



WEIRD CHURCH

WELCOME TO THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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INITIUM



The Colors of Cultural Revolution

There is a Catholic church just outside the tourist gates of the Forum in Rome called Santa Francesca Romana. It is built on the ruins of the Temple of Venus and Rome. According to legend, this church sits on the place in which Simon Magus wanted to prove his powers as stronger than those of the apostles and started levitating in front of Peter and Paul. The two apostles fell on their knees preaching, and Simon fell, dying. This church is just steps away from the Arch of Constantine that marks one of the greatest turning points in history—the military coup that eventually made Christianity the mainstream religion of the empire, about seventeen hundred years ago.

On a summer day in 2014 in a sea of tourists, the bells chimed for the 11 AM Sunday mass. Curiously Beth walked in to find that the priest was the only person in the sanctuary. The ancient space was awe-inspiring and no one was there for mass. At the epicenter of the birth of Western civilization and Christendom, no one was attending mass. Much could be written on the reasons why that particular church is today a museum to the glorious past. But is it also a canary in the coalmine? Especially as we look toward midcentury in the United States, why do we believe that the United States will continue to be exceptional in resisting the tide of secularization that has taken Christianity in Europe to ruin?

American Christianity, as a compelling social institution, has outlived European Christianity by about half a century. We were more innovative, for one thing. And without a state church, we have typically had more church options per community than is true anywhere in Europe. Plus, for a variety of reasons, which we will address below, the social assumptions that undergirded Christendom simply lasted a bit longer on this side of the Atlantic. But, since the turn of the twenty-first century, if you have been paying any attention at all to the news about American religion, you are aware that we are becoming more like the Europeans every day. We are experiencing a vast and unprecedented exodus of Americans from organized religion, similar to what Europe saw in the years just after World War II. For every ten that leave the old-line churches, two or three stop in at the nondenominational church. And a steady trickle of frustrated young evangelicals keep traveling against the traffic back towards the liturgy, the architecture, and the more liberal possibilities of a few old churches. But the overall trajectory is grim, if you have any investment in “church-as-we-have-known-it.”

“Please God, not on my watch,” bishops and other denominational leaders pray under their breath, as hundreds of congregations go from full-time pastorates to less-than-full-time and then to closure and the selling of property. About a decade ago, Paul wrote a book with a bold title: *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*. In fact, we continue to see amazing possibilities for any church that is willing to do a deep rethink of mission and ministry and to follow the Spirit to new places, *and* which is fortunate enough to have a pastoral leader of somewhat exceptional gifting. What this means is that for every church that manages a comeback, nine do not. And even where there is a comeback this year, there is a good chance of a renewed and intensified decline in the same place just a decade or so into the future. It is truly a perilous time for institutional Christianity in America.

A few years ago, the bishops of The United Methodist Church decided (albeit briefly) that new church starts might save the denomination, since new churches have a track record of reaching new people faster than existing congregations. But over the last two decades, planting churches has become harder, and the size of the new churches launched has steadily de-

clined. In many neighborhoods, a church planter can do everything she was supposed to do a generation ago to get two hundred people, and today she will be lucky to gather about a third of that—not enough to pay the bills. According to a recent study by Lifeway Research, the median worship attendance in an American new church start in the first year is thirty and slowly grows to seventy-two by year four. Under conventional assumptions of church with the full-time pastor-employee, the building, and the ability to send financial support to the denomination, most of our new churches are not financially viable after five years. Even with less-than-full-time pastoral leadership in many cases, nearly one third of current American church plants will never discover financial self-sufficiency. Hence many end up failing, especially if they are dependent upon denominational money to stay alive.¹

Once upon a time in the American heartland, circuit riders and camp meeting alumni planted churches faster than they could start the towns and cities. Today one of the Methodist bishops in the heartland longs to plant “bread and butter churches,” which would grow to sufficient financial strength to build a building, pay a preacher, and send some money to headquarters. We feel his pain. With very talented and well-coached church-planting leaders here and there, we will still see more of these in the years ahead. But we will not see enough to turn the tide of the overall decline. The whole paradigm of church that has traditionally undergirded such projects is dying, along with the market of people who respond to such opportunities.

The buzzword du jour is *sustainability*. If only we can find enough money to keep these places open, maybe then the lack of people will not be so much a threat. Sustainability is important. Our company works to help churches create sustainable ministry models and to raise funds. But we do not believe that sustainability is the critical issue. Where there is spiritual vitality, the church can always find a way for sustainability. In fact, our vision would be a church that is both spiritually robust *and* able to cover its costs. The word for that would be *resilient*: a faith community that moves beyond mere financial sustainability—and that is suited for a viral replication.

No other church is as loaded financially as the Roman Catholic Church. They have the cash flow to stay in the game longer than any of us, albeit in a downsized form. Yet that image of being the only one who shows up for worship lingers in the background, twisting us in pangs of anxiety and a sense of hopelessness as if all of Christianity is falling off a cliff. We might wonder, what is the point of the priest in the empty church with his salary endowed overseeing an institution where the spiritual movement it existed to support has died? We believe God desires something much more of the church than financial sustainability.

In the years ahead, we will see many Christian clergy just giving up on the whole enterprise of “church-as-we-have-known-it,” and finding different work. Others will narrow their focus to be chaplains to an aging remnant. Still others will obsess over liturgy and pageant. More than a few will gallantly seek to organize for social justice. Some of the most highly motivated will resolve simply to try harder at the things they know how to do, with some smart tweaks, as they seek to compete for the dwindling remnant of people willing to engage. A small minority will be fortunate enough to preside over growing congregations, and many of those congregations will in fact grow to be very large, with multiple locations. But the latter will be very much the exception, and not the norm.

The Christendom world we knew is gone.

If you cannot accept yet that it’s over—if you choose to dwell a few days or few years longer in the unreality that the institutional church “as-we-have-known-it” still has significant control over the future of the Jesus movement, then you might as well stop reading right here. We can’t help you with denial.

But if you have already awakened to the great dis-ease that the future is not the past, then *by all means*, come along with us! And if you are open to consider a new way forward, hang in here with us! We think you may in fact find the pages ahead most encouraging.

We (Beth and Paul) are Christian leadership coaches. We have worked with hundreds of leaders. We are conversant with the cutting edge of Christian ministry in places ranging from China to Germany. In the midst of all the change and the overall trajectory of decline in the West, we continue to

see hope for the spiritual future of North America. Many of our clients are growing ministry in their communities. Some of them are launching new spiritual movements with the capacity for rapid multiplication and world impact, both in existing churches and in new. But they are coloring outside conventional lines—in all sorts of ways. In the world that is unfolding, thriving ministry often looks and feels really weird to those who were raised in Christendom churches and/or trained to serve them.

In this book, we work from a particular framework for understanding the social changes that are driving the North American decline of organized religion. We did not invent this framework. (We are not that smart.) But we have found it to be immensely helpful in making sense of current realities, especially to explain why some churches are thriving while most are not. Most importantly this system offers a perspective that moves us from the cliff of confusion toward a realistic hope for the new days ahead.

This model is called Spiral Dynamics. It is a particular theory of human bio/psycho/social evolution, developed by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, rooted in the work of Clare Graves. There are all kinds of folks across the years (philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and so forth) who have offered developmental models to explain how people and societies grow and change. We chose Spiral Dynamics for this conversation simply because we think it offers a compelling framework to explain what's going on underneath the surface of the changes we are experiencing today.

Don Beck and Christopher Cowan are co-founders of the National Values Center and authors of the 1996 book *Spiral Dynamics*. The book offers a comprehensive model of human and cultural development that allows us to better understand where we have been and where we are going. Their premise, based on four decades of research, is that human nature changes as the conditions of existence change, thus forging new systems. We change our psychology and rules for living to adapt to these new conditions. When our worldviews begin to collide with more complex life conditions, we are able to transcend the old and include the new. Both individuals and societies move along this evolutionary spiral of development, much like the major cognitive, moral, and faith developmental theories suggest.² This movement vacillates between expressing our individual selves to sacrificing our selves

for the good of the whole. Each new system is a prelude to the next one. Both personally and corporately we can't jump levels of development; rather, we have to go through them all in a particular order. As our worldviews grow we can move up and down the spiral to meet the particular needs that our life conditions warrant.

It is important to note that these value systems are expressed in people and are not to be mistaken for types of people. They are like fractals or operating systems that point to how people think and not what they think. Each of these value systems can be expressed in both healthy and unhealthy ways. This developmental spiral is not a dominant hierarchy; rather, it is a holon (something simultaneously a whole and a part) much like the building blocks of life itself—atoms to molecules to single cell organisms to more complex life forms that transcend and include the earlier manifestations towards more complexity. As St. Paul reminds us, the eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you!" (1 Cor. 12: 21).

The levels of development along the spiral are color-coded for ease of application. Here are the characteristics of each, stated briefly in the order that they evolved throughout history, and also the order that human beings experience them today.

Beige began two hundred fifty thousand years ago as stone-age humans used their instincts and habits just to survive and get their basic needs met. It is a survival mentality. All humans begin at this stage at birth and can revert to this stage through illness or catastrophic disasters.

Purple began about ten thousand years ago after the end of the last major ice age when small bands of people bumped into others and had to compete for resources. As a response they formed into tribes that practiced mutual reciprocity. This self-sacrificing value system shows allegiance to the chief, elders, ancestors, and clan through rituals, magic, and superstition. The primordial stories in the early part of the Book of Genesis originated in a purple context.

Red came into existence as the safety and security needs of the tribes were met and people began questioning the superstitions and rituals of elders. This desire to be free and break away was the beginning of the ego-centric system. This worldview expresses itself as impulsive, creative, and

energizing as well as dominating and aggressive. It enjoys the self to the fullest without regret or guilt. Think of two-year-olds, rebellious teenagers, gangs, feudal kingdoms, contact sports, the mafia, Mardi Gras, and the Wild West.

Blue counters the lawless self-expressions of red with enforcing a code of conduct that produces stability, laws, and discipline with a healthy dose of guilt. This worldview helps to build character and moral fiber as one sacrifices the self to a transcendent cause, truth, or righteous pathway. Moses delivering the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai to the tribes of Israel ushers in the blue system. This value meme helps people have a fresh start as they are born again and forgiven whether or not that is within a faith tradition, a boot camp, or a 12-step group. Think of the birth of all the major faith traditions, patriotism, the Protestant work ethic, Roberts Rules of Order, and authoritarian regimes. With all blue systems, the “old and cherished ways” are the only way. Many of the “salt of the earth” people who were anchors of the communities where many of us grew up expressed healthy blue to their core. Blue worldview shows up on all ends of the spectrum in fundamentalist groups of all persuasions from quiet conservatives to atheists. When blue is fully engaged, tolerance and understanding are largely absent. Try to challenge some assumed premise of theology or politics with a person in the blue zone, and you may find them arguing back at you until they are blue in the face. Anytime that we find it unsafe or provocative to raise honest and reasonable questions about faith, we are likely experiencing a community with blue worldview.

Orange shows up once blue stabilizes the world and brings order. As this happens the focus can shift to an I-me-mine-express-myself system of achievement and personal success. This is a movement from the sacred to the secular, as witnessed with the birth of the Enlightenment and the conviction that societies prosper through reason and science. The United States was formed out of this value system. Democracy, freedom, liberty, technology, and competitiveness are key. Think of the age of exploration, colonialism, the industrial revolution, Wall Street, the emerging middle class, Shark Tank, and the church growth movement. Key words spoken in this worldview are free market, profit, entrepreneur, strategic plan, excellence, met-

rics, purpose-driven, and business models. Twentieth-century New York City pastors Norman Vincent Peale and Harry Emerson Fosdick, though different theologically, pioneered a life-coaching form of preaching that has been adapted in various ways as a foundation stone for most suburban megachurches in America that live out of this worldview.

Green came onboard as people began to question the affluence and excesses of orange. Global warming, world peace, eliminating hunger, and closing the gap between the have's and have not's are important issues within this value system. The focus moves back from the individual to the larger community. Feelings, sensitivity, caring for all people, equality for all, consensus processes, and reconciliation are expressions of the green worldview. Think of the Beatles, liberation theology, feminism, LGBTQ rights, Black Lives Matter, political correctness, national healthcare, Congress of World Religions, farm to table food, and recycling. (Millennials are turning up green in unprecedented numbers—largely explaining why they struggle with church organizations designed for folks with blue and orange sensibilities.) When persons of green worldview choose to participate in a church it is usually because they bring with them a very positive experience with Christ from their younger years in a blue/orange kind of community. As adults, they no longer feel at home in the church where they were raised. But, somehow, they long to integrate Christian experience and identity into their adult life and worldview. Their peers, however, *if* they had no such formative experience early in life, will seldom express interest in joining them on this journey.

Yellow is the first value system that can respect all the perspectives along the spiral as healthy and needed. It can take a balcony view of all the colors along the spiral and can integrate facts, feelings, and instincts in order to help the evolutionary spiral function in a healthy way. Flexibility, spontaneity, and functionality have the highest priority. People operating in the yellow zone think and act from an inner-directed core, free to be and do as they choose. Intuition plays a key role. They not only think outside the box but also have moved outside of it as they experiment with new ideas. They are able to access knowledge on multiple levels and are comfortable with paradox, taking “both/and” perspectives. They look to chaos as a gift that

helps to leverage the potential for healthy change. Think of people and organizations using chaos and systems theories, as well as experimenting with holocracy.³ This is at present a very small percentage of Americans, estimated by Don Beck at maybe 1 percent. Look for their numbers to increase exponentially between now and midcentury. You will know them by their capacity to think beyond the confines of politically regimented thinking or behavior. They have moved out of fear and into freedom. Bible study with these folks can feel like playing in a sandbox of delight.

Turquoise experiences the wholeness of existence through mind and spirit with mystical and intuitive sensibilities. There is a growing sense that reality can be experienced, but never fully known. This value meme stands in awe of the cosmic order in which every person, species, and creature belongs. Fractals, holons, and waves are the images that help to express this connection to everything in an ecological alignment. This value meme is able to gather groups of people to work on solutions to global problems, moving beyond all the barriers of race, culture, and nation toward a global tribalism. Ego is virtually nonexistent. Think morphic fields, integral theory, evolutionary spirituality, intuitive thinking, and cooperative action. This is the most advanced value meme articulated in the Spiral Dynamics model to date, and it represents a very tiny group of people so far.

Spiral Dynamics anticipates a potentially endless array of value memes that stretch into the future mostly beyond the time horizons that we are considering in this book. It is important to note that this is the first time in history when all the colors of the spiral are bumping into each other, creating cultural wars and political polarities around the globe. It is vitally important that more people move into the second tier yellow and beyond worldviews so that we can solve the increasingly complex problems of our world.

Unless you are already very familiar with the aforementioned color code, we recommend that you make a tab or dog-ear this page so that you can come back to here as reference when you may be unclear why we are referring to one worldview or another in the pages ahead. In some cases, rereading this summary of the value memes will help readers make fuller sense of comments we make in the pages ahead.

Almost every Christian denomination was born out of a blue value system, and the middle-class American variety of church grew up in a mostly orange value system. American Christianity in the twentieth century was a mix of blue and orange and often a tug-of-war between the two. Now we are seeing that the green value system that so boisterously announced its arrival in the 1960s was not just a fad (as many church people hoped). Steadily more and more people in the United States are moving into the green worldview, following patterns observed in Europe, Canada, and Australia in recent decades. We see this most clearly expressed in the U.S. Pacific Northwest and the Northeast, where a growing number of people self-identify as “spiritual but not religious.” However, in most metropolitan areas of the United States there are major pockets of green showing up, often growing from the middle of the city outward. And in the age of Internet connectedness, this is in no way limited to central city life or to university communities.

When people move into the green value system, there is a precipitous drop in their ability and willingness to relate to blue and orange inspired systems. The percentage of green worldview people who are interested in exploring organized church is much lower than for blue and orange worldview folks. Churches that designed ministry for people in the green zone have historically shrunk or remained quite small, until recently, as more and more people began emerging into this worldview. The Unitarian Universalist churches have begun growing recently—for the first time in many years. Hardline fundamentalist churches are not growing as they once did; what is left of American church growth is now mostly a soft-pedaled evangelicalism, orange for all practical purposes, perfectly positioned for consumers who want a positive and practical faith experience for themselves and their kids. Most growing churches in the early twenty-first century are simply (and often brilliantly) positioning themselves to glean the dwindling supply of people who are still shopping for a good church—many of whom were raised in very blue homes.

Using Spiral Dynamics, we can see that the role of the church is not to turn “green” people “blue,” but rather to partner with people, however we find them, to create that new thing that longs to spring forth. For many of

the remnant church members in the conventional churches, this may be distressing, because what is unfolding simply does not look like our mother's church.

But in all times and cultures from the first century until now, the Christian gospel has found fresh expression that is both indigenous to a new time and place and also rooted in the ancient story and wisdom. We believe a gospel expression birthed in a green value system can be just as faithful, if not more faithful, than what was birthed in the blue and orange value systems. Faithful and also weird, relative to what we have previously known. You can love Jesus at any place along the spiral.

Weird Church is divided into two sections. *Primus Motus* explores seven significant ministry implications that flow from the epic cultural shakeup underway from blue to orange to green to yellow value systems. For church of the Christendom variety, the shift to a green value system may feel like a cultural earthquake, shaking everything down to the foundations. You could think of these first seven chapters as aftershocks that flow from the most fundamental cultural shifts underway. But if they are aftershocks, there is nothing automatic about them—they each require leadership.

In *Secundus Motus*, we will offer glimpses of what the immanent future will likely look like—we are getting far enough into the liminal sea that land is beginning to peek through the fog on the far horizon. It is not all mystery—there is emerging clarity about what is coming, and with every passing year it will be getting clearer.

This is not about the random flavor of the month or some clever idea one church had in Omaha. This is about the kinds of churches that will thrive in the years before us, because leaders were willing to make some difficult moves in sync with the Holy Spirit.

We do not see a uniform future as we move into the green and yellow value memes. Where blue expressions are conventional, green expressions are “multi.” There are many futures, parallel futures if you will. Many churches will rise from the ashes as Christian leaders rise to the challenges of this moment in history. Some of them will be relatively orthodox theologically, with respect to past theology. Others will be highly

syncretistic, blending sources and traditions that have not commonly been mixed together.

Another way of saying it would be simply: “There are many shades of weird in the church that is rising, post-Christendom.” Some of them will not be your cup of tea. But one of them might surprise you and your friends, offering a newfound experience of the Holy, and very possibly in a place and manner where you least expected it.