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Hope in a Time of Fracture

Turning the Tide

Anne Snyder

This article is a lightly edited version of an address delivered at Brigham Young University on October 22, 2019, and sponsored by the Wheatley Institution. It was previously published in Comment magazine on October 10, 2019, as “Turning the Tide: A New Page in Christian Influence.”

“[The] first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matt. 19:30).

In the spring of 2015, I encountered two worlds within twenty-four hours—worlds yoked by creed but divided by demographic and disposition. On a crisp Wednesday evening in May, I was invited to attend a cocktail reception at the New York Yacht Club for a celebration among Jews, Catholics, and Evangelicals honoring the legacy of a man named Dietrich von Hildebrand, a philosopher and anti-Nazi hero during World War II. The room was filled with intellectuals, politicians, bankers, and think-tankers, and they were largely male and all Caucasian. These were true believers, and yet they felt isolated in their faith amid a secular elite, beleaguered as well by a mainstream culture that seemed increasingly hostile to some fundamental principles.

“New York is so secular,” one panelist lamented. “We need the moral courage of von Hildebrand to stand against the corrosive culture of our day.”

It was just weeks before the Supreme Court decision on gay marriage, and there was an air of embattled weariness in the room. The panelists sounded fearful, even defensive, though our surroundings were plush, and many of us held resumés sparkling with names like Harvard and Yale, *New York Times* and Google.

Not twenty-four hours later I was sitting in the front row of Bethel Gospel Assembly Church in Harlem, waiting for graduates of Nyack College to walk down the aisle and receive their hoods. Nyack is a Christian university whose campus in Battery Park draws from the hundreds of storefront churches that line the boroughs beyond Manhattan. The pews were overflowing with immigrant families, Asians, Latins, and African Americans hailing from Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and beyond, with the bulk of the international students coming from the Majority World. I watched a seventy-nine-year-old grandmother ascend the stage and collect her diploma for the first time, followed by a Chinese woman in a wheelchair, followed by a single mother, followed by an ex-offender.

Joy and expectation filled the air¹ as one by one these graduates walked, danced, and bowed their way to the stole that would confer the students' official readiness for ministry and as community-builders. According to the commencement bulletin, most graduates were planning to return to their home neighborhoods to serve in churches, social agencies, schools, and counseling centers. Instead of expressing fear that a great Judeo-Christian heritage was losing ground, there was compassion in their testimonies, the scent of hope anchored in humility and fervent faith. There wasn't a dry eye in the room when one Nyack professor addressed the graduates: "You don't have to wait in line behind other people who are more important than you to receive God's love." Said another, "If the world will not listen to your words, make them listen to your lives."

I was sitting there caught up in the gorgeous triumph of it all, and I couldn't help but let my mind wander back to the reception the night before. The contrast was striking. One room had held a concentration of the elite faithful, largely homogenous in educational and racial makeup, nostalgic and worried. Yet not one subway stop away was this room full of Christians of every tribe and tongue, radiating hope and purpose. I found my own soul singing, moved by the sight of faith without fear or guile. Where was this world in the Yacht Club's more foreboding diagnosis? Why the demographic blind spot among the "influencers" anxious for the future of Christendom?

It has now been four years since that encounter, and we in the U.S. have since had an election that has exposed the cultural fences between coast and heartland, between the "creative class" and everyone else. Elites

1. See Nyack College, "Nyack College Class of 2015 Graduation Highlight Video HD," June 26, 2015, YouTube video, 4:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNaSZ5LifGg>.

are wringing their hands about a country they thought they understood but don't. Racial tensions are up, accompanied by a renewed, hot reckoning with our mottled history as a nation founded on ideals of human dignity and equality that time and again it has failed to embody. A crisis of solidarity has cracked open, running first along lines of social class, now layered with—if not eclipsed by—race and ideological worldview. Some of the more prominent Christian voices, instead of serving as repairers of the breach, as is always the call for the people of God, have capitulated to the pressures of a divided land, baptizing their belligerence in the name of the common good while manifesting few of the virtues this good requires.

A subtle yet important question embedded here is one of influence: How are people of faith called to influence the larger culture? As long as I've been an adult swimming in and out of Christian waters, talk of "witness" and "Christ redeeming culture" has seemed to hinge more on creating strategies leveraging temporal power than on nurturing contexts for demonstrations of God's power. From messianic hopes placed in the White House every four years to theories of cultural change overly dependent upon our elites and the institutions they represent maintaining the public trust, there seems to be a glaring forgetfulness about who Jesus Christ said he was and the Beatitudinal kingdom he came to bring. Many white believers in particular, if I may, are expressing crisis-level concern that Christianity is threatened in the West, a fear that has driven them to make certain political choices and appear like an aggrieved minority hungry for lost power. I believe deeply in the leavening role the sacred sector plays in our society and will march to preserve the freedoms of the faithful as indispensable to our democracy's survival. However, the rhetoric from today's more conservative spokespersons makes them look amazingly ignorant of what their faith community actually *is* in their own nation, of Christianity's growth and vitality among the burgeoning sectors of our society. In short, those who get to speak for "We, the Church" are too often found fighting their own oppression while not attending to the struggles, the energy, and the wisdom of their brothers and sisters from historically nondominant worlds.

I've long been an appreciative student of Western civilization: I've been shaped by its ideals and worked for several institutions that seek to protect and advance them. But at Nyack, in all its grittiness and with its prismatic perspective, the future felt closer, the Christian difference more palpable. Here were souls whose stories were rooted in exile, and yet they were living in this exile with hope and hospitality. And I wondered, sitting there, tears coming down my face, if the more visible

ambassadors of American Christianity—be they Catholic, evangelical, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—concerned for the future of Western civilization and the freedoms of the faithful, could learn something from their posture and build an alliance.

Here is the opportunity: at a time when the loudest Christians often seem to be operating from a place of defensiveness, fear, and cultural bereavement, there is a growing source of vitality to pivot toward, learn from, and walk side by side with—one that will create a new Christian face, a new message, a new energy, and a more rooted and inspiring faith. As sincere people of faith navigate an era that once again scorns and misunderstands us, there is a need to look beyond each of our own cultural and ecclesial comfort zones for instruction, sustenance, and relationships with those whose lives are surrendered to the same Source of Life and Love yet are faced with different pains, equipped with different gifts, and established in trusted relationships with different communities. A compelling witness in embattled times is not going to come from legal prowess or from pedigreed intelligence or from capitulation to the latest moral consensus that the broader culture dictates or, in an opposite reaction, from a mass withdrawal from mainstream culture. Instead, a compelling witness will come through porousness and humility in our more dominant faith streams to question our own assumptions and listen to our indigenous, immigrant, Asian, Latino, and African American brothers and sisters. It will come as we begin to learn from their respective experiences as peoples of faith in the West; to understand their cultural and civic responses, their heroes, and their theological emphases; and to hear clearly, with humble hearts, what they're asking of us. We need a gloriously unruly, Nyack-like movement of doers and thinkers across city, suburb, and agrarian community.

Some Personal Autobiography

So, zooming down a little from this call to build a table for a larger circle of souls, I thought I'd risk a little personalism and share some of my own autobiography, just to lend some context to my own coordinates in this vision. I was born in Boston and shortly thereafter moved to Hong Kong and then Australia with my sister and parents, my father's job as a foreign exchange currency trader introducing us to worlds both global and cosmopolitan. Our actual apartment, however, was filled with a contrasting mix of indigenous artwork and Quechua flutes from Latin America, my mother having grown up in the Amazon jungle in Peru as the daughter of linguists who had given decades of their lives to translating the Old and New Testament into the native tongue, or

heart language, of one Quechua tribe. Her childhood stories—and the witness of her parents, whom I would know as amazingly loving grandparents—shaped my girlhood perception of Christianity as a faith that had the unique capacity to intricately incarnate in cultures both new and ancient, powerful and marginalized. And with grandparents whose particular charism as linguists was intrinsically one of bridge-building, I knew this faith as something bracing yet life-giving, transcendent yet culturally adaptive.

Fast-forward a decade to the United States, and I had a very real encounter my sophomore year of high school with what I can only describe as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit wooing me to surrender my life to God and to the part of the Lord's prayer that says "thy kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). Not really knowing what this would mean but hungering to gain further experience and learn how to share this love that was so unlike any other kind of love I knew in the world I was in—at the time I was attending an aggressively secular prep school called Andover—I started a Bible study in an almost desperate attempt to see if there was anyone else out there who shared this strange faith in a Savior who'd walked this earth so long ago. There *were* others, as it turned out. The Bible study became a weekly scene of me strumming four chords tentatively on my mother's guitar, surrounded by thirty Korean and Korean American students at Andover, singing, praying, and discussing different passages of scripture together.

Fast-forward still further, and I wound up at Wheaton College in Illinois, where I was granted the foundation to ask the big questions, the Christian questions, even if there weren't always—or even often—neat and tidy Christian answers. And alongside the delicious breadth of the liberal arts, I was also exposed to the range of theological traditions and their champions, writers like Thomas Merton and Charles Spurgeon, Peter Kreeft and Edith Stein, Kierkegaard and Saint Augustine. At age twenty, I had a vocation-cementing experience helping build a water system in rural Honduras, where I developed a friendship with a member of our team, César Gomez, a Paraguayan who had become a custodial staffer at Wheaton's physical plant. I also had a spirit-altering conversation in a water ditch along a hillside with a local Honduran man, my work partner. These experiences deepened my faith from one of sincere belief and intellectual integration to one that hinged on compassion and the ability to suffer with others and humble oneself before wisdom from unexpected quarters of society, to one that found its most joyful expression in building bridges between groups that have trouble understanding each other. I was given a conviction that for my life to have integrity, it had to integrate head,

heart, and helping hand; it had to be a host for others to bloom; it had to bridge uncommon worlds; and it had to be faithful to this gospel of grace. Since then I've made a million mistakes and failed many times, but this compass has been the lodestar for life decisions and my work.

The Demographic Future

The world today is witnessing a non-Western explosion of Christianity. By 2050, Christians living in the global South and East will number 2.18 billion, roughly three times as many as the 741 million projected for the global North.² At the same time, migration patterns from the South to the North are leavening the spiritual tenor of a secularized West. About 68 percent of immigrants who come to the United States today identify as Christians.³ Latino Protestant congregations are growing while White Protestant (both evangelical and mainline) congregations are shrinking.⁴ Seventy percent of Catholic growth since 1960 is due to migration from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Latin America,⁵ with over half of the United States' Catholic young people identifying as Hispanic.⁶

These migration patterns yield a combustible set of dynamics—theological culture clash and new pathways for spiritual renaissance, both. As institutional Christianity continues to weaken and as the elite corridors double down on their secularist, individualistic preferences (and as the far wings of each political base definitely do the same)—it's worth saying that at the loudest top and the loudest base of our society we are officially paganized—newcomers bring expressions of faith that are full of vitality and without domestic baggage. The culture wars that have

2. Pew Research Center, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050," Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, 142–65, https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/03/PF_15.04.02_Projections_FullReport.pdf.

3. 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/immigrant-status/immigrants/>.

4. Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, "America's Changing Religious Identity," PRRI, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

5. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, "Think Christianity Is Dying? No, Christianity Is Shifting Dramatically," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/>.

6. Cox and Jones, "America's Changing Religious Identity": "Fewer than four in ten (36%) Catholics under the age of 30 are white, non-Hispanic; 52% are Hispanic." Also Granberg-Michaelson, "Think Christianity Is Dying?"

pitted church against world in the whiter U.S. of past decades don't carry the same currency for Christians today whose heritage lies elsewhere. Instead, immigrant churches tend to emphasize the faith's more experiential dimension, as well as civic responsibilities that dwell not just on Supreme Court justice picks but also on serving as agents of compassion and hope within local communities.

And then there is the African American church. Born in suffering and sustained despite bearing the scars of the country's most egregious sin, the Black church, I'd argue, has been *the* leading agent of grace in American history—and the yeast in Christ's church at large. The Beatitudes certainly feel closer to the surface in Black congregations, their paradoxical power embodied in a heritage oppressed but not crushed, persecuted but not abandoned. Along measures of devotion and faith practice, the American Bible Society has found that African Americans are more than twice as likely as other groups to say Bible reading is crucial to their daily routine.⁷ And while Black voices were rarely woven into the parachurch unfurling of evangelicalism in the mid-twentieth century, it is now more often African Americans who draw unapologetically from Christian wells in their public engagement today. It was no aberration that President Obama sang “Amazing Grace” in mourning the massacre in Charleston in 2015. It was no aberration that the families of the slaughtered chose to forgive the murderer who killed in the name of racial hate.

The gatekeepers of Christian thought have much to gain from expanding their circle and seeking perspective from those who may not look like them. For one thing, many Black and immigrant-dominated churches have maintained a respected civic role in a way many White evangelical churches have not. Where the latter may serve their individual members in the ways of encouragement, worship sessions, exegetical preaching, and small weekly groups, today's Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other bodies remain as much a civic pillar for their members as they are sanctuaries for prayer and worship—many of them doubling as job banks, legal agencies, homeless shelters, or information hubs. In short, my experience with Black and immigrant congregations is that they tend to be more like the field hospitals Pope Francis has spoken about⁸—

7. Kate Shellnutt, “Building on the Black Church's Bible Legacy,” *Christianity Today*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/january-february/african-american-bible-reading-abs-pew.html>.

8. See Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America* 209, no. 8 (2013), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

welcoming everyone, regardless of sin or circumstance, and caring for the needs of the whole person, whole neighborhood, whole system, not just one's individual soul. This comprehensive realism grants these local churches moral authority—not only in their home community, but in the world at large. And they offer an important lesson: if you want *entré* to a hurting if skeptical world, care for it, don't try to rule it.

Lifting Up the Shepherds

Zoom out from the reality of this century's demographic unfurling, and you see something else. Theories of cultural change are shifting: from top-down to bottom-up, from national to local, from institutions to networks, from structured hierarchies to open ecosystems, from advice by outside expert to praxis by indigenous shepherd. There's a growing awareness that love can never be abstracted—we're touched by incarnational living and doing, less by prescription from on high. Macro content can paint a context within which we all think and make decisions, but that's not determinative. It's proximate *people*—and the broader moral norms and social fabric shaping how we relate to one another—that shift the terrain on which we live and make decisions.

Young people tend to understand this, and the New America tends to understand this. In many of the seminaries attracting predominantly immigrant and African American students, the education of the book is *peopled* by the education of relationship. The idea is that if you're going to train people to be healers, you must begin with personalism. "What a wise person teaches is the smallest part of what they give," said veterinarian Dave Jolly. "The totality of their life, of the way they go about it in the smallest details, is what gets transmitted. . . . The message is the person."⁹ When every faculty member gets up at Nyack's commencement before the graduating students with a word of exhortation, you see an institution fueled by relational genius, operating from an understanding that great and consequential human journeys only advance by parking for a spell in the blessing of spiritual mothers and fathers, active service in the community of concern, and the one-on-one. It's *shepherds* we need to lift up, encourage, and equip, and who better to do so than a church founded by one?

I'd like to encourage the Wheatley Institution, BYU, and the broader Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—just as I'm encouraging my

9. Quoted in David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2016), xv.

own magazine, *Comment*, which seeks to reflect on two thousand years of Christian social thought for the common good—to make a bet on this uncharted theory of influence, one that puts these shepherds in conversation with national thinkers, caregivers, and village-makers; with institutional stakeholders, musicians, and poets; with policy wonks and tech whizzes. I really don't believe in burning any one world down, be it the elite establishment or the populist extremes. Rather, I believe in taking courage to foster a space that's willing to hold the raw vulnerability and pain felt in all quarters these days, encouraging patience before the time it usually takes to understand the root of the other's pain and the arc of the other's hopes, and to sustain a conversation committed to showing our common capacity to care. And I *do* believe it's the sacred sector that has to lead the way in providing this space. This is in part because we, as Christians, are unusually anchored in a common story and ultimately oriented toward a common end, in part because our very existence is bound up in the power of grace, in part because we believe human beings are souls, carrying infinite weight and eternal direction, which changes how we see and engage others, all others. And finally, very much because the transcendent seems to be the only dimension we have left to both supercharge and protect our uniquely human capacity to love, to confess, to forgive and receive forgiveness.

Where to from Here?

“The leaders of the future will be those who dare to claim their irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows them to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success, and to bring the light of Jesus there.”¹⁰

So said Henri Nouwen. It's a bracing charge for the Church today. How do we become more a healer than a wager of war, a witness to a strange if compelling beauty rather than a fortress built to preserve controlled perfection? How might we dig into our baptized imaginations to reframe some of our most fraught debates as a society and model the possibility that grace is possible amidst deep disagreement? How do we become more of a people that remains alien to the world, yet reconciling? An alien reconciler. What could that look like?

10. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

The Apostle Paul may have given us a roadmap:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. . . . Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."¹¹

If Christianity is going to reclaim its collective witness in the West, an alliance must be built between elite and commoner, scholar and practitioner, Black and White, able-bodied and handicapped, immigrant and indigenous, young and old. If the Church is to draw closer to God's heart and revive her force in history, she will be one of sacrifice, atonement, private and public honesty, and hope without rival. She will love despite fear, count the cost and consider it joy. She will be bridging, Beatitudinal, broken, and bottom-up.

This is the future. This has to be the future.

Anne Snyder is the editor in chief of *Comment Magazine* and the host of *Breaking Ground*, a collaborative web commons created in 2020 to try to inspire a dynamic cross-section of thinkers and practitioners to respond to the various crises of this year with wisdom, hope, and courage. Anne is also a 2020 Emerson Collective Fellow and the author of *The Fabric of Character: A Wise Giver's Guide to Renewing Our Social and Moral Landscape*.

11. 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 (New International Version).