

## **Reforming Toward Beautiful, Less Arrogant, and De-Centered Christianities**

It's not that I hold a grudge against the Christian Reformation of the 15<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Really. I did not grow up under its thumb, nor have I directly suffered deeply because of it, as some of you have.

On one level, one might say that I simply have been bored with all those words. It did not take me too long to see that a movement which hallowed words as the key to either a full life or salvation from something awful was on the wrong track. But inasmuch as I was Protestant—and I was—the Reformation did not seep very deeply into my pores.

Although I personally have not found much inspiration in the historical or religious remnants of the protestant Reformation, I am happy to take the image of “re-formation” as a metaphor for the deep intellectual stirrings and creative spiritual power in our present time. Indeed, I am enthusiastic about strikingly creative spiritual, communitarian, social, and intellectual Christian movements which have re-emerged over the past 30+ years.

Even more to the point, although we must acknowledge that Christianity is failing throughout much of the world; I am much more gripped by profoundly new and healthy emergence of non-normative Christianities. I mean here to describe the broad swaths of new re-forming Christianities. As we converse during this annual Sea of Faith conference, I aim to give images, stories, and examples of these blossoming Christianities, mostly in the United States.

As I did 12 years ago with the Polebridge Press publication of *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*, I want primarily to describe these movements through providing their defining characteristics. Let me be clear that my first-hand pastoral experiences and my extensive direct grass roots research over the past 30 years wants to stand both over against and on the shoulders of the primarily deconstructive era of liberal Protestant critique, anti-spiritual postures, and word-heavy tendencies.

That is, while affirming the recent past's need to deconstruct conventional western Christianity, I ask your attention to a strongly embodied set of spiritual and social practices, fresh constructionist theologies, and diffuse congregational-and-parish-based communities of the past 30 years. Your kind invitation to me allows me to place special emphasis on the last ten years since my *A New Spiritual Home* book. Although this new set of descriptions underline, revise, and correct the defining characteristics of 2006 grass roots, so-called “progressive Christianity,” they mean to stay with *A New Spiritual Home* principle and

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methodology of description of real phenomena rather than wishful thinking, abstract principles, or playful brainstorming. As such it is a hands-on update and persistent preference for in-place practices rather than proposals and prescriptions for what “progressive Christianity” should be. I look forward to talking descriptively about the wide range of these smart post-modern intellectual clarities and multiple, queer, and subtle spiritual depths; while we think together about bright, less arrogant, and de-centered Christianities.

My five primary characteristics of “progressive Christianity” in 2006—to which I still hold descriptively, but which I am eager to add another level of descriptive characteristics—were:

1. Spiritual Vitality
2. Intellectual Integrity
3. Transgressing Gender Boundaries
4. Vitality without Superiority
5. Justice and Ecology

In the 2006 book, I listed and described 1,000 such local churches that have these characteristics. Here are two quick looks at the websites of two of them in their current guise. [I hope, if technically possible to show the group at this point: [www.jubileecommunity.org](http://www.jubileecommunity.org) and [www.stlydias.org](http://www.stlydias.org) . [For those reading this shorter overview of my Sea of Faith conference presentation, please feel free to go to both websites.]

Today I offer a complementary, yet somewhat different set of characteristics. So these new characteristics are meant to take advantage of the last 10+ years, to identify some deeper swirls of the 2006 characteristics.

Before laying out the 2017 complementary—yet somewhat different—characteristics, it is probably important to note here that I am a bit less sanguine about the category of “progressive Christianity” now than I was in 2006. This is not so much that I think the 2006 characteristics do not exist now to a similar degree, but more that the category of “progressive Christianity” is actually a bit more contested than it was in 2006. In certain circles now, the category of “progressive Christianity” has come primarily to represent a certain kind of socio-political and intellectual point of view that I did described in 2006. These current, perhaps more socio-political and intellectualist circles that claim the moniker of “progressive Christianity” do fit my 2006 characteristics 2-5 [2. intellectual Integrity, 3. Transgressing Gender Boundaries, 4. Vitality without Superiority, 5. Justice and Ecology]. But these more explicitly socio-political and intellectualist Christian circles are generally less interested in emerging

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spiritual practices {1. Spiritual vitality] that I described in 2006 and that continue to emerge strongly. So, it may be that my categories of re-forming Christianities could cede the category of “progressive Christianity.”

Now my complementary—yet somewhat different—2017 list of characteristics:

- 1. Vulnerability:** I am increasingly drawn to a portrait of divinity itself, practice of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianities, and life in the world as deeply entwined with vulnerability. Such vulnerability is, I think, constructive of human/divine connectivity, creativity, and provisional agency. On the theological level this comes out of the dead-end the 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced in particular contact with the Holocaust. The all-loving and all-powerful God could not survive the processing of a set of 20<sup>th</sup> century events (e.g., Jewish Holocaust, Cambodian genocide, and indigenous massacre). Rather than the all-powerful, all-loving God of pre-Holocaust times, the theological characteristic of “vulnerability” can point to somewhat powerful divine agency, partial healing, incompletely divinizable humanity compassion as a core divine attribute. There are well-worn christological articulations of such vulnerability, but there are also other spiritual paths that articulate power that is not all-mighty, incomplete healing, and compassion (cf. John Caputo’s signature book, *The Weakness of God*; Leonard Cohen’s on-going poetic proposals centered around the “broken Hallelujah;” Barbara Brown Taylor’s challenge to the Christian theology of the light in her NY Times best-seller *Learning to Walk in the Dark*; and my own “Disparate Presence” in Charles Hedrick, ed, *When Faith Meets Reason: Religion Scholars Reflect on Their Spiritual Journey*). 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christianities can learn from and articulate clear practices of vulnerability as they seek to find ways past the arrogance, self-absorption, and privileged social location of classic Christianity. Indeed it may be that social, theological, and political vulnerabilities are primary in Christianities’ chances to undo some of classic Christianities’ violence and arrogance, and attract new demographic constituencies. Living fully in today’s world beckons people toward vulnerability as a way to connect with one another and move past rhetorics of superiority. So I propose vulnerability as a primary way both to re-form the world and Christianity and a present resource and characteristic for Christianities reconstructing themselves toward grounded and vibrant life.
- 2. Queerness:** Rooted in the experience of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, intergender, trans-women, third gender, drag queen, gynosexual, closeted, drag king, or other kinds of gendered people; a powerful new social identity theory has developed that is called ‘queer theory.’ Already the queerness theorized by this important new perspective has leapt out of the gender box, and is helping us think about a wide spectrum of human socialities-and-identities-in-the-making. Standing alongside of new

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intersectional, hybridity. and post-colonial theorizings, queerness is blazing new ways of thinking about everything from national identities through biblical studies to massive migrations. Resisting abstract and dominant categories for understanding human life, queerness is opening up ways to welcome multiple uncomfortable differences, complicate phenomena that have been caricatured, leave in flux life that those in control want to pigeonhole, and mix complexly otherwise rigidly separated realities. It is this queerness paradigm that can re-form societies and relationships around the world so that ruling discursive categories no longer impose themselves on people's realities, belongings, identities, and behavior. As such queerness is already a powerful reformation away from over-determinedness and toward strangeness, incompleteness, and categoricalness. Similarly in terms of the new constructions of Christianities, queerness is a characteristic and resource to live into indeterminacy, hybridity, and fluidness.

- 3. Democratic ritual:** In quite close relationship to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation innovative practices, today for both societies at large and re-forming Christianities in particular, people are claiming meanings and identities by creating and practicing rituals whether they are officially sanctioned or not. This is what I call democratic ritual, that is, ritual that is not from above, necessarily in churches, or by instruction, but by desire and authenticity. Of course, in many ways, this is closest to the most common definition of "liturgy," whose etymology points to the "work of the people." Such democratic ritual exhibits power, imagination, and solidarity in people's lives. It is not just that democratic ritual is close to standard definition of "liturgy" or to 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation that enacted the reading of the Bible by the people, or beyond the purview of clergy. Democratic ritual is in full bloom in our time. In the broader cultures body-surfing at rock concerts and American footballers kneeling at their national anthem are not happening because someone tells them to do it but because it makes sense of their lives in new and deep ways. In reconstructing Christianities, one of the strongest new ritual movements is what is called "joys and concerns" or "what's on your hearts and minds" in which people speak their own longings, praise, and prayers rather than wait for clergy direction.

In both societies at large and Christianities such democratic rituals defy hierarchical and intellectualist controls in order to make deeper meaning in their own practice and re-form life itself.

- 4. Spirituality:** Here too in interestingly parallel developments to 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation practices, both larger society and re-forming 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianities spiritual practices are broadly afoot. Both inside and outside churches, people are practicing Buddhist and Hindu meditations although their own traditions do not model them or endorse them. Conservative and liberal intellectuals alike are nervous that wide-ranging

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kinds of early medieval Christian, Sufi, nativizing, Jewish, and wiccan practices are emerging helter-skelter. The likes of Taize monasticism draws thousands of people daily to rural France to chant Gregorian versions of scripture and spend afternoons in intense social discussion. In general these deep impulses toward embodiment of meaning rather than intellectual clarity or orderly process claim curious mixes of various religious traditions, new art forms, and populist musical and meditation practices tumble out as real re-forming happens inside and outside Christianities. Spiritual practice today, not unlike the deeper democratizing moves of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, re-form the social and personal dimensions of life.

Take a look now, if you would, at two additional websites that underline both the 2006 and the 2017 characteristics of re-forming Christian communities: [www.chestnuthillunited.org](http://www.chestnuthillunited.org) and [www.mystmiriam.org](http://www.mystmiriam.org). [For those reading this shorter overview of my Sea of Faith conference presentation, please feel free to go to both websites.]

For a good 30 years I have participated in ways that respond to the overwhelming decline in Christian practice with theological, practice-based, institutional and non-institutional, and strategic efforts to re-form American Christianity. My 2003-2006 research produced in-depth evidence that wide ranging, yet still minority, new models of local church life accompanied by larger values that apply to re-framing societal life itself. That earlier 2006 published survey in the United States found over 1,000 such local church communities that looked and acted quite differently. Now when one looks again at this 2006 portrait again, I think there is both increasing vitality even while the overall situation in American local churches has further declined. This—to my mind—does not promise a restoration of Christian privilege or empire. Rather these re-emergent swirls are probably best compared to the minority spiritual and intellectual fervor of medieval monastic movements. Not so much in character or content as in the ways that the social marginalization of monastics often have allowed them to birth beautifully deep spiritualities and incisive intellectual clarity.

I ask your forgiveness for this concentration on my United States-based experience with re-forming parishes and congregations in my work over the past two generations. I look forward to comparing notes, and thinking of the our possibilities for on-going re-forming, not based so much on 16<sup>th</sup> century models but on the variety of emerging values and practices in our time.

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Biographical Summary:

Hal Taussig is a post-modern theologian and pastor. He celebrates the vitality of pluralistic Catholic and Protestant communities in North America, and works energetically to expand their spiritual and intellectual reaches. His professorial career has featured experimental and humor-filled masters and Ph.D. level instruction in New Testament and early Christianity for 17 years at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and more than a decade in Roman Catholic colleges and universities as Professor of Bible. Of his 14 books, the most recent are *A New New Testament: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bible Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*; *Re-Reading the Gospel of Mark Amidst Loss and Trauma*; *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*; and *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity*. While a professor, he co-pastored two long-term churches that rose from the ashes and displayed young congregation members full of social moxie, multi-cultural hilarity, and art-filled innovative worship. He is currently the co-chair of Westar Institute's Christianity Seminar that is re-writing history of early Christianity, a member of Westar's Board of Directors, Board Chair of the Tanho Center (on the study of extra-canonical texts), and on the steering committee of the national Society of Biblical Literature's Seminar on Meals in the Greco-Roman World. Ordained a United Methodist, he currently has an episcopal appointment as a consultant for churches in decline.