

Grace for the Spiritual Marketplace: Thinking about Christian Spirituality Today

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In his inaugural address at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Joseph C. Hough, Jr. proposed three signs of our time that challenge liberal church leadership today: *spiritual hunger*, *growing religious pluralism*, and *the moral problem of poverty*. In answer to the spiritual hunger, Hough calls the progressive liberal tradition in theological education to develop “a new form of spiritual formation” as an integral part of, not an add-on to, the preparation of ministers for the church. He advocates a “reflective piety” shaped by the best biblical and historical scholarship as well as by the “experiences of regular participation in the practices of prayer and worship...that are actually practiced in communities of faith.”¹ This new concern for spiritual formation is to fund an ecumenical vision that will seek to overcome the divisions and conflict within Christianity and among the religions of the world. It will nourish commitment to advocacy and care for the poor of the earth.

This proposal of the teaching of Christian spirituality as the first ingredient of progressive theological education should stimulate all of us to clarify our responsibility to provide congregational leadership for inculcating the conscious, articulate, and intentional commitment to know, speak about, and practice Christian faith. All three of Hough’s signs—spiritual hunger, pluralism, and poverty—imply that today’s congregational and seminary leaders must cultivate spiritual formation with renewed interest and commitment.

Ministers in congregations have traditionally been responsible for teaching the fundamentals of Christian faith in a spiritually edifying way, but the church today exists in a world in which becoming a Christian requires a conscious choice and a moral commitment that is arguably more like the pre-Constantinian cultural environment of the early church than any other era since the establishment of official Christendom. This present loss of prestige and authority means that increasing numbers of people look for other resources to nourish spiritual hunger. Seminaries now find that many students do not come with the practices and disciplines that are a part of the nurture of Christian piety in its personal or communal ramifications. Many active pastors who return to the seminary campus are weary with the demands that an indifferent or hostile culture places upon them. In the many diverse claims for spirituality, neither Christian identity nor harmony and ecumenical vision are assured. In the breach of factionalism and individualism, our ministry to and with the poor loses out. To embrace a piety of ecumenical vision and commitment to the lowly is a main task of teaching Christian spirituality today.

Hough’s placement of the task of Christian spiritual formation is daunting, but it is also attractive. Furthermore, we have some hopeful signs that congregations are taking it on. This article will examine two recent studies of the religious pluralism in our culture that reveal the real need for clarity in Christian identity and for openness to ecumenical coalition. Then it will point out the resource for an ecumenical Christian spirituality in John Calvin’s theology for envisioning piety as following the call of

Jesus Christ to deny self, bear one's cross, meditate on the life to come, and live as stewards of the gifts of God in this earthly life. Finally, drawing on a recent presentation by Walter Brueggemann of the biblical themes of covenant righteousness in Deuteronomy and holiness in the Priestly tradition, it will suggest a basis for a present-day version of Reformed Christian piety.

Our Context: Two Recent Studies of Spirituality

Robert Wuthnow, in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950's*² and Wade Clark Roof in *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*³ offer studies of religious seekers in our day. We may take them like news of the day in Karl Barth's advice that we preach with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. They provide some openings for our work.

In the background of both is the work of Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton in *Habits of the Heart*.⁴ Bellah and associates posited an American civil religion, which provided a unified master narrative, merging biblical religion and utilitarian individualism. They found in the alienation and relativism that came from the 1960's and 1970's that individualism was undermining the communal commitments that hold our society together. They studied the North American, middle-class pursuit of happiness in diverse areas of both private and public life. The now-famous example of "Sheilaism" became the moniker for the highly personal "expressive individualism" these authors considered a threat to the civil institutions, like family, work, community, citizenship, and religion that support our freedoms. The personal religious philosophy of Sheila Larson, a single nurse who sought liberation in a day of changing gender roles and a benevolence in the midst of the suffering of her patients, became emblematic, probably unfairly, for private religion, which was at odds with the tradition of public religion in our society.

Spiritualities of Dwelling, Seeking, and Practice

Wuthnow's social research, tracing religious trends through the last fifty years, finds that most religious people in the 1950's understood their commitments as a spirituality of dwelling, of inhabiting sacred spaces. This spirituality centered on home, the safe haven. It emphasized sacred space embodied in the local church, separate from the profane world. Beyond these boundaries of home and church, the sanctity and strength of the United States provided an encompassing, safe homeland. The 1960's shook the foundations of this comfortable habitation. A cumulative intensity was brought to the alienation of African Americans within the North American homeland by the civil rights movement, the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, and the more radical movements, including The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Malcolm X and The Black Panther Party. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy decimated Camelot. The Vietnam War and the Johnson and Nixon years, ending with Watergate, eroded confidence in the morality of our national life. The continuing threat of mutually assured destruction in Cold War strategy, and the increasing alarm of environmental degradation shook the confidence many people had in home surroundings. Easy birth control changed sexual mores. The opening consciousness of women to new roles, the proposal for and final defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, and the surprising

leadership of women in business, education, and society made the 1950's view of a "Father Knows Best" home untenable. The ending of custodial care for many mentally ill and addicted, the increasing and recalcitrant poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and crime, especially of our cities, showed us that we did not have a home for all. This 1960's earthquake, shaking the foundations of our dwelling, made us all, in the words of Simon and Garfunkel, go on a search for America, and the ethos changed from dwelling to seeking.

Wuthnow's contrast between the spirituality of dwelling and the spirituality of seeking provides us with a perspective on the transforming changes in the fifties and sixties. The movements for social change in the 1960's, especially in civil rights, the Vietnam War protests, the feminist movement, the growing awareness of the Third World, and concerns for pollution and environmental degradation engaged many in those years in moral reflection and religious probing that deepened Christian engagement with issues of public life. Others reacted to the sixties conservatively: James Dobson taught discipline to children, James Davison Hunter popularized the notion of "culture wars," and the Ronald Reagan and George Bush political campaigns emphasized "family values." Wuthnow's telling critiques of spiritualities that seek to sacralize individualism and isolation in therapeutic spiritualities, like that of M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*, or New Age "angel awakenings," show that the spiritual hunger of people may lead to the kind of narrowness that Bellah and associates documented in the early 1980's. For Wuthnow, evidence abounds that seeker spirituality is too individualistic and too fluid to provide the support people need; he proposes that we return to ancient wisdom, to rediscover spiritual practices, an alternative both to dwelling and seeking. Wuthnow cites Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, and the lives of Teresa of Calcutta and Thomas Merton as his best examples of spiritual practice.

Mapping the Spiritual Marketplace

Rather than trace the changing spirituality of North Americans in historical sequence as does Wuthnow, Wade Clark Roof offers us a new map of the contemporary religious landscape. His impressive research is based on a panel study (follow-up interviews) of the same baby boomers that provided the data for his earlier study, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*.⁵

The new map, illustrated in rich descriptions of representative participants, includes several types of religious groups or subcultures. *Born-again Christians or evangelicals* are the largest constituency, and make up about a third of the boomer generation. Catholics make up more than half, and Protestants about thirty-five percent, of the *mainstream believers*, which are about twenty-five percent of the boomer population; the rest are ex-Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, blacks, Jews, and others. They are the most affluent and centrist within American life. Typically, their religious vocabulary is minimal; their religion could be described as "Golden Rule religion," but the leaders in the vanguard of the mainstream are reassessing the traditions of Christianity and the relationship of faith and culture. The most diverse group and the most fluid are *metaphysical believers and seekers* who typically reject any religious identity, understood as institutional loyalty, but affirm a spiritual identity that may be Neo-pagan, Wicca, goddess worship, Zen Buddhism, Theosophy, eco-feminism, New Age, and a host of others. This heterogeneous group makes up

fourteen percent of the boomer population. *Dogmatists*, who claim they are religious but not spiritual, and *secularists*, who claim neither, make up respectively fifteen percent and twelve percent of the boomer population.

Roof's new map of the religious landscape in North America today locates a specific place for leadership in mainline Christian congregations. He introduces Sarah Caughman, a woman who is typical of persons who rediscovered religious tradition on new terms. Caughman, in her forties, had been raised Christian. In her twenties, however, she had dropped out of Christianity and stayed out for over twenty years. But a "great turnaround" came at the death of her brother. She became involved in a downtown church that is open to diverse membership and seeks actively to minister to homeless people. She joined with her new rector and a number of other members and studied new forms of ministry. They created a base community that studied liberation theology and Christian spirituality. She and her group have come to find in their worship and their community a shared experience and growth in Christian commitment. Although Sarah Caughman still has a seeking spirit, she now has companions who share a new spirituality of community and concern for those on the margins in her city.

Both Wuthnow and Roof show that secularism has not overcome religion by any linear or evolutionary displacement. On the other hand, neither do they inspire confidence in civil religion as a common substratum of spirituality that could serve as a resource for reflective piety. Both suggest that spirituality is learned in practices, community, language, and traditions from which individuals may appropriate Christian faith. They imply that the leadership for renewal of spirituality must come from the biblical and historical sources that gave birth to Christian faith. Roof's example of Sarah Caughman, who came back to the Episcopal Church with a seeking spirit, openness to diversity, and desire to work in service to the community, might serve as a model of reflective piety. However, since over half (about fifty-eight percent) of the people among the Baby Boomers are either evangelical Christian or in the mainline denominations, the ecumenical challenge close at home is to develop coalitions between these two main groups. If Christians are not talking to each other, then we cannot talk very convincingly to any one else. If Christians do share in worship and partnership, we model spiritual formation.

Spirituality in the Reformed Tradition

The time is right for a reconsideration of the piety that Reformed theology offers for a contemporary spirituality. The Reformed branch of the Protestant Christian community has a definite and lively option for reflective piety, ecumenical vision, and commitment to public ministry in the theology of John Calvin. Calvin presents his understanding of "the Christian life" in Book III of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It and What Effects Follow." The main themes of his treatment of the Christian life come from the biblical themes of the holiness and righteousness of God, reflected in our life as regeneration (sanctification) and justification. The two go together for Calvin as obedience to the will of God and as forgiveness and mercy for our sins. Together, the requirement of obedience and the justification by God's mercy make up Calvin's understanding of God's grace. This obedience and this faith in God's forgiveness are the basis for Calvin's vision of the Christian life, and make up the

comprehensive understanding of a person's relationship to God, his proposal for Christian spirituality. Rather than spirituality, Calvin called it piety, and understood it to be the human response to the grace of God's regenerating and forgiving power in Jesus Christ.

Two recent Roman Catholic studies of influences on Calvin reveal that he was heir to earlier traditions of Roman Catholic spirituality, especially to the Brothers of the Common Life.⁶ This reforming spirituality was established by Gerhard Groote (1340-1384) in the Netherlands. Groote preached against clerical abuses and called for repentance. He gathered communities, but the brothers were free to continue their vocations in the common life. He also established a community of sisters. He built schools wherever there were communities. Perhaps the most famous representative was Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), who attended the Brothers' school in Deventer. The probable author of *Imitation of Christ*, he pushed the mystical and individualistic dimension of the Brothers' piety at the expense of the vocation in common life. Calvin attended the College of Montaigu (1527-1528) in Paris, where this piety was dominant, but Calvin received it primarily through the French Humanist tradition, especially Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (c. 1450-1536) and Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536). Particularly important was Erasmus, who sought church renewal through this spirituality, which gave many people a critical distance on the highly sacramental order of the Catholic priesthood. Erasmus set aside the Aristotelian dialectics of the scholastic theology faculty at the Sorbonne and espoused a study of the biblical texts by the knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin and training in the liberal arts. The combination of the reflective piety of the Brothers of the Common life with Renaissance Humanism that developed in the colleges around the University of Paris had a profound effect on Calvin. As a result, Calvin came to understand theology as the combination of piety and the knowledge of biblical truth, both contributing to the right knowledge of God. Calvin applied Humanist method in a thoroughgoing way to the interpretation of the Bible.

Calvin's reform grew in part out of the reformation in spirituality already available in the Roman Catholic Church of his day. Ultimately, he would find Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples inadequate for the resources he needed to establish an organized Christian church based on Protestant principles in Geneva. However, when he wrote to Francis I, King of France, in the preface to the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin denied that the reform he sought was new in the sense of a novelty and said that his intention was only to restore the ancient teaching of the church. He sought only "to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness." He rejected the need for rebaptism with the Anabaptists, and maintained throughout his career that the church had endured, even though sometimes "as in hiding places." The point of seeing these continuities, even in his quarrel with medieval Catholicism, is for us to recognize that Calvin's spirituality was born out of a conviction of ecumenical unity with the church catholic. Calvin's spirituality would have us seek unity and community in the midst of our contemporary spiritual marketplace.

In Book III of the *Institutes*, Calvin sets his presentation of the Christian life as faith (confident personal conviction) in our redemption in Jesus Christ, our strengthening and calling to obey God's will, justification by God's forgiveness, Christian freedom, prayer, election by God's grace, and resurrection to eternal life. All these are

the benefits of God's Holy Spirit to us, and we might, therefore, call them the elements of Calvin's spirituality. Particularly, Calvin elaborates his understanding of the Christian life in chapters 6-9 of Book III, in which he interprets the call of Jesus Christ to his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8: and parallels).

The Christian Life

Calvin's treatment of the Christian life (Book II, Chapters 6-10) begins with an introduction in which he recalls the object of regeneration (Book III, Chapter 3): "to manifest in the life of believers a harmony and agreement between God's righteousness and their obedience." He says he does not intend to describe the Christian life by recounting various virtues, but to provide direction for a rightly ordered life and "briefly to set down some universal rule with which to determine [Christian] duties." The strongest motive for the Christian life is to follow the pattern of Jesus Christ, "that our life express Christ, the bond of our adoption." The Christian life is not simply an intellectual matter, but occurs only when "it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart."

The Denial of Ourselves (Chapter 7)

Two steps are contained in self-denial: the dedication of ourselves to God and the seeking of the things which "are of the Lord's will" and which "serve to advance his glory." That "we are not our own... we are God's" is the real meaning of Jesus' words to the disciples: "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Christian people are convinced that they have to do with God throughout life and travel with soberness, righteousness, and holiness as pilgrims through this life. Self-denial gives the right attitude toward other people, and is the basis of helpfulness and love. It is also the means of our devotion to God's will in adversity and the foundation for the right attitude toward wealth and poverty.

Bearing the Cross (Chapter 8)

Christ calls his disciples to a greater demand, to prepare for "a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil." Suffering becomes God's way of promoting our salvation, because by it God brings us to "grasp the power of his resurrection." Instead of trust in our own strength, we learn that God "provides the assistance he has promised." In this way we learn patience and obedience. The cross is medicine curing us of a diseased estimate of ourselves. The cross is punishment, correcting our wrongs. The cross is comfort when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Cross bearing is not an endurance without emotion as the Stoics recommend but rather means in the midst of emotion "to bear cheerfully" what God wills for our final good. The Christian life is then one of thankfulness and spiritual joy.

Meditation on the Future Life (Chapter 9)

The end for which God is preparing us is the future life, and the self denial and cross bearing call us to have "contempt for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life." To be without a desire for "heavenly immortality" is to be like an animal, and yet we are readily distracted from our final good by the attractions and vanity of this life. The discipline of the cross shows us that "this life,

judged in itself, is troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and in no respect clearly happy.” Yet contempt for the things of this life does not mean “hatred of it or ingratitude against God.” We are not only in preparation in this life for the life to come, because the life we live now “is a gift of God’s kindness.” The contempt is only of “a perverse love of this life” and by way of contrast with a better one to come. This contrast is the only way our natural fear of death can be overcome, we can find comfort, and learn to await the day of death and final resurrection with joy.

How We Must Use the Present Life and Its Helps (Chapter 10)

The Scripture also teaches us “the right use of earthly benefits,” both things of necessity and things of delight. If we use the things God has given us for the end to which they are created, we will find not only provision for what is necessary but also “for delight and good cheer.” The aspiration to eternal life teaches us that we are on a pilgrimage and that neither undue severity nor excessive indulgence is appropriate. There are four rules for the use of the things of this life, not in the sense of “fixed formulas” but in the spirit of “the freedom of believers in external matters”:

- to indulge oneself as little as possible;
- to those who have slender resources, to go without things patiently;
- to know that all things are entrusted to us and we must render account to God;
- to look to our calling in all life’s actions.

Calvin joined regeneration and justification in a piety understood as the right relationship to God and to our neighbors. The language and conceptuality came from the Bible and also from the spirituality of late Medieval Roman Catholic piety. We cannot simply adopt this piety without an awareness of its historical setting. It is Neoplatonic in its espousal of the immortality of the soul and of “contempt” for the world. However, Calvin’s clear commitment to the resurrection of Jesus and Calvin’s distancing from the material necessities of life with the biblical notion of stewardship both show that he intended the language of piety to serve biblical truth.

Appreciation for Calvin’s piety will look for its fullest expression in the kind of church community that it built and in the lives of faith that came from it. W. Fred Graham shows how Calvin’s piety led the building of a city shaped by the worshipping Christian church.⁷ From our standpoint, and even for some of Calvin’s contemporaries, the rules and regulation of civil order were burdensome and paternalistic. Berthold Haller, a pastor in Berne, wrote in 1559 of Calvin and his associates, “If they had had the government of the church of Corinth, they would have excommunicated not only the incestuous, but almost the whole community.”⁸ Graham shows clearly that Calvin was determined to regulate the commerce of the city to protect the poor and all citizens from economic exploitation. Calvin was more concerned for the public good than he was for the rights of the individual when they ran counter to the good of the community. He was highly sensitive to the wringing of riches out of the life of the poor. Through the order of the deacons, “the fourth order of ecclesiastical government” in Calvin’s *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, ministry to the poor and the refugees was the express concern of the church. Included in this ministry was a network of hospitals for travelers, the sick, the poor, and the homeless. In sum, “Calvin’s thought helped produce a small welfare state in middle Europe in the sixteenth century. In Tawney’s phrase, it was Christian socialism.”⁹

We can appreciate that Calvin’s vision of the Christian life became manifest in a

remarkable way in the economics and the civic life that grew up in Geneva and that followed the Reformed churches. It is not a perfect record, and some of the Reformed tendencies are lamentable, especially those directed toward narrow legalism and a kind of holiness that is exclusive rather than being generous toward other people of God. However, Calvin's piety funded an express commitment to social righteousness. He understood it to be based on the nature of the Lord God of Israel and of Jesus Christ. For us to seek this piety would cause us to return to the same source from which Calvin drew, namely the testimony of Scripture itself and the interpretation and embodiment of the message in the ecumenical church.

Conclusion

Walter Brueggemann, in two compelling addresses given at Joseph Hough's inauguration,¹⁰ applies to the concern for ecumenical vision in the face of pluralism and the moral problem of poverty the biblical themes of covenantal righteousness in Deuteronomy and of holiness in the priestly tradition. At Sinai, the Torah of Yahweh was for abundance and for generosity, signaled in the Deuteronomist's joining the *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" [Deuteronomy 6:4 NRSV]) with the command to keep the Sabbath, and its extension to include the year of release from indebtedness and slavery every seven years (Deuteronomy 15:1-18), and its further extension in the "Jubilee" with the restoration of ancestral lands (Leviticus 25). This tradition, mediated by the prophets against the acquisitiveness and idolatry of the kings in Israel, became the basis for the platform address of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-37), and was embodied in his proclamation of "good news to the poor" and "deliverance to the captives."

The Priestly tradition emphasized the holiness of God ("You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" [Leviticus 19:2]) and the separateness of the Lord's people. This burden of sanctification is "to be a community matched in its life and practice to the very character of YHWH."¹¹ In spite of the intense and anxious forms that this requirement at times elicited in Israel and since, it is this intentional separateness that legitimates covenant faithfulness to "the other." The clarity and boundaries of identity become the foundation for the security of openness to cross the boundaries to neighbors. For example, the election of Abram and Sarai is for blessing "for all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:1-3) and the prophetic development of this theme in Isaiah 42:6-7: "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." In the New Testament this dialectic of holiness and neighborliness becomes especially clear in Simon Peter's vision of the cleanness of profane foods and the openness to table fellowship with Cornelius the Gentile, and it is the foundation of the Pauline advocacy for the new community in Christ by justification through faith in God's grace.

These summary remarks suggest, if they cannot fully demonstrate, that Calvin's theology of sanctifying and justifying grace are best understood as a remarkable interpretation at the crucial time of the Reformation of the Bible's themes of God's holiness and righteousness, what Brueggemann calls "the deep and defining tension in ancient Israel and the early church about holiness as separated purity and transformative engagement."¹² I believe in this biblical tradition and Reformed heritage, we have the basis for a new commitment to the formation of a reflective piety that charts

boundaries of identity and the paths of ecumenical openness and engenders a stewardship of self and resources for the good of those deprived of the means of selfhood and well-being.

Notes

¹Joseph C. Hough, Jr., "Recollection and Anticipation: The Heritage and Hope of Theological Education at Union Theological Seminary in New York, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* Volume 54, 1-2, (2000): 14.

²*After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950's* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

³*Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴*Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁵*A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

⁶Lucien Joseph Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1974) and Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, translated by David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

⁷*The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1971).

⁸Graham, 113.

⁹Graham, 196.

¹⁰Vision for a New Church and New Century, Part I: Homework Against Scarcity" and "Part II: Holiness Become Generosity," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* Volume 54: 1-2 (2000): 21-64.

¹¹ Ibid, 46.

¹² Ibid, 60.