfully to God’s word (1:54-55), and she gives birth to Jesus as the angel declares (1:31; 2:1-7). The shepherds find the baby in a manger as the angel had said (2:12, 16). And John’s proclamation of a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” in 3:3 is in accord with Deutero-Isaiah’s vision of one who prepares God’s way. God’s word is reliable, effective, lifegiving. Theophilus can have security, confidence, assurance about the divine purposes (1:4). And us? Scripture is not a recipe book, more a set of signposts which point in certain directions. They offer visions of life lived in and out of relationship with God. They point to God’s unorthodox but faithful and gracious ways of being. They indicate key aspects of discipleship, even if they do not spell it all out. Incarnating those features in appropriate ways in our living remains the certain task of a Christmas people.

A further observation is worth making. The word comes to John “in the wilderness” in accord with Isaiah’s word (3:2, 4). The wilderness is not a “get-away-from-it-all” place but a place of encounter with God. As in the Exodus and exile stories, it is a place of liberation and testing. God’s purposes are central to this text. It ends with a clear statement of that purpose: “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6; cf. Simeon in 2:32). This is the perspective from which Luke presents John’s role, Jesus’ role, and the church’s (Acts 1:8). God’s salvific mission remains an unfinished task. Bearing witness with our words and our actions is the task and identity of a Christmas people.
December 14, 1997—The Third Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:7-18
Isa. 12:2-6
Zeph. 3:14-20
Phil. 4:4-7

“Unseasonable Living”

I have the same concerns about the inappropriateness of this text as for last week’s text. And the same questions await the preacher who chooses to work with this text. What does this passage about John call us to be and do as a Christmas people who live the story of God’s coming to us in the baby Jesus?

The passage divides into three sections: 3:7-9 identifies John’s central message of repentance and judgment; 3:10-14 supplies some examples; and 3:15-18 defines John’s role in relation to Jesus. John’s preaching is sharp. Preachers must be careful that we do not turn this into an anti-Jewish attack (those faithless Jews, etc.). This passage is not about the rejection of Israel. It warns and invites. It is not the congregation’s task to secure its own inclusion with claims of another’s exclusion. It is the congregation’s task, though, to listen for the word of the Lord, to heed the warning and to live faithfully. That’s the preacher’s task, too.

In 3:7-9, in the tradition of the prophets, John calls the crowds (3:7) to change their lives. Addressing the congregation as a “brood of vipers/snakes” is probably not a good example to imitate (cf. Isa. 59:1-6). John describes them as fleeing God’s coming wrath. For the prophets wrath denotes God’s future judgment revealed on that day (Isa. 13:9; Zeph. 1:14-16; Ezek. 7:19). The only way to avoid judgment is to change their ways, to stop relying on ethnicity (descent from Abraham), and to live one’s reliance on God. If this invitation is rejected, judgment awaits the people (3:9).

So what does a faithful life look like for a Christmas people (3:10)? John focuses on possessions and social structures. First in verse 11, using examples of clothing and food, he proposes a redistribution of resources. Those who have more divest themselves of their excess in order that others may have enough (cf. Acts 2-5). This emphasis may not surprise a Christmas people who know Mary’s Magnificat (1:46-56). God works to overturn political, social, and economic inequalities. However, a Christmas people must understand that John
is not talking about outbursts of seasonal charity. Just as “need knows no season,” God’s commitment to justice is not limited to a season. It is God’s eternal way of being. And it must be a year-round way of living for a Christmas people, out of season in a consumerist, acquisitive society.

John’s next two examples involve tax collectors and soldiers (3:12-14). Levying high taxes and misusing military power to corrupt justice are basic to empires (see the comments on Luke 2:1-14). Those who rule empires thrive at the expense of peasants and the powerless. But Luke’s John is not frightened to call for major changes. To collect what is needed and not what might satisfy human greed (cf. Zacchaeus in 19:1-10) and to refuse to use military power for personal wealth or to corrupt justice restrict the power of empire and changes its basic ways of operating. John’s challenge does not go unheeded by the authorities (see 3:19-20; 9:7-9). But it must not go unheeded by a Christmas people called to live “against the grain” in an alternative community, a sign of God’s presence and salvific purposes.

The third section responds to those who wonder if John is the Messiah (3:15). This Jewish term means “anointed” (priests and kings were anointed or commissioned to carry out tasks). Preachers must be careful with it. Neither it does signify divinity nor was there a fixed messianic expectation in the first century. Extant texts refer infrequently to a messiah. Among those that do (Psalms of Solomon; 1 Enoch 37-71; Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs; 4 Ezra; several Qumran texts), there is no monolithic expectation. Why John’s prophetic message should raise this question is not clear. Perhaps it comes from traditions such as 1 Enoch 37-71, in which the messiah will carry out God’s judgment.

John’s response highlights three differences between himself and Jesus. John is not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals; Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit; Jesus will exercise judgment (3:16-17). Again this text allows the preacher to put Christmas into a wider perspective. This baby is also Lord and Savior. God’s actions here lead to Pentecost, to the experience of the Holy Spirit in the community of believers (so Acts). They also lead to the judgment. A Christmas people knows it is accountable to a God who wants desperately to save the wheat (3:17). Equipped by the Spirit, it lives faithfully. This is good news (3:18).
Finally, the Sunday before Christmas Day, the lectionary takes us to a
text explicitly from the birth story! That's too late in my view, a
mistake that preachers do not have to maintain.

This passage (1:39-45) pulls together the two story lines developed
in 1:5-38. They demonstrate something of God's ways of being and
doing among humans, along with human responses to that intervention
and unfolding of God's purposes. As is typical of Luke's Gospel, we
enter a world in which divine presence is not elusive, ordinary, or
seemingly absent, as it sometimes/often seems to be for us. Luke does
not share our hesitations about the miraculous. God is very apparent,
mysterious, purposeful. God intervenes, transforms, graces, and
demands. It is also a world in which humans have insight into what
God is doing, and they do not hesitate to articulate it (1:42-45, 46-56).
Both realities, God's presence and human proclamation, raise
questions about our (lack of or limited?) experiences of God and about
our general reluctance to engage in "God-talk." The text might nudge
us, as a Christmas people seeking to live this story, into new and
authentic worldviews, new and theologically informed
self-understanding, new but not glib discourse, bold but wise actions,
if we dare risk it.

In 1:5-25 the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and announces
Elizabeth's pregnancy (see Advent 2). In 1:26-38 Gabriel reappears,
"sent from God" to the virgin Mary, betrothed to Joseph (1:26-27). In
this direct encounter with the divine world she hears a revelation of
God's workings in her body. She will bear a son called Jesus (1:31),
"the son of God" (1:32, 35), the agent of God's will, in the line of
David (1:32-33). Gabriel also reveals what has happened to Elizabeth
(1:36).

Numerous parallels are evident through the two scenes. Both
women know God's favor. Elizabeth, like Zechariah, is righteous and
obedient (1:6), while Mary is addressed as one who has found God's
favor (1:28-30). Both encounter God's intervention in humiliating
circumstances, the barren Elizabeth and Mary the pregnant betrothed
virgin. Both conceive children who will play important roles in God's purposes, John the prophet (1:17, 76) and Jesus, God's child in the line of David (1:31-35). Like many women before them (see 1 Sam. 1:5-20), both recognize God's act of giving life. For Elizabeth it is an answer to prayer (1:13, 25) which removes her social disgrace. Mary describes herself as the Lord’s "servant," a designation of low social position but also one used to name significant figures in Israel's history (Abraham, Moses, David, Hannah) as well as to describe Jesus' ministry (22:27). By association she has a noble role.

In a sense it is quite marvelous and wonderful, yet it seems that the women are affirmed for their domestic and conventional roles of child-bearing. We should also note that accomplishing the divine will (1:37) brings both favor and social embarrassment to Mary. Socially, the pregnancy of a betrothed woman could mean only unfaithfulness (unless one knows otherwise, as the readers do). The narrative, though, silently passes over any social distress. Mary submits to the divine will without much choice, it seems. Her visit to Elizabeth, based on the angel's revelation (1:36), offers further opportunity not only to underline the solidarity of the two women (pregnant, chosen by God) but also to celebrate God's acts.

The yet unborn John "leaps in her womb" at Mary's arrival (1:41). As with Esau and Jacob in Rebekah's womb, intra-wombic activity is deemed to reveal God's designs. Their struggling is interpreted as foreshadowing the older's service for the younger and the struggles of their descendants (Gen. 25:22-23). Here Elizabeth interprets John's action, not as contention, but as a leaping for joy which signifies alliance (1:44). "Joy" and "rejoicing" are important words in these opening chapters (1:14, 44, 47; 2:10) and throughout Luke-Acts (8:13; 10:17; 15:7, 10; 24:41, 52; Acts 2:46; 8:8; 12:14; 13:52; 15:3). They denote not the selfish focus of the contemporary obsession with "fun" but recognizing, receiving, and participating in, God's work.

The Spirit enables Elizabeth to interpret and celebrate the divine action (1:41). In chapters 1–2, the Spirit actively carries out God's will (1:35) and enables others to testify (1:15, 44, 67; 2:25, 26, 27). The Spirit will continue God's work in Jesus' ministry (4:18-19) through the church in Acts and the contemporary Christmas people. Elizabeth is not a priest, but her utterance begins with two blessings. Her blessing of Mary "among women" recalls Deborah's blessing of Jael (Judg. 5:24) and Uzziah's of Judith (Judith 13:18), who, in military situations, had with God's help overcome the strong to deliver Israel.
Mary is another woman who performs God's redeeming purposes. Her blessing on Jesus links Mary and Jesus with Israel. Moses had declared God's blessing on "the fruit of obedient Israel's womb" (1:42a; Deut 28:1-4).

Elizabeth's two blessings resemble those spoken by the woman in 11:27 concerning the womb that bore and the breasts that suckled Jesus. Jesus responds by blessing those who hear and keep the word of God (11:28). Her third blessing anticipates Jesus' response (1:45). She blesses Mary for trusting that God would complete the purposes announced by the angel (cf. 1:38). Mary is blessed, then, not primarily for her child-bearing role but for doing God's will. In 8:21 Jesus makes this redefinition of motherhood explicit. Not physicality but trustful obedience constitutes Jesus' family: "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." The reliability and trustworthiness of God's word is central to this Gospel (so 1:4, "you may have security"). Elizabeth underlines Mary's embodiment of this discipleship quality.

Between these blessings Elizabeth asks why she should visit with "the mother of my Lord" (1:43). With this designation, Elizabeth makes, for the first time in the Gospel, a disciple's confession in identifying Jesus as Lord (cf. 1:17e). Numerous disciples address Jesus as Lord (e.g., 5:8; 6:46; 7:6). But also significant is that Elizabeth's phrase "my Lord" appears in Ps. 110:1, "The Lord says to my Lord." This psalm originally celebrated the coronation of Davidic kings to represent God's reign. In using it, Elizabeth recognizes that Jesus, in the line of David (1:32-33), will be an agent of God's life-giving authority and reign.

Space precludes any lengthy consideration of Mary's song, the Magnificat (1:46-56). Mary interprets her situation as God's liberating work. Mary's God saves those oppressed by the powerful, who are powerless to save themselves. She borrows language from Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and other traditions which celebrate God's surprising and reversing ways among humans. She represents all the ordinary folks who, though marginalized and exploited by gender, age, socioeconomic, and political forces, are central to God's purposes. She celebrates that God's purposes challenge, not sanction, systemic evil and that God's mercy transforms death into life. Her vision is a stunning one of liberation and reversal, proclaiming both the extent and the limits of human arrogance and injustice. For Mary, the faithful and powerful mercy of God is seen to be at work in the conception of
her baby. Who would have thought it? But that’s the point for a people who want to live by this Christmas story.

December 24, 1997—Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-14
Ps. 96
Isa. 9:2-7
Titus 2:11-14

"Peace: Whose? What Kind?"

Luke emphasizes that God’s purposes in Jesus involve transforming human life. John is to prepare a people with renewed relationships (1:16-17). Jesus is to reign over the house of Jacob forever (1:33). Mary magnifies God’s reversal of social, political, and economic structures. Zechariah celebrates God’s mercy which lights up darkness and death and which guides into peace (1:79). A Christmas people is transformed and transforming.

2:1-14 continues the emphasis on transformation. The context is empire, Caesar Augustus (2:1; ruled from 27 BCE-14 CE) and the governor Quirinius; the place is the Roman province of Syria. Empire was, in a sense, the defining reality of first-century life. Roman power—military, political, economic, social, cultural—extended across the known world. The Romans boasted of their gift to the world: peace, prosperity, law and order, safe travel. These benefits often went under the banner of Pax Romana, Roman peace, attributed initially to Augustus, who ended civil war, but also claimed by his successors. Festivals, inscriptions, and literary works (e.g., by Virgil and Horace) praised these gifts.

But the inscriptions and literature do not often note the means and cost of empire. Propaganda never does. It was, and is, a system which relies on military power, heavy taxation, social control, and the subordination of ruled people. It requires compliance and a significant percentage of the income of the poor. Its constant presence and demands, whether in the form of military personnel, civil administrators, or taxes, emphasizes that empire is pervasive and unrelenting. Opposition is futile and hopeless. It benefits the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor.

In a long biblical tradition of prophetic resistance to the nation-state’s unjust claims on human allegiance and avoidance of the
divine will, Luke refuses to accept the empire's definition of reality. The empire is not all-consuming or final. There is an alternative understanding of reality and of human society.

Luke’s critique centers on peace. Central to the empire’s propaganda, “peace” sums up the empire’s supreme achievement and denotes the empire’s claim for gratitude and loyalty. Luke employs the word three times in these opening two chapters (1:79; 2:14, 29) but redefines it. Peace is not the gift of empire but the work of God. It is experienced not through loyalty to a militaristic and oppressive system but by participating in God’s activity, which brings all into right relationship (shalom).

Joseph and Mary journey to Bethlehem because the decreed census requires them to go to Joseph’s ancestral city (2:1-5). There Jesus is born (2:6-7). Several details continue the critique of empire. First, the census (whatever the historical unlikelihood of this exact one) is an instrument of control. In part, it displays the empire’s power to require people to do its bidding. But more than that, the empire registers and counts in order to tax. But the narrative exposes limits to this power. Unbeknownst to Augustus and Quirinius and resembling the role of Cyrus in returning the exiles from Babylon (Isa. 45:1), the census becomes the instrument of God’s will. It moves Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, a key city for God’s purposes. The empire thinks it is in control, but the narrative shows God at work relativizing its goals and actions, redirecting them for God’s purposes.

Second, Bethlehem’s link with David as the city in which David is anointed king (1 Sam. 16) is underlined. It, rather than Jerusalem, is described as “the city of David.” Joseph travels there because he “was descended from the house and family of David” (2:4). This emphasis on David recalls Israel’s traditions of kingship and points to an alternative way of understanding power. Though they often failed, Israel’s kings were called not to oppress and exploit but to represent God’s life-giving rule, justice, and peace, particularly on behalf of the poor and needy (see Ps. 72:1-7, 12-14). This vision contrasts with the reality of empire. Jesus is identified with this vision of kingship by Gabriel in 1:32-33.

Third, the birth of Jesus, according to Gabriel’s announcement, demonstrates the powerful effectiveness of God’s word and actions. God’s word is reliable and trustworthy, active in the midst of a world apparently defined by other realities. So it will be in accomplishing
God's promises of sovereignty and blessing for all of God's creation (cf. Abraham, Gen. 12:1-3).

Fourth, at his birth Jesus is laid in a manger, or animal feeding trough. The contrast with Augustus is clear. Though a savior, Jesus does not receive royal treatment. God's actions take place among the poor who comprised most of the population.

And fifth, though it is very obvious, we must not overlook that God's purposes are here committed to a baby. We postmoderns are likely to get sentimental at this point: the innocence and sweetness of a baby. Not so for Luke's initial readers. In the ancient world, children were not so regarded. Though loved and acknowledged in Jewish traditions as gifts from God, children were also widely regarded with suspicion. Weak, irrational, ignorant, unpredictable, lacking judgment, dependent, marginal and wicked were some common views. A child needed socialization and discipline; transition into adult ways was to be as quick as possible. Through such a marginal being and not through the powerful center, God creates God's alternative ways.

The alternative to empire, the emphasis on the margins rather than the center, continues in verses 8-14. Shepherds provide the audience for an angelic announcement. Conventional wisdom says shepherds were particularly despised. It would be more accurate to say that while they were socially disreputable and at times regarded as dishonest in letting their flocks graze on others' land, primarily they were poor like most of the population (cf. 4:18; 14:31). The shepherds also recall previous instances in which shepherds have figured prominently in God's purposes: David's anointing and Ezekiel's condemnation of false leaders (Ezek. 34). The scene is infused with divine presence: "angel of the Lord" (cf. 1:11, 26), "stood before" (used in contexts of encountering God in 2:38; 21:34; 24:4), "the glory of the Lord" (cf. Exod. 24:16-17; Num. 14:21-22), "they were terrified" (cf. 1:12-13, 30). The shepherds, representative of the poor, receive a divine revelation.

Continuing the critique of empire, the angel declares Jesus' birth to be "good news." This is "angel talk." Gabriel had said the same thing in 1:19 about John. John (3:18); Jesus (4:18, 43; 7:22; 8:1, etc.); and the church, leaders (Acts 5:24; 10:36; 13:32) and members (Acts 8:4), continue to proclaim "good news." "Good news" designates God's liberating action under way in Jesus. This action is not completely new. In second and third Isaiah, the verb euangelizomai denotes God's
saving action in liberating the exiles (Isa. 40:9-10; 52:7) and setting free the oppressed (61:1). The cognate noun, significantly, is used of the emperors. In one inscription (from Priene), the birth of Augustus begins a new age and is good news for the world. His accession to power extends the benefit, and annual celebrations renew it. Luke does not agree. The good news is God’s act of liberation in the birth of Jesus. This is good news for “all the people,” not just the powerful and rich but especially the poor and lowly at whose expense Augustus thrives. And the birth is a personalized delivery, “to you.”

The contrast continues in verse 11 as the angel identifies the one who is born. Naming David’s city invokes the alternative view of kingship noted previously. Jesus is “a savior.” While rare in the Gospels, not surprisingly this title is used of Augustus, the one who had saved the world from war and unrest. But not so for Luke. Quite the reverse. God is “savior” (1:47), a God who brings down the mighty and exalts the lowly. As savior, Jesus carries out this work (1:69), manifesting God’s saving power (2:11). In the angel’s announcement he is to represent God’s rule (1:33), a function reinforced by the title Lord. And the sign of this good news (2:12)? A baby—in a feeding trough! Before the scandal of the cross, there was the madness of a manger. The sign enables the angel’s message to be verified and the trustworthiness of God’s message to be experienced. But it also underlines God’s strange ways of working among the lowly.

The proclamation is greeted with two responses. The shepherds journey to Bethlehem (2:15-20), but before that is described, there is another miraculous scene as an angelic choir offers a postproclamation anthem of praise. Praise has punctuated the two chapters, just as it will the life of a Christmas people. Mary (1:46-56), Zechariah (1:64, 67-79), the angels (2:13-14), the shepherds (2:20), Simeon (2:28), and Anna (2:37-38) offer it. The angels are described as a “heavenly host.” The word for host is used in the Septuagint to refer to armies (Pharaoh’s in Exod. 14:4, 9, 17). This army, unlike Caesar’s, does not conquer people but celebrates God’s salvation. It does not laud Caesar’s peace but God’s peace, the wholeness of relationship which results from God’s presence and favor (2:14). To be a Christmas people is to sing and live in opposition to contemporary forms of Pax Romana and in constant and daily advocacy of God’s wholeness.
Bibliography


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