

THE
Great
EMERGENCE

How Christianity
Is Changing and Why

PHYLLIS TICKLE


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is known as “the Keatsian heresy,” after John Keats and his famous observation that truth is beauty, and beauty is truth. Beauty, in point of fact, rests in the eye of the beholder, to quote another famous cliché. It is, therefore, subject to all the conditioning and interpretive filtering of human culture. An action or object is not, in other words, divine or holy or authoritative simply by virtue of appearing beautiful or harmonious or even efficacious.

To counter the tendency toward allowing aesthetic response and/or emotionally or spiritually moving experience to become bases for authority, emergents and emergings on the right of the vertical have reactivated or reconfigured a word of their own: *theonomy*.¹ Obvious in its derivation from the Greek *theos* (god) as well as from *nomos*, this combination is in far wider circulation than is its counterpart, having been actively present in the discussion since midcentury. As a term, it means to say or name the principle that only God can be the source of perfection in action and thought. The question, of course, is how best to pierce through to His meaning, the Bible itself being the only “source” of authority as well as the one readiest to hand for those who hold with theonomy.

As is patently clear, the burden of the argument of theonomy is still the principle of *sola scriptura*, albeit in more modish and culturally attractive clothes, while orthonomy is only a variant of tradition, reason, and inspiration as conduits for safely receiving the holy. Neither is sufficient by itself, yet they seem antithetical, one to the other. Then again, maybe not.

Networked Authority

The new Christianity of the Great Emergence must discover some authority base or delivery system and/or governing agency of its own. It must formulate—and soon—something other than Luther’s

sola scriptura which, although used so well by the Great Reformation originally, is now seen as hopelessly outmoded or insufficient, even after it is, as here, spruced up and re-couched in more current sensibilities.

Over the course of previous hinge times, the Church has always been sucked along in the same ideational currents as has the culture in general, especially in matters of governance. The result has been that, at any given time, the political structure of one has always been reflected in and/or exercised influence upon the organizational structures of the other. Gregory the Great, in wrapping up the chaos of the sixth century, created a Church run by monasteries and convents, a system that was in every way analogous to the manors and small fiefdoms of Europe’s Dark Ages. The Roman Church, in emerging from the Great Schism, positioned the exercise and definition of authority in a single position, the Papacy, and the council of appointed cardinals surrounding that throne. As a pattern, it was a religious expression of the system of kings and lords growing up in the centuries of pre-Reformation culture. The Reformation, with its shift to the democratic theology of the priesthood of all believers and its insistence on literacy for the sake of *sola scriptura*, created a governance exercised by elected leaders subject, in theory anyway, to the will of the people whom they served. Modern Protestant bodies reflect this flow of authority for the same reason that America herself does. Both are products of the same stimuli and circumstances. Given all of that, what logically can be expected of the Great Emergence, especially in terms of authority in religion?

When one asks an emergent Christian where ultimate authority lies, he or she will sometimes choose to say either “in Scripture” or “in the Community.” More often though, he or she will run the two together and respond, “in Scripture and the community.” At first

blush, this may seem like no more than a thoughtless or futile effort to make two old opposites cohabit in one new theology; but that does not appear to be what is happening here. What is happening is something much closer to what mathematicians and physicists call *network theory*.

That is, a vital whole—in this case, the Church, capital C—is not really a “thing” or entity so much as it is a network in exactly the same way that the Internet or the World Wide Web or, for that matter, gene regulatory and metabolic networks are not “things” or entities. Like them and from the point of view of an emergent, the Church is a self-organizing system of relations, symmetrical or otherwise, between innumerable member-parts that themselves form subsets of relations within their smaller networks, etc., etc. in interlacing levels of complexity.

The end result of this understanding of dynamic structure is the realization that no one of the member parts or connecting networks has the whole or entire “truth” of anything, either as such and/or when independent of the others. Each is only a single working piece of what is evolving and is sustainable so long as the interconnectivity of the whole remains intact. No one of the member parts or their hubs, in other words, has the whole truth as a possession or as its domain. This conceptualization is not just theory. Rather, it has a name: *crowd sourcing*; and crowd sourcing differs from democracy far more substantially than one might at first suspect. It differs in that it employs total egalitarianism, a respect for worth of the hoi polloi that even pure democracy never had, and a complete indifference to capitalism as a virtue or to individualism as a godly circumstance.²

The duty, the challenge, the joy and excitement of the Church and for the Christians who compose her, then, is in discovering what it means to believe that the kingdom of God is within one and in understanding that one is thereby a pulsating, vibrating bit

in a much grander network. Neither established human authority nor scholarly or priestly discernment alone can lead, because, being human, both are trapped in space/time and thereby prevented from a perspective of total understanding. Rather, it is how the message runs back and forth, over and about, the hubs of the network that it is tried and amended and tempered into wisdom and right action for effecting the Father's will.

Thus, when pinned down and forced to answer the question, “What is Emergent or Emerging Church?” most who are will answer, “A conversation,” which is not only true but which will always be true. The Great Emergence can not “be,” and be otherwise. Furthermore, whatever else such a conceptualizing may be, it is certainly and most notably global, recognizing none of the old, former barriers of nationality, race, social class, or economic status. It is also radical . . . and it is predictably our future both in this model as the relational, nonhierarchal, a-democratized form of Christianity entering into its hegemony and as an analog for the political and social principles of authority and organization that will increasingly govern global life during the centuries of the Great Emergence.

The Great Emergence's movement toward a system of ecclesial authority that waits upon the Spirit and rests in the interlacing lives of Bible-listening, Bible-honoring believers undoubtedly has some of its impetus in the sensibilities of the secular Great Emergence around it. It nonetheless has found most of its power tools and construction theory not in the culture per se but in the theology and experience of the quadrants and, significantly, in one non-quadrant group.

A Gift from the Quakers

The Great Emergence as a religious reconfiguration in Christianity had its earliest proponents and energy in evangelicalism. In fact,

there was once a time when many scholars argued (and a few still do) that the Great Emergence was simply crypto-Evangelicalism and would go away in time, swamped by its own gravitas. That has not happened; but neither does its failure to happen unsay the fact that the first, early signs of restiveness and change happened in the lower, right-hand quadrant of the original quadrilateral and swirled from there leftward, up, and around.

The Conservative quadrant, however, did not have native to it any unifying or cohering way of maintaining biblical authority in a postmodern, post-rational, post-Enlightenment time. It lacked the flexibility in both imagination and practice required to shift from democratic systems of organization to those of network theory, affinity grouping, and open source discernment. Yet wedged between that lower, right-hand quadrant of the Conservatives and the quadrant just above them of Social Justice Christians was a discrete body of Christians who did.

Both by heritage and by virtue of having always been middlers belonging in nobody's camp, the Quakers have from the beginning had a distinctly "other" easiness with the paradoxical interplay of revelation, discernment, and Scripture in the life and governance of the body of Christ on earth. Not exactly a refusal to engage questions of authority, Quaker thought chooses rather to assume that quiet engagement with God and the faithful reveals authority from the center out to other centers of engagement. Network theory, in other words, or at the very least, proto-network theory.

As a result, over the closing decades of the twentieth century, Quaker writers and theologians like Richard Foster and Parker Palmer and J. Brent Bill became more and more central to the life and thought of Christians gravitating toward the center. These Quaker writers instructed spiritually, certainly; but they also described, almost by default but still with great credibility, a different set of foundational

approaches to orderly being. Almost as significantly, they became comforters and pastors to thousands of early emergence Christians who had forfeited both of these benisons by the simple process of moving toward the center. The most significant of them all, however, may turn out to have been John Wimber, one of the founders and arguably the leading theorist of the Association of Vineyard Churches and himself a Quaker.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, Donald E. Miller, Firestone Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California, came to be one of the most prominent and influential authorities on, and analysts of, the emergence phenomenon. He wrote:

I believe that we are witnessing a new reformation that is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium. This reformation, unlike the one led by Martin Luther, is challenging not doctrine, but the medium through which the message of Christianity is articulated . . . these "new paradigm" churches have discarded many of the attributes of established religion. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, these churches are creating a new genre of worship music, restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion, and democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers.³

Miller's scholarly work was concerned more with the changes that emergence was causing in Protestantism per se than it was with the whole of North American Christianity in the time of emergence. As a result, Miller came to isolate and describe what he refers to as "new paradigm" churches, by which he meant emergent forms of Protestantism that differed markedly from any forms that had preceded them, but which could hardly be expected to be either "a" or "the" final expression of what the new or post-Emergence Protestantism would eventually be. In his study, Miller identified

three such groupings—The Vineyard, Calvary Chapels, and Hope Chapels—as being “new paradigms.”

While Hope Chapels have remained vital and active, it is the other two of Miller’s new paradigms that are of the greater interest here. Calvary Chapel, which calls itself a Fellowship of Churches, was founded in 1965 in Costa Mesa, California, by Chuck Smith Sr. Over the almost half century since, it has grown into a large network of congregations, some of them approaching megachurch size. It has also become, for the sociologist of religion, an absorbing case study in the tensions of emergence.

In the late 1970s, Chuck Smith Sr.’s son, Chuck Jr., established a Calvary Chapel at Capo Beach. Capo Beach rather quickly grew into the substantial and vibrant church it presently is, with Chuck Jr. serving as its senior pastor until 2007. Over the years, however, Smith Jr. began to become more and more interested in, and attracted to, ancient and/or liturgical Christian practices, wishing to weave them—and exposure to them—into his congregation’s worship and thought. The result was that Capo Beach began more to resemble an emergent church than a Calvary Chapel per se.

By 2006, the distinctions in those two ways of being had become antithetical to one another, and the Capo Beach congregation was asked to remove itself from the affiliation of Calvary Chapels. Smith Jr., presently on sabbatical for a time of study and discernment, describes himself as one who is “convinced that something other than Evangelicalism is on the horizon. . . . I’m not emergent, I’m something else and I don’t think there is a name for it.”⁴ All of that is a way of saying, of course, that the new paradigms, as early expressions of emergence, are subject to the same decisions that the hyphenateds are going to have to make: Which are we, and where do we belong?

The Vineyard Association of Churches, while hardly free of tensions and while certainly not escaping the questions of self-

definition, has followed a somewhat different course, in no small part because of Wimber and his Quaker ways of being. Wimber, an adult convert to Christianity, attended a Quaker meeting in Yorba Linda, California, for several years during the 1960s and early ’70s, becoming in the process a powerful evangelist who led literally hundreds of people to conversion. By 1974, he had become founding director of the Department of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, a position he would hold for almost five years.

During the Fuller years, a house church began in Wimber’s home. Affiliated originally with his Quaker meeting, the group in time became first charismatic, and then so charismatic as to cause rupture with the Quakerism from which it had sprung. The Wimber congregation, predictably enough and shortly thereafter, outgrew the Wimber house and briefly joined itself to a Calvary Chapel. The differences between the two groups, especially over the gifts of the Spirit, became too great, however; and the Wimberites left to join what was, at that time, a very small group of churches known as the Vineyard Christian Fellowships.

It was Wimber, the former Quaker, who would transform that tiny clutch of like-minded proto-emergents into the Association of Vineyard Churches that now constitutes one of the few—some would say the only—examples of more or less traditionally structured emergence Christianity.⁵ It was Wimber also who would articulate and popularize some of the theological principles needed to accelerate the pace of the gathering center. He spoke over and over again of “church-planting as the best form of evangelism.” And “authenticity,” now the *sine qua non* of the Great Emergence and in essence its tribal war cry, was a Wimber war cry first.

In his theory of “The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit,” so named by his Fuller colleague, C. Peter Wagner, Wimber also managed to

modify classic Pentecostalism enough so that thousands of Evangelicals and Conservatives, who were fearful of an exclusive emphasis on speaking in tongues, could embrace the Renewalist part of the quadrant without fear. Wimber simply argued that speaking in tongues was only one among many gifts of the Spirit taught in the Scripture and that to reject those gifts because of the particularities of one gift was itself foolhardy.

Center Set and Bounded Set

More portentously, Wimber, having cut his teeth on Quakerism, taught and publicized something very close to network theory, though he did not have those words at the time. He spoke instead of “center-set movement,” of a Christianity whose basic gatherings would be clear about their vision and be busy about the work of the kingdom while letting people sort themselves out by how close each wanted to get to the center. Such an approach was—and still is—clearly a leap of enormous faith. That is, it assumes that something other than “rules” is holding things together while, at the same time, also preventing the whole construct from skittering off into chaos. In the final analysis, in other words, it places authority in the existing center.

The whole question of rules is, of course, a subset of the authority question. That is, the very presence of rules assumes some authority effecting them and some consequence for violating them. In addition to defining how things must be conceptualized and/or executed, rules also result in what Wimber called “bounded-set” groups. That is, among their other functions, rules also define the boundaries that determine who is in and who is out of a bounded-set group, but never of a center-set one. By the change of the millennium, emergent Christianity in general had adopted a center-set approach, though its leaders no longer use that terminology very frequently. More commonly,

one will hear emergence leaders speak about the difference between “believe-behave-belong” and “belong-behave-believe.” And while such a string of words seems at first to be more clever than substantive, first impressions can often be wrong. They certainly are in this instance.

The first triad of “believe-behave-belong” fits the bounded-set approach of both traditional Roman Catholicism and historic Protestantism. It requires adherence to certain rules of doctrinal belief and human conduct as prerequisites to membership in their ranks. The second triad, which occurs in the center-set or emergence approach, reverses the process. In center-set Christianity, one simply belongs to a gathering of Christians by virtue of a shared humanity and an affinity with the individuals involved in whatever the group as a whole is doing. And belonging may be as far into Christianity or Christian experience as a believer wants to go. Should he or she, however, become desirous of more, or be led to more, or be convinced by association that there is more, then he or she will begin to behave in an un-superimposed iteration of the conduct and mode of thinking that informs the group as a whole. As behavior begins to condition living, it also begins to shape belief until the two become one . . . the center-set approach, in other words. And the difference between the two is indeed substantial.

Narrative

The Great Emergence is characterized, certainly, by more than one principle that at first blush seems so subtle as to be, if not insubstantial, then at least nonsubstantial. Both in its secular and its religious forms, emergence thinking has a mysticism that is often seen by its critics as amounting to anti-intellectualism. Probably nothing could possibly be any further from the truth. But then, probably nothing could possibly be more totally postmodern, either.

Emergents, because they are postmodern, believe in paradox; or more correctly, they recognize the ubiquity of paradox and are not afraid of it. Instead, they see in its operative presence the tension where vitality lives. To make that point, an emergent will quite often offer the most simplistic of proof texts: $X \text{ squared} = 4$, and that is a fact. Since it is a fact, what is the value of X ? Quite clearly, $X = 2 \dots$ except, of course, X also quite clearly equals -2 . What is one to make of that contradiction, that impossibility, that paradox?

For starters, what we in the first world have made of it is the bulk of all the technology and gimmicks that render our lives so much more comfortable than otherwise they would have been. The point, in other words, is that logic is not worth nearly so much as the last five hundred years would have had us believe. It is, therefore, not to be trusted as an absolute, nor are its conclusions to be taken as truth just because they depend from logical thinking. Very often, in fact, logic's fallacies result from logic's lack of a sufficient height or distance in its perspective. That is, logic suffers from the fact that it is human, not divine, and suffers all the limitations of humanity, including being irrevocably contained in time and space.

By extension, meta-narrative is likewise to be distrusted, being as it is also a product of humanity's human thinking and explaining. Narrative, on the other hand, is the song of the vibrating network. It is the spider's web in its trembling, a single touch on one strand setting all the others to resonating. Narrative circumvents logic, speaking the truth of the people who have been and of whom we are. Narrative speaks to the heart in order that the heart, so tutored, may direct and inform the mind.

In effect, such a position is not only a relational conceptualization of reality, but it is also the foundation of a markedly different principle of human organization and of the understanding of "self." Where exactly it will go remains to be seen, but go it will. There is

no doubt about that. One of the two or three secondary but primal obligations facing the Great Emergence, as we have said, is the formulation of a working answer to the question of what exactly a human being is, not only as a single creature, but also as a part of a genus in creation.

The Problem with Constantine

But also running like lietsmotivs through emergence conversation are some other, very down-to-earth and harrying concerns about meta-narrative. Not the least of them, in terms of the coming conflict between traditional Christian and emergence theology, is a growing distrust for the precepts and teachings of the post-Constantinian Church. Arguably, one of the most potentially destructive things that can happen to a faith is for it to become the accepted and established religion of the political, cultural, and social unit in which its adherents live. Certainly, there is no question that Constantine's preempting of Christianity in the fourth century was the great pivot point by means of which Christianity became a dominant institution. It is also the point at which the so-called Hellenization of the faith began to accelerate, infiltrate, and eventually dominate Christian theology.⁶

Doctrine as a codified part of Christianity was born under Constantine and was, among other things, formalized for his convenience. More consequential even than doctrine per se was Christianity's shift, under Constantine's protective aegis, from Judaism's wholistic theology and wholistic conceptualization of human life and structure to the dualism of Greek philosophy and of Greco-Roman culture. The whole purpose of "salvation" began to shift from a means of effecting or living out God's will on earth to being a ticket for transplantation into a paradisial hereafter. Gnosticism flourished as never before. The body became evil and therefore suspect.

More to the point, the body became a thing separate from the soul, whose definition as a result grew more and more nebulous even as it became more and more privatized and individualized. Whether or not extant Roman and/or Protestant Christian thought can or will revisit their foundational assumptions about such matters remains to be seen. The significant thing here is that the Great Emergence is doing so; and the theology that comes from that work will be the theology, in part, of society's reconfigured understanding of the self, the soul, the humanness of being in *imago dei*. It will impact everything from medical policy to moral theory as well as evangelism and religious formation.

Future Possibilities

Some of the impact of de-Hellenization on religious formation is already discernible. The actual nature of the Atonement, for example, or the tenet of an angry God who must be appeased or the question of evil's origins are suddenly all up for reconsideration.⁷ If in pursuing this line of exegesis, the Great Emergence really does what most of its observers think it will, it will rewrite Christian theology—and thereby North American culture—into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything the Church has had for the last seventeen or eighteen hundred years.⁸

Regardless of what its theology eventually matures into, however, there is no question that the Great Emergence is the configuration of Christianity which is in ascendancy. It is just as certain that both the Roman and the Protestant communions in North America will have to readjust themselves to accommodate the stresses of such massive changes in the culture and in the Church.

The Vatican presumably will influence the former's adaptations. But, as Miller clearly understood, it is in Protestantism that the

adaptations will be the most dramatic. Within the near future, post-Emergence Protestantism will almost have to assume (indeed, some would say it already has begun to effect) a collegial congress of all its member parts that functions democratically and is class- and merit-based in oversight and authority. The seeds of that accommodation are already deep within its history.

What is not nearly so easy to discern just yet is how the Great Emergence will interface with the results and consequences of such realignments; and more than any other of North America's Christians, it is emergents themselves who are going to have to reconsider Emergence Christianity. They must begin now to think with intention about what this new form of the faith is and is to become; because what once was an engaging but innocuous phenomenon no longer is. The cub has grown into the young lion; and now is the hour of his roaring.

1. Since about 2004, there has been a still-small, but perhaps growing divergence within the ranks of those who call themselves center-dwellers. For that reason, this overview has frequently used the somewhat awkward phrase, "emergent and emerging" Christians to indicate that the two are not quite the same thing and may not ever come to be of one mind just as was true, for example, with the Reforming, Confessing, and Professing strands of the Great Reformation.

The principal point of the differences between contemporary emergents and emergings is, as one might suspect, in the orthonomy/theonomy conflict. Emergents, associated with and led by Christians like Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, etc., would put more emphasis on orthonomy than on theonomy, were they forced to choose between, rather than integrate, the two. Emerging Christians, whose most visible and influential leaders are Dan Kimball and Erwin McManus, tend toward the theonomy side of things, finding it increasingly difficult to occupy the same theological ground as do emergents.

2. To more fully appreciate the nuances and radical comprehensiveness of these distinctions, the reader may want to see Brian McLaren's *Everything Must Change* (Thomas Nelson, 2007) or visit McLaren's related website.

3. Miller, a voluminous writer, but a careful and consistent observer, made this point in essentially these same words many, many times. The form quoted here is taken from *Thunderstruck—A Truck Stop for the Soul*, a website exemplary of where emergence as a conversation has for years been taking place. Readers who prefer their sources to be more traditional ones may want to look at Miller's bibliography. He introduces his *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*, for instance, with the words, "A revolution is transforming American Protestantism . . ." (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.

4. Email to author from Chuck Smith Jr., March 19, 2008.

5. While staunchly refusing to be a denomination or to take on the apparatus of traditionally institutionalized church, the Association does have "overseers" who exercise something very close to episcopal oversight. It maintains as well a central office of sorts and convenes its pastors from time to time for discernment, prayer, instruction, and, to some limited extent, matters of Association business; yet it is entrepreneurial in governance at the congregational level, is egalitarian to a fault, regards itself as non-creedal, and uses "tribal" as an adjective of choice for describing its singular form of group affinity and affections.

6. Doug Pagitt, founding pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis and one of emergent Christianity's most influential leaders and brilliant thinkers, makes a spirited and detailed presentation of this whole area of concern in his *A Christianity Worth Believing* (Jossey-Bass, 2008).

7. In the same way that Martin Luther became the symbolic leader and spokesman for the Great Reformation, so too has Brian McLaren become the symbolic leader and spokesman for the Great Emergence. His 2005 volume, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan) is both an analog to Luther's ninety-five theses and also a clearly stated overview of many of the parts of post-Constantinian Christian theology that are now undergoing reconsideration.

8. If such should indeed happen, then there is no overstatement or inflation in saying that the Great Emergence is not only a semi-millennial upheaval, but also a bi-millennial phenomenon. As many readers may know, Medieval mystics like Joachim of Fiore would regard that development as nothing less than prophetic fulfillment, inasmuch as they believed history

to be divided into bi-millennial units. For them, from the beginning to the birth of Christ was the two thousand years of primary emphasis on God the Father. From the coming of Christ to 2000 was to be the two thousand years of primary emphasis on God the Son. From 2000 CE to 4000 CE would be the two thousand years of the primacy in worship and in human affairs of God the Spirit. To complete the biblical scheme of seven millennia, the era from 4000 to 5000 CE will be the consummate and glorious union of all three parts of the Godhead within space/time.