

## **ARE WE LIVING IN A POST-PROTESTANT ERA?**

reading suggestions from R. Bruce Douglass,

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The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which was commemorated this past year, was an occasion for serious reflection and debate about many interesting topics related to that anniversary. One of the more important of those subjects has to do with the current status and future prospects of Protestantism, and my exposure to the exchanges that took place on that subject in 2017 led me to do quite a bit of reading--and lecturing in our churches--on the issues it raises. Some of you who have heard me speak on the topic have asked me for suggestions of works that might be consulted for further guidance, and my purpose here is to respond to that request. Please understand that the works I will be citing here represent just a sample of the resources that are available in English.

### **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

I first encountered the term "post-Protestant" in discussions of the place of Protestant influences in the political and cultural life in places such as the United States where in the past Protestants have enjoyed such influence that they have sometimes been characterized as a hegemonic force. This country is a particularly good example because for much of the nation's history it has been a place where the particular version of the Christian religion practiced by white Protestants has been understood to have a privileged standing. Indeed, for much of American history it has been that way by design. Not only did white Protestants assume they had a right to govern the nation, but once it had established its independence, they often made a point of saying that the United States was the kind of country it was because of its roots in the Protestant Reformation. But as soon as people of other faiths began coming to this nation in numbers that were sufficient to be politically significant, that tradition began to be problematic. Especially so as Catholics and Jews had sufficient numbers of voters to challenge the hegemony enjoyed by white Protestants.

Though signs of that challenge were evident as early as the first part of the 20th century (the successful campaign against Prohibition, the nomination of Al Smith for the Presidency by the Democratic Party, etc.), the issue came to a head in the public life of the nation in the 1960's with the election of John Kennedy, a practicing Catholic, as President (despite strong opposition

from prominent Protestant clergy) and Supreme Court decisions which outlawed certain long-standing rituals in the public schools (such as daily Bible reading and prayers led by teachers) that were often regarded by people from other religious traditions as expressions of Protestant piety. And even though the majority of African-Americans were themselves Protestants, their dramatic entry into public life in the 1960's via the Civil Rights Movement served only to weaken further the authority of white Protestants. It happened even in the South, but even more was it evident outside the former Confederate states.

The most common way of describing the trend represented by these developments has been to say that the nation has been moving increasingly toward a more "pluralistic" identity; and that, I believe, is actually a more accurate term than "post Protestant." For even though Protestants of European descent are nowhere near as unambiguously privileged in American society as they once were, they are still the largest single religious "bloc" in the nation (roughly 50%), and their influence on American life is by no means just a thing of the past. Indeed, in some states and localities that influence remains quite strong. But the assumption that the beliefs white Protestants hold and the practices they favor should be overtly privileged in the policies adopted by our governing bodies is largely a thing of the past; and it has been replaced by a principled affirmation of the idea that government should seek to be as neutral as possible when it comes to religion. And the practical significance of that commitment is being felt ever more strongly all the time as the number of people espousing other religions steadily grows.

One of the best brief analyses of these developments I have encountered is an article by Peter Berger, the famous sociologist (and Lutheran lay theologian), entitled "**Religion in Post-Protestant America**" that appeared in *Commentary* magazine on May 1, 1986. An article which complements Berger's nicely because it focuses more narrowly on the changing fortunes of the mainline Protestant churches in this country is Joseph Bottum's "**The Death of Protestant America**," which appeared in the August/September 2008 issue of a conservative journal called *First Things*. But for me an even more interesting piece is one Bottum (who is himself a conservative Catholic) published on February 22, 2014 in *The American*, a journal of the American Enterprise Institute, under the title "**The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America**." But for those who really want to get into the subject I suggest taking a look at a book he published under the title **An Anxious Age: the Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America** (Image/Random House, 2014), which has to do with changes that have taken place in the composition of the cultural as well as political elites of the nation in the period since the Kennedy Presidency.

Bottum's argument has to do with more, however, than just the make-up of American elites. It is a deeper book than that because he believes the changes that have been taking place in recent decades in the make-up of our elites have been accompanied by changes in the whole cultural ethos of the nation. And the changes he has in mind fall under the heading of movement toward a "post-Protestant" identity because they are carrying us, he says, beyond anything that would fairly qualify as a descendent of the original Protestant ethos of this country. That is a more debatable claim, in my opinion, but his defense of it is well worth examining. Another piece that makes a similar argument is an article by the Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas (a Protestant who once taught at Notre Dame) called "**The End of American Protestantism**" which appeared online on July 2, 2013 on the ABC Religion & Ethics page.

## PROTESTANT/CATHOLIC DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES

Another reason for thinking we may be living in a "post-Protestant" era is a series of developments that have taken place in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant worlds in the period since the 1960's that have made possible various kinds of theological rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants. Especially interesting in that regard is a set of developments that are helpfully discussed in a book by historian Mark Noll and journalist Carly Nystrom (both Protestants themselves) entitled *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Baker Academic 2008). I say that because the book has to do mainly with the interaction between Catholics and theologically conservative Protestants, who have a long history of being staunchly anti-Catholics. So they have usually disapproved of the friendly overtures made by other Protestants to Catholics (and vice versa) during and after the Second Vatican Council. But the common cause Catholics and evangelicals have been able to make in recent years on such topics as abortion and homosexuality appears to have changed the mood quite significantly on both sides, and the obvious question now is how much this convergence on certain moral issues has affected (or could affect) the attitudes on both sides with respect to doctrinal issues. Will it extend to the deeper theological issues that used to separate Protestant evangelicals and Catholics or not, and if it does carry over into the realm of doctrine, how far will that go? That is the main subject of the Noll and Nystrom book, and the short answer they give is that while there is much evidence of good will on both sides, the actual progress that has been made is small.

Church doctrine is one thing, however, and the beliefs held by lay people are something else again; and on that front too there is by now considerable evidence of convergence on a number of important topics. In the United States the shift began with the election of John Kennedy as President in 1960, and it was aided greatly by the changes Catholicism underwent in the time of Vatican II and its aftermath, and it appears to have been advancing steadily, if intermittently, ever since. So it was not really that surprising when the Pew Research Center announced in 2017 that it had polling data which showed not only that both Catholics and Protestants in this country tended to believe not only that there was not that much difference between their respective versions of the Christian religion, but that their own beliefs on fundamental doctrinal issues confirmed the point as well. The authors of the Pew study, whose findings were summarized in an article on the Pew Research Center website on August 31, 2017 called *"U.S. Protestants Are Not Defined by Reformation Era Controversies 500 Years Later"*, even went so far as to claim that on the key issues at stake in the Reformation--such as the authority of Scripture and the relationship between faith and works--Protestants and Catholics were now largely in agreement. They conceded that this was less true of Protestant evangelicals than it was of other Protestants, but they still maintained that overall their polling data showed that the differences that existed at the time of the Reformation were fading in importance.

I see no good reason to dispute the truth of those claims, and not just because of my respect for the research done by the Pew organization. It is also because in my experience the claims in question correspond well to the way Protestants and Catholics in this country tend to think these days. We are living in an ecumenical age, after all, when the inter-religious hostilities that do exist (as they surely do) do not follow confessional lines as a general rule. We tend to define our antagonists very differently these days than past generations did, in other words. But that having been said, I still think the impression created by the Pew findings is a misleading one. Why? In part because of historic differences between Catholics and Protestants that the authors of the 2017 study themselves acknowledge still are very much in existence. Hardly any Protestants believe in purgatory, for example, while most Catholics say they do. The same is true of the veneration Catholics profess to have for Mary, the mother of Jesus; and even though some Protestants clearly do now admire the authority accorded by Catholics to the (exclusively clerical) hierarchy of their church, the difference between Catholics and Protestants on that score is still huge. Indeed, in this age of stand-alone Protestant churches that pride themselves on being answerable to no other church body, it may be larger than ever.

As a lifelong member of a church that is committed to the proposition that the church needs always to be open to the possibility of being reformed ("according to the Word of God"), moreover, I cannot help but be aware of the difference between Catholics and Protestants on that subject. In saying that I don't mean to suggest that the Roman church is incapable of change; only a person who knew nothing about the history of western Christianity could possibly believe that. Nor do I mean to suggest that change is always good, even if it is done for righteous purposes. But I do mean to suggest that Protestants have long tended to be more receptive to calls for innovation in their religious beliefs and practices than Catholics, and that surely remains the case today. This is ultimately a difference that is rooted in theology, too, and I do not think it takes much study to grasp how much of a practical difference it makes. Just think, for example, of what a difference the ordination of females as clergy has made in the life of the mainline Protestant churches in this country in recent decades and, in contrast, how difficult it has been for the Roman church even to consider taking any such action despite all the changes taking place in the role of women elsewhere in society.

Lay people have long played a much larger role in the governance of their churches than their Catholic counterparts have done, and that, too, remains the case today. We Protestants have been accustomed to playing that sort of role even on doctrinal matters, in fact, and even though that practice tends these days more to be taken for granted than seriously debated, I do not think there can be any doubt that if it were ever to be seriously called into question, most American Protestants would insist that active participation by elected lay leaders is the right way for the affairs of their churches to be run. Catholics, in contrast, tend to have a different view even when they are uneasy (as many now are) about the effects of the power wielded the clergy in their church. So on that score as well there continues to be a big difference between the Protestant and Catholic versions of the Christian religion, and it is one of the more commonly cited reasons why growing numbers of American Catholics have been migrating to Protestant churches in recent years. (For the relevant information consult an article entitled "***The hidden exodus: Catholics becoming Protestants***" by the Rev. Thomas Reese, S.J. in the *National Catholic Reporter*, April 6, 2011).

## THE "EMERGENTS" & POST-DENOMINATIONALISM

In spite of the continuing evidence of such obstacles to agreement, however, there are still Christians in this country who claim to have transcended the differences that in the past have divided Christians into separate communions. Indeed, there is now a whole movement of such people, which prides itself not only in having members from a variety of different Christian communions (including the Roman Catholic Church) but also on seeking to forge a new version of the Christian religion that is at once post-denominational and post-confessional. Or, as one of the better known leaders of this movement of "emergent" Christians, Brian McClaren, has declared in one of his more recent books, the point is to take part in **The Great Spiritual Migration** (Convergence Books, 2016) that is now being undertaken by those interested in creating a "better way of being Christian" than the versions we have inherited--one that draws creatively on the resources of many different Christian traditions without being bound to any one of them.

The people who are attracted to this movement typically gather in local communities of faith that make a point of being unaffiliated with any denomination; and that above all is what they mean when characterizing themselves (as they often do) as "post-Protestant." But it does not take much reflection on this behavior to see how very Protestant it is in spirit, if not always in other ways, which is why the membership of the movement tends to be made up largely of people with Protestant backgrounds. The whole idea of seeking a new way of being Christian in conscious opposition to inherited beliefs and practices is hardly something a serious Catholic (much less an Orthodox Christian) could embrace, after all, and the fact that it is embraced so uncritically in the circles where the "emergent" project is being pursued speaks volumes about its real character. In fact, when the "emergent" phenomenon is considered this way, it is not inappropriate to interpret it as just one more version of the Protestant approach to tradition and innovation.

Though the people who think as McClaren does tend to speak in a manner that gives the impression that their particular brand of Christianity is the wave of the future, moreover, the fact of the matter is that the number of denominationally unaffiliated congregations in this country is actually quite modest. Some of them are quite large, to be sure, but scholars who have studied the relevant evidence report that no more than 20% (a liberal estimate) of the Christian congregations in this country are really independent. So the vast majority of American Christians are still affiliated with one or another denomination, even though it does appear that the strength of their identification with the particular religious "brand" they have chosen is weaker than it used to be. For a good introductory review of the relevant data on this matter consult the writings of Scott Thurmman, a scholar whose writings can be found on the website of the Hartford (Seminary) Institute for Religion Research, especially his **Report on the 2010 National Profile of U.S. Nondenominational and Independent Churches**.

## SHOULD WE REGRET THE DIVISIONS?

One of the better things the commemoration of the Reformation anniversary in 2017 brought us was renewed awareness of the fact that Christians throughout the world are still deeply divided; and in some quarters, at least, that was cause for regret. But not nearly as much as might have been expected. Given the obvious fact that the splintering of the Christian church to which the Reformation gave rise has not been reversed despite the increasingly common recognition in Christian circles that it is theologically problematic, one might have thought that the coming of this particular anniversary would be an occasion for much soul-searching and perhaps even repentance. But I have seen little sign of that. Every commemorative event of which I am aware included some token acknowledgement of the need for such repentance, to be sure. But these gestures were usually just that, tokens; and hardly ever were they accompanied by serious calls for action to overcome our ecclesial divisions. So I have come away from the events of 2017 with a sense that most of us are in fact quite comfortable with the divisions we have inherited. (For further discussion of this state of affairs see the memorable sermon entitled "**Unfinished Business**" delivered by Eric Springsted, a former member of the Reformed Institute's Company of Teachers, at a meeting of National Capitol Presbytery in November, 2017--which is available on this website).

Not everyone thinks this way, however, and some of the exceptions are worth noting. I think, for example, of a recent book by a Protestant evangelical named Peter Leithart called **The End of Protestantism--Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church** (Brazos 2016), which argues that the time has now come for Protestants to abandon denominationalism and actively seek reunion with the Roman church on terms that will allow for the creation of something like what he calls "Reformational Catholicism." Or, on the Catholic side, there is George Weigel's **Evangelical Catholicism--deep reform in the 21st century church** (Basic 2013), which, though much less concerned with ecumenical relations, explicitly urges Catholics to forsake the legacies of the Counter-Reformation and has much the same sort of ambition as Leithart's book. In both cases, the idea is that perpetuation of the status quo is no longer acceptable and we need therefore to do some deep thinking about church reform. On a variety of issues, the people who think this way say, we need to be prepared to break fresh ground, but on terms that respect the deep reasons for the staying power of the beliefs and practices we have inherited.

Talk of this kind is aspirational, however, not descriptive. It articulates a vision of what could be, not what is actually the case; and it is unlikely to amount to anything more until such time as the way of thinking it expresses capture the attention (and imaginations) of more than just a few of us. But to date that has not happened, and only, I submit, when it does happen (and in particular only when it happens to those who are in a position to do something effective about the matter) will it really be appropriate to conclude that we are living in a time that deserves to be characterized as post-Protestant. In the meantime, it is best to assume that most all the talk in that vein is just hyperbole.