



THE GATE OF HEAVEN IS EVERYWHERE

Among the contemplatives

By Fred Bahnson

All happy religious families are alike; each unhappy religious family is unhappy in its own way.

The family of American Christianity has been unhappy for quite some time, so much so that it's hard for many of us to imagine that it could be otherwise. The past four years have brought these feuds into the open. For Catholics, there is the glaring pedophilia scandal. For evangelicals, there is disagreement over church leaders' alliance with power, their unwavering fealty, since 2016, to the crotch-grabbing Caligula of Mar-a-Lago, whose every abuse of office made them double down on their support.

For mainline Protestants like me, the discontent has been less visible. Denominational squabbles over human sexuality have made headlines, but across every denomination a certain lassitude pervades, a general lukewarm-

ness that makes it feel as though Protestantism has run its course. When the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation rolled around in 2017, a few academics published monographs on Luther, and a commemorative study Bible appeared, but with church membership declining in every mainline denomination, Protestant circles shrugged. We knew there wasn't much to crow about. What was it, exactly, we were still protesting?

Outwardly, it might look as if the family dynasty is on the wane, a decline that deepens with every new Pew study. What of the alternatives? A growing number of people are simply leaving the Christian household altogether, becoming Spiritual But Not Religious. Among some conservatives, there is talk of "strategic withdrawal" into tiny neighborhood enclaves. In *The Benedict Option*, Rod Dreher asserts

that serious Christian conservatives could no longer live business-as-usual

Fred Bahnson's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "The Priest in the Trees," appeared in the December 2016 issue.

lives in America, that we have to develop creative, communal solutions to help us hold on to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them.

Dreher laments “the breakdown of the natural family, the loss of traditional moral values, and the fragmenting of communities,” which he blames on “the flood of secularism.” But the Ben Op, as Dreher calls it, feels a lot like old culture-war stuff repackaged with a catchy title; what Dreher really means by “our values” is protecting the Christian family from “the LGBT agenda.” By accepting gay marriage, his argument goes, the church has failed. “I have written *The Benedict Option* to wake up the church ... while there is still time,” he warns.

Meanwhile, those on the Christian left are also digging in politically. The primacy of *race-class-gender* (in the world of progressive theological education it’s often said breathlessly, as one word) as an interpretive grid, the focus on political advocacy, the intense energy directed toward voter registration or climate justice or affordable housing—all of this can make it feel as if progressive churches have become religious versions of MoveOn. The drive to stay politically relevant makes it hard to talk about prayer or salvation or Jesus, unless it’s a prayer that everybody at a rally can get behind, a salvation that exists in this world, or a Jesus who is just a political rabble-rouser. If conservatives like Dreher fear assimilation, progressives fear being too Christian. Having grown up in one camp (conservative), I long ago threw in my lot with the other (progressive), but my point here is not to promote camps or criticize platforms. It is precisely to say that religious life, to its detriment, has been reduced to a platform.

Like the Kardashians, the American Christian family has become obsessed with its own profile. It has become faith as public spectacle, faith as political engagement, as party affiliation, as reputation—anything but faith as paradox, as mystery, as the hidden and seductive dance between spiritual desire and satiation, the prolonging of a hunger so alarmingly vast and yet so subtle that it disappears the moment it’s made public.

In early monastic Christianity, that hunger was acknowledged and channeled, given shape and form and expression. It went by different names—*contemplatio* (silent prayer) or *hesychia* (stillness)—which led first to an inner union with Christ, and then to a deep engagement with the suffering of the world. The order was important. In John Cassian’s *Conferences*, a fifth-century account of the early Christian monastic movement in the deserts of Egypt, a certain Abba Isaac describes how the monks modeled their prayer on Jesus’ practice of going up a mountain alone to pray; those who wished to pray “must withdraw from all the

THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICS SOUGHT AN INTENSE EXPERIENCE OF INWARDNESS GLARINGLY ABSENT IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY TODAY

worry and turbulence of the crowd.” In that state of spiritual yearning, God’s presence would become known. “He will be all that we are zealous for, all that we strive for,” Abba Isaac said. “He will be all that we think about, all our living, all that we talk about, our very breath.”

What the early monks and the Christian mystics who followed sought was union—an intense experience of inwardness that is glaringly absent in what many of us get from American Christianity today. Perhaps this absence is the real reason for the mass exodus from churches. Perhaps it is not Christianity that many followers are disappointed in, but Christendom.

While the mysteries of contemplative Christianity were once handed down by emaciated anchorites in the Egyptian desert, the modern wisdom seeker might find himself, as I did, in the Albuquerque Convention Center, watching Richard Rohr speak on a Jumbotron.

On the last Thursday in March 2019, I arrived at the Universal Christ conference—an event coinciding with the release of a book by Rohr with the same title—along

with several thousand other people. Rohr, a Franciscan priest whose books consistently make the *New York Times* bestseller list and whose Daily Meditations newsletter has nearly half a million subscribers, began the conference by reading from the well-known “water from the rock” chapter in Exodus, the story in which Yahweh commands Moses to strike a rock with his staff, causing a spring to gush forth.

“Sounds like paganism,” Rohr said. The crowd laughed. Water is the one element necessary for life, he continued, which is why baptism by water became Christianity’s initiation rite.

“This is why we need to read scripture symbolically,” Rohr said. “Who cares if it happened on this or that day? Who cares? Read it as the unlikely source of life and grace: water from a rock. Symbolic language is true on three or four or five levels, but we’re afraid of it.”

Since Rohr founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in 1987, his aim has been to revive the Christian contemplative tradition. For a growing number of Christendom’s defectors, his teachings have provided a bridge, even a destination. Through conferences, podcasts, dozens of books, a two-year curriculum called the Living School, and his newsletter, Rohr has become a leading voice for a growing population within American Christianity: those who were leaving the church not because they were done with Christianity, but because they were drawn to its more ancient, mystical expressions. In addition to the two thousand attendees from fifty states and fifteen countries, nearly three thousand more people from forty-two countries joined via webcast. I bought one of the last tickets before the conference sold out. To his credit, Rohr is quick to say that whatever popularity he enjoys is not because of himself—“God deliberately made me not so good-looking. I’m short and dumpy, a B student ... and I don’t think I’m a saint”—but because he speaks on behalf of what he calls the perennial tradition, a lineage rooted in Christianity but that he says is present in all faiths.

The “all faiths” part of Rohr’s message is sincere—he often concludes his

prayers with “in the name of Jesus and all the holy names of God”—yet he considers himself an orthodox, Catholic Christian. Part of the delicate balance Rohr has achieved lies in maintaining his institutional credentials. He told me proudly of a call from Cardinal Timothy Dolan declaring his new book free of doctrinal error—while not shying away from critiquing the church and its many failures. Throughout the conference, Rohr dished out a series of barbs aimed at Christian piety.

“How did the church create so many Christians who don’t love the world?” he asked. “We’ve created fire-insurance people. They have an evacuation plan to the next world. They’re fear-based. Why do they have such little spiritual curiosity?”

The message of the Gospels, Rohr later told me, “has been pretty much co-opted by empire, by academia, and by a sort of elegant notion of priesthood that’s disconnected us from the earth beneath our feet.”

The problem is not just with Catholicism. Rohr’s core audience, including many of the people I met that weekend, consists of disaffected Christians of all denominations who feel like outsiders, or perhaps fringe dwellers, and are leery of the established church. Part of Rohr’s appeal is that he keeps one foot in orthodox Christianity while also pushing the boundaries of the faith.

That first evening, Rohr read a passage from Genesis, the account of Jacob’s ladder. In the story, Jacob had left Beersheba and was on his way to Haran when he stopped to sleep. That night, Jacob dreamt of a ladder that reached heaven, with angels going up and down. When Yahweh appeared in the dream and spoke to him, Jacob awoke and exclaimed, “How awe-inspiring this place is!

This is nothing less than a house of God, this is the gate of heaven!” To mark the place, Jacob set up a stone monument and anointed it with oil.

“Let’s start by anointing one thing,” Rohr told the crowd, inviting each table to pour oil on the rock in its center. My table watched him on the Jumbotron, then eyed our own rock,



something like volcanic basalt, next to a dropper of olive oil.

“You have to be in awe and kneel and kiss the ground before one thing,” Rohr said, holding up his right index finger. “Then you can do that for everything. Jesus is the concrete, Christ is the universal. Wherever you want to kneel and kiss the ground, that is Christ for you.”

Over the next three days, the Universal Christ conference became what the organizers called “a pop-up spiritual community.” With Tibetan singing bowls and periods of communal si-

lence, a certain ceremonial ethos prevailed. I never warmed to the Jumbotron. Still, the gathering felt surprisingly intimate, even worshipful, less like a conference and more like, well, church.

In addition to Rohr, the conference featured two other speakers: John Dominic Crossan, an elfin-voiced Irish

New Testament scholar, and Reverend Jacqui Lewis, an African-American preacher from New York. Reverend Lewis gave a talk called “Where Is the Crucified Body of Christ Today?” She invoked Mother Earth and climate change, racism and white supremacy. “The crucified Body of Christ is in cages at the border,” she said.

The majority of attendees were white, but Rohr and the CAC say they are actively trying to diversify their audience, in part by recruiting more people of color as teachers. Reverend Lewis is one. Another is Dr. Barbara Holmes. Rohr quoted Holmes often that weekend. Several weeks after the conference, I read her book *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, and I was particularly struck by her phrase “crisis contemplation,” especially in the context of black religious experience. The

contemplative experience, she writes, has always been part of African-American religious life, often hidden in plain sight. Holmes writes of the civil-rights movement, in which she was an active participant: “You cannot face German shepherds and fire hoses with your own resources; there must be God and stillness at the very center of your being. Otherwise, you will spiral into the violence that threatens you.”

I was seated at a table with Chris Hoke, the founder of Underground Ministries, a prisoner reentry project in Washington State. Over the years, Hoke had introduced contemplative

prayer to incarcerated men, including those in solitary confinement. Sitting next to Hoke was Ray Leonardini, a retired lawyer who now teaches trauma-informed contemplation to men at Folsom State Prison in California. I asked Leonardini what drew him to contemplative practice. “The only spirituality that’s worth a damn is one that deals with our pain, our trauma,” he said. “The subconscious is where all the action is.”

Between sessions I strolled through the atrium. One of the welcome tables featured signs for affinity groups. **CANNABIS USERS FOR CHRIST** stood next to **SUFI TAOISTS FOR CHRIST**, and **RAISED BY AN ATHEIST (REALIZED THEY WERE CHRIST)**, and one that simply said **CANADIAN**. Given the event’s outlier vibe, the sign for **ORDAINED ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS** seemed the most incongruous, but this was after all the *Universal*—not the stingy, parochial—Christ conference, and it brought all types. Standing alone, as if none of the others wanted to associate with it, was a sign for **TRUMP SUPPORTERS**.

Talk of Trump was blessedly absent at the conference, though it seems the Donald had inadvertently boosted Rohr’s following. A number of evangelicals turned to Rohr’s teachings following the 2016 presidential election, in which 81 percent of their fellow churchgoers had voted for Trump. My friend Hoke told me of his own vocational crisis following the election. He grew up evangelical, and though he’d long ago opted out of that tribe, his work as a prison chaplain in Washington’s Skagit Valley involved partnering with local churches, most of them evangelical or mainline Protestant. He remembers driving across Washington soon after the election, in the dead of winter, listening to a podcast debunking the myth of the nose-holding voter. Evangelicals didn’t vote for Trump reluctantly, a study showed; they supported each promise of his campaign platform. Hoke was irate. “I thought, *What the fuck am I doing working with these churches?*” he told me. “I felt so betrayed. I don’t want to be the judge of anyone’s heart, but anthropologically speaking, these peoples’ values were not recognizably Christian.”

After working through his initial anger, Hoke reconsidered. He realized that he made allowance for guys in prison all the time. *What if churches were just boxes of people, like prisons?* he thought. *Some people inside them might be connected with Jesus, others not.* Hoke still had access to these boxes of church people, just as he had access to boxes of incarcerated men. Following that realization, Hoke began connecting parishioners and prisoners through letter writing and a shared contemplative practice. “Jesus called people out of both the temple and the tombs. He called both into his movement,” Hoke told me. “That’s how I’ve come to understand the word ‘church’ now: *ekklesia*, or public assembly, might better be translated as ‘movement.’ Maybe this very connecting of religious folks and the most repressed in society is my part in that movement: a larger spiritual reorganizing of human relationships that breaks down walls between us and them, the inside and the outside, the living and the socially dead. That’s what Jesus is doing in every version of the Gospels: breaking down barriers. My contemplative journey is to open both boxes and discover that we’ve needed each other.”

Hoke’s idea of the church as movement was in some ways what the conference was about. Though initially it felt a bit fringe, my experience over the course of the weekend began to deepen. More than the plenary sessions, I came to look forward to our times of contemplative prayer, when all two thousand of us would sit in silence for ten minutes. And not a polite silence. I mean the kind in which you sit long enough to become vulnerable, when you feel on the cusp of hearing something necessary that might otherwise pass you by. Rohr and Lewis led these sessions, sometimes solo, often together, and their gentle manner onstage set a tone that invited us to attend, if only for a few brief moments, to something quiet and ancient and true.

On Monday, after the conference had ended, I spoke with Rohr in his book-lined adobe office at the CAC headquar-

ters. He wore a full gray beard, a plaid shirt, and jeans. I found him avuncular and easygoing, if a bit worn out from the event. Over the weekend, I'd heard attendees use the words "mysticism" and "contemplation" interchangeably. I was curious to hear Rohr describe the difference.

"My definition for mysticism," Rohr said, "is experiential knowledge of the Holy, the transcendent, the divine, God—if you want to use that word, but I'm not tied to it." Experiential knowledge, which differs from textbook knowledge, "will always be spoken humbly, because true spiritual knowledge is always partial. You know you don't know the whole mystery. But even one little peek into one little corner of the mystery is more than enough."

Rohr's experiential knowledge of the Holy came one summer evening at age ten. While visiting his cousin's farm in western Kansas, he lay on a little patch of velvety grass hidden behind some chokecherry bushes. He was there alone, just looking up at the stars, when he felt the world open up. "It doesn't sound very original at all," he said and laughed, "but I knew the world was good, that I was good, and that I somehow belonged to that good world. It was what the Buddhists would call waking up, overcoming your separateness." He had no words for it as a ten-year-old boy, but he credits the experience with giving him the psychic self-confidence that would later carry him through thirteen years of formation, the training in theology and philosophy required to become a Franciscan priest.

One of Rohr's main projects is to move his fellow Christians away from dualistic either-or thinking and point them toward a more expansive faith that he calls the contemplative mind, or as the early Christians called it, *contemplatio*.

Though one could cite the Gospels, which report Jesus going frequently up a mountain to pray alone, Rohr's brief history of *contemplatio* starts among the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers. Rohr can't prove this, but he thinks the early monks began to speak of *contemplatio* instead of *oratio*—the word for spo-

ken prayer—because *oratio* had been co-opted by Constantine's Christian empire. Prayer became "a formulaic repetition of telling God things or announcing to God your grandma was sick, which is nice, but even Jesus tells us, 'Why do you tell God what God already knows?'"

"That sounds like the *juswanna* prayer," I said. In my evangelical church growing up, I explained, the pastor would scrunch his eyes shut and say, "We *juswanna* thank you, Lord, we *juswanna* ask you," a curious form of address that, even as a child, struck me less as an intimate connection with God than a kind of inane virtue signaling. Rohr gave a deep belly laugh and winced. "But it's so sincere, isn't it? God must be so patient to put up with that."

As Rohr tells it, the contemplative mind went underground during the Protestant Reformation. It was still being taught in some monasteries as late as the fifteenth century, and in isolated places such as Spain there was "an explosion of contemplation" through the mystical writings of Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross. But then came Luther's *sola scriptura* and Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, both of which placed the dualistic, egoistic mind at the center. Guigo the Carthusian, a twelfth-century monk, spoke of three levels of prayer: *oratio*, or spoken prayer; *meditatio*, using the mind to reflect on a piece of scripture; and *contemplatio*, the wordless prayer of the heart. This is the moment, Rohr explains, when "you shed the mind as the primary receiver station. You stop reflecting. You stop critiquing or analyzing. You let the moment be what it is, as it is, all that it is. That takes a lot of surrender." After the Enlightenment and its Cartesian dualisms, the contemplative mind—"our unique access point to God," as Rohr describes it—"was pretty well lost."

It was through the writings of Thomas Merton, Rohr believes, that the contemplative mind resurfaced. On the wall of Rohr's office hangs a framed cover of Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, first published in 1948, a story about a bohemian artist turned monk. When I later asked Rohr how he came by the first-edition

