

Susan Phillips's Response to Arthur Holder's Lecture:  
*Will Spirituality Have a Past?*

Graduate Theological Union 2010 Distinguished Faculty Lecture—9 November 2010

### **Preliminary Remarks**

1. Jerry Brown is the governor-elect of California,
2. sociologists are writing about people who claim to be “spiritual but not religious,” and
3. we're witnessing an emerging form of Christianity that is, broadly speaking,
  - a. youth-oriented,
  - b. focused on heartfelt faith and the biblical story, rather than doctrine,
  - c. counter-cultural,
  - d. engaged in social action,
  - e. communal,
  - f. casual, and
  - g. in some manifestations bearing similarities to monastic life.

This sentence describes 2010, and it describes the late 1970s when I moved to Berkeley, drawn in part by the sociological work of Robert Bellah on the “new religious consciousness” project which included study of the “spiritual but not religious” human potential movement, and also the radical Jesus People movement (mid- '60s to mid-'70s), some of the participants in which were involved with New College Berkeley, founded in 1977. (See Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, eds., *The New Religious Consciousness*, University of California, 1976).

The fact that there are striking similarities between now and 33 years ago, makes me think the answer to Dr. Holder's title question, “Will Spirituality Have a Past?,” is—much as he's indicated—yes, but that past may not be acknowledged. Even now, few remember, speak about, or study the very recent past of 1970s “new religious consciousness,” though these spiritualities seeded what sprouted later, for instance, the Jesus People movement as it dissipated in the late 1970s planted some of the fastest growing U.S. denominations of the late 20th century, such as Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard Churches, and also brought energy into Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches.

Each generation seems to need to rediscover and claim the real estate of faith—what Dr. Holder tells us Rowan Williams called the “*heart of faith*”—that is the ground, the true property of the faith tradition—as distinguished from non-essential accretions of particular cultures, styles, or time periods. As with physical real estate, in religious real estate we also have to attend to “location, location, location.”

### **I. An Anchoring, Orienting Location**

First, there is the place of the faith tradition in the broader social and historical context which allows an anchoring and orienting location. The Jesus People movement developed in the context of the turbulent decade of the American Sixties, and the church of the first century was their anchor. Social philosophers tell us that the high rate of religious switching and ending that we find in the U.S. today is taking place in a culture that is itself “liquid” (Zygmunt Baumann, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, 2000) and “fragilized” (Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*, Harvard, 2007).

As Dean Holder notes, people in the emerging church movement have looked to the ancient Christian church for orientation and anchoring to the bedrock of the faith. Many North American churches I visit and classrooms I teach in now—unlike 20 years ago—contain icons, candles, bells, photos of ancient sacred sites, and sometimes a labyrinth. The communities I now speak to know *lectio divina*, the prayer of *Examen*, and many are familiar with the practice of spiritual direction.

#### A. Reclamation of an Anchoring Past

More than a romanticizing of the ancient, I understand this as a reclamation of what before Vatican II—and for evangelicals, pre-Richard Foster and Dallas Willard days—was cut off from the awareness of many Christians for whom antiquity has only become accessible and engaging during the last thirty years. In the context of widespread social fragmentation, people of faith seek the *locus communis*, the *topos koinos*, the common place, and some are finding that anchoring orientation through participation in traditional Christian practices. This appropriation of ancient understandings and practices of the Christian faith may grant the emerging church population a foothold or a bridge for ongoing religious involvement.

#### B. Moral Orientation

I share with Arthur the concern that appropriation of traditional practices may be shallow and stylistic, at best forming exclusive affinity groups sharing “taste” or “habitus” and becoming entrenched in hierarchies of social power, wealth, and privilege. At worst this may lead to what Miroslav Volf warned of in writing:

Strip religious commitments of all cognitive and moral content and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, and you are likely to get religiously inspired or legitimized violence. (*Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities*, Eerdmans, 2010, p. 159)

For the integration of the ancient with the modern to orient us toward the real and good core of our faith, it needs to be robust and whole, involving, what Dr. Holder in his 2009 presidential lecture to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality described as “a reform of our practices in accordance with our avowed commitments” (“The Problem with ‘Spiritual Classics,’” p. 11). Such a “location” yields gravity.

## II. A Location within the Communion of Saints

### A. Relationship

The second location that tradition affords is that of the communion of saints, a location or dimension of spirituality that is more than the institutional dimension. Tradition is that which is handed down, and it enlarges our faith to be aware of the hands that forged the chains of memory. The Jesus People of the 1970s looked to Christians of the first century. Today, many young Christians are encouraged—additionally—by Christians who lived between that time and now, and, in this sense, I would agree with Courtney Bender that they, like the new metaphysicals, are not orphans.

Perhaps the interest in ancient traditions allows us a transhistorical, transcultural acquaintance with people standing on the same “real estate” in different contexts:

- This offers rootedness in the midst of liquidity and fragilization;
- it’s a personalization that counters the depersonalization of the market, state, and network structures of our time;
- and extends a wide embrace across difference that could counter the pride that can crop up within orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

### B. Moral Responsibility

The broader moral thrust—and hope—of being located in the communion of saints might be what Hannah Arendt called “training our imaginations to go visiting” (*Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ronald Beiner, Chicago, 1982, p. 43). Projective identification—and shared worship—with those so different from ourselves just might “rend our hearts,” not only our clothing (Joel 2:13).

At the end of *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (University of Notre Dame, 1980) writing 30 years ago, presciently instructed us to wait for St. Benedict, rather than Godot, a plea for conscious, moral community. Whether this acquaintance with the ancients will translate into affiliation with particular historical streams of organized religious institutions, or lead to merging with the wide river of saints, I don’t know.

## III. The Ultimate Location: Contemplation of the Holy

The final and ultimate “location” has to do with the listening for and attending to the Holy, and one might call this a “contemplative” location. Andrew Louth wrote that “tradition [is] the life of the Holy Spirit in the church” (*Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology*, Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 94). Therefore, it’s always newly made by the One who is beyond us, and “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8). Just as the Jesus People movement seeded various churches, we wonder what seeds from the emerging church the Spirit may be blowing and where they might take root and sprout.

Our reception of the Spirit's life accords us orientation, gravity, and communion, if we are willing to receive it.

Now, another word from Emily Dickinson, who captures the sense of this contemplative location:

This World is not Conclusion.  
A Species stands beyond—  
Invisible as Music—  
But positive, as Sound—  
It beckons, and it baffles—  
(1862, #501)