

2014

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CHOOSING MY TRADITION

By **Travis Pickell**

May 12, 2014

The term *millennial*—as in, that generation born between 1981 and 2000—does not tend to bring to mind the notion of tradition. Millennials, considered as a group, are not particularly known for rigorous adherence to particular traditions. Nor are they known for their “traditional” ways of doing things. That said, a number of commentators have noted a rising tide of interest in tradition in the spiritual lives of young people in this country. For some, this interest takes the form of a self-conscious appropriation of a single theological or historical expression of the Christian faith, as demonstrated, for example, by joining a Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Anabaptist church. More often, it takes the form of a turn to traditional elements of liturgy. In this paper, I examine the self-conscious turn to tradition, particularly among evangelical millennials. In doing so, I hope to articulate the social and contextual factors that encouraged this turn, as well as the desires and

dissatisfactions that are being expressed through it. My ultimate aim is to determine whether this turn to tradition carries legitimate prospects for helping young Christians live more faithfully in our late-modern context.[1]

A Millennial Turn to Tradition

It seems clear that there is a renewed interest in the nature and role of “traditions” within academic theology. But I think many of us could also point to anecdotal evidence of a renewed interest in tradition and traditions in our own churches, synagogues, and mosques. Long-time religion and culture writer Jay Tolson brought widespread attention to this phenomenon in the cover story of the December 2007 edition of *US News & World Report* aptly titled “A Return to Tradition.”[2] According to Tolson, “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.” Tolson goes on to describe a “return to tradition and orthodoxy, to past practices, observances, and customary ways of worshiping” in Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, and Muslim communities. Citing a professor from Dallas Theological Seminary, he notes a “growing appetite for something more than ‘worship that is a glorified Bible class.’” For Catholics, this may mean a return to the Tridentine Latin Mass, personal confession, reciting the rosary, or renewed interest in monastic or religious orders. For Jews it may mean more frequent use of Hebrew in worship or stricter observance of halakhah. For Muslims, it may mean choosing to wear the hijab or closer observance of Ramadan or Salat. And for evangelical Protestants it may mean weekly communion, reading the church fathers, recitation of creeds, or following the liturgical year.

Tolson is careful to note, however, that this is not simply a backward-looking traditionalism. According to Tolson, “even while drawing on deep traditional resources, many participants are creating something new within the old forms.” They are undertaking what sociologist Roger Finke labels “innovative returns to tradition.”[3]

Tolson also notes that “the return to tradition has different meanings for different people.”[4] One way to describe the difference is to distinguish between form and content. There are some who seek a return to the traditional *content* of Christianity, alternatively expressed as the true gospel or right doctrine, and there are those who would appropriate the historical *forms* of Christian worship, that is, the elements of liturgy or ancient prayers. Tolson, however, describes the divide as epistemological in nature:

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.[5]

Within contemporary evangelicalism, the first group is exemplified by the “young, restless, and Reformed” Christians.[6] This group is anxious about the relativism entailed in a postmodern context, and so they seek a stable foundation for theological commitment in a particular theological tradition. In doing so, they are attempting to connect with an era of church history that is understood to have been free from the relativism, commercialism, and tepid superficiality of our own age.[7]

The second type of turn to tradition is exemplified by the emerging church movement, whose whole-hearted embrace of postmodernism signals their desire to move beyond what they believe to be an overly rationalized expression of Christian faith.[8] In this context, turning to tradition means remembering “lost secrets of the ancient church,” especially liturgical elements that incorporate bodily senses of touch, smell, or taste. Participants may be asked to focus their attention on a burning candle while reciting an ancient Celtic prayer, or they may read Scripture with a group using the practice of *lectio divina*, or they may be led through a modern-day stations of the cross or an art walk before being asked to journal their thoughts and prayers. Such practices seek to selectively incorporate traditional elements of worship into a liturgy to create an environment that will foster a contemplative spiritual experience.[9]

Returning to Tolson’s categories, one might say that the young, restless, and Reformed group is seeking a premodern solution to postmodern relativism while reinforcing an Enlightenment epistemology. In contrast, the emerging Christians seek a postmodern solution to modern rationalism by means of premodern forms of worship.

However much they differ, the two groups share much in terms of the dissatisfactions that motivate their interest in tradition. Both groups can be interpreted as reacting to the perceived shallowness and inauthenticity of the most dominant expressions of evangelicalism in the late twentieth century, exemplified by the so-called seeker churches. This movement was immensely successful at attracting new members, especially among baby boomers and Generation Xers,[10] and it did so precisely by means of a rejection of tradition.[11] According to Kimon Sargeant, seeker churches endeavor to “present a more plausible model of Christianity—a model that fits with pervasive cultural understandings about choice, individualism, autonomy, the importance of the self, therapeutic sensibilities, and anti-institutional inclinations.”[12] Anything that might alienate a non-believer has to go. And tradition, according to Sargeant, is “simply put . . . not market sensitive.”[13]

The seeker church model brought many new people into the church, but it also was the seedbed for much dissatisfaction; many millennial Christians embracing tradition come out of this context. While sympathetic to its commitment to evangelism, the young, restless, and Reformed crowd are seeking a theological depth and seriousness that seeker-sensitive churches avoided for fear of alienating the unchurched visitor. And while sympathetic to its focus on the self and its willingness to oppose institutional hierarchies, emerging Christians eschew cultural accommodation to the market mentality of late-modern capitalism. Both groups, in their own way, are turning to tradition in order to find a deeper, more authentic spirituality.

Points of Tension

How can we evaluate this return to tradition among millennial evangelicals? There are many positive and encouraging things one might say. Many people likely share their concerns about theological shallowness and about the market mentality of many church leaders. That said, I will note three points of tension with the way these movements make use of tradition.

The first point of tension has to do with individualism. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the centrality of individualism, which he distinguished from selfishness, to the American ethos.[14] Individualism and traditionalism have long coexisted in America, and in many ways individualism can itself be described as a tradition. But not every form of individualism is compatible with an embrace of tradition. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah describes American individualism in the twentieth century as an amalgam of four cultural logics, and he explains that two of these cultural logics, civic republicanism and biblical faith, hold individualism and tradition together, whereas the other two, pragmatic utilitarianism (do what works) and Romantic expressivism (do what feels right), pry them apart. According to Bellah, civic republicanism and biblical faith have been gradually eclipsed by pragmatic utilitarianism, on the one hand, and Romantic expressivism, on the other.[15] And when these two cultural logics combine, as is seen among millennial evangelicals and earlier generations, the result can often be a “therapeutic” individualism (we know what works because it makes us feel good).[16]

Pragmatic utilitarianism, Romantic expressivism, and therapeutic individualism are less friendly to the idea of tradition, primarily because of the way they question the idea of authority or locate authority in the self. Sargeant has pointed out how therapeutic individualism fuels a suspicion of authority in the seeker-church movement.[17] Yet even those millennials who seek tradition often carry with them the therapeutic individualism of previous generations. Tolson points to this tension, which he describes as the “paradox” of desiring to be rooted in tradition while also being “wary of authority figures.”[18] This means that if Alasdair MacIntyre is right and tradition is best understood as apprenticeship to a craft, then the potentially troubling side effect for millennials is

that they must balance their desire for tradition with some sense of placing themselves under authority.[19] And it may be that the sort of individualism expressed by these millennials, especially in the emerging church, precludes this possibility.

The second point of tension is that traditions are being adapted and combined in “strangely innovative”[20] and eclectic ways. The cultural anthropologist James Bielo describes the emerging church approach to traditions as “remembering in a bricoleur fashion.”[21] Similarly, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, professors at Fuller Seminary who study church growth, liken the “blending of traditions” to “the liturgical equivalent of DJs working with a mix of songs to produce fresh expressions and moods.”[22] But is a selective appropriation of traditional elements really a turn to tradition at all? Or is it merely turning consumerism upon tradition? In its partiality, it is unclear whether this approach reckons with tradition at all, particularly in a way that poses serious questions to the interests and commitments of the participants.

The final point of tension has to do with the effects of pluralism on modernity. Both the conservative and emergent reformers seem to be working with a truncated understanding of modernity, leading each group to focus too much on what they believe to be the core of the postmodern context. To explain what I mean, consider the following quotation from Gibbs and Bolger’s study of emerging churches:

The pervasive practice of spirituality in Western cultures marks the beginning of postmodernity, for as mentioned, modernity created secular space. Modernity separated spheres of reality into neat boxes. . . . The recognition that this division was artificial demonstrates the pervasive influence of postmodernity, and the interest in spirituality is a significant manifestation of this shift.[23]

Here, modernity is described solely in terms of what sociologists call “structural pluralism,”[24] the division of reality into different spheres of public and private or facts and values. Although this is one snapshot of what modernity entails, modernity is not simply a matter of epistemology; it is a complex process of cultural and social change surrounding a rapid rise in technologically induced economic growth. Modernity includes structural pluralism, but it is also characterized by cultural pluralism (as a result of globalization, urbanization, and information technology) and the rise of functional and bureaucratic rationalities. Describing our context in the philosophical register of postmodernity, rather than the sociological register of “late” or “advanced” modernity does two things: first, it tends to downplay the importance of cultural pluralism and functional rationality, and second, it tends to conceal the fact that modernity is still very much with us—and in us. If anything, those causes that gave rise to modernity are in hyperdrive today. The upshot is this: when modernity is understood as primarily an expression of the public/private divide, then it is far

too easy to see postmodernity and premodernity as compatible allies against modernity, which emerging church talk of “merging ancient and contemporary spiritualities”[25] and “Ancient-Future”[26] worship seems to suggest.

In particular, such an approach omits the effects of what Peter Berger calls the “pluralization of social life-worlds.”[27] For Berger, modernity is essentially about pluralism, the effect of which is to multiply choices in such a way that it becomes impossible *not to choose* things that were previously taken for granted.[28] The substitution of choice where what was taken for granted once reigned has an inherently destabilizing effect on belief and certainty, and it tends to produce considerable existential angst. This does not mean that belief becomes impossible, although it might mean that for some. Rather, according to Berger, “Pluralism influences not so much *what* people believe as *how* they believe . . . what before was given through the accident of birth now becomes a matter of *choice*.”[29]

Are We Unhappily in Love?

Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote that “Tradition is not something a man can learn; not a thread he can pick up when he feels like it, any more than a man can choose his own ancestors. Someone lacking a tradition who would like to have one is like a man unhappily in love.”[30] Can we choose our tradition? Can tradition be learned? I would answer yes. But I also deeply feel the force of Wittgenstein’s words because I recognize the tenuousness of such an undertaking. One cannot completely escape the knowledge of the contingency of one’s choices. It is unclear whether this existential phenomenon—what we might call “permanent reflection”—is compatible with the institutions needed to carry on a tradition.[31] In other words, can we still have traditions when they are the products of our choice? Berger argues that we can choose our traditions but that “the members of these institutions will always remember that they have chosen to belong to them and that this choice could in principle be revoked. Such institutions are, by definition, voluntary associations. The same voluntariness by which people choose to join them may at a later date allow them to leave.”[32]

I see three possible ways that millennials can navigate these questions. First, there is the path of uncritical acceptance of authority for authority’s sake. Berger describes this as absolutist retrenchment and fanaticism. Given that the discovery of a range of options where there once seemed to exist only one option leads to psychological distress, it is no mystery why one might choose this path, but it is clearly a dead end. The second path is the embrace of contingency, the surrender of the quest for certainty. This is Berger’s own path, which he sees as simply living out the Protestant principle of *sola fide*, by faith alone. If we take this path, we might whole-heartedly embrace the image of *bricolage*, so long as there are structures in place to keep us accountable to

one another and to those who came before.[33] The final path would be to seek to embed all discussion of tradition and authority in the prior categories of narrative and community. In doing so, we might come to find that our “first task” is to “form a community consistent with [the] conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of [our] existence.”[34] This approach is most promising for creating “plausibility structures” that are difficult to come by in a liberal, pluralist society such as our own and that therefore might mitigate the effects of “permanent reflection.” Such an effect, however, would have to be a *by-product* rather than a goal of seeking to be a story-formed community. For if we are seeking to reinforce plausibility structures *for the purpose of* regaining a sense of certainty, the continued existence of pluralism will eventually reassert itself and press the arbitrariness of such an undertaking. Ultimately, some mixture of these last two ways seems promising as a mode of inhabiting tradition, but I also am aware that this might be the hopeful conclusion of a man unhappily in love.

1. I am not a practical theologian or sociologist of religion, yet in this essay, I take solace in James Gustafson’s observation that “Theological ethics always invade territories where other scholars reign” (Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979], x). In the hope of *minimizing* the scope of my invasion, I limit my focus here to the context of contemporary American evangelicalism, a context that more closely aligns with my own ecclesial background and its odd mix of traditionalism and antitraditionalism. Within that context, I see many of my peers (myself included) attempting to be rooted in something called *tradition* without knowing exactly how to go about it. Of course, I recognize that evangelicalism is itself a tradition, but it is one with such fluid edges that it sometimes seems unhelpful to think of it that way. Evangelicals of my generation tend to have a “mere Christianity” (Lewis) ethos, which seeks to transcend traditional distinctions (e.g., denominationalism) in order to uphold the essentials of Christian faith.

2. Tolson, “A Return to Tradition: A New Interest in Old Ways Takes Root in Catholicism and Many Other Faiths,” *US News and World Report*, December 13, 2007, <http://www.usnews.com/news/national/articles/2007/12/13/a-return-to-tradition>.

3. Ibid., and Finke, “Innovative Returns to Tradition: Using Core Teachings as the Foundation for Innovative Accommodation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (March 2004): 19–34. Finke argues that “Religious groups sustain organizational vitality by preserving core religious teachings as they introduce innovations for serving members and adapting to their changing environment” (20). According to Finke, although innovations of the “core teachings” threaten organizational vitality, innovations in form *for the sake of* preserving core teachings in

the modern world can help sustain vitality. Finke sees the “worst-case scenario” exemplified in mainline Protestant churches, who “accommodate their core teachings to be relevant to the culture as they failed to adopt organizational innovations” (23). We might remark that Finke’s analysis seems to rely on implausible distinction between “form” and “content,” but the critique is one that is common usage among those evangelicals turning to tradition.

4. Tolson, “Return to Tradition.”

5. Ibid.

6. See Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, Reformed,” *Christianity Today*, September 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html>. Leaders in this group include Joshua Harris, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, Al Mohler, and Mark Dever.

7. Ibid.

8. Much has been written about the emerging church over the last fifteen or so years. One difficulty of talking about the emerging church is that many within the movement eschew labels and categories, making it exceedingly difficult to define emerging Christianity. For an investigation of the emerging church grounded in the field of religious anthropology, see James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011). For an account of the emerging church grounded in the field of practical theology, see Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

9. See Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 74. Bielo, who spent two years conducting an ethnographic study of emerging congregations in the central Midwest, draws attention to “Ancient-Future” worship among emerging church congregations.

10. See Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 38.

11. E.g., Sargeant suggests, “In general, seeker churches have taken a very low view of tradition in all of its various meanings” (ibid., 62–63).

12. Ibid., 31.

13. Ibid., 64.

14. Tocqueville explained that “*Individualism* is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with *egoisme* (selfishness). Selfishness is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself and to prefer himself to everything in the world. Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. Selfishness originates in blind instinct; individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment more than from depraved feelings; it originates as much in deficiencies of mind as in perversity of heart” (*Democracy in America*, vol. II, sec. 2, chap. 2, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/detoc>).

15. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 6, especially.

16. For more on the evangelical blending of pragmatic utilitarianism and Romantic expressivism, see Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially chap. 4, where the authors describe millennial spirituality as “moralistic therapeutic deism.” James Bielo describes emerging church worship as “highly individual spirituality” that is both “introspective” and “expressive” (Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 95). For more on therapeutic individualism, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 1st Harper Torchbook ed. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1968), chap. 1.

17. Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 164.

18. Tolson, “A Return to Tradition.”

19. MacIntyre explains that “We shall have to learn from that teacher and initially accept on the basis of his or authority within the community of a craft precisely what intellectual and moral habits it is which we must cultivate and acquire if we are to become effective self-moved participants in such enquiry” (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 63. See also, page 84: “faith in authority has to precede rational understanding.”

20. Tolson, “A Return to Tradition.”

21. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 99.

22. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 222. The authors make the explicit connection with individualism and resistance to authority in the next line: “The eclectic approach of the emerging church is also in sync with the wider culture’s approach to spirituality, which has become divorced from institutional religion and the control of dogma.”

23. *Ibid.*, 218.

24. See, e.g., James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), chap. 2.

25. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 218.

26. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 74.

27. Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974), chap. 3.

28. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979).

29. Berger, “Protestantism and the Quest of Certainty,” *Christian Century*, August 26, 1998: 782–96. See also Charles Taylor’s account of the effects of the “immanent frame” on the conditions of belief in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), especially part V; italics in original.

30. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 76; quoted in Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), xxi.

31. See Helmut Schelsky, “Ist die Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar?,” 1957, in *Auf der Suche nach Wirklichkeit* (Köln, Germany: E. Diedrichs, 1965), 250–75.

32. Berger, “Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty.”

33. This would be to work out of the picture of tradition offered by Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

34. See Stanley Hauerwas, John Berkman, and Michael G. Cartwright, *The Hauerwas Reader*

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