

THE MORNING STAR

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On Returning to the New World

BY Chris Seitz

Europeans generally think of Americans as very religious. They see things like a public swearing-in with a hand on the Bible and read a lot into that—even as it is somewhat of a formality that may have no obvious religious significance for those taking an oath. “So help me God”—this is less a final declaration freighted with Christian significance than a necessary legal obligation.

To be sure churches dot the landscape in ways a foreign visitor will not fail to note. One can say this and yet equally remark that French villages display crucifixes at their entrances in a way that would be illegal in the US, and ancient Catholic parishes are equally replete and noteworthy for their omnipresence across France.

What is, of course, distinctive about the US—and to a certain degree, Canada—is the variety and number of different denominations. The Yellow Pages of old would display page after page of church listings, remarkable for their sheer differentiated number. Four or five kinds of Baptists, same for Presbyterians, Lutherans and Methodists, a United Church of Christ that is anything but that, Brethren, Adventists, Disciples of Christ, Latter-day Saints and Christian Scientists, and on it goes. The European Reformation/s birthed these entities. Hostilities, loss of employment, and wanderlust shipped them abroad to set up shop in the New World. The New World itself confected New North American offshoots.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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Europe is different

In France, where we have lived for four years, there is nothing remotely similar. There is a struggling Église Reformé, Evangeliste gatherings in small modern spaces, and that is about it. The church is for all intents and purposes Catholic. Their buildings are historically ancient and deeply entrenched. France is a Catholic country, if even in spite of itself.

In Germany, it is the Roman Catholics who are largely uprooted from their ancient physical embodiment in Cathedrals across the country. So too in England. But in neither place is there the same denominationalism such as one finds in the USA.

What the European—going back to de Tocqueville—is observing on the religious landscape of the New World is a physical presence in the form of denominated churches spread across the land. It is this pluriformity that says to them: America is a Christian country. Yet, of course, this is a judgment prone to exaggeration and misunderstanding, especially since the last decade of rapidly changing trends in American life.

An accident of history

What I wish to dwell on, however, is just this diversity and pluriformity, if even in diminished and diminishing form. What does it mean? Is it indeed a sign of vibrancy and health, such as is often claimed—from afar or from within? How should one, in fact, characterize the religiosity displayed in the form of variety of choice, when it comes to the denominated landscape of America?

One way to think of this is simply as a fact, an accident of history, which surely it is. No one designed this denominational variety or set about to construct it as a preferred good. It comes, literally, with the territory. It is a fact ingredient in what it means to be a New World, a land full of those who came from somewhere else

and who brought with them the expressions of Christian faith and life that had existed across the variety of Old World countries, now plopped down in one United States.

Just here is the challenge for characterization. As time marches on, what the variety of expression must invariably entail is the sense of choice. This is true simply because one has thirty different church choices on one's doorstep. It is also a religious fact that merges pretty quickly with perhaps the biggest American cultural reality, that of consumer choice. Just as there are fifty dog food choices at PetSmart, cable TV channels aplenty, and manifold different breakfast cereals to choose from, so too the fact of churches in differentiated number means they are there to be evaluated and chosen from. Mobility means the Old World parish idea is gone and thrown in for good measure is this astonishing church variety. First Methodist versus African Methodist, PCA or PCUSA, Missouri Synod Lutheran and North American Lutheran, and further abundant choices across even these named tribes and sachems.

And so now as well, a bit closer to home, the Anglican Church of Canada and The Episcopal Church, or should one choose, the Anglican Church of North America. Here we have a choice born not of historical differentiation, but one of a recently minted fracturing and division.

The result of all this variety

The rich variety we observe in church choices used to mean that ecumenism was an obvious project. Enthusiasm for that at present no longer dovetails with the turn-of-the-twentieth-century idea of a "Christian Century." Two World Wars flattened that kind of optimism. The Catholic Church did not fade away as an immigrant and anti-democratic entity with odd accents and foreign ideas and vesture. It is hard to believe one even thought that

way, not very long ago.

When the New Testament, and Jesus Christ himself, speaks about the church as the Body of Christ, could it possibly coordinate that idea with this diffuse, differentiated, denominated variety? To be an Episcopalian is not to be something else. And so it goes across the denominated board. Surely this is not what the New Testament envisioned with the word "church"?

But we may be at a point where this rich diversity begins to mean something rather different. The historical anvil on which these differences were forged begins to recede from view. People forget who they are and where they came from. Certain groups—one could name the Reformed Episcopal Church as just one example among many—end up with an identity they did not start with, and indeed one they pushed hard against.

A reality that must be dealt with

These reflections need not point in any obvious direction. They are an effort to describe a fact about ecclesiology that must be dealt with in our present age in the New World. My sense of the Catholic Church in France was that, given the secular default of culture, and in the wake of having formally separated church and state in the early twentieth century, it occupied ground that was more centrifugal in character than centripetal. That was a trend going in the opposite direction in North America, given the reality I have sketched above.

But maybe the trend will reverse course, asking people to identify common ground wherein older historical differences simply lack the same urgency. This is not ecumenism-as-formal-project, but something more inchoate and unplanned.

ABOUT

Christopher Seitz is Senior Research Professor at Wycliffe College.

This Wednesday...

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2020

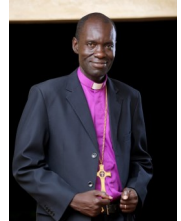
Wednesday, January 22, 2020 at 1:30 p.m. at St Basil's Church at the University of St. Michael's (50 St Joseph St)

This is an all-TST service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Wycliffe lunch will begin at 12:30 p.m.

WEDNESDAY EVENT WITH BISHOP WANDERA

Wednesday, January 22, 2020 at 3:00 p.m. in Reading Room, Wycliffe College

Bishop Wandera is bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Mumias, Kenya. He will deliver the Sadleir Lecture in the Reading Room. Note that there will be no Wycliffe Community Eucharist at 4:45 p.m.



Public Events at Wycliffe



MISSION WEEK BY THE RELEVANT SERIES

Jan 20-24 at Wycliffe College

Wycliffe College is hosting the Relevant Series—University of Toronto with various campus groups such as InterVarsity and Power to Change. Throughout the week there will be workshops and discussions addressing many issues of our time, including Professor Marion Taylor's "Is the Bible Good for Women?" on Jan 23 at 12 p.m. For listing of all these exciting events, please visit <https://relevantseries.com/toronto/>

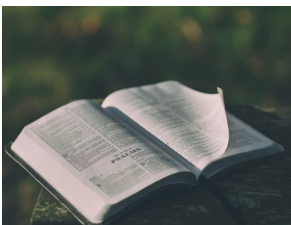


THEOLOGY PUB NIGHT WITH MARION TAYLOR AND KIRA MOOLMAN — *BREAKING SILENCE: THE GRANDMOTHERS WE NEVER KNEW WE HAD*

Friday, January 31, 2020 at 7:00 p.m. in Leonard Hall, Wycliffe College

Professor Marion Taylor, scholar of Old Testament and Women's Interpretations of the Bible, will join Kira Moolman, PhD student at Wycliffe College, on uncovering the voices of women in the history of biblical interpretation and theology. Come hear some of the fascinating stories of women who were pioneers in these areas, how the culture of interpretation shifted in the beginning of the 20th century, and what work is yet to be done in this emerging field.

This is a free event and it is open to the public. There will also be snacks and beer so bring your friends! For more information: wycliffecollege.ca/theologypub



PREACHING DAY—THE PSALMS: SONGS OF HEALING

Tuesday, February 18, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Wycliffe College

Preaching Day is an annual event at Wycliffe College. This year we welcome Dr. Ellen Davis from Duke Divinity School, whose research interests focus on how biblical interpretation bears on the life of faith communities and their response to urgent public issues, particularly the ecological crisis and interfaith relations. For this event, Dr. Davis will be exploring preaching from the Psalms in the context of some of the traumas we experience in life and in ministry such as the opioid crisis, PTSD, and the global refugee crisis. Purchase your tickets at wycliffecollege.ca/preachingday.

From the Registrar's Office



Graduating this May?

Do you expect to graduate this May? Be sure to sign up for a photo sitting for January 29 or 30. Your robe and hood will be provided for you at the session. These photos will be used for the graduating class composite which will be hung in the ambulatory, so be sure that you are included! You also have the option of purchasing copies for yourself. Please choose a time slot on the signup sheet which will be posted at the front desk the week before the photo shoot. Cannot make either day? Please contact Jeffrey Hocking (jhocking@wycliffe.utoronto.ca)

Jeffrey Hocking, Assistant Registrar

Some key academic dates

- New January academic starts in the Winter Session can opt out or enrol their spouse and/or dependent children in the UTSU health plan between Jan. 1 – 31, 2020 for coverage from Jan. 1 – Aug. 31, 2020.
- Jan. 24, 2020 is the date the U of T cancels registrations for non payment.
- For more academic dates, visit <https://www.tst.edu/academic/key-academic-dates>.

OGS Scholarship

This is a reminder that if you expect to be registered in a conjoint MA, ThM, conjoint PhD, or ThD program in academic year 2020-21, you may be eligible for an Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) award. For eligibility information, application instructions, and the application link, please see <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/awards/ontario-graduate-scholarship/>. Please also see the updated TST SSHRC/OGS Application Guide for important additional information. TST's deadlines are as follows: Domestic students: 11:59 pm, March 2, 2020 (EST), International (visa) students: 11:59 pm, March 2, 2020 (EST). Applications are completed entirely online.

Need a Social Insurance Number?

Get your Social Insurance Number at a time and place that's convenient for you! Book an appointment with Service Canada staff right here on campus, on [Friday, January 24th, 2020](#). Students should ensure that they are [eligible to work in Canada](#) prior to registering at uoft.me/cie-events.

Stay Connected

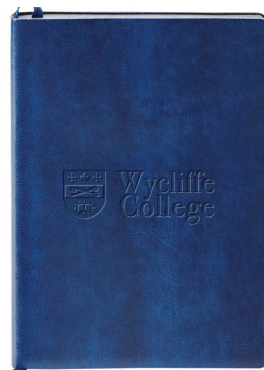
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Merchandise



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