

Introduction

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Recently a small group of students from Occidental College in Los Angeles approached my organization, Progressive Christians Uniting, with the message that despite the college's deep commitment to diversity, there is literally no social space there for liberal Christians. Or as one of the students put it, "I am involved in all kinds of groups on campus that support social justice. Then one day it occurred to me that the reason I do all this is because of my Christian faith—so where is the Christian community on this campus that can support me?"

Thanks to the efforts of this student and others like her, there soon *will* be a progressive Christian presence at Occidental. But what an odd historical twist and what a commentary on the culture that even at our best liberal arts colleges, the only form of public Christianity on offer is what Rick Hertzberg and others have rightly labeled *Christianism*: an exclusivist creed that is fueled more by fear than by love.

The 2004 election and its aftermath—the Terri Schiavo drama, unprecedented attacks on the judiciary, the relentless advance of "intelligent design," and continuing assaults on gay equality and abortion—all bespeak a phenomenon that no one could have predicted. In the middle of the last century it was generally agreed that fundamentalism—a late and peculiarly American reaction to biblical criticism and to modernism generally—had been decisively defeated as a cultural force. Pundits assumed that it would live on in the South and in pockets of the Midwest but would never again pose a serious threat to enlightened liberalism and rational progress, let alone to core understandings concerning the separation of church and state. Thoughtful Christians would remain firmly committed to an ideal of secular, scientific progress. As education spread, the influence of primitive religion would dwindle almost to extinction.

It did not work out that way. In a classic demonstration of the Return of the Repressed, an old-style militant Christianity fusing super-

patriotism, male supremacy, and rigid biblicism has reemerged as a potent cultural and political force in the space of five decades. This dramatic turnabout can rightly be seen as a brilliant feat of organizing on the part of a handful of conservative visionaries—and it certainly is that—but it can also be seen as a commentary on the spiritual vacuousness of the liberal project and as a rebuke of liberalism’s inability to shield working people from the ravages of the corporate state. It can even be seen as an encrypted expression of white rejection of multiculturalism, despite the presence among the new Christianists of many leaders of color. There is room for many construals, each of them bearing part of the truth of what has happened.

Some of the essays in this book hint at the sources of the new Christianity that roils our politics, but the book is not intended to uncover the historical roots so much as deplore the practical effects. Many of the contributors to this volume—a diverse mix of preachers, thinkers, and activists along the moderate to progressive spectrum—fear that the message and meaning of Jesus have been all but drowned out by the noise machine of the Christian Right. Bill McKibben’s essay puts this challenge directly: he ponders why nearly all public expressions of Christianity in America today bear little or no relation to what Jesus of Nazareth said and did. Reclaiming Jesus is a central concern for these essayists.

This book is also intended to take the Bible back from the blinkered biblicists and reemphasize the scriptural primacy of justice and mercy—what Marilynne Robinson in her essay calls generosity. Rather than take on the biblicists, many progressive Christians have simply walked away from the Bible. This is a strategic mistake inasmuch as tens of millions of Americans continue to respect and even revere the Bible’s authority. But it is also a substantive mistake inasmuch as the heart and soul of the scriptural testimony is on the side of peace and justice. A plain reading will find Jesus and the prophets fiercely at odds with the kinds of social arrangements (notably rule by and for the wealthiest) now prevailing in the United States. The essayists represented here would have us reading the Bible more, not less, but would also have us

doing so with a degree of sophistication and always with the caveat that Jesus Christ—his spirit, his generosity, his compassion—remains the true canon for faith and practice, which also means that anything “scriptural” that is *not* in accord with the spirit of Jesus cannot claim final authority.

I am convinced that there is a profound hunger in our culture now for the religion of Jesus—for a generous and compassionate Christianity that desires mercy, not sacrifice, and that actively pursues peace at every level.

In Southern California progressive Christians by the hundreds who have no church home have begun show up at the rallies and teach-ins presented by my organization. These are passionate, justice-seeking people who have not yet found a congregation that is sufficiently attuned to their own sense of urgency. They are outraged by the direction of the nation and by conservatism’s suffocating grip on public discourse. If these “free radical” Christians could be organized to work in tandem with the millions of churchgoing progressives—and if both groups began to work strategically with enlightened secular forces in the culture—America’s long night of conservative domination would be at an end. This is why seemingly sectarian and intramural struggles over what the Bible really says and who Jesus really is matter hugely to *all* progressives.

In France the idea that enlightened public policy might hinge on getting one’s theology right would be laughable, but this is America. If moderate and progressive Christians can’t get on message and get their act together, we will remain in a world of trouble (and let us remember that the Christianists *welcome* Armageddon). But if moderates and progressives *do* find a way to reclaim and express the heart of the gospel in ways that resonate, there may yet be hope for the democratic dream.

Out of the depths, life-giving progressive voices are beginning to be heard. That these voices should become a mighty chorus: that is my hope and that is the animating premise of this volume.