

THE 1997 H. PAUL DOUGLASS LECTURE

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP, RELIGIOUS RESEARCH AND RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

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I have been here in California for over a year now, but confess it still seems odd for me to welcome people to California and the Pacific Rim. Nevertheless, I am happy to add a word of welcome and an invitation for all of you to wander to the north and visit Northern California. A year and a half ago, as we were preparing for our move from Hartford to Berkeley and the Pacific School of Religion, people on both coasts would pull us aside and whisper, "California is different, you know." Now I find myself pulling people aside and whispering the same thing.

I want to argue in this lecture that what we term "Religious Research" has long been distinguished by a concern for religious renewal and by a special relationship with religious leadership. Beginning in the 1920s and continuing into present times, the social sciences have had a place in the life of major faith communities because religious leaders have been convinced that positive change begins with fair and accurate understanding and interpretation of social and religious reality. While the relationships between religious research, religious leadership, and religious renewal remain strong, they are also changing. I will try to suggest that religious renewal requires a new collaboration among religious researchers and religious leaders around the shared task of describing social and religious reality.

One of the challenges in a lectureship like this one is to convince the audience that one's choice of topic is more than indulging one's own personal interests and agenda. I have been privileged to serve eleven years in a church agency and about the same amount of time in a theological school, both of which are committed to religious research and religious renewal. I am now called upon to help lead an institution that has committed itself to equipping historic and emerging faith communities for a changing world. So sorting out the relationships between research, leadership, and renewal are of high personal stake. I would not dare attempt this lecture in a session of the American Academy of Religion or at a meeting of my own church body, but I know these are issues for many of you as they have been for several generations of our Religious Research Association colleagues.

RELIGIOUS RESEARCH AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY

This lectureship honors the contributions of one of the pioneers in our field. Until Jeffrey Hadden's 1987 lecture on H. Paul Douglass (1990), few of us knew much about him. Hadden traced Douglass's career through four fairly discrete stages: as pastor, mission executive, social scientist, and very active retiree.

In 1921, at age 50, Douglass joined the staff of the Institute for Social and Religious Research. The Institute was enormously important in its time and has no parallel today. It was created to serve Protestant churches and their mission but remained somewhat

independent from them. It was free to take on major projects on church and public issues and to draw freely on the resources of university disciplines in its work. John D. Rockefeller was the Institute's principal benefactor.

Most of us know the Institute for Social and Religious Research for its work in community studies. Douglass and his colleagues conducted dozens of studies in local communities around the United States. In its 13 years of existence the Institute was responsible for 48 research projects and 78 books (Hadden 1980:73)! Most of these works were based on interdenominational community surveys and informed by the vision that the key to congregational renewal lay in (a) interchurch cooperation and (b) understanding and adapting to changes in local communities. These studies form the basis for Douglass's book, *1000 City Churches* (1926) and for Douglass and Brunner's *The Protestant Church as a Social Institution* (1935).¹

Why, one might ask, did churches turn in the 1920s to new disciplines like sociology to help deal with the problems they were facing? Probing this question in depth is beyond the scope of this lecture, and the answer likely lies as much in the religious biographies of sociologists of the time as in the churches.

This was a difficult time in the life of American religious bodies. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. called the period between 1925 and 1935 the American religious depression. Churches were divided on ideological grounds and membership growth was failing to keep pace with growth of the population. Prominent laity were drawn into church decision-making circles from the ranks of industry, and they brought pressures to apply scientific management techniques to managing church mission operations.

In 1930, John D. Rockefeller called together a group of Baptist lay persons to take a fresh look at foreign missions work. This meeting led to the formation of what became known as the Hocking Commission or the "Laymen's Inquiry" on world mission (Hutchison 1987:158-175; Fitzmier and Balmer 1991; Patterson 1990). Funded by Rockefeller, its purpose was to assess the purposes and the effectiveness of the American missionary effort. The commission was made up of influential lay members of seven Mainline Protestant churches. It was chaired by a distinguished Harvard philosophy professor, William Hocking, with staff support from the Institute for Social and Religious Research.

The commission's report was published in 1932 as "Rethinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After 100 Years." The report concluded that dramatic changes were needed in the shape and quality of overseas mission activity. Missionaries were seen as well-intentioned but often ineffectual, and the report called for managing mission work in more professional ways. Its most controversial recommendation was that greater appreciation be given to faith traditions other than Christianity.

What is especially important about the work of the Hocking Commission was its methodology, which would help shape the relationship between religious research and religious leadership for decades to follow. After deciding to restrict its work to four countries, India, Burma, China, and Japan, the commission divided its work into two stages.

There must be an impartial and scientifically directed accumulation of data so that the judgment reached should be based on pertinent and accurately stated facts; and there must be an appraisal of these facts in the light of the widest possible consideration of the

meaning of the missionary enterprise and of the worm conditions in which it is now, and is to be, carried out.

The Institute was given the mandate to pursue the first phase of this work, with H. Paul Douglass assigned, in retirement, to be the chief researcher dealing with China. Jeff Hadden suggests that Douglass was a primary architect of the report itself; certainly its conclusions reflect major themes in Douglass's work,² including an emphasis on interchurch cooperation and more attention to the social sciences in training mission personnel.

The Laymen's Inquiry was among the first major efforts - and among the most prominent - to bring to religious work the new insights of scientific management. James Moorhead (1994) has examined what he calls the mystique of organizational efficiency in American culture in the late 19th and early 20th century. Focusing on Presbyterianism, he outlines the rise of centralized missionary structures and organizations. The churches drew freely from new developments in business and government. Out of disorder, Moorhead writes, gradually emerged the signs of a new organizational style.

When fully developed, its marks included specialized departments governed by regularized administrative rules, staffed by "experts," and organized under central coordination. In performing their tasks, these agencies accumulated data in a scientific fashion and employed business-like sales campaigns to promote support (Moorhead, 1994:269).

When the Religious Research Fellowship began meeting in the 1950s, Douglass's Institute had closed but certain of its patterns had been well established within Protestant mission circles. "There must be an impartial and scientific accumulation of data so that the judgment reached should be based on pertinent and accurately stated facts" had become a hallmark of professional, efficient mission management, not only for world missions but for a range of domestic mission activities as well. From H. Paul Douglass the fellowship inherited what Jeff Hadden calls his "one true fanaticism: a tenacious commitment to the pursuit of facts" (1980:86).

The Laymen's Inquiry report was clear to distinguish between fact gathering and assessment, and this distinction became institutionalized as research offices were formed in mainline Protestant denominational and ecumenical agencies. For researchers, separating research from policy formation preserved a claim to scientific neutrality and a bridge to the academy and the social science guilds. Church leaders, on the other hand, were able to point to scientific studies and not merely personal whim or church politics as the basis for policy-making.

Douglass stood out as one who was able to embody both vocations: the sociologist and the religious leader with, as Hadden suggests, uncommon grace. One of the masons he was able to do so is that he shared his generation's confidence that when the facts are gathered fairly and presented accurately, reasonable persons will know what actions to take. Research and policy development, while remaining distinct from one another, both rested on a platform of rationality. Just as research findings were understood to be replicable by other scholars, two groups of policy-makers might be expected to come to the same conclusion given the same set of facts. This is very clear in *The Protestant Church as a Social Institution*, where Douglass writes: "The scientific method... has been a discipline in fair-mindedness, helping one to see the frequent need of change. Its consequent mood brings anything but joy to the

stand patter; and its results almost inevitably constitute an apologetic for institutional plasticity" (Douglass, 1935:15-16).

When one looks at the major issues facing religious bodies at the national level and in local communities over the past several decades, the impact of this new management style becomes very clear. For example, the churches' initial efforts in working with blacks and other ethnic minorities almost always began with research studies, some of the earliest by Douglass himself? In a recent volume of essays edited by Clifford Green (1996) on urban ministry in the postwar period, virtually every author points to sociological and demographic studies as an early phase in denominations' response to urban change. Religious researchers played an important role in diagnosing Mainline Protestant membership declines following the 1960s, and the social sciences are integral to the work of the "Church Growth Movement." Even on difficult issues such as human sexuality and the ordination of gay men and lesbians the first stage has been impartial and scientifically directed accumulation of data so that judgment could be based on pertinent and accurately stated facts.

By the late 1960s, as national church and ecumenical organizations struggled with issues of renewal and identity, a variety of para-church organizations came into being, many of them with explicit renewal agendas. Bill Webber (1981) catalogued many of these in his 1980 H. Paul Douglass Lecture. For all of their diversity in purpose and methodology, the dozens of non-profit and for-profit institutes and consulting firms that now exist to serve congregations and para-church organizations have in common a grounding in the social sciences. It is remarkable how many of these new groups, some of them quite radical in purpose and method, others fairly conservative, retain the connection between religious research, leadership, and religious renewal. Renewal begins with the impartial and scientifically directed accumulation of data so that the judgment reached by leaders might be based on pertinent and accurately stated facts.

The rise of religious research within the denominations was not, in short, due solely to the expansion of religious bureaucracies in the years following World War II. It also grew from a new and different way of understanding the role of the denominational leader - indeed, of the denomination itself, in Moorhead's terms, governed by the mystique of organizational efficiency. I recall two incidents from my time as a denominational researcher with the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. On my first day on the job, in 1975, *the* executive vice president made me a promise: "Young man," he said, "I'm going to make you a promise. Nobody will ever assign you a study to do. Your job is to figure out what's going on in this country and what it means for our mission." My freedom was to be protected.

The second incident, which involved the same executive, was during a meeting of a search committee seeking a staff person for young adult education. "The candidate should be a member of the United Church of Christ," he said. "It's not like McKinney's job, which could be done by a person of any religious background - or no religious background? Facts know no particular religious loyalty. He didn't have to tell me that my role on the staff would be different than almost everybody else. I was a researcher and not an advocate. I was to be held to a different standard - not a higher one, but different?"

THE RESEARCH/LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIP IN TRANSITION

The world of religious organizations has changed dramatically since 1975, and these changes have affected religious research. There are far fewer resources and fewer trained

research personnel. The more important change, however, is in the perceived relationship between research, policy-making, and religious renewal. It is to that relationship that I want to turn.

H. Paul Douglass, the researchers who have followed in the tradition of applied social research in faith communities, and the leader/managers for whom they have been a resource were able to assume that religious systems, once presented with an impartial and scientifically directed accumulation of facts, would know what to do with them. Sadly, that's not always true; in fact one could argue that it's often not true. There are persons present who could argue that this is *rarely true*. As a result, much attention has been given to ways research and policy-making might be brought into a more dynamic conversation. The standard solutions emphasize more involvement on the part of policy-makers in research design, better strategies for dissemination of research findings, and helping social scientists learn to write more clearly. These are all worthy aims.

What these approaches fail to recognize, I think, is that the sharp distinction between research or scholarship, on the one hand, and leadership or management on the other - a distinction pioneered by the Hocking Commission and others - no longer holds as it once did. For earlier generations of social scientists, establishing the independence and non-partisanship of one's scholarship, perhaps especially in the scientific study of religion, was of considerable importance. It is one of the reasons we have two separate societies meeting here. Alan Eister pointed out some years ago that many of the founders of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion felt that research undertaken under the auspices of religious groups "was not, on the face of it, as free as research disciplines and their representatives need to be to 'serve' the broadest interests of the *whole* community or the whole society instead of one structure or set of structures, namely the religious organizations" (Eister, 1974:60).

Those lines are less tightly drawn today, not only between these two academic and professional societies but in scholarly circles more generally. Feminist scholars, among others, have helped us recognize that in a sense all scholarship has a partisan dimension, not just those conducted under the auspices of religious groups.

But the relationship between religious researchers and religious leaders has changed for another reason as well, this having more to do with changes on the religious side.

When I was beginning my work as a religious researcher I was greatly influenced by Paul Harrison, my teacher at Penn State and his classic book, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (1959). Harrison, you will recall, was one of the first to point to the emergence of a new form of religious authority based not on tradition, law, or charisma but on expertise. Religious research and what Harrison called rational-pragmatic religious authority were awfully well suited for one another. Douglass was among the first of the national religious leaders whose authority rested less on his experience as a religious professional than on his specialized training and secular credentials. He fit the mystique of organizational efficiency.

Like many of you, I have recently read Don Miller's new book, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1997). From his immersion in the life of three evangelical religious movements Miller has identified "new paradigm" churches with very different leadership patterns. New paradigm pastors, he writes:

appeal to both the charismatic and traditional forms of authority: charismatic authority in the sense that God communicates directly with them through the Holy Spirit, and traditional authority in the sense that the biblical tradition is referred to as normative for contemporary life and practice. what is not present in the new paradigm churches is any appeal to legal rational authority, such as church law.

Miller describes the management goal⁶ of new paradigm religious leaders as "to avoid clogging the arteries of the church's 'body'" (142). He has rather harsh things to say about his own liberal church tradition, which he finds to have an ambiguous message, to be lacking authority and anemic in worship. "Furthermore," he writes, "they are mired in organizational structures that deaden vision as people gather endlessly in committee meetings." He feels liberal churches cannot compete with new paradigm churches unless they can radically reinvent themselves. This means giving ministry back to the people, developing much flatter organizational structures, and becoming "vehicles for people to access the sacred in profound and life-changing ways" (187).

I have singled out Don Miller's argument but he is by no means alone in pointing to the emergence of a new form of leadership. Peter Drucker (1990), Ron Heifetz (1994), William Bergquist (1993), and Peter Senge (1990) are but a few of the leadership theorists who point to the need for a radical shift in our understanding of leadership in the postmodern organization. Bergquist, for example, sees postmodern leadership requiring "a tolerance for ambiguity, a recognition of the need for one to learn from his or her mistakes, and a clear sense of personal mission and purpose." "Leadership," he writes, "is ultimately spiritual rather than secular in nature" (Bergquist, 1993:94).

Ironically, I sense that religious organizations have lagged behind other social institutions in incorporating insights from postmodern leadership theory. For the most part, the churches and other faith communities I know best remain locked in traditional bureaucratic paradigms. "Great Man" theories of leadership have expanded to include the possibility of "Great Women," but I would be hard-pressed to find more than a few examples of faith communities where Miller's new paradigm leaders are the norm. In New York, Louisville, Cleveland, and Nashville the mystique of organizational efficiency lives on.

Nonetheless, change is in the wind. If for no other reason than the growing financial crisis faced by traditional church organizations, the national and regional denominational and ecumenical entities brought into being to bring order and efficiency to the missionary enterprise will have to change. For the time being they continue to gasp for air.

While I have tried to argue that changes among researchers and religious leadership have forced changes in the relationship born in the twenties and thirties with the beginnings of the modern era in American denominational organization, I remain optimistic about the future of applied social research in religious organizations.

My optimism does not rest on the prospects for more jobs for religious researchers in America's major faith communities. I do not expect any, or many, of them to create new positions for sociologists to help shape new strategies for mission. As I have tried to suggest, they have tried that.

My optimism comes from the growing sense from the literature on leadership, ten years of working with a Lilly Endowment seminar program for church and ecumenical leaders, and my

own experience. I believe that Max De Pree is correct in his book *Leadership is an Art* in arguing that "the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality" (De Pree, 1989:11). As Wallace Stevens, the poet, reminded us, we live in our description of a place and not in the place itself. I would go further to say that one of the distinctive responsibilities of *religious* leaders is to challenge prevailing descriptions when they are out of date or wrong.

I am impressed by the power we have as social scientists to influence the descriptions of reality with which religious leaders work. Consider, for example, the work of C. Eric Lincoln and Larry Mamiya summarized in *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (1990) and the way it has helped the public understand the historic black churches as a religious force in their own right and not a subspecies of a more generic Protestantism. Or the body of Lilly Endowment-sponsored work on Mainstream Protestantism. Or the legit-imization of congregations as an arena for serious scholarship. Don Miller's new book has the potential to help religious leaders understand that something new may be on the horizon that defies the current description of certain religious groups as socially and culturally marginal. Our descriptions have power.

We need also to be reminded that our descriptions are often flawed. Think, for example, of the argument of Will Herberg in his very influential 1950s book, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* where he wrote, "not to be a Protestant, a Catholic or a Jew is somehow not to be an American... Americanness today entails identification as Protestant, Catholic or Jew in a way and to a degree quite unprecedented in our history" (1960:56). Think, too, of the influence secularization theory has had on our descriptions of religious reality. I fear that other prevailing descriptions, including the culture war thesis promoted by James Davison Hunter (1991) and others, may be similarly flawed.

My point is not to praise descriptions that are accurate or to criticize those that are wrong, but to encourage greater attention to the importance of this descriptive or definitional aspect of our work. In the earlier division of labor among researchers and religious leaders our role as applied social scientists was to provide facts on which leaders would build policy. This suited the mystique of organizational efficiency but did not serve the scholarly or the religious community very well.

Let me again use Don Miller's new book as an example. Without the active cooperation of the leaders of the three movements that are the subject of his study, it would not have been possible. Nor, I suspect, would the book have been the same had it been paid for by Vineyard Christian Fellowship or Calvary or Hope. The portrait he has been able to paint, even where it may be seen as unpleasant by leaders of the groups studied, contributes to a new definition of the reality of the three church organizations. Further, it provides a mirror for leaders of other groups struggling to define or describe their own reality. It is, as Barbara Wheeler pointed out in her lecture a year ago, an experience of an *other* that illumines the self.

Religious research presents, in Peter Berger's fine phrase, a precarious vision, which is why religious leaders are so dependent on it -- not because it tells them what to do, which programs to create, or how to develop mission strategy, but because it contributes to the faithful description on which leadership and renewal both depend.

I close with a story that is for me a very good description of the world in which we live. The story comes not from a sociological study but from a novelist, James Carroll (1997), who is

among other things a former Roman Catholic priest. Carroll, who writes regularly for the *Boston Globe*, reflected recently on his annual summer visit to the town of Well in the Netherlands. On the first Sunday of his family's visit he waited for the ringing of the bells from St. Vitus, the town's parish church. "Always, at 10 minutes to eight, the calm of this little Dutch village on the River Maas would be shattered by the peel rolling across the fields of rosebushes and hay, summoning worshipers as it had been doing for hundreds of years, but the bells did not ring today."

The bells did not ring today. Carroll went off to the church and found that there was no longer a mass at eight, indeed that there was no Sunday mass at all. Father Jerry, who had served St. Vitus for many years, had retired and there was no one to replace him. A priest from another parish comes over on Saturday evening but the church is locked on Sunday morning, its once-active rectory is closed, and the church's future is in doubt.

While Carroll experiences a personal sense of loss in the silence of the bells at St. Vitus, he is more worried by its larger meaning. He quotes historian Karen Armstrong on the "god-shaped hole" in the consciousness of Western Europe. "The god-shaped hole in a village," he writes,

is a locked church, and it forces the question: When we lose "God," along with a system of set rituals that enshrined 'God's' presence in our lives, are we losing something central to our humanity? Or are we only repeating the pattern of our ancestors, whose religious impulses were constantly refined, progressing from the violently primitive to the intellectually sublime?

James Carroll is a sophisticated thinker, aware that Western Europe's now-dominant liberal humanism is not the whole or even the most important development on the world's religious scene. He wonders whether resurgent fundamentalisms may not be in part a reaction to secularism, but he cannot avoid concluding that Western Europeans are abandoning the very forms of spirituality they invented. He closes:

None of this denies my own sense of dislocation today at the loss of Sunday Mass; nor does it mean that locked churches are not an ominous symbol of time's power to erode, or that the lovely fields on which I look out do not themselves seem sadly chastened by the silence of the bells.

This story is a reminder of the complexity of our subject matter. It begins with an individual with religious yearnings. James Carroll is an individual who, on a particular Sunday in a place where he is something of a stranger, wants to go to Mass in a particular Catholic parish in a small town in the Netherlands.

The church, St. Vitus, has its own story. It has been around for hundreds of years and occupies a dominant public space in its village center. Carroll describes it as a "hulking" brick church that dominates the physical setting of the town of Well. Carroll, who is middle aged, says almost all who worship there are older than he. This St. Vitus isn't dancing any more. It's nearly closed. There is more that we don't know: presumably the church is part of a diocesan structure with a bishop. Surely, someone or some group is making decisions about its future. Furthermore, St. Vitus exists in time and space: in the town of Well, in the Netherlands, in Western Europe late in the twentieth century. Carroll is correct, I think, in seeing connections between the silence of the bells, the locked church door, and the wider socio-cultural context

of Western culture.

Over the years, social researchers and religious leaders have shared a commitment to religious renewal, the key elements of which are captured in James Carroll's brief story: an individual who turns to God and a community of fellow believers, a faith community that has good times and bad, and a village and society with a "god-shaped hole." By describing those elements well, we define the social and religious worlds in which we live. May we, like H. Paul Douglass and others who have gone before us, do that work well.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Moore has addressed the complicated relationship between the social sciences and the Protestant establishment and views liberal Protestants as embracing sociology out of a need to preserve its social position by remaining in touch with new currents in American intellectual life. Douglass, he argues, was one of the first to see sociology's utility for church renewal. Moore judges Douglass's efforts to have been "disappointing," unable in the end to counter sociology's determination to treat religion as a marginal phenomenon.

2. James Alan Patterson (in Carpenter and Shenk, 1990:87) assigns the first four chapters to Hocking himself with assistance from Rufus Jones. He adds that Robert Speer noted the authors of individual chapters in the margin of his copy in the Speer Library Princeton Theological Seminary. Hadden is probably correct, however, in saying that Douglass provided the methodological foundations for the project.

3. I have often wondered why church bodies turned so readily to sociology as opposed to theology, history or other academic disciplines in attempting to understand the membership declines that began in the 1960s, but now suspect it was due to the fact that Dean Kelley's book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972), was read so widely by church leaders. Because Kelley's book "looked" sociological church leaders turned to sociology to understand the reasons for decline.

4. He was true to his word. Over the years the board's research staff has included Roman Catholics, United Methodists, Jews, and Southern Baptists.

5. This was an unusual setting in which to do research. We had a remarkable freedom to define an independent research agenda and to probe topics that were not yet priorities on anyone's agenda. That hasn't always been true in denominational research shops but it has been true to a remarkable degree. For the most part the major faith communities have had the good sense not to reduce the research functions to market research and trivial program evaluations.

6. Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Chapel and Hope Chapel - and other religious movements like them -- are not opposed to the use of scholarly research and various technologies. On the contrary, their application of various technologies is far more impressive than that of the historic denominations. But the place of religious research and other technologies is carefully circumscribed. A Laymen's Inquiry on Foreign Mission sponsored by new paradigm churches would likely not begin with H. Paul Douglass and the Institute for Social and Religious Research.

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