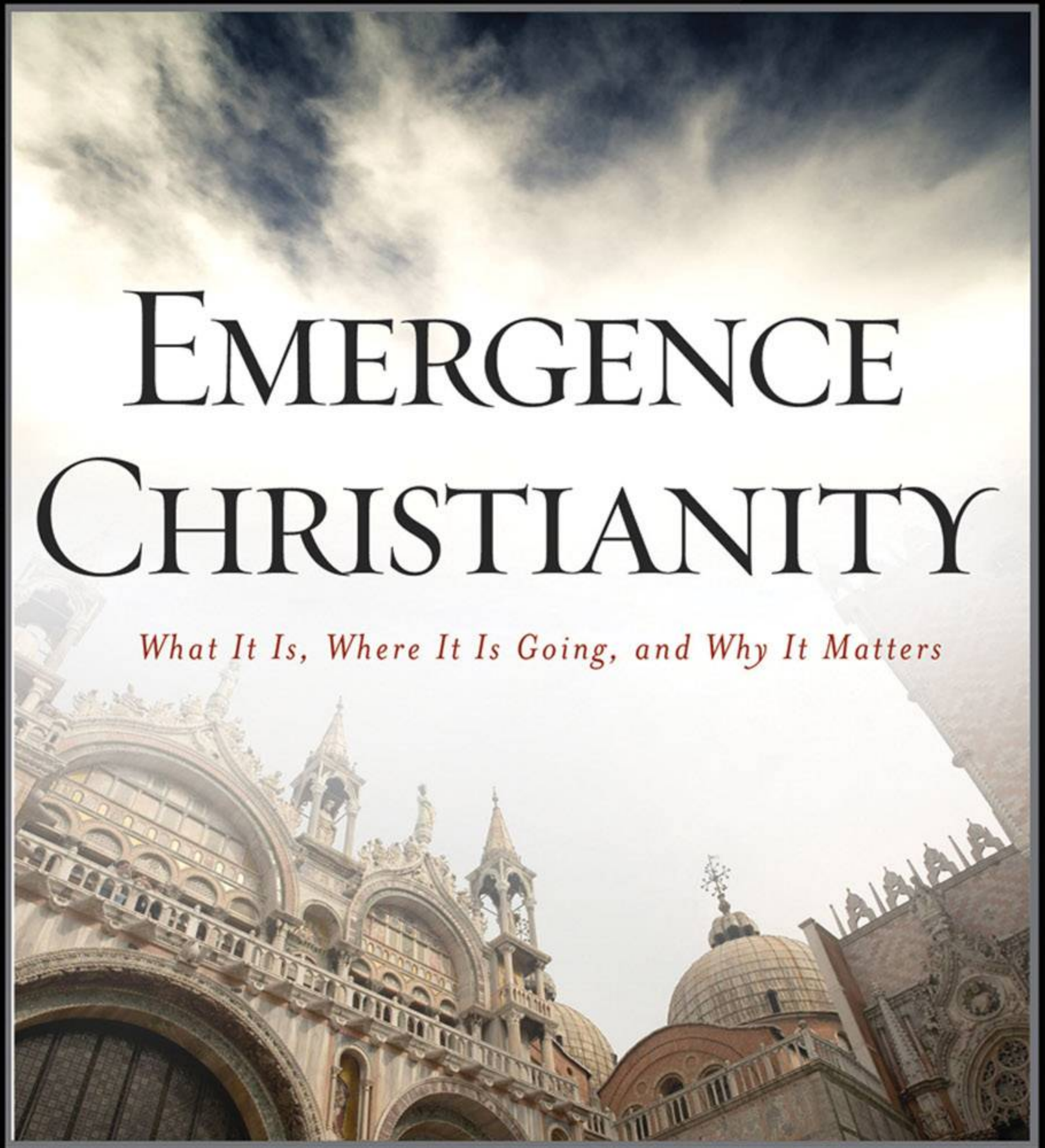
PHYLLIS TICKLE

Author of *The Great Emergence*

EMERGENCE CHRISTIANITY

What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters



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The old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God.

2 Corinthians 5:17–18 NIV

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Preface

This is now the fourth time I have spoken in book form about what is happening to us as North American Christians in the twenty-first century. The first of those four volumes was written in 1994, in the early days of my tenure as religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, the trade journal for the English-language book industry. *Re-Discovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America* was written not as a general book but as a professional one, thus its rather ponderous title. That is, it was intended as a report of sorts to publishers, booksellers, and librarians about why religion books were suddenly and abruptly—or so it seemed to most of them—riding the country's bestsellers lists and outpacing every other category and genre in both public attention and growth of market share.

The fact that what began as a professional paper or report to a professional audience became a general-audience seller spoke volumes about our American desire in the last decade of the last century to know more about what was happening in religion and why. In response to that burgeoning need, but still interpreting things through the lens of book sales and book trends, in 1996 I wrote the manuscript for what was to be published for the general

reader as *God-Talk in America*. This second volume probably had as great an impact on me as it did on anyone, a circumstance that is not unusual for writers and their writings, I might add.

To say the least, *God-Talk* and the response to it helped convince me that the time had come for me to take my eye away from its narrow focus on the book industry and train it instead to look, forever after apparently, at the broad, varied, and truly wondrous larger landscape of religion as it was being lived out in America right here and right now. It was time for me to take what my profession had given me and grow it into a bank of information of more public and hopefully far broader utility.

As a result, I began to spend more of my days and weeks traveling the country, talking to audiences—both lay and clerical—learning from them, and listening as much as I was talking. Even more of my time, however, was probably spent in reading what scholars—also both lay and clerical—had said over the centuries, not to mention over the very recent past, about patterns in religion, about ecclesiology and theology, about the sociology of religion and the courses of Judeo-Christian history and its place in the land masses and political units it had formed and been formed by. The result of all of that was a third volume, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, published in 2008.

Now, after almost two decades since I first began this line of study, the time has come to file yet another report—not a final report in any sense of that word, but merely an interim one. Whatever else one may say of Emergence Christianity, one must also say that it is growing and shifting and reconfiguring itself in such a prodigious way as to still defy any final assessments or absolute pronouncements. What is needed in such a set of circumstances is, at best, no more than a dispatch from the field, an opportunity for us all to assess where we are, project where we probably are going, and enter prayerfully into this new thing that God is doing.

To that end, it seems to me that we would be well served at this moment to remember the words of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In counseling his flock worldwide, Williams has said repeatedly over the last few years that we are not to read and study and discuss Emergence Christianity in order that we might save the Anglican Church or any other such institution. Rather, he says, we are called to read and study and discuss Emergence Christianity in order that we may discern how best to serve the kingdom of God in whatever form God is presenting it. While most of us will indeed have to substitute "Baptist Convention" or "United Methodist Church" or "Presbyterian Church" or "Assemblies of God" or some such other term for the archbishop's one of "Anglican Church," we still can find in his admonition, I think, the attitude with which to begin a new level of investigation and conversation. Pray God that is so.

Part 1

An Interim Report

Telling the Story So Far

1

Back to Now

How Semi-Millennial Tsunamis of Change Shape Religion and Culture

Every five hundred years, give or take a decade or two, Western culture, along with those parts of the world that have been colonized or colonialized by it, goes through a time of enormous upheaval, a time in which essentially every part of it is reconfigured.[1] From the perspective of the twenty-first century, and thus from our own place in Western history, it is fairly easy for us to see that pattern writ large over the last two millennia.

Most of us have little or no difficulty in going back five hundred years in our understanding of the Christianized Western story and seeing the Great Reformation staring back at us. We can see, from the latter years of the fourteenth century to the dramatic one of 1517 when Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door in Wittenberg, the process of wrenching, deconstructing, liberating, anxiety-producing, world-rending change as it works its way, straight as the proverbial arrow, from one regimen for ordering life to a new and unprecedented one.

And everything did change. Protestant Christians tend to think of that harsh period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries chauvinistically, choosing to celebrate it, from the comfort of our five-hundred-year remove, primarily as a major event in the history of our faith, as a time when a new stream of Christianity was born, when old ways of doing God's business were purged, when ordinary Christians' souls were freed from human institutions and human mediation between God and the believer.

All of those things did indeed happen. It is only our mono-focus that is in error. Falling into the trap, because it pleases our religious pride or needs, of equating that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century tsunami solely with religion and of perceiving its consequences solely as matters of doctrine and religious practice is not only historically wrong but also dangerous. More to the point, it is especially dangerous for folk like us who are removed from that time of rigorous change by the fated number of five hundred years.

The Great Reformation

In point of fact—and we know this because we are taught it in school—the Great Reformation was about the change, politically, in Western governance from fiefdoms, baronies, and hereditary domains to the nation-state configuration that for most of the last five centuries has informed the Western way of ordering life. The Great Reformation was about the rise of the merchant class in accommodation to the fact that vast improvements in transportation, and thereby in commercial shipping and ordinary travel by individuals, made the merchant life not only possible but enormously profitable. The ultimate result of that, among others, was the rise and growth and, eventually, dominance of the middle class in Western culture's social order.

The Great Reformation, economically, was about birthing a new way of ordering the Western economic order; it was about

birthing and then enabling capitalism as a dominant characteristic of Western ways as we have inherited them. The Great Reformation was also about a world that, in order to communicate its new ways and profit from them, abruptly needed a literate population for commercial reasons, or at the very least for several citizens in any given village or hamlet to be able to read. And no culture can go from illiteracy to increasing general literacy without shock waves.

The Great Reformation was also concerned with the discoveries being made about the physical universe and, as a result, of human ability to begin to pierce, penetrate, understand, manipulate, and even in some ways change or harness that power for "the betterment of humankind," to use an old tried-and-true cliché about it. As a result, there was a growing sense that all things—as in "every thing"—could be reduced to component parts and, once reduced, be understood.

The Great Reformation was about a whole shopping list of things, every one of them part and parcel of who we are and what our society for the last five centuries has been. Yet only a very few of those changes have to do just with religion as such. It is an important point, and one we need to be very clear about before we wander away from it.

Religion, whether we like it or not, is intimately tied to the culture in which it exists. One can argue—with only varying degrees of success, though—that private faith can exist independent of its cultural surround. When, however, two or three faith-filled believers come together, a religion—possibly more of a nascent or proto-religion—is formed. Once formed, it can never be separated entirely from its context.

Just as surely as one of the functions of religion is to inform, counsel, and temper the society in which it exists, just so surely is every religion informed and colored by its hosting society. Even a religion's very articulation of itself takes on the cadences, metaphors, and delivery systems of the culture that it is in the business

of informing. Thus, when we look at these semi-millennial tsunamis of ours, we as Christians must be mindful of the fact that the religious changes effected during each of them were only one part of what was being effected, and that all the other contemporaneous political, social, intellectual, and economic changes were intimately entwined with the changes in religion and religious thought.

With that in mind, we can look back not just five hundred years to the Great Reformation but a thousand years, instead, to the Great Schism of the eleventh century when the Western world spent a contentious and bloody century and a half getting ready for the severance of East from West politically, militarily, economically, culturally, linguistically, intellectually, and—of course—religiously. As a result of the aggregate of all these confluent events, East and West would become alien to one another—natural antagonists, in fact—and Europe would get its Middle Ages in return for its trouble. Not inconsequentially, Catholicism would emerge out of the scarred remains of latinized and monastic Christianity to become the Roman Catholicism against which Luther was destined to rebel.

The Great Transformation

We can, in fact (hopefully without becoming tedious), look back fifteen hundred years from our current place in history to the Great Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and watch as the Roman Empire crumbles into something less than even a shadow of its former self. We can watch as all communication and trade systems collapse; as formal learning ceases to be the norm for citizens; as medicine, math, and science fail; as the wisdom of the ancients is lost; and the West slides, silent as a sinking stone, into its Dark Ages. But in our watching, we will observe as well how Monastic Christianity begins to emerge as the form and organ of the faith, as the repository in aggregate of Christian treasures, the definer

of its praxis, and the delivery system of its pastoral functions, of clerical training, and even of literacy itself.

We can look back from where we stand to the era of two thousand years ago when the shift was so overwhelming, so total, so cataclysmic that we know it as the Great Transformation. We continue to honor it to this day by notating the whole course of human time in the westernized world as having pivoted in just that place from "before the common era" to the "common era." We should note, by the way, that this is the era that gave us Christianity in the first place, as it emerged up out of Judaism to inform everything about us in the West, whether we are religious believers or not.

All of that is a rather absorbing story when looked at in the abstract as the delineation of a pattern or cycling in our way of doing things in Western or latinized cultures.[2] It can even be a bit enjoyable just to look back and see how the centuries have flowed. The old folk-saying that "Everything that goes around comes around" rests gently in our memories, in fact, right up until that moment when it dawns on us that the Great Reformation was five hundred years ago, the last expression of a pattern that Western culture seems fated to reenact every . . .

Mercy! That's now!

It is also us.

NOTES

1. The recurring use on these pages of the terms *West*, *westernized*, and *latinized* can become grating unless one understands the imperative for their repetition. The word *latinized* refers to those cultures and parts of the world that received their Christianity through the Latin language or were colonized by those who had so received or were colonialized by them. The other principal vehicles for the transmittal of Christianity were the Greek and the Syriac languages, both of which flourished in, and helped to create, distinctly different contexts and sociopolitical structures. There is currently little evidence that these parts of the globe and the cultures that inhabit them are susceptible to an analogous pattern of five-hundred-year upheavals. If we are to appreciate accurately what is happening in the world at large as we pass through the Great Emergence, we need to be cognizant of these distinctions.

Second, it is entirely likely that within the twenty-first century itself, the most formative change of them all for Christianity in the West will be the demographic shift in its worldwide center. In 1900, 80 percent of Christians were resident in Europe and North America. If scholarly and informed predictions and trends hold, by the middle of the twenty-first century, 80 percent of Christians will *not* be residents of either Europe or North America. Korean scholar Soong-Chan Rah of North Park University calls this shifting "probably the most significant development in church history in the past 500 years" ("Heroic Tales from Distant Lands," *Christianity Today*, April 2010, 65). Most observers either agree with Professor Soong-Chan Rah or are loath to challenge him. Certainly within the Roman communion, there is already more than enough evidence of the geographic shifting to persuade any thinking person of its impact.

As a case in point, we should note that when, in the spring of 2010, the Vatican released its annual statistical yearbook, it sent shock waves through much of the latinized Christian community. As reported by Religion News Service, this 2010 survey showed that the number of Catholics in Europe had increased by just over 1 percent in 2009. That's all well and good, of course. The arresting data, however, were that within the same time period, Roman Catholicism had grown just over 33 percent in Africa and roughly 15.5 percent in Asia. Among other things, the Vatican noted that the result of such a shift in growth patterns was that, as of 2010, only one-quarter of Roman Catholics were European. If nothing else, the implications for the election of the next pope are as enormous as they almost assuredly will be historic.

2. The whole business of cycles and cycling has so complex an academic and scholarly history as to almost defy imagination. So too does the somewhat newer field of Systems Theory. Both are far too intricate and controversial to be engaged in these pages. I have, however, been interrupted at least three or four times in or after public lectures by systems theorists who were intent, albeit not rudely, on supplying my audience and/or me with the precise and mathematical or sociological reasons for the cycles involved in any discussion of the Great Emergence. Curious or interested readers, therefore, may wish to pursue these areas in great detail and would be well served by making at least a cursory and preliminary digression into the work of general theorists like Edward Cheung, Peter Turchin, or even the most colorful of them all, the renowned Russian patriot Pitirim Sorokin, who founded the department of sociology at Harvard in 1930.

2

Calling It What It Is

The Difficulty of Naming

However one may feel about cycles and their inevitability, there is no question about the hard fact that something dramatic and irresistible is happening to every part of our lives right now, that it has been first building and then occurring for some several decades, that it became irrefutably obvious and present at a popular or lay level somewhere around or in conjunction with the opening events of this century, and that we can either be its passive medium or its active architects.[1]

Being an active architect, for most of us, is a much more appealing as well as more honorable role than is passivity. Certainly, it requires a great deal of thought and more informed consultation than does passivity, but it also requires—to use another bit of folk wisdom—that we first name the beast before we try to engage it.

Descriptive or Poetic?

A number of names have been proposed over the last five or six decades for what this upheaval of ours is. In the mid-twentieth

century Carl Bridenbaugh was not only an established scholar but also, because of his influential standing in the scholarly community, held the prestigious position of president of the American Historical Society. Among other things, that office gave him a podium of authority from which to analyze the times within which he lived and to name the parts thereof. Accordingly, on December 29, 1962, in his annual President's Address to the society, speaking at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, Professor Bridenbaugh first discussed the cataclysmic shift that was obviously happening around both him and his community of his fellow historians, and then, after doing so, proposed that the phenomenon be named "the Great Mutation."

As a name, the Great Mutation is certainly more colorful and considerably more threatening than is that of the Great Emergence, which we use today. It is also considerably less poetic and euphonious. The surprising thing, then, at least from the perspective of half a century later, is that Bridenbaugh's Great Mutation held on to the scholarly—and to some extent to the popular—imagination for several decades. One can, in fact, still find it mentioned from time to time even today.[2]

Over the years since Professor Bridenbaugh's attempt at leaving us with the Great Mutation, various and sundry other names have been suggested, some of them even enjoying a fair amount of life in our general conversation. There have been soft and appealing terms like "a hinge of history." There is at least one bestselling book as well as a number of popular theorists arguing adamantly that our time in history is "the Fifth Turning," a titling that tips its hat immediately to the fact that, by any name, we at 2000+ CE are living dead center in the fifth such event in history.

There has been some sustained argument for using the term "the Great Convergence," which, by the way, is sometimes seen as a sequel of "the Great Divergence." I rather like the convergence one for two reasons. First, it retains "the Great" part that has been

assigned to our previous mid-millennial experiences; and second, *convergence* is a very descriptive word that, unlike *emergence*, carries no freight beyond itself—a point that matters, as we will soon see.

In all of this, there is no question, however, that for me the happiest term to be suggested for naming our beast is that of Episcopal bishop Mark Dyer, who has argued since the early 1990s that we should just call the whole thing "A Giant Rummage Sale" and be done with it.

The Great Emergence Emerges

Yet despite all the colorfulness of these alternative labels, the one we hear most often and that now seems destined to stick is that of "the Great Emergence." So be it. But the minute we acquiesce to a naming, the question then becomes one of "So what is it that we have named?" In this case, the answer to that one is "Quite a lot!"[3]

Like its cycling predecessors, the Great Emergence is an across-the-board and still-accelerating shift in every single part and parcel of our lives as members in good standing of twenty-first-century Western or westernized civilization. Intellectually, politically, economically, culturally, sociologically, religiously, psychologically—every part of us and of how we are and how we live has, to some greater or lesser degree, been reconfiguring over the last century and a half, and those changes are now becoming a genuine maelstrom around us.

Most of us don't really need to be told we are living in strange and strained times, nor do we really need much cataloging of the strangenesses that assault us on a daily basis in order to accept the fact that they are there. But sometimes it is just plain fun as well as a lift of the spirits to look at some of the more bizarre or less immediately obvious presentations of this "Great Emergence" of ours. For example, I find it somewhere between amusing and

distressing to know that we now have five times as many words in the English language as William Shakespeare had when he wrote his plays. We have them because, like it or not, we have five times as many things, ideas, and events to name as he had. The downside of that, of course, is that because of the Great Emergence and as part of it, technical information is now doubling at a rate of once every ten or so months, meaning that unless something slows down soon, our grandchildren will have at least five times as many English words as we have, assuming they don't die first of the overload.

It's a fact that in 1900 there were only eight thousand cars in the whole United States, but it's a result of the Great Emergence that presently there are more cars than that in an average urban neighborhood, all of them heavily involved in five o'clock traffic on any given day of the workweek. That congestion, by the way, is also a direct result, as well as evidence, of the Great Emergence.

It is the Great Emergence that the smallest of nation-states or tribal confederations can hold the largest of nation-states hostage to their own ambitions and internal strife; but it's also true that that very change allows brilliant and respected analysts like Thomas Friedman to report to us with a straight face that the world has gone flat again and then have us delight in his image. The same kind of playfulness allows the economic analyst for CNN and *Time*, Fareed Zakarias, to invent the word *mergonomics* in an attempt to defang the worldwide financial crisis that is a factor of the Great Emergence. But perhaps the most beguiling of them all is the bon mot of the Canadian scholar and bestselling author Richard Florida, who just says we should call the whole economic part of this thing "the Great Reset" and be done with it, a fiscal attitude not unlike Bishop Dyer's ecclesial one.

It is the Great Emergence—and this one is probably my favorite amongst them all—it is the Great Emergence that we are so far removed from the source of our foodstuffs that a jar of cashews at Sam's Club nowadays has to show on its small-type contents label,

"Cashew from Brazil, India, and Vietnam, Packaged in China, Manufactured by Nut Farms in Australia P/L. Please dispose of empty packaging thoughtfully." I know this, because I am the one who bought the cashews for a family party and, for the first time in my life, enjoyed the label more than the nuts.

One of the half-funny absurdities of the Great Emergence frequently repeated these days is the fact that one person or even one group of people can no longer produce so simple a thing as a lead pencil. Indeed, it now takes a truly mind-blowing conglomeration of us to produce a Dixon Ticonderoga No. 2, or at least according to George F. Will it does. He, famously now, drew public attention to that disconcerting fact in 2008 with his oft-quoted and much-cited *Newsweek* essay, "Pencils and Politics—Who Commands the Millions of People Involved in Making a Pencil? Who Is in Charge? Who Is the Pencil Czar?"[4]

Will was not exaggerating or engaging in hyperbole just for his own amusement, of course, even though he certainly made his point and had his jollies with the whole thing. Nor, I assume, was his concern really about pencils and their manufacture. It was—and at the serious level remains—about our twenty-first-century severance from the production of our simplest needs, about the growing and universal interdependence of all of us on all of us if any of us is to thrive, and about the kind of insouciance we have developed in order to avoid having to engage the obvious.

It is also somewhere between funny and pathetic that, for better or worse, we now send each other over 247 billion emails every single day. Such connectedness boggles the mind . . . or it does if one is inclined toward thinking about it for long.

It's worth noting as well that, thanks to the Great Emergence and as part of living in it, we Americans download well over ten billion iTunes songs a year now, in contrast to absolutely none in 2000. The intriguing factor in that shift is not so much the acceleration in our technological expertise or our increasing Net use or

even the exponential growth in our online hours per se. Rather, the intriguing thing to consider is the obvious fact that someone has to be listening to all those tunes. And now think about that one not just in terms of hours expended or as an opportunity to employ the relatively new Great Emergence skill of multitasking; think of it also as a greatly enhanced means of human melding, and think as well of the unifying effect, semantically and emotionally, that a broadly shared aesthetic can exercise. Is this a good thing? The jury is probably still out on that one.

It is also almost a source of levity that, thanks to the Great Emergence of which it is a natural child, Wikipedia is certifiably at least 6 percent more accurate than are our most respected print-copy encyclopedias. Whatever would your grandfather make of that! It's also true, and probably even more telling, that over the first decade of this Great Emergence century of ours, we in the United States lost almost two hundred of our daily newspapers, and, Grandfather might say, with them lost almost two hundred sources of particularized opinion and perception just by losing the syndicated comics and the local daily cartoons . . .

. . . and the jests and slightly cynical observations can run endlessly on.[5] Certainly they can help to soften some very sobering insights, at least for a while. But eventually the truth behind the jests is still the truth: We are in a time of transition, and that transition is not a casual or passing one. Rather, it is yet another of the semi-millennial upheavals that have shaped latinized culture and latinized religion from their inception. We are citizens living within the Great Emergence, and as Christians of whatever stripe, we are watching the formation of a new presentation of the faith. We are attending upon the birth and early growth of Emergence Christianity.

NOTES

1. As we have already suggested, there is a period—generally of about 150 years—that leads up to each of our semi-millennial upheavals. Known as the

peri-Decline, the peri-Schism, the peri-Reformation, etc., these peri-'s or periods of buildup are like those of a pot being heated on a stove. There comes that dramatic moment when the pot's contents go from hot to boiling.

That moment of transition, in matters of Western history, if not of boiling pots, is usually the date assigned after the fact as the moment when the upheaval can be named. Thus, October 31, 1517, is routinely listed as the beginning of the Great Reformation. It is not. It is simply the date when there was no longer any way to deny that the world was in re-formation. In the same way, we are told that history will date our own upheaval from September 11, 2001, not because that was or is a pivotal North American event, which it obviously was, but because it was and remains a global one that arose from, and is evidence of, the cataclysmic shifts we now name as the Great Emergence.

The line of argument describing, explaining, and greatly illuminating the process involved here is known as *panarchy*, and it too has come up out of Systems Theory (cf. n. 2, chap. 1). I am indebted to Brian McLaren for many, many things in this life, not the least of which is his having sent me to the work in this area of men like Professor C. S. Holling, L. H. Gunderson, G. D. Peterson, etc. A Google search for "panarchy" will offer up a veritable wealth of material and external sources about a subject that, while it is somewhat tangential to our immediate concerns here, is still a major behind-the-scenes agency and a gratifying source of information for those who wish to go deeper into the causes and machinations of our current amazement.

2. We tend to forget—our kind has always tended to forget—that we live firmly embraced within the long arms of history. Our times are never ours alone. They are merely the continuation of, or sequel to, the times that belonged to our predecessors. Normally, such naïve forgetfulness does not matter greatly in the general scheme of things. In something as dramatic and laden as our semi-millennial shifts, however, forgetfulness is not a virtue. It obscures the vision and therefore beclouds with ignorance how we approach and fashion the future. It is beyond imperative, then, that we look at the struggles, however antique they may now seem to us, of credentialed, earlier thinkers like Bridenbaugh. They wrestled with that which they saw through a glass darkly but which we now see face-to-face, and the records of their earlier engagements can, if nothing else, often steer us away from repeating their missteps, misinterpretations, and miscalculations. Bridenbaugh was nobody's fool; he simply was one of the first predictive historians to talk so publicly about what he was seeing.

3. It is a bit of a reassurance in all of this to remember that our prior upheavals have all had variant names also. My favorite example of this is the fact that as recently as 2009, noted scholar and much-admired author Karen Armstrong suggested that the Great Reformation should really be called the Great Western Transformation (*The Case for God*, Alfred A. Knopf, 166). Nor was she speaking in jest.

Likewise, Armstrong offers Renaissance Christianity as a name for the five hundred years from the Great Schism to the Great Western Transformation. Beyond that, she suggests as well that the new body of Christianity coming out of the Great Reformation should be called Reformation Christianity instead of Protestantism, presumably in much the same way and for many of the same reasons

that Emergence Christianity is increasingly the name being assigned to what's happening across all Christian faith-lines within our own time.

4. For a firsthand read of this rollicking and insightful essay, *see* Will's "The Last Word," *Newsweek*, September 22, 2008, 80.

5. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of facts and factoids like these now circulating through every media outlet known to exist. This particular set or shopping list draws heavily from the "Did You Know?—Rome Conference, 2008" film clip and from the delicious "Back Story" in *Newsweek*, July 26, 2010, 56, entitled, appropriately enough, "Exactly How Much Are the Times A-Changing?"