

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

April, 1994

TODAY THE CHURCHES IN CANADA are undergoing a process of change. This metamorphoses is throwing organized religion into a state of chaos and confusion. In fact, these changes are creating a full-scale crisis in declining memberships that could mean the end for many congregations. Others are beginning to try to adopt new and better ways to promote their programmes and message.

Reginald Bibby, the Canadian sociologist and professor at Lethbridge University, Alberta, who conducts continuing surveys of Canadians' religious customs, notes that secular humanism, clerical abuses, and a distrust of institutions have resulted in Canadians simply investing less energy in their churches. Only 56% of conservative Protestants, 33% of Roman Catholics, and 20% of United Church and Anglican affiliates claim that religion is important to them. And that lack of interest is conveyed to their children.

Though the vast majority of Canadians still identify themselves with some traditional church they do precious little about it. Bibby's recent survey shows only 24% of Canadians are "active affiliates" (attending nearly every week) of a church. 27% are "marginal affiliates" (attending several times a year). 39% are "inactive affiliates" (calling themselves members though attending only once a year or less). Only 10% are "disaffiliates" or "non-affiliates".

Churches consider "marginal affiliates" as burdens instead of

opportunities. Failing to serve precisely those with whom they could have the most success, their own nominal members, churches miss their best probability for growth. The existence of so many still preserving some vague, transcendent longing associated with the "faith of our fathers", indicates the "demand" for their product. They are failing to market it. Where demand is not met, presumes Dr. Bibby, there must be failures of supply.

Bibby also points out that the churches lose out a great deal today by relying too heavily upon volunteers to do the work of the church, at a time when many people have less time and energy for volunteer activities, and thereby scare more people away.

Bibby forecasts that in this generation weekly church attendance of all denominations will shrink from the already low of one-quarter of the population to a negligible one-seventh. He warns the churches to pay heed to the looming neo-paganism growing in our society and challenges churches to find new and modern ways to "market their product".

FOLLOWING YOUR BLISS

The latest fad in the present-day process of re-inventing the congregation is to bring members together and allow them to raise the questions they feel must be addressed and then to participate in seeking solutions in the area of their personal "passion". The weakness in the method is that often the old, usual questions, like how to get more people to attend church services, with attention focused upon the filling and paying for a building-centred programme, are the ones asked. This is a failure to recognize the basic problem that people's customs and desires have changed and no longer find the old style systems appealing.

Another word that should be inserted at this point is the word "bliss". The rank and file today are interested in their spiritual life and experience, and seek therein to find gladness and bliss.

Christianity is a life rather than a system or an organization. It is more than acts, it is the experience of God in us, the eternal in the temporal, the absolutely worth while that lifts us above ourselves and transfigures our particular acts and purposes.

In this sense the psychologist Jung was right when he declared, "Religion is a defense against the experience of God". It is possible to worship God without naming God, and this is precisely what we do in every honest surrender of inclination to duty, in all devotion to

doing what we sincerely believe is right and true. When we live out the highest and best we know to be right within us, the closer we are to God. We hereby make God in our lives to be the end, not the means.

There is a Hindu saying which states: "None but a god can worship a god". Contemplate the meaning of this along with the words of the apostle John when he said: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us".

Aurore Larkin, a member of the Grey Nuns, recently professed, "There is no human face. God is a force, or a strength, or an energy". John said God is love. Therein does one find ones bliss.

It is a common mistake to think of God as a noun. The Bible speaks of God in verbal images, in terms of action and events in our experience of living. We attempt to give God a name, to make God an object, and to this the Bible declares, no! When the biblical writers speak of God, they do so in terms either of personal pronouns or of the verb, "to be". When Moses enquired as to God's name, the reply was: "I am who I am". God refuses to be named and is thus called the nameless one.

When we talk about God we must move away from God as the supreme object, and think of God as the supreme subject. We must ponder not the God in the heavens, but the God in me. God is the subject of all that makes life ultimately meaningful.

To think of God in terms of verbal images is to be interested in the fulfillment

of our humanity. "To be or not to be," that is the great religious question of the younger generation, and they think in verbal images. In Jesus' life they can discover the meaning of humanity. Here God becomes the subject and not the object; God becomes personal.

The Bible always speaks of God as living, the realism of the ways of life and death. The Bible is not interested in the definition of the word "God". The emphasis is more on doing than in hearing what we believe. Our chief difficulty is not in knowing the true and the right. It is in doing it. When people are loving, brave, truthful, charitable, God is present.

Let us be grateful to feel God's presence in our lives and within the people around us.

THE LORD'S PRAYER, MAORI VERSION

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer,
Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For your reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.
Amen.

GOD IS THE SMALLEST OBJECT

This poem is from "Cantos From A Small Room", published by Wolsak and Wynn. The author is Calgary resident Robert Hilles, who teaches computer programming.

God is the smallest object in a room. Some of us see it and speak to it as if it were a pet or a lover. Others imagine it was bigger and could not fit into this room at all. Others still fall in love with it and take it to bed with them every night. Some of us can't even get into the room at all and must stare at the object from the doorway like a prisoner staring at the sea from their cell window. This object does not move or breathe or even love. It merely thinks about ways to get out of this room for good. It thinks about wings about legs about fingers but none of them is adequate. In the end this object decides that it is stuck for good in this room. Those that truly love it will pick it up and throw it out the window. Those who despise it will try to hide it beneath some large piece of

furniture. Most of us however will take no notice of it merely sitting next to it once in a while and glancing at it from the corner of our eyes hoping that sometime we will discover what to do with it.

SMALL GROUP MOVEMENT

One of the things that is exciting in the church today is the energy that is generated through small groups. Where enthusiasm and progress is being experienced it is generally found now in small group activity. It is becoming a cultural and administrative realignment.

Small groups are fostering a new sense of community, as well as how we conceive the sacred in today's world. They provide a social arrangement in which joint achievement and personal integrity are not opposed, but mutually contributory. The members become united as persons in relationship.

The deity of small groups is a God of love, comfort, order and security. God is seen less as an almighty celestial king and judge, dispensing judgement, threatening wrath and punishment, a mystery to those who would seek to comprehend a divine being.

This is not a sign of weakness in the church, but rather an indication of strength. Without the desire to fellowship, study, participate, worship, people would not make the effort to form a group.

People feel more

comfortable and at ease in the small, accepting clusters. They can more easily take part in the group's purposes. They feel wanted, find people like them and who like them.

The small group movement, according to the observations of the Gallup poll professionals, appears to be bringing North American society back together, answering what seems to be one of our central needs of fellowship, personal involvement, and warmer worship.

Described by some observers as a quiet revolution, the small group movement is appealing to the many who are yearning for a greater knowledge and a closer relationship with the divine in life.

The whole history of divine disclosure is a record of insights and knowledge gained by individuals in community with others. A creative interaction often takes place within small groups of Christians when they struggle together to interpret the holy in their everyday lives, personal experiences, and shared religion.

"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Cert of Corrections, McMaster University, in the interest of furthering knowledge and participation in religion.

Dialogue is invited and welcomed.

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