The Great Emergence

How Christianity Is Changing and Why

A Book by Phyllis Tickle

Note: I have read Phyllis Tickle’s book The Great Emergence and recommend it highly to anyone who is interested in the transitional phases of Christianity throughout history. However, whereas Phyllis focuses on changes in centuries, for the purpose of my book, I focused on changes in Catholic Christian history by millennia.

Dan Fusting

A Book Review by Ben Simpson*

November 14, 2008

Before The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why** appeared on the shelves at the local bookstore it was on my radar screen. I’ve read Phyllis Tickle’s work in the past and have been amazed at her command of the language. Her ability to translate complex ideas and vivid images into captivating prose is undoubtedly impressive and her latest work is no exception. The ideas contained in The Great Emergence cannot be ignored and will surely be of vast importance for “emergers,” “emergents,” and the “hyphenateds” (Presby-mergents, Metho-mergent, etc.) as the church charges into the future.

After naming the historical reality in which we stand “The Great Emergence,” Tickle states her task as answering three questions, “What is this thing?”, “How did it come to be?”, and “Where is it going?”

The church, according to Tickle, stands in the midst of a giant rummage sale. This rummage sale is not the first of its kind, as each of the great Abrahamic faiths has been through this before. These moments have come about in history at approximately five hundred year intervals. Quoting the Anglican bishop Mark Dyer, Tickle states, “About every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” Tickle believes that we are now in one of those times. Tickle generalizes three results each time one of these historic shifts has occurred. According to her analysis: (1) a more vital form of Christianity emerges, (2) organized expressions are reconstituted into a more purified expression of the former self, and (3) the “the range and depth of Christianity’s reach” expands.

To support her argument Tickle provides a broad historical sketch. Her markers in history include the rise of Gregory the Great and the monastic movement in the 500s, the Great Schism which occurred near 1000 AD, the Great Reformation of the 1500s, and, now, the Great Emergence. During each period she uses a tethered cable as a helpful
analogy which consists of four components. The exterior of the cable is a mesh sleeve, represents the common imagination of the time. Once punctured, lying beneath that common imagination are three strands representative of the spirituality, corporeality and morality of the age. Tickle’s examination of each designated time period shows how an individual, a group of individuals or some historic event punctures the common imagination and brings about the reexamination of each of these three strands, raising new questions pertaining to authority, reality, and meaning in the world. When challenges arise, a new common imagination must be formulated which will guide existence within reality. As this occurs, the process can be painful and discomforting. Yet, purgation leads to purification.

According to Tickle, the two central questions of the Great Emergence are: (1) “What is human consciousness and/or the humanness of the human?” and (2) “What is the relation of all religions to one another—or, put another way, how can we live responsibly as devout and faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions?” Tickle further asserts, “The other great truth here is that we can not be said to have truly entered into any kind of post-Emergence stability until we have answered both of them.” Interestingly for Tickle, the question is one of plurality or the truth of plurality. In order to negotiate this question, one must wrestle with the location of authority. The dilemma of authority today is presented, not only in Christianity, but in the world at large. Tickle is right to point us in this direction.

In an attempt to explain how we got here, Tickle traces important philosophical, sociological, theological, scientific and technological developments including Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, Einstein’s theory of relativity, the advent of the automobile, the shifting relationship of families, the rise of the drug culture in the 1960s, the quest for the historical Jesus and the rise of Pentecostalism. All of these factors, in a way, eroded the Reformation foundation of authority - sola Scriptura.

To address her final question, “Where is it going?” Tickle provides a quadrilateral to serve as a guide. In each of the four quadrants (moving from upper left, clockwise to lower left) she locates Christians on Liturgical, Social Justice, Renewalist and Conservative terrain. The Great Emergence has brought about a stirring in each of these four quadrants, drawing leaders in each area in to a gathering center. As this gathered center begins to draw more and more people of like mind together the church becomes primed for renewal, though this new reality is turbulent and challenging. The church together must navigate these new frontiers, with traditionalists, re-tradition-ers, progressives and hyphenateds engaging in constructive dialogue which paves the way forward.

As this pattern emerges, Tickle turns to the sources of authority in this new environment. Here she defines and explores two terms, “orthonomy” (correct harmony & beauty) and “theonomy” (only God can be the source of perfection in action or thought). Under this context she explores how Christians in the Great Emergence will define authority underneath these categories, offering that authority is established in Scripture and Community. Authority becomes a dynamic conception based on a network theory or
crowd sourcing and levels hierarchical structures which have carried the day in the past. Christian communities will become a centered set rather than a bounded set, will emphasize narrative and will which have defined certain aspects of Christian belief and doctrine.**

Tickle’s ideas are complex and defy simplification. I recommend you read them. Tickle’s book is a good one. At times I found places where her argument could be strengthened, though not to the detriment of the whole. This book should be read by practitioners and church leaders seeking a way forward and then discussed with fervor. There will be moments when one may strongly agree or disagree with her argument, but Tickle must be contended with. We stand at the precipice of a new age, which in and of itself is not a new dilemma. Christian people must seek to be faithful in that age. A debt of gratitude is owed to Tickle for how her ideas might sharpen our thinking, strengthen our practice, and spur us on to greater deeds.

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**  I agree with much of which Ben Simpson writes. However, I disagree that we will return to Hebraic roots of the Christian faith and purge Hellenistic influences. As I propose in my book *The Catholic Church In The Third Millennium*, we will retain the traditions of the present Church and will emphasize even more the Catholic-Christian tradition of spirituality, most of which is derived from the Hellenistic Greek philosophers.

Daniel Fustering

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