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Unformed future

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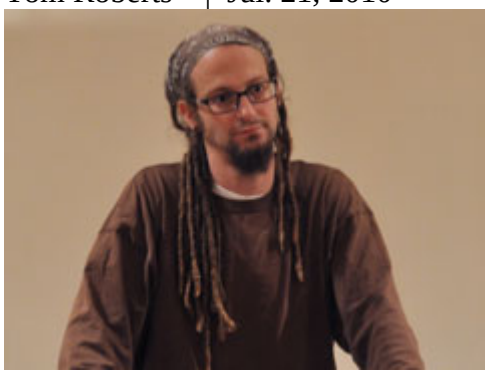

Shane Claiborne (photo by Shirin McArthur)

In Search of the Emerging Church [1]

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- When Shane Claiborne hops to the podium in the meeting room at the Hotel Albuquerque, he looks as stylistically unbounded as his spiritual quest that?s outlined on a bio sheet. He?s long and lanky with a goatee. He looks bookish in dark-rimmed glasses, his thin face framed by dreadlocks held in place by a handkerchief bandana. He projects a kind of urban underbelly chic with an accent as pure as the early days of NASCAR.

He is a product of East Tennessee Protestant evangelical Christianity transplanted to the Northeast, where he engages in a robust version of Catholic Worker-type community, advocating for the poor and for nonviolent solutions to problems.

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr speaks of him as a gifted ?third-way person.? In the context of the conference on emerging Christianity he is about to address, he serves as a bridge, and a personification of one version of what might be arising out of what is.

To talk of an emerging church or emerging Christianity is to speak of something that owes a great deal to tradition but that seeks its shape and bearing in ways not yet formed.

That may be the nature of emergence -- that whatever it is never fully arrives all laid out with clear boundaries and certitude, with clear markers so everyone knows who?s in and who?s out. That may also be why the

language of those who take the prospect of emergence seriously is so loaded with movement and an impression of travel. Consider the title of the conference held in April in Albuquerque, at which Claiborne spoke: ?Emerging Christianity: How We Get there Determines Where We Arrive.? The journey, then, is the place, and the sojourners don?t expect that all the answers will be waiting, like an award for finishing, at the end of some religious obstacle course.

?I hope whatever emerging Christianity is,? said Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, a featured speaker at the conference, ?it?s going to be much more practice-based than doctrine-based. Where has this obsession with believing correct doctrines gotten us? The Roman church is right back into it, although maybe that?s why God is humiliating us, to say: ?This obsession with being right and having the whole truth, look where it?s gotten you, Roman church,? ? he said in a not-so-thinly veiled reference to the then-breaking story that the shadow of the clergy sex abuse scandal had darkened the door of the papal palace. ?It might well be in the great scheme of God?s grace the only way to bring us to humility, to balancing all of our absolutely certain knowing with a necessary unknowing.?

The conference was sponsored by Rohr?s Center for Action and Contemplation, the second of its kind, and the title suggests an expansion of the idea from last year?s conference, which bore the heading, ?The Emerging Church.?

Whether a relative handful of people meeting in the New Mexico desert (some 570 people from 45 U.S. states and five other countries) can be considered a measure of new things emerging, only time will tell. Numbers aside, the discussion was broad enough to cross a range of denominational borders and ideological presumptions, and it wasn?t about easy fixes or the simple overthrow of dogma and traditional practice. In fact, in some instances, the case was quite the opposite.

If Rohr, for Catholics, embodies in many ways whatever is left of the renewal impulses of the Second Vatican Council, he also is a leading advocate today of contemplative life, the ancient discipline that has found a resurgence in some unlikely places.

It is an aspect of Christianity that Rohr thinks has been shortchanged in the church over the centuries. He also believes it holds the key -- ?nondualistic thinking? -- to the next level of Christian existence. That level, he said, will be one that goes beyond the mind, beyond rationality, beyond ego. ?The mind,? he said, ?is never going to get us to a great church. It will always create some moral and doctrinal distinctions because that?s the way the ego operates. The ego prefers the dualistic mind.? In contrast, he said, ?the soul prefers to embrace things, not to name things. It is what it is without a name. It is what it is as it is. The soul has a different set of eyes, and my assumption is that the soul sees with contemplative eyes. It sees things without needing to label them up or down.?

Respect for not knowing

The discussion of emerging Christianity turns not so much on the difference between the old and the new as on the difference between a spirituality trapped in what Rohr calls a ?mode of consciousness? that is constantly taking sides and what he describes (citing the late theologian Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner) as a consciousness that has ?a respect for not knowing, for unknowing.?

If all of that sounds impossibly abstract and noncommittal, Claiborne helps to ground things.

For him, Rohr?s idea of a nondualistic approach to lived belief becomes real in an activism that was unknown in his childhood experience. For Claiborne, emergent Christianity is moving beyond not doctrinal indoctrination and the certitude of systematic theology, but beyond the certainty of salvation, beyond his Bible Belt formation, ?where Christianity was a lot more about what we believe than how we act.?

?I kind of stumbled into that [realization] when I began to discover every year that we were going and getting born again, again. We would come forward singing, ?Just As I Am,? ? he said, ?and leave just as we were. Then I started to read the scripture and I saw that we?re not just called to be believers, but to be disciples and to live out that faith as Jesus did with the same marks of justice, peace and reconciliation.?

Activism and ?a vital prayer life? began to take shape, he said, when he moved outside of the environment he grew up in, ?away from this pattern of insulating ourselves from suffering.?

As he tells it, he eventually jumped into the deep end of the pool of suffering in inner-city Philadelphia, where he lives in a community called The Simple Way. It is evangelicalism with a new face that finds itself in startlingly new places. Claiborne is a breathless storyteller with a disarming sense of humor, given his material, and as the anecdotes pile on one another, it becomes clear that the activism he practices has a hard and local edge to it. He and others have spent considerable time in courtrooms advocating for the interests of the poor, arguing changes to laws that further marginalize the marginalized and against local gun shops that sell their wares to anyone.

The witness can be as expansive as it is local. He tells of being in Iraq during the initial bombing as a witness against international violence. On another occasion, the community took $10,000 it had received as a gift, money that had been earned on the stock market, and gave it all away in small denominations on Wall Street.

Theatrics aside, Claiborne speaks about transformation in the neighborhood and the long haul of being with people in their circumstances of poverty and alienation. ?I?m so excited to be alive today because I think there?s something happening in the church. ... What are some of the marks in the DNA of the current movement that we see in the church that are trying to marry contemplation and action together?

?One of those I would say is that we have a movement in the church that is trying to connect orthodoxy and orthopraxis. We?re not throwing out the things that we believe, but we?re trying to also have practices that work those things out. What has happened in the past few decades is that our Christianity has just been about what we believe, as if our Christianity was just a doctrinal statement. But in Jesus you don?t see a presentation of ideas. You see an invitation to join a movement and the actions of that movement.?

He said he has been working with Rohr?s center on ?the new monasticism, to create a resource of spiritual direction and a way of trying to cross-pollinate the older and the younger in the movement? to create stability and the tools for discernment. He warns against ?a murky liberalism that leads to sloppy discipleship.? The liberalism he experiences, he said, is a reaction against old legalisms, and he recalls that Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, said ?that we of all people have to be disciplined. ... We have to create an environment where it?s easier to be good.?

Critique of liberalism

Liberalism also came in for critique from Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest, writer, retreat leader and a longtime practitioner of centering prayer who is deeply interested in restoring the Christian contemplative tradition. She recalled the question she received from a friend and colleague after she had preached an Easter sunrise service. ?He said, ?You mean you really believe in Resurrection?? I said, ?You mean you really don?t?? It was one of those aha moments, to be sure, but it?s an aha moment we will face because a lot of the best theology which is undergirding the sweep into an emergent church really emerges from an academic, rational, polite, pluralistic home that does not take us far enough.?

She recalled the words of Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, ?I?ve seen the Lord.?

?From that hushed astonishment and wonder,? said Bourgeault, ?she went forth from the garden to first give voice to that message: ?He is risen. He has risen, indeed.? ?

Were the details exaggerated? Was it delusion? The result of cover-up? ?I think not. Real transmission doesn?t work in that way,? said Bourgeault. ?Whatever the details of that reality, the Resurrection and the meeting in the garden, the absolute sense that the disciples bore, that they had met their Lord as a risen presence, was an absolute reality to them, not a belief, not a proposition they were passing on, not a lie, but a reality from the imaginal realm working its way out with an explosion of energy.?

She explained that the term imaginal doesn?t mean imagination. It describes realities that are not made up but that are subtle and not easily perceived ?by our usual senses, our coarser, outward-directed five senses tied to our usual mind.? Instead, she said, imaginal reality impresses itself in the still, reflecting mirror of the heart.? It is a realm for which ?Jesus had a pet term,? she said. ?He called it the kingdom of heaven, and it describes a reality looming on the surface, the dawn with regard to our laws and our world, that from which things emerge.?

It is a realm, as well, that doesn?t depend on the old dualisms, the ?either/or? of most organized religion. It is not a realm where ?God fits your theology,? said Rohr. ?Religious consciousness from the beginning has to have a respect for not knowing, for unknowing. That?s contemplation. That?s the different mind. It is wonderful how broadly and widely and deeply it is being rediscovered.?

Rohr said Rahner believed ?the mind?s deepest need is not for answers, but for communion. That might seem surprising and maybe even soft theology,? he said, ?but the mind and ego want answers, answers, answers because it gives you a sense of control. The soul doesn?t want answers, it wants meaning.?

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