

Some Thoughts About Christianity's Failures to Challenge and Inspire

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a famous German theologian of the late 18th and early 19th century, considered by many the father of modern theology, addressed one of his major works to his generation's "cultured despisers." His aim, at the least, was to present a philosophically informed and coherent account of the Christian faith, one that could not be intellectually dismissed out of hand.

While my own understanding of the Christian faith departs from Schleiermacher in significant ways, I have always shared the desire to render the Christian faith in as intelligible, coherent, and compelling a manner as possible.

I hope there are readers of this column who have not abandoned Christianity despite the fact that so few accounts of the Christian faith these days possess much intellectual rigor or integrity, or much uplifting passion for that matter. The preponderance of books in the religion section of virtually every bookstore, not to mention most of the sermons preached on TV and in pulpits across the country, are extremely thin gruel to anyone with a lively and inquiring mind or a deeply compassionate heart.

The problem is not just one of supply, however. It is also one of demand. If more people bought and read serious theological books, there would be more of them on the bookshelves. If more people who frequent the pews of our churches insisted on meatier sermons with fewer platitudes and more incisive theology and social concern, I believe there would be improvement in that direction. If fewer people tuned in to watch huckster preachers on TV, and fewer sent in money to support their typically lavish life-styles, their numbers would decrease.

I don't know if there's any solution to the spiritual poverty of our times. I'm convinced, however, that most current religious fads will fade. Those who eschew institutional religion but still lay claim to some trappings of spirituality are like cut flowers. They cannot reproduce themselves, and will eventually wither away. A sustainable life of faith and spirit requires the greater resources provided by rootedness in rich traditions that nourish even while undergoing constant reformulation and change.

Unfortunately, the more disaffiliation from existing church bodies by those who find their current prevailing religious teaching and conduct arcane, hackneyed, insular, shallow, trivial, and/or superficial, the less ferment there will be within these bodies to accomplish the change needed to keep alive a vital and compelling Christian faith and practice.

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