

Keith Watkins

Fluid Retraditioning

Classically Christian and at the Same Time Liberal

As I grow older, the biblical character with whom I most closely identify is the man in the ninth chapter of Mark who blurted out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" This conflicted declaration of faith came forth when the man's adolescent son, who suffered from a seizure syndrome, was brought to Jesus to be healed. When Jesus stated that healing depended upon faith and prayer, the father confessed his own divided heart: faith was intermingled with unfaith. His ardent hope that miracle-worker Jesus could heal his son was compromised by years of disappointment as he had watched the child's malady grow ever more troublesome.

My conflicts concerning faith are sometimes caused by immediate experiences, but more often by a broader conflict in the mind, by the tension between classic Christian beliefs concerning God, who made the world and called all things good, and the "terror of history," to use Mircea Eliade's telling phrase, which is the context in which all people dwell. A second reason for my cognitive dissonance is that the classic language of faith, as used in the church's liturgical practice, the Bible, and theological tradition, is couched in the "picture language" of heaven and earth, principalities and powers, angels and demons, mighty works and wonders. Yet the world in which my head and body live is determined by the double axis of history and science. How can I, an intelligent man of our time, affirm a vision of life that is expressed in language that is so contrary to what I know to be true?

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Peter Berger, who is a credentialed sociologist and active lay theologian, expresses the challenge succinctly: it is “to have faith in the redemption of which the Bible is the principal witness, without necessarily accepting the cognitive structure within which this witness is communicated” (*Questions*, 113).

This conflict came to mind as I listened to lectures by historian and church consultant Diana Butler Bass and later read her book *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*.¹ Her extended study of vital and effective mainline Protestant congregations had led Bass to the conclusion that these congregations have “theologically moderate-to-liberal *messages*, but they have embraced traditional Christian practices in worship, prayer, moral formation, and life together.” The practices are the “what” of vital church life and the tradition on which they are based provides the “why.” Bass’s thesis is clearly stated: “Practicing congregations experience new vibrancy through a reappropriation of historic Christian practices and a sustained communal engagement with Christian narrative” (14).

Acknowledging the cognitive dissonance between moderate-to-liberal Christian thought processes and those of classic theology, Bass discusses three ways for people of our time to deal with tradition, following the lead of social theorist Georges Balandier. The first, which is manifested in American Christianity as fundamentalism, insists that the values and models of classic times must be retained unchanged. The second approach keeps traditional language and forms but changes their substance. There is “a continuity of appearances” but these appearances “serve new designs.” Bass calls the third approach, which is practiced in the vital congregations she has studied, *fluid retraditioning*. This “view of tradition recognizes the paradoxical nature of modernity and tradition—that modernity creates the possibility for a return to tradition and that tradition ‘re-reads’ and ‘re-creates itself’” (42). The cultural demands that we encounter are viewed not as a threat, as fundamentalists hold, but as a creative challenge.

The Heretical Imperative

At this point in my reading of *The Practicing Congregation*, I remembered a slender volume that I had read at least twenty-five years earlier, Peter Berger’s *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*.² In those years, I was aware of other books by Berger—*The Sacred Canopy* and *A Rumor of Angels*, both published in 1969—that had brought

him to the attention of many church leaders because they affirmed evidences of the transcendent in modern societies. Although I had not read those books, I had laboriously worked my way through a much more technical book, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, published in 1967. I was drawn to *The Heretical Imperative* because it looked accessible and promised to deal constructively with an intellectual and religious challenge that was important to me. I wanted help in translating my Christian faith from a language that was theologically archaic and arcane into one that seemed at home and useful in the intellectual world that I inhabited. Neither fundamentalism nor its modern resurgence under the name of neo-orthodoxy was believable. Questions that were in mind as early as first grade, and became only more insistent as I grew older, would not allow that solution. A comment by my colleague Ronald Osborn ruled out full-blown liberalism. "Theologians like Tillich restate the gospel in ideas in a new language that makes sense," Osborn had said, "but in the process they lose the gospel. When you examine their new ideas closely, they mean something that is very different."

A generation earlier, Charles Clayton Morrison had said much the same thing in his book *The Social Gospel and the Christian Cultus*. Many people had successfully translated the language of Christian faith into the language of the psychology of religion. It was, however, only "a clever trick of legerdemain," because in the process the gospel had been lost. Berger's book, I hoped, would help me find an approach to tradition that would explain and confirm what I already, rather tentatively, used as the basis for my Christian life and professional responsibility as a scholar of the church.

Berger's book was clearly stated and cogently argued, with a short list of basic ideas. All human beings, regardless of their culture or intellectual disposition, live in a cultural and religious context that differs dramatically from the one in which their foundational faith tradition developed. Yet, to some degree, that foundational faith is still a necessary part of contemporary life. All people are required to make decisions with respect to how they will affirm that tradition. Everyone has no choice but in some way to become a heretic. "Modernity is the universalization of heresy." Berger proposes that of all of the world's faith traditions Protestant Christianity has dealt with this challenge most directly and deeply. Therefore, the three ways that Protestantism has responded can be used as a means of understanding the character of the responses that others can make with respect to their own faith traditions.

Berger's summary of these responses is clearly stated: "They can reaffirm the authority of the tradition in defiance of the challenges to it; they can try to secularize the tradition; they can try to uncover and retrieve the experiences embodied in the tradition." He labels the first method *deductive* and cites Karl Barth as the Protestant exemplar, the second *reductive*, with Rudolf Bultmann as his example, and the third *inductive*, using Friedrich Schleiermacher as his model (xi). Late in the book, Berger asserts that we have to presuppose "a continuity between Christian theology and the general enterprise of understanding the world rationally, including the rational undertakings of philosophy and the empirical sciences." Since this assertion repudiates neo-orthodoxy, Berger says, it places a person "in the line of liberal theology. One returns to Schleiermacher at least to the extent of assenting to his basic methodological program. By the same token, one considers both the neo-orthodox and the secularist movements in twentieth-century theology as aberrations to be laid aside" (166).

Fortunately, *The Heretical Imperative* is one of a relatively short list of theological books that I have carried with me through my gradual movement into retirement. When I picked it up again, twenty-five years after first reading it, I found it copiously underlined. With few exceptions, those passages still stand out as ideas that are current in my intellectual and spiritual life today. Rereading the book, I found myself underlining, in ink of a different color, almost as many lines as I did the first time through.

This second reading brought to mind the impact of my doctoral studies with A. Durwood Foster at Pacific School of Religion in seminars focused upon nineteenth and early twentieth century German theologians: Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, and Harnack. They "emphasized ethics as well as cultural achievements in their discussions of the merits of Christianity, but none of the three *identified* Christianity with these ethical and cultural merits." These prototypical liberals prove to Berger that "there is no reason why an inductive model would have to slide over into reductionism: The best guarantee against this happening is that the procedures used within the model really be inductive and meticulously so."

Using a term often identified with Karl Barth and the deductive theology of neo-orthodoxy, Berger says that "properly understood, faith and inductive reasoning stand in a dialectical relation to each other: I believe—and then I reflect upon the implications of this fact; I gather evidence about that which is the object of my faith—and this provides a further motive to go on believ-

ing” (128, 129).

In rereading *The Heretical Imperative*, I realized that I had largely forgotten a theme, which Berger discusses in a chapter entitled "Between Jerusalem and Benares." He argues that one of the issues that will be central to making religious decisions in the future has to do with two experiences of God. "Put simply, western Asia [Jerusalem] and India [Benares] have given birth to the two most comprehensive religious worldviews, and the antithesis between them constitutes the most important problem for contemporary ecumenicity" (144). Western religion is *confrontational* and eastern religion is marked by *interiority*."

The question facing us today, Berger asks, is how can both religious experiences, confrontation and interiority, be true. The challenge for approaching one's experience inductively today, he says, requires that we deal with both experiences of the divine. All the while, we have to be aware of our changed context: "*The old agenda of liberal theology was the contestation with modernity. That agenda has exhausted itself. The much more pressing agenda today is the contestation with the fullness of human religious possibilities*" (166; italics by Berger).

Questions of Faith

It is one thing to propose a method for a theological project, but quite another to follow that method and state the conclusions that a careful person develops in so doing. During my second reading of *The Heretical Imperative*, I discovered that Berger has done this for us. In 2004, exactly twenty-five years after first publishing the book on method, he published a *book—Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity*—in which he gives his own way of understanding the Christian faith in our time.³ This book explains, Berger says, "how one contemporary individual, skeptical in temperament and reasonably well informed manages to affirm the Christian faith" (ix). He structures the book upon the "key phrases of the Apostles' Creed" and roams through a substantial body of theological literature in a mostly sure-footed way.⁴ His skepticism concerning many ways of discussing the Christian faith shows through. Even more important is the fact that Berger's core faith is stated forthrightly and with existential and intellectual power.

Berger is unequivocal in his assertion: "Religious faith, in whatever form, always involves one fundamental assumption—namely, that there is a reality beyond the reality of ordinary, everyday life and that this deeper reality is

benign." Faith implies "that there is a destiny beyond the death and destruction which...awaits not only ourselves but everyone and everything we care about in this world, the human and the planet on which its history is carried out, and...the entire universe" (1). The cosmos and humankind were created to be good and immortal. At every point in our intellectually responsible faith journey, we must focus attention upon the nexus between tradition and our own experience of reality.

Despite Berger's calm, orderly, and learned exposition of religious ideas, the book's power is generated by two aspects of experience that are completely unacceptable and have to be accounted for by any religion that will be "interesting" (a word that Berger often uses) and credible. To use language that is common in a Christian's vocabulary: sin and death. As I read *Questions*, I realized that two of my own deepest problems with faith coincide with Berger's. I am increasingly overcome by rampant cruelty, especially state-sponsored, that has led to suffering and death, increasing it would seem in geometrical proportion. Berger uses the Holocaust as his focusing example and in his treatment of Hitler declares that only a serious concept of evil can account for such events and human beings. My second challenge is the heart-rending suffering and early death of children. Berger personifies this by reference to "a neighbor's child," and I see it in the terrible events in Africa where disaster affects children more than anyone else.

Berger's emphasis upon the suffering God and cosmic destiny comes into focus in his discussion of Jesus Christ in which he discounts much of the technical theology about Jesus and repudiates the liberal tendency to interpret Jesus within human forms as a great moral teacher. Faith in Jesus does not depend upon the historical reconstruction of his life. The central proposition of Berger's chapter about believing in Jesus Christ is this: "*An affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ hinges on the Resurrection as an event, not in human existence or consciousness, but in the reality of the cosmos. Christianity is based not on Good Friday but on Easter...Only through the Resurrection is Jesus perceivable as the Christ—that is as cosmic redeemer, and as victor over all the evils and sufferings of this world*" (66, italics by Berger).

Berger takes 176 pages to develop his faith statement and the intellectual foundation upon which it depends. In order for a religious faith to be interesting and useful, he asserts, it has to overcome sin and death, with the overcoming of death the more important matter. In his concluding pages, he discusses a chapter in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov* that focuses upon

the cruel killing of a child. Berger asserts that God does not will what happened to that child, but instead is present with the child and its mother. "He suffers with them and with all of tortured creation. This *kenosis* on the part of God is what inaugurates the healing of the world's pain." Furthermore, all participants in the story have "a destiny beyond this life." The child and the mother will be infinitely comforted beyond this life and there will be a judgment beyond this life of those who "perpetrated this horror" (175).

Berger suggests that three Aramaic sentences inserted into the Greek text of the New Testament "contain the entire Gospel." They are: "*Talitha, cumi,*" "Little girl, arise" (Mark 5:41), "*Eli, eli, sabachtani?*" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46), and *Maranatha,* "Come, Lord," or possibly, "The Lord is coming" (Revelation 22:20). Then comes Berger's summary of Christianity, which is the result of his own inductive appropriation of the ancient tradition, which came to him through his life experience as a Lutheran Christian.

"With Christ an immensely powerful process of redemption has been released into the world. In Christ's suffering and death on the cross, at the extreme point of God's humiliation (kenosis), God both shares all the pain of creation and inaugurates its repair. And Christ will return as victor and restore the creation to the glory for which God intended it" (176, italics added).

The Renewal of Old First Church

Since fluid retraditioning is a process, the conclusions that are reached depend upon the experience of the people who are making the reappropriation. People who agree with Berger that evil and death, both personal and cosmic, are the two enemies will likely find his conclusions persuasive. If other aspects of contemporary experience are the primary factors to be addressed, thoughtful people engaged in fluid retraditioning will likely find themselves developing statements of faith that differ from Berger's. Bass's thesis is that vitality in congregational life is based not on a specific set of doctrines but on the classic faith, experienced in ways that are continuous with human life over the generations and described in language that is rooted in the past but couched in the intellectual patterns of our time.

My way of stating the diagnosis of what ails "old first church" is that its preaching, teaching, and praying avoid the deepest human experiences, especially those that often trouble us most profoundly, and trivialize the explanations. The prescription for this kind of congregational disorder is to focus at-

tention upon these experiences and to show how the God who comes to the world in Jesus Christ suffers with us in every kind of life experience and provides a way for us to overcome all that would destroy us and the world.

Two questions are likely to be in the mind of churchgoers as they hear the basic ideas of faith as expressed in church life: Is it true (we might say believable)? And if it is, so what, what difference does it make in my life? Practicing congregations, Bass affirms, vital mainline congregations, can answer the first question with a resounding “yes,” and the second by pointing to many people who have found a new capacity to live in the hope of paradise beginning now even though today's world seems to be going to hell.

As we work at reconstructing church life, we need to acknowledge that even at their best congregations are frail institutions. Here Berger the sociologist expresses a skeptical attitude that can be useful to pastors and parishioners alike. Faith requires “institutional anchorage,” and for Christians that means the church. But which one? Although Berger is a Lutheran by upbringing and in his continuing spirituality, the Lutheran congregations near his home are either deductive or reductive, to use his terms, and as a result he worships in an Episcopal church where he finds it possible to practice his Christian faith inductively. The church that a person adheres to is a matter of vocation, something to which a person is called, because no church is ideal and all people come out of their own set of life experiences.

Berger's radical disregard for denominationalism comes through clearly when he says that “the preferred choice for Christians should be to gather around a box from which the Gospel is preached and around which one tries, feebly, to reach out to the cosmic liturgy. But one should not absolutize the choice of any particular box” (143).

Just as Berger has his preferences about how this church—Lutheran, Anglican, even Roman Catholic—will conduct its life, I have mine. As a mainline Protestant, with an attenuated connection to the Reformed Tradition, I have been significantly shaped by the liberalism that Berger rejects, for reasons that also affect me deeply. That is the reason why Bass's project is important for people like me: she deals with churches that are moderate to liberal in theology, activist by instinct, cut adrift from their classic roots, churches that have been weakened by the reductive tendencies of liberalism. She refers to some of these churches—the vibrant and effective congregations—as post-liberal. These “practicing congregations” are both liberal (rather than conservative) and intentional (rather than satisfied with their establishment

past). One of her paragraphs describes her position well.

Postliberalism is not a return to conservatism but instead “an independent, constructive theological turn birthed within classical liberalism.” It revisits Christian doctrine “seeking resources that it may contain to redefine or illuminate current perspectives” (here quoting John B. Webster). Bass continues: “Some have characterized postliberalism as ‘generously orthodox’ a position that combines the openness of liberalism with a commitment to Christian particularity” (85).

Near the close of her book, Bass describes Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, California, which is one of her models for becoming a practicing congregation. She reports that sometimes people cry when she tells them about this church because they experience “a story that enables them to see past the surface, a story that lifts them above the thick level of cultural haze and helps them imagine a better, different way of being church.” Bass has learned that “people want to soar above the smog. They want to see. They want to find an enchanted world” (93).

Classically Christian and at the same time liberal, empowered to live creatively and courageously. Now that is a stance on which to build a life and a church!

Fluid Retraditioning is one of a series of essays in which I describe books that have influenced my thought, work, and life. I read each of these books at an earlier time of life and now, as I move into my fourth quarter century, I am rereading them, remembering how they affected me years ago, and assessing how these impacts have been altered by later experience and continued reading.

¹ Diana Butler Bass. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004)

² Peter L. Berger. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1980)

³ *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)

⁴ One place where he clearly has been inadequately informed is his brief discussion of the Disciples of Christ, 138, 9