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THE LOCAL CHURCH

The Church in primal community is a key to social demonstration. This involves two things: an undergirding human dynamic and a sociological form. The Church involves those absolutely crucial dynamics without which there can be no community. I use the word "church" to talk about both these dynamics. I also want to use the words, "local religious institution."

The relationship you personally take to the word "church" is inconsequential at this point. Local church, or local religious institution, is not one of the Movement's twenty programs at this point. But the three letters "LRI" help me. For the sake of this talk, it does not really matter what your particular religion is, or whether you think you have ever participated in religion or piety or theology or comparative religion.

What really matters is that throughout history, the dynamic of being the Church-- and the concretion of that dynamic in local religious institutions has been absolutely critical in the history of society. The issue for today is the recovery, the reforging of the local religious institution, not for its own sake, but for the sake of an understanding that history cannot be history unless the local religious institution is present. In prayers, someone seemed to be praying for a revolutionary means by which to bring this about.

I have made the decision to love the local religious institution. I do not like it at all, but I have decided to love and care for it. In pondering this decision, I realized that loving the local institution meant not only loving the Methodist Church, but the entire Christian Church; and then it shocked me to realize that this meant not only the Christian Church, but any and all religious institutions which have participated in carrying history up to this point. This means that if I were giving this talk to Buddhists in Sri Lanka, to Hindus in Bombay or to Muslims somewhere in the Middle East, I do not think the talk would change much. I think I would give the exact same talk.

Bergson captured the essence of the role of religious institutions in history when he said that everytime-- and he used the words "mystical awareness" comes into history, it permeates the fabric of society. It is held in being by sociological forms until a new mystical breakthrough emerges and the old forms break down. Instead of "mystical awareness," I prefer the words "image of humanness," or "new image of what it means to be society" for describing what comes into being. This new image then solidifies into social form and structure so that it can be guarded-- preserved for historical time. The social configuration I have chosen to call the LRI, or the Church, guards this new image of humanness for the rest of society.

Religious institutions are as old as history itself. They are part of what history is. It is nonsense to believe one can somehow separate secular and religious history. A tour of the Museum of Natural Science makes that perfectly clear. From man's earliest dawnings, the pot he made to carry water was not a pot to carry water but the story of his life, the story of his origins, destiny and vocation. He implanted the stuff of his life on the side of the pot which he used to carry the mundane stuff called water from the river to the fire pit. Throughout history, man has always found ways to carry meaning with him in artifacts, rituals, rites, training or in sitting at the feet of a guru. Through such means man has expressed the meaning of being the guardian of human community, being the guardian of understanding what it means to be man or woman, tribe or nation, a people before the Mystery in life.

Religious institutions are temporal, public, historical happenings. They came into being under the rubric of a particular world view, the objective thereness of the times. A particular social setting-- perhaps the desert, mountains or river valleys-- shape the way in which the encounter with what it means to be human is carried forth and preserved. Once this happens, that world view literally determines the social structure that will exist. This new breakthrough shatters the present social structures.

Confucius and the Confucian ethic serve to illustrate. It literally expressed how one acted as a human being in China; it articulated what were crucial values and what were not. It is no wonder that in trying to forge a new image of what it meant to be China, Mao found it necessary to undercut Confucianism. Confucianism may not be a religion, per se, but my experience in Asia tells me that it is a religion and it had to be undercut-- not so some new religion could come into being, but so that new social formations could happen in the society. When the essential life articulation is being guarded as it should within a religious institution, then it continues to shape the picture of life for the entire people.

Religion's destinal role is to allow men in any age, culture or society to grasp the significance of human existence and forge out society's structures. As a religious institution, it is always concerned with plumbing the depths of the secular society. It is a public reality-- except when the religion has turned in on itself. It functions as part of the social fabric.

Religious institutions have the task of pushing meaning into the everyday. To fulfill its role of guarding the meaning of life, religion does not create a configuration of stories, myths or a system of training which takes away life's ambiguity, pain, absurdity, awe or wonder. That is the job of moralistic or psychological religions. Instead, religion gives man a way to articulate what it means to be a human being, to be alive in the midst of exactly those oases and deserts that are everyman's gift.

Religious institutions have been found in every age and every social vehicle. They are the way, if you will, of painting a face on the mystery of life. In every age, when shifts have taken place, they take place simultaneously in the local religious institutions.

In our time, religious institutions are in crisis-- not because they are naughty-- or because people have stopped attending churches, but because of an objective happening in the world. Our world view has done a total flip in such a way that the mythology which was part of the public, secular, temporal existence of man sped off in one direction while the world, in its self understanding, went off in another. The public religious institution became the private, religious club which demanded that you live out of a different world view than the one in which man actually found himself day after day. This created a radical void in symbolism, training and vocation which allowed man to tell himself an inauthentic story of life. This is our present predicament. This void is not exclusive to Western cultures or to Christian religious institutions-- Buddhist, Shinto, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish-- whatever. All are in exactly the same situation because of an objective happening in the world's midst.

This means that ours is a creative moment. It is a dangerous moment, for it is a time when people are living virtually devoid of a mythology. It is a time when, perhaps, the tyranny of reduced life images could simply take over. Perhaps that is why in a time like this, mystery religions are having a new day. People are again searching for a story of what it means to be vocated, what it means to be human. This is a time of both crisis and possibility.

I like this quote from Theodore Roszak we use in LENS: "I believe the religious renewal we see happening about us means that we have arrived after long journeying at an historical vantage point from which we can at last see where the wasteland ends, and where a culture of human wholeness and fulfillment begins. We can now recognize that the fate of the soul is the fate of the social order."

Certainly it is not new that the world is in a time of crisis and renewal. Prophets of the future have been saying that to us for a long time. But there are some who suggest that the present crisis means the demise of religion. I do not think that is a viable possibility. Man has to have a way of articulating the story of what it means to live in his world. Therefore, if throwing away religious institutions is not the answer, one has to ask the question, "What is the underlying reality, or the underlying dynamic, which I have called the Church, to which every institutional form has been pointing?"

We have worked with the question of the dynamics of the local church for some time. In part of our curriculum, we talk about the elements, or the dynamic components of any primal community. We talk about the ever-present dynamic of the shamans, or those who always discern the spirit deeps, the spirit edge of any community. They do this not only for the religious of that community, but for everyone.

There are also those who hold the cultic in being, who hold the story, the dance, the liturgy, the drama, the life meanings. And there are also those who forge human settlement. I do not know what to call them anymore. They are pioneers hunter, warriors, builders.

We have called those people who hold the pole of the spirit deeps the Cadre. I like to add the suffix "thing" to Cadre, just to remind myself that I am not talking about social structures, but about dynamics. Congregationing holds the cultic pole. The forgers, or builders, do what we call "guilding".

The three dynamics of congregationing are symbolizing depth humanness, awakening self-consciousness and signaling the corporate style. The congregation dynamic symbolizes depth humanness, not for its own sake, but for the sake of keeping a story of what it means to be human in history. In awakening self-consciousness, I like the picture of Australian Aboriginals who are sitting around a log learning from an elder. It is in the seminary dynamic that teaching and wisdom go on; it is teaching the deepest wisdom of what it means to be human. And that is very practical. Signaling corporate style is the cultic dimension of the congregational dynamic. It forges out for society its style of life.

When the Christian Church was public in North America, insofar as it was part and parcel of the fabric of society, Sunday was the unquestioned, undisputed day of rest. There was also no question about an appropriate style for men or women, or style of human care. Whether or not you participated self-consciously in that congregationing, it formed your images of what the style of existence needed to be. That is the congregationing dynamic. The entire dynamic is about facilitating vocational engagement. This is not to say some particular vocation, or any superficial implication of the term, but vocation in the sense of facilitating man's depth engagement in the history-making process.

The cadre is about releasing spirit deeps. It involves those who seek the necessary means by which man expresses the deeps of his humanness. Part of this is shaping the futuric vision, or discerning trends, waves of history and contradictions. It has to do with seeing the direction society needs to move in and beginning to create images of that direction. There is also the function of illustrating the practical means, or being the bodies-- like others through out history who stand and illustrate the new shift. Further, there is the dynamic of developing representational servanthood. I suspect if we trace man's history through that screen, every society would include those who are and were developing representational servanthood as a key to the sustaining or forging of a direction for community.

In guilding, I put initiating social demonstrations on the top pole. Guilders are those who forge out the necessary directions by standing before the mystery of life and their particular situation. They see what is necessary. They are involved in engaging human resources. How is it that you motivate, how is it that you recontext, educate and give new images of engagement to humankind? They are involved in formulating structural care. I call the entire process, sustaining total expenditure; that is, sustaining total expenditure toward the future of any community. When a community fails to see itself expended toward the future, then it begins to disintegrate; it begins to fail. It fails to be able to engage its people.

I like to think that Greek civilization collapsed when people stopped acting out those dramas which the local citizenry came to for the entire day with picnic baskets to hear stories about the Greek gods. That is an image of what I am talking about, whatever other historical factors may have been involved. In so far as this dynamic is always present in community, it becomes solidified not in a negative sense if the word--but becomes solidified into a society's religious forms, or its religious institutions. The dynamic itself is always much more than the institution.

Obviously, for our times, religious institutions are in need of renewal or reforging. I do not like the word renewal; it sounds like an attempt to do the same old thing only bigger and better. That is not what I mean. I prefer the word reforging. The key to this reforging, or renewal, will be a renewed mythology, a new morality and a new piety.

New mythology cannot be whopped up. It does not entail sitting around dreaming up neat stories. The new mythology will emerge from the stuff of the post-Einsteinian world. Religious institutions do not whomp up an interesting mythology for the times. Instead, they give new direction, or articulate the mythology already necessary and present indicatively in the society. Religious institutions formulate the myth of the firms into rituals, rites,

stories, celebrations, dramas and songs. Part of what it means for us to take responsibility for the reconstruction of religious institutions is to reveal the insight in the presently operating mythology and to allow people to see its perversions so that they have permission to move into the future.

The suburbs strike me as places with no origin and no destiny. They are a microcosm of some of the crises in our time. By no origin, I mean they have no story to tell about their origin. By no destiny, I mean they have no place they are particularly going. They contain a void in the articulated significance of what it means to be a corporate body or an individual in history today.

New morality comes out of the fact that we live in one globe, one world. Man sees indicatively his responsibility for every other man, or that life is utterly interdependent. How does this affect what it means to care responsibly in our time? We are moving away from corporate, communal or family images of what morality is to a set of images that take the entire globe into account. The required new morality is methods by which man can act out his engagement in the world. Every social vehicle has with it methodologies, the common sense of how you act and be, of what to value and what to abhor. When a social vehicle collapses, so do the methods which have kept it in being.

These methodologies are necessary for getting work done. The question is what are the necessary methods by which one can be human--and act humanly--in the twentieth century? How does one think in a relative, global universe with the knowledge expansion and self-consciousness of our time? How does one think? It is almost as if once you have moved into the new world, everything you thought was "think" before, is now "unthink." The creation of the new morality has to do with methods delivered to people that illuminate ways in which they can be engaged.

We also have the new piety to consider. Piety has something to do with the necessary discipline and rubrics by which the individual and the community can maintain steadfastness in living; it is the means by which they can plumb the depths of their own interiors, individually and corporately, and can be sustained in their resolve to be engaged in life as they stand before its absurdity and wonder. Somehow the new piety has to be a means of seeing through the meaning of the mundane--which is the only "in" there is to be in. It also must provide a means of experiencing the human journey. The old forms of piety worked, if you will, in another world view. They do not work in our present world view.

The local religious institution will fight against being renewed. This always irritated me until I realized that the local religious institution is called upon to be a guardian. This is a great historical role to play and it demands that we have clarity and forthrightness in moving into the future. It pushes us to deep reflection. Thank God for what we know as conservative churches in Christianity. The liberal churches have failed to be guardians and instead have involved themselves in whatever was the next thing to come along-- sensitivity training and the like. They failed to be guardians for the social vehicle that has been in being up to this point.

The local religious institution wants to be what it is called to be. The seeds are in its midst. The people who care and yearn to be engaged in the future are there. We need to find the means for its reforging. I suppose sometime down the road this will mean a new religious form. Not because we are doing anything, in the first instance, but because God is doing something in His world. I have no conception of a new form and in some ways, I am not much interested in that question. But I am interested in revolutionary means by which we care for the reshaping of these present religious forms, structures, and dynamics as they move toward what they are called to be in the creation of primal community.

It seems to me, our own understanding calls us to be the revolutionary force within primal community at the point of our work with local religious institutions. This is not to say we are about reforming. Most plans for religious institutions I know anything about are reform projects. Reform means finding ways to get things back to the way they used to. This is a radical "no" to the future.

The other option is revolt. To say, "We don't need religious institutions anymore," is to revolt. Remember when during RS-1's a few years ago people would ask "What do you do to renew the church?" and the first answer would be, "Burn the institution down." That does not happen anymore, interestingly enough. Revolt is a way of saying "no" to the past.

The revolutionary is one who sees the depth insight of the origins of any religious articulation, in any structural articulation, and says "yes" to both its greatness and its perversions. He takes hold of both and moves into the future.

The local religious institution has got to be dealt with if you are going to deal with primal community. Either you must work for its renewal or kill it. Those are the only two choices. I think Mao took the route of killing it-- not the dynamic of the church, but the religious institution. In fact, in Hong Kong, you can buy parts of buildings that were dismantled and moved across the border during the Cultural Revolution. It was Mao's way of dealing with the fact that the religious institution holds the old social vehicle in being.

Our understanding is that you work through the local religious institution and move with it, always sensitive to its own interior struggles in moving into the future. It is our work to release and engage troops from within the church to rearticulate the dynamic of being the local church in community.

All this means catalytic tactics and indirection. For the past four years, in local churches across the country, we have not been involved in a head-on assault at some problem. We have been involved in illuminating the depth meaning behind everything that is being done so that what is being done can be transformed in a post-modern, twentieth century world. We have done this so that the meaning of the mythology, the meaning of the training, the meaning of social action can be radically metamorphosed into something which moves toward the future. Releasing methodologies in the life of local churches serves to illuminate the new mythology and thereby release the means by which local church people who already care for primal community can act out that care significantly.

This entire process is both local and global. The concern for local, religious institutional renewal is not for the sake of my own community, but for the sake of renewing religious institutions across the globe. Unless that happens, there is no reason to bother with the religious institution in my community. However, those institutions are the only place where I can concretely act out my concern for the totality of that social form and its role in primal community.

I think this is the right time. Not only is it the right time within Christian institutions, but within Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. The conversations we have had with various religious groups over the past two years indicates that each has a fantastic awareness of its role as guardian of what it means to be human, and what it means to be community. Each, too, has got to go through a metamorphosis. This is the time when we can move on religious institutions and rebalance the dynamic of churching in local communities. It is the key. It is interesting that years ago, Augustine said, "The church is the congregation of the human race." The church dynamic is a microcosm of social form and human depth. It is essential to primal community.

It does not matter what your particular religion is, or what particular form of piety you engage in or whether or not you attend any form of worship. But if you love, if we dare to love primal community, we have no choice but to dare to love the local church in order to again recover our roots as a society, and move through them into the future. This gives us the freedom to do the necessary, revolutionary deed and gives us the possibility of creating the future.

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