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# Introduction

A Christian church is a paradoxical entity. All churches trace their origins back to Christianity's archetypal moment of inspiration, the day of Pentecost, when tongues of fire rested on the apostles and the Spirit stirred them into unexpected and turbulent life; and beyond that moment to Christ himself, who had much more to say by way of criticizing religious institutions than he did about establishing new ones in their stead. The Holy Spirit has remained at the heart of most Christian doctrines of the church ever since, and one of the Spirit's defining qualities is that the wind blows where it wills. And yet a church is and must of necessity be a human institution, with structures, traditions, laws, offices and finances. The story of Christianity's history is in large part the story of how these two threads – the inspirational and the institutional – have been woven together: sometimes one in the ascendant, sometimes the other, sometimes unravelling, but never parting company completely. A church which no longer seeks inspiration is merely a fossil. And a Christian community without institution is not merely doomed: it is an impossibility, since no human community can endure without *some* structure, however fluid or implicit.

One recurrent dynamic at work here is what Weber called the routinization of charisma, in which a community dominated by the personality of a founder or early leader is compelled, after that person's death or departure, to replace them with institutional forms that serve as a kind of effigy, filling their seat but doing so lifelessly. That process is matched by one of sheer scale, as communities are compelled to regularize their structures through numerical growth or geographical spread. And it is true that we can see these processes at work again and again in Christianity's history, as indeed in many other spheres of life. Contrast the freewheeling fluidity of the early Pauline letters, urging that the Spirit not be quenched, with the prudent legalism of the later Pastoral Epistles, a sign of what was to come.

Yet it is not enough to see this as a matter of relentless withering and ossification, for two reasons. First, most obviously, attempts to quench the Spirit or to routinize charisma generally fail. Sometimes fresh upsurges of inspirational religion take place within existing

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church structures, sometimes outside, and sometimes they cross from one to the other; some cultures and ages experience them more frequently than others; but they will come, sooner or later, as unpredictable as the weather and as inevitable as the climate. The instinct that institutional religion is a hindrance to true Christianity – perhaps even its opposite – is evergreen, whether it be the Desert Fathers shaking the dust of a supposedly corrupt urban church from their feet, or the medieval beguines who chose to bypass monastic establishments they no longer trusted, or the nineteenth-century Americans who wanted to rediscover or create a pristine, republican Christianity. Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Restoration movement, claimed that he hoped 'to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me … I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever'.[1]

But this rarefied anti-institutional purity eventually, and inevitably, ended the way countless other anti-institutional revolts had before: in the foundation of new institutions, in this case the denominations such as the Churches of Christ, into which the Stone-Campbell movement eventually splintered. The only alternative, as some of the radical anti-institutionalists of the 1960s discovered, is an institutional self-immolation so complete that a movement simply ceases to exist.

So Christianity's history is a recurrent spiral of inspirational outbreak, institutional containment and renewed inspiration. Martin Luther proclaims a gospel of Christian freedom; establishment Lutheranism settles into a static orthodoxy; Pietism challenges it with a religion of the heart; Pietism itself swiftly adopts surprisingly rigid norms; the Moravians challenge it in turn. 'A Pietist', the Moravians' founder Count von Zinzendorf observed wryly, 'cannot be converted in so cavalier a way as we can. … We ride, and the Pietists go on foot.'[2]

But secondly, and more interestingly, there is more to the institutionalization process than this. Sometimes – normally, indeed – it

[1] Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1989), 179.
[2] Quoted in W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge, 1992), 136–7.



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fails entirely. Sectarian movements collapse, wither or spin out of control as quickly as they had flared up: routinizing charisma is easier said than done. There was a moment when the Moravians seemed poised to inherit the whole evangelical movement, but, under-institutionalized as they were, they then blew themselves apart with financial scandals and a swerve into idiosyncratic devotional practices that most of their contemporaries found bizarre. Christianity's history is dotted with eras of inspirational creativity and sectarian formation, from the earliest church onwards: most of these new movements quickly gutter out, usually with a whimper, occasionally – especially in the case of certain apocalyptic movements, which use predictions of the imminent end of days to avoid institutional constraints – with a bang.

Yet some flourish. They tend not to be the movements that fossilize, or those that clamp down most effectively on the disruption of inspirational religion. They are the ones which learn to manage it. They build institutions which work with the grain of inspiration: to discipline, house-train and direct it, not to suppress it. They may even intensify it. They develop structures which are flexible enough to accommodate and benefit from inspiration but supple enough to contain it. The early church's development of episcopacy – a collective-security system in which authoritative local leaders could generally manage their own affairs but could also call on, or restrain, one another when necessary – is the archetype of such a system, an institution whose ability to manage the wildly fissiparous tendencies of early Christianity without squeezing the life from it gave it a totemic status that endures to the present. Or again, the Benedictine rule could hardly be described as *routinizing* charisma; we might rather say that, in the manner of monastic winemakers, it bottled charisma, to be laid down to mature and uncorked when needed. In the Reformation era, the primary reason why the diverse and quarrelsome family of the Reformed tradition has come to be known as 'Calvinism' is that Calvin found an institutional expression – the fourfold ministry, synodical government, cell-churches, endogenous discipline – which enabled the movement to spread like bindweed in the most inhospitable of environments. Mid-seventeenth-century England saw a surge of sectarian creativity: the Muggletonians, Diggers and Fifth Monarchists came to nothing; the Baptists and the Quakers found structures that endured, structures that governed them loosely enough for them to flourish, tightly enough for them to hold together. John Wesley came late to the



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revivalist party in the eighteenth century, but by using the established Church of England as a matrix on which Methodist movement's connexional system could be grown, he created an institution which outspread and outlasted most of its rivals.

This is not to suggest, like a low-rent management consultant, that there is an organizational secret sauce for ecclesiastical success: much less that this volume will reveal it. Plainly, institutional structures that have nurtured inspiration in some eras have choked it or been overwhelmed by it in others. The relationship between institution and inspiration in Christian history is not a formula, but a complex and unpredictable dance, in which neither dancer is particularly surefooted but in which, for all the mis-steps, the show has – so far – kept going. This volume of essays consists of reports from the sidelines. Some articles consider cases where the dance has found its rhythm and flowed smoothly, even gracefully; some look at moments when the dancers have not been in time, or have indeed reached the stage of kicking each other in the shins or walking away entirely – only to discover, of course, that neither one can manage on their own. These are stories about how formal structures of authority have negotiated with the fluid reality of charismatic leadership; about how even institutions that have managed to absorb inspirational movements with delicacy and grace have nevertheless changed them profoundly in the process; about how institutional memory has meshed with inspirational revival, since both of our dancers are deeply aware of the depth of the traditions they follow. We read about how institutions have picked their paths between suppressing, ignoring, condoning, manipulating and celebrating inspirational movements; how inspirational movements have rejected, negotiated with, exploited, succumbed to or taken over institutions, or simply flourished safe within their walls; or, often, how they have whipped up new institutional structures of their own, which, in the way of things, mostly crumble or subside in a generation or two. Inspiration may feel more ephemeral than institutions, but in long historical perspective it may be that the opposite is true.

The two conferences from which these articles were taken were held – although we did not know it at the time – on the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic which began in early 2020. Producing a volume under those circumstances has been a trial for the contributors, whose access to libraries and archives has been sharply curtailed, and for the Ecclesiastical History Society as a whole. The society has done what institutions do best when facing unexpected crises, that is,



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to adapt and press on: and we all owe a considerable debt to the society's officers and committee, who have ensured that, a year on, the institution is stable, financially sound and shaping itself to the emerging circumstances. As to whether its inspiration has deserted it, that is for readers of this volume to decide.

Alec Ryrie



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