

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Whither the PC(USA)?

THOUGHT

Novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson has written of “the rise in this country of a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought.” She continues:

I intend this as a criticism not only of the so-called fundamentalists but, more particularly, of the mainline churches, which have fairly assiduously culled out all traces of the depth and learnedness that were for so long among their greatest contributions to American life.

She then quotes Emily Dickinson:

The abdication of belief
Makes the behavior small.

Robinson concludes her critique:

There is a powerful tendency also to make belief itself small, whether narrow and bitter or feckless and bland, with what effects on behavior we may perhaps infer from the present state of the Republic.¹

Robinson’s words, as they often do, haunt me as I consider my role in the Presbyterian tradition into which I was born, a tradition in which I found my moral home as a teenager impressed with the courageous witness of Presbyterian ministers supporting Dr. Martin Luther King before and after he lost his life in my home town, a tradition in which, a few years later when I was in college, I saw a local congregation surround my family with care and support following the untimely illness and quick death of my father, and a tradition in which I have given my life to preaching, teaching, and being a pastor since entering seminary at age 21.

Let me be clear and frank. American Presbyterians have a sordid history. We have supplied some of the most thoughtful apologists for slavery in the antebellum South and for the excesses of capitalism in the Gilded Age. We have lived *in* history and often been *on* its wrong side until it was too late to make much difference. In addition, as God’s

¹ Marilynne Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals,” *The American Scholar*, Volume 75, Number 2, Spring 2006, 42-43.

“frozen chosen,” we thankfully do not represent the only way of being Christian, perhaps not even the best way, if there is such a thing.

But more than our more liturgical or revivalist siblings among the churches of the Reformation, we have, *at our best*, appreciated, striven for, held fast to, and at times even embodied well the role that positive, informed thoughtfulness can play in the Christian faith and that a thoughtful Christianity can play in culture. Among the gifts of the spirit, we have received – at our and perhaps God’s best – the ability to think. Even though we have often used this gift to historically detrimental ends, when we have nurtured this gift and used it well, our congregations and our institutions, though small in numbers, have served the larger body of Christ well, in addition to making, as Robinson says, our “greatest” contribution “to American life.”

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With these preliminary thoughts, I should like to answer three issues posed by the by Reformed Institute:

The PCUSA has suffered a steady decline in membership over the past several decades. How significant is this development in assessing the state of the church. Do numbers matter? If so, how?

Numbers matter, but most people in most cultures live more by the heart than the head, more by the hands than the mind. Our gift and calling as Presbyterians lies primarily with the life of the mind. So we will always be a minority. At least in America, we will never present the gospel in such a way that great masses of people will respond, but at our best we can present it in such a way that people who appreciate thought will respond. In a world in which thoughtfulness must ultimately govern our major decisions, lest we all risk perishing, the contributions that arise from this gift will be immeasurable.

We often hear that the mainline Protestant churches are now in a new situation in American society. Do you believe that is true? If so, how would you define the new situation? What is the appropriate response to it? What implications does it have for the church’s mission?

In 1962, the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that by the early 1800s,

The Puritan ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader was steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister as a popular crusader and exhorter. Theological education itself became more instrumental.

Simple dogmatic formulations were considered sufficient. In considerable measure the churches withdrew from intellectual encounters with the secular world, gave up the idea that religion is a part of the whole life of intellectual experience, and often abandoned the field of rational studies on the assumption that they were the natural province of science alone. By 1853 an outstanding clergyman complained that there was “an impression, somewhat general, that an intellectual clergyman is deficient in piety, and that an eminently pious minister is deficient in intellect.”²

Personally, I have a hard time mustering much energy for believing that “mainline Protestant churches are now in a new situation in American society.” Thoughtful preaching and teaching, like serious journalism and rigorous analysis of public policy, have always gasped for air in the glitz and glamour of America. Perhaps we gasp a bit more in our culture today, but historically “There is nothing new under the sun.”

Do you believe the PCUSA stands for something coherent theologically? If so, what is it? If not, do you consider that a problem? Why or why not?

I share Robinson’s wise but unfortunate assessment that for the most part, mainline churches “have fairly assiduously culled out all traces of...depth and learnedness,” leaving us with a “belief” that is “itself small.” While not wanting to be critical, I cannot help but feel that, depending on which congregation one attends and which clergy leads that congregation, much of our belief has become, ironically, *both* “narrow *and* bitter...feckless *and* bland.”

We do not live in coherent times in our culture: politically, ethically, morally. If by theological coherence we mean theological uniformity, and if such uniformity were to become our goal, we would likely become more a closed religious society than a living tradition. But if by theological coherence we mean being more thoughtful, more thorough, more intellectually demanding, our witness to the world and our place in the larger Christian church will be strengthened.

“The abdication of belief” does indeed make “behavior small.” In the PCUSA, we need not abdicate belief. We need not be “small” in our “behavior,” in our witness, in our place in God’s Church and world. We need to be what we have always been at our best: thoughtful.

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² Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House, 1962), 86-87.