

Introduction

By Phyllis Tickle

WHEN, IN THIS country, more than three or four of us begin at any one time to talk about religion, we can almost always count on an ensuing, and sometimes heated, difference of opinions. Those animated exchanges spring, as a rule anyway, from disagreements about doctrine and dogma, creeds and postures. Rarely do they arise from any confusion about the fact that religion really does exist among us.

Whether one is religious or not, observant or not, “spiritual but not religious” or not, or just plain agnostic or atheistic or not, the fact still remains that we all recognize that there is an area of human thought and activity called “Religion” and that it is compellingly important at a personal level for some of us while being only tangentially present in the greater scheme of things for some of the rest of us. But what all of us on that spectrum also recognize is that independent of the degree—or lack thereof—of our personal faith and commitment, religion still exists and dwells among us as an arbitrating institution, as an informing structure within the architecture of society;

and we accept it as such. As a part of that acceptance, we recognize as well that at the front lines of every presentation of religion, regardless of its particular confessions or creeds or theology, stand its clergy. It is primarily they through whom we, whether we be believers or not, interface with both the institution and the implications for our society of the faith and values it embodies.

Oddly enough though, unless we are Jewish, even the most faith-oriented among us in this country, tend to think of “clergy” first and foremost as that group of professionals who bury us, marry us, preach at us, counsel us and, from time to time, exercise a kind of political or moral authority for us.

The oddity in that job summary is that we ... and most particularly we Christians ... rarely think of our clergy as men and women who routinely spend agonizing hours and days and weeks pouring studiously over sacred texts in relentless, ongoing attempts to penetrate the mysteries contained there, to discover their wisdom, their instruction, their relevance, and to consider the means and repercussions of their implementation within our here and now.

And the oddity in that, of course, is that most of us, whether religious or not, have heard the term *midrash* often enough in popular movies and novels, if nowhere else, so that we know at least vaguely what it means and tries to name.

What it means and names is that informed and trained poring over Scripture ... that agonizing and intricate pursuit of nuance and particularity and then their recording so that others might see ... that endless, deep labor of awed thought followed by its careful articulation ... that weariness which comes from elusive resolution and, after that, the burden of pushing on nonetheless ... That—all of it—is *midrash*, just as surely as it is an expected and traditional rabbinic or clerical and pastoral role within Judaism.

Despite that fairly well-known fact, however, up until recently, we Christians have tended to not even recognize such arduous work as part of the contemporary clerical calling

in our own communion, much less expected it, hoped for it, prayed for it. But now these times that are our times, with their swirling insecurities and burgeoning opportunities, almost compel us ... almost demand of us ... that we go looking for *midrash* ... and here, in the pages that follow, we have before us one of the most exquisite, painful, candid, brilliant pieces of contemporary Christian *midrash* that I have ever seen.

As is true with all *midrash*, some congregants—and we are all Wilson's congregants by extension—may not like the scriptural parsing and probing and proof-texting that lead to modified behavior, community change, confessional growth. None of that, though, ever unsays or disestablishes the compelling power of careful and reverent exploration of Scripture or the authority of what is discovered in that process. It certainly does not here. Nor does an ordered presentation of good *midrash* to the cleric's congregants ever quite manage to mask the agony or self-shredding of the journey that has been made for us. It certainly does not here, and I am grateful. Pray God, you will be too.

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