

## PRIESTHOOD IN THE POST-MODERN WORLD BY DR. HARVEY COX

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**“The priest is a human being like all the rest of us. He or she is born, lives, works, and dies as any other human being. Priests do not belong to a special caste. They are not semi-divine beings or people removed from the stress and strain of normal human living.”**

Within weeks after the ending of the Second World War in Europe, Cardinal Suhard, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Paris, hit upon a new plan to meet the religious needs of the battle-weary people of France. His idea would eventually have far wider implications for the concept of priesthood in the emerging post-modern world than he could have imagined. The Cardinal was vexed by what appeared to him to be a deep chasm between the church and the working masses. He told his friends that he often anguished over this terrible separation and that it kept intruding into his meditation and prayer. Finally, in response to a memorandum sent to him by two priests who had worked with young factory workers—Abbe Godin and Abbe Daniel—Cardinal Suhard drew up a scheme for what was to become known as the “worker-priest movement.”

The idea of this experiment was a radical one. Hundreds of young French seminarians would be trained not only as priests but also in the skills of factory work. They would be detached from ordinary parishes and sent to live and work in the vast industrial slums surrounding Paris, Marseilles, and some of the minor cities of France. There they would labor and live among the urban proletariat and seek to work out a new form of priestly ministry. The idea, as one of the priests wrote later, was “to become a worker among workers as Christ had become man among men.”

From the outset, the worker-priest experiment was highly controversial. The young priests did relate directly and compassionately to the working masses in the factories and slums. Contrary to what many had expected, they were warmly received by the workers and their families, and together they began to think through a new and more relevant form of priesthood. However, there were grave worries among conservative members of the hierarchy about how the experiment was going. Some complained that the young priests would “inhale too much of the poisonous atmosphere” of the working classes. Others feared they would not have enough time for prayer or that they would become unduly involved in “merely temporal” concerns. The papacy also itself expressed its grave reservations about the experiment, and in 1954 Cardinal Lincin articulated the growing official opposition in the following words: “The current experiment cannot be continued in its original form... The Holy Father has taken this decision for doctrinal reasons. Being a priest and being a worker are two separate functions. Two different states of life. They cannot be joined in one and the same person without derogating from the idea of the priesthood. The business of the priest is to consecrate his life to God and to the service of souls. The worker accomplishes a temporal task.” Eventually Rome decreed that all the worker-priests must be withdrawn from their work in factories and should live in normal parish-

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es under the close supervision of their bishops. Officially the worker-priest experiment came to an end, even though some of the priests stayed on without the sanction of the hierarchy.

The worker-priest movement in France raises a number of questions about priesthood in the post-modern world that go beyond Christianity. What is the nature of religious priesthood? Is it possible to make the priesthood more relevant to the changing conditions of industrial and information-based society? What forms of opposition do changes in the organization and expression of priesthood meet when they are attempted?

In English the word “priest” is derived from the Latin “presbyterios,” which simply means an “elder.” It suggests a person of wisdom and experience who is asked to assume a particular responsibility in a religious community. There are other meanings which have also become attached to priesthood, mainly the idea of a mediator, that is one who intercedes between God and the people, both as the people’s representative before God and as God’s spokesman or channel to the people. In many religions, priesthood has an additional significance. It suggests someone who offers a sacrifice. Still, the main function of priesthood continues to be that of mediation.

The study of the history of religion and comparative religion clearly reveals that although priesthood has been a feature of nearly every religious tradition in human history, it varies greatly from time to time and place to place. Priesthood does not take the same form even in the same religious tradition over the course of time. Recent research in the history of priesthood in ancient Judaism, for example, has revealed that in the earliest period a wide variety of different persons served as priests in a wide variety of ways. As the society became more complex, hierarchical and centralized, the priesthood also became more centralized in one tribe, the Levites, and even in certain members of that tribe. Studies of the role of the priest in Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity also reveal a remarkable variety in the ways priesthood has been expressed through changing times and altered circumstances. Within the Christian tradition, the role of the priest differs markedly from church to church and from age to age. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, at least in recent centuries, the priest is set apart by a special ordination into sacred orders, a ceremony which is believed to confer an indelible supernatural quality on its recipient. In the Latin rite Catholic churches, celibacy is mandatory, but in the Uniate and Maronite branches it is not. In most of the Anglican tradition, both men and women are now ordained into the priesthood and all are permitted to marry. In the Eastern Orthodox traditions, priests generally are permitted to marry, unless they have taken additional vows as monks, and many priests work in other kinds of occupations in addition to serving as priests.

In most of the Protestant churches, the pattern of priesthood was set by the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Martin Luther, who first studied law but became a monk after his personal religious conversion, eventually reintroduced a concept of the priesthood which dated back to the earliest days of Christianity and even to early Judaism. He taught that everyone in the church was called by God to be a priest—a mediator of God’s love—to his or her fellow human being. This teaching of Luther drew both on the notion of the “nation of priests” found in ancient Judaism and also on the radical equalitarian concept of early Christianity, what Elisabeth Schüssler Fioreuss has called the “discipleship of equals.” Luther was especially concerned about the temptations to corruption and misuse of power which frequently seemed to arise in a permanently separated and consecrated priestly hierarchy. He was opposed to priestly celibacy, which he thought set priests too much apart from the everyday joys and concerns of life, and he himself married a former nun.

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Luther also worried about how an unduly elevated and set-apart priesthood can lead to corruption and the attempt to monopolize spiritual power. During his life, the papacy was pressing the sale of so-called “indulgences,” in part to raise money to construct St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The idea behind the indulgence was theologically questionable even on the basis of prevailing Catholic belief. The indulgences were sold to people who wanted to make sure that their departed ancestors and family members would reach heaven. Luther first attacked both the idea of the indulgences and the corrupt financial practices of the church of his time. Eventually, in his famous tract *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he insisted that priests cannot claim to be the sole mediators between God and man. He claimed on the basis of his reading of the Bible that every person had equal access to the presence of God, since the spirit of Jesus Christ was present in every person. It was at this period that Luther declared his famous principle of the “priesthood of all believers,” the idea that we all mediate the divine to each other.

In the four centuries since Luther, the various protestant churches have not always practiced the idea of the priesthood of all believers with the kind of thoroughness his teaching suggests. This is understandable. In any religious organization certain functionaries have a tendency to accumulate both symbolic and organizational power and to find ways to legitimate it theologically. This suggests however that the capacity for corruption lies not in the idea of priesthood itself so much as in the inner dynamics of religious organizations and in their interaction with the societies in which they live. The solution seems to be to recognize that the more widely the responsibility of priesthood is shared, the less chance there is for corruption and the misuse of spiritual power.

Do we have new models of priesthood in the post-modern world that might serve us better than the traditional ones? Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, which took place from 1962–1965 in Rome, the bishop of Cuernavaca in Mexico gave an especially pertinent answer to this question. Bishop Don Sergio Mendes Arceo came to his position as bishop from an earlier career as a historian of religion and culture. The Second Vatican Council had strongly emphasized the idea of the church as a “people of God” and had underlined the responsibility of all members, especially laity, to assume their responsibilities within the body of the church. In his cathedral in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Bishop Mendes Arceo introduced a practice which seemed to symbolize the new direction. At the Sunday Mass, he entered the crowded cathedral from the side door and stood directly in the center where the two aisles crossed, dressed in his ordinary street clothes. When everyone had been able to see him in his loose trousers, open-collared shirt, and leather sandals, he smiled and nodded to the attendants around him. They approached him with the bishop’s cope and mitre and with the other liturgical vestments of the Mass, placing them on the bishop in full view of the congregation. Once vested for the Mass, Bishop Mendes Arceo then proceeded in this colorful regalia to the high altar where he and his co-officiants presided over the Mass, with the bishop usually preaching the sermon. At the close of the Mass, the bishop returned to the center of the cathedral still in full view, and the attendants removed the priestly and episcopal vestments, leaving him once again in his street clothing. He then walked to the exit of the church and stood there to greet the worshippers as they filed out.

What Bishop Mendes Arceo once jovially referred to as his “ecclesial strip tease” had a serious theological purpose. It stated in a very dramatic and visible way two things about the priesthood which are important for religious people in a post-modern world where we all play multiple roles, and where sharing power rather than accumulating it is important.

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1) The first is that the priest is a human being like all the rest of us. He or she is born, lives, works, and dies as any other human being. Priests do not belong to a special caste. They are not semi-divine beings or people removed from the stress and strain of normal human living.

2) The second aspect of the priesthood that Bishop Mendes Arceo's practice revealed is that the priest exercises a particular responsibility within the religious congregation. He expresses one "gift" among all the other gifts which other members of the congregation have and also exercise. Priests have a function that goes along with other functions in a religious body in which there is a wide variety of different functions and tasks to be performed.

For two decades, Bishop Mendes Arceo of Cuernavaca was a leader not only in the liturgical reform movement within the Catholic Church, but in finding other ways to relate the church more creatively to the problems and challenges of the modern world. He strongly emphasized the political and social role of Christians in striving to make the world more just and peaceful. He was a strong advocate of human rights especially for people oppressed by the military dictatorships which caused so much suffering in Latin America at the time. His liturgical practice and his social theology were integrated with each other and he represented them both with great dignity and intelligence.

By the time of the retirement of Bishop Mendes Arceo ten years ago, a major reaction against much of what he stood for was already underway in the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. The more participatory and equalitarian practices introduced by the Second Vatican Council were questioned by the new leadership in Rome, both by Pope John Paul II and by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Also the call for a more politically and socially relevant Christianity began to be viewed with suspicion and distrust from Rome. After Bishop Mendes Arceo's retirement, a more conservative and traditional bishop was placed in the diocese of Cuernavaca and many of the changes Mendes Arceo introduced have now been reversed.

When one thinks about Cardinal Suhard, Martin Luther, and Bishop Mendes Arceo, it becomes evident that changes in the priesthood are responsive to at least two factors. First, they respond to changes and developments *within the religious tradition itself*. Over time all religious traditions evolve and develop. Otherwise they rigidify and die. There is also no such thing as a permanent and eternal form of priesthood not subject to development, alteration and evolution. Second, such changes also respond to changes in the *enviroming social and cultural setting* within which religious movements live. The growth and spread of movements emphasizing racial justice, democracy, the equality of the sexes, and international cooperation obviously create an atmosphere to which religious groups cannot remain wholly unresponsive.

Luther did not reconceptualize the priesthood exclusively on the basis of his study of the New Testament. He was also responding to the anger and resentment of the peasants of Northern Europe about the financial extractions drawn from them by an increasingly greedy church. In addition, Luther was supported in his reformation by the princes who resented the tendency of the Roman ecclesial authorities to translate their spiritual power into a form of political imperialism. Cardinal Suhard, living in post war France, realized that the chasm between classes in industrial societies is one which must be addressed. The fact that his bold experiment with the worker-priests was finally terminated by higher authorities in the Catholic Church should not detract from the imagination and boldness of its original concept. After the worker-priest movement was terminated in France, some-

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thing very similar to it arose among Protestant ministers in Germany and among Catholic priests in Latin America. It could be argued that the entire “liberation theology” movement, which has been one of the most powerful currents in Christianity in the last four decades, owes its inception in part to the worker-priest experiment. Likewise, Bishop Mendes Arceo, although he was a scholar of scripture and religious history, was also aware of the dislocation, suffering and oppression of the third world and wanted to make both the church and the priesthood a more relevant witness to the vision of justice and peace which is central to the Christian notion of the kingdom of God.

The question of how the divine presence mediates itself to human beings and of how human beings encounter the holy will continue to vex and challenge people as long as religions exist. Since the questions religions address are so basic to human existence, it is safe to assume that men and women will continue to be religious in one way or another as long as they are human. Within this larger picture of the religious enterprise of humankind, the function of priesthood will inevitably assume a wide variety of different expressions and forms. It is vital to recognize, however, that symbolic power is real power. It can be used both for positive and for negative purposes. Since priests are also human, and have a tendency to try to control and monopolize symbolic and spiritual power, it is safe to predict there will always be revolts against established priestly classes and that the vitality of religious traditions will continue to reformulate what priesthood means. Meanwhile, Martin Luther’s historic assertion that in one sense all human beings mediate God to each other, and that all persons receive the blessing of the divine presence from other people continues to be a powerful insight. One can easily see parallels to it in various other traditions including in the Islamic Brotherhoods, the so-called New Religious Movements of Japan, and in lay Hindu organizations that seek to reconcile people of different religious backgrounds. What seems clear is that in the post-modern world with its emphasis on change and fluidity, no single form of priesthood has any particular claim to exclusive legitimacy. In one way or another we are all priests to each other and we need to be constantly searching for the most effective ways of expressing that common priesthood. □

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