

STILL “PEOPLE OF THE BOOK”?
PROTESTANT IDENTITY IN OUR TIME

2019 Convocation address
Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington

R. Bruce Douglass

What does it mean to be a “people of the Book”? As those of you who are familiar with the history of the concept know, it comes from Islam, where it originally had a meaning that was not altogether flattering to the other religions to which it was applied. But in our time it has passed into general usage, where it has acquired a meaning that it is less prejudicial. It is in the latter sense that I am invoking it here. It can be applied to any religion—or, for that matter, even any movement—that has sacred scriptures (or their secular equivalent) to which special authority is ascribed.

All Christians are to some extent people of the Book in this latter sense. Students of early Christianity tell us that this was the case even before the formation of the Biblical canon. But it has been true in an especially strong sense of Protestants, for reasons I hope are obvious. Indeed, this is so much the case that it is no exaggeration to say that the special role we assign to the Bible has become one of the defining parts of our identity. Our attachment to the Book is central to who and what Protestants have been.

But is this still true today? We are living in the 21st century, after all; not the 16th, and much has changed in the intervening centuries. Even though Protestantism is now still very much a going concern, there are reasons to doubt whether we are still a “people of the Book” in anything like the original sense. This is one of the reasons why there is now talk in some circles of the Protestant era coming to an end, especially here in the West. Protestant Christianity may be flourishing in the global South, these people say, but it is another matter in the North.

I consider this to be one of the more important subjects we need to address in thinking about our future, and that is why I have chosen to make it the focus of these remarks. The answer I am going to be giving to the question I have posed is as follows. Yes, I think we are still people of the Book, but not in the same sense as our forebears have been. The way in which we Protestants relate to the Bible is changing profoundly, and it is not in a direction I welcome. There are people who do embrace the change in question (I’ll be discussing some of them), but I am not one of

them. In so far as it is possible for us to resist this development, I think we should do so. Toward the end of my remarks I will say something about how that might be done, but let me say in advance that I regard the work we have been doing in the Reformed Institute as a small but perhaps significant example of such resistance.

CLASSICAL PROTESTANTISM

What is the change I believe has come over Protestantism in our part of the world on the crucial matter of our relationship to the Bible? To explain I want to make use of a concept that has been invented by historians and theologians to identify the form that Protestant Christianity took in its formative period (16th and 17th centuries). That concept is “Classical Protestantism.” As an ideal this form continued to exist long after its foundations were laid, persisting well into the 19th century. But in that century it began to lose strength, and it has been doing that ever since. It has never entirely disappeared from our consciousness because the ideals that were constitutive of Classical Protestantism are the basis of many of our traditions; and in some sense we probably still respect those ideals. But the farther removed we have become from the conditions that gave rise to those ideals, the harder it has been for us to understand (much less actually fulfill) those ideals in practice.

To make sense of the particular part of Classical Protestantism that is my interest here, I want to remind you of a most significant challenge our spiritual forebears faced at the time of the Reformation. This challenge came from Catholic critics, who said (roughly) the following: if you translate the Bible into the vernacular and put it in the hands of ordinary people, telling them to read and interpret the text for themselves, the result almost certainly will be moral and spiritual chaos. Even though you defend this practice in the name of the “authority of Scripture,” the practical effect will be to make each person (individual) an authority unto himself. Which means: doing away with authority altogether.

The Protestant response to this, especially in Reformed circles, was to say (and do) the following. As true as it may be to say that we want lay people to have access to the Bible in a form that will allow them to make sense of the text for themselves, that is only part of the story. Another part is that we also want (and expect) Christians to be part of worshipping communities in which, on an ongoing basis, the members seek to make sense together of the meaning of the text for their lives. We expect this to happen, of course, with the help and leadership of educated clergy, but we regard the task as a collaborative one. Furthermore, we want people’s thinking

about the Bible to be shaped and guided by the results of the community's ongoing deliberations about the meaning of that text. That is why we have creeds, confessions and catechisms, which provide a framework for making theological sense of Scripture.

Not only did Reformation-era Protestants answer the Catholic challenge in this way in their words, moreover, but on the whole they did so with their deeds as well. They walked the walk, in other words. So in its formative period (and even beyond) Protestantism was not in fact radically individualistic. It was a blend of individualism and (strong) communalism; and for a long time that provided a workable solution to the problem that had been posed by Catholic critics. This did not prevent the proliferation of Protestant denominations, but it did make the idea that Protestants were incapable of acknowledging or respecting authority seem like a caricature.

A GOD OF ONE'S OWN

For some time now, however, the set of ideas and practices that made this way of being a Christian possible have been in decline. We still give them lip service, but the day is long since past when they had anything like a strong hold on our lives. Especially has that been true in the past half century (1960's on), when in the industrialized world, at least, our societies have experienced a dramatic turn away from the "old time religion," and our churches have scrambled to accommodate the resulting mood. And the way we have done this has typically been at the expense not only of creedal knowledge but of Biblical knowledge as well. Or, at least, it has been at the expense of the particular kind of Biblical and theological knowledge on which our forebears prided themselves. So by the standards of Classical Protestantism, most lay people in our part of the world are Biblically illiterate. No less important, this state of affairs is taken for granted as normal in our church life, even in the selection of church officers. Nor is this confined just to mainline churches, either. If *Christianity Today* is to be believed, the difference between mainline Protestants and those from more conservative churches is only a matter of degree.

Surely this is anomalous. And it gives rise to certain obvious questions, such as: How could this possibly happen? and Why do we accept it so matter-of-factly? The common answers to these questions disparage our professions of respect for and interest in the Bible. They say that even though we claim to be a People of the Book, in fact our attachment to the Bible is now rather weak. I think there is some truth to that claim, but I don't think it suffices as an explanation. I think something else is going on, and it has to do with changes that are taking place in the nature of religious experience in our time. Our comparative lack of Biblical literacy as Protestants today

is a product, I submit, not of a lack of interest in the Bible as such, but rather of disinterest in a certain way of reading the Bible—i.e., as a source of doctrinal claims. Among lay people (and even among many clergy as well, I suspect) that way of reading (and using) Scripture (which was so characteristic of Classical Protestantism) has gone out of style. It has been replaced by other ways of reading the text that are more in keeping with the highly individualized forms of religiosity that are in vogue these days.

But how did that happen? How did we get into this situation? Part of the answer is given by Harvey Cox, the Harvard theologian, in a book called *The Future of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009) which reflects the mood of this development well. The disinterest and even distaste for religious doctrine that even religious people now have is a result, he says, of the fact that we are living through an epochal development in the long history of religion. The technologically advanced societies are passing from an age of “belief” (when people worried about objective truth in such matters as predestination) to a stage when people no longer worry about such things. Feelings tend to be much more important than beliefs in religious life these days, Cox says. Indeed, many doubt whether such thing as a “truth” exists in religion, except in the sense of what makes sense to each of us as individuals.

Cox doesn't really try to explain this development, other than to imply that the age of belief is coming to an end because people are fed up with the conflicts and even violence to which creedal differences can lead. There may be some truth to that, but I don't think it is the whole story. A better account, in my view, is provided by a German sociologist named Ulrich Beck, who in a provocatively labelled book called *A God of One's Own* (Polity, 2010) has argued that the demise of doctrinal religion is a natural by-product of the drift toward ever more radical forms of individualism in our time. He concedes that spirituality has made quite a comeback, but he maintains this happening in a way that makes anything like doctrinal claims increasingly beside the point. Claims of that sort just don't fit the current mood (or, *Zeitgeist*), which inclines and even encourages each of us to think of our spiritual lives as intensely personal and private matters. And that applies, of course, to our reading of sacred texts as well, with each person feeling that she has a right to read the text in her own way.

THE PRICE

As a sociological account I find this type of analysis to be quite persuasive. It captures well what appears to me to be happening. But as I have indicated above, unlike both Cox and

Beck, I do not look favorably on the developments in question. I concede that the turn away from creedal religion in the direction of forms of spirituality that are more privatized has certain advantages, and I can understand why someone who was not a believer or disliked “organized religion” would find movement in that direction appealing. But like so many things in life, those advantages come at a price, and it is not clear to me at all why those of us who are believers and are serious about our religion should want to pay that price. Especially not if one has any appreciation of the value of the sort of qualities I have attributed to Classical Protestantism.

What do I have in mind when I say that? What sort of thing is likely to be lost—or at least marginalized--if we allow ourselves to be carried in the direction of privatized, non-creedal religion?

First, doctrinal religion has tended to be intellectually serious and had real intellectual substance. The kind of individualism Cox and Beck favor almost certainly works against that. Why? Because when religion is privatized and belief is deemphasized, the truth question is bracketed. Yes, people can still read books and go to lectures. But they are under no obligation to engage other people in the sort of conversation about the merits of their beliefs that is meant to lead to judgments about the merits of those beliefs. In fact, when the ethos is really one of live-and-let-live, such engagement is actually discouraged. The likely effect, I suspect, would be a loss of intellectual seriousness about religion on the part of lay people.

Second, doctrinal religion, as the product of a communal activity, has provided believers with a robust experience of community, derived in part from the intellectual exchanges it has entailed. In the Protestant case, exchanges with wide-ranging participation. That too is surely threatened when religion is privatized and belief deemphasized. That doesn’t mean that community in all forms is threatened. But in the absence of serious conversation about the things we believe as Christians and the reasons why we believe them, we are deprived of an experience that historically has been one of the most important sources of community in Protestant churches.

I know the word “creed” evokes unappealing images in the minds of many. But most of that thinking is based on a caricature of the way in which the Protestant version of creedal religion, at least, has actually functioned. By that I mean the following: creedalism in our form has been as much about ongoing conversation as it has been the creeds and confessions themselves. When that conversation has been conducted at all well, it has knitted people together in ways that are difficult to achieve any other way. In the process it has also empowered them, by

giving them a sense of shared belief and purpose that has proved to be a source of great strength in their attempts to influence the course of events in the wider world.

Finally, there is the matter of articulacy—or, the ability to express and explain what we believe. On that score, too, the turn toward privatism can be expected to have adverse effects, some of which we are already experiencing. I say this, I should add, without any illusions about the relationship between articulacy and the actual practice of Christian discipleship. It is a complex subject. We all know of people who are good at talking but not at doing. We also know that the best witness to our faith is often in deeds, not words. But still, articulacy does matter, and not just in communicating with others. It also is helpful to believers themselves in enabling them to understand and practice their faith, which is one of the reasons why Protestants historically have placed such emphasis on the spoken word.

In our worship services we still have that, of course, in the form of sermons, usually delivered by clergy. But except for the scripted parts, the rest of us are largely silent—in that part of our church life as well as others. So not having much experience with talking about matters of faith, we tend to have a hard time expressing what we believe, even on the most basic questions. All too often our children inherit that. They are articulate about many things (as we are), but not usually about religion, which is why the demand that they do so at the time of confirmation often comes as a shock. I might add that in making that demand, we are imposing on them, curiously, a requirement that we rarely make of adults, when they join our churches.

RESISTANCE

I hope it is clear by now why I think the currents pulling us in this direction need to be resisted. But in suggesting that is what is needed, I do not mean to exaggerate the significance of the problem I have been posing. I am not one of those who thinks Protestantism is coming to an end. There is too much vitality and creativity in the Protestant world today for that idea to be plausible. Nor, as I have indicated, do I think it is appropriate even to conclude that we are ceasing to be people of the Book. We do remain attached to the Bible, albeit in ways that tend to be significantly different from the ones experienced by our predecessors. But we are not attached nearly as well as we could or should be.

So what then do I have in mind? What specifically is it that I think needs to be resisted?

Broadly, it is the whole recasting of the meaning and purpose of religion I have described. But more specifically and closer to home, it is the tendency in our churches today to treat the effects of the movement toward privatism and non-creedal religion as though the resulting state of affairs were normal. We have gotten so accustomed to low levels of Biblical and theological knowledge among lay people (including our elected leaders) that we are inclined to treat that condition as unproblematic—or at least unavoidable. But in principle it is very problematic, and it needs to be treated as such.

That is something, however, that can only happen if it is recognized as a problem. I concede that when a problem is as large as the one I have been discussing here, the mere recognition of it does not necessarily lead to positive action. Sometimes, problems of that sort can seem so daunting when they are well understood that people have a hard time figuring out what to do. I realize that is a danger with the kind of analysis I have provided here because it relies so heavily at a crucial point on a sociological trend. That kind of analysis can easily get people into a highly deterministic frame of mind. We encounter this all the time in our society—especially with regard to religion. Analysts identify a certain trend (on the basis of polling or other quantitative data), and on that basis they then proceed to tell us what is likely (if not certain) to happen in the years to come. In the process they create an impression that events are inexorably moving in a certain direction. (Think, for example, of the way the phenomenon of the so-called “Nones” in our society has been treated by opinion writers in recent years.)

But, as someone who spent his professional life in a scholarly discipline that is commonly regarded as a social science, I want to insist here as emphatically as I can that reasoning of that sort is usually misleading—sometimes highly so. Why? Because unexpected things can and do happen to change the course of events. That occurs all the time. For that reason, even when a trend seems formidable, fatalism is not an appropriate response. It is especially inappropriate in the Protestant world, moreover, purely on historical grounds, quite apart from any theological considerations that might be cited. For the history of our particular type of Christianity is filled with one example after another of renewal movements that have successfully challenged a status quo that seemed intractable at the time, and I see no good reason to think that has come to an end.

So I refuse to be pessimistic about our ability to address successfully the problem I have been posing in these remarks, even though that problem can seem daunting. And in saying that I am reflecting the mood that I remember prevailed among the people who were involved in the conversations that led up to the creation of the Reformed Institute back in the early 2000’s (a mix of laity and clergy). We recognized that the problem about which we were concerned was a big

one, but we were also convinced that there were practical steps that could and should be taken to address it. We conceived of the Institute as a means of fulfilling that ambition, and we presented it to prospective sponsoring churches that way. Our aim, we said, was to strengthen and enrich the educational ministry of congregations by providing them with resources and encouragement that would enable them to tackle the larger issue we had in mind. We also wanted to provide a forum where such things could be discussed on an ongoing basis. Our hope was by taking steps of that kind we would be able to create a cadre of people in each sponsoring church (and perhaps others as well) who would understand the problem that concerned us and be motivated to do something constructive about it.

To some extent, I believe, we have done that, which has meant that in most of the churches that have stayed with us for any length of time there is by now some awareness among lay people of the problem I have been posing here and a commitment to address it. So we have had some modest success. But even though we have been at this some time, the results we have achieved to date are just beginning. A foundation has been laid. But much remains to be done, and hopefully some of that will happen in the next phase of this organization's life. I look forward very much to seeing it occur.