

Religious Roots

A tenacious myth about which I have long been deluded has been effectively exploded and put to rest. The myth is the notion that the Christian church at some times in the past was a large, stately, awesome institution that wielded great power and influence in human society. It has never been any such thing. It has never been, is not now, nor ever will be, anything but a small, despised, outcast sect, relegated to the lowest of stations among respectable religious organizations.

This idea seized hold on my mind, as far as I can tell, apart from ambitious wishful thinking and a carnal desire to be associated with such a mythical church, from reading and studying church history from the respectable and learned historians who followed, not the course of the true blood-bought and blood-bathed children of the Cross, but the monstrous hybrid that is known as the institutionalized church.

The instruments of my deliverance have been many, not the least of which are two books: The Torch of the Testimony by John Kennedy of India, recently republished by Christian Books; and the Reformers and Their Stepchildren by Leonard Verduin, published by Baker Book House.

Mr. Kennedy's work is a more comprehensive history. It begins with the foundations of the early church's taking its order from the synagogue meetings and evolving from there. He then observes the gradual changes initiated by supposed expediency rather than divine authority. His section on the heretics provides some interesting insights to what was right about what they taught and reacted against, in contrast to the flat negative slant given by the usual historian anxious to get a favorable review from the established religious power. From the pivotal point of Constantine's alleged conversion and the marriage of the church with the state and the world, he takes an entirely different route of church history. Where the usual historian follows the fallen and polluted Church of Rome and all her bastard offspring, he takes off after the church comprised of those who recognized that the religion that now called itself the Holy Catholic Church was no longer Christian. They left it. Because the Roman Church had the power of the magistrate and his sword, this faithful believing remnant were tried, condemned, persecuted, hated, murdered and slandered all down through the centuries to the Reformation. That great and celebrated event first promised relief to the outcasts who bore the torch of Christ's testimony, but ultimately proved to be a worse enemy than Rome. Mr. Kennedy goes on to trace the attempts in post-reformation history to bring the church back to its primitive order and glory. Again, his route follows, not the established church and her brief revivals and scattered exceptional preachers, but those people who found respectable institutionalized Christendom too stifling and apostate for redeemed souls hungering and thirsting after the Living God.

Those of us who have been confused and condemned over the years because we have not been able to fit into the system may find ourselves perfectly at home with the church Brother Kennedy traces from Apostolic times.

Leonard Verduin's work, on the other hand, concentrates on the single issue which, more than any other factor, the devil has used to corrupt organized Christendom. This issue revolves around the word "sacral", meaning "bound together by a common religious loyalty". All pre-Christian Society, points out Verduin, was sacral; that is, all the members of a particular society were also adherents to one religion: They all bowed at the same shrine. From Daniel 3 we learn that all Babylonians were expected to bow to the same image. The Ephesians were all expected to worship the goddess Diana. Members of a particular Indian tribe in this country worship the same sacred objects. The Old Testament Jewish economy was sacral. All who lived among the Hebrews embraced Judaism. One of the reasons Christianity has had so little success among Moslem nations is their intense sacralism. They will not allow the existence of a serious challenge to their religion.

Christianity brought with it a break with this kind of society and the thinking that goes with it. The New Testament allows room for a man to give allegiance to his God and at the same time allegiance to his state, even though the god of the state is not the same God he serves. The Roman government could not think in those terms. They interpreted departure from the state religion as rebellion against the state. The magistrate felt he was bound to coerce the Christians to worship the Roman gods by whatever means he could. If economic privation, social ostracization, threats and torture would not do it, then they must die.

Thus the Christian church suffered unto 300 AD when Constantine was "converted" to Christianity and became the emperor of Rome. He then established Christianity as the state religion with all the benefits and protection that the former paganism enjoyed, and outlawed paganism. Now the pagans who would not become "Christians" were persecuted and murdered with the same vengeance under which the church had suffered. But they were not alone. True Christians, who recognized that the religion established and mandated by that society was not Christianity but a pagan counterfeit, left the established church and went underground. They continued to suffer at the hands of society's church. This faithful remnant has been designated in popular church history as the "heretics".

The heretics had great hope that Luther and Zwingli in the sixteenth century would indeed bring the church back to its primitive purity; and for awhile it seemed that they would, for they first embraced and endorsed the heretics. But when the Pope, with his armies of state, sent for Martin Luther's head, he had to make the choice of a very brief career or allying himself and the Reformed Church with the state so he could have some military protection. He chose the latter. Zwingli followed suit; and by the time Calvin came on the scene, the Reformed Church had already condemned the faithful Christians who refused to corrupt a pure voluntary and regenerate church.

“Reformed Baptist” is a ludicrous contradiction. The Reformers hated the Baptists with a passion rivaling Jezebel’s for Elijah. And courageous “heretics” were preaching justification by faith through the effectual substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for sixteen hundred years before the “five points of Calvinism” surfaced under the Reformed flag. This hostility does not survive today only because both the Protestants and Baptists have become so apostate, spiritually bankrupt and unbelieving, they hold to nothing worth fighting over.

Mr. Verduin records for us a number of theological cuss-words or insulting nicknames the Reforms gave the heretic. One was *Catherer*, from *cather*, meaning cleansed. If we are going to make the church one with society or the world, we cannot differentiate from any behaviour of the members of that society. Everyone lives by the same standard. If all of the members will not live holily, then none must. The heretics insisted that Christians lived holy and godly lives, and demonstrated it in their own behaviour. So much was this an issue, that if any person displayed any degree of moral living, he was suspected of being an heretic. A man arrested and charged with heresy was obliged to get his neighbors to testify to the lewd, licentious and perverse life he lived to prove that he was a “good Christian” and not an heretic.

They were accused of holding community of goods because of their generous caring giving to the needs of others. They abhorred the covetous, greedy, selfish plundering practiced by the established church. They were called *Rottengeister*, because they caused a division in society. They insisted that Christianity was a separate sect, not the same as the rest of the world, and intensely different from society in general.

It has occurred to me that sacralism is just as alive today as ever. We live in a “Christian” society, not a pagan or Moslem or Jewish one. Almost everyone who lives around here professes to be Christian. They are not constrained by the state and its sword, but by popular public opinion. But they are not Christians, and most churches are not Christian. True Christianity is still an outcast sect, not in the mainstream of society. Yet we are not without historic roots. We do not fit in the Roman Catholic tradition. We do not fit in the Protestant system. And we cannot subscribe to any of the rootless non-denominational Charismatic cults of today. Our history is found in that small outcast sect holding true to the Bible, the scandal of the Cross, and the reproach of Jesus Christ

- C. M.