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Sharing the Burden

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Last week, sandwiched in between updates on Beyoncé's trip to the West Coast and sighting of the latest super moon, the Huffington Post featured an article by power preacher Lillian Daniels entitled "Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me." Daniels lamented her situation on long plane flights, where she had to endure the stories of fellow travelers who, upon finding out she is a minister, confessed their rejection of religious institutions in favor of finding spirituality in sunsets and walks on the beach. Inevitably, they would present their experience to her as a revelation: "Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature." Daniels' article represents a backlash coming from the institutional end of the spectrum, but her plea for loyalty to religion-in-community was met by many who found her (apparently, according to the comments section) insulting, condescending, and close-minded.

I relate this anecdote to refresh our memories about the fact that emotions continue to run high around matters of religious institutional life. This is not territory for the faint-hearted, even if historians occasionally may find archaic the preoccupations of previous generations with denominations or churches. Thus I am especially grateful that four outstanding scholars of religious history have written sustained responses to my call in January 2013 for more conversation about the rubric of church history. My intent in that presidential address was to further a conversation about the meaning of "church history," both as an historical category and as part of our lived reality of modern institutional life. In my address I attempted to tack back and forth between our theoretical preoccupations and our own social and professional circumstances, because of my conviction that the two cannot be separated. Despite our assertions of freedom of choice, institutions shape our own lives as much (if not more, as John Lardas Modern's comments suggest) as they did the lives of our predecessors.

I'm not surprised, given my own bifurcated focus, that my respondents selected varying points to dig in and begin conversations, all of which can lead us in fruitful directions. I'd like to briefly highlight the points that

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pertain most directly to the issues I hoped to raise, with the full knowledge that there is much more to be culled from their provocative reflections. Brad Gregory rightly notes that the procedural questions raised are, to a great extent, issues confronted by all historians: how do present-day observers bring new questions to bear on the past without losing sight of older approaches? He is correct that my comments were at least partially intended as a plea for scholarly humility on everyone's part: the pressures of professionalization (another institutional constraint) all too often encourage scholars to frame their work as latter-day revelation rather than addition to ongoing discussions. While sometimes our academic fathers and mothers do need to be corrected and less occasionally renounced, more often they simply need to be joined by a newer generation of approaches that can make sense of the past in a different way (and perhaps one more relevant to current preoccupations). So, in this case, exploring religious life in its relation to race, gender, or class is terribly important—and indeed, essential for a full understanding—but it doesn't obviate the need for recognizing the relevance of institutional life. If anything, these newer theoretical lenses (and the constellation of cultural analyses that have been generated) should lend new dimensions to our studies of the "church."

Here is where I may differ from Gregory, who wants to separate *logically* the conception of "church" operative in the ASCH before the 1970s from a general turn away from ecclesiastical institutions and collectively constituted experience. He is certainly right that the former does not necessarily imply the latter. Yet in the case of this field of church history, at least as it is demonstrated in journal articles and conference papers, there is a connection precisely because our own notions of what constitutes history are intimately bound up with our own relationships within institutions, be they churches, universities, or something else. It is exactly those often-invisible webs of significance (with the allusion to Weber fully intended) that shape our approaches to historical subjects, for better or worse. Perhaps it is optimistic to assume that by thoroughly exploring our own webs we can become better historians (indeed, it may only betray my own entanglements in therapeutic culture), but I think it can help—*not* because it will enable us to feed back to our students or audiences what they expect to hear. Far from it! Precisely because, knowing what those expectations (and ours) are, we can better use history to challenge their assumptions in order to think critically about them.

Sylvester Johnson's essay provides an excellent case in point by probing the close relationship between the growth of British nationalism and a particular understanding of the Anglican Church. Johnson incisively describes how the purportedly transnational character of the church became a model and justification for the imperial reach of a globalizing empire; he even raises the intriguing question of whether ecclesiastical formation manifests itself

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primarily as a mode of extending political dominance. This suggestion raises many questions that could be explored fruitfully through a comparative assessment of the concept of "church" in a wider set of times and places, focusing on different kinds of empire (since modern nationalism presumably employs quite different modes of orientation than did the Roman Empire). Even in the modern era, however, "universalism" has assumed multiple meanings that deserve careful parsing. In the case of the AME Church and Bishop Richard Allen, for example, the invocation of the universality of the church provided a critique of national formation by allowing its followers purchase in an alternate community. Allen's approach to his Methodists roots evinces this complex set of obligations: faced with the choice of joining a separate African Episcopal Church being formed by many of his African American colleagues, Allen declared that he would remain a loyal Methodist (because it was the Methodist faith that had saved his soul). Yet he also renounced white iterations of his own denomination because the American churches had not stayed true to Methodist piety as he construed it (i.e., as an interracial, egalitarian institution). This suggests, at the very least, a qualitatively distinct approach to universalism than that employed by white Americans or by African American Anglicans. They all espoused a "universal church" as an ideology, but their relationship to contemporary material and political contexts rendered their "universalisms" quite disparate. Did they all desire domination, and of what did that domination presumably consist? Johnson's focus on nationalism opens up a host of terrific avenues for scholarly pursuit.

Through a case study of a very different place and time, Barbara Newman's essay also challenges the meanings of church, of membership, and of what universalism might mean. Through her discussion of the meanings of church history for Hildegard of Bingen and William Langland, she rightly reminds us that, no matter the origins of the ASCH, Catholics have always maintained a robust theological definition of "ecclesia" that opens us to a different understanding of sacred history. And, lest we get sloppy with our assignations of religious agency, she points out that the idea of church membership as a matter of choice (not merely which church to join, but whether one joins a church at all) is very recent and still inflected very differently for Catholics than for our professional forebears in this Society. Echoing some of Johnson's mention of universality, Newman focuses on the "doubleness" of this ecclesiastical vision, one rooted in the present but with tendrils constantly reaching toward the past and future. Both transnational and transhistorical, filled with pleasure and pain (sometimes agonizing pain) the ecclesia as it is rendered by Langland and Hildegard radically relativizes the present moment by presenting a longer view of the Church. Newman reminds us, as does Gregory, that attention to Catholic understandings of the

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church both past and present can enrich our conversations and challenge us to think more expansively about religious institutional life. To be sure, the liberal protestant view of universalism had its blind spots, and we would be well advised to focus sustained attention not just on Roman Catholicism but on Eastern Orthodox traditions, Mormons, and others who claim the mantle of a Christian polity.

I should not be surprised that John Lardas Modern honed in most directly on the reflexive elements in my address. Invoking Laurie Anderson's work is an apt way to capture the multiplicity of responses that we have to institutional life (just as Hildegard and Langland did, apparently), including churches. But it is also true that in this modern, neo-liberal moment the reach and ubiquity of bureaucratic structures have never been as tenacious. I tried to capture some of my own ambivalence about those structures—our need to analyze them, the pleasure we can take in them, our frequent desire to escape them—in my address and in my previous work. My book on African American sacred history is, to my mind, an attempt to explore precisely the "mechanics of connection, grounding, and orientation" that Modern calls for, and I could not agree more about the need for such work to continue. As I read his comment, however, I discern a significant misreading of my argument. Modern takes my comments about the application of Marx and Foucault—comments specifically directed at my reading of Marilynne Robinson—as a rejection of cultural studies. Nothing could be further from the truth; cultural studies and its myriad practitioners have ineluctably shaped my work. But I don't want to focus on my intellectual genealogy as much as I want to underline what I understand as the critical universality of the very critiques Modern mounts as particular to the institutional topics on which I focus. Far from wanting to defend any particular institutional tradition (and certainly not that of 1950s liberal protestants), my point is to use cultural analysis to relativize them all, including our own assumptions about free agency. Modern is no more a free agent than I am, inasmuch as we both exist in academic communities that regulate our activities and our production. This is precisely why we desperately need to be reflexive, while knowing that we will never quite grasp all of the ways that our social circumstances shape our behavior. We need analysis and humility, in equal measure.

In like manner, I would not want to be read as defending the ASCH of the 1950s; on the contrary, my point was exactly to suggest that the iteration of the discipline of church history within a liberal protestant milieu during the era of the "organization man" has had lasting effects and has limited our line of vision in particular ways. I hope for an even more rigorous historicizing of the origins of this society that has shaped the idioms in which we speak in order to imagine alternative ways of thinking about church (some of

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which have been suggested above). Cultural studies provides wonderful tools to do so, but those tools must be wielded with awareness of their limitations and occlusions alongside their advantages. Here, too, I will defend my fellow religious historians rather than call for more criticism. Gregory, Johnson, and Newman's essays, for example, exemplify the multiple ways that historians of church life draw from questions raised outside of church history (literary studies, postcolonial studies, etc.). Far from understanding the church as a "universal rubric," they mine the past for the many interpretive possibilities that might help us better understand this constantly contested and shifting concept.

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