

Life Goes On

*I walked by the bleeding corner
today looking for the faces of
so many killed by others who*

*hide despair behind guns. my
eyes roamed the neighborhood
from the curve and noticed the*

*clocks in the bodegas not
telling time for the dead nor
those who will descend into*

*hell for their sake. the old
men who still live in the barrio
stare with disturbed eyes at the*

*young men on the corner who
they cannot understand but
fear. shadows stay eternally*

*on our streets while in them
we ponder a deep place inside
us where something has already*

*died. madness covers half
the soul of this barrio that
is home to a forgotten people*

*of this city where life goes
on never looking the other
way. . . .*

Mainline Protestantism has been in a state of crisis regarding its cultural function in the United States. Mainline churches had for years enjoyed a privileged status in American society. They fulfilled the role of promoting cultural integration of individuals around a system of core beliefs, values, and practical behavior. They explained the meaning of U.S. social history in terms of a broader frame of reference rooted in biblical symbolism. Mainline Christians thought their interpretation of national identity and existence was indispensable to the social order. Nonetheless, now many mainline churches find themselves struggling to survive in a society that keeps them at the margin.

Since the Great Depression, mainline Protestant denominations have been experiencing more of their life at the edge of society as the government expanded its social functions to include areas deemed the church's unique domain. In a comprehensive study of American religion since World War II, Robert Wuthnow argues that with this expanding role of government the environment of American religion changed; moreover, as educational levels rose in society and various church groups shared more of a common culture, the significance of denominationalism declined.¹ Although conflicts between denominations have lessened and religious resources are mobilized interdenominationally, the mainline churches' marginality is accentuated by these new cultural conditions.

Between 1965 and 1990 mainline Protestant churches who were steadily losing members reported a total membership decline of one-fifth to one-third.² Members of my own United Methodist Church are raising questions about the future identity of their congregations

and American religion. Mainline Protestant churches are facing declining attendance, economic crisis, and the possibility that in the future they will be less capable of culturally influencing a society that appears to act without any appeal to its dominant religious heritage. Indeed, the biblical theism that provided a common morality for national identity even during years of open conflict between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews is now an unstable meaning system.³

In part, membership decline in mainline Protestant churches has been explained by the forces of urbanization, secularization, and growing levels of mass education. Researchers have argued that these social factors produced cultural shifts in society that included the desacralization of the human order. The decline of religion, however, is never complete. People seek to understand their lives with reference to categories that transcend the boundaries of ordinary existence. Interestingly, conservative Christianity was gaining members in major cities despite the eroding impact of secularization. This suggests mainline Protestant church membership decline may be foremost explained by a decline of belief in the lives of members.⁴

For the most part, established culture bypasses church leaders on questions of meaning and moral guidance. This may seem to indicate that people now do not need a church to establish a sense of meaning in the world they inhabit. Americans seem more interested in diet and fitness books than the Bible. Many clergy persons from mainline Protestant churches are personally experiencing their denominations' marginalization in the wider society. Once treated as respected and influential members of local communities, ordained pastors now vocalize frustration over lost influence in community life. In a society lacking a universally accepted moral vision, mainline Protestant clergy and churches have gradually become just another set of minor actors.

Today, as the standard moral certitudes of mainline Christians enter into crisis stemming from the experience of marginality and competition with different moral interpretations of the gospel, barrio Christianity offers a fresh look at the meaning of faith in Jesus of Nazareth. It promises to renew belief in the church by calling Christians to enact the imperatives of the gospel in their personal

and social lives. This book invites you to the barrio where the particular faith witness of the dehumanized poor and powerless reflects the liberating and empowering Spirit of God (Joel 2:28-29). Latino/Latina Christians largely forgotten by the mainline church and mainstream society are now articulating visions of a world based on the love and justice of God.

Latinos speak of a Jesus who pitches God's tent among the poor and calls for the renewal of the belief and practices of established Christianity. From the barrio the Jesus whose body is broken each day in the poor asks followers, "Who do you say that I am?" For years mainline Protestant churches have approached Jesus as the definitive answer for the human condition. In contemporary life where belief has declined and cultural diversity deabsolutizes meaning systems, Jesus approaches the world not so much as an answer to our confusion but as a hard-hitting question. I propose to take a fresh look at the question posed by Jesus to human beings by finding vital responses in the witness of those who live in the barrio.

Barrio people know what it means to live in a social reality structured in terms of suffering, violence, and death. The church will find Jesus in current social experience by looking at the barrio where poor, rejected, and socially and politically oppressed people explain the carpenter from Nazareth to the universal church. I believe that a new theology can be discovered by the mainstream church by walking the road to Emmaus that leads to the barrio. On that road Jesus will be rediscovered in the witness of people who have been turned into strangers by mainstream society. In the barrio, clarity about who Jesus is comes from breaking bread and entering into a new relationship with the strangers and outcasts (Luke 14:15; 24:35).

The church will find Jesus in the barrio. Latinos/Latinas invite mainline Christians to experience the gospel in the barrio where the racially despised and rejected live. Mainline Christians will learn to sing a new song about the God of the poor—strangers and outcasts in the witness of the barrio. For many mainline Christians who wonder about the future of their churches, the barrio has a special word of address. Barrio Christianity says the future does not include a new culture and religion synthesis on conservative ground. Neither does

the future look more contentious with mainline denominations competing against other Christian and secular groups for the moral center in society. Membership decline is also not to determine the meaning of the church.

By reading the Bible from the perspective of the barrio, the mainline church will rise to an existence more basic than any now imagined. Reading the Bible from the perspective of the barrio means recognizing that God has already prepared an identity and a future for mainline Christians in society. Mainline Christians must never forget that Paul reminds believers that God-in-Christ begins the church with despised, lowly, powerless, and rejected humanity (1 Cor. 1:26-29). The church's identity, future, and place in the world is with those who count for nothing. God who takes the side of utterly rejected human beings invites culturally marginal mainline Protestant churches to the world of the rejected—the barrio.

Notes

1. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).
2. Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens, "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline," *First Things* 31 (March 1993), p. 13.
3. See especially James Davison Hunter "American Protestantism: Sorting Out the Present, Looking Toward the Future," *This World* 17 (spring 1987), pp. 53-76.
4. See Johnson, Hoge, and Luidens, "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline," pp. 13-18.

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Who Comes *in the* Name *of the* Lord?

Jesus at the Margins

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