

Every church is molded to a great extent by its sociocultural context. The American church is no exception. Its buildings, songs, language, organization and even theology are influenced by the ideas and practices of its people. We cannot speak of *the* American church, just as we cannot speak of a single American culture. We can only talk in terms of various types of American cultures, and of the kinds of churches that tend to grow in each of them.

A typology

Mary Douglas in *Natural Symbols* (Random House, 1970) provides us with a useful typology



of societies and cultures that we can use to analyze the relationships between churches and their sociocultural contexts. Douglas uses a two-dimensional grid in which to locate her types. The horizontal dimensions are group control. On

the left are societies in which individuals are strongly controlled by their group. Figuratively speaking, the people march in lock-step with their peers. In the U.S. for example, this strong group consciousness is often found among ethnic groups that are mobilized for the defense of their own rights. On the right end of the scale are societies that stress extreme individualism, often to the point where each person fights for his or her own rights. Commitment to corporate groups is low. They exist largely to help individuals realize their own goals and potentials. In America such communities are frequently found in urban areas. Societies with strong group control tend to emphasize bonds of kinship and hereditary relationships. Those with high individual freedom make extensive use of voluntary associations and contractual relationships. Most American communities can be placed somewhere on the continuum between these two extremes.

Douglas' second dimension has to do with world view. On the upper end of this scale are societies or individuals with a strong monocultural world view which they publically affirm or even try to force upon their neighbors. This provides them with a highly ordered and comprehensive system for the explanation of human experience. They see the world as being built upon a single uniform order that encompasses all of nature and society. People with monocultural world views have never seriously considered the possibility that others may hold a different world view that makes sense to them. Such people often live in homogeneous societies with few foreigners or as dominant majorities in societies with powerless minorities and the views of foreigners and minorities can be ignored as primitive and foolish.

On the lower end of this scale are people who have come to recognize pluralism not only in cultural behavior but also in beliefs and fundamental assumptions. They recognize that people of integrity may hold different world views, even if they reject these as false and hold strongly to their own. Beliefs and world view are considered to be more private rather than public matters. These people often belong to larger societies in which there is little common agreement as to the nature of reality and morality, no strong sense of absolutes, and few common beliefs or symbols to hold people together. Consequently, the world outside of the individual or the homogeneous group appears to be chaotic, confusing and often evil.

Types of cultures and churches

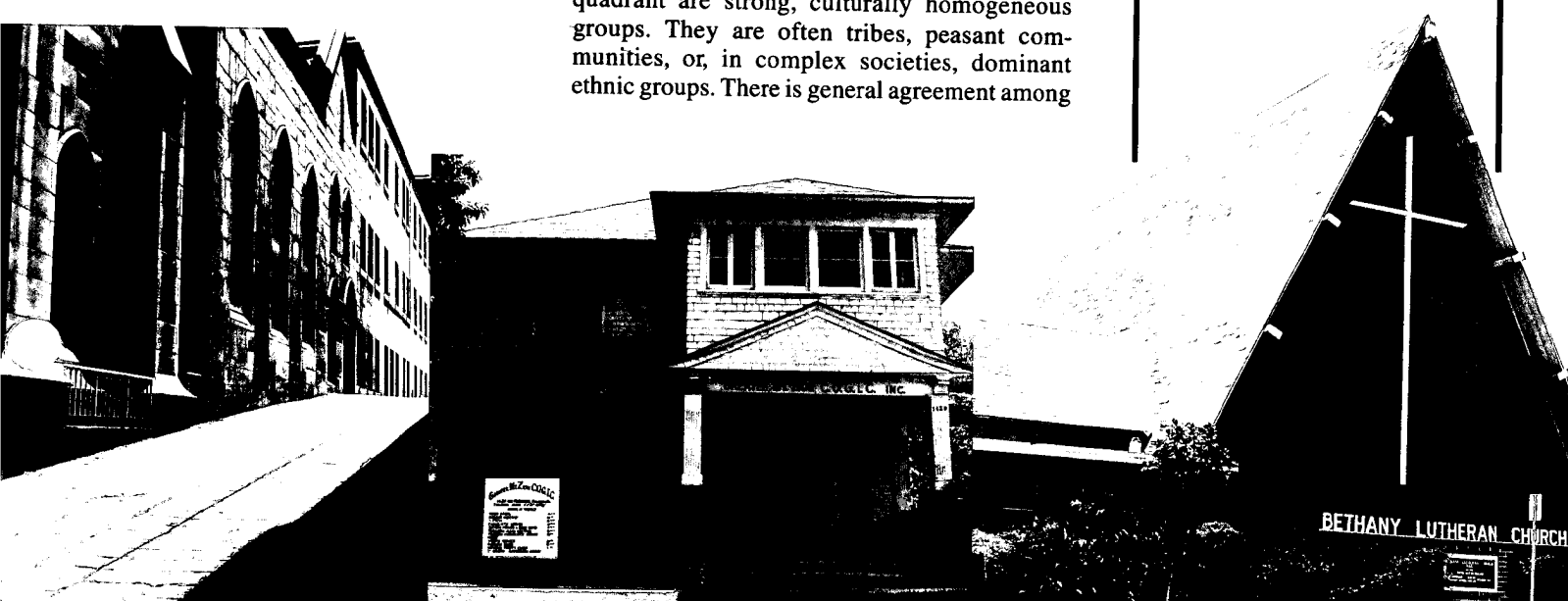
Using Mary Douglas' grid we can look at the diversity of the American church as this relates to its sociocultural context. The grid can be divided into quadrants which can be used to analyze particular types of cultures and churches. These are ideal types. Rarely do we find cultures and churches that exactly fit any one of them.

The High Church • Societies in the upper left quadrant are strong, culturally homogeneous groups. They are often tribes, peasant communities, or, in complex societies, dominant ethnic groups. There is general agreement among

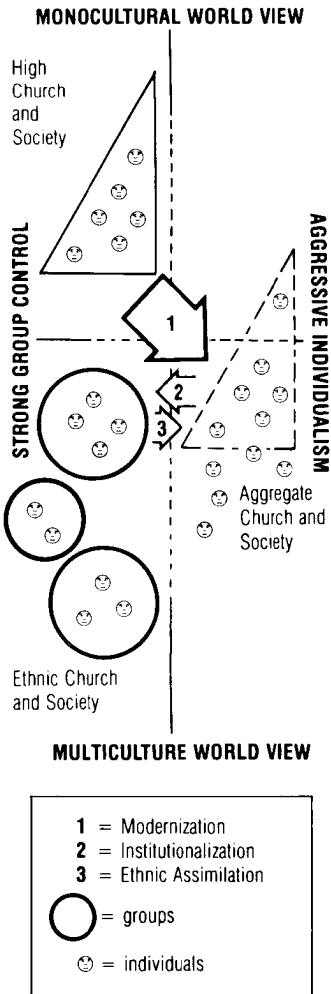
Church and Society: An Analytical Typology

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TYPES OF CHURCHES AND SOCIETIES



the people on the nature of reality and morality. The world itself appears to be uniform, orderly and predictable, and therefore, meaningful and friendly. Truth is eternal, and is found in the traditions handed down from the forefathers. It is often embodied in creeds, myths, chants, songs, texts and other highly structured and symbolic forms of knowledge. Language in these societies is used mainly to transmit the unchanged knowledge and beliefs of the group.

Rituals play an important role in these societies, not only as statements about the nature of reality, but as living expressions of that reality. Little distinction is made between the form and meaning in cultural symbols. For example, men in battle are willing to die for their flag. And people do not go to church in order to worship. In going to church they are already worshipping. The performance of a ritual in itself brings about the desired result.

Social organization in this quadrant tends to be bureaucratic. Leadership is in the hands of elders, officials and priests who receive their authority from the group. Social values such as conformity to the norms of the group, etiquette, status and recognition of social hierarchies, wealth, offices and public displays of generosity are held in high regard.

Churches in these societies have many of the same structural characteristics. They tend to have a high view of God, and to stress His holiness and transcendence. The world is His creation, and so is order and good. These churches often have a high sense of the righteousness and purity of God, and make a sharp distinction between sacred and secular. Certain times, places and persons are thought to be pure and are symbolically set apart from the ordinary polluting world. Asceticism takes on meaning as a search for greater purity and sacredness. Rituals play an important part in expressing and maintaining the cosmic order. Sin is perceived as a transgression against this divinely created order. Admission to the church is often based on birth, or on group conversions in which whole families, lineages or tribes turn to Christ in people movements. The church and its task are perceived within the

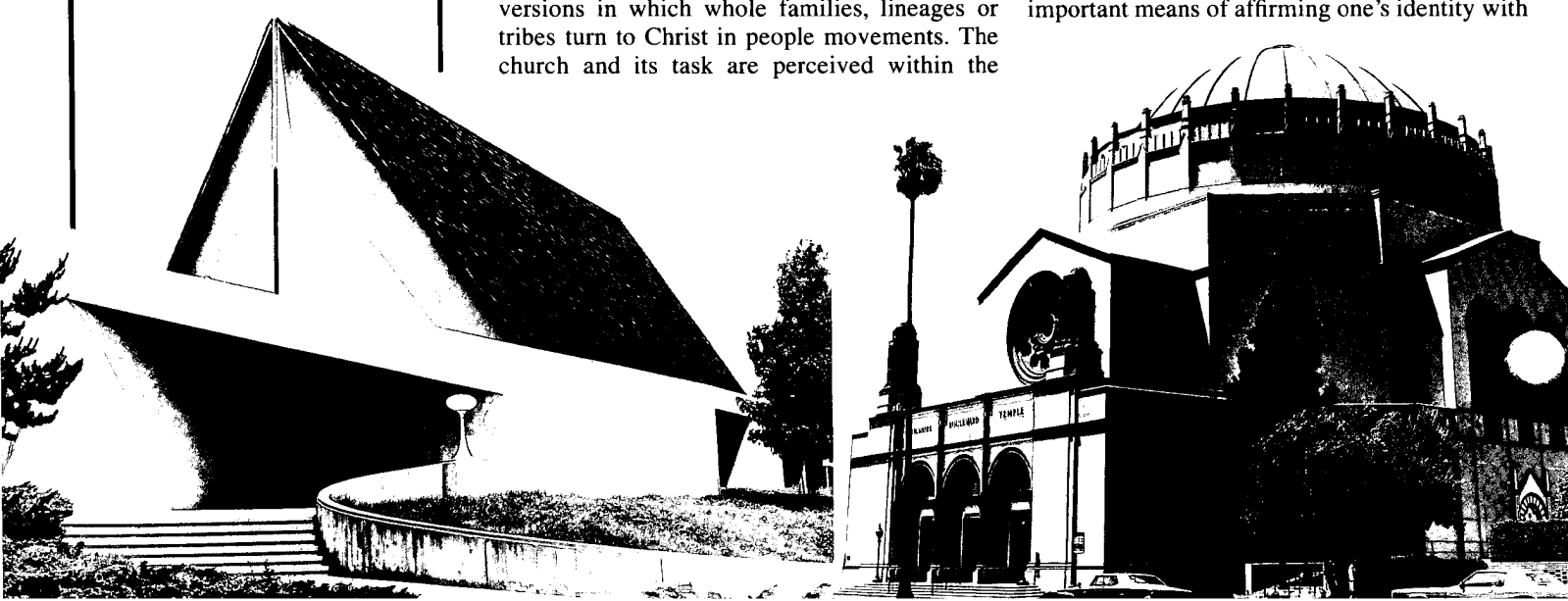
broader context of the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. If any one hymn were used to express the world view of the high church it would be "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

The Ethnic Church • Societies in the lower left quadrant are tightly knit, culturally homogeneous groups, but unlike those in the upper left, they are islands of community in a sea of foreign cultures. In America these groups are often ethnic minorities who have a strong positive consciousness of their identity and cultural distinctives but are painfully aware of the foreignness of the dominant culture around them. The world within the group is perceived as orderly and right. Outside it is chaotic and evil. The group sees itself as civilized and righteous, but in danger of being corrupted by the unrighteous world. Consequently it must build and maintain boundaries around itself to preserve its identity and purity.

Inhabiting what they perceive to be a chaotic and evil world, people in this quadrant often turn in to their social group for meaning and identity. Truth is commonly equated with the affirmations of the group. The human body and culture are frequently thought to be evil. There is often a strong sense of sin and an intolerance of imperfections, particularly in leaders.

The ethnic group is held together, in part, by common code of behavior backed by ethical sanctions. It feels threatened by contacts with the outside world and seeks to maintain its identity by demanding loyalty and conformity to the group. This stands in marked contrast to the dominant group whose integration is based on a common, publically affirmed world view and a homogeneous social order, and whose identity, therefore, is strong enough to allow for internal social and ideological variations, so long as these do not threaten the total sociocultural order.

The social organization of ethnic groups tends to be based on principles of personal relationships and brotherhood. Participation in conferences, festivals and other group gatherings is an important means of affirming one's identity with



the group. Leaders are generally those personally known and trusted by the people. But because the people feel hemmed in by a warring universe, they are often caught up in rivalries, fission and witch hunts.

The ethnic church often sees itself as the last defender of the faith in a world of relativism and sin. It stresses the immanence of God, and the need for personal fellowship with Him. He is the one who is leading the church, like the people of Israel, through the wilderness of life. The Kingdom of God is equated with His people, the church, and, in the extreme case, with their communities and lands. Stress is often placed on separation from the world and its culture. This may be expressed by symbolic behavior that sets the group apart from the general society. Sin is perceived largely as a violation of group norms, and leads to a sense of shame. One of the cardinal sins is to leave the group. Membership is often based on an inner conversion and an outer identification with the group. Conversion frequently follows patterns of group dynamics and people movements. If one were to choose a hymn to characterize these churches, it would be "Hold the Fort, for I am Coming."

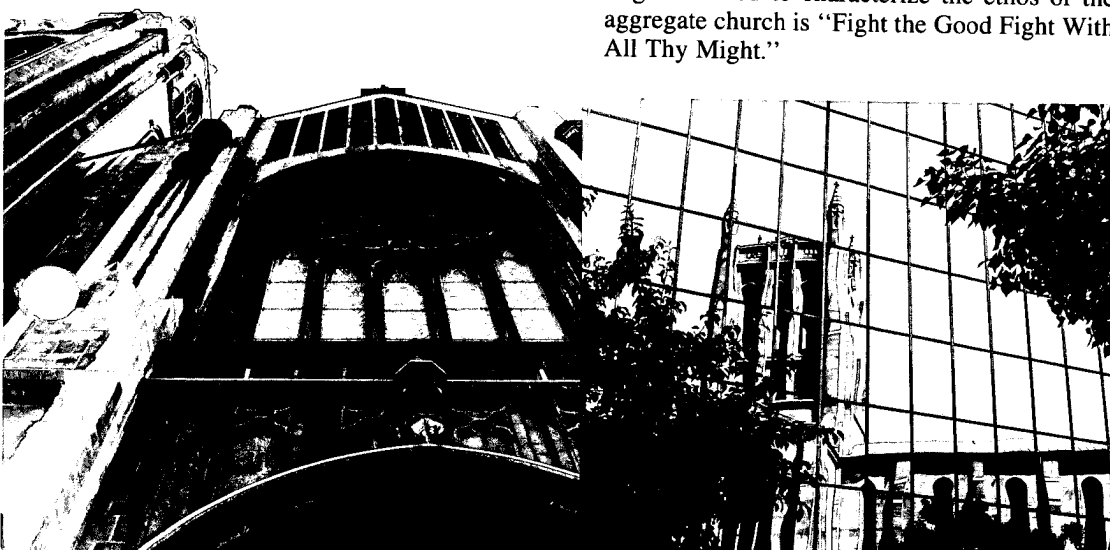
The Aggregate Church • Societies in the lower right quadrant are individualistic and culturally heterogeneous. The people's pursuit of personal goals and self realization take priority over their responsibilities to corporate groups such as church and neighborhood. Individuals in dominant and ethnic communities frequently feel a bond of kinship between them—that is, they see themselves as the same "kind" of people. But for people in aggregate societies bonds of kinship and ethnicity often mean little. Children move away from their parents at marriage, and marriage itself may be seen as a contract that can be broken. Social organization in aggregate societies is built on voluntary groups formed on the basis of shared characteristics—on holding the same set of beliefs or interests, on having the same age or sex, or on living in the same area. Culturally the aggregate society is pluralistic. There is no single agreed upon set of

values and norms, no uniform world view that serves as a common basis for integrating the society. There is a tendency to see the world as an impersonal place, determined by natural laws and by forces largely beyond human control. The lack of a uniform cosmology and stress on individual achievement is often accompanied by the loss of a sense of the sacred, and a secularization of the universe. While rituals have cosmic significance in the high society, and corporate significance in the ethnic society, in the aggregate society they take on inner and personal significance. A sharp distinction is made in symbols between form and meaning, and importance is ascribed to the latter. For example, one goes to church in order to worship. But if in the service one has no meaningful inner experience, the ritual itself is thought to be meaningless. Aggregate societies are often anti-ritualistic in nature. Religion becomes a matter of personal faith and conviction.

People in aggregate societies frequently lack strong dogmatic convictions about the nature of reality. Consequently they are attracted to charismatic leaders who do. Such leaders command the trust and loyalty of their followers, and provide them with a clear sense of meaning, purpose and certainty in the midst of an uncertain and confusing world. But these leaders belong to the upper right quadrant. They are strong individuals with deep convictions about the way the world *really* is or should be. They have a monolithic world view which they are willing to share or impose on others.

The visible church in the aggregate society is a voluntary association. Primacy is placed on inner experiences, and God is often seen as a personal friend. The Kingdom of God lies within. There is less of a sense of the sacred, and fewer symbols and rituals calling attention to the holy. Rather, fellowship and mutual support among believers are stressed. Sin is perceived in terms of violating one's personal ethics, and is accompanied by a sense of failure. Conversion is a highly personal matter, and frequently is thought of in cognitive rather than behavioral terms. One hymn that might be used to characterize the ethos of the aggregate church is "Fight the Good Fight With All Thy Might."

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Sociocultural movements

The model presented so far is a static one. But cultures and societies change, and with them their churches. There are many kinds of change. Only three will be used here to illustrate the dynamics of the model.

Modernization • Modernization, at least in its Western forms, has been characterized by a movement from the upper left to the lower right quadrant. Culturally Medieval Europe was dominated by a monolithic world view presided over by church and state. There were minorities but these could be ignored as pagans. In contrast, modern urban societies are characterized by the weakening of kinship ties, high mobility, increased specialization and a strong sense of individualism. Culturally, the city is pluralistic. People are held together not by commonly shared world views, but by laws that regulate their relationships rather than their beliefs.

The process of modernization continues in our day. People are rapidly moving from communities with strong kin and corporate ties and homogeneous world views to urban aggregations with their social diversity and cultural pluralism. The implications of this shift for the church will certainly increase in the future.

Ethnic integration • A second movement has been the integration of many ethnic minorities into mainstream American culture—in other words, a movement from the lower left to the lower right quadrants. The process has not been without anguish as parents often lament the loss of their cultural traditions. Other ethnic groups have not always been allowed by the dominant society to assimilate, and in recent years there has been a resurgence of ethnicity as a flag around which people rally in search of fellowship and corporate identity. Nevertheless, on some fundamental levels, assimilation into a single, though pluralistic society continues.

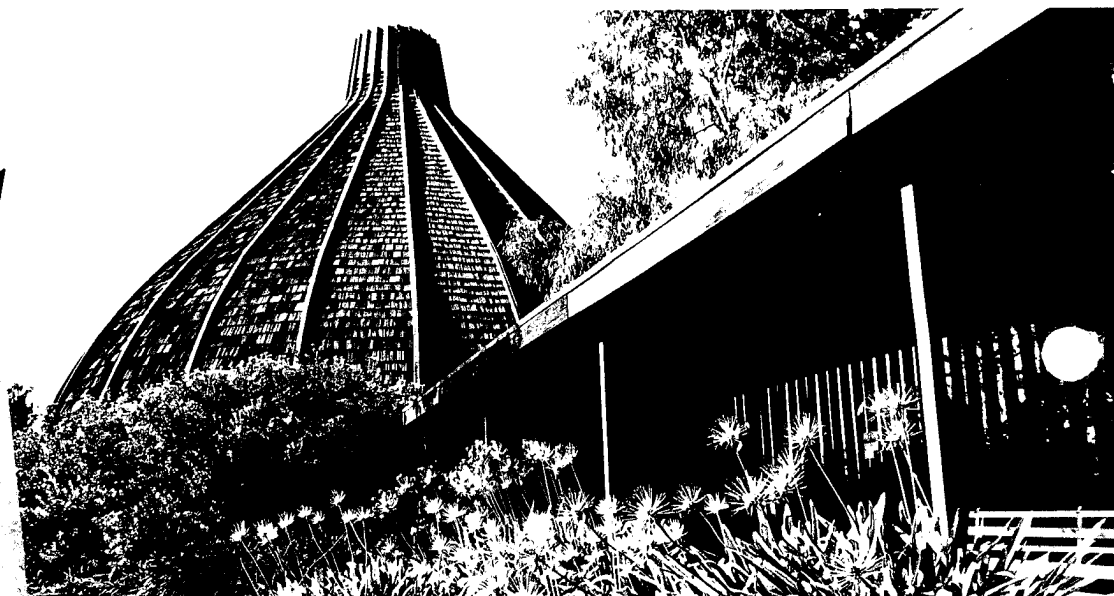
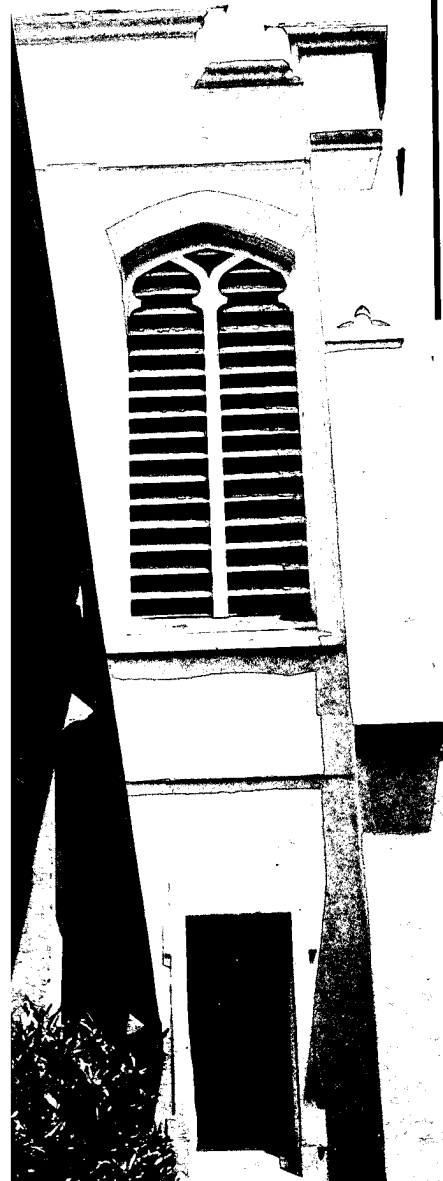
Institutionalization • Running counter to changes associated with modernization are those related to institutionalization. Movements that begin as aggregates of individuals following a strong leader soon begin to acquire property, to formulate constitutions and creeds and to develop bureaucratic organizations. In the process the members develop a corporate identity and move towards the left. But as strong as the forces of institutionalization are in the West, they rarely move people fully to the left hand quadrants where they would acquire a sense of corporate identity that overrides their individualism. Churches, too, become institutionalized. What begins in one generation as an aggregation of individuals, may, in the next, become an enduring congregation.

Implications for the American church

What implications does this analysis have for the church in America? Space will permit only a few preliminary observations.

First, social dynamics vary from quadrant to quadrant, and methods of evangelism must be adapted to each. Group dynamics are strong in societies on the left. New information entering a group, such as the Good News of the gospel, is generally circulated widely by the members. Conversions, at least in their public expression, are frequently based on corporate group decisions that are strongly influenced by key persons, but require the consent of the people. In multi-ethnic societies of the lower left, the church tends to grow in one or another of the ethnic groups. But new beginnings must be made in each of the groups if the whole of the society is to be evangelized.

Evangelism in modern urban aggregates cannot utilize the communication networks of clan and family as effectively, for these tend to be weak. Rather the networks of personal friends and acquaintances of church members must be mobilized. Moreover, in a society in which indi-



Individuals are fragmented and depersonalized by their highly specialized roles in the society, the church must be a place where they can be whole people—where they can gather for worship, recreation, mutual support and even economic aid.

Second, we must recognize that the significance of rituals varies greatly from one type of church to another. In the high church, rituals and symbols are important, not only for what they say, but also for what they do for the worshippers. There is a high sense of the sacred and of the transcendence of God, and these are expressed in the use of symbols such as time, space, architecture and ceremony. In the ethnic church, social rituals such as the national and regional conferences drawing people together from different churches are important symbols of the unity of the church. Cultural symbols such as food and dress may also be important to their identity. But in worship and other forms of religious expression, ethnic churches and aggregate churches tend to be antiritualistic. Worship is a spiritual matter and involves beliefs and feelings. Symbols and ceremonies have a place only if they evoke an immediate, personal and inner response on the part of the worshipper.

This variance in the ways symbols are viewed often leads to misunderstandings between churches. Those who see rituals as acts of faith—as a sacred communion with God, cannot understand the antiritual stance of those who see rituals as only outward forms by which the individual expresses his faith. But the problem goes deeper. Pastors trained in seminaries that assume individual responsibility and cultural pluralism, but ministering in strong homogeneous groups, often misunderstand the importance of ritual to the people. Antiritualistic in stance, such pastors

may try to change the order of service or other rituals of the church, only to face unexpected opposition from those who feel that their very foundations are being threatened. On the other hand, pastors with a strong sense of group and a monocultural world view will find the pluralism and antiritualism of modern urban aggregates threatening.

Finally, churches in each of the sectors have certain potential strengths and weaknesses. Dominant monocultural churches have a high view of God, of sin and of forgiveness. But they are in danger of overrunning the individual, and of being intolerant of those who do not accept their theologies. Their temptation to idolatry is the worship of the institution. Ethnic churches have a strong sense of community and fellowship. But they, too, are in danger of crushing the individual. They are tempted to worship the group. The aggregate church is strong on personal commitment and involvement. The dangers it faces is secularism and the loss of a sense of history. Their idolatry is the worship of the self, or of the charismatic leader at their center.

What should the church be? The answer must be sought in a theological understanding of God's divine purpose, and the ways in which He works out that purpose in different societies and cultures. ■

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