

The Shape of the Church to Come

Renewing, Liberating, Flourishing

Timothy Radcliffe | APRIL 13, 2009

I was looking out my window at the winter silhouette of a white beam in our garden at Blackfriars Priory in Oxford, wondering what I could say about the topic proposed to me, “the shape of the church to come.” It struck me that the tree might offer a way to explore the subject. The shape of a tree is the fruit of its interaction with its environment. Its leaves receive sunlight and convert it into sugars; the roots burrow down for nourishment and water; the bark is its vital skin. The tree exists in itself, of course, but it is only alive in multiple interactions with what is not itself. The shape of the church to come will also be determined by how it interacts with our world. The church faces the dilemma that has shaped Judaism over the centuries: how to avoid both assimilation to society, which would lead to the church’s disappearance, and the ghetto, another form of death. What sort of dynamic interaction with the world would let the church flourish?

We pose this question at an interesting moment in the history of our culture, with quite different challenges from when **America** was founded a century ago, or even when Karl Rahner, S.J., posed the question in 1974. We are slowly moving beyond the culture of the Enlightenment, which has largely shaped how we have seen things for the last few hundred years. I do not wish to attack the Enlightenment and blame it for the woes of the modern world. It has been an immensely beneficial moment in the history of humanity. But some of its thought patterns locked the church in narrow places, cramped her into ideological positions that have not always helped the church to flourish, like a tree confined in the angle of a rock. The emergence of a new world with fresh ways of thinking may offer a new spring for the church.

One characteristic of this Enlightenment age has been its competitive nationalism. Western empires, above all the British, imposed national identities on peoples who had other ways of understanding themselves: tribal, feudal, ethnic, migratory, mythical. To have an identity in this world was to have a flag and a national song. One consequence has been nationalistic wars, culminating in the dreadful massacres of the 20th century. Now we all are becoming citizens of a global village, and here the church can lead the way. We are already the most global institution on the planet. But to do so, we must seize the day: *Carpe diem!*

Tradition and Progress

One of the dichotomies that structured the mindset of the Enlightenment was the opposition between tradition and progress. To be “enlightened” was to cast off the shackles of the past, especially the philosophy of Aristotle and the dogmas of the Catholic Church. So the church was seen as an institution that was of its very nature opposed to modernity. The church often made the mistake of accepting this image instead of challenging the categories that trapped it in the past. In the Syllabus of Errors of 1864, Pope Pius IX condemned as an error that the pope “can and should reconcile himself with progress, liberalism and recent civilization.” So the church was often seen as necessarily opposed to democracy, to freedom, to new ideas and to science.

The Second Vatican Council tried to liberate us from this mental imprisonment, but it is hard to give up entrenched ways of thought, and so many Catholics still define themselves as either “traditionalist” or “progressive.” Such polarization is deeply wounding and inhibits the flourishing of the church. It is as if an antipathy were to develop

between the trunk of the tree, the tree's past, as it were, which holds it high, and the vital surfaces of the leaves, the bark and the roots, which keep it alive.

That old Enlightenment world is fading. The myth of "progress," its secular faith, is looking pretty implausible as we face ecological disaster and the rise of religious terrorism. For the Enlightenment, if progress becomes doubtful, then one is left with despair or traditionalism. But for Catholicism, this moment could lead us to a renewed, vital sense of tradition in a dynamic interaction with modernity. One consequence is that teaching would again be seen as inherently dialogical.

The Enlightenment put in question the whole concept of teaching. Nicholas Lash, of Cambridge University, wrote in his book *Believing Three Ways in One God*: "The Enlightenment left us with what we might call a crisis of docility. Unless we have the courage to work things out for ourselves, to take as true only that which we have personally attained or, perhaps, invented, then meanings and values, descriptions and instructions, imposed by other people, feeding other people's power, will inhibit and enslave us, bind us into fables and falsehoods from the past. Even God's truth, perhaps especially God's truth, is no exception to this rule. Only slaves and children should be teachable, or docile."

A Man of Conversation

Teaching about Jesus Christ is necessarily dialogical, because he was a man of conversation. The whole of St. John's Gospel, from the discussion of John the Baptist with the priests and Levites until Jesus' final exchange with Peter on the beach, is one probing, exploratory conversation after another. Jesus shares his life and message with the disciples by opening a space of dialogue, a spacious world in which they can abide. The Trinity itself is the eternal, loving, equal, undominative conversation of God. Herbert McCabe, O.P., described our entry into the life of the Trinity as being like a child who hears intelligent adults having a wonderful conversation in a pub. In his book *God, Christ and Us*, he wrote: "Think for a moment of a group of three or four intelligent adults relaxing together in one of those conversations that have really taken off. They are being witty and responding quickly to each other—what in Ireland they call 'the Crack.' Serious ideas may be at issue, but no one is being serious. Nobody is being pompous or solemn (nobody is preaching). There are flights of fancy. There are jokes and puns and irony and mimicry and disrespect and self-parody.... Now this child is like us when we hear about the Trinity."

So our preaching and teaching as Christians are necessarily conversational. Otherwise we would be like pacifists trying to convince our opponents by beating them up. Indeed, the word "homily" comes from a Greek word meaning "to converse." Preaching is at the service of conversation that is the church.

Some Christians remain suspicious of dialogue. This was a hot topic at the Asian Synod of Bishops. It was seen by some as potentially relativistic, as if all religions were equal. But nearly all the Asian episcopal conferences disagreed. Indian bishops insisted that dialogue is "the new Asian way of being church." Dialogue is not an alternative to preaching; it is preaching.

All true conversation leads to conversion of all the interlocutors. Pierre Claverie, O.P., the bishop of Oran, Algeria, dedicated his life to dialogue with Islam. This led to his own conversion, as he learned to see the face of Christ in his Muslim friends. It led to their conversion too. Some of them were deepened in their faith as Muslims, and a few became Christian. One consequence of moving beyond the alien categories of the Enlightenment could be renewal of how we understand what it is to be a teaching, preaching church in vital interaction with our world.

An Oasis of Freedom

Another element of the Enlightenment mindset from which we need to be liberated is “the culture of control.” In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has plotted its development. Compared with the relative freedom and chaos of the Middle Ages, we see the emergence of absolute monarchs, the state, the police and the army. The poor are no longer seen as images of Christ, to whom we are bound by love, but as a source of danger that must be policed. The insane must be locked up in what Michel Foucault called “le grand renfermement,” the great lockup. Society is no longer understood organically but as a mechanism that can be adjusted. When belief in God weakened, there was a vacancy left that we rushed to fill. As the atheist in the Victorian cartoon said, “I did not believe in God until I discovered that I was he.” The result is an endless growth of legislation. The British government has introduced 3,000 new criminal offenses in the last 10 years. We are monitored incessantly.

In contrast to this culture of control, the church should be an oasis of Christ’s freedom. But that is not always so. Instead, the church has imitated secular society in centralizing power, in decision making and in the appointment of bishops. This was perhaps unavoidable, given that empires in the 19th century did everything possible to acquire power over the church. But now we are creeping into a new world, where “the culture of control” may be fading away. A centralized nation-state, with complete control of trade and currency, is no longer possible in a global village. Businesses are discovering that they flourish best if decisions are decentralized and creativity and experimentation are encouraged. Let us hope that the church will breathe more easily and reverse the centuries-long tendency to centralization, which began even before the Enlightenment, and help its members to recover some of Christ’s joyful spontaneity.

The shape of a tree is the fruit of its free interaction with air, soil, sun and rain. How might the shape of the church change? A first way might be in evolving multiple institutions that give different people a voice and authority in the church. Medieval society was a complex interlocking of all sorts of institutions: the hierarchy, universities, religious orders and monasteries, the monarchy and nobility, lay guilds and fraternities. One should not be overly romantic about the Middle Ages, as if it were some golden age of democracy. Yet in that less disciplined world, kings and bishops, abbots and abbesses, preachers and teachers, nobles and merchants—all had their say in the endless conversation of the church and society, even if one risked being burned at the stake if one said the wrong thing.

The rise of the nation-state saw a simplification of society, as power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of secular governments. To some extent, the church again imitated society, and the hierarchy became almost the sole real power within the church. If the church is to have a healthy and complex interaction with society, neither retreating into a ghetto nor going down the plughole of assimilation, then we need a dynamic Catholic culture. This means universities and faculties in which we have the confidence to explore our faith, to ask difficult questions, to try out new ideas, to play with ideas, to float hypotheses without timidity, not feeling that we have to get it right the first time because otherwise we shall be in hot water.

I expect a massive revival of religious life soon, even in the West. This has happened every couple of centuries since the fourth, and will surely come again soon. We need the diversity of styles of life, spiritualities, charisms of different religious orders to free the church from the heaviness of uniformity. We have seen the development of new lay movements, especially in France, Spain and Italy. Let us hope that others will emerge that will flourish in the rest of the church. We need institutional creativity so that laypeople, especially women, acquire a voice and visibility. This is not to undermine the hierarchy or to diminish its power. If anything, it would be invigorated, as it held together the complex, vital creativity of the community in the unity of the body of Christ.

The Flourishing Tree

If the great tree of the church is to flourish, then we also need a moral vision that neither locks us in a ghetto nor assimilates us to society. The church is neither a sect, hermetically sealed from the world, nor a group of people who happen to share a number of opinions, like a bridge club that meets on Sundays. We need a moral vision that engages us as people of the 21st century and leads to our flourishing. Many Catholics understand morality in a way that reflects an Enlightenment culture of control, obligation and prohibition. To be a Catholic is to accept the rules, starting with the Ten Commandments. Bertrand Russell said that these should be regarded like questions in an examination: No candidate should attempt more than six! Commandments have always, obviously, had a role in Catholic morality, but with the Enlightenment they became central, rather than being part of our formation as people who seek our happiness in God.

The renewal of virtue ethics, especially in North America, promises a way beyond a voluntaristic morality. It is not so much about acts as about becoming the sort of person who finds happiness in God. By practicing the cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, temperance and justice, we can become pilgrims on the way to holiness. With the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, we are given a foretaste of the end of the journey. A morality founded on the virtues is about the transformation of our desires rather than their control.

Many people find themselves ill at ease in the church. People who have been divorced and remarried, or gay people, or people living in some other “irregular” situation may wonder whether they belong and can ever be anything more than second-class citizens. As Western society drifts away from its Christian origins, more and more people will wonder whether they belong inside or outside the walls. A moral vision founded on the virtues invites everyone, whoever they are and whatever they have done, to begin the journey home to God. It neither locks outside nor accepts the ethics of society.

There are many other ways in which the end of the Enlightenment may be an exciting moment for the church. For example, its Cartesian individualism, with an image of the mind as the ghost in the machine, does not sit well with a Catholic understanding of the utter unity of mind, soul and body, as in Aquinas (and as expressed in the whole of the church’s sacramental life, which blesses the dramas of our embodied lives: birth and death, eating and drinking, sex and sickness). Catholic social teaching on the primacy of the common good suddenly seems the only sensible ethics for a planetary population faced with ecological catastrophe.

Many things often thought of as typically Catholic—an authoritarian style of teaching, centralized control, a legalistic approach to morality, suspicion of the body—are, perhaps, a result of our church’s conformity to the culture of the Enlightenment. As we move into another moment in humanity’s history, we may find the church renewing itself, liberated from the confines of a way of thought that, though hugely beneficial to humanity in many ways, cramped the church’s life and obscured its visibility as a sign of the Kingdom. “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which someone took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches”(Lk 13:18f).

Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., *is the former master general of the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans) and author of numerous books.*