

Confession and community

Developing an Israel-like view of the church

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I picture the process of change in my theological thinking in both archaeological and architectural terms: I have dug down into earlier layers of experience, and built on what went before. In my childhood and youth, I encountered cultural and religious groups other than my own; later I would engage them theologically, in reverse order. The Chinese were the first I knew as different, then Jews, Roman Catholics and non-Lutheran Protestants, in that sequence. The latter engaged my theological attention first, and then the Roman Catholics and Jews. The Chinese I have yet to examine theologically, and now that I am in my 60s, perhaps I never will. Their tacit influence on my thinking, however, lies deepest and it is only gradually that I have become aware of how pervasive it has been.

I was born in north central China, far from port cities and displays of Western power, and lived there for 17 years until shortly before Pearl Harbor. Because of illness I did not go away to boarding school until I was 12, and my life was very different from the standard accounts of many Americans who grew up in the Far East, such as John Hersey. My parents were Swedish-American Lutheran missionaries who were more Sinicized than they realized. They contributed more than they knew to my childhood sense that the Chinese are the most intelligent, handsome and, at their Confucian best, cultivated of all peoples. To be sure—so my parents thought—they needed Christianity in order to make democracy work and escape communism, as well as for their souls' salvation, but that belief did not make me suppose that Westerners are superior. I came to think that apostate Christians were much worse than non-Christian Chinese, as the Nazis were proving. Thus China laid the groundwork for a disenchantment with Christendom that led me 30 years later to hope for the end of cultural Christianity as the enabling condition for the development of a diaspora Christianity. (Some articles I wrote in the '60s and '70s seem to me close to Stanley

Hauerwas's position, but since then I have had reluctant second thoughts.)

Loyang, the city in which I was born and reared, was without electricity, running water, motorized transportation or even radios. The ways in which our neighbors lived and thought were as unmodern as those of the Han dynasty 2,000 years before. Further, famines, pestilences, brigandage and war (both civil and with the Japanese) engulfed our area repeatedly, and flight to safer places for short or long periods was common. Yet the processes and perceptions of life, I later came to think, were not greatly different from an American suburb, medieval ghetto or first-century Hellenistic household.

As I grew older I concluded that modernity is not unique in either its goodness or badness, but is just one epoch and culture among others, in some ways better and in some ways worse. Those who thought otherwise I found pretentious, including most of the writers of the past 400 years whose works were staple fare in my student days in Minnesota, Connecticut and France. Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Bultmann I found unappealing. Instead, I favored an unlikely combination of, on the one hand, medieval thinkers and their contemporary interpreters such as Maritain and Gilson, and, on the other, the Reformers and their neo-Orthodox successors (who were fashionable) and confessional Lutherans (who were not). The only recent theologians I would now add to this list of major influences are Roman Catholics such as Rahner and von Balthasar. On the nontheological side I gained a new dimension in the '60s from Wittgensteinians, T. S. Kuhn, Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz and contemporary nonfoundationalists. Whatever their differences, they are not bewitched by modern uniqueness: they hold that the basic processes of the linguistic, social and cognitive construction of reality and, experience are much the same in all times and places, however varied the outcomes. One need not grow up in China to find such views persuasive, but in my case it helped.

The dichotomy I perceived between Chinese and non-Chinese was soon overlaid by a more salient trichotomy among Christians, non-Christians and Jews. By the time I was six or so, I saw these as the three basic types of human beings. That I would have noticed Jews is odd, for I had never, as far as I knew, met any, and my parents, products of the rural Midwest, probably hadn't either. The Old Testament, however, was as much a part of my upbringing as the New, and I early learned to think of the Jews as Jesus' people. Some of them, furthermore, had once lived in our part of China, and my father was fascinated by the remains of their T'ang dynasty

settlements. Now other Jews from other parts of the world were returning to the Holy Land, as the Bible foretold. By 11, I was imaginatively a Darbyite Zionist daydreaming of becoming a kibbutz fighter. The rise of Nazism first made me aware of anti-Semitism. Some of the German missionaries we knew were at first pro-Hitler. Refugees began arriving in China, and two Jewish boys were members of my high school graduating class of 20.

My premillennialist philo-Semitism did not survive adolescence, but the aftereffects persisted. I was conditioned against Marcionite tendencies—evident in some post-Reformation Lutheranism—to spiritualize and privatize Christianity and neglect the Old Testament. I was also predisposed to welcome, at a much later date, the work of my Yale colleagues Brevard Childs and Hans Frei on canonical reading and on narrative and figural scriptural interpretation, respectively. More and more I have come to think that only the postcritical retrieval of such classic premodern hermeneutical strategies can give due weight to the abiding importance of Israel (including contemporary Judaism) and Israel's scriptures for Christians. This development in my thinking started late, beginning in the '70s, and first entered my published work in *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984). Now I am writing an ecclesiology that is in large part an "Israelology."

In contrast to my literary encounter with Jews, I knew Roman Catholics personally before I learned they were different. They were cousins, children of my mother's brother, whom we visited when on furlough in the States. Only gradually did I realize that theirs was the church that had persecuted Luther, slaughtered the innocents of whom I read in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and supposedly taught that salvation was by works, not faith. I hoped that they trusted Jesus and not the pope's rules and regulations, but believed their chances of salvation would certainly be greater if they were Bible-believing Protestants.

The most important change for my work is the polarization between left and right in both Protestantism and Catholicism and the decline of a center rooted in communal traditions.

The sad state of the Catholics troubled me in childhood, but not until I was in college did this concern translate into a theological and philosophical interest prompted by reading Gilson and Maritain. That interest led to doctoral work in medieval philosophy and theology as preparation for specialization in contemporary Catholicism. After ten years of teaching medieval thought at Yale (mostly in the

philosophy department), I was selected by the Lutheran World Federation to be a delegated observer to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and since then have done most of my research and writing in the context of participation in national and international ecumenical dialogue, mostly with Roman Catholics. It is the ecumenical movement even more than my teaching at Yale (since Vatican II, all in the divinity school and the department of religious studies) that has been the context of my thinking.

My ecumenical concerns have been tilted in a Catholic direction. Under the influence of three European Lutherans, Kristin Skydsgaard, Peter Brunner and Edmund Schlink, and one American, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, I came to think that Lutheranism should try to become what it started out to be, a reform movement within the Catholic Church of the West. By such a strategy it can best contribute to the goal of wider Christian unity. This goal and strategy have guided almost all my work since then, though my notions of appropriate and feasible tactics have been changing in the past decade.

My turn away from developments in post-Reformation Protestantism started in midadolescence, years before my tilt toward Rome. In my early years I made no distinction between Lutherans and other Protestants. In order to maintain as much of a common Christian front as possible, American Lutherans in China, including my parents, did not advertise their confessional and sacramental differences from those to whom they were closest, Protestant conservative evangelicals (or "evangelicalists," as some Europeans call them). This was easy for them, for they were for the most part pietists of biblicistic and conversionist proclivities, but it confused me. Their pietism, which I confused with Lutheranism, early made me restive, not least because of my precocious reading of Britannica articles on evolution and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (my father's library was short on comic books). My restiveness was increased by memorizing Luther's *Small Catechism* for confirmation, and by arguments in boarding school with, for example, Southern Baptist classmates about such matters as infant baptism. Obviously Lutherans were different from other Protestants (that was a relief), but I still did not know what they were: I was looking for an identity.

That was provided in my sophomore and junior years by a new headmaster, Pastor Albue, a bright, personable and athletic young missionary, the idol of the high school students. He alerted me to the possibility of an unambiguously confessional Lutheranism that was devout but not pietistic, and quite unreticent about baptismal

regeneration and the real presence. Others whom I came to know during the same period pointed in the same direction, most notably the Norwegian missionary scholar K. L. Reichelt, suspected of heresy by evangelicals because of his immense knowledge of and respect for Buddhism, but remembered by me for his Lutheran preaching.

Through such influences, I began to opt for a Reformation Christianity self-consciously opposed to modern Protestantism in both its conservative and liberal forms. Its starting point is neither biblicistic nor experientialist, and certainly not individualistic, but dogmatic: it commences with the historic Christian communal confession of faith in Christ. For the Reformers, as for the Orthodox and Catholic churches of East and West, that confession is the one expressed in the ancient trinitarian and christological creeds. The Reformers did not so much try to prove these creeds from Scripture (and certainly not from experience), but rather read Scripture in their light, and then used the Bible thus construed to mold experience and guide thought and action. God's word, in their premodern hermeneutics, was ever applicable, and changed in import with the circumstances. It was not constrained to a single kind of meaning by inerrantist theories of inspiration or liberal ones of revelatory experience. My understanding of the implications of beginning with dogma has developed greatly (see *The Nature of Doctrine*), but not the creedal and confessional starting point. That has remained the integrating center of my later theological work.

Although I early defined myself theologically in opposition to modern Protestantism (rather than in dialogue, as with Roman Catholicism, Judaism and China), I have constantly been preoccupied with Protestants. I have lived with conservative Protestants in my youth, and liberal ones ever since I arrived at Yale as a student over 40 years ago. I keep hoping that evangelicals will not think my work compromises their emphases on the love of Jesus and on biblical authority, and that liberals will not suppose it is inconsistent with intellectual openness or commitment to peace and justice. The desire to communicate affects theology, and changes I have perceived in the climate of discourse have affected my thinking in recent years.

The most important change for my work in the past 20 years is the increasing polarization between the modern right and left in both Protestantism and Catholicism, and the corresponding decline of a center rooted in premodern communal traditions. That center had been constituted by the Protestant neo-

orthodoxy and Catholic *nouvelle théologie*, which were ascending from the 1920s to the 1960s. They had sought renewal in the light of contemporary needs by critically returning to the sources of the faith in Scripture and premodern tradition. They failed, on the whole, to escape the limitations of modern historical criticism and, with partial exceptions, did not retrieve premodern classic hermeneutics. Yet they provided the context for the flourishing in Protestantism and Catholicism of the unitive ecumenism that has been my life's work.

Now, however, interest has shifted more and more to unmediated *aggiornamento*, the updating of faith and practice by direct translation into presumably more intelligible and relevant modern idioms and actions. This is a revival of the liberal strategy, familiar since the Enlightenment, of letting the world set the church's agenda. What is different is chiefly the agenda and the tactics, for the world has changed. The dechristianization of the public realm proceeds apace, and communal traditions have weakened. The ecumenical focus has shifted from church unity, from reconciling the historic communities, to the service of the world, and therefore away from the kind of ecumenism that has been my chief concern. The new left is more extreme than the old, and is stronger in the historically mainline churches than ever before.

The extremism and the strength of the right is also increasing. Rightists also are unconcerned with church unity and community or with *ressourcement*. They emphasize not the critical retrieval of the sources of the faith but recent traditions formed in earlier modern contexts. Roman Catholic traditionalists cling to a 19th-century version of Tridentism and, judging by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and his followers, are more schismatic than the progressives. Protestant evangelicals are also fixated on the 19th century and are systematically antiecumenical. After the interlude between the 1920s and '60s, the polarization between right and left characteristic of modern mass societies is on the rise and swamping the churches as never before.

Others share this picture of the present situation, but I find it less depressing than most for both nontheological and theological reasons. The four centuries of modernity are coming to an end. Its individualistic foundational rationalism, always wavering between skeptical relativism and totalitarian absolutism, is being replaced, as I earlier mentioned, by an understanding of knowledge and belief as socially and linguistically constituted. Ideologies rooted in Enlightenment rationalism are collapsing. This is unmistakably true of the leftist ones after the *annus mirabilis*

1989, but it is also true of liberal democratic capitalism on the right. Politically pragmatic liberalism may be practically necessary in pluralistic societies, but as an individualistic secular ideology it is no more viable in the long run than its illiberal counterparts. Societies need strong mediating communities through which traditions of personal virtue, common good and ultimate meaning are transmitted to new generations. It is hard to see how such communities can flourish without a religious dimension, and in traditionally Christian lands, that means a Christian one.

I once welcomed the passing of Christendom and found Richard John Neuhaus's demurrers misplaced; but now, as I earlier mentioned, I am having uncomfortable second thoughts. The waning of cultural Christianity might be good for the churches, but what about society? To my chagrin, I find myself thinking that traditionally Christian lands when stripped of their historic faith are worse than others. They become unworkable or demonic. There is no reason to suppose that what happened in Nazi Germany cannot happen in liberal democracies, though the devils will no doubt be disguised very differently. From this point of view, the Christianization of culture can be in some situations the churches' major contribution to feeding the poor, clothing the hungry and liberating the imprisoned. So it was in the past and, given the disintegration of modern ideologies, so it may be at times in the future. Talk of "Christian America" and John Paul II's vision of a "Christian Europe" make me uncomfortable, but I have seen a number of totally unexpected improbabilities come to pass in my lifetime, such as Roman Catholic transformations and communism's collapse, and cannot rule these out as impossible.

Whether or not re-Christianization occurs, however, our era is a new one, and the churches are in the midst of a vast transformation. My understanding of what is needed has developed in three interrelated directions in the past decade: hermeneutical, organizational and ecclesiological. Renewal depends, I have come to think, on the spread of proficiency in premodern yet postcritical Bible reading, on restructuring the churches into something like pre-Constantinian organizational patterns, and on the development of an Israel-like understanding of the church.

These elements belong together. For classic hermeneutics, the Hebrew bible is the basic ecclesiological textbook. Christians see themselves within those texts, when read in the light of Christ, as God's people, chosen for service not preferment, and bound together in a historically and sociologically continuous community that God refuses to disown whether it is faithful or unfaithful, united or disunited, in the catacombs or on the throne. It was in some such way as this that the Christians of

the first centuries, whom we call catholic, used Israel's story as a template for their own existence. It was they, not the Marcionite or gnostic Christians, who developed a communal life strong enough to become the great majority and win the Empire, despite their lack of social, economic, intellectual, political or military power.

They were also, however, supersessionists who claimed to have replaced Israel, thus denying that the Jews were any longer, except negatively, God's chosen people; and they were triumphalists who believed that the church could not be unfaithful as Israel had been. The logic of Christian faith thereby became perversely opposed in a variety of ways to the fundamental belief in Jesus as the crucified Messiah. It has taken the disasters of Christian apostasy, often disguised as orthodoxy, in combination with historical-critical work to unmask the problems. We can now see that the early Christian errors resulted from self-serving gentile Christian misappropriations of intra-Jewish polemics over Jesus' messiahship, and that these, errors are blatantly opposed to much of the New Testament witness, especially Paul's. But if these errors are rejected, so I have come to think, Christians can now apply Israel's story to themselves without supersessionism or triumphalism. The story's power is undiminished. "Oneness in Christ" gains a concrete specificity that it otherwise lacks. All Christians, whether Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox or African, American and Chinese, belong to a single community of morally imperative responsibility for one another like the members of the early church or contemporary Jews.

These are the issues with which I am now struggling. I think I can show that none of the major Christian traditions is dogmatically opposed to an Israel-like view of the church, but acceptance of it involves a break with nearly 2,000 years of both modern and premodern Christian self-understandings. Unitive ecumenism, among other things, needs to be reconceived. It can no longer be thought of, as I have done most of my life, as a matter of reconciling relatively intact and structurally still-Constantinian communions from the top down. Rather it must be thought of as reconstituting Christian community and unity from, so to speak, the bottom up. It is here that the structuring of the church in the first centuries is especially instructive. The ecumenical journey when thus conceived will be longer but also more adventurous: renewal and unification become inseparable.

This focus on building Christian community will seem outrageous to some in view of the world's needs, but it is a strength for those who see the weakening of communal commitments and loyalties as modernity's fundamental disease. Perhaps no greater

contribution to peace, justice and the environment is possible than that provided by the existence of intercontinental and interconfessional communal networks such as the churches already are to some extent, and can become more fully, if God wills.

By centering this article on communities, I have not mentioned, for example, those who taught me most about *how*—as distinct from *what*—to think theologically and historically: Robert L. Calhoun and H. Richard Niebuhr of Yale, and Paul Vignaux of Paris. Nor have I mentioned my daughter, a Christian student of rabbinics, from whom I have learned much about Judaism; nor my wife, a Presbyterian and professor of religious studies, who has in various ways greatly heightened my appreciation of Calvin. Yet the communal focus, though oversimple, is not wrong. As far as my scholarly career is concerned, I have always been primarily interested in how ideas function in communal traditions of language and practice rather than in themselves or in their role in individual lives considered in isolation.

I seem to have come nearly full circle. The ecclesiology on which I am working concerns Chinese, Jews, Roman Catholics and Protestants within the horizon of a crumbling of modernity that brings Christians closer to premodernity than they've been in perhaps 300 years, and closer to the situation of the first centuries than they've been in more than a millennium and a half. We are now better placed than perhaps ever before to retrieve, critically and repentantly, the heritage in the Hebrew scriptures, apostolic writings and early tradition. This retrieval is also more urgent than ever if the churches are to become the kind of global and ecumenical community that the new age needs. Such are the convictions that now inform my thinking, and they are developments rather than departures from my early experiences and youthful theology. Archaeology and architecture almost coincide.