

The Episcopal Church: the Canary in the Culture's Coal Mine

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The Episcopal Church has lost approximately a third of its members in 50 years. This should be a warning to other denominations. The gas that is choking The Episcopal Church is the same gas that is affecting all other church traditions, as well as the universities and other institutions of Western Civilization. The air we breathe does not contain the gas of coal mines, but our air does contain a mold or yeast.

Jesus warned us of this yeast in Matt. 16:6: "Take heed, beware the yeast of the Sadducees!" The disciples were confused since they thought he was rebuking them because they had brought no bread. Then they realized that he was not talking about bread but about the teaching of the Sadducees.

I have long wondered why he said "yeast" when he actually meant teaching. I found the answer to this some time ago while reading Parade Magazine, the Sunday supplement:

In Chippewa Falls, Wis., it got so hot that a traveling load of yeast-filled pizza dough expanded, breaking out of the back of a truck and creating a 25 to 35 mile of oozing blob on Highway 29. "We had everything from bread-loaf size droppings to some about half the size of a car," said Sgt. James Barnier of the Wisconsin State Patrol. They used snowplows to get it off the highway.

The point is that yeast is not only pervasive and too often unseen, but remarkably powerful. Jesus' warning to his disciples is a warning to us because it is the natural air of the world in which we live. St. Paul begins his great Chapter 12 of Romans with the exhortation (significantly absent from the first 11 chapters) with verse 2: "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world..." (NLT) This problem of the Sadducee yeast in the Episcopal Church did not begin yesterday. Bishop James Pike denied the creedal affirmation regarding Christ and the Trinity in the 1960's. A committee was formed under the leadership of Bishop Stephen Bayne to determine how to deal with this departure from the faith to which we have sworn. Their report was issued in a book, *Theological Freedom and Social Responsibility* (Seabury Press, 1967). The matter was resolved with the recommendation that "the word 'heresy' should be abandoned except in the context of radical, creative theological controversies of the early formative years of Christian doctrine." The word, heresy, it continues, "presumes to a measure of theological prejudgment which is inappropriate to the mature Christian community." (p. 22,23) Bishop Pike was censured by the House of Bishops, but only for the "tone and manner," not the substance of his teaching.

This response would seem to stem from the overweening confidence that the 20th century was immune from the warnings in Scripture (2 Timothy 4:3; 4 Hebrews 13:9; Ephesians 4:14; 2 John 9; Romans 16:7) about false teaching and bad doctrine. Philip Rieff's *Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966) showed the widespread substitution of the "therapeutic" for Christian orthodoxy within the churches as well as in psychiatry. A Methodist historian at Emory, E. Brooks Holifield in his *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation of Self-Realization*, shows in the subtitle the influence upon our seminaries and ordinands. Bishop John Spong has written and sold more books than all Episcopal bishops together. He requires assent to oaths in his confirmation and

ordination services that he himself has repudiated. No one has been more successful in accommodating his religion to the spirit of the age than Spong. Successive presiding bishops Ed Browning and Frank Griswold have consistently justified unbiblical teaching by their use of John 16:12, "There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now. When the Spirit of faith comes, he will guide you into all truth..." (NLT) The present Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts-Schori uses the text "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased..." (Matt. 3:17) (KJV) as applicable not only to Jesus at his baptism but to all of us for whom no sacrifice has yet been made and who have neither believed nor repented. This exegesis certainly resolves all the problems of justification, sanctification and atonement.

The presenting symptom and issue is homosexuality. Browning appointed a committee, which lacked any scholar. The committee issued the pamphlet, "Sexuality: A Divine Gift," which recommended the following: acceptance of pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, and homosexual behavior as an acceptable lifestyle. It said that homosexual behavior was not condemned in Scripture or church history and that prior statements by the church on homosexual behavior were to be dismissed since they caused "non-communication and enmity."

The Episcopal Church has been increasingly choking on this Sadducee yeast, this continuous accommodation to the secular culture. Sadducees rejected any belief in a resurrected life (Matt. 22: 23-32). Their teaching was a rough equivalent of secularism, "this-world-is-all-there-is-ism" as Reinhold Niebuhr expressed it.

Our churches are pandering to a secularism that is characterized: 1) by our believing that ideas, doctrines and teachings are without consequences; 2) by an arrogance based on a cruel Pelagian naiveté regarding sin and evil; 3) by ethics without moral foundations; 4) by a reductionist art devoid of transcendent hope; 5) by inescapable idolatry; and 6) by depression.

1. Ideas and Doctrine Denigrated

Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1947) is still in print and needs to be. He says we have succumbed to an "historical optimism" that will not disappear until we have established "that cultural decline is a historical fact." (p. 10) Ideas expressed in Christian doctrines are rarely taken seriously and too often subsumed under such contemporary values as unity and relevance. The best example of this is the way both the Lutherans and Anglicans fumbled in their joint statements with Roman Catholics regarding the doctrine of justification. These historic concerns of doctrine have largely been replaced by the secular dogma of inevitable progress. A recent book by the incomparable scholar, Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence, 1500 to the Present: 500 years of Western Cultural Life* (2000, 900 pages) is an outstanding example among many that might be described as the epitaph on the idea of inevitable progress, the crucial dogma of secular hope.

2. Arrogance and Naiveté

Karen Armstrong's widely acclaimed *A History of God* (1993) ends with this sentence: "...if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings." She has turned Psalm 100 backwards. It is now we who have made God. Her writings exemplifying the Sadducee hope have been well received but the arrogance is unnoticed like a black cat on a dark night.

Another ex-Roman Catholic, Jack Miles, has written *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (2001) claiming that Christ died, not for our sins but for God's sins! Miles is no offbeat exotic scholar but a seriously respected author, another black cat in the dark night of cultural arrogance. His book, a best seller, not only received the Pulitzer Prize but Miles was also awarded the John Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. Little wonder that Alasdair MacIntyre, Professor at Notre Dame, could exclaim, "If I were God, I do not think I would want to be studied by most contemporary theologians." ("Books and Culture," Winter, 1988, 5)

Matters of the soul (psyche) are now left to psychologists and psychiatrists in the secular society. Erich Fromm's influence is hard to exaggerate. Writing in the middle of the 20th century, he claimed:

If man gives up his illusion of a fatherly God, if he faces his aloneness and insignificance in the universe, he will be like a child that has left his father's house. But it is the very aim of human development to overcome infantile fixation. Man must educate himself to face reality. If he knows he has nothing to rely on except his own powers, he will learn to use them properly. (*Religion and Society*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950, p. 26.)

The assumption, with no empirical evidence, that one can educate oneself to "reality," and "know" that there is nothing to rely on but "his own powers" and that he "will learn to use them properly" is a confidence, a faith, in psychological dogmas, a naive trust of prodigious proportions.

Allen Wheelis is equally dogmatic in his secular but unexamined assumptions. In *The Quest for Identity* (1958) he describes his approach to a hypothetical clergyman:

If the clergyman remains intellectually and emotionally open, his work may provide him with such insight as will force him eventually to relinquish belief in a personal God, in life after death and in other absolutes, which had guaranteed his security.

Wheelis claims that "Psychoanalysis provides no value system nor should it," (p.109) but he clearly carries into his therapy his unacknowledged but naive "value system" that, in effect, renders Dante, Milton, Handel, Bach, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and C. S. Lewis, among millions of other believing Christians throughout the centuries, not "intellectually open" and in need of therapy. He goes on to claim: "Whether or not [the clergyman] can survey the damage, salvage those elements which are sound, and build a new structure of belief depends on the courage, tenacity, and creative ability which he alone can mobilize to meet the crisis." This confidence in man's nature to do what he should is what Christians have called the Pelagian heresy. As St. Augustine has warned us, it is a "cruel" and misplaced confidence.

Years after writing these sentiments Wheelis is now not nearly so confident. "I have not found in psychoanalysis the meaning I sought. I function as a guide to the lost, but do not myself know the way." (*New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 20, 2007) He is now unpersuaded by attempts to render death as a meaningful conclusion. "A symphony has a climax, a poem builds to a burst of meaning, but we are unfinished business. No coming together of strands. The game is called because of darkness." (Ibid)

Arrogance leads to darkness but humility can lead to a new hope. The naive confidence in human

nature was best expressed by John Morley in the 19th century. "Human nature is good. This," said Morley, "is the key that secularizes the world." (quoted in Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, p. 152.) A recent writer has discovered a more realistic view of the human condition and a deeper hope. After writing the remarkably popular *The Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck realized that his clients' unconscious, as well as his own, was not God, as he had previously insisted. He realized that our unconscious was as much in need of redemption as our conscious mind. He later wrote a much more accurate picture of human nature in *The People of the Lie* (1983). In the preface he describes his baptism in 1980: "My commitment to Christianity is the most important thing in my life and is, I hope, pervasive and total." (p. 11)

Shortly before Peck's death he was interviewed by David Neff of *Christianity Today*. Peck offered this observation:

You know, we look at young children, and we rejoice in their smooth skin and spontaneity, but they're also all born liars, cheats, thieves, and manipulators. And it's hardly remarkable that many of them grow up to be adult liars, cheats, thieves, and manipulators. What's much more difficult to explain is why some of them grow up to be honest God-fearing people. Saint Paul talked about the "mystery of iniquity," and this is all mysterious stuff. Evil is a great mystery. But it pales, as far as I'm concerned, before the mystery of goodness, which is the even greater mystery.

Yet within the churches, the Sadducee teaching persists. Van A. Harvey of Stanford University claims: "For historians (and that includes a number of Christian historians as well) supernaturalism is simply not an option." (*Christian Century*, January 26, 2000, p. 91, 92) He is followed by such prominent theologians as Gordon Kaufman, Shubert Ogden and Rosemary Radford Ruether who not only deny the hope of resurrection, but also claim such hopes as deplorable machinations of self-interest.

3. Ethics Without a Moral Foundation

A recent public broadcasting program concerning the current crisis in morals in our society cited the example of a doctor, who was suspected of killing his patients (later verified). He was given high recommendations in his transfer to another hospital where he continued his killing. Other examples cited were the widespread cheating by students whose parents defended this behavior, unacknowledged corruption in accounting firms and brokerage houses, and falsification in medical and scientific research. Experts spoke exhaustively on the immorality, which is rampant in all aspects of society, on its causes and possible cures. Needless to say, in our secularist culture no mention was made of the culture's loss of any sense of accountability or justice beyond this life. Is our culture affected by the loss of God's judgment and mercy? The program illustrated Christopher Lasch's perceptive and enduring diagnosis of our narcissistic culture where any sense of justice is rooted only in self, providing no adequate foundation for ethics.

4. Corruption in the Arts

The Sadducee/secular yeast severs our culture's connection with any transcendent dimension of reality and deprives us of our purpose and goal. The playwright, Eugene Ionesco, in his essay on Kafka, shows how anything "without a goal is absurd...when man is cut off from his religious or

metaphysical roots, he is lost; his entire struggle becomes senseless, futile and oppressive.” (N. Vos, *Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee, A Critical Essay*, Eerdmans, 1968, p. 6)

The prolific Cambridge writer, George Steiner, similarly writes:

What I affirm is the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable. (*Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 229)

He argues that great works of art cannot be produced within a secularized culture. Without transcendence, human creativity is truncated. Steiner insists that “poetry, art and music put us in sane touch with that which transcends, with matters ‘undreamt of’ in our materiality.” (p. 226, 227) He is aware that such affirmations are not welcome conceits in the secular climate of contemporary universities and that they are bound to evoke negative reactions. Nevertheless he asserts: “The attempt at testimony must be made and the ridicule incurred.” (*Theology Today*, Dec. 2003)

Ingmar Bergman, the non-Christian producer of numerous widely acclaimed films adds to this lament about the sickness resulting from the secular yeast:

Regardless of my own beliefs and my own doubts, which are completely without importance in this connection, it is my opinion that art lost its creative urge the moment it was separated from worship. It severed the umbilical cord and lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. (*Horizon*, No. 1, Sept. 1960, pp 4-9)

5. Idolatry

Another and perhaps the most dangerous of the Sadducee/secular pathologies is idolatry. A popular assumption about idolatry is that it is relegated to primitive societies. Gerhard Forde shows that when we attempt to construct an image of God who is more amenable to our expectations and desires (e.g. Donald McCullough’s *The Trivialization of God: the Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*, Nav Press, 1995) it “is no different from making a god of wood or stone or bronze; it is simply idolatry, and it is born of unbelief.” (A. Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God*, Eerdmans, 1992, p. 114)

Andre Malraux, war hero, scholar, novelist, French intellectual and statesman writes under the influence of the Sadducean yeast: “The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random among the profusion of the earth and the galaxies of the stars, but in this prison we can fashion such images of ourselves sufficiently powerful to deny our nothingness.” To “fashion images of ourselves” is precisely what Scripture means by idolatry. With no ultimate and transcendent hope beyond this world our hearts are, in Calvin's words, “a veritable factory of idols.”

When the cross was replaced by the goddess of reason in the Cathedral of Notre Dame the streets soon ran red with blood in the name of “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.” An equally admirable conceit: “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” seduced much of the intelligentsia of the Western World, but it was bereft of any transcendent judgment of how to

put the ideal in place. It resulted in even more horror and deaths than anything else in the bloody 20th century. Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and its Confrontation with American Society* is the outstanding contemporary work on this subject.

6. Depression

Few things give us a deeper diagnostic understanding of our own age than a classic work of art reworked and redone for our times. Such a work is Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, a modern retelling of the Book of Job. J.B.'s fortune has been destroyed, his five children cruelly killed and he is beset by a terrible illness. He chokes out, "The Lord gave. The Lord taketh away. Blessed is the name of the Lord." Sarah, his wife, responds in anger, "I will not let you sacrifice their deaths to make injustice justice and God good! God is God and He is not good or God is good and He is not God." She screams, "Curse God and die. . ." and leaves him.

At the end of the play Sarah comes back to J.B. He says, "You said 'curse God and die' and you left me." "Yes," she replies, "You asked for justice and there isn't any. You cry for justice and the stars shine until your eyes sting. There isn't any justice. Only love. Blow on the coal of the heart."

Here the play ends: There is no justice or hope for justice. It is the poignant realistic lament of the Sadducee. The Scripture's Job has a radically different hope: "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold and not as a stranger." (Job 19:25-27)

When finally there is no justice, when ultimately nothing is fair, when goodness to which we strive is never reached, when sin, selfishness, betrayal, tears, loneliness, cruelty and death are at last unredeemed, unresolved, and are the unloving final realities, it is truly depressing. No amount of Zoloft or Prozac can cure this malignancy.

Matthew Arnold foresaw, in the 19th century, this sadness in the trajectory of secularism:

Ah, love let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

It is into this sadness we are privileged to go with the confidence of Jesus' admonition to the Sadducees: "But now, as to whether there will be a resurrection of the dead - haven't you ever read about this in the scriptures? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died God said, 'I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' So he is the God of the living not the dead." (Matt. 22:31-32) (NLT)