

Joseph Driskill's Response to Arthur Holder's Lecture:
Will Spirituality Have a Past?
 Graduate Theological Union 2010 Distinguished Faculty Lecture—9 November 2010

I want to thank Dean Holder for his engaging lecture and for the opportunity to reflect with him on this last section of his presentation. I find the three metaphors that Arthur has laid out for us in this third section of his lecture especially helpful as we turn to a brief investigation of mainline Protestant spiritualities with, I suggest, the question: "Will mainline Protestant spiritualities have anything other than a past"? I will focus my response under each of the three metaphors Arthur presented, exploring a few of their intra-religious implications with the intent to clarify the nature of one stream of Christian spirituality.

The metaphor of various paths leading up the mountain to a common end has characterized ecumenical discussions in the Christian community for more than 100 years. If one looks to the 20th century for a major marker in the ecumenical movement, the World Mission Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 is often cited as a beginning. Charles Clayton Morrison represented the spirit of the time with his belief that the 20th century would be the Christian century. There was excitement, at least, at the national level of most mainline denominations, for these discussions. Something vital was at stake: the hope that the hostility among the various Christian denominations could be overcome, with participation not only from Protestants but also from Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities.

The GTU was born during this time of good will and excitement—which some sociologists of religion¹ observed through the 60s. The 1970 book published to honor the GTU proclaimed: "Not since the Reformation has an institution so effectively woven bonds of understanding and common work among men of varying faiths. Clergy and teachers educated at GTU will go to churches, communities and schools with a new attitude and experience; they will have lived and learned within a consortium which respects broad differences but works for common goals. This will prepare them to be the needed catalysts and bridge builders in a torn and fragmented society."² Indeed, "not since the Reformation"—is a claim reflecting excitement and enthusiasm and not the more anticipated scholarly reserve one might expect. During this time we see at least two major approaches to the cooperative ventures: One represented by the Church of North India, where faith and order agreements were reached before the union was consummated; and the other, the Church of South India, where the merger occurred based on good faith with the expectation that agreements would come later. Both models were effective.³ Through this period we learned that meaningful dialogue was effective at reducing hostility among faith groups and that we could work together on shared mission projects. We also learned that unless something was at stake for so called grassroots members of congregations,

¹ Mark Chaves and John R. Sutton, "Organizational Consolidation in American Protestant Denominations, 1890--1990," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43:1 (2004): 51-66.

² Elizabeth Kelley Bauer and Florence Noyce Wertz, *The Graduate Theological Union* (Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union Guild, 1970), p. 2.

³ Alan D. Falconer, "The Future of Protestantism: Ecumenical and the Mainline Denominations" in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, ed. Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 413.

the will toward union would dissipate.

The last decades of the 20th century can be characterized by a dynamic rendering of the second metaphor. The elephant, coping with persons hanging on to its various parts, has had enough... and is carefully stepping on each part, bringing about unforeseen transformations. There is much evidence that the lived experience of faith of 20th century mainline Protestants will differ in significant ways from 21st century mainline Protestants. Mainline churches have lost members every year since 1965,⁴ three years after the GTU was incorporated. That is now forty-five years of loss. The institutional changes started in the 80s as denominational offices left the institutional manifestation and symbol of the Protestant ecumenical world: 475 Riverside Dr. in NYC, the so called “God box” of the National Council of Churches: Presbyterians to Louisville, UCC to Cleveland, ELCA to Chicago.⁵ Today national office staffs and programs of the mainline denominations are shrinking.

Graham Ward argues that Protestantism was the religion of the Modern period. “Christianity in a certain sense had to abolish itself through a secularization of its goals before liberalism could emerge. The generally accepted agent for this secularization in the West was Protestantism.”⁶ Postmodernity . . .devalorizes subjective agency, mimics the literacy and elitism of liberal humanism, is skeptical of panaceas for social amelioration, and refuses the ideology of a neutral space and the unmediated arrival of social consensus.”⁷ He suggests that with the shift in world view the postmodern period will not sustain the mainline Protestant church as we know it.

The implications of these changes on theological education are rapidly becoming our reality. The Disciples, UCC, and United Methodists have created alternative paths for ordination and commissioning that do not require the M.Div. Seminary faculty can be the resources for these educational options, but we will need to be more flexible with our offerings and our methods of delivery. Our commitment to doctoral education can no longer simply be taken for granted. The elephant is walking on holy hill.

Arthur’s third metaphor, differing languages, each needing to be appreciated on its own terms, is suggestive. With its thick texture this metaphor offers a more robust frame for shedding light on mainline Protestant traditions. These traditions evidence some signs of adapting to a world of new assumptions. But things will not be as we have known them. With this metaphor we can note a few key dimensions of mainline Protestant spiritualities that offer some hope: 1) The diversity of voices of postmodernity is embodied in the mainline commitment to culturally diverse communities of faith. This is evidenced in resources for new church starts and in the agendas of national and regional expressions of church. 2) The emphasis on practices, that characterizes the Emergent Church movement, is also gaining acceptance in the mainline

⁴ William McKinney, “Mainline Protestantism 2000” *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 558 (July 1998), pp. 57-66.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last of Man*. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1992) quoted in Graham Ward, “The Future of Protestantism: Postmodernity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, ed. Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 456.

⁷ Graham Ward, “The Future of Protestantism: Postmodernity,” *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, ed. Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 456.

churches. Mainline scholars investigating church vitality, e.g. Diana Butler Bass,⁸ find the new interest in practices a life-giving sign. 3) There is a growing openness to explore the meaning of community as it is established through: a) interfaith dialogue, b) new uses of technology, and c) links to the Southern Hemisphere, where new custodians of Protestant traditions are emerging. These signs give me hope that the language of the GTU—in the words from 1970—“will prepare them (leaders) to be the needed catalysts and bridge builders in a torn and fragmented society.” There is much at stake.

Joseph D. Driskill
Professor of Spirituality
Pacific School of Religion

⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004).