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Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?

By ROSS DOUTHAT

IN 1998, John Shelby Spong, then the reliably controversial Episcopal bishop of Newark, published a book entitled “Why Christianity Must Change or Die.” Spong was a uniquely radical figure — during his career, he dismissed almost every element of traditional Christian faith as so much superstition — but most recent leaders of the Episcopal Church have shared his premise. Thus their church has spent the last several decades changing and then changing some more, from a sedate pillar of the WASP establishment into one of the most self-consciously progressive Christian bodies in the United States.

As a result, today the Episcopal Church looks roughly how Roman Catholicism would look if Pope Benedict XVI suddenly adopted every reform ever urged on the Vatican by liberal pundits and theologians. It still has priests and bishops, altars and stained-glass windows. But it is flexible to the point of indifference on dogma, friendly to sexual liberation in almost every form, willing to blend Christianity with other faiths, and eager to downplay theology entirely in favor of secular political causes.

Yet instead of attracting a younger, more open-minded demographic with these changes, the Episcopal Church’s dying has proceeded apace. Last week, while the church’s House of Bishops was approving a rite to bless same-sex unions, Episcopalian church attendance figures for 2000-10 circulated in the religion blogosphere. They showed something between a decline and a collapse: In the last decade, average [Sunday attendance dropped](#) 23 percent, and not a single Episcopal diocese in the country saw churchgoing increase.

This decline is the latest chapter in a story dating to the 1960s. The trends unleashed in that era — not only the sexual revolution, but also consumerism and materialism, multiculturalism and relativism — threw all of American Christianity into crisis, and ushered in decades of debate over how to keep the nation’s churches relevant and vital.

Traditional believers, both Protestant and Catholic, have not necessarily thrived in this environment. The most successful Christian bodies have often been politically conservative but theologically shallow, preaching a gospel of health and wealth rather than the full New Testament message.

But if conservative Christianity has often been compromised, liberal Christianity has simply collapsed. Practically every denomination — Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian — that has tried to

adapt itself to contemporary liberal values has seen an Episcopal-style plunge in church attendance. Within the Catholic Church, too, the most progressive-minded religious orders have often failed to generate the vocations necessary to sustain themselves.

Both religious and secular liberals have been loath to recognize this crisis. Leaders of liberal churches have alternated between a Monty Python-esque “it’s just a flesh wound!” bravado and a weird self-righteousness about their looming extinction. (In a 2006 interview, the [Episcopal Church’s presiding bishop explained](#) that her communion’s members valued “the stewardship of the earth” too highly to reproduce themselves.)

Liberal commentators, meanwhile, consistently hail these forms of Christianity as a model for the future without reckoning with their decline. Few of the outraged critiques of the Vatican’s investigation of progressive nuns mentioned the fact that Rome had intervened because otherwise the orders in question were likely to disappear in a generation. Fewer still noted the consequences of this eclipse: Because progressive Catholicism has failed to inspire a new generation of sisters, Catholic hospitals across the country are passing into the hands of more bottom-line-focused administrators, with inevitable consequences for how they serve the poor.

But if liberals need to come to terms with these failures, religious conservatives should not be smug about them. The defining idea of liberal Christianity — that faith should spur social reform as well as personal conversion — has been an immensely positive force in our national life. No one should wish for its extinction, or for a world where Christianity becomes the exclusive property of the political right.

What should be wished for, instead, is that liberal Christianity recovers a religious reason for its own existence. As the liberal Protestant scholar [Gary Dorrien has pointed out](#), the Christianity that animated causes such as the Social Gospel and the civil rights movement was much more dogmatic than present-day liberal faith. Its leaders had a “deep grounding in Bible study, family devotions, personal prayer and worship.” They argued for progressive reform in the context of “a personal transcendent God ... the divinity of Christ, the need of personal redemption and the importance of Christian missions.”

Today, by contrast, the leaders of the Episcopal Church and similar bodies often don’t seem to be offering anything you can’t already get from a purely secular liberalism. Which suggests that perhaps they should pause, amid their frantic renovations, and consider not just what they would change about historic Christianity, but what they would defend and offer uncompromisingly to the world.

Absent such a reconsideration, their fate is nearly certain: they will change, and change, and die.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 17, 2012

An earlier version of this article misstated the date of an interview an Episcopal Church bishop did with The Times. It was in 2006, not 2005.