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A Return to Tradition

A new interest in old ways takes root in Catholicism and many other faiths

By *Jay Tolson*

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Worshippers come to St. Mary, Mother of God in downtown Washington, D.C., for various reasons, but many say that a big draw is the Tridentine Latin mass that is said here every Sunday. Soon, St. Mary may be less well known for that distinctive liturgical offering than for the number of big-name government and media types that occupy its pews. Now that Pope Benedict XVI has loosened the restrictions on churches that want to observe the pre-Vatican II rite, more parishes are availing themselves of the option. Call it part of a larger conservative shift within the church—one that includes a renewed emphasis on such practices as personal confession and reciting the rosary as well as a resurgent interest in traditional monastic and religious orders.



Celebrating the Latin mass at St. Mary, Mother of God in Washington.

(Jim Lo Scalzo for USN&WR)

But this shift extends beyond the Roman Catholic Church. In Richardson, Texas, the congregation of Trinity Fellowship Church participates in something that would have been considered almost heretical in most evangelical Protestant churches five or 10 years ago: a weekly Communion service.

An independent, nondenominational church of some 600 members, Trinity Fellowship is not the only evangelical congregation that is offering a weekly Eucharist, saying the Nicene or Apostles' creeds, reading the early Church Fathers,

or doing other things that seem downright Roman Catholic or at least high Episcopalian. Daniel Wallace, a professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, which trains pastors for interdenominational or nondenominational churches, says there is a growing appetite for something more than "worship that is a glorified Bible class in some ways."

Something curious is happening in the wide world of faith, something that defies easy explanation or quantification. More substantial than a trend but less organized than a movement, it has to do more with how people practice their religion than with what they believe, though people caught up in this change often find that their beliefs are influenced, if not subtly altered, by the changes in their practice.

Put simply, the development is a return to tradition and orthodoxy, to past practices, observances, and customary ways of worshiping. But it is not simply a return to the past—at least not in all cases. Even while drawing on deep traditional resources, many participants are creating something new within the old forms. They are engaging in what Penn State sociologist of religion Roger Finke calls "innovative returns to tradition."

You see this at work quite clearly in the so-called emergent communities, new, largely self-organizing groups of young Christian adults who meet in private homes, church basements, or coffeehouses around the country. So free-form that many don't even have pastors, these groups nevertheless engage in some ancient liturgical practices, including creedal declarations, public confession, and Communion. They may use a piece of a bagel as the body of Christ, but the liturgy is a traditional anchor in services that may include films, skits, or group discussions of a biblical topic.

More Hebrew. The return to traditional forms and practices is occurring not only in the big tent of Christianity. In Judaism, too, in addition to a small but detectable surge in the Orthodox denomination, the most observant branch of the faith, even the moderate Conservative and the progressive Reform denominations are shifting toward the older ways, including the use of more Hebrew in the services or stricter observance of the Halakha (Jewish law). Many young adults who are joining the Jewish equivalent of the Christian emergent communities, the independent minyanim (plural of minyan, the quorum required for communal worship), are drawn in part by the commitment to traditional liturgical practices and observances. Reform may still be the largest Jewish denomination in America, but much of the faith's vitality is devoted to recapturing those traditions that modernizers dismissed as relics.

The state of traditionalism in Islam is more difficult to capture. On one hand, more young Muslims are embracing outward symbols of their devotion—women wearing head scarves,

men growing beards. Many are also more observant of the duties of the faith, whether saying the five daily prayers or fasting during Ramadan. But it is hard to say whether all of this signals a return to traditional Islam or the embrace of a highly puritanical reformist Islam associated with Wahhabi and Salafist teachings—teachings that many Islamic scholars find contrary to the deeper traditions of the faith. Indeed, Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt, and some Islamic scholars in America argue that an informed understanding of *sharia* (Islamic law) is the best antidote to extremism and fundamentalism. The uncertainty, of course, is whether their views will find a wider following among contemporary Muslims.

In all faiths, the return to tradition has different meanings for different people. To some, it is a return to reassuring authority and absolutes; it is a buttress to conservative theological, social, and even political commitments. To others, it is a means of moving beyond fundamentalist literalism, troubling authority figures, and highly politicized religious positions (say on gay marriage and contraception or abortion) while retaining a hold on spiritual truths. In short, the new traditionalism is anything but straightforward.

And that is one reason it is so hard to quantify. Mary Bendyna, executive director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, laments the lack of hard data on traditionalist developments in the Catholic Church but plans to launch a large study on sacramental life in January. Even without the numbers, though, Bendyna is confident that a change is afoot. "There has been a renewed interest in traditional life, in traditional devotions, even among young Catholics," she says. (Bendyna doubts, though, that the Latin mass will catch on in a big way. "There just aren't that many priests who are prepared to celebrate it," she says.) More broadly, Bendyna wonders whether a renewed interest in traditional devotions or religious orders correlates directly with conservatism on such matters as papal infallibility, contraception, or the exclusively male and celibate clergy. Determining that relationship, Bendyna says, is one of the greater investigative challenges.

"Hype." Some liberal Catholic clergy are completely skeptical about the scope and meaning of the traditionalist turn. "It's more hype than reality," says the Rev. Thomas Reese, a Jesuit priest and political scientist at Georgetown's Woodstock Theological Center. Reese thinks the church should focus less on the Latin mass than on the three

things that draw most churchgoers: "good preaching, good music, and a welcoming community." He is equally dubious about all the attention being devoted to the habit-wearing Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia and a few other traditional religious orders that have enjoyed an uptick in younger members. "I have no problem with their habits," says Reese. "On the other hand, if the church ordained women, we'd have thousands more women coming forward."

But Sister Patricia Wittberg, a sociologist at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis, sees more substance in the new traditionalism. "I think churches that can articulate what they do and what they stand for tend to grow better." To that extent, she says, the conservative turn in the church makes sense. But she points out that there are two kinds of conservatives. "One group," she says, "would like to take things back to the [16th-century Counter-Reformation] Council of Trent, but I don't think the future's with them. I think the future is with a group that is interested in reviving the old stuff and traditions in a creative way. Sisters in traditional orders may wear habits, but they often live in coed communities." Sociologist Finke agrees: "Members of traditional religious orders want to be set apart, to have a more active spiritual formation and a strong community life. But while they are obedient, they are less submissive to authority and want to make more of their own decisions and be active professionally in outreach activities. It's a structured life, but it's a structure they are seeking and not simply submitting to authority."

Contradictory? To be sure. And it becomes no less so in other denominations and religions. That may be why George Barna, whose Barna Group does extensive polling on religious life in America, does not identify neotraditionalism as one of the four "megathemes" in his most recent survey of the American scene. But one of those themes, "Nouveau Christianity," speaks to the conditions that some say are giving rising to it: "'unChristian' behavior by church people, bad personal experiences with churches, ineffective Christian leadership amid social crises." Such factors have led, the Barna Group reports, to new spiritual practices that embrace diversity and tolerance, emphasize conversations and relationship, blend all forms of art and novel forms of instruction, and foster new spiritual communities. But how do tradition and orthodox practices enable attempts to build a stronger spiritual life?

Talk to Carl Anderson, the senior pastor of Trinity Fellowship Church, and you get an idea. "Seven or eight years ago, there was a sense of disconnectedness and loneliness in our church life," he says. The entrepreneurial model adopted by so many evangelical churches, with its emphasis on seeker-friendly nontraditional services and programs, had been successful in helping Trinity build its congregation, Anderson explains. But it was less successful in holding on to church members and deepening their faith or their ties with fellow congregants. Searching for more rootedness, Anderson sought to reconnect with the historical church.

Connections. Not surprisingly, that move was threatening to church members who strongly identify with the Reformation and the Protestant rejection of Catholic practices, including most liturgy. But Anderson and others tried to emphasize the power of liturgy to direct worship toward God and "not be all about me," he says. Anderson also stressed how liturgy "is about us—and not just this church but the connection with other Christians." Adopting the weekly Eucharist, saying the Nicene Creed every two or three weeks, following the church calendar, Trinity reshaped its worship practices in ways that drove some congregants away. But Anderson remains committed, arguing that traditional practices will help evangelical churches grow beyond the dependence on "celebrity-status pastors."

Something of a celebrity ex-pastor himself, Brian McLaren, the popular author and a founder of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Md., recently left the pastorate to talk and write about the emergent movement and other developments in Christianity. While at Cedar Ridge, which catered specifically to previously "unchurched" seekers, McLaren instituted a Eucharistic liturgy and contemplative prayer retreats. And he appreciates the role of tradition in the new self-organizing communities that are sprouting up around the country. "Protestantism has been in a centrifugal pattern for so long, with each group spinning away from others," McLaren says. "But now there is some kind of pull back to the center."

Like McLaren, Tony Jones, author of *The New Christians: Dispatches From the Emergent Frontier* and national coordinator of Emergent Village, talks about the postmodern aspects of the new traditionalism. People of the postmodern mindset—particularly 20- and 30-somethings—question the hyperindividualism of

modern culture. They search for new forms of community but tend to be wary of authority figures and particularly of leaders, Jones says, who take divisive liberal or conservative social-political positions—one reason why the emergent groups tend to be antipastoral. "The problem is not the issues," says Jones, who belongs to an emergent church, Solomon's Porch, in Minneapolis. "The problem is how we talk about issues. We are going to live in reconciliation with each other, and traditional practices are what restore us and hold us together."

The young neotraditionalists also have an almost intuitive attraction to liturgy, ritual, and symbol as forms of knowledge that complement the dominant rational, scientific one. "There is a certain kind of postmodern sensibility that loses confidence in the rational explanation of everything," McLaren says. For him, Jones, and others, "doing church" in traditional and innovative ways is a form of theological reflection that leaves behind the fundamentalists' need to make all religious propositions into pseudoscientific statements, to turn Genesis, for example, into a geology textbook.

Pushing limits. "I would argue that people are looking for a dialectic," says Avi Weiss, senior rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in Bronx, N.Y., and founder of a new rabbinical school that trains Jewish leaders in the approach of what he calls Open Orthodoxy. "People are looking for a commitment that is grounded but not one that is stagnant," Weiss says. "The other part of the dialectic is an openness but not without limits."

So in Weiss's synagogue, you will see things that push the limits of orthodoxy to encourage a more open and accepting community. There is the traditional divide (*mehitza*) between women's and men's sections, for example, but it is a low one that runs down the middle of the central worship space, rather than a high *mehitza* that sequesters women in the back or on the sides. Opposing many less flexible Orthodox scholars, Weiss argues that it is correct within Jewish law for all congregants to touch the Torah and for women to lead their own prayer groups—practices that he allows. Most important, while he wants congregants to follow as much of the Halakha as they can, he opens the door to all Jews and indeed all people who want to explore the path of Orthodox Judaism.

The success of his approach, including his encouragement of participatory leadership, can

be seen not just in Riverdale but in the synagogues led by his associates and former students. When Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, once an assistant rabbi at Riverdale, took over Ohev Sholom almost four years ago, the northwest Washington, D.C., synagogue had dwindled to about 15 families. Today, with some 300 families (and bearing the additional name "the National Synagogue"), it buzzes with energy and enthusiastic congregants. "Most come from nonspecific affiliations," says Herzfeld. "They find authentic spiritual life and tradition. Some make the full, radical transformation into the Orthodox life. Some even sell their homes and move so they can walk to shul on the Sabbath." Jill Sacks and her husband, Tom, formerly members of a Conservative synagogue who lived in Bethesda, Md., for 26 years, are one couple who moved to be closer to Ohev Sholom. They were drawn by Herzfeld's self-deflecting but charismatic leadership, the traditionalism, the vibrant community, and the commitment to social outreach. Sacks's former synagogue was a very egalitarian one, she says, and she read the Torah and the haftarah there. "I had that option," Sacks says, "but I am very happy with this synagogue."

The appeal of traditionalism across all Jewish formations—including the some 80 independent minyanim that researchers have identified in the United States and Canada—has some scholars wondering whether the biggest middle-ground formation, Conservatism, may not soon be absorbed by a Reform denomination that is more orthodox and an Orthodox denomination that is more accommodating. A new regard for tradition may be rearranging Judaism's organizational landscape.

In all corners of Judaism, as in all parts of Christianity, traditions are being adapted in strangely innovative ways. Ari Y. Kelman, a professor of American studies at the University of California-Davis, describes what he finds at the Mission Minyan in San Francisco, a group of about 100 mostly youngish Jewish adults who convene for davening (praying) at the Women's Building in the artsy Mission District. "The service is traditional," he says, "from the right end of Conservatism and the left end of Orthodox. It's all in Hebrew, with no instruments or instructions on when to sit or stand. Most of it's mixed seating, but there's also a separate men's section and a separate women's section—a sort of *tri-hitza*. Women lead the first part of the service, which is not officially prayer, and men lead the second part."

Limits and openness: Welcome to the new, and sometimes bewildering, world of religious

traditionalism.

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