

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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Volume 40, Number 1

January 2010

Contrast and Companionship: The Way of the Church with the World Exploring Presuppositions

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The question of the Church's responsibility for the society in or with which it lives has been important and difficult since the beginning of Christian history....Though the problem is so rooted in the nature of both Church and secular society that it is always present, yet it has a peculiar urgency for the modern church which is confronted with unusual evidences of misery in the life of human communities and of weakness within itself.

Writing these words at the end of World War II, H. Richard Niebuhr considered the responsibility of the church for society. His expression of the urgency of the question could have been written in 2010: "Christians live today in and with nations that are either dying or over which the threat of doom hangs like a heavy cloud. Some of them are miserable in abject physical poverty; some seem hopelessly divided within themselves; some are powerful and affluent beyond the imagination of past years but full of internal anxieties and badgered by fears. In a general atmosphere of spiritual confusion, political decisions are made uncertainly and hesitatingly. Apprehension of disaster has taken the place of the hope of progress as the dominant mood and motive of action."¹

Few Christians would deny that the church has responsibility for the world, but what that means concretely brings many different responses. As caring and responsible people, church members participate in various civic endeavors. Denominations have agencies such as The Board of Church and Society or Church World Service or Catholic Charities which promote social service, social legislation, or social action. Committed to humanitarian good works, Christians join with others (Christian and non-Christian) to promote the flourishing of life within the wider community of the human family. Yet, in this involvement, what is their distinctive contribution as church? What, if any, is the unique perspective which only the Christian faith offers the world?

This series of *The Center Letter* hopes to stimulate reflection about the way of the church with the world. This will also be the theme of the Center's 2010 Convocation in Chicago, IL on July 22-24 (see www.missionalchurch.org for more details). We begin by exploring presuppositions which shape the discussion of the church's responsibility for the world.

Church and World. A very basic beginning is to reflect upon how the terms "church" and "world" are used. Usually without conceptual or practical clarity, modern thinking assumes a distinction, if not a separation, between the two. Wolfhart Pannenberg comments that there has always been a more or less marked difference between the spiritual and the secular spheres of life. But this difference reflected "the eschatological awareness of the transitoriness of the order of the world," rather than the secular culture of modernity which refounds "cultural life generally on that which is universally human, leaving aside all historically conditioned religion."² Pannenberg locates the starting point of secular culture not in a revolt against the absolutism of the Christian conception of God, but as a response to the confessional wars which divided Europe in the sixteenth century. In reaction to the destructive passion generated by religion, "that which is common to all human beings, human 'nature,' became the basis of public order and social peace."³

John Milbank, in his insightful critique of the role of sociology, notes how that discipline has constructed and interpreted the secular in such a way that "nature, human action, and society are seen as a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power." He claims that sociology "fully embraces the notion of humanism as the perennial destiny of the west and of human autonomous freedom as always gestating in the womb of 'Judeo-Christianity.'" Within this perspective, modernity "fulfills the destiny of Christianity to let the spiritual be the spiritual, without public interference, and the public be the secular, without private prejudice."⁴

Religion and Society. The "functionalist" approach of sociology, which assumes a distinction between religion and society, fits Milbank's appraisal. Within this perspective society is understood "as an ongoing equilibrium of social institutions which pattern human activity in terms of shared norms, held to be legitimate and binding by the human participants themselves."⁵ Religion is viewed as but one form of institutionalized human behavior whose particular function is to deal with those aspects of human life which transcend the mundane events of everyday existence: the sacred, the sublime, the ultimate. The place where religion can be helpful to society is to enable persons to deal with the "contingency, powerlessness, and scarcity fundamentally characteristic of the human condition."⁶ Thus religion gives a larger view of something "beyond" the daily strive and struggle, and facilitates a relationship with the beyond "which gives enough security and assurance to human beings to sustain their morale."⁷

Milbank critiques functionalist sociology as reflecting a positivistic orientation which assumes that the "religious" and the "social" are categorically separate realms.

- *The "social" is associated with given, permanent categories.*
- *There is a dualistic conception of humanity as caught between "real" nature and "spiritual" values.*
- *The "religious" is identified with irrational and arbitrary forces which are irreducible and unexplainable.*
- *An importance is given to functional causality.*
- *There is an empiricistic attitude to "facts."⁸*

When church and world, or religion and society, are placed in two separate and distinct realms, religion is identified with the private, the subjective, and the evaluative, in contradistinction to a public, natural or social realm of objective fact. Milbank characterizes this state of affairs as a "policing of the sublime." Religion is accepted and affirmed, but kept within its proper place where it has little or no effect upon the concrete issues and struggles of life.

Religious Experience and Institutionalism. Grounded in the distinction between church and world, religion and society, and reflecting the radical individualism of western modernity, is an anti-institutionalism. This orientation is prevalent within American society and is uncritically assumed within the religious community as well. For example, some authors contrast a "theology of mission" with a "theology of institution." While many people may have experienced the oppressive and negative forces of organizations which are resistant to change, an unreflective anti-institutionalism can lead to the neglect of the power and mission of the organized community of faith. This perspective assumes that those who pay attention to the internal dynamics, practices, programs, and structures of the Christian community are neglecting the real work of the church—mission in the world. Thus the life and practice of the community—worship, study, prayer, fellowship, action—are viewed as at best secondary and instrumental, and at worst as elitism and narcissism.

Intimately linked with anti-institutionalism is the "privatization of religion," the view that religious faith is an individual and purely private matter. This means that the realm in which religious language functions, and in which it applies, is that of the solitary and interior life of the individual. Here again is encountered the fundamental problem of the divorce between the interior and personal life of religion and the external and public world of social reality.

Ecclesiology as Social Theory. To move beyond the distinction or separation of church/world, religion/society, private/public, subjective/objective, experience/institution requires a rethinking of the nature of the Christian faith. John Milbank proposes one approach as he critiques modern theology's "false humility" which accepts the division between the secular and the sacred and thereby gives the social sciences the right and responsibility to lay claim to the description and understanding of empirical reality. He challenges theology to reconceive itself as a social science, as "the queen of the sciences for the inhabitants of the *altera civitas*, on pilgrimage through this temporary world."⁹ He is

not advocating another abstract, universal, "rational" account of human history, but a distinguishable Christian social theory grounded in a distinguishable Christian mode of action, a definite practice. Thus theology becomes ecclesiology as Christian sociology:

The explication of a socio-linguistic practice, or as the constant re-narration of this practice as it has historically developed. The task of such a theology is not apologetic, nor even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian mythos, to pronounce again the Christian logos, to call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality.¹⁰

The goal of theology as ecclesiology is to discern, express, and manifest an alternative vision which not only challenges the values of the world, but which provides a different way of being human: the communal mode of interdependence, mutual support, and participation grounded in the creative power, redeeming love, and liberating presence of the Triune God. Not an abstract or speculative theory, this ecclesiology would move beyond functionalist sociology to relate Christian faith to the totality and the concreteness of human life. The power of Christianity would be found not only at the margins of life, where human reason finds its limits, but at the center, as the source of imagination and ingenuity. The mission of the church is quite simply to be the church.

The church is God's people gathered as a unit, as a people, gathered to do business in his name, to find what it means here and now to put into practice this different quality of life which is God's promise to them and to the world and their promise to God and service to the world....Such a group is not only by its existence a novelty on the social scene; if it lives faithfully, it is also the most powerful tool of social change.¹¹

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Niebuhr's description of the state of the world relate to the contemporary situation?
2. How would you describe the responsibility of the church for the world?
3. What is meant by an eschatological distinction between sacred and secular?
4. Why is a functionalist sociology problematic?
5. How do you experience the "privatization of religion"?
6. How could ecclesiology as social theory overcome the separation between church and world?

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¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," in *The Gospel, The World and the Church*, ed. Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harper Bros., 1946).

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World* (Crossroad, 1989), pp. 23-24.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 9-10.

⁵ Thomas O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

¹¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Herald Press, 1977), p. 31.

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