

BOOK REVIEW:
**PHYLLIS TICKLE, *THE GREAT EMERGENCE: HOW
CHRISTIANITY IS CHANGING AND WHY*, (BAKER BOOK
HOUSE WITH EMERSON, 2008) 172 PAGES**

BY PHIL BOURNE

1 Introduction

Scot McKnight, quoted on the back of the dust cover, remarks, “One thing I’ve learned to appreciate as I’ve grown older is big theories - and that is what Phyllis gives us.” I too like big theories, but the problem with big theories about history is that they tend to come unravelling in the minutia of historical detail. And, that is what I fear happens to Phyllis Tickle’s theory.

So what is this ‘Great’ theory? It is, that once every five hundred years or so the Church has a grand rummage sale and re-invents itself. The result of this process is often two ‘traditions’. One continues along the ‘old’ pathway, but clears away much of the weeds and clutter that has accumulated in the previous five hundred years as it is revitalised. The other is changed and re-defined in a radical new way that tries to take account of deeper and more fundamental ways in which society has been changing. It comes up with something that is qualitatively different from the way that Christianity has been understood in the past.

2 Division of the Book

The book is divided into three Parts. Part One introduces the thesis. It begins by describing the pattern of change as realised in the

events known as the ‘Great’ Reformation’¹, conveniently dated by Luther’s nailing his theses to the door of Wittenberg Church in 1517. Before this we had the Great Schism of 1054, when the Western and Eastern Churches parted company. Then, some five hundred years earlier, we had the formal end of the Roman Empire, 480, and the reorganisation of Byzantium Church by Gregory I (Gregory the Great). This latter event is linked in Phyllis’ analysis with the Great Council, the Council of Chalcedon in 451, in which the Byzantium Church broke ranks with the Oriental Orthodox Churches (or *vice versa* if you prefer! ☺).

The second chapter of Part One tries to unravel the significance of these historical events. Religion, Phyllis argues, is a social contract reflecting the social changes of the time. She argues that it is a kind of cable, “a cable of meaning that keeps the human social unit connected to some purpose and/or power greater than itself.” (:34). As human society changes so the assumptions encased in the cable are challenged and eventually it becomes evident that the cable needs a thorough repair.²

The Second Part of the book traces the social evolution of Western Europe, taking us through the tensions that led up to and encompassed the Reformation [Chapter 3] and its evolution through the Enlightenment to Modern times [Chapters 4 and 5]. From Chapter Four onwards the account focuses more particularly on North America and how changes in world view affected American Society. The thesis is that modern science has undermined the world-view of the Reformation with its reliance on the authority of the Bible as the word of God.³

¹ The addition of the term ‘great’ to the Reformation is to me a novel appendage - I’ve not seen it described this way before. But it suits Phyllis’ alliteration.

² I would think in this context of the solution described here, the metaphor implies more than just repair: the cable is to be replaced.

³ The impression given is that science disproved Reformation Christianity. It did nothing of the sort and indeed was subject to its own fashions and fancies. For example, the problem which the Church had with Darwin did not arise from Dar-

To what extent, then, is modern man a 'new' being? Has our understanding of ourselves so shifted that Descartes' definition of humanness - 'I think therefore I am' - has become, as Phyllis suggests, "woefully inadequate" (:71). "The two overarching, but complementary questions of the Great Emergence are: (1) What is human consciousness and/or the humanness of the human? and (2) what is the relationship of all religions to one another - or to put it another way, how can we live responsibly as devout and faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions?" (:73)⁴

Chapter five traces some of the major cultural shifts of the last hundred and fifty years, recognising that a full list would need a much longer book. It is a good overview of the making of modern North American culture. It starts with the debunking of the authority of the Bible by what to my mind is a dubious appeal to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.⁵ It goes on to consider the Quest for

win's thesis *per se*, but in the use made of it by elements hostile to Christianity. The real issue with Darwinism is not the six-day creation, but the mechanism often labelled 'the survival of the fittest'. Natural selection may turn out to be more subtle than that.

⁴ The questions that Phyllis raises about the meaning of self, consciousness, and authority are of central importance. But here, her overview is too brief and too hasty to adequately explore fully implications of the various ideas to which it alludes. They do not all speak with the same voice. Jung's own research into the 'Phenomenology' of religious experience has given a tremendous boost to mysticism. But such mysticism contrasts somewhat starkly with the concrete phenomenon of the founding events of Christianity. It is just that modern epistemology has chosen to discount the latter and put its faith in an unproven thesis about the 'collective unconscious'. [See for example the writings of Henry Corbin who draws extensively on the ideas of Jung to vindicate his views on mysticism.] I am not sure how seriously Freud's ideas about the unconscious are taken these days. Clearly there is more going on in the brain than we are conscious of, but is that necessarily significant?

⁵ If 'literary deconstruction' planted its standard dead in the centre of 'Heisenberg' (:79) then this just goes to show how little they understood Quantum Mechanics. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle has nothing to do with philosophical uncertainty or doubt of the sort that Descartes is supposed to have engaged in while warming himself by the fire. Heisenberg's Uncertainty strictly applies to a

the Historical Jesus, the rise of Pentecostalism, changing family values, Socialism, etc. etc. Phyllis makes an interesting linkage between Alcoholics Anonymous and similar therapies as an alternative to traditional religion. She goes on to describe the rising influence of non-Western religions like Buddhism and the Drug Culture, all of which added to the erosion of belief in the authority of scripture. Phyllis criticises the Reformation for his codification of its beliefs as doctrine. For Phyllis the significant challenge came when the churches began to lose the debate over moral issues. The final sections of chapter five look at the impact of technology and the Second World War on North American society. The family has been reconfigured and the impact of the Bible in practice marginalised. The same could be said of much of Western Europe.

Part Three seeks to describe what is going on in the Church. With a series of helpful diagrams⁶ Phyllis seeks to describe the impact the changes in the wider world are having on the Church. Here she discerns an emerging centre that bring together elements

well defined set of problems in the Quantum Mechanical description of the Universe. Roger Penrose cautions, "To clarify this picture we must recall carefully what Heisenberg's uncertainty relations actually state. 'They do not tell us that there is something inherently "fuzzy" or "incoherent" in the way that nature behaves at the tiniest scale. Instead Heisenberg's uncertainty restricts the precision whereby two non-commuting measurements can be carried out.... There is a perfectly well-defined quantum state, however, and if no actual measurement is performed, the state of the particle will evolve precisely according to Schrödinger's equation....' (Penrose: *The Road to Reality*, 2007 edition: 861) This remark is made in order to warn us against making unwarranted and hasty deductions about the nature of physical reality. If so, then how much more should we heed his remarks when tempted to make inappropriate application to other fields of knowledge, such as hermeneutics!

⁶ I am always a bit wary of diagrams as they can tend to oversimplify what are often complex processes. But as far as it goes, the description makes sense. At the centre is the emerging church, while at each corner are gathered the diehards of the old traditions who may rework some of their ideas but who will continue to adhere to their inherited values. I can see myself in this process, probably at the bottom right-hand corner.

from the four major types of churches found in North American - Liturgical Churches, Social Justice Christians, Renewal (Charismatic) Movements and Conservatives.⁷

The final chapter seeks to describe what the emerging church is beginning to look like. In contrast to the authority of *sola scriptura* it presents a decentralised, dynamic concept of authority as manifest in a network of interconnected fellowships and individuals. The emergent church becomes a ‘conversation’, or a ‘participation in a conversation’. Phyllis discerns something of a precursor of this in the Quakers. It began to crystallise in the thinking of Richard Forster, Parker Palmer, J Brent, and Donald Miller. Miller identified three groupings that gave expression to the emergent forms of Christianity: The Vineyard Association founded by John Wimber, the Calvary Chapels founded by Chuck Smith Senior and the Hope Chapels. Wimber, from a Quaker background, was one of the founding directors of the Department of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary and an early advocate of the centred-sets view of church membership. This sought to replace the traditional focus of church membership, “believe, behave, belong”, with one that advocated, “belong, behave, believe”. One “simply belongs to a gathering of Christians by virtue of a shared humanity and an affinity with the individuals involved in whatever group as the whole is doing.” (:159)⁷

A second characteristic of the emergent narrative is its belief in paradox.⁸ Coupled with this is the whole raft of postmodern her-

⁷ I am not sure that this squares with the Biblical view where our identity as Christians is focused in our identification with Christ and his sufferings. The Bible describes this as union with Christ, so that our unity is found in Jesus himself, not in a “shared humanity and affinity with the individuals involved”. One of the characteristics of the church is its ability to transcend such cultural boundaries. But equally it is not therefore always a safe, cosy place to be. Being part of Christ’s church is a challenge.

⁸ The example given on page 160 about the square roots of 4 does not strike me as at all paradoxical. There is simply more than one answer. In real life, as in

meneutics with its distrust of Meta-narratives. But, despite the popularity of these ideas, there is nothing self-evidently true about them. For some it is just a licence for evil. It is a symptom of moral decay and epistemological suicide.

3 Reflections

The problem with time is that it is asymmetrical: so we tend to judge, and dismiss, the past on the basis of contemporary ideas. But the past has no opportunity to reply. If it did it may well have warned us that some of the roads into which humanity has wandered are not ones our forebears would have recommended. Those of us who believe in the authority of the Bible would argue that we were warned, but did not always choose to heed those warnings.

Is the way in which society is changing an appropriate guide to what road we should take? In the context of Phyllis' thesis, that surely is the fundamental question. She argues that the approaches of the past have all been discredited and that something new should now emerge.

I wonder what, for example, the leaders of the Reformation would have made of such an argument. I can imagine them scurrying back to their Bibles in horror, and indeed, the defenders of the old paths are doing just that. But is the authority of the Bible really discredited? I don't think the case that Phyllis makes for this holds water. But here we get embroiled in the minutia of history. In making the case Phyllis covers a lot of ground, using very broad brush strokes in her evaluation of the Enlightenment and rise of Modernism. But I would contend that not all of the evidence points in the same direction.

Looking at the outline in chapter four, one wonders how the disparate parts fit together. What does Faraday have to do with

mathematics, there is frequently more than one solution. Not every answer is unique, nor is every decision critical.

Darwin, or Freud with Jung? At least the latter are working in the same broad area of research, but I believe they sharply disagreed. I think what Phyllis is trying to do is to show how science, psychology and the impact of the media have resulted in a sea-change in popular perception. Granted there has been such a sea-change, but this has often been the result of misrepresentation or oversimplification of complex ideas. The democratisation of opinion does not necessarily make us wise.

The ‘Cable of Meaning’ introduced in Part One is an interesting metaphor. But the strands suggested by Phyllis seem to reflect a more contemporary outlook on what some people today think meaning should be. To describe religion as “a social contract” (:33) is a modernist, if not a post-modernist perspective. A Biblical perspective would want something more robust. Our spirituality would be founded upon our encounter with God mediated and assessed in the light of the Biblical record. Our morality would be more firmly grounded on what God says causes him pain, and less on our perception of what feels right for us. (It is perhaps not surprising then that without this scriptural perspective Phyllis describes “accepted principles of morality” as a “work in progress” for the emerging church. (:102) The greatest challenge to contemporary Western society is its lack of consistent morality.) Nor am I at all convinced that a ‘conversation’ can give the same sense of corporeality as for example the text of the Bible, or a council of elders, or even a Pope. A Network suits the modern mind, largely because it gives more latitude for dissent without one having to forego belonging.

To my mind the key question that arises is whether what emerges at the centre of this maelstrom is in any coherent sense Christian. Of course it will incorporate elements from the various traditions which have their origins in Christian belief and practice. But why stop there? Phyllis is already advocating that elements of Judaism will be merged into this new emerging phenomenon. It is not clear exactly what she means by Judaism in this context, but I

suspect it reflects the easy-going spirituality of some American Rabbis, rather than the cut and thrust of Old Testament faith in its confrontation with paganism.

If Judaism, then why not Buddhism or Hinduism, or Islam, or traditional North American Indian religions, or any of the cacophony of new 'faiths' thrown up by the New Age movement? It returns to the challenge of the question asked on page 73, "How can we live responsibly as devout and faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions?" It would seem that what is being offered is an easy going eclecticism that neither confronts nor speaks coherently into the challenges facing contemporary Western society.

It would seem to me, to be Christian means that not just anything goes. For example, in her discussion of Timothy Leary, she could have referred to his foreshadowing in the writings of Herman Hesse. In the latter's *Steppenwolf* the 'hero' undergoes a hallucinatory experience that bears all the hallmarks of an LSD-induced experience. But in the process he nearly strangles his girlfriend. Okay, it was only a story. But it illustrates very well how we often simply catalogue religious and social values as if they were morally neutral. If we condemn the people of the 16th century for their cruelty, how can we pass over in silence the evils of our own generation? In all these things Satan is lurking in the background, "seeking whom he can devour". The Bible teaches that evil is real, and warns us against the consequences of ignoring or underestimating it. It is an aspect of reality that we have to take seriously and we need clear guidelines on where the boundaries are to be drawn.

In this context I do not see how, on the basis of human experience, a 'conversation' can result in decisive action when decisive action is needed. Will the competing 'opinions' be able to draw the moral lines in such a way as to be an effective bar to evil? Or put another way, how is the emerging church to "discern the word

of truth” from among the disparate and competing foci of authority represented by the network?

Where does God, as the Bible describes him, fit into all this? Surprisingly he rarely gets a mention in Phyllis’ book and when he does it is often only as the butt of some theological disagreement. There is nothing in the pages of this book to suggest that it is God who ultimately controls history or that all the muddy eddies of human endeavour are but part of a great drama in which God unfolds his goals in the great drama of cosmic history - a drama that possesses the question, time and time again, who is God?

Is it YHWH the God who reveals himself in the Bible, and who ultimately revealed himself in Jesus Christ? Or is it the god of man’s imagining, created in his own image? That was the question that Isaiah laid before king Hezekiah in 6th Century as the armies of Sennacherib stood before the walls of Jerusalem. (Isaiah 37) It was not just a theoretical question for debate, because the future of the whole city depended upon the response Hezekiah made to this question. In this case Hezekiah was prepared to trust his fate and the fate of all his people to the God of Heaven, and the armies of Sennacherib melted away in the night. To this day we do not know why they left: it remains one of the great enigmas of history. The same challenge confronts God’s people today. Which God will we choose?