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MEDIA, RELIGION, AND THE CHURCH’S TASK

WILLIAM F. FORE

THE HIDDEN ROLE OF TELEVISION

The role of television in our culture, while in some ways extravagantly obvious, is at its core essentially hidden. We think of TV in its roles as entertainer, relaxer—a source of information, security, stability, escape, which helps us to keep up with how to talk and behave and dress, and which gives many a sense of belonging and companionship. But there is a hidden role, and to discover it I ask you to use your imagination.

Imagine that you are with me and others in a boat, moving across a vast, slow-moving river—a river so large that you cannot even see the other side. We view other boats moving back and forth. Some boats are faster than others, more efficient, more powerful, some larger and carry more wealth, and they are going in many different directions. We all use the river. But most of us—ourselves and those we are observing—are quite unaware that all of us are being moved by the river itself—that we are going from where we have been to where we will be, simply because we are on the river.

This is the way it is as we move through the world of television. Some programs are more effective, some more costly and entertaining, others go off in educational or special—

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interest directions. But as we participate, all of us are being changed from what we were to what we will become, by the process—of—television itself.

This process goes on regardless of what program is viewed at a given moment. It is present in every sitcom, every soap opera, every movie, every newscast and commercial—regardless of whether the particular program is in good taste or bad, high art or kitsch, pandering or profound. The impact does not show up very easily in research, because the process is so slow, so cumulative—any more than a single snapshot in a cave can tell us very much about how a huge stalagmite came to grow many feet into the air as the result of tiny drops of water.

What is happening is that the whole medium of television is both reflecting and expressing the myths by which we live. These myths tell us who we are, what we have done, what power we have, who has power and who does not, who can do what to whom with what effect, what is of value and what is not, what is right and what is not. They also tell us what has happened, and what has not. It takes our history and our present and interprets it to us.

TV has become a kind of collective memory of our shared experiences. One need only think back to what we remember of major events—the deaths of presidents, or the waging of war, or the Summer Olympics, for example—to realize that most of what we remember is in fact what images television has fashioned and repeated on our behalf.

The same is true of our present: television decides on our behalf not only what to think, but more importantly, what we will think about.

THE CONCERN OF RELIGION

But why should religion be concerned with the cultural role of television? Granted that there are many church-sponsored programs on television, and that church people want to get their messages across to the wider public, just as educators, artists, vegetarians, Rotarians, and other groups in society want to get their ideas expressed. What is unique about the interest of religion in television's role in society?
Here it is necessary to state what I mean by religion. While attendance at church services may be one index of religiosity, it certainly is not a very good one. Neither is adherence to a particular creed, or membership in a particular church, or support of "religion in general." What I mean by religion is what is of ultimate concern to a person—that which is of ultimate value and importance, what people would (and do) stake their lives on.

Paul Tillich said that "religion is the essence of culture, and culture is the form of religion." If this is true, and I think it is, then we can see that religion—the essence of culture—is on a collision course with television—the dominant expression in our culture. Television is expressing our cultural values, which are in conflict with our historic Judeo-Christian religious values.

The challenge is even more fundamental: in many ways television is beginning to replace the institution that historically has performed the functions we have understood as religious. Television, rather than the churches, is becoming the place where people find a worldview which reflects what to them is of ultimate value, and which justifies their behavior and way of life.

Television today, whether the viewers know it or not, and whether the television industry itself knows it or not, is competing not merely for our attention and dollars, but for our very souls.

THE MEDIA WORLDVIEW

And what are the mass media telling us about who we are, what we can do and be, and what is of value? In a complex society such as ours, it would be impossible to detail all of the images and symbols that go into creating its commonality. However, here are a few central myths from which many of the images and symbols spring, listed only as a guide for your perception while looking at TV, and to whet your appetite to discover your own set of TV myths:

1. The fittest survive. Television tells us that life not only is that way, but that it ought to be that way. And who are the fittest according to TV? It is no accident that in Gerbner's TV-violence
profile, lower class and nonwhite characters are especially prone to victimization, are more violent than their middle class counterparts, and pay a higher price for engaging in violence (jail, death). In TV's mythical world, the fittest survive, and the fittest are young, male, middle and upper class white Americans.

2. Power and decision-making start at the center and move out. In the media world, the political word comes from Washington, the financial word comes from New York, and the entertainment word comes from Hollywood. While watching television, one gets the sense of personally existing at the edge of a giant network where someone at the center pushes the right button and instantaneously millions of us "out there" see what has been decided we will see.

Of course, there are alternatives to the worldview that power should move from the center to the edges. Our own Declaration of Independence proposes just the opposite—that government derives its power from the consent of the governed, in other words, that the flow of power should be from the periphery to the center. But the opposite model is much more supportive of the needs of the industrial revolution, the rise of our nation-state and the demands of the new technological era. Center-out is essential to the maintenance of both our centralized governmental bureaucracy and our capitalist economy.

The idea that people in the power center should plan for others extends into corporate offices, national church bureaucracies, and social welfare agencies. But ordinary people tend to resist this imposition of power from the outside. The result is that corporate business leaders wonder why they are so low in the credibility polls, church leaders wonder why they are losing their jobs and why their budgets are shrinking, and social workers wonder why the poor don't appreciate the plans that have been worked out for them.

3. Happiness consists of limitless material acquisition. This one is so pervasive and so blatant in all TV that it does not require further comment.

4. Progress is an inherent good. This myth is symbolized by the words "new and improved" attached every few years to every old product.
5. There exists a free-flow of information. Of course the whole import of this analysis is that instead of a genuine free-flow of information, there is consistent, pervasive, and effective constriction of information and images, driven not by governmental edict, but simply by society's need for the media to conform to the values and worldview of the new Technological Era in which we live.

And what are the values that the mass media communicate to us on behalf of our culture? Power heads the list; power over others; power over nature. Close to power are the values of wealth and property, the idea that everything can be purchased and that consumption is an intrinsic good. The values of narcissism, of immediate gratification of wants, and of creature comforts follow close behind.

SOME THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION

In dealing with these competing myths of secular culture, there are several Christian doctrines, derived from the witness of Scripture, Christian tradition, and the reflection of Christians today, which can be useful guides. They are: creation and stewardship; sin and redemption; the newness of life; good news and proclamation; and Christian witness.

1. That God is creator of “all things visible and invisible” is a central Christian doctrine. By this is meant that all things are interrelated, that the eternal order of things is revealed in the historical order, and that we human beings are not the creators but rather are bound together as part of creation along with all other parts of creation, in mutuality. Creation includes the techniques of social communication—the telephone, radio, television, movies, print, and so on. Without these technologies, humankind simply would be unable to live in the complex social structures we now enjoy.

Since all elements of social communication are first of all God’s creation, and not our creation, they must be thought of as being held in trust by those who use them. Stewardship is a necessary corollary of creation. The mass media are especially powerful forces in the society, and the importance of exercising stewardship in the use of them for good increases with the magnitude of their power.
The biblical record and Christian tradition are clear that human beings are expected by their Creator to use the good things of the earth to accomplish God's will: the building of a just, peaceful, and loving community. The media of social communication have enormous potential for aiding in this goal, and to use these techniques purely for self-aggrandizement and profit is completely ruled out by the Christian understanding of creation and stewardship.

2. Christians understand sin as the misuse of God's gifts. Sin is taking something that is a gift of God—things, money, power, prestige—and treating it as if it were God. Sin is not something that people are thrust into by events, but is the result of choice, a choice not to live up to God's expectations for the full potential of all human beings, but rather to further the self at the expense of others. Humans constantly misuse the power over creation that God has given them. Instead of using their unique gifts to bring about harmony in all creation and its interrelatedness, they misuse power for selfish purposes.

The communication media have become a major source of power and potential in the technological era. Because men and women depend upon them for information about their world, the media have become keys to many other forms of power: economic, social, and political. And precisely because of their intense concentration of power, they inevitably become a primary locus of sin. The primary manifestation of sin in the mass media is their treating persons as objects of manipulation and turning them into consumers of media rather than into participants through media.

Historically, Christianity has understood that a major role of government is the regulation of the misuse of power. A fundamental task of government is to protect the weak and defenseless against the powerful and the predator. It is only through the power of the whole state, acting on behalf of its citizens, by establishing limits to untrammeled exercise of power by the strong at the expense of the weak, that society can remain civil and community can remain intact. Thus Christians recognize the necessity for governmental regulation of those aspects of communication which allow it to become a monopoly of the few at the expense of the many.
3. Christian doctrine takes seriously the concept that God makes all things new, that novelty and creativity are essential elements of God’s world. Therefore, Christians resist any attempts to restrict communication so that persons are restricted in their choices. New ideas, new values, new understandings are essential to growth and to human potential. Any policy or regulation which would restrict opportunities for persons to discover new meanings is theologically unsupportable.

Censorship of communication is itself a sin, since it allows one person or group to dominate the information intake of all others. Christian belief insists on remaining open to newness, and rejects attempts to restrain the way newness comes into the world. It also rejects top-down, one-way flows of communication. It remains open, not only to novelty, but also to that which is not yet completely understood, since God works in mysterious ways, and can never be fully grasped, predicted, or controlled.

For Christians the aim of communication is to help people interpret their existence in the light of what God has done for them as manifest in Jesus Christ.

This means that the purpose of Christian communication is not to ask, “How can we communicate the gospel in such a way that others will accept it?” This is the wrong question, the public relations question, the manipulative question, the question asked by the electronic church. Rather, our task is to put the gospel before people in such a way that it is clear to them that they can accept it, or reject it—but always for the right reasons. As Tillich points out, it is better that people reject the gospel for the right reasons than that they accept it for the wrong reasons.

Of course, one can never know with certainty what are the exactly “right” and “wrong” reasons for someone else, any more than we can know perfectly the innermost thought of others. Therefore, in fashioning a strategy to communicate our faith we can only act in faith, never in certainty. But our objective should always be to present the Gospel in ways so clear and self-evident that the recipient will have an “Aha!” experience, so that the good news will make complete sense to his or her own inner world, so that the recipient will say, in effect, “I already knew that!”
WHAT THE CHURCHES CAN DO

So how should the church respond to the challenge of this new media—religion? I suggest the response falls into three areas: media production, media education, and media reform.

First, in the area of programming, I am particularly concerned about the so-called Electronic Church, or commercial religion, programs that ape the symbols and images of the secular media—the images of prestige and power, the appeals to winning and getting, of the importance of being #1, programs with all the trappings that reinforce the myths of secular society, both consciously and unconsciously—and yet somehow hope to turn the whole thing into a religious statement about the God who requires only justice and humility and love. These programs simply do not recognize that all their good words in all their sermonettes are overwhelmed by the images and symbols of the programs themselves: the parade of worldly success, the beautiful women, the endless stories of material success, the political ambition.

The increase in programs that sell religion—for-money’s sake simply attests to the gullibility or lack of moral sensitivity on the part of a relatively small audience. In some cases the hosts for these programs are downright charlatans, and in other cases they are themselves innocents who simply have bought the society’s values and applied them to religion without realizing what they are doing. My advice about this kind of programming is: IF YOU CAN’T BEAT ‘EM, DON’T JOIN ‘EM.

Then what should the “church”—both local and national—do in the area of programming? Surely we must not abandon relating to TV and radio merely because there are dangers involved. But broadcast production does represent an area of great moral ambiguity. For transcendent religious values are so much at odds with society’s values that it always is difficult and often it is impossible to deal seriously with real issues on radio and television. Some sensitization through mass media is possible, of that I am sure. But the dangers of being taken in by the media are so subtle and so powerful that it is incumbent upon us to approach every attempt to program in television and radio with the greatest caution and theological sensitivity.
Our objective in using radio and TV should be what I call pre-evangelism. You cannot BE the church on radio and television. I doubt that you can even give the answers to serious religious questions satisfactorily on radio and television. But you can raise the right questions, help people ask who they are and what they are here for and whether they have any worth and if so why.

We should use the mass media as preparation for the gospel. This involves three steps. It requires exploring with people what Paul Tillich calls the “boundary situations,” those places where modern men and women reach the limits of their human existence, where they sense a lack of personal meaning, a fear of being useless and of not having worth. Then, we can then affirm in the media those persons and events that have been able to deal with these “boundary situations” creatively and with faith: news stories from Manila and South Africa; biographies of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Tutu. And finally, we must always point to the church as being the place where people can go to begin to work out their salvation, find community, discover the power of confession and forgiveness.

We can help lead people to understand what the Gospel message is, can encourage them to go where they can get more answers and possibly, to use a decidedly non-media term, become saved. And that place is, simply, the church. Television should always be used as a sign-post, a servant of the local church—and never the other way around.

The second kind of response of the churches is media education. In effect we must systematically expose our parishioners to the cultural biases and distorted values systems of our culture in the light of the prophetic visions of the Old Testament and the harsh demands of the New.

Unfortunately, church leaders, both nationally and locally, still tend to view television as if it were a major entertainment diversion which keeps people away from church, rather than as an alternative religion which is wooing people into a whole new way of thinking about, and living in, our world. Real media education will not become effective until it has penetrated the thinking of every theologian, pastor and parishioner—and
among other things, this calls for a change in approach to the training in every theological school.

Finally, we need to continue to work for media reform. I have suggested that television is so powerful because it functions in many ways as though it were a religion. But in addition, it functions with such centralized economic and political power that genuine competition of ideas in our society is becoming suppressed.

There will be no remedial action to counter the overdose of violence on TV, or achieve a thorough airing of all positions on matters of public importance, or an opportunity for the public to hear "fringe" positions, or the broadcasting of quality programming for children, so long as the television industry is able to neutralize regulation through its power over members of Congress.

It can at the same forestall the development of economic countervailing forces by invoking the shibboleths of freedom, censorship and the First Amendment.

Freedom without responsibility is the freedom of the "free fox in the free henhouse" and leads to domination and repression that is more dangerous in a democracy than the governmental regulation of licenses which could insure the responsible use of a valuable public resource.

What is needed certainly is not governmental censorship. What is needed is a freeing up of the existing regulatory system so that broadcasters would once again be expected to use their licenses in the public interest. What is needed is the busting of media trusts. There is a danger of censorship. But there is also the reality of monopoly, exercised by large corporate interests which keep the public from knowing what is going on in their own society.

What is needed is media education so that people will not be helpless illiterates in their media world. What is needed is public action which will form the countervailing economic force that can pit the public’s interest against the industry’s profit motive. What is needed are new ideas and approaches in how to use these media in ways that can open up their potential for the public commonweal.
It was David Thoreau who said: “There are thousands attacking the fruits of evil for every one who is attacking its roots.” I have tried to describe the roots of what may well be one of the most serious problems facing America today: the misuse and abuse of the potential of television. This is a moral and ethical issue—it is a religious issue. I hope that people of faith in America will have the insight and the will to deal recover the potential of television before we lose our right to diverse and varied points of view, our right to robust debate and free and open communication, and ultimately our Christian concept of community-building as essential to the well-being of every individual.
In the early 1960s, we beginning ministers told ourselves two kinds of stories about class—one about our congregations and one, slightly less malicious, about the clergy. The first had to do with family that “improved” its church membership as it increased its wealth. Usually it started poor as Baptist, rose to material security as Methodist, entered the ranks of the well-to-do as Presbyterian, and achieved genuine social standing at Episcopalian.

The second kind of story cloaked its malice in historical garb. It told, for example, how the clergy went West. The Baptists went as pioneers, on foot. The Methodists, pioneers too, but slightly less “of the people,” went on horseback. The Presbyterians rode the stage coach. The Episcopalians waited for the train.

Both stories, and those who told them, acknowledged class as a fact of life. It was, at its worst, only a petty peeve, however, and had not become what the zealots of the next generation came to call an “issue.”

Not that we ever thought of class as an immutable fact of nature. We did not. It seemed, instead, to have a kind of porous
fixity about it. One could, as the stories showed, change one's class—although within limits: it took a generation for the new rich to become the old rich, with all of the privileges attached thereto.

But most of us, I believe, thought more about changing our social class than about changing the class ladder. And some of that had to do with how we first learned about it. Our great teachers were the stories in books and movies that urged us to climb the class ladder, not to pull it down. We learned about class in the context of the American morality tale about the virtue of ambition. That tale gave unmitigated approval to upward social movement.

We knew, to the marrow of our bones, that ambition and hard work were virtues. The reward for them was success. And success meant increased wealth and social status. That was not only true, it was right.

The American morality tale also chronicled the descent of those who failed on the ladder. They fell, we knew, through their own dissoluteness—dissoluteness, which meant, at a minimum, a lack of personal moral restraint and self-discipline. The focus set upon the individual, not the system.

If there were incentives to think critically about class, the shrill anti-communism of Senator Joseph McCarthy tended to overwhelm them. Under his influence, criticism of almost any aspect of the country was often treated as tantamount to disloyalty. McCarthy was gone by the 60s, but the aroma of his kind of anti-communism hung in the air. It actually intensified in some ways because of the Cold War, with its constant worry about "monolithic communism" against the "free world."

When liberals attempted to do class criticism, the only analytic language available for the job used words like "masses," "proletariat," "bourgeoisie," "labor," and "workers," each bearing in the popular mind the signature of Karl Marx. Liberals had to choose their words with care to avoid being labeled communist sympathizers. Even John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier" in 1960, for all that it promised of newness and change, never mounted a criticism of class and the distribution of wealth. It portrayed instead a Camelot of class and wealth with an emphasis on youth. Like all things of that time, it stopped literally and symbolically at the Berlin Wall.
The staying power of McCarthyism is usually a chapter in the text of political history. It ought also to occupy the pages of social and class history. One can see in it how right, how tenaciously right, any system can seem to those raised with it, and the effect of those beliefs on basic rights. For example, many people had stood up to McCarthy, and not a few became heroes to many of us. But by and large, we were either unable or unwilling to invite those whom McCarthy had stained (many of whom, like screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, suffered from blacklisting for nearly the rest of their creative years) back into visible participation in the nation’s public life. Our deeper commitment was to what we saw as the American Way of Life. That Way meant individualism, hard work, ambition, and the right to the rewards of it all. We still believed more in the right to class than in the right to free speech.

Seminary offered a muddled opportunity to know more possibly to know better. A few books of social criticism showed up on reading lists. Gibson Winter, David Reisman, and C. Wright Mills appeared in the conversations of some of the trendier students. But everything was read in the light of neo-orthodox theology. There we learned that the major human problem was anxiety, not poverty; that the cause of human affliction was meaninglessness, not classism; that the answer was revelation, not praxis.

Celebrity preachers visited my seminary every quarter for a week’s preaching. Eloquent and elegant, smooth, sophisticated, and serving large congregations, these symbols of ministerial success showed us what we could really look forward to. Large church and large choir—these were how clergy learned to handle the threat of anxiety and meaninglessness.

Those were also the days of “freedom rides.” Seminarians joined college students, bussing south to help break the chains of segregation. Not many went from my seminary. One professor did go, and ended up in a southern city jail after he and some friends tried to integrate a Methodist worship service. He returned to school a hero, spoke in chapel to thunderous applause, and did the local speaker’s circuit for a while. Meanwhile, the celebrity preachers continued to hold forth and to shape most aspirations toward ministry.
No one would say that we were left unshaken by the rumblings of racial change. But we did could not think of that as a class issue. Unprepared to think critically about class, we did not see racism—which selects a certain classification of persons for special treatment—as classism.

I think, at that time, we would have understood de Champfort's saying about class: "The nobility, say its members, is the intermediary between the King and the people. Indeed, yes, just as the hounds are the intermediary between the hunter and the hare." We would have understood, but would have seen it as a trenchant witticism about someone else's society, not about ours. The predatory aspects of class evaded us. In some sense that we did not know how to explain well, we believed ourselves to be equals although we still had classes.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since those days. We've talked a good deal about the velocity and extent of change in American culture. And, for a while, we endured some very heavy weather of social criticism. Yet, for all of that, it seems to me that the mainline churches in the United States have generally remained at peace with class. We have had liberation theology, feminist theology, and Black theology, and a bishops' brew of epistles on peace and denominational pronouncements on justice. Many have listened, and a few have heard.

But like the celebrity preachers, the mainline ministers and lay leaders teach the same old line of class ambition—give or take a few adjustments to fit the times. Some suffer from bad conscience over this, and a few clergy from large congregations minister to the homeless and to the victims of this drug-drenched society, motivated by a genuine impulse of the Gospel. But even they arrive at their places of ministry from perches high in the social stratosphere and, at day's end, return there to enjoy the pleasures of good salaries, nice homes, and pleasant associations—pleasures they have come to expect as their right. I do not condemn them. Their well-learned ambitions take them toward the rich, even as their consciences take them to the poor.

Others have bypassed bad conscience and moved directly to what I, not they, would call bad faith. The television evangelists, who promise a glide to the heights for all who believe, have only
rediscovered how tightly Americans tie together virtue, reward, and class. They baptize the perennial slogan of the newly rich: wealth hasn’t to do with class, it is class. For them, religion hasn’t to do with class, it is class. Belittling them or parading their sexual peccadillos hardly suffices. They long ago learned how to avoid teetering on the brink of class conscience.

LEARNING ABOUT CLASS

Some things might be learned from those early days. For one, most of us were innocently classist. That doesn’t mean that our classism remained innocent of terrible effects. Quite the contrary.

What I mean is that, as we awakened to life, a certain kind of life with a certain place in history awakened us. Its values, its biases infused its language and its gestures. They became our language and gestures, our ways of organizing and understanding the world. Class was part of that primitive vocabulary. Like the sun, class was not what we saw but that by which we saw.

Order and difference are borne to our lives in our mother tongue. And it is not a neutral tongue. It expresses and organizes what matters to our society, our family. In the ecology of the tongue, there isn’t space for unlimited growth. Orders and differences, to exist, must preclude, must exclude others.

Language, then, by bringing order, brings classification. And no classification is neutral. All of which is to say that living with class bias does not begin as a matter of choice but of simple, unreflective world knowledge.

The second thing to learn is that no world awareness is without rumblings of possible change, without elements—large or small—of instability. Those elements, like the early news of the freedom rides, fit uneasily into the way things are. But they do not register high on the Richter Scale until they have advanced quite a distance. If class is that by which one sees, those rumblings appear at first like something only dimly heard, perhaps the harmless note of distant traffic. Only later do they show themselves as clouds, heavy with storm and change. The first effort, when noises are heard, is to repress them or explain them away.
The third, and most important learning, is that it takes a good deal of time and luck to discover the meaning of class in our lives. And that is because it remains right at the base of our practical ambition.

Nor does church membership affect that base of ambition. Clergy families want for their children the right friends, the right colleges, the right opportunities. In that, they differ not at all from their parishioners. Congregations sponsor activities that prepare children for “social improvement.” From Head Start to College Night for Youth, the same emphases resound: ambition, hard work, success, advancement. Advancement measured by what? We don’t quite say it, but we still mean advancement measured by improvement in social class.

While we do not call it class interest, we want the benefits of class. It is an ambition that crosses all racial lines. The exit of successful blacks from the inner city to the suburban ring has been widely observed. Improvement in class, symbolized by dress and address, is a practical ambition. Korean pastors, whose congregations have tended to become quite affluent, report that new immigrants from Korea feel uncomfortable at church. American Korean Christians seem of a higher class.

What we have yet to learn, behind these benign appearances of class, is how concrete and physical class truly is. As the typical British detective might say, getting the facts about class is not only a matter of deduction, but a matter of knowing where the bodies lie. Class might seem to do only with access to resources, who gets what. That half-truth obscures a much darker one: social classification orders human bodies, determines the fate of blood and flesh.

All societies have their preferences for ordering things. They may over time even change their preferences, and therefore their orders. But they never escape the fact of order.

Orders place things in positions relative to one another, often following a spatial scheme: higher and lower, beside or among, near and far. In Michel Foucault’s phrase, order is “incorporal materiality”—the way human life and its material accomplishment are arrayed.

The notion of place is important here. What place do you occupy relative to others? What powers are allotted to your
place? How are you and others in your place taught what to expect and think? In a remarkable way, Foucault demonstrates that the soul is not in the body, but the body in the soul. That is, the way we construe your essence will determine what we do to your body.

For example, the different ways we have construed true humanness have led to different ways of disposing of those who lack some of those “truly human” traits. Under various definitions, the mentally ill have been judged to be children in adult bodies, throwbacks to primitive humanity, animals lacking a human soul, devil-possessed, psychically disabled, or willfully misbehaving. Depending upon the prevailing definition, then, the bodies of the mentally ill have been placed with families, in attics, in caves, in boats set loose upon the sea, in asylums, in hospitals, or burned at the stake. Today, in response to more “sophisticated” understandings, we put them on the street to wander among the homeless debris of our society.

The orders of society are orderings of flesh and blood. Classification is not neutral. Today we watch as a new classification of persons appears and a new debate arises about how to dispose of their bodies. The debate has to do with carriers of HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus, often a preface to AIDS.

AIDS first appeared to be an affliction among gay males. Because many already viewed them as immoral, and they tended to isolate themselves in gay communities, those with AIDS were viewed with alarm, but let be.

Then the virus began to appear among intravenous drug users, which included many of the prostitutes visited by straight, middle-class males. That caused some alarm, which increased when the health professionals and ordinary people alike recognized the threat of HIV donors to the nation’s blood supply. In recent discussions, three classes of people have become distinctly identified as threats: gays, drug users, and prostitutes. The question now arises about social controls, that is, where we will place their bodies in order to minimize the risks we face.

To show that the matter is more than a medical problem, but reflects also the values of the current system of class, consider
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the missing element in the debate about social controls. In heterosexual AIDS as in nearly all venereal diseases, among the greatest of infectors is the prostitute-visiting, middle-class white male. The debate has not touched the topic of how we newly order the lives of middle-class males.

We don’t often attend to the way class orders the fate of bodies in our culture—largely, I think, because we believe so overwhelmingly that people create their own fates. Our society’s luxuriant class structure abetted that belief. We have had so many levels of material wealth that the distance from any one to the one next to it has not seemed great. There has been plenty of evidence from nearby that people could work hard and climb out from where they are to a higher and better level of living.

With so many “proofs” that individual initiative determines the outcome of one’s life, our attention has been distracted by the motion of advancement. We have not focussed on the prevalence and fixity of the levels through which some move, nor on the more remote levels in which some are mired.

That may change. It appears now that the gap between the rich and the poor has begun to widen in the United States. Americans will soon sort out into fewer levels of wealth, and the space between those levels will grow greater. Like mountains seen from the distance, the characteristics of class may become clearer. So may the inequities in distribution and the fate of bodies stand out in bolder relief. And, as the distances between classes become more difficult to surmount, the consciousness of class may affect Americans in new ways.

Some of those ways may be salutary, others not. The clergy may offer a case in point. According to some seminary leaders, many young clergy now are coming to the church expecting to serve socially static ministries. The number of middle-sized congregations has diminished, while the numbers of small and large churches have increased. Without middle-sized congregations to serve as transitional pastorates, clergy end up itinerating among congregations of roughly the same size. The desire of large churches to recruit and train their own pastors will only reinforce social immobility among clergy. The result may well be two classes of clergy, each flying at quite a different altitude.
Older clergy, nurtured on the escalator view of ministry and now stuck near ground floor level, feel dispirited. But new clergy, raised in the current state of affairs, now come to seminary expecting much less social mobility.

If the clergy offer any clue, we may find at least this one tendency as the gaps between classes widen. People will learn new places where their bodies can be accommodated, and will learn to be comfortable there. A new peasantry and nobility will arise. We will find a new way to live with class. But we may not remain quite as blissfully unaware of what it means.

THE ROOT OF CLASS

The widening breach between congregations could become the motive for thinking in new ways about how we live with class. We could, for example, allow the tensions of class to surface. We could seek the fragility in the apparent fixity of class. A clue lies in the root of the word.

The word “class” roots in the Indo-European kel, which means “to shout.” It comes to us through the Latin classis, which means “to summons” and is tied to the reputed summons from Flavius Tullius to the citizens of Rome—a summons dividing them into classes for the military draft. A “class” is a group summoned forth.

We ought not lose the sense of that root. Classes come, not from nature, but from the summons of society. They serve social purposes. And, they determine the fates of members of the society. Some will go to military service, some will remain home to enjoy the fruits of the victories.

From social classes, the word evolved to designate other important categories, for example, scriptores classic!, writers of the first rank, who wrote books that were “classics” and in a class by themselves. The term located the founts of social wisdom. It also located the dregs, as in quintae classis, people of the lowest rank.

Flavius Tullius, who may have been mythical, mirrors in a minute way what the God of the Hebrews had done on a cosmic scale. That God, by the sound of the voice, summoned light from darkness, making possible the passage of days and
creating the classes of time. Further distinctions followed. Humans were classified as male and female. Following the Fall, the classes of alien, nomad, citizen, and countryman, arose; and the classes of those condemned to bear pain in childbirth, and those who must till the unrewarding soil. Insiders and outsiders, aliens and citizens, nations among nations, the myriad languages—all classes of things and all arising from the voice of God.

Those two accounts clarify our experience of class. The fact of classification, of the separation of this from that, seems anchored in our deepest sense of how things are. God creates and classifies. Flavius Tullius also created by classification. His order emerged, refined, faded, and fell. The fact of classification did not fall with it. His order fell to another. Orders of things will change, the fact of order will not.

We will always live with class. But we do not always have to live with this way of classification. The orders of society are summoned into being through the power of language and gesture. From the slumbers of gestation we awaken within a language suffused with values, cut into millions of distinctions and classifications, filled with nouns, which are, after all, the names someone has decided to call things.

The language-rootedness of class usually lies well below consciousness. But at certain times, when there are strident calls for change, we move quickly to preserve our way of speaking about things—a tacit recognition that in voice lies the power of order. In the midst of this ubiquity of name and noun we sense the possibility of other names, other nouns.

We can, at times, hear the voice that brings new order in the midst of the old. And sometimes we can sense the weakening of old voices. Prior to the Reformation, during the ravages of the Black Plague, some voices lost resonance and new voices were heard. Roman Catholic priests were the principal practitioners of health. Through their rites they ministered to both the soul and the body. But, again the virulence of the plague, their voices had little power; they spoke their prayers, millions still died. A crisis of confidence engulfed the church. If it could not deliver what it said for the body, how reliable were its words about the spirit? Priests as a class lost voice, as in some cultures people lose
face. With it went standing and control. It was a prelude to change.

Change arrived on the argumentative tongue of Martin Luther and others. When it came, it showed not only how new voices create change, but how the resonance of those voices can extend far beyond the speaker's intentions. Luther preached a priesthood of all believers, and of equality of all before God—in heaven. He was bitterly disappointed when his followers translated this newly discovered equality of all persons before God into an earthly expectation. They wanted this new arrangement of bodies now. Luther resisted. Change heaven, yes. Change the social hierarchy? Never!

Luther could not restrain what the people heard. That, too, is an insight of Foucault's. Orders of things are not visible images of eternal essences. They are echoes, resonances, from the way we have learned to speak about things. And, like all sounds, they resound slightly differently in each person. Some resonances override or overwhelm the old. Some words will resound in some ears more loudly than we had hoped. The wailing of those dying from the plague simply out-sounded the hymns of the Roman Church, and the ineffectual voices of the priests could not stifle the plea of the people for healing. Luther's words about equality were magnified beyond his control in the hearts of peasants yearning for power.

In the language lay the old order. In that same language lay the new order.

LANGUAGE, VOICE, AND CLASS

The church has both orders within its language, as well. At times, the meanings drive against one another. But then, the Gospel has always been generous with tension.

Paul could advise his readers to be obedient to the established authorities and, at the same time, urge against obedience to the reigning principalities and powers. Christians live on the seam between the old and the new. It is a life destined to leave one exhilarated, but also nervous and uncertain. The old order persists as evidence that perfection is not yet in hand; the promise of the new resonates through the old, as evidence that perfection may nonetheless be at hand.
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The same language carries forth the old and the new—and the lines between the two are not clear. All of us can quote with approval Paul's declaration that Christians are in but not of this world. Abstractly that seems picture clear. Concretely, the picture is more like a newspaper photo, dissolving into disconnected dots as we draw closer to it.

We are left with a language that resounds with the powers of the old and the new, and with ambiguity lacing the frizzled borders between the two. That is why Paul could affirm and deny the prevailing powers. That is why he could affirm and deny the value of those who spoke in the most disturbing of all "languages": glossolalia. Paul traveled the intersections of ambiguous discourses.

Social classification is no exception. As our language and gestures parse out the orders of society, they also carry with them counter languages, counter orders.

Religious language about society is no exception, either. Paul blended affirmation and denial in his language about the world. It is good to remember that, for it helps us avoid the simplifications of some otherwise well-intended social criticism. It helps us avoid, for example, the identification of the church or the kingdom of God with current notions of the classless society.

The classless society, as an historical ideal, is more Marxian than biblical. Even the church, Paul recognized, had to have classifications of members. Marx's dissolution of classes was based on economic analyses, and it reached to unimaginable heights.

The communist revolution . . . does away with labor, and abolishes the rule of all classes along with the classes themselves, because it is accomplished by the class which society no longer recognizes as a class and is itself the expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities, etc. (The German Ideology)

For Paul, the church may have been the "class that society no longer recognized as a class," but he did not expect that, in its earthly tenure, it would ever avoid classification. Nor did Paul balk at designating classes of authorities. Apostles and prophets, elders and others, had authority and were to be heard and obeyed. Of course, those of the church’s ruling class were
themselves bound by the rules of the community: care for the widow, support the itinerant preacher, love one another, and preach the Gospel. Even so, authority and the power that accrues to it were not allowed to dissolve into a classless society. Rather, the order of common community and the order of authority speak to each other within the same language.

That leaves Christians in the same position in the church, with class, and in the social order: in but not of. We shall be living with class as long as we are living at all. The test of discipleship, therefore, is not that of developing an anti-class or a classless rhetoric. Class is the map by which all people plot their identities and chart their progress through life. Take away the map, and society and the church feel directionless.

Nor, I think, will special theologies—liberation, feminist, black—succeed on the basis of anti-class rhetoric. For one thing, the ambitions behind them are all too often themselves class-bound. Their criticisms of the current class structure bring to sharp focus the oppressions of the present order. But none of them can deliver a classless society, and, short of that, the solutions they offer will also be fraught with problems of injustice, maldistribution of benefits, mass mismanagement, and waste.

Yet, acknowledging that, the church must continue to use the full resources of its language to show the inadequacies of whatever class structure orders the world. Its language will be sin-afflicted, bearing the marks of impossible idealisms and class- and time-bound prejudices. But it will help to keep systems open. It will help keep the current order under the pressure of perfection.

To do that, the church has refined the riches of its language into special discourses: the discourses of utopia, apocalypse, and revolution. Each has brought a specific kind of criticism to its present age.

The discourses of utopia have to do with visions of the true human community. The early Christians, according to Acts, created a community of common interest and common possession. Paul spoke of the church as a body in which all parts contributed to the harmony of the whole.

When attention focuses on the true, common, and harmoni-
ous community, the distorting, privileged, and dissonant aspects of the current age stand out by comparison. Reforms of the church and the world have often taken the tack of actually building those utopian communities. None of the utopias has worked for long. Always some people are more equal than others. But, by living differently alongside the present order, by speaking differently about the possibilities for human community, utopians show the finitude of the existing order. Things could be otherwise. That very suggestion is both critique and promise.

Another discourse is that of apocalypse. Unlike utopian discourse, apocalyptic does not call people out of the present order. That is because it views the total order as not only finite but fated for destruction. Rather, apocalyptic uses a different vocabulary about the old order in the midst of the old order. Apocalyptic is an ironic discourse about the present age. The very signs that the principalities and powers read as indications of their success and control, apocalyptic reads as signs of the crumbling of the foundations on which the principalities and powers rest. Domitian may have seen the cults that worshiped him as signs of his growing influence; John knew they meant that the end of Domitian and of Rome lay at hand. God was wresting a new age from the affluence/spoilage of the old.

A third discourse is that of revolution. In a way, it is the discourse of apocalyptic intensified. Revolution declares the imminent possibility of the kingdom here and now, and on earth. It urges activism to bring in the kingdom. If apocalyptic reads and signs of the times differently than the prevailing powers, revolutionary Christians, impatient with waiting, put up their own signs.

Some forms of liberation thought use the language of revolution. Theirs is the especially difficult task of finding in the language of the church a discourse that sanctions violence. But they are not the first to try or to think that have found it. Thomas Meunzer, an Anabaptist preacher, did so in the 16th century.

Whatever the church’s success as a source of revolution, its revolutionary discourse highlights the magnitude of the injustice of the present order. It also forces the church to see its non-neutrality with regard to the present state of affairs. It is the
discourse of decision about the present age.

None of those discourses has a claim to full truth. Each has its own ambiguity. But they abide within the language of the church, and they do force into the open a view of the finitude and potential mutability of the order of the day.

While the hopes are small that the middle-class congregation in the United States will develop a genuine interest in class as an issue, the stakes for ignoring class are high. Sociologically speaking, the voices of those pushed under the foundations of our affluence will remain stifled. Theologically speaking, the voice of the one who speaks for the alien and outcast may resound less among us. The church may recede into the order of the day, gridlocked and sclerotic, a wallflower defending the very things that make it frigid and plain.

Much better that the gift of ministry be the gift that restores to the church the variety of its discourses and the plurality of its voices. Clergy, in our day, may be among the few asked to maintain an institution both by affirming it and by restoring the voices it represses.

Let us say, at the onset, that clergy have the privilege of showing that there are other discourses, other voices to be heard. That privilege abides in their tradition. To tell about Amos is to have an occasion for showing God's interest in bringing the unwanted voice to religious people. To preach on the parables of Jesus is to show how the discourse that affirms a tradition at the same time cuts against it. Amos exposed the tinsel soul of Israelite worship. Jesus revealed the price paid by the unseen poor to maintain a religion that ignored them. There are other voices.

Let us say, next, that clergy have the privilege of speaking for those other voices. If the poor will always be among us, there will always be some who need our voices. We can speak for them as we understand them. Our voices, bearing the grief of their lives, may be a resonant gift for the altar on Sunday morning.

Yet that step brings dangers. Our voices may supplant the voices of the poor. Our passions on their behalf may become our passions for our interpretation of them and for our programs for their deliverance. We become like the Marxists who claimed to
know more about the proletariat than the proletariat knew about itself. Middle-class intellectuals (which many socially-concerned preachers are) may fall in love with a theory only to discover, as Marxists have, that those on behalf of whom they have the theory don't recognize themselves in it and want no part of it.

We must know the precariousness of the enterprise of speaking on behalf of others. The poor for whom we speak may lose the affection of the church, not because they are objectionable, but because of the way we speak. Pity the client who has a boor for a lawyer. Pit the poor who have abrasive zealots as their interpreters.

Because of that precariousness we have the privilege, finally, of letting the other voices speak for themselves. All translation is interpretation. A good heart does not guarantee good words. In one of his interviews, Michel Foucault tells why he went to prisons and asylums. He recognized how patronizing it was to presume that only our words can make the voices of the captives legitimate, worthwhile.

Possibly nothing angered the scribes, Pharisees, and priests of Jesus's time more than Jesus's insistence on being with outcasts. He preferred listening to their voices to listening to other voices talking about them. He welcomed the unwelcome voices. Worse, he took seriously what he heard from them.

In Jesus, both voices resonated. Each gave the lie to the other. Both lived within the language of his tradition. In him the conflict of the orders in those voices came to consciousness. With him came the importance of sustaining the life of the suppressed voices.

Those locked into the prevailing discourse of his day placed him upon the cross—the ultimate act of linguistic repression. But each nail driven in his hands only served to secure the discourses that he represented. Like the hammer blows, they resonated throughout place and time.

Caught in that new resonance, the old order began to give way. A new order emerged, still ambiguous, still finite, still sinful, still repressive, but also bearing new resonances that, once heard, spoke the promise of other new days, more new orders.
CONCLUSION

Seminary thirty years ago left one at home within the prevailing notions of class. If anything caused one to tremble with delight, it was the giddy agitation of ambition. Few of us thought of ourselves as those who bore both the marks of class and the seeds of its disruption. Few congregations knew it then, and few know it now.

Clergy remain at home with class, although many seem more resigned to living at a lower level. Few question the arrangement that has placed a lower ceiling over their heads. Uneasiness has more to do with budgets than class. Waves of change flatten out long before they touch the shores of the faithful.

Yet, the language we speak is larger than we are. It continues to bear within itself the discourse of its own dissolution. Against our worried hold on the present order, its sends waves of promise of a new order. That promise lurks in a parable, moves uneasily through pastoral lessons here and there, and stirs deeply in our prayers. There is always the danger that the promise of a new order will again resonate too wildly to be contained. Again a new discourse, possibly a new order, will be upon us. With our openness and anguish, it may be a better one.

When the church becomes the forum for other voices, other discourses, even clergy hear new things. We hear how human being occurs and survives in previously unheard of circumstances. We hear church language in voices discordant with our own. We hear words about ourselves and catch resonances of our lives in other words, other streams of value. We risk renewal. We risk revelation.
Anxious to please and committed to First Church, Mrs. Grant works very hard at her job as church secretary. Though she has commented that the pastor is very nice, she has spoken less often about his outbursts of temper in the office. One day as Mrs. Grant is talking with some women of the Day Circle, the pastor, obviously angry, arrives at the office. Without stopping to speak to the others, he turns to Mrs. Grant and says, “Why didn’t you tell me Mr. Jones was in the hospital? Can’t you get anything right? I should have known that and it’s your job to see that I do. Oh never mind, I should know better than to depend on you. It’s the same old story, if you want something done right, do it yourself.” Mrs. Grant blushes as the pastor goes into his study with a brief “Excuse me, ladies,” to the rest of the women. She looks down and says softly, “Well, I’d better get back to work now.”

Pastoral wisdom is inclined to view Mrs. Grant’s predicament in terms of guilt. Certainly, on the surface, it would seem that Mrs. Grant has done something wrong. Since she and the pastor are alienated, and she seems to have missed the mark, we could say this is an example of sin. Take another look. Blushing, averted eyes, blame, lack of closure and many other responses point not so much to guilt, but to shame. This difference is crucial in our practice of pastoral care in the western cultural tradition, for it involves two different but related theological issues: shame/grace and sin/forgiveness. Distinguishing between shame and sin is essential if we are to take advantage of
the full range of theological resources available for dealing with each of these powerful issues.

The difference between shame and sin is obscured by Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin. Elaine Pagels, in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, writes that in the first three centuries of the Church, the proclamation of "... the moral freedom to rule oneself [was] virtually synonymous with 'the gospel'." However, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Augustine changed all that.

Instead of the freedom of the will and humanity's original royal dignity, Augustine emphasizes humanity's enslavement to sin. Humanity is sick, suffering, and helpless, irreparably damaged by the fall, for that 'original sin,' Augustine insists, involved nothing else than Adam's prideful attempt to establish his own autonomous self-government. (p. 99)

If we assume that sin and shame are the same thing, then pastoral responses will treat them alike. To the degree that sin/guilt is different from shame, there must be different responses. In *The City of God* Augustine boldly declared that "... everyone, arising as he does from a condemned stock, is from the first necessarily evil and carnal through Adam." If we follow Augustine, Mrs. Grant has no real freedom of will or choice, but rather is ontologically guilty, and therefore ashamed. The pastor confirms this when he indicates that Mrs. Grant couldn't do the correct thing anyway. Blamed for something she could not control, Mrs. Grant suddenly stands alone, exposed before her friends. She blushes, looks down, and withdraws into her work.

**MAKING DISTINCTIONS**

It is easy to confuse shame with guilt, but they are not the same thing. Bruce Fischer describes shame as "the weight of 1000 unrelenting eyes focused on one defective soul." The psychologist is revealed as theologian, showing that shame is a feeling of being spiritually flawed, not good enough. Both psychological experience and theological category become intimately connected in the process of shame.
Often, when a person feels exposed somehow, or suddenly filled with rage in response to a situation one is powerless to alter, shame is the dynamic. We don't know whether Mrs. Grant had done something wrong or not, but we can see the presence of shame. The pastor did not question her or provide a chance to explain. Rather, he laid the blame for his embarrassment directly at her feet, without hesitation. There was no opportunity for repair since the pastor indicated that in his view Mrs. Grant was not competent to do the task correctly. The implication is that she is permanently flawed. The only solution is for him to do it himself. It is likely that both the pastor and Mrs. Grant are victims of shame. The pastor, having experienced a "loss of face" and perhaps feeling exposed as less than competent, transfers his own pain to Mrs. Grant in the form of blaming. She, then, is left to carry the burden of shame for them both.

By contrast, guilt is the sense of having done something wrong. Guilt is associated not with "being" but with "behaving." Sin has to do with decisions people have made, not who they are. Pagels writes:

That Adam’s sin brought suffering and death upon humankind most Christians, like their Jewish predecessors and contemporaries, would have taken for granted. But most Jews and Christians would also have agreed that Adam left each of his offspring free to make his or her own choice of good or evil. The whole point of the story of Adam, most Christians assumed, was to warn everyone who heard it not to misuse that divinely given capacity for free choice. (p. 108)

Suppose Mrs. Grant had forgotten to give the pastor the message. If she had experienced guilt instead of shame, she would have apologized, admitting her error. Or, if the pastor acknowledged he might have overreacted, he could have apologized. Upon realizing the pain of the other or the infraction of an appropriate rule, the guilty person seeks confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The point is that reconciliation makes sense in the context of freedom. Faith communities have a great variety of rites and rituals for dealing with guilt. These are used to facilitate the open flow of spiritual energy that maintains connection between people and God.

When sin/guilt and shame are confused and merged, as with
Augustine, the result is a ritualization of shame, as in the eucharistic “Prayer of Humble Access” that reads in part, “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table.” In their book *Facing Shame* Fossom and Mason say that

For many people shame exists passively without a name. Its origins are in identity development or in the premises of ‘who am I.’ The roots of shame are in abuse, personal violations, seductions and assaults where one’s sense of self has been trampled, one’s boundaries defiled. What remains is only an ache. There are no words for the absence of an affirmation of self, as shame often is. How do we say, “I fail to affirm my worthiness to myself?” (p. 6)

Reflecting on his experience of more than fifty years of living, and most of those as a faithful member of the church, one of my students wrote (I quote with his permission): “I had decided a long time ago that there was no way that I could be really good at anything. Why? Because I was the original sin.”

**SIN OR SHAME?**

The formulation of orthodox theology referred to as Original Sin might better be understood as Original Shame in keeping with the apparent meaning of Augustine’s arguments about the consequences of the Fall. In *The City of God* Augustine argued that the Fall changed the individual’s very being. “For we all were in that one man, since all of us were that one man who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him.” Because of Adam and Eve, the being of all humankind was profoundly altered for the worse.

The popular, and long-held connection between sin and guilt, however, points to some sort of personal complicity in this state. Since Augustine, individuals have been considered to be accomplices in Adam’s act. This suggests the involvement of human will. Augustine taught that the Fall made it possible for humans to sin only, that is, there is not just a “bent to sinning” but that sin is the only option. One cannot will to do anything else. This position of Christian orthodoxy then claims that at one and the same time people choose to sin (a purposeful act) while
being unable, because of the Fall, to do anything else (an essential state of being.) Thus, the confusion between sin and shame turns into a double bind. Following this argument, we might say that Mrs. Grant was indeed accountable and responsible for the unfortunate situation in which the Pastor found himself (guilt/sin) and she was helpless to do anything else because of her flawed personhood (shame). The only possible way Mrs. Grant might defend herself would be to claim "The Devil made me do it!"

Sin, as a category understood in the context of freedom and choice (and therefore somewhat different from the shame of Augustine), has been a major focus of Protestant pastoral theology. E. Brooks Holifield summarizes historical attitudes toward sin in America this way:

In the hierarchical suppositions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it seemed natural to think of sin as an offense against a sovereign God. The activist piety of the early nineteenth century, the preoccupation with reform and respectability, tended to engender an image of sin as a specific act—a vice, perhaps, or a wayward thought—but in any case, a voluntary decision. That emphasis on the will endured throughout the late nineteenth century. It permeated liberal concepts of sinfulness, and it remained implicit within the early theories of self-realization.” (A History of Pastoral Care in America)

Sin has been seen as a choice for which one should experience guilt. This reflects the views of Augustine’s predecessors expressing the idea of sin in the context of choice. Developmental psychologists of the twentieth century would do the same, linking psychology and theological anthropology. Erik Erikson, using his epigenetic stages of psychosocial development (discussed in both Childhood and Society and Youth, Identity and Crisis) locates guilt at a stage of growth subsequent to shame, that is, issues related to shame developmentally pre-date those of guilt.

After postulating an initial stage of “basic trust vs. mistrust,” for infants, Erikson observes a second “crisis” of “autonomy vs. shame and self-doubt,” around the age of one or two. At this point in human development a positive outcome is the
emergence of the virtue of human will. Should this stage become a "stuck point" in one's development, should shame and self-doubt become the organizing factor in personal identity, a person will act not so much from the virtue of will as from the vice of anger. Here we are not talking about a simple "I'm angry with you for this or that reason," but rather a smouldering internal rage in response to feeling powerless to experience oneself as being "good enough." People who have experienced sufficient basic trust and then autonomy are usually able to tolerate a variety of feelings within themselves and others, and able to communicate clearly and overtly about those feelings. Those who powerlessly rage in the midst of their own self-doubt and shame behave differently. "There are people," says Alice Miller in her profound book, The Drama of the Gifted Child,

... who never say a loud or angry word, who seem to be only good and noble, and who still give others the palpable feeling of being ridiculous or stupid or too noisy, at any rate too common compared with themselves. They do not know it and surely do not intend it, but this is what they radiate. They have introjected a parental attitude of which they have never been aware. (pp. 108-9)

Having experienced terrible shame as children, and become stuck there, such people pass it along, often quietly but powerfully. Fossom and Mason call this "inherited shame" and observe that "the family members often feel they individually have inherited some kind of 'curse'..." This inheritance sounds a lot like the way Augustine describes original sin.

For Erikson, it is not until the third stage that guilt enters the picture. Here, Erikson writes of "initiative vs. guilt." When resolved in a "good enough" manner, this developmental crisis leads to the virtue of purpose.

For Christians, purpose involves freely following Jesus. Failing to fulfill this purpose in some specific way (by lying or cheating, for example) correctly leads to the experience of guilt—having broken a personally or corporately held value—and the response of repentance. This is appropriate, since purpose is a function of personal/corporate initiative, and interacts in a mutually self-correcting way with repentance. One repents from behaviors that are at odds with one's stated
purpose. This is the process of reconciliation: sin, repentance, forgiveness, renewed purpose. Zacchaeus, when confronted with the presence of Jesus, learns that he has gone the wrong way and become lost. This knowledge allows Zacchaeus to make reparations and regain his sense of purpose (Luke 19:1-10).

It is the sense that one has freedom to choose that distinguishes sin from guilt. Therefore one is not surprised that when Menninger Foundation psychologist Paul Pruyser studied Augustine’s Confessions more than twenty years ago, he found very little that expressed guilt but much that suggested shame. Don Capps, in Life Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care, writes: “Since shame is often associated with the feeling of sinking through the floor, severe experiences of shame threaten . . . foundational assurance. This is why we associate shame with ‘fallenness’.” It is not guilt, sin and forgiveness that are being dealt with in Augustine’s doctrine, but rather shame.

SHAME IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

Shame is always interpersonal and systemic. For there to be an experience of shame, there must be interrelatedness. Shame exists only in relation to others. Psychiatrist Donald Nathanson writes:

From my study of shame as an internal experience I have been led to an understanding of the interactional aspects of embarrassment, to what shame does in a relationship, and how shame can be used to affect, even control relationships. This has led me to an investigation of the public as well as the private aspects of shame, of the social and cultural aspects, and from the inner experience of shame as an unexpected event to shame as the intentional product of conscious action on the part of the shamer. (p. 251)

Historically, most Christian communities could be thought of as places of order and stability in the midst of chaos and change. Hierarchical authority structures, clearly defined and differentiated roles for clergy and laity, and doctrines that required strict adherence have been hallmarks of our major religious institutions. Systems theorists would describe most congregations like
this as "closed." Change comes slowly to such systems and the tradition is maintained, in part, by routinized liturgical rituals and practices.

Erikson's work with ritual shows that the dialectic of autonomy vs. shame and self-doubt includes the ritual encounter of a "trial" where the disorienting experience is resolved by either approval or disapproval. In order to gain approval, people often engage in pleasing behavior; that is, they do or say or even believe things in order to make other people happy, or to avoid the displeasure or judgment of others. Such persons often feel "on trial," and when this ritual is taken to excess, legalism results.

In closed congregational systems where there is "original shame," one will find a legalism that requires perfection, an assault on the worth of people who do not (and by definition, cannot) maintain the rules. Therefore one may identify a theological anxiety that relationship to and with God is always in jeopardy. This anxiety usually leads to more shame and despair, increasing rigidity, alienation and distance, and the development of an "acceptable appearance" requiring increasing control to maintain.

The theology implicit in such a system is of a demanding God (who bears a striking similarity to the critical parent of childhood) before whom one can only tremble in terror or gravel in despair. The individual (and faith community) feels fundamentally flawed and in constant danger of being exposed as not good enough. Therefore, like Adam and Eve, it seeks to hide. (Donald Nathanson points out that the Indo-European root from which shame is derived, SKEM, or SHAM, means 'to hide'). The shamed Christian therefore constructs a mask of holy well-being to present to the world and to God. The appearance of being good enough (as for early Calvinists the appearance of being among the elect) is considered a faithful act. Maintaining this emphasis on appearance precludes the risk of openly confronting feelings of shame, while concentrating on specified sinful acts. One may then be in the position of being forgiven but not experiencing acceptance. Viewed developmentally, it would seem that one cannot be forgiven for who one is
ORIGINAL SIN?

but rather only for what one does. It is grace and acceptance that
deals with shame, not forgiveness.

TOWARD RECOVERY

According to Fossom and Mason, shame is the foundation for
a wide variety of addictive behaviors, including workaholism,
substance abuse, eating disorders, and family violence. Spiritual
healing in this context is correctly called recovery. Recovery
begins with an acknowledgement of the existence of shame as a
potent force in the lives of faith communities. This will mean the
recognition of an original shame-maintaining action plan:
governance structures that require one group of people to
control another, beliefs about the necessity of perfected
behaviors, legitimization of blaming behaviors to explain failure
and/or to distinguish good people from bad, and methods for
disqualifying any experience that does not conform to accepted

teaching.

The next step is to address the feelings of shame that are a part
of human and community life. This begins to validate, rather
than disqualify individual’s experiences. Many will recall
participation in consciousness-raising workshops over the past
twenty years. In my own experience, these revealed (exposed)
my collusion with power structures that caused others to suffer.
Unfortunately, at the same time I was told I was responsible for
the situation even though I had not been aware of its existence
up to that point. In the liberal parish and academic communities
of which I was a part, there were tacit rules about the expression
of anger, and so I did not feel free to explore this position
“between a rock and a hard place.” Rather, the acceptable
response was to admit my “guilt,” and ask for forgiveness. This
“shame-raising” experience had to be passed along as a way to
reduce my own anxiety. As with many of my colleagues, shame
led to anger which was expressed as prophetic preaching which
maintained the shame of still others.

A different approach is offered by feminist pastoral theologian
Margaret Huff, who writes of the relationship between
unconditional and critical love.
Unconditional love supplies the counted-on affirmation and validation of feelings and perceptions; critical love supplies the possible alternative perception of the experience which gives rise to those feelings and perceptions. Unconditional love must be present for critical love to be comprehended as love, and without critical love, unconditional love is reduced to mere sentimental posturing.

Tolerance of differences (within limits obviously), a sense of equality in power relationships, clarity about what one can actually take responsibility for and accountability for that responsibility, and opportunities for repair when there are breakdowns, provide a climate in which shame can be more openly named and examined. Then, recognition of the reality of God's graceful acceptance, incarnated in pastoral care, liturgical and community life, becomes an important part of worship, preaching, counseling and social justice. Mediation of conflicts in the faith community to reduce blaming and increase personal disclosure and responsibility begins to alter behaviors that maintain shame.

I have adopted a chart from Fossom and Mason to summarize the consequences of recovery for faith communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recovering Faith Communities</th>
<th>vs.</th>
<th>Shaming Faith Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violation of values leads to guilt.</td>
<td>Violation of persons leads to shame.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self is separate and part of a larger community.</td>
<td>Self has vague personal boundaries.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gospel requires accountability.</td>
<td>Gospel requires perfectionism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with God and others is dialogue.</td>
<td>Relationship with God and others is always in jeopardy.</td>
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Adapted from Fossom and Mason, p. 21

While there is a developmental place for the experience of shame, loyalty to shame-based operations within the faith
community is not only dysfunctional but destructive, denying the validity of the very creation God has and is redeeming in Jesus Christ. Rethinking the idea of original sin, casting it in its clearer form of original shame, is an important step. Renewed understandings of the doctrine of grace, proclaimed via sign/acts that vividly communicate a basic sense of God's acceptance of individuals in community, will facilitate personal and corporate growth. In the midst of grace-given freedom, sin may not disappear, but people will be accountable, empowering deeper relationship with God and others, leading to greater potential for the just and loving community traditionally called the Kingdom of God.

FOR FURTHER READING

Wary of the irresistible attraction of two people for each other, the culture that fostered me established two limits to romance. First, people who fell in love could experience a rather minor trial or two and then marry. Marriage established a limit to the romance. Second, people in the throes of eros could surrender to the wildness of romance and end their lives in tragedy. Death ended romance gone wild.

How surprising, then, to go beyond these limits and discover that romance exists to serve God—who wants us not only free but soaring in that freedom. Romance, eros, falling in love, aim to serve God by drawing out of the mystery of the human self the highest human happiness—harmonious relationship. But romance, like all God’s servants, can fall to corruption.

During my seminary days, the wife of one of my seminary companions served as sometime secretary to the bishop of the area. Although a competent and trustworthy young woman, she occasionally allowed hints about confidential matters from the bishop’s office to flavor our academic conversations. Of the sparse clues she furnished, none baffled me more than those about the church trial of a dignified and successful preacher of that conference who refused to hand over his orders when charged with sexual immorality. He insisted on a trial, one that ended his clergy career. The story was this: on a youth retreat he slept with a woman married to a parishioner. He did so with

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such little attention to privacy that numerous persons attending the retreat could and did testify to his immorality of adultery.

How, I asked, could a man with a call from God, with a wife and family, with a career full of potential, behave so destructively? Does sexuality promise that much? How much did the same possibility reside in me? Would I, once out of seminary and into the parish, follow a like course? Does something that powerful reside in a man? (Yes, a man. At that time, I, though married, lived under the false concept that most women, if not all, could live exempt from something that powerful. After all, David took Bathsheba, who appeared merely passive—1 Samuel 11:4.) Should I never develop a friendship with a woman, unless it stayed within the “safe” bounds of friendship between couples? Do men make friends only with men?

As the years enhanced the blessing of life, the same bewildering questions kept appearing. As a district superintendent, on the Board of Ordained Ministry, and as an acquaintance of several ministers, I watched male clergy commit the adultery that put them out of their career—sometimes with great publicity and other times with a quiet surrendering of ministerial credentials. Something that powerful does reside in men and women. (The years taught me women have it too.) And that “something” remained unaccounted for, although I tried to find explanations based on my sympathy for overworked clergy, my understanding of lust’s fires, or my experiences in working with the incarcerated, who savored the notoriety of their crimes. The only answer that continues to hold, when I ask why clergy fall into illicit romance, is the same answer I get when I ask why we suffer. We do not know why we suffer. Indeed, why we suffer is a secondary question. The primary question is: who is with us in our suffering? The same question arises when I ask why clergy fall: why we fall is not so important as asking about the nature of the eros that accompanies our fall.

Recently, Stanley Menking of Perkins School of Theology asked me to help mentor twelve young pastors in a new program designed to take young clergy and develop their leadership skills for the eventual benefit of the church. Since the twelve young pastors included ten men and two women, I chose
to think with them about romance and friendship. The two years mentoring these twelve in a group and individually would raise both issues. They would become friends with each other and with me, I hoped. Even if romance did not arise between them in their two-year stint on leadership, I knew it would appear somewhere in their ministry. If I left them confounded, I would do so through an attempt at understanding, not by a suppression of the subjects of romance and friendship.

ROMANCE

When my community attempted to confine romance, eros, falling in love within the limits of marriage and tragic ends, my community tried to do what it could not do. Romance, eros, falling in love exceed the limits, even the most rigid of limits. Not even an entire community with hundreds of years of tradition can squelch the vital movement of romance. Romance will even squeeze through the carefully wrought propaganda designed to establish limits about friendship—a harmonious human relationship.

In spite of all the messages we kids received from our community about the nature of the Japanese enemy during the Second World War, a circumnavigation took place in the very heart of the limit-establishing community. A young soldier from our community survived the Bataan Death March and agreed to speak to our sixth grade Sunday School class. He told us the shocking stories of that awful and cruel event and then, in an aside almost missed, he told us of his friendship with one of the Japanese guards—astounding to us kids; blasphemous to our elders; but redemptive for him. He owned plenty of cause to hate the enemy, but I still recall after more than forty years how kindly he spoke of his captors, captors we supposed beyond any love let alone the love of one of those they persecuted.

Gilbert Meilaender sums up Augustine's views on the connection between romance and friendship by writing "... any particular love, taken seriously, will draw us beyond its own particularity toward the One who is love itself." (Friendship, p. 24). As a particular love, friendship then becomes a means of grace we receive to get to God—the One who is love.
That soldier revealed how a little love like a friendship can cancel out a huge hate, even a hatred implanted by wartime cruelty. At once a question arises: what about sex? If we turn Meilaender’s thought loose on our congregations, won’t we find a number of our charges charging off into romantic escapades while pointing to Meilaender’s summary of Augustine with the words “it’s OK, because we hold this particular love for each other”? Or, won’t we find justification for engaging in all kinds of particular loves, especially the kind that gets us into serious trouble? Doesn’t Augustine’s thought—as summarized by Meilaender—open the door to romantic love? We know the dangers of that strange and powerful phenomenon.

Ah, but do we know all that much about romance? Doesn’t the word “romance” conjure a sense of the sloppy, the superficial, the gushy, or, as my daughter used to say before hormones turned her into a teenage siren, “mushy stuff.”

Sure. We know from long and frightful experience the volatile and dangerous nature of romance—the energy system that aims us toward love. This energy system can take up residence in a too narrow sphere of human life and burst that life at the seams. Years ago I tended to refer some young couples to a psychologist when they asked me to preside at their weddings. I could see that they burned with erotic love. After a spate of such referrals, the psychologist told me to quit it. When I inquired why, he said, “People who fall in love like that go crazy. You can’t heal them; you can only wait around and pick up the pieces. That’s your job.”

Romance implies that people fall in love. Once people fall in love they supposedly become unmanageable; they go crazy. Psychologists and preachers don’t break that fall, not in young couples or mid-life crisis folk, or the aged. No wonder we shy away from romance.

Soren Kierkegaard did not go timid about romance. He embraced it as a theologian–psychologist. When it comes to falling in love, Kierkegaard argued, such falling is “self-love, and erotic love is self-love. In erotic love I keep my own idea of what is lovable and find that the object completely suits my head and my heart; this is why I love the beloved so ardently—that is, I ardently love myself” (Journals and Papers, Volume 2, p. 126).
Kierkegaard gives us the essence of what we fear in romance. We know, when it happens to others, that romantic falling in love means self-love so exclusionary it excludes the object of our affections, the object who, for all our strickeness, only carries the projection of our self. Romance can issue in a self-love so exclusionary as to reduce the self to the self. That is too small a place from which to live. The self only is too narrow, too lonely, too cramped, too limited.

The word “romance” comes from the Old French romans and its definition somehow rests in the imagination we require to create narratives. English dictionaries attempt to define romance by viewing its usage through stories about people in love. Romance describes what moves us to create stories. And, as James McClendon writes, “the story of each and all is itself hungry for a greater story that overcomes our persistent self-deceit, redeems our common life, and provides a way for us to be a people among all earth’s peoples without subtracting from the significance of others’ peoplehood, their own stories, their lives.” (Systematic Theology: Ethics, p. 356). We do not live without stories and romance generates stories; yet, we fear romance, because we know some of the stories romance generated. But, if our stories are not complete, if we hunger after stories that complete us, then we need that which generates stories. We need romance. When we drop romance, we also drop the completion we need.

ROMANCE AND BETRAYAL

Romance, that powerful servant of God so feared by my rearing community, works near the dangerous edge of betrayal, the denial of God through the misuse of our self or of another self.

In my first pastorate, there lived a young woman about my age. Even now she glides into memory as I unfold the story for you. She was beset with more kids than a young woman should manage and she dreamed of a life apart from the farm; a young woman suddenly enamored with the new clergyman in town—me; a young man not reeking of tractor fuel and the smoke of small town cafe talk, but a young minister who spilled
out conversation tinged with readings from scientists, philosophers, theologians, and novelists.

Of course, a crisis ensued in the young woman's marriage. At her husband's insistence, they went for counsel to the clergyman whose presence and education had inspired the crisis. As I listened to their marital woes, it struck me with an odd shock: the young woman acted erotically toward me. As we put it in my adolescent years, she was falling for me. Her husband never recognized more in me than the sexual neutering he assumed about clergy in general. Seduced by the false god of authority, he only wanted the parson to thunder forth and restore to him a wife any hard working farmer could expect, a wife who waited on him, who raised kids, who participated with alacrity in the myriad goings-on in that farm community.

When I became threatened by her erotic leanings toward me, I lectured her. In front of her husband and privately, I told her to stay with her husband, to see her work as a vocation from God, to work harder at mothering, and to endure faithfully. Secretly, I felt great about her falling for me, figured she made a good choice, and worried that I had in some way misled her. I also wondered if my enjoyment of her romantic leanings meant I had acted unfaithfully to my wife?

The look of anguish on her face at my last lecture to her still gives me agony. Somehow I knew I betrayed her, but I assumed my guilt arose over my enjoyment of her attraction for me: an easy trap for a young man unsure of himself and prone to lap up attention. I did not then see how much my betrayal was of her and not of my wife. I did nothing overtly to encourage her, but I did much to suppress the erotic in her and in me. That suppression was my sin, my missing the mark.

But, blessed with animating guilt that moves us from self-condemnation toward transformation (Ochs, Agent to Joy, p. 170), I kept wondering through the years about her look of betrayal. First with Freud and then through Jung along with Reik, Gaylin, Guggenbuhl-Craig, and Nelson, I did the reading that unlocked my sin, my suppression of the erotic. Possibly no one author better sums up my own journey than does James Wm. McClendon, who agrees, with Freud, that "erotic love at
its best will turn upon episodes of transformation" (p. 150). Of course, he knows well that erotic love can also turn up demonic episodes, as can any gift of God misused. For example, rationality in the employ of the prejudiced person can issue in extreme harm.

Thanks to study, to therapy with a psychologist, and to hours with persons who sought spiritual guidance from me, I began to understand: romance's erotic love aims us for salvation. It does so by leading us to surrender.

ROMANCE AND SURRENDER

Some years ago, I began a growth group. This group, usually numbering six persons, meets weekly for one and one-half hours for spiritual guidance. Only one member of the group also holds membership in the church I serve. The other members come from other denominations. One of the women, youngish and pretty, came into the group after experiencing a divorce fraught with adversarial proceedings. She suffered depression, anger, guilt, and frustration over her divorce and the same responses over her perceived failure to live as a "good Christian."

Through the years with her, I never felt quite focused. Although she worked hard in the group to achieve openness, somehow the anger and the tears never reached as deeply as I thought they must. When I questioned her about withholding, she responded by working harder to reveal. Yet, I still thought I failed with her.

Finally, one evening, she stayed after everyone else left. Slowly she unwound her story.

When the threat of her divorce neared reality, she went to a clinical psychologist for counsel. The psychologist saw her and her husband. He referred the husband to another psychologist and undertook her therapy. Using psychological tests, he began by exploring her relationship with her father, a relationship she knew needed exploration. However, in the course of the work, she discovered her increasingly strong erotic feelings. When she expressed these feelings in words to her therapist, he responded by touching her and by hugging her. As she told the story, he
explained his actions by saying she needed to trust the father she
never got to trust as a girl. Gradually, the touches and hugs grew
into sexual intercourse with the therapist. In the past, she never
thought about intercourse with any man except her husband.
She wondered why she did so now. Over the weeks that
followed, she had intercourse several times with her therapist.
At home, her husband began to accuse her of infidelity, but she
denied it. Increasingly, she demanded more commitment from
the therapist than he would give. He urged her to keep quiet
about their sexual liaisons.

For a time, she ceased therapy. Later she engaged another
therapist. Her husband divorced her. She did not tell her new
therapist about her seduction by her former therapist or of her
willing participation in it. After wringing out the whole story
slowly so she could keep my mounting rage at the therapist in
check, she asked me what I thought.

I told her when we enter into therapy, we expect the romantic.
However, once romance loses erotic feelings, we expect
non-seductive treatment. Erotic feelings and falling in love
provide the very “stuff” of therapy, the building blocks, the
perception builders, the self-cleansers, and the self-enhancers.
The erotic even leads us to surrender to the mystery we cannot
describe, the mystery that renews us. Our little egos cling to
self-creation. The erotic tears us loose from self-creation and
casts us on another to break us out of a too narrow existence.
When a therapist or a spiritual guide receives the erotic from a
client or a parishioner, the way opens for surrender that allows
the loss of the ego to grant the gift of the self’s potential. She
should expect, although she did not then know, her erotic
surrender to her therapist. Her therapist, in turn, should have
“integrated, little by little, into a true friendship [with her] and
expressed [the erotic] only in the precise conditions of a
covenant . . .” (Vanier, Man and Woman He Made Them, p. 98)
that did not deny or denigrate his covenant with his wife.
In her study of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal,
Wendy M. Wright concluded that we “are threatened by the
emergency of such a relationship,” because we “fear the
consequences if its development should lead to a physical
intimacy that violates sacred vows or commitments.” However,
she continues, “friendships that touch on all levels yet remain respectful of the larger context of one’s life are possible” (“Reflections on Spiritual Friendship,” p. 17).

The therapist used the surrender of the woman in my group for his own ends; thereby, he revealed his unsuitability for the practice of psychotherapy. But his betrayal of his client did not mean the erotic should be suppressed.

My response to this woman represents a far different response than I made to the farm wife. With the farm wife, I shut off erotic feelings—a harmful act on my part. In the twenty plus years between my lectures to the farm wife and my exchange with the woman in my Sunday evening group, I had discovered for myself the power of a particular love to draw us to love divine. Or, put another way, I found that Kierkegaard put it exactly: romance’s erotic love serves our salvation; it reveals who we are and thereby gives us the foundational chance we need to enter into new creation. By casting ourselves through erotic love on the spiritual guide, we see who we are and whose we are. We are God’s and God gifts us with a grace (eros) that shakes us loose from self’s prison. Once that sight is ours, then we own the potential of new creation. The tomb of the self becomes the womb of the new birth (McClendon).

ROMANCE AND FRIENDSHIP

Once the erotic reveals our self in its enclosures and fanciful fantasies, then we own the opportunity to enlarge that self, to enhance and to expand our self by a move toward others. We can find friends.

Friendship is the enlarging, enhancing, expanding move of the self toward others and, finally, the Other. We fall in love. Our falling in love gives us a chance to see the self too narrowly bent in upon itself. The ensuing pain calls us to enlarge, expand, enhance; we do that by finding others to include. Romance moves us on, moves us on to friendship.

If romance uses eros to expand the gift of the self through self–love carried to an extreme, how, then, does romance move us to include others, to find friends? Friendship is the enlarging, enhancing, expanding move of the self toward others and, finally, the Other.
First, romance gently edges erotic love to the periphery and brings in adventure, that heady risk of the unknown, that uncovering and making visible of what is. Friends are discovered not made; hence, friendships occur out of our desire for adventure, our tug to get into what we do not know.

If we discover our friends, we do not, then, control who will become our friends. Indeed, the stranger and the ordinary become holy. Who knows what we will find in them, if we risk ourselves on them and approach them without presupposing some value, principle, or expectation? If we set out on the adventure to discover friends, we do not exclude persons supposedly closed to us by the principalities and powers of the world, those not of our religion or our class or our intellectual sphere or our profession. Nor must we exclude from friendship members of our parish.

Someone once told me never to make friends with parishioners. He argued that clergy need to afflict parishioners. Who could afflict a friend?

I found that poor advice and did not follow it. I did not follow it because I discovered friends in the parish and because friends, perhaps more than any other group, will receive, with charity if not with change, the forthtelling affliction of the prophet. Indeed we will more likely receive affliction from a friend than from anyone else.

Second, romance carries us so far into ourselves that we find the limits of the self cramping and imprisoning. That throws us out of the self toward others. Since a self alone is too lonely, we learn that we must receive others. Going toward others means receiving them; hence, friendships are born.

And, when we receive others, our own lives are enhanced, enlarged, made fruitful. Andrew Greeley writes, "Friendship is the only way that we can come to see the riches of our own possibilities, when the admiration for those possibilities is so powerfully reflected in the face of our friend that we can no more escape it than we can the glare of the rising sun." (The Friendship Game, p. 111) Romance cures us of receiving only the self and opens us to the reception of friends. Such reception gives us a sense of our own potential through the eyes of our friends.

Third, romance gives us erotic love, but erotic love for one
other to the exclusion of others. This should teach us that friendship is not inclusive. God may be limitless, but not God's leaders. We may discover the entire population could be our friends, but we can only include a few.

Fourth, romance moves us toward friendship by changing us. We try to stop along the way of life as if its entire purpose were longevity or riches or sexual intercourse or competition or whatever. But, like a magic wand waved over Cinderella in her dust and ash despair, romance moves us out and away from dead ends into life where joy is our destiny.

ROMANCE AND MOVEMENT

When romance moves us away from cowering at the dead ends, we enter renewal, that sparkling creation of new life out of chaos.

I participate in a spiritual formation group with a group of clergy from other denominations. Once a year some of us take three days together at a Benedictine monastery in New Mexico. At the monastery, we observe the canonical hours, the silence, the vegetarian diet, the work program in mid-afternoon, the abbot's sermons at the Lord’s Supper. In addition to this, one of us enjoys collaring monks, when possible, to interrogate them about life in the monastery.

After a recent visit, the clergyman who interrogates monks came to me for spiritual direction. Although nearing fifty years of age, he did not know if he should be in the ministry. Did I, too, wrestle with the same question about my calling?

I promised to answer his question, but first I asked him one: Why his romance for the monastic life?

A long pause ensued, then he said "I never thought about it as a romance, but that seems just right. Of course, I am attracted to that life and I revere the monks as next to God, but now that I think about it, I wonder why myself. I could never be a monk. My wife and children would starve and I can’t get a divorce to go live as a monk."

"Well, you say you are insecure about your calling and that you question being a clergyman. What do you think it means, this romance for the monastic life and this unclarity about your calling as clergy?" I asked.
"I live trying to please people. The monks don't have to please anyone. They live miles from civilization and merely observe the Hours each day. They don't even use their birth names, but adopt new names. I would not have to please anyone," he said.

His romance for the monastic life merely moved him into a far more important problem: his exertion of his powers as a clergyman to please people, to protect his self from rejection by thwarting criticism. But, the protection of self won't do for one called to follow the Christ who leads us into the ultimate vulnerability—death.

To get at him, God sprinkled him with romance for the monastic life, which revealed what the pain of his unsureness about being clergy tried to reveal, namely, that he sacrificed self to fear of rejection, of not pleasing, of not measuring up. A person cannot be a friend to oneself or to anyone else, if he or she worships at the altar of safety, safety from vulnerability, safety from criticism.

Romance moves us toward friendship, common love, and koinonia love by changing us in and through our attractions. Or, as Mellaender puts the case: "One is sustained by the vision of universal love toward which one is drawn, but the way to that goal leads through particular bonds of affection and attachment" (p. 22).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


A tension between promise and doom unites five Hebrew Bible lections for the season of Epiphany in the C cycle of the Common Lectionary. The texts, Isaiah 60:1-6, Isaiah 61:1-4, Isaiah 62:1-5, Jeremiah 1:4-10, and Isaiah 6:1-13, represent a period of Judah’s history stretching from the eighth to the sixth century B.C.E. Although chronologically they straddle the historical exile of 587 B.C.E., with the Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1 pericopes falling before and the Isaiah 60, 61, and 62 texts coming after, it is the problem of exile, both its causes and its resolutions, that forms the central concern of these texts.

EXILE AND PROPHECY

The exile as an historical event is of marginal significance when seen in the context of the broad sweep of ancient Near-Eastern history. In fact recent historical-critical scholarship has suggested that dispersion is a more fitting description of the actual historical events of 597–587 B.C.E. in Judah. Little evidence exists to support the notion of a full scale deportation of the people of Judah. It is more plausible that many left the homeland as a way to escape “the uncertainties and inequities of life in Palestine.” In recent scholarship the exile increasingly does not qualify as a single historical event, but something more akin to an emigration trend.

Lections are taken from Common Lectionary: The Lections Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983).

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The exile may still be understood as a unified theological and/or rhetorical event. The series of historical events that led to the functional demise of the nation of Judah coalesced into a single exigency, a single problem demanding response, and as such gave rise to the urgent speech that today forms much of the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. The exile is theologically construed by these prophets as a moment of divine judgment and promise. Set against the backdrop of the exodus from Egyptian slavery and the founding of the Davidic monarchy, the prophets address a people whose relationship with Yahweh is marked by a history of covenant promises. Yahweh had brought this people into this land, established them as a nation, and had given them a tripartite vocation of doing justice, seeking righteousness, and singing praise. When the security of the land and the establishment of the nation were threatened by political forces at home and abroad the question of causality was raised. The threat to land and nation were either the result of the failure of Yahweh’s promises or Judah’s infidelity to its vocation. The overwhelming prophetic consensus is that infidelity to vocation is principal cause for Judah’s doom.

Judah’s doom—to speak of this is to come close to what actually forms the core of something called the exile. From our vantage point it is possible to speak of the exile as nothing more than that which occurs between the pre-exilic and post-exilic times. The single distinguishing feature between these periods is the Israelites ability to deny the threatened status of Judah. In the pre-exilic time it was still possible for some to deny that Judah was doomed. In post-exilic time denial of doom was no longer possible. Inasmuch as Babylonian captivity and colonial rule in Jerusalem after 587 B.C.E. made it impossible to deny the doom of Judah, it is accurate to describe these historical realities as constituting the exile. However, these events constitute the exile only to the extent that they contribute to the impossibility of denying Judah’s doom. As such they are most likely only a sampling of a myriad of historical events that made the presence of doom undeniable. When doom is no longer deniable, for whatever reason, exile is experienced.
Experiencing disruption in life, finding ourselves in the midst of tragic circumstances, brings with it the question “Why?” Why have these things happened? Why are they happening to me? Exile is a disruption, a tragic circumstance. When exile is experienced, it too brings with it the question “Why?” Why have the promises of land and nation collapsed? Has God abandoned God’s people? Is God punishing God’s people? Are the people to blame? Is there hope beyond exile? These are the driving questions for the three prophets whose voices are heard in the lections for this epiphany season. The prophets ask these questions because they experience exile.

The pre-exilic prophets experience exile before it is experienced by all of their contemporaries. As a result it is incumbent upon them to make the case to their contemporaries that exile is real. This they do in the prophetic form called an oracle of doom. Oracles of doom are prophetic constructions of the reality of exile. Through these oracles the prophets attempt to make it clear that exile is an undeniable reality. Resolutions to the problem of exile lack a comprehensible context, unless the people see the reality of exile. The degree of success the prophets actually have making a case for the reality of exile is not great. The literary evidence for the reception of these oracles of doom, most clearly seen in Jeremiah, indicates that they are appreciated more in a post-exilic time than in their own time.

Pre-exilic prophecy consists of the following four tasks: 1. pronounce the impending doom of Judah; 2. make the causal attribution of doom to divine judgment; 3. reiterate Judah’s vocation, which serves variously as a reason for divine judgment (when evidence exists that this vocation has been abandoned) and a call for national repentance; and 4. continue to make the case for Yahweh’s faithfulness.

Because the reality of exile is now plain to all, post-exilic prophets are freed from the necessity of pronouncing the doom of Judah. Excluding the task of pronouncement of impending doom, post-exilic prophecy shares the tasks of pre-exilic prophecy. The theme of hope that is prevalent in post-exilic prophecy is not absent in pre-exilic prophecy. It is only that the need to pronounce doom is more pressing for before the exile. Hope is present in prophecy from both periods, and in both periods it is hope over against the tragedy of exile.
Traditionally pre-exilic prophecy has included only those prophets whose prophecy can be dated within a fifty-year range of the benchmark date of 587 B.C.E. The categorization of prophecy along these lines has relied on an understanding of exile as a single identifiable historical reality. The argument being made here, however, is that exile is not a single historical reality. It is a theological reality founded on the perception of Judah’s doom as due to either the failure of Yahweh’s promises or the abandonment of Judah’s vocation. Exile occurs as an historical event when it is no longer possible to deny the doom of Judah. Given this definition of exile, it is possible to include Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose prophecy is included in the first thirty-nine chapters of the canonical book Isaiah. Active in Jerusalem sometime between the dates of 750-701 B.C.E., Isaiah of Jerusalem pronounced the impending doom of Judah and Israel, made the causal attribution of doom to divine judgment, reiterated Judah’s vocation as both a reason for divine judgment and a call for national repentance, and made the case for Yahweh’s faithfulness. The problem of exile is the central issue for this prophet.

Only one pericope from Isaiah of Jerusalem appears in the lectionary for the Epiphany season. Appointed for the fifth Sunday after Epiphany, it is the text known as the call of Isaiah, Isaiah 6:1-13.

Jeremiah has long been categorized as a pre-exilic prophet and comes within the definition of pre-exilic prophecy given here. That Judah is doomed is beyond question for Jeremiah even when it is doubted by those around the prophet. The pervasiveness of this perception and the persistence of denial by some is what qualifies this prophecy as pre-exilic. Jeremiah is more conflicted in his assessment of the doom of Judah than any other Hebrew Bible prophet. The conflict is a vascillation between causes of doom. On the one hand, it is clearly the abandonment of its vocation to do justice, seek righteousness
and praise Yahweh that causes Judah’s doom. On the other hand, Jeremiah turns the tables of causality and lays the fault of Judah’s doom at the feet of Yahweh, whose promises have failed.

Despite the doom Jeremiah proclaims, the prophecy yields hope. The grounds for hope are only marginally based upon confidence in Judah’s ability to reclaim its vocation—on this front Jeremiah is skeptical. Instead Jeremiah is able to assert hopefulness because Yahweh might renew the promise. If Yahweh is to renew the promise with a faithless people it is because of the pathos of Yahweh. The God who has been moved to anger over a recalcitrant people might also be moved to compassion for the same people. Jeremiah’s willingness to lay fault for doom at Yahweh’s feet opens the way for grounding hope in Yahweh’s mercy.

Pericopes from Jeremiah are appointed for the fourth and sixth Sundays after Epiphany. The first text is the call of Jeremiah and will be treated in greater detail in the exegetical section below. The second text is an example of Jeremiah’s skepticism concerning human capacity for change apart from the intervention of God. This text will be briefly discussed below.

TRITO-ISAIAH

The section of the canonical book of Isaiah found in chapters 56-66 has for some time been called third or trito-Isaiah. It has received this denotation because its character is distinct from that of Isaiah of Jerusalem (chapters 1-39) and deuter-Isaiah (chapters 40-55). Most often dated in the period following return from Babylonian exile (c. 520 BCE) trito-Isaiah is both similar to and distinct from deuter-Isaiah. The deuter-Isaiah theme of hopeful anticipation of Yahweh’s renewed relationship with a dispersed people continues. Unlike its predecessor this portion of Isaiah lacks the same concrete historical references. Where deuter-Isaiah sees the working of God through the agency of a Persian King, Cyrus, trito-Isaiah does not identify the agents of God’s working.

Trito-Isaiah is unmistakably post-exilic prophecy. The doom
of Judah is a fait accompli. Possibilities of denying this doom are long since passed. As a result there is no need for pronounce­ments of doom on Judah. Now the energies of the prophecy are freed to focus on the problems of exile, responding to the question why, and exploring possibilities for hope.

Epiphany and the two Sundays following it include a portion of prophecy from trito-Isaiah. Each of these texts respond to the problem of exile. They do this by asserting the faithfulness of Yahweh and reiterating the vocation of the people of Yahweh. Although these texts are lavish statements of hope, it is a hope over against the problem of exile.

ISAIAH 60:1-6 — THE DAY OF EPIPHANY

Isaiah pronounces a rousing statement of hope. It is hope that frankly acknowledges the continuation of darkness, while looking to the rising of light. Isaiah calls for action and announces the resources available to respond to the call.

This text is filled with allusions that easily make it possible to say too much about epiphany. The repeated reference to the coming of light tempts one to speak of the star the Lukan shepherds or the Matthean wisemen followed. The statement about the kings coming to the “brightness of your rising” (v.3b) is an almost irresistible invitation to mention John Hopkin’s “three kings.” And to top it all off the final verse names two of the three gifts every children’s Christmas pageant gathers for props—gold and frankincense.

As is often the case it is possible to say too much in a number of ways. The more obvious problem is the temptation of typological interpretation. (One even wonders if this is not a problem inherited from the creators of this particular lection­ary.) Because talk of light, visiting kings, and frankincense is so readily associated with Jesus, it is easy to find in Isaiah striking prefigurations of Jesus, Old Testament promises for New Testament fulfillments. The seminary educated preacher will likely shy away from this temptation, recalling a professor’s disdain for this outmoded exegetical style. Although countless good arguments can be made against neat-fitting typologies, they are more appropriate for classroom than pulpit.
This text is not a prediction of the wise men’s visit to Jesus. It is instead a call to renewal for the people of God. It includes a frank recognition that all is not yet well and may not be well in the future (v. 2a). It is not, however, a pronouncement of doom. It is a rousing statement of hope. The glory of the Lord will rise over the people who have been in exile, the people who have known and will continue to know darkness. The coming of God’s glory will change everything that now is. The dispersion of God’s people will end (“your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms” v. 4b); the shame of the nation will be reversed (“nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising” v. 3b); and the poverty and deprivation will be turned around (“the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you” v. 5b).

In the first verse there is the imperative to “[A]rise.” It is followed by a declaration of the event that makes it both necessary and possible to respond to the imperative. Arise for your light has come. The coming of the light is in direct correspondence to the rising of God’s glory. With the exception of verse 2a, all else in this pericope is an unfolding of what it means that God’s glory has arisen. Everything that follows this opening imperative provides the reasons for arising.

Given the importance of the imperative to arise, it is essential to come to some understanding of what it means. What does one do when one arises? Is it a call to awake from slumber? Is it a call to take up arms, or is it simply a cue to stand up from sitting? The Hebrew translated as arise is qum. A review of the uses of the word in the Hebrew Bible displays a full range of uses, including arising from sleep, taking up arms, or even the “rising” up of a new ruler for Israel as in Judges 10:1. The broad use of the word makes it difficult to fix a definite use in this setting. The historical setting of post-exilic Jerusalem does little to narrow the range of possibilities. It could be a call to restore the political stature of Judah, a possibility finding support in the references to nations and kings looking on favorably (v3.). But if this is intended, how is it to be accomplished? Or it could be a call to religious reform, not unlikely given a dating of the text around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.
The breadth of possible references may have contributed to the survival of the text beyond the abyss of forgetfulness. That is, the ease with which arise might refer to any number of activities increases its applicability to a number of settings. Even though arise may apply to a broad spectrum of activities, it still suggests an activity. That is, it is a call to action of some sort. The forces that have held the people down are about to be overcome and it is now possible to act, to stand, to get up, to arise.

It is extremely important to note that this text announces the resources available for responding to the call. A call to action, even lacking specificity as this one does, is capable of overwhelming those who are called. It is not enough to say that something is to be done; it is necessary to say what resources are available to meet the call. This is not a demand that cannot be met. This is not a call to do the impossible. Instead it is a call to do what is possible given the coming glory of God.

Trito-Isaiah is addressing a people whose experience of exile has led them to believe that either God has failed on God's promises of land and nation or they have failed in the fulfillment of their vocation. In either case they are without resources to restore what has been lost through exile. When the imperative 'arise' is coupled, as it is in this pericope, with a pronouncement of God's coming glory, the resources necessary for renewal are revealed to the people. A helpless and hopeless people have a renewed hope and a source for help in the God whose glory is coming. With hope and help the people are able to act, to respond, to arise.

Preaching from this text on the day of Epiphany will be enhanced by an understanding of what is at stake on Epiphany. The word epiphany means to make manifest, to show forth. Traditionally it refers to the manifestation of the new born Christ to the Magi, the revealing of God's glory in the coming of the Messiah. What is made manifest for all the world to see is the power of God to do a new thing in the Christ. What is at stake is the church's claim that in Christ are the resources for the transformation of the world. What was, has been, and appears to always be, is now called into question. The darkness that covers the world generation after generation, perpetuates the doing of evil, maintains the agony of enmity, and keeps the
creature from attaining the goal of the creator, receives word its imminent demise. On Epiphany the powers of doom are given first notice that they will not hold sway forever. Epiphany is the first battle cry in the war against all that diminishes the fullness of life. It is the first summit meeting on the road toward peace, a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that is no balance of powers, but a victory of God's power for life over death.

Preaching on this text on the day of Epiphany entails a call for action and an announcement of the resources available in the coming glory of God. However, the wise preacher will know that congregations have grown weary with calls for action and are skeptical about announcements of coming glory. At the threshold of a new year and the beginning of a new era of presidential leadership, congregations will have heard ample rhetoric of new possibilities and fresh starts. If wise, they will have grown skeptical about such talk of newness. Years have come and gone, presidents come and go, and peace and prosperity for all still elude us. The challenge of preaching a believable word in the midst of such skepticism will be helped by attending to the movement of this text from Isaiah.

Isaiah's call for action is set within the context of a frank acknowledgment of the continuation of darkness. The coming glory of God is not alongside of this darkness, but over against it. The darkness is real and will not easily dissipate. No blithe promise of joy will convince a people in exile, nor a people wearied by political propaganda. If hope is to be found it is to be found on a horizon beyond the presence of darkness. The glory may not yet be fully present (if it were darkness would have already been banished), but it will come. The prophet keeps the hope for the coming of God's glory alive by piling image upon image of its coming. This prophecy restores the imagination of a people from whom imagination has been stolen by the ravages of exile.

The preacher of this text on Epiphany will be well served if he or she sees the task of preaching on this occasion as that of restoring the imagination of a people from whom imagination has been stolen. Undoubtedly a call to action is fitting in this day, and the sermon should issue such a call. But it will have to be a call set within the context of a frank acknowledgment of the
persistent presence of darkness. Such darkness is easily identified in our time. Even a cursory glance at a daily newspaper will provide a clear picture of its presence. Bombarded with the picture of darkness, we have almost lost our imagination for a brighter horizon. It is the restoration of an imagination for this horizon that is the task of preaching on Epiphany. The sermon will do well to pile up images of what is to be expected with the coming glory of God. The task is not to foster fantasy, but to rekindle hope for a new day. The resources are the same as those of Isaiah: the faithfulness of God to God's creatures.

It is this resource that makes a sermon's talk of newness distinct from the optimistic talk of a new political administration. If God has abandoned us, then we must rely on the politicians for the security of our future. However, if God has not given up on us, if God has not finished with us, then we may look to a future where darkness will not be held at bay by political maneuvers, but overcome. The christological claim of Epiphany is that the one visited by the Magi promised a future in which darkness would be overcome. This christological claim is still open to us. It is the responsibility of the preacher to help us reclaim our imagination of this future, to encourage our impatience with the persistence of darkness, to call us to arise, to stand up against the darkness as we anticipate the coming glory of God.

ISAIAH 61: 1-4 — FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

After the exile the vocation of Yahweh's people is renewed by the prophet. The calling to do justice for those to whom injustice has been done is renewed.

This text in trito-Isaiah is perhaps the most familiar. Luke tells of Jesus reading it from the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Again it would be easy to say too little by saying too much if the preacher were to engage in a typological exegesis for preaching on this text. As is the case with all overly familiar texts, the preacher will need to be diligent in allowing a fresh hearing of the text.
A fresh hearing may be found in recalling what was said above about the causes of exile. Exile is due either to the failure of God’s promises or the abandonment of the people’s vocation. In this text trito-Isaiah works at speaking a new word against the background of exile. The text addresses the causes of exile by uniting a claim that God has not failed on God’s promises with a restatement of the people of God’s vocation.

On the one hand the text suggests the call of a prophet. This prophet has been given the Spirit of God to bring good tidings, to proclaim liberty, and to comfort. But this is not an ordinary account of a prophetic vocation. The giving of the Spirit is followed by an anointing. In his commentary on this text Claus Westermann notes that “the Old Testament almost exclusively reserves anointing for kings.” The exceptions are the later anointing of priests. This call is therefore not simply a call of a prophet, and it is clearly not an anointing of a king. Instead it may be understood as a hybrid in which a prophet is called to perform a sacredotal function. That is, the prophet/priest is called to embody on behalf of the people the vocation that is theirs. Judah’s vocation of doing justice, seeking righteousness and praising Yahweh was abandoned going into exile. On the other side of exile the vocation is to be taken up again.

The calling and anointing in Isa. 61:1a are immediately followed by a list of infinitive clauses: to bring good tidings, to bind up, to proclaim, to comfort, to grant, to give. Each of these infinitives is attached to the doing of justice. It is the poor who are to be brought good tidings, the brokenhearted who are to be bound up, the captives to whom liberty is to be proclaimed, the bound whose prisons are to be opened, the mourners who are to be comforted. In short it is all those to whom injustice has been done that justice is now to be done. Yahweh’s people’s peculiar vocation of justice has always meant attending to the marginalized and victimized. When the prophet/priest claims this vocation, it is claimed for all of the people of Yahweh. The calling to do justice is renewed for the people.

In Isa. 61:3b the reason for the vocation is given: “that they may be called the oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that God may be glorified.” The people are to take up again their vocation of doing justice and when they do, the other
two aspects of the tripartite vocation will be restored: to seek righteousness and sing praises. As justice is done to the ones to whom injustice has been done, a right relationship will be restored and again songs of God's glory may be sung. For an exiled people the renewal of such a vocation surely means that the devastations of the past will be reversed and the future will be bright. And indeed this is what the prophet proclaims: "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (61:4).

Preaching on this text entails attention to the vocation of the people of God. To be this God's people means to respond faithfully to the vocation of doing justice. However, it will not do for the preacher to simply state what is to be done, or to demand that it be done. Rather, to renew imagination it will be helpful if the preacher assesses the work in progress of the gathered congregation and finds ways to help congregations see where justice is already being done. If this is a congregation that participates in a neighborhood soup kitchen, shares in an annual food or clothing drive, has a history of responding with comfort to those who have mourned the death of a loved one, or participates in the denomination's mission work, take this opportunity to point out how these are fitting responses for a people with a vocation to do justice. Undoubtedly such actions are inadequate to the vast needs of those to whom injustice is done. As a result the aim in speaking of these events is not self-congratulation, but to connect these activities to a broader vocation and horizon. Even trito-Isaiah faced only paltry signs of the renewal of justice, but these very signs were the foundation for a broader effort to renew the vocation of the people.

ISAIAH 62:1-5 — SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

The prophetic role is one of unfailing vigilance for the sake of the people. Even God is not exempt from the prophet's vigilance. The bearer of the prophetic office cannot rest until the relationship between Creator and creature is made whole.
Isaiah 61:1-4 is the vocation of the prophet taken on behalf of the whole community. The anointing of the prophet/priest reiterates that the vocation of doing justice is not reserved for the prophetic office, but is for the whole people. In verses 62:1-5 a vocation more clearly reserved for the office of the prophet is articulated. Here the prophet proclaims an unwillingness to keep silent or to rest until Zion is vindicated (62:1); the vindication is made public (62:2a); and until the ones called forsaken and desolate will be called, “my delight is in her” (62:4).

The prophetic role as it unfolds in this text is one of unfailing vigilance. The prophet pushes on against all that diminishes the stature and vitality of the people. Pushing is not reserved for the prophet’s own people or foreign nations, but may be directed against God as well. No one is exempt from prophetic utterance and vigilance. What is most intriguing is for whose sake the posture of vigilance is assumed. It is for the sake of Zion (62:1), for the sake of Jerusalem (62:1). Strictly speaking the prophetic cause is not self-centered or even God-centered; it is instead for the people’s sake. The prophet has taken up the cause of the prophet’s people and will not rest until their stature and vitality are renewed. Undoubtedly for the prophet such a renewal will be self-beneficial and will also be pleasing to God (62:5b). However, the standard for success is vindication and salvation for the people.

The vigilance of the prophet for the sake of the people frames the question of the cause of exile in a purposely ambiguous manner. Were the prophet vigilant for God’s sake alone, it would be clear that the cause of exile was Judah’s abandonment of its vocation. When prophetic vigilance is for the sake of Zion, the prophet retains the ability to assign causality for exile to Judah’s failure, while opening the way to blame God for failing on God’s promises. Wherever fault lies, the prophet will not be silent or rest until the scourge of exile is removed.

It is as if the prophet keeps one hand on the lapel of Judah and the other on the lapel of God, alternately shaking the separated parties, dragging them to the negotiating table, and not giving up until the relationship between Creator and creature is made whole. The prophet knows that the relationship is in tatters; this
is clear from the diminished state of Zion. And so it is for Zion's sake that the prophet persists, pushing for a union between the forsaken people and the abandoned God.

The marriage imagery of this text holds out the hoped for reconciliation. It is important to avoid a misreading of this imagery. Contemporary images of marriage are shadowed by blissful, romantic scenarios. Countless movies and popular paperbacks flood our vision of marriage with notions of cupid and dewey-eyed love affairs. Marriage in ancient Israel has less to do with romantic love and more to do with the securing of progeny. When trito-Isaiah uses the marriage image, it is a hopeful image because it signals the securing of a future for God's people with God. The prophet will persist until the separated partners are bound together and their future together is secured.

Preaching on this text will vary depending on where the preacher may locate an appropriate contemporary analogue for the prophetic office. Although it may be argued that the modern preacher should assume the prophetic mantle as it is outlined in this text, there are grave risks with limiting the office in this way. The problems of clericalism, with its authoritarian trappings, should serve as a caution for too facilely installing the preacher into the prophetic office. It might be possible to see a contemporary congregation as a bearer of the prophetic office. A congregation could be seen as persisting with vigilance until all that diminishes the stature and vitality of the creation is overcome. The congregation could be a community that laments God's apparent abandonment of the creature, and by doing so maintains a grasp on the lapel of God, while simultaneously grasping the lapel of the nation and culture, demanding responsible and just dealings with all of God's creatures and creation. Such a congregation would be a community unable to keep silent or rest in the presence of injustice. Locating the prophetic office in the congregation also gives it a special calling. The task of preaching would thereby become to help form the congregation as such a specially called people.
Jeremiah traverses a road between dangerous optimism and quietistic escapism. His route down this road suggests a painful embrace of despair and doom before arriving at a nascent word of new life.

No other prophetic book provides more biographical information about its prophet than the book of Jeremiah. As a result, the prophetic message of Jeremiah is often lost in a fascination with the person of Jeremiah. This problem is exacerbated by the Jeremiah texts selected for the Common Lectionary, which are disproportionately biographical.

The lection appointed for the fourth Sunday after Epiphany is the text traditionally called the call of Jeremiah. The greatest portion of the text deals biographically with Jeremiah’s reluctance to accept the call to prophecy. The word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah informing that Jeremiah has been formed from the womb to be a prophet. Jeremiah’s response to this news is reluctance. Jeremiah is only a youth and does not know how to speak. The prophet is assured that God will send, command, deliver and put words in the prophet’s mouth.

Although six of the seven verses in this pericope are biographical, the final verse (1:10) provides a succinct summary of Jeremiah’s prophetic message. In a series of six infinitive clauses it is made clear what Jeremiah has to say and do in the saying. The prophet is being sent to pluck up, to break down, to destroy, to overthrow, to build, and to plant. Since two-thirds of what the prophet is to do is destructive, it is no wonder that in Jeremiah we encounter a tortured figure.

The pre-exilic prophetic task of pronouncing the impending doom of the nation has fallen squarely on Jeremiah. The plucking up, breaking down, destroying and overthrowing with which Jeremiah is charged are necessary elements of a prophecy concerning exile delivered to a people who do not universally believe in the inevitability of exile. Doom is still deniable, so Jeremiah must make the case for its undeniability.

As long as doom is deniable, there is ground for optimism concerning the plight of Judah. Optimism is not a prophetic theme—hope is. Optimism is a reading of the present data in
such a way that a brighter future may be predicted. Hope does not rely on a reading of the present data for its vision of a brighter future. Instead, hope anticipates a livable future because it trusts in the faithfulness of God to provide such a future.

When Jeremiah engages in the tasks of plucking up, breaking down, destroying and overthrowing, it is for the sake of hoping in a livable future. The proponents of optimism invest their reading of the data of the present with wishful thinking that skews the data toward their own end. Such a skewed reading of the times makes it possible to see peace when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14b), to assume deep wounds are healed when they are only lightly treated (Jer. 6:14a), and presuming that all is well or at least getting better, to go on with business as usual (“from the least to the greatest of them, every one is greedy for unjust gain” Jer. 6:12). Because the prophecy of Jeremiah is principally a prophecy of hope, it may face the harsh truth about the present. And the harsh truth is that the walls are tumbling down.

Two-thirds of Jeremiah’s task as it is outlined in this text is to announce the doom of Judah. When the last remnant of optimism is cast out, there stands the final task—to plant and to build. These two are infinitives of nascency. They are verbs that describe the beginning of something new, something that has not ever been before. The hopeful visions of a new covenant in chapter 31 and a new land in chapter 32 are distant expectations for newness beyond the collapse of the already present. The ability to articulate such hope is dependent on an honest view of what is.

Preaching on this text could be well served by focusing on verse ten. The American pulpit is often held captive by what Douglass Hall calls the “officially optimistic society.” A strong dose of Jeremiah might free the pulpit from optimism. Epiphany reveals the good news of the coming reign of God made manifest in the Christ, but even this newness comes only after the destruction of the last ground of optimism on Golgotha. The preacher cannot share the hopeful prophecy of Jeremiah without sharing the painful sense of the walls tumbling down. No program of restoration will bring the newness in; it must be awaited in the shaky confidence that the God who forms life in the womb will one day perfect life on the earth.
To hope in this fashion often raises concern about quietism. Are we to simply await the final day when evil is destroyed and persist in confidence that God will snatch us from total destruction? What of human responsibility? These questions and criticisms are worth the preacher's note. Indeed quietism is to be avoided and human responsibility is to be valued and nurtured.

However, fear of quietism and calls for human responsibility can be helpfully tempered by another Epiphany lection from Jeremiah. On the sixth Sunday after Epiphany the lectionary includes Jeremiah 17:5–10. In this text the plight of those who trust in humanity is compared to a shrub in the desert to which no good comes. Jeremiah is skeptical about human capacity to do good. Preachers and congregations, when truly honest with themselves, will share this skepticism as well.

The road between facile and dangerous optimism and quietistic escapism is narrow and treacherous. Jeremiah's route down this road suggests a painful embrace of despair and doom, two-thirds full of plucking up, breaking down, destroying and overthrowing. The final word, however, is neither nihilism nor anarchy, but the nascent word of new life imaged in figs and deeds of land and new hearts. And for the church the final word is imaged in a resurrected body, a shared cup, and a broken loaf of bread. This final word is the one that is to be lived toward, hoped for, eagerly anticipated, and continually celebrated when we encounter places and times where it already rings true. The road is a hopeful one. Those who journey down this road will not sit quietly, but they will arise, renew their vocation to do justice, seek righteousness and sing praises to the God by whose hands will be wrought the coming of a new and livable future for all the creation.

ISAIAH 6:1-13 — FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Behind the familiar aspects of this call narrative lurks a darker side. The called one is not a blessed one, but one cursed with the burden of pronouncing devastation. Isaiah knows the devastating costs of premature triumph. This prophet refuses the seduction of triumphalism.
The call of Isaiah of Jerusalem found in this lection for the fifth Sunday after Epiphany begins with a grand and glorious vision of the holiness of God (Isa. 6:1b–4). The vision of God sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, is not an unfamiliar one. Sharing the Anselmian definition of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” makes it easy to picture God as grander, higher, more holy than all else. Nor is it surprising that in the presence of such holiness the prophet should woefully face personal and societal inadequacy (Isa. 6:5).

When the seraphim of God touched the mouth of Isaiah with a burning coal and proclaims the prophet’s sins forgiven and guilt taken away, the high and holy one has set aside a special one. The newly cleansed prophet responds to the general call for one to send, and the holy one says “Go!”

Many an ordination has been celebrated with this text in the background. The ordinand is clearly inadequate to the task, but the high and holy one has called and will provide the necessary cleansing for the job. So familiar is the story to this point that seldom is the remainder of the pericope even considered. Even the lectionary leaves open the option of ending with verse eight. But the full weight of this call narrative is not encountered until text is read in full. Otherwise, it may be misread as means of those called by God to share in the glory of the holy one. The called one is not a blessed one, but one cursed with the burden of pronouncing devastation.

The prophet is not simply sent, but is sent to say the most vicious and dreadful things. The prophet is to say that the people do not understand, do not perceive. This alone is not so bad, but then the prophet is to persist until everything lays in waste, utterly desolate, burned and reburned, until only a stump remains. Just the slightest hint of hope is to be uttered: “The holy seed is its stump” (Isa. 6:13b). It is nearly impossible to overestimate the slenderness of hope the prophet offers. The extent of devastation to be pronounced points to the miniscule prospects of renewal. Born out of the desolation is a messianic hope. From a stump is to come a new day and a new way for a wayward and wicked people; but it is only a seed in the stump.

Isaiah faces the threat of triumphalism. The people who are the prophet’s contemporaries are seduced by the possibilities of
triumph. But it is premature, and the prophet recognizes the costs of premature triumph. The description of a face to face encounter with the holiness of God forms a background against which triumphs are to be measured. Compared to the holiness of God everything else pales. Final triumph rests only on an eschatological horizon like that described in the familiar messianic chapters nine and eleven. The seed for this future triumph is only to be found in the barren leftover of destruction.

A powerful common ground exists between this text and us. We are a people regularly seduced by triumphalism. In many ways the motto of our contemporary existence is "count your blessings." So busy are we counting our blessings that we fail to see the extent of evil around us. If by chance the reality of evil penetrates our thickened skins, we defend ourselves by counting our blessings. Our good fortunes, which to a large extent are our amassed fortunes, are seen as indications of our triumph. Isaiah's vocation is to shatter the illusion of triumph, to combat the seduction of triumphalism. There is no triumph when devastations are daily wrought on the vast majority of God's children. Our fortunes are not so good if they are held at the expense of another's suffering.

The hope Isaiah utters is only found on the other side of shattered illusions of triumph. The only meaningful hope is one that does not delight in where we are, but longs for where we might one day be. Until God's children stop dying before their time, there is no triumph, only a false and illusory triumphalism. Our blessings, which often include such marvelous things as adequate food, housing, health care, education, and meaningful work, far too often prevent our seeing the misery of God's children. Uttering a meaningful hope in our day may mean reassessing our fortunes, stripping them of their protective function, being laid bare to the devastations that lie beyond our barrier of blessings. Rather than counting our blessings, we might liken them to glimpses of the holy, which when compared to the fortunes of majority of the world's population lead us with Isaiah to wail "Woe!"

Beyond the collapse of an illusory triumph is, however, a real triumph. During the season of Epiphany the church celebrates the showing forth of the glory of God in Christ. What is made
manifest in Christ is real triumph. For the church the real triumph of Christ is a triumph in prospect, the church anticipates triumph in full. Until the fullness of triumph comes illusory triumph will need to be debunked.

CONCLUSION

The Hebrew Bible lections for Epiphany in the C cycle of the Common Lectionary are rich resources for preaching. As all of the biblical texts that form the Christian canon, they have survived countless opportunities to have been forgotten. Vast portions of what are now written words began as spoken discourse that could have easily fallen into the abyss of forgetfulness, the abyss into which most speech falls once it is spoken. Even those portions of the Bible that originated in written form could have disappeared without a trace. That these texts survived is testimony that at the very least they have had something to say that needed saying and an indication that they have something to say today.

The common thread in these exegetical reflections has been the emergence of promise from the doom of exile. It is the contention here that these texts have survived because they have contributed to a believable hope for a livable future. What these texts have said that needed to be said, and still needs to be said today, is that beyond the undeniable reality of doom is the prospect of a renewed vocation—a vocation of doing justice, seeking righteousness, and singing praise to God. Furthermore, they tell us that the resources for responding to this vocation rest in the faithfulness of God to God’s promises.

NOTES

4. Otto Kaiser argues that the extant work of Isaiah of Jerusalem is largely the result of an exilic or post-exilic editor. That Isaiah of Jerusalem is concerned with the problem of exile...


When marginalized peoples gain a voice and begin to influence theological conversations as they have in contemporary liberation theologies, it is a sign for many Christians that God’s spirit is moving in a fresh way. When these voices engage in serious conversation with one another there is even more reason to celebrate. Since commitment to long-term causes can undermine tolerance, dialogues such as those between male liberationists and women show us that particularist advocacy can heighten rather than destroy sensitivity to the issues of others. Leonardo Boff’s *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions* and Elsa Tamez’s collection of interviews with male Latin American liberation theologians in *Against Machismo* provide just such evidence of the Spirit. The books are responses to the contemporary women’s movement as that is experienced in Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, theological discourse, and society. They are welcome begin-

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nings of important conversations. They represent unfinished explorations, however, in a dialogue that will require many more rounds of conversation and practice.

Although they share common cause—exploration of sexism in church and culture and the constructive role of the feminine in its transformation—these two books are quite different in style and focus. Elsa Tamez offers informal interviews with 15 well-known (Rubem Alvez, Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jose Miguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo) and not-so-well-known liberation theologians (Frei Betto, Jorge Pixley, and Raul Vidales, among others). The content of this book is a bit thin, held together thematically only by the set of questions used by Tamez in each interview. Yet even with the constraints of the format, where answers are not developed or pressed by Tamez to much depth, the interviews are interesting and often provide warm and engaging portraits of these thinkers. Several of the Protestants offer personal reflections on the importance of their own relationships with women for their grasp of the issues. All are concerned to acknowledge of the oppression of women by society and by the church (Catholic and Protestant), identify of the considerable impact of women in churches, and explore of the nature and unique contribution of feminine experience.

In contrast, Boff's book is a complex consideration of the theme of revelation. It treats the feminine as an avenue to God and as a vehicle for divine self-disclosure. This book is slow reading and even a bit obscure at times, in contrast to the straightforward, easy style of the Tamez interviews. However, its ambitious subject matter earns it a second reading as that of the first book may not. A careful perusal of The Maternal Face of God pays off in the end because it offers a theological–doctrinal proposal for the function of the Virgin Mother Mary as an actual moment in salvation history. The stunning character of this proposal, presented as an hypothesis rather than new doctrine, will be particularly provocative for Protestant readers not used to the symbolic respect for the feminine found in Catholic Marian dogma. Despite heavy trading on the Jungian source of such beliefs, Boff's project is the divinization of the feminine by way of the claim that God as Holy Spirit effects a hypostatic union with the feminine in Mary. This "orthodox" strategy for
the incorporation of what feminists would call “women’s experience” into God-language means that the imago dei is incomplete with God’s incarnation in Jesus. The divinization of the feminine is a virtual necessity, then, in order to round out full humanity as God intends it. While Mary does appear in feminist thought, this presentation of the feminine “face” of God is the most thorough and thought-provoking treatment within an orthodox Christian frame of reference that I have seen, and it constitutes the far more serious proposal of these two Latin American male offerings.

REVIEW OF FEMINIST DIALOGUE ON DIFFERENCE

In order to assess the contribution of these male voices in the liberation dialogue it is helpful to hear a few that have gone before. For much of the feminist conversation, theological and secular, the term “difference” is a central concern. What is the difference between the sexes? What is womanly? What is manly? Questions such as these are age-old and systematic responses to them obviously pre-date the Second Wave of Feminism, which began in the early 1960s in North America. However, the sophisticated tools of analysis have given rise to a qualitatively new theoretical discourse about difference. The questions are therefore restated. Is difference merely anatomical, genetic, and hormonal? Or do personality traits also distinguish men from women? Is there such a thing as “masculine” or “feminine,” and, if so, how are these categories related to social location?

It may have once been true that, however mysterious difference might be, its certain existence was one of the comforting sureties of the cosmos. Now, however, such assumptions have lost their stability as the old questions of identity and difference are addressed from sociological, psychoanalytic, Marxist, as well as scientific vantage points. Social sciences tell us that definitions of masculinity and femininity and the roles and social places associated with them are gender constructs, i.e., social creations rather than necessities of anatomy. Thus notions about difference must be contended with, and these can be seen as functioning ideologies rather than
changeless givens from God or nature. When such relativizing discoveries are placed alongside what turn out to be a continuum of physiological and anatomical differences, a serious investigator must focus on more complex ways of assessing gender difference.3

In the context of such unsettling and ongoing shifts in knowledge, feminist analyses in contemporary North America have advocated at least two major approaches to difference. When analysis focuses on the socially constructed character of difference and its use to restrict women—in Janeway’s phrase, to give man a “world,” and woman a “place”—difference is seen as a tool in the hands of those privileged (mostly white, male) with the power of creating culture.4 According to such analyses, for example, the notion of woman as fragile and morally superior to man must be regarded with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Any definition of female nature must be correlated with access to resources and power women have or do not have in a particularly context and critiqued accordingly. Critics who highlight the social construction of difference frequently idealize the transcending of difference. It follows that society must either seek androgynous definitions of the human, or that women must appropriate the more successful ‘male’ way of being human.

A second type of analysis focuses on the reclaiming of difference, valuing what is uniquely female. Such analyses can claim that the feminine is socially constructed or that it is innate and “essential” in origin, for they share the affirmation of the special traits and capacities that women possess. These sensibilities range from women’s intuitive sense and nurturing abilities to their advanced integration of mind and body and their inherently relational, connected way of approaching the world. “Woman-centered” analyses like these vary widely and are held by diverse thinkers, from psychologists (Carol Gilligan), to philosophers and poets (Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin). They frequently appear in some form in the work of theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, and Sallie McFague, all of whom bypass the technical debates about sources of difference, but trade on some version of its outcome, the theme of women’s epistemological privilege. This
privilege requires the strategy of commending the values and perceptions accessible to the female standpoint. Woman-centered analysis finds the male perspective to be dualist, hierarchical and responsible in some way for a world threatened by nuclear logic. Proposals for progress in the human situation stemming from this perspective judge either that the masculinized, patriarchal world desperately needs the difference women's standpoint brings, or that the “male” is essentially and hopelessly destructive and opt for woman-defined separatist communities.

These two broad options in no way capture the complex and nuanced positions that make up feminist debates. Current agendas also include the task of combining the pieces of truth in each conversation. However, these general alternatives provide an important context for male liberationist voices. Without exception these male liberationists emphasize difference and its constructive use. They share the clear conviction that the fruits of female difference are paramount to the well-being of church and theological discourse. That both Boff and the men of Tamez's book approach the problems of sexism by opting for special female traits and cognitive access allows me to consider them in relation to the strategy of commending difference. Through this lens we can evaluate their strengths and the unresolved issues that attend the affirmation of the feminine.

WOMEN'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRIVILEGE

The theologians of Tamez's book do not offer the slightest hint of theory regarding the origins of difference in their lived situation, the Latin American basic communities. Most of them comment specifically on the epistemological privilege of women as persons of faith. Many associate this gift with the familiar liberation theme, the “hermeneutical privilege of the poor,” thereby speaking of the particular wisdom of poor women. However, there are also many claims here that sound like the sensibilities that feminists have recognized as distinctively female. Women avoid the dualisms of Western thinking, and their relational, intuitive-poetic ways of knowing unify the world. Although these thinkers repeatedly claim that women
are more "spiritual" than men (an old and suspect notion for many feminists), it is to their credit that they extol these capacities without associating them with roles traditionally assigned to women, e.g., their care of children, or their responsibility for values, sentiment, and religion. Instead, a persistent theme is women's connection with the concrete, the sensual, and the everyday. These men indicate an understanding of woman's potential to be anywhere as opposed to being circumscribed anatomy, for it aligns best with the notion that woman's unique gifts may be attributed to long habits of practice rather than a fated and eternal female destiny. The most frequent term of approbation for this epistemological privilege is that women's "affective" capacities are distinct. This helpful summarizing term may represent an important resource for transformative praxis.

Without further clarification, however, some of this affirmation of women's experience is sheer romanticism. According to feminist critiques mentioned earlier, the positing of special female traits (which almost attain the status of virtues in the brief comments of the Tamez book) is very near the kind of essentialism that can be used as a tool to proscribe women's opportunities and relieve men of the responsibility of developing such gifts. But the test of adequacy exposes another weakness. These theologians are noted as liberationists who by definition work from careful analyses of context. Their concept of "woman" is simply not contextual enough.

For such reasons they have more work to do. Alvez, Bonino, Segundo and the rest need to identify the sources of feminine affectivity. Is it only a female or a human possibility? They need to show in their further deliberations the mutual interaction of female connectional, poetic knowing with other aspects of context, such as women's labor and social location, and the poverty that some find so significant epistemologically. Alvez, Bonino, Segundo and the rest must also expand the class, race and ethnic grids that shape Latin American women's perspective and help us understand how the native sensibilities of the poor Uruguayan peasant woman are different from the white middle class Methodist woman's. Perhaps there are commonalities shared by those who occupy these different social
locations. If so, we need to know how to value what women have together and still respect the variables that contribute to their unique epistemological standpoint. Otherwise these liberationists risk diluting their concern for political and economic oppression with the monothematic notion of privileged, universal female insight.

If these theologians are not exhaustive in their dialogue with women's issues, however, they are to be commended for their recognition and respect for women's ways of knowing. Of particular interest are the various ways they imply that such a privileged perspective matters for the church, Roman Catholic and Protestant. Although typically unreflective on the how and why of this process, Tamez's interviews reveal men who are convinced that the church needs women's epistemological standpoint as well as their leadership. Several speak of theology done from a woman's perspective. A good many insist that such affectivity needs to shape the first moment in theology, the moment typically identified as the commitment to the oppressed. Frei Betto argues that, just as the affective is central to faith, women's affective gifts make them optimal candidates for the kind of noetic activity such a moment requires (p. 95). Others simply claim that women are more sensitive to the religious dimension of reality, an old theme (p. 98).

One of the most provocative proposals comes from Rubem Alves, who connects theological understanding with the erotic. His version of the unification of human faculties, the antithesis to dualistic thinking, is by far the most interesting and moves beyond what are fairly familiar themes from feminist rhetoric regarding the addition of women's sensibilities to theological discourse. Alves speaks of the connection between bodies, of passion and the beautiful, all of which must be reappropriated in a theology of love (pp. 71ff.). I wish his chapter were longer, particularly when he takes what is one of the dominant themes in feminist and post–modern discourse—the erotic—and finds traces of his ideas in John Calvin. It is the discovery by women of the goodness of their bodies in the order of salvation to counteract the strong anti–body strains in Christian tradition that is a mark of Christian feminist wisdom.

The most specific theological use made of women's stand-
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point is its value as a source of biblical hermeneutics, and here several comments are in order. Once again, what is offered in the Tamez book is simply attestation to the special character of women's reading of Scripture; no examples or generalizations are provided about what this means for communities of faith or for women's plight. Nevertheless it is important to appreciate what they do offer, namely, the recognition that a woman can see the texts differently. I find this a true claim as well as a timely one, since common sense dictates (and post-modern theories of the role of the reader in interpretation confirm) this difference. I look forward to more examples of the perceptions generated by women's Bible study in basic communities. Given the contribution these theologians make to the confirmation of women's standpoint, it is striking that none of them think additional imagery of women or new traditions are needed, a common feminist debate that they do not appear to consider. A later conversation will need to press them on the character and role of canon in a theological world that acknowledges the perspectival character of all interpretation. For some feminist theologians, the choices that created boundaries of canon are themselves perspectival and subject to scrutiny.

A final question for Tamez's group concerns what I find to be a strange inconsistency in a liberationist strategy that would draw on women's difference as the source of needed female value and perception for the church and world. Their frequent comments on the issue of the ordination of women reflect an ambivalence that almost undercuts the believability of their admiring claims regarding women's epistemological talents. There appears to be nothing to prohibit this inclusion of women, paraphrases Hugo Assmann's support for women's ordination. There is no biblical or theological reason not to, is the general argument of others like Pablo Richard. I would expect a claim for the theological and urgent necessity for the full inclusion of women by theologians who truly believe that women's sensitivities are so spiritual, particularly since their common thesis is "Against Machismo." If it is simply not politically expedient, we deserve to hear how and when it will be.
It is Leonardo Boff's work in *The Maternal Face of God* that explores the issues of difference in greatest depth. He intends this book to be a contribution to the revolutionary shift in male-female relations that he sees rising out of the death of patriarchal culture currently in progress. Explicitly rejecting sexual hierarchy as an order ordained by nature or God and the related strategy that exalts women in order to remove them from reality and access to power, Boff offers complex ruminations on the special nature of the feminine and masculine. The book is written in five sections of uneven length. In the first one Boff rushes through an account of the changed social situation, which he asserts is one of increased activity by women in the larger society. In part two he leads us through consideration of this basic constructive theme, Mariology as the revealed truth of the feminine. He concludes what is really the first half of the book with a consideration of the feminine from a host of perspectives—anatomical and physiological, historical, philosophical, and theological. The remainder of the book is focused on Mary. After considering the pertinent historical and doctrinal traditions, he finishes with a constructive theology of the feminine. Mary, then, is the real star of this treatment of the feminine as revealed and revelatory. The book lauds the Virgin Mother as the source of the Christian community's revealed knowledge about the feminine and as God's glorification of the feminine, which together suggest the way the Divine nature is feminine.

The book presents parallel physiological, philosophical, and theological theories of the feminine. Thus, methodologically, Boff's argument resembles a kind of layering process rather than a deductive or tightly reasoned case. This movement implies that the complementarity that obtains between these several sources is confirmation of their truth, even though he acknowledges that materials are selected in the first part that will harmonize with the religious values he highlights. Such an approach makes for a rich development of mutually confirming treatments of human sexuality and gender definitions (my distinction, though implied by Boff). It appears to serve as a
buttress for a powerful proposal for the feminization of the Trinity.

However, Boff's method leaves the Protestant interpreter a bit dissatisfied. Because he has not specified the relationship between the various theories of the feminine, there is no pattern to consult for the more demanding task of coordinating these theories with the Christian version of masculine/feminine difference. Boff's understanding of the Christian view sexuality and gender is heavily influenced by Jungian psychology. Its advantage is that it allows him to see the masculine and the feminine as attributes existing within individual human beings. However, we may question the authority of a Jungian reading of Christian views on male and female. There are two possibilities that suggest themselves. It is possible that he thinks a Christian understanding of sexuality and gender must be supplemented by a separate and authoritative Jungian revelation. Or he may find that a new Christian view of gender—that Mary reveals the eschatological Christian enfleshment of God’s feminine face—now shows that Jungian insights are true. While this dilemma may be a singularly Protestant one, involving a reluctance to allow non-biblical sources of authoritative revelation, it echoes the difficulties that feminists have had with suspicious applications Jungian constructs.

I see a similar lack of concern about the rootedness of knowledge and revelation in particular contexts. Boff, like the Latin American thinkers of Against Machismo, doesn't help much with the contextually thick character of being woman or being man. In the first place, Jungian constructs about the essential masculine-feminine polarity sit in some tension with the complex issues of environment vs. nature that Boff also tries to take seriously. He argues for a reciprocal interaction between the anatomical and physiological marks of sexuality and the socio-cultural factors in the creation of human being and gender identity. Thereby he avoids a simple biological determinism. Then to my surprise, Boff moves in the direction of the social construction of all knowledge of sexuality when he acknowledges that our constructs are all we have with which to comprehend these human realities (pp. 26f). However, this claim does not accord with his view that femininity and
masculinity are "essential determinants" and not "accidents" of 
human nature (p. 33). Since the very objectivity of our scientific 
definitions is currently under scrutiny by science and feminism 
alone, even the claim that there is an essential anatomical 
definition of sexuality is a contested one. The very construal of 
sexuality as the "plain facts" of anatomy and physiology is 
problematic, despite our common sense preference for such 
distinctions. Thus "essential femininity" needs more 
unpacking.

Boff's use of the Jungian feminine and masculine is further 
complicated by the fact that it includes particular character traits. 
These are granted a kind of ahistorical status when termed the 
"essence" or the nature of the beast. It is "masculine" to be 
rational, aggressive and objective, he says; it is "feminine" to be 
receptive, nurturing, intuitive. Any good liberation theologian 
knows that ideas need to be connected to material contexts, not 
in order to reduce them to other causes, but to fill in the living 
matrix of their genesis, their function, hidden as well as overt 
messages they bear, and to identify their potential to deform and 
to transform particular situations. It is very difficult for those 
familiar with feminist conversations to dissociate the parceling 
out of human virtues and vices from the distribution of roles and 
places; both practices have a long history of connection with 
issues of power that frequently remain unnamed. Indeed, 
women first asked liberating questions when they wondered 
why emotional and nurturing were good traits to have in the 
home, but not appropriate for those who control the market­ 
place or international politics and arms control.

To Boff's credit, his doctrine of the divinization of the 
feminine in Mary is aimed at ending such distortive uses of 
stereotyped traits. He banks on a strategy which would correct 
the imbalance of the masculine-feminine. Patriarchy for Boff is 
an overemphasis on the masculine side of human nature that 
has worked to the advantage of male human beings. He, like 
those in Against Machismo, would bring "feminine" values to the 
world and end their provincialization in the domestic place. 
However, the continued labeling of some values as feminine 
and others as masculine is a choice to preserve descriptions 
whose social and political associations do not die easily. I am not
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convinced by Boff that all the problems associated with these characterizations have been resolved; characterizations become caricatures too easily. I am impressed by his respect for the mystery of difference. If he has not solved it, it is not because the denial of difference is the obvious and overlooked solution. However, if androgyny is not the answer, I am not satisfied with the essential feminine either.

There is no doubt that Boff values women's reality. Nowhere is his celebration of the feminine more serious than in this claim that it fills out the full meaning of God’s trinitarian revelation. His is a proposal that has only been made otherwise, to my knowledge, by adding a female to the all-male Trinity via the feminine Holy Spirit. Since this latter option reminds me of the sort of cosmetic change that evades the serious challenges involved with acknowledging the gender specificity of theological constructs, Boff has my interest and attention on this issue. Rather than putting a female together with two Divine males to “get the feminine in God,” he poses an hypostatic union of God with the female in the historic person of Mary. This strikes me as a serious attempt to grapple with the meaning of the Trinity rather than its minimalist form, even granting the inseparability of the two. The feminine as a particular, historical reality must be a saving moment in God’s history with the creation.

Boff insists that the Trinity must and does remain orthodox in his formulation. Yet he creates a theological affirmation of the integrity of woman as the imago dei and the correlation of that in claims about God. This is precisely what feminists have claimed was not adequately institutionalized in Christian tradition. To be sure, Boff uses a Jungian stereotype that appears too formal at times. It is also not clear if a Trinity is now a Quaternity. Yet he ventures the interpretively brazen hypothesis that gender specificity matters in our understanding of the Trinity. In short, the corporate claim that God is personal, saving love in history is a gender one; it is impossible to “say” this meaning without gender specificity. Furthermore, that which is not named and assumed in history for the gender-specific, linguistic creatives that we are is not fully loved and saved. These assumptions found Boff’s insistence that a new moment in salvation history is necessary for the full revelation of imago dei—an historic female
supplement is necessary to complete that imago as revealed in the male Jesus. In addition, a symbolic (read, linguistic) acknowledgement of that saving reality is necessary in our “saying” about God’s nature.

Boff has, with such assumptions, responded to feminist conversations with great powers of perception. If Boff has not listened to all the voices and failed to solve the complexities of difference, he has contributed to an important dimension of the hunger that women feel as we look to the church to name us as God’s. Even as Boff insists that his doctrine of God remains orthodox, that it means the same as the original, I cannot help wondering how this could be true. With the refusal of machismo, and the maternal face of God before us, rich affective dimensions of human experience will be tapped. That will be different. It can be Christian, and the work of the Spirit. All of these authors offer important testimonies to the difference that women’s experiences, the feminine, will make. It is hard to imagine how our understanding of God can remain the same if we confirm their testimonies.

NOTES

1. The most familiar feminist treatment of Mary that does not trade on Jung’s views is Rosemary Radford Reuther’s Mary—the Feminine Face of the Church (Philadelphia:Westminster Pr., 1977). See her chapter on Mariology in Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 139–156, which has some striking similarities to Boff’s account. Mary Daly (Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1973)) has a proposal for the second coming of Woman that intends this divinization of the feminine, though not from an orthodox Catholic (or Christian) perspective.


3. Feminists reacted early on to Freud’s anatomical construal of difference. An example of an argument for the extreme expression of constructionism rejects the notions “woman” and “man” as well as role-specific gender constructs. See Monique Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” in Jaggar and Rothenberg, Feminist Frameworks, 148–152.

4. Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Miller, Betty Friedan, Marxist and socialist feminists are significant theoreticians of this stream. Most liberal Christian feminists assume this to some degree, even though they hint that women’s standpoint is a privileged one. To my knowledge these latter have not tackled the question of environmental and physiological factors, the issue that ultimately must be resolved.
5. Mary Daly is the best-known (former) Christian defender of separatist women’s communities. See Eisenstein for a general account of this focus. Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Thought.


7. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Ruether raise the question regarding canon as a boundary. Similar issues regarding the literary canon are also being raised in secular feminist circles. See Elaine Showalter, ed., The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women Literature and Theory (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF ALDERSGATE: A RESPONSE TO "JOHN WESLEY AGAINST ALDERSGATE"

KENNETH COLLINS

In his article "John Wesley Against Aldersgate," which appeared in Quarterly Review 8 (Fall, 1988), Professor Theodore Jennings put forth the thesis that the celebration of Aldersgate leads to the subversion of Wesleyan theology in two key ways: first, it obscures the true origins of Methodism by claiming that this movement begins in May 1738; second, it distorts the primary evidence relating to Wesley's own spiritual life by making 24 May 1738 his conversion. Since it is readily conceded that Methodism was clearly established prior to John Wesley's Aldersgate experience—at least in terms of Wesley's understanding of the end or goal of religion—it is the second prong of the argument which will be treated in this present essay. Indeed, some response from moderate and conservative Methodists along these lines is called for due to the tone of Jennings' piece, its repeated exaggerations, and what appears to be its faulty reasoning.

The flow of Jennings' argument concerning Wesley's spiritual experience is fairly straightforward and can be easily summarized. He reasons, first of all, that all views which consider

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Aldersgate as Wesley's conversion are dependent upon a "dramatic transformation" from Wesley's state before to his state after this event. Now this statement, in and of itself, is not really the problem. However, when Jennings goes on to explain that this "dramatic transformation" is to be understood in terms of the sharpest contrast possible—that prior to 24 May 1738 Wesley utterly lacked faith and that afterwards he experienced nothing but spiritual elation—one begins to realize that Jennings is tying the plausibility of the conversion model to the fate of his own overdrawn contrast—a contrast that few scholars, moderate or otherwise, would care to assert.

Nevertheless, with this framework in place, Jennings begins to review the primary material to show that Wesley indeed had faith prior to Aldersgate. In support of his case, he cites the four often-quoted disclaimers of Wesley ("I'm not sure of this," "I had even then the faith of a servant," "I believe not," and "I then lacked . . . the full Christian liberty.") in which the Methodist leader balances some of his earlier strong statements to reveal that he was a person of faith and trust quite early on. But these disclaimers are damaging to conversionist views only if one makes the untenable claim that John Wesley had no measure of faith in his early years. Who asserts this? The celebration of Aldersgate as a crucial point in Wesley's life does not need and is not dependent upon such an assertion. Quite the contrary, the cruciality of 24 May 1738 remains intact, indeed is further heightened, by the distinction of the faith of a servant (legal faith)/the faith of a son (evangelical faith) that is displayed in Wesley's preached theology, especially in his sermon, "On the Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption." How then is "Aldersgateism" overthrown here?

II

The other half of the contrast which Jennings draws concerns Wesley's spiritual life following Aldersgate. Here he maintains that a conversionist interpretation is dependent upon proving that Wesley's "mood swings" ended on May 24th and that his subsequent spiritual life was marked by continual happiness. If
one, therefore, can find any example of spiritual malaise after Aldersgate, the conversionist model will be overthrown—or so it is argued. And Jennings, of course, finds several instances of spiritual distress—how could it be otherwise?—and calls attention to the various temptations that Wesley encountered after May 1738, along with material from the Journal which suggests that spiritual depression was a continuing problem for the leader of the British revival.

But again is all this evidence detrimental to those views which attach some importance to Aldersgate? Not really. Take, for example, the issue of Wesley's spiritual depression. Here, one must first of all understand the nature of this spiritual problem, the reason for its existence, and then, and only then, can some judgment be made with respect to its bearing upon the May 24th event. Where in Wesley's writings, for instance, does he claim that the experience of justification by faith and the assurance associated with it—which some call conversion—cannot be followed by a measure of doubt, fear, or even depression? How, then, is such evidence cited against him? Therefore, the mere recitation of Wesley's more somber moods and his subsequent spiritual struggles in itself proves nothing, for it must then be argued in what way and to what extent these experiences were inconsistent with or detracted from that of Aldersgate—something that Jennings does not do. Instead, he simply assumes that the least shred of evidence in this area undermines the significance of 24 May 1738.

To be sure, competing interpretations of Wesley's spiritual distress can and should be offered. Could it be, for example, that Wesley's one spiritual turmoil after Aldersgate was precipitated, for the most part, by his painful realization that justifying faith neither destroys the whole body of sin (which must await the further work of entire sanctification) nor removes all manner of fear and the heaviness that results from manifold temptations? Again, could it be that Wesley's experience was similar to that of Christian David, which Wesley saw fit to record in his journal on 10 August 1738:
I saw not then that the first promise to the children of God is, 'Sin shall no more reign over you'; but thought I was to feel it in me no more from the time it was forgiven. Therefore, although I had the mastery over it, yet I often feared it was not forgiven, because it still stirred in me, and at some times thrust sore at me that I might fall; because, though it did not reign, it did remain in me; and I was continually tempted, though not overcome.¹

Yet Jennings remains unconvinced. And so in a further attempt to downgrade the importance of Aldersgate by highlighting Wesley's subsequent depression—which "true conversion" was supposed to remove—he contends that there were instances after 24 May 1738 when Wesley even denied that he was or ever had been a Christian. Indeed, he specifically refers the reader to the very dark though remarkably honest Journal entry of January 4, 1739 where Wesley states repeatedly, "I am not a Christian." But how is such an obscure and unrepresentative passage to be interpreted? If one employs it as Jennings does—in order to "debunk" Aldersgate—then a question immediately emerges: why stop there? At face value, the Journal reveals that Wesley never was a Christian in 1738 or in 1725 or at any other time prior to 1739 for that matter. But does Jennings, and those who follow in his train, really wish to claim this? The inordinate difficulty of such an interpretation should indicate all the more clearly that the language of this letter is a fine instance of Wesley's tendency, on occasion, toward hyperbole pure and simple.

To bolster his case that Aldersgate was a "non event," Jennings makes a number of additional claims, one of which is that Wesley thought so little of this experience that he never spoke of it in his later years. But is this judgment fair? More importantly, is it accurate? Apparently not, for in Wesley's sermons, theological treatises, and letters there are some specific references to 24 May 1738 as well as some general references to the year 1738 that cannot be denied, although they have often been misunderstood. And the following pieces of
evidence, numerous though by no means exhaustive, appear to support Cell's claim made earlier in this century that there is a distinct chronology in the Wesleyan literature that makes Aldersgate its center.

A. References to May 24, 1738

1. Four days after his Aldersgate experience Wesley told some friends at the house of Mr. Hutton that "five days before he was not a Christian."

2. On October 30, 1738 John wrote to his older brother Samuel: "By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no more dominion over him. And in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May 24th last past."

3. Wesley's comment in his Journal on January 4, 1739 which Jennings uses to diminish the significance of May 24th actually supports it by referring to that date. Wesley writes: "My friends affirm I am mad, because I said I was not a Christian a year ago. . . . Indeed, what I might have been I know not, had I been faithful to the grace then given . . . "

4. In a letter to "John Smith" on December 30, 1745 Wesley said: "For it is true that from May 24, 1738, 'wherever I was desired to preach, salvation by faith was my only theme' . . . And it is equally true that 'it was for preaching the love of God and man that several of the clergy forbade me their pulpits' before that time, before May 24, before I either preached or knew salvation by faith."

B. References to the Year 1738

5. On June 22, 1740 Wesley wrote in one of his letters, "After we had wandered many years in the new path of salvation by faith and works, about two years ago it pleased God to show us the old way of salvation by faith only."

6. In a lengthy letter to Thomas Church on February 2, 1745, Wesley repeated his claim put forth on June 22, 1740 just cited and added, "Let us go no farther, as to time, than seven years (1738) last past."
7. Again in a letter to Thomas Church on June 17, 1746 Wesley traced the course of his ministry along the following lines: "From the year 1725 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour. . . . From the year 1729 to 1734 . . . I saw a little fruit. . . . From 1734 to 1738 I saw more fruit of my preaching. . . . From 1738 to this time . . . the word of God ran as fire among the stubble." 7

8. In the year 1765, Wesley wrote to John Newton, "I think on Justification just as I have done any time these seven-and-twenty years, and just as Mr. Calvin does." 8

9. And in that same year he wrote to Dr. Erskine, "In . . . justification by faith I have not wavered a moment for these seven and twenty years." 9

10. In November 1765, in his sermon, "The Lord Our Righteousness," Wesley stated concerning justification by faith, "this is the doctrine which I have constantly believed and taught for near eight and twenty years. This I published to all the world in the year 1738 . . . ." 10

11. In 1772, Wesley observed, "With regard to [the doctrine] that we are justified merely for the sake of what Christ has done and suffered, I have constantly and earnestly maintained [that] above four and thirty years." 11

12. Wesley affirmed in 1778: "I am not sensible that this has made any essential addition to my knowledge in divinity. Forty years ago I knew and preached every Christian doctrine (including justification by faith) which I preach now." 12 Once again, the reference is to 1738.

In light of the preceding, it is obvious that Wesley does in fact refer specifically to the Aldersgate experience on at least four occasions ranging from the year 1738 to 1745 (first four items above). And, interestingly enough, the last entry on 30 December 1745 undermines Jennings' position. Would Wesley have recalled a humdrum day, a "non event," over seven years after its occurrence? The inference is clear.

Beyond this, Wesley repeatedly refers to the year 1738 throughout the course of his ministry and in a manner that warrants attention.
references, Wesley just might have had 24 May 1738 in mind as
he wrote this material. Such a view, far from being obscure,
gains considerable support in light of Wesley’s own precedent of
showcasing the day of May 24 above all others in the year 1738 in
his Journal. To argue that such an interpretation is impossible,
that the later material unequivocally excludes reference to
Aldersgate is to claim to know too much. And perhaps this last
factor of overstatement is precisely the problem with “John
Wesley Against Aldersgate.” The work proceeds not by carefully
drawn distinctions, but by exaggerations and distortions as
evidenced by the following phrases—some of which are
outright inflammatory—in which Jennings characterizes the
scholarship of all views different from his own:

“superficially implausible,” “dishonest reading,” “systematic sup­
pression,” “conversionist myth is a lie,” “perpetuate a historical fraud,”
“knowing distortion of the truth,” lack of “hermeneutical integrity,”
“pseudo-Wesleyan,” “anti-Wesleyan,” “pious fraud,” “pious individu­
alism,” “distortion of Wesley’s own texts,” and “ersatz gospel.”

Obviously, something has gone very wrong here. The author,
apparently unable or unwilling to argue in a cool and deliberate
manner, has ultimately resorted to hyperbole and name-calling
to carry the day. Would it not, however, be better to eliminate
the easy generalizations and the cant phrases which quickly
come to mind in one’s frustration with a view that one neither
likes nor understands? Again, is it too much to ask Jennings to
refute the best position moderate and conservative scholarship
has to offer in this area instead of a caricature concocted in his
own head?

Admittedly, towards the end of the essay, the language is
modified somewhat and Aldersgate reemerges not as a “non
event” but this time as one of the many moments of reassurance
in the life of John Wesley. But is an appeal to the doctrine of
assurance sufficient to explain all that occurred on May 24th?
Observe the many elements in Wesley’s own account of the
event:
In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Notice that Wesley connects a number of items in the selection above with the conjunction "and": trust in Christ alone, and assurance, and freedom from the law of sin and death. If there ever was a good example of Wesley's conjunctive theology, which contemporary scholars are so fond of pointing out, this is it. Therefore, it is certainly not denied that assurance is an integral part of a total picture; what is denied, however, is that assurance is the whole of Aldersgate. The reference to freedom from the law of sin and death—and trust in Christ alone for that matter—must neither be minimized nor repudiated in any assessment of this experience. And it is Wesley, himself, who first of all focused on this last aspect of power over sin, and not the Methodist hagiographers.

Not surprisingly, "John Wesley Against Aldersgate" concludes in pointing out that if anything, the year 1725 not 1738 marks Wesley's conversion. But how is such a statement to be understood? If conversion means a call to the ministry, sincerity in spiritual life, and an earnestness displayed in missionary service, then Wesley, of course, was converted prior to May 1738. If, however, the term is understood in an existential way, as the time when one experiences both forgiveness and freedom from the guilt and power of sin, and the assurance which results from this, then by no stretch of the imagination was Wesley converted prior to Aldersgate. Moreover, that the latter definition is more appropriate to Wesley's own consideration of the matter is substantiated by the theology displayed in his *Standard Sermons*, especially in the pieces on the prerogatives
of the children of God (The Marks of the New Birth and The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God).

Why, then, is Jennings still not persuaded? Perhaps because he, and other scholars like him, cannot fail to be impressed by the zeal of the early Wesley in his many activities on behalf of the Church. But do these things count for salvation? Do works, earnestness, sincerity, and zeal constitute conversion? Do they make a Christian? Wesley thought not, and this is the key to his spiritual trajectory. Perhaps Jennings has not fully considered the idea implicit in sola fide that so much which matters can happen in such a short time, with the corollary that so much which does not matter can happen over a long period of time. But if salvation, hence being a real Christian, is by faith, then why not? Is Jenning's theology predisposed to misprize brief, powerful, and significant crisis experiences? Indeed, his argumentation, his attempt to deflate Aldersgate and its significance, reminds one of Mrs. Hutton's protestation in the face of Wesley's own claim on 28 May 1738 that five days earlier he was not a Christian: "If you was not a Christian ever since I knew you," she spoke, "you was a great hypocrite, for you made us all believe you was one."

Despite the new wave in Wesley studies, the importance of the Aldersgate account as a hermeneutical device through which one can gain insight into Wesley's spiritual dynamic cannot be denied. The dramatic structure of this account, the allusions to other significant conversion experiences within it (Paul, Augustine, Luther), the spiritual autobiography which precedes it, the indication of spiritual power and victory which conclude the record, and Wesley's numerous references to this event well after it occurred all illustrate that this was an extraordinary occurrence. Indeed, the very fact that scholars today are still discussing its value underscores its perennial significance.
NOTES

2. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 264.
10. Ibid., 4:295.
THEODORE JENNINGS REPLIES:

The editors have asked me to respond to Kenneth Collins' attempt to maintain "the continuing significance of Aldersgate," I do so reluctantly since I think much of what he says is already adequately dealt with in the essay itself. Some of the confusion is due to the fact that Collins is not responding to my essay in the QR but to an earlier presentation at the American Academy of Religion (in December of 1987). That essay did make two related cases: first that Wesley does not regard Aldersgate as a moment of any significance for the history of the Methodist movement (still less as the founding event.) The second deals with the question of whether it is true that Aldersgate was the dramatic turning point in Wesley's own religious life. Was it, as is so frequently claimed, Wesley's conversion? QR decided for reasons of space to publish a revised version of this second argument. (The original essay may be requested from Rex Matthews at Candler in his capacity as head of the Wesley Studies group of the AAR.) While the revision does not materially alter the argument I hope I have sufficiently clarified it so that Collins will now better understand it. Accordingly I will not repeat that argument here nor will I reply to Collins' repeated characterizations of my essay. Instead I will attempt to keep the question focussed on the issue of the significance (or lack of it) of Wesley's "Aldersgate experience."

Collins complains about my "overblown contrast." He appears to think that I have created a straw man in order to more easily debunk the significance of Aldersgate. If Collins wishes to counter my argument he should do something besides characterize it. Does he wish to suggest some contrast before and after Aldersgate? If so what contrast? He appears to agree that Aldersgate was not the beginning of faith or of a commitment of Christ for Wesley. That is, it was not the occasion of what is popularly called a conversion. If he agrees with this he should say so forthrightly. This in itself would help to overcome some popular misconceptions about this event.
What then was the contrast? I have explored it using the words of Wesley himself to demonstrate that the changes Wesley himself was expecting and hoping for did not occur. I did not invent these characteristics as a straw man or "overblown contrast." They are taken from the very passages from Wesley's Journal used to claim that there was a dramatic change at Aldersgate. Nor have I simply asserted that after Aldersgate the same characteristics apply as before. I have demonstrated it, from Wesley's own words. If Collins wishes to dispute this he must offer not a counter assertion but a counter argument. If he does concede that I have demonstrated this case then what I have called the "Myth of Aldersgate" is demonstrated to be a fraud. Now Collins wishes neither to contest the argument nor to concede the conclusion. He wants to change the subject.

Accordingly he proposes another change based on Wesley's later distinction between the faith of a servant and the faith of a son. I do not contest that forty years after Aldersgate Wesley did characterize the time of his turmoil in Georgia and following his return to England as "faith of a servant." That is why I cited Wesley's notes to this effect in his Journal. But that is not sufficient to establish that after Aldersgate Wesley had the faith of a son. Notice what must be proven here if Collins is going to make use of this distinction to salvage Aldersgate. (These conditions will apply to any other attempt to salvage the "continuing significance of Aldersgate." Thus it will do no good to change the subject again.) It must be shown that Wesley did have the faith of a son following Aldersgate (in spite of the fact that Wesley himself does not claim this), that this is datable from Aldersgate (i.e., that Aldersgate is the occasion of this change), and finally that this change is sufficiently radical to warrant the significance attributed to Aldersgate. Collins even imagines that this change of subject will "heighten" the significance of Aldersgate. Now where is the argument? Where is the documentation? There is nothing. We have been chasing a will 'o the wisp. It is a rhetorical flourish and nothing more.

Rhetorical flourishes can be dangerous. Thus we have the following brave flourish: "Where in Wesley's writings, for instance, does he claim that the experience of justification by
faith and the assurance associated with it—which some call conversion—cannot be followed by a measure of doubt, fear, or even depression?” Now this is simply absurd. It is precisely because Wesley believed this in the months before and after Aldersgate that he was susceptible to the suggestion that he was not yet a Christian. Rather than list a number of passages where Wesley does claim that these experiences are inconsistent with being a Christian let us keep to the one passage to which Collins refers. Recall that the term “depression” is neither mine nor Wesley’s. Where does it come from? Collins uses it to characterize what Wesley was feeling when Wesley wrote the passage in his Journal dated Jan. 4, 1739. Now where does Wesley assert that what he was sensing in himself (which Collins calls depression) was inconsistent with being a Christian? The same entry for Jan. 4, 1739. Has Collins forgotten that he wanted to dismiss this passage by characterizing it as “depression?”

In the third section of the paper we finally get what appears to be an argument and documentation. There are no less that 12 citations from Wesley. But what are they supposed to prove? How are they related to the question of the significance of Aldersgate? The last group of eight refer to the year 1738 as having had some significance for Wesley. Collins knows that I have dealt with them in the argument about the origins of Methodism. Why then are they cited here as though I had not said anything about them? But what is Wesley saying in these texts about the significance of the year 1738? He is maintaining that in or about the year he was persuaded of and preached justification by faith. What has this to do with Aldersgate? Collins doesn’t even try to demonstrate their relevance. He hopes the reader won’t ask such embarrassing questions. But the reader of Wesley’s Journal knows:

a) that Wesley does not claim that Aldersgate played any role in persuading him of this doctrine;
b) that Wesley does say he was persuaded of it months before [Journal March 5 and 6, April 22, 1738 recalled again as having occurred weeks earlier in the account of May 24, 1738 [paragraph 12];
c) that he began preaching this doctrine well before Aldersgate, on March 6 in fact.
Thus none of these texts support Collins’ contention of the importance of Aldersgate. But then why are they cited here. Are they not mere window dressing?

That leaves the four texts that presumably bear more directly on the case. The first of these supports the view that four days after Aldersgate Wesley was still hoping that the decisive change had occurred. This was not in question. The second is from Wesley’s letter to Samuel in which he admits to his brother that he had not had the change he had expected but that he still had some measure of faith. But Collins seems to agree that Wesley had some degree of faith prior to Aldersgate. How then is this supportive of his case for the enduring significance of Aldersgate? The third text is taken from the very passage where Wesley maintains that he had not been a Christian before Aldersgate and that more than six months later he still was not one. The text does show that Wesley mentions May 24. He mentions it in maintaining that it produced no change. What does Collins think he is proving anyway?

The last text is interesting as it is the only place where the later Wesley seems to attribute some significance to May 24, 1738 and Collins waves it like a brand plucked from the burning. But what importance does Wesley attribute to that date here? Does he claim that he was converted then, that his life was changed, that it is in some way the center of his spiritual journey? Nothing of the sort. He claims that it was from that date that he was opposed for preaching justification by faith. The text says nothing whatever about a dramatic change in Wesley’s spiritual life at all. It is completely beside the point.

But Collins wishes to claim that it shows that the date was important enough for Wesley to remember it “over seven years” later. Unfortunately the reference seems to prove the opposite. For Wesley does not voluntarily refer to May 24. This is forced on him by an opponent who is accusing him of inconsistency in his account of the main doctrines of Methodism. Instead of proving that the date was indelibly etched on his memory, it suggests that Wesley had forgotten about it until forcibly reminded of it by his opponent.

The text is a slender reed to build any case on since even the significance which Wesley does reluctantly attribute to that date
appears to be erroneous. The Journal suggests that Wesley was opposed for preaching justification by faith prior to May 24. (see Journal entries for May 7, 9, 14, and 21). A full clarification of this passage need not detain us here any further. It is clear that it does not have to do with Wesley's vivid recall of Aldersgate. Like the other texts listed by Collins this one does precisely nothing toward advancing his case for the "continuing significance" of Aldersgate. In this as in other matters it is important not only to quote texts, one should also read them and understand them.

Now Collins is offended at my strong language about the perpetuation of the myth of Aldersgate. I admit that I have used strong language in an attempt to break through the obfuscation which envelops this issue. But it appears that my language was insufficiently stern to awaken Collins to the perils of his position.

However I am grateful to Collins for suggesting another reason for abolishing the commemoration of Aldersgate. If the defense of the "continuing significance" of that episode produces this degree of confusion in its otherwise intelligent defenders, it would be to their advantage to be relieved of the occasion for such confusion as soon as possible.

Let me conclude with another attempt to clarify what is at stake in this discussion. The problem with Aldersgate is that it presents as normative a position of the immature Wesley. In contrast it is the mature Wesley who develops such doctrines as prevenient grace and sanctification as well as the distinction between justification and perfection which is such an important part of the Wesleyan legacy. It seems clear that it is precisely as Wesley develops such mature positions that Aldersgate loses any significance for him. That is why it is necessary for him to add the notes to his Journal which deny the claim that he was not a Christian in Georgia, that is why his own abridgement of the Journal eliminates all reference to Aldersgate, that is why there is no mention of Aldersgate in any of Wesley's accounts of the rise of the Methodist movement. The attempt to rescue the significance of Aldersgate by appeal to the theological developments which in fact reduced (or rather eliminated) its significance for Wesley himself is utterly confused and
REVIEW AND COMMENT

self-stultifying. I am sorry that Collins has not grasped this essential point. I hope I have succeeded in stating it more clearly and persuasively this time.

I don’t think that I have said the last word about Aldersgate. I don’t even think I have said my last word about Aldersgate. Thus I welcome the desire of Collins and others to continue the discussion. We are agreed that it is an interesting problem and one worth discussing. I hope the readers of QR agree with us on that.
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