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FROM ILLUSIONS OF INNOCENCE

TO

THE WISDOM OF SERPANTS

Shaun Casey

Forty years from now, when an unfortunate doctoral student sets out to write a social history of the discontent within the Churches of Christ during the closing years of the twentieth century, the beginning point of that endeavor could well be **The Worldly Church**. This collaborative effort of Michael Weed, Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes is as close to genuine social criticism as the Churches of Christ have produced since the white heat of the Sixties.¹ It has been read widely, has always been provocative, if not persuasive, and has produced varying responses ranging from charges that the authors have abandoned restorationism to the hilarity of preachers conducting classes on why their congregation is not a worldly church. It has been fascinating to watch people in our tradition read the book in such a manner that, as one friend of mine put it, people see in this book what they want to see in it and thus liberals and conservatives like it for radically different reasons. Nevertheless, in an era when church college administrators are reputed to deny tenure based on errant choices in politics and presidential races, the publication of this type of critical work is not without its risks. The authors are to be commended for their courage and conviction in bringing this stimulating book to print.

The broad thesis of the book is that the Churches of Christ today, heavily influenced by secularization, have lost a sense of transcendence and are in danger of losing their identity. The three fold movement of the analysis is to summarize what the authors see as the current predicament of our denomination,

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explain its origins, and to offer some guidelines for reversing the identified problems in the future. It is my hypothesis that the underlying unity between the authors is their discontent with the current state of affairs in the Churches of Christ of their region and their common (though not stated) admiration for Barthian theology. Hughes and Allen found in Weed's theory of secularization a convenient typology to unify their wide ranging complaints with contemporary practice. This approach results in internal tensions when the book attempts to offer some kind of map for the future. The primary strength of the book is found in the discussion of current practices while the primary weakness is the attempt to describe conceptually what has precipitated the current problem. The attempt to construct a theology for the future has mixed results. The task of reviewing the book is made all the more difficult because the book reads like an atomistic work redacted by committee. A strong editorial hand could have shortened the book and confronted the inner conceptual difficulties.

Chapter 1, "The Identity Crisis of the Churches of Christ" begins with the ominous observation that the biblical identity of the Churches of Christ is substantially undermined and is in danger of being lost. We are no longer known as we once were as a people of the Book. It is striking to me that from the outset the book sounds a typical restorationist theme: what once was held dear has been lost and now needs to be rediscovered. What is intriguing is that what was lost and needs restoring is not the purity of the first century church, but the identity of the Churches of Christ at some unspecified time after 1906 but before the end of the Sixties.

There is no reason to quarrel with the observation that the current state of affairs among many of our congregations is bad. It should be noted, however, that

the complaint seems aimed at those large churches in Texas which are the trend setters in whatever the latest fashion happens to be. While it is no doubt true that these churches are influential, it should be remembered that they do not represent the experience of the majority of members in the Churches of Christ. As I recall, Mac Lynn's research from the early 1980s suggested that the average congregation of the Churches of Christ had well under a hundred members. Many of

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the complaints suggested by the authors apply to the mega-churches but probably do not reflect the normal experiences of most members of our tradition. We are still a denomination comprised of small to moderate congregations. The range of actual practices in our churches is much wider than the book hints. It is all too easy to assume that the big city Texas churches represent the norm when in fact they do not.

Is it really wise or accurate to compare the current situation with an unspecified point in the past and to claim that things are worse now? The resulting wistfulness hangs heavily over the rest of the book and greatly handicaps its mission. Their anguish is over the loss of a state that never existed. The authors recognize that sectarianism was strong in the past yet they seem to either be more comfortable with that heritage than the current constellation or they want a return to the past without carrying the sectarian baggage with them. But the Churches of Christ of the middle century were hardly idyllic. We were rabidly sectarian, racist and segregationist, anti-women, pro-Vietnam war, thoroughly assimilated to a view equating capitalism with Christianity, and generally oriented to right wing politics. We were a people of the Book only to the extent we were able to make that Book conform to the social norms of the culture we were in. If the point of the authors is simply that things are different than before and bad as well, they are, of course, correct. I am not convinced that they are, on the whole, worse than in previous years. I would much rather fight the current set of battles than to fight the old sectarian agenda.

After sounding their alarm the authors then introduce their most important arguments. They point to the loss of transcendence which is felt in our churches which in turn segues into their contention that the secular spirit of our age which would deny any relevance to the transcendent has deeply influenced

our theology. The contention is that these facets of our existence have arisen in the past twenty years. They elaborate that the lack of understanding of precisely what transcendence means within the contemporary Churches of Christ is itself evidence of the secularization of our movement. Concrete examples of secularization include the rise of self reliance, the increase of wealth, the increased participation in civic affairs, the rise of need oriented ministries and the demise of 'biblical theology.'

The crucial questions, in my mind, are whether or not the Churches of Christ are more assimilated to American culture than they were twenty years ago and whether or not a sense of transcendence is a sufficient antidote to the alleged corrosive effects of secularism. I think we have become assimilated to a broader spectrum of our society as it has grown increasingly complex across all its strata. Twenty five years ago Norman Parks wrote a fascinating paper which is helpful in assessing the questions at hand.* Parks observed that the Churches of Christ were comfortably nestled within the lower middle class ethos of the day. It was a church which had made peace with its world almost exactly along the lines set forth by the authors with the exception that the level of material gain was not as high as is true today. For anyone who believes that the catalogue of vices in **The Worldly Church** is new should consult the specifics of the Parks article.

The irony here, I believe, is that the Churches of Christ have suffered from an overly transcendent view of God that bordered on deism. God has sent his Son alright, but the New Testament functioned in place of an abiding presence of the divine. The work of atonement had been accomplished but Father and Son were in the heavenly realm, and the remaining task of the church was to use its God given reason to study the Bible and convert the world. The gulf between human and divine was large and the only path between them was scripture properly used and understood. It was, and perhaps always has been, a message of self reliance. If self reliance is at the heart of secularism, as the authors argue, then we have been secularists for a long, long time. Furthermore, it is not at all clear to me that a renewed message which emphasizes the transcendence of God will lead to a breakthrough of the current impasse.

What we have seen in the last twenty years has been a steady erosion of that old sterile transcendence and a cacophony of pietistic and evangelical incantations moving in to fill the void in our popular piety. In the process any conscious notion of restorationism has all but died among the laity in the mainstream churches. The old language of restorationism is still trotted out by clergy and teachers on those occasions when the boundaries of doctrine or acceptable practice are threatened, but the hermeneutical calculus of explicitly restoring the New Testament Church has long since disappeared among the laity in most mainline Churches of Christ.

The second chapter, "Secularized Religion in

American Culture,” sets forth the primary interpretive tool for analyzing the current morass. Secularization involves two separable dimensions. One involves the decline in importance which society attaches to religious institutions and the other is the erosion of religious consciousness in the minds and lives of people. An analysis of the secularization of western Europe and attempts to draw parallels to the American situation are discussed. Such secularization theory is not without controversy. There are several important things to notice. First of all, the authors recognize that the same type of secularization has not taken place here as in Europe. Consequently, such theorists are forced to posit a more subtle and insidious form of secularism that looks like religion but is in fact really secularism. This type of shift then allows for an analysis that sees irreligion in religion and most anything can become evidence for the theory at hand. So despite the fact there is ample evidence in the culture at large and within the Churches of Christ that religious institutions are not in perpetual decline, and in some cases flourishing, this modification of secularization theory can ignore the evidence.

Second, the authors transform what is a sociological category, secularization, into a theological judgment beyond the parameters of the term. The analysis presumes a baseline of Church of Christ practice at some indeterminate point before the end of the Sixties which was not influenced by secularization and argues that secularization has eroded this state in the last twenty or so years. They mistake change within a religious movement as evidence of the sociological phenomena of secularization. This is not always the case. In fact, at one point they observe that sectarianism is evidence of secularism and yet the authors note that sectarianism has declined dramatically in the last twenty years. Secularization is presented as an almost irresistible deterministic onslaught and no historical evidence is given of religious groups which have successfully resisted. The authors go so far as to state that to seek a solution to secularism would in fact be a symptom of the problem itself! (Though, ironically, a sketch of where we should go from here is put forth later in the book).

The authors have taken over part of the communitarian critique of liberal society and shifted the focus of the discontent from liberal society as a whole and made the target the current Churches of Christ.³ In doing so they unfairly juxtapose therapy and religiously motivated social action against the true work of the church. In their various statements about the rise of therapeutic ministries in our churches they gloss the terrible psychological toll exacted upon an inordinate number of members in the Churches of Christ. These ministries arose, in part, in direct response to the real issues created by our theology. No amount of preaching, rightly conceived and executed, can address these problems effectively.

What we lack is a theology which is capable of appropriating therapy, among many other things, in a satisfactory manner. This problem calls for better theologizing rather than the polemics we get here.

The strength of the book rests in its descriptions of actual practices within churches and in its reinterpretation of restorationism as an ongoing process. (It is interesting to note that when the book gets to setting forth a theology this notion of restoration as an ongoing process is dropped. My hunch is that one author is at work in one place and another author is at work in the other.) Rather than muddy the water by stretching and reinterpreting sociological theory, the authors should stick to their effective critique of current practices in our churches. The current hodgepodge of practices reflects less of an infection of secularism than it does a lack of any sense of a theological method at the level of the local church. Instead of plagiarizing Hardeman's Tabernacle sermons our preachers now plagiarize Chuck Swindoll. Is it any wonder we are in a mess?

The “consequences” of secularism that the authors observe are real practices, but I think they stem more from bad theology than the abstraction of secularism. These practices include a prudential gospel, an excessive focus on the self and a widespread reverence for power, control, and wealth. The gospel can become merely a means to an end and in some of our churches it has. That is a tragedy. In the absence of a strong impulse to serve others as we have been served by God it is easy to adopt a gospel of self-help. Our reverence for power is cause for a call to repentance and for more thought and action on how disciples are to use their money. But I believe all of these tendencies

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can be traced back in our history before the recent period of alleged secularization.

What would be fascinating to see from the authors would be historical analysis of actual institutions and practices in the last thirty years and a survey of the evolution of our interpretive methods. These are their skills. Admittedly, such work is dangerous, but so is making the charge that mainline Churches of Christ are secularists. It would be interesting to see how preaching has changed, how ministerial training has changed and how elderships function differently today. What has been the role of Christian colleges in the changing practices of our tradition?⁴ These are the

questions whose answers will give us a better sense of where to go than whether or not certain church constellations really are "secular." We would benefit from their expertise as historians in these areas.

As I mentioned at the outset, the attempt to offer some alternative theological vision produced mixed results. The book goes so far as to say that various "cause theologies" such as black theology, feminist theology, liberation theology and Moral Majority(!) are all at their heart secular movements. Is this really a fair characterization? It is bothersome to maintain that major strains of contemporary theology are to be equated to Moral Majority because they share a utilitarian approach to religion.

On the other hand, Chapter 5, "Recovering the Way" sets forth a very interesting sketch of the type of biblical theology the authors advocate we adopt as a movement.⁶ It is interesting to note that the authors do not give us historical examples either from within our movement or without that embody the type of theology they set forth here. There are five rubrics under which the chapter is organized. The first of these is "A People Under the Word." Here we are encouraged to engage with the theology of the Bible which means we should attempt to discern the central themes of the biblical writings. The analysis is excellent as far as it goes. My main concern is that there is little room given in this theological method for grappling with the world as we encounter it. Is there not a place for the social and natural sciences in the theological enterprise? The Bible does in fact provide us answers to questions of atonement, human nature, and God's continued activity in our midst. But the Bible does not provide us with interpretive tools to understand all problems and organizational issues in the world.⁷ Indeed, by relying on the disciplines of sociology and critical history the authors tacitly admit this, so why no explicit recognition of that fact when talking about what our theological method should be?

The second category set forth is "A Community of the Cross." Closely related is the third category, "A Fellowship of the Spirit." Here an eloquent plea is made for recognizing that the local church is the locus for doing theology. Our theology should be centered in the community of faith, and it should take on the character of the cross and be sustained by the presence of the Spirit. The fourth category, "A Worshiping People" extends the notion of a community centered faith and argues that we should encounter the reality of God in our worship in a manner which discloses the awesome presence of God. This is in marked contrast to the cult of efficiency which reigns in far too many of our worship services.

The chapter concludes with its most powerful section, "A Holy People" where, for the first time the authors set forth anything that resembles a social ethic. Here we are reminded of God's acts on behalf of the poor and oppressed and we are exhorted to live and serve in ways which carry on this special activity of God.

Are the authors still restorationists? The answer must be yes and no. Yes, in the sense they cryptically and only briefly refer to restoration as an ongoing process. No, in the sense that this radical reinterpretation of restoring the New Testament Church is ignored when they set out their guidelines for the future. The question is not personally troubling to me. Yet, for many it is unfortunately the question to be asked of the book *The Churches of Christ* are a big tent and my seat offers a unique though limited view. Nevertheless, I will make a few observations. First of all, we are already a pluralist community, like it or not. We are part of a tradition that includes the disparate likes of Kip McKean, Ira Rice and Leroy Garrett. We will never recover the sense, real or imagined, of being a uniform and coherent movement. The sooner we make peace with this realization the sooner we will see that such pluralism is not a scandal but an asset. Some will attempt to impose an orthodoxy on the rest of us, but they will not succeed.

It may be that the current spate of historical work being done on the Churches of Christ in the first half of this century will reveal that we have been more diverse and less uniform than we suspected. Perhaps that is one reason this time period has been neglected by our historians. Indeed, one cannot write a history of the Churches of Christ before this century, yet resurrecting Barton Stone as a theological model is safer than dealing with the history of the Churches of Christ in this century.

Further, our credo should become talk or die. And in this vein we should be thankful for the efforts of Weed, Allen and Hughes for they have started conversations as few have in the past with this book. We need to cultivate conversation partners within our movement and we need to develop the ability to converse beyond our fellowship. Academic theology and the experiences of other denominations hold out much more promise than most of our members suspect. (This is also why I believe that **Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of the Churches of Christ** is a far more helpful book than this one). We have had very few models of civil discourse between different positions in our tradition. Neither liberals or conservatives have a good record of talking beyond their own circle of friends. Perhaps we have reached a point where that can begin to change.

And finally, if we are ever to be taken seriously by anyone in our world, we have to expand our intellectual horizon beyond the current provincialism. We can no longer get by with skinning Darwin and Freud and rejecting the various theological disciplines. One can look around and see signs of change. It is fascinating to watch doctrinal entrepreneurs convince our movement to collect funds for missionaries in a manner which would have been broadly unacceptable even ten years ago. What this tells me is that there are a number of formerly important issues that no longer carry the weight they used to. The primary question seems to me to be where this theological evolution will go next.

Over the past few years I have had many con-

versations with ministerial friends who confess, for instance, a belief that our churches need to allow equal access for women to positions of ministry, leadership and public worship. Yet they all feel that to go public with such an opinion would be futile at best and job threatening at worst. My hope is that more ministers will display a moral courage that leads them to speak their private opinions publicly as we grapple as a movement with issues such as gender, race, and class which are far more important than the issue of a missionary society. Do we have either the maturity to have this discussion or the forum in which the discussion can take place? I hope the answer is yes on both counts but I am not so sure that is the answer.

It may be that our tradition does not in fact possess the requisite resources to continue to exist in

the modern world for much longer. Over half our population is made up of women and I see plenty of evidence of their growing exodus in our congregations. Nevertheless I believe we do possess the raw material for a theological renaissance, and I am committed to participating in the continuing conversation to nudge it along. What we need is a theology which corresponds to our lessening sectarianism and reflects our increased participation in the world. The Churches of Christ are composed of people who are active in the public sphere but who participate without any real theological understanding of that participation. To retreat into a modified sectarianism would not reflect the real status of our church in the world and would be little more than schizophrenic.

*We are intended to please God -- not
the other way around -- and the idea
that Christianity is something we adopt
for what it will pay us in happiness and
personal mastery is an idea which must
be explicitly discouraged.*

-- Neal Plantinga
