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Congregational Leadership and Spirituality in the Postmodern Era

In addressing the issue of leadership in congregations which are increasingly influenced by the emergence of cultural postmodernism, I write not as one who is engaged in leadership or trained in the fields of organization and management, but as a theologian reflecting on the spirituality of contemporary religious. But part of my preparation for these reflections involved talking with a number of religious in leadership positions, asking them what were the major challenges they faced as leaders. One woman, by means of a highly symbolic vignette, epitomized what many others expressed. She said that, if one prepared an agenda for a meeting far enough ahead of time for the participants to come prepared, the first item on the agenda would be the revision of the agenda because the actual situation in the congregation would have changed so significantly that neither the items on the agenda nor their relative importance would be what they had been when the agenda was formulated. In other words, the challenges about which leaders talked were not so much specific problems but pandemic unpredictability and uncontrolability. While leaders face particular challenges because of

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their public role and more global responsibilities, the situation which makes leadership so difficult today is the same one all of us in religious life face, namely, the context of chaos within which we are trying to live religious life coherently and minister effectively. It is this peculiarly contemporary experience and its significance for spirituality that requires analysis and engagement.

Whether or not we articulate it explicitly, we are always living, thinking, working within and out of some implicit worldview which defines both the problems and the potentialities of our historical situation. Until we come to some understanding of that worldview, we stand little chance of developing an operative spirituality. How we understand reality in general, religious life in particular, and our own congregation specifically determines what we think we are doing as religious leaders or followers.

A worldview is like light or a pair of glasses. We do not notice its role in what and how we see until it flickers or gets cloudy. Furthermore, until relatively recently we were unaware of the plurality of worldviews because we thought that what we saw was simply what is, rather than what is visible through a particular set of lenses which not everyone in the world is wearing. Until the mid-sixties Catholics in general and religious in particular lived within a peculiarly schizophrenic worldview whose intrinsic contradictions seldom came clearly into view.

Within the institution and culture of the church, we lived out of a medieval worldview in which society was organized according to an ontologically based, and therefore unchangeable, hierarchy of status and roles; in which all reality could and must be explained in the categories of an Aristotelian/Thomistic philosophy and theology; and in which the next world, and therefore religion, held a clear priority over the present world and its concerns. However, outside the church arena we lived out of a modern worldview in which democratic capitalism constructed an economically competitive society within a deceptive rhetoric of personal equality.

The explanation of reality in this modern world was supplied by the confluence of the dualistic philosophy of Descartes, the mechanistic physics of Newton, the deterministic biology of Darwin, and the materialistic hydraulics of Freudian psychology. The practical priority of this world over the afterlife was expressed in the banishing of religious concerns from public life to the private realm of family and church.

Although these two worldviews, medieval and modern, were
largely incompatible, what they had in common may be more significant for our present considerations than how they differed. Both of these worldviews presented chaos as the ultimate enemy and order as the ultimate good. It is hardly surprising, then, that we are uncomfortable to the point of panic amid the unpredictability and uncontrollability of so much of our experience today. And, the more people, property, and projects we are responsible for, the more threatening and even paralyzing widespread chaos in our domain of responsibility is likely to be.

However, as cultural critics are increasingly convinced, the modern worldview itself is rapidly giving way to what is being called *postmodernism*, a worldview that is still largely inchoate and unarticulated, but which is actually conditioning our experience more deeply and extensively than we can yet appreciate. Characteristic of this emerging worldview is what is being called the “new science” or quantum physics, which is not only calling into question the adequacy of Newtonian science to explain the natural or physical world, but implying the necessity for a new, cosmologically based philosophy that sees much deeper connections between matter and spirit, between humans and the rest of reality, between this world and whatever transcends it. Implied in the collapse of the classical dualisms is a revisioning of chaos and order which may open up some possibilities for reinterpreting our present experience within religious life.

Although I have been reading voraciously in the new science for a while, I do not claim to understand, much less be able to explain, quantum physics. What I want to do, however, is to use a few of its basic categories, namely, autopoietic structures, fields, and strange attractors, as metaphors for thinking about contemporary experience in religious congregations. After exploring these categories from the new science in relation to religious life, I will try to make some suggestions that are theologically sound, spiritually vital, and culturally plausible about our current experience of religious life and leadership.

**Autopoietic Structures**

Margaret Wheatley, in her wonderfully provocative book *Leadership and the New Science*, brings together new ideas from biology, chemistry, and quantum physics which are analogous in suggesting that order and chaos are not contradictories, but that
order emerges from chaos as from its matrix. Furthermore, control is not synonymous with order nor does it produce stability. Rather, control causes a deadly immobility or stasis which ultimately dooms the structure to disintegration.

This phenomenon of the constructive relationship between chaos and order is characteristic of living organisms. Erich Jantsch, whom Wheatley cites, describes autopoiesis as “the characteristic of living systems [by which they] continuously renew themselves and . . . regulate this process in such a way that the integrity of their structure is maintained.” In other words, living things maintain their integrity and identity not by eliminating change, but by continuous, dynamic interaction with their environment. It is equilibrium, not change, that is fatal!

However, the history of religious life in the United States from the 19th century until Vatican II was characterized by steadily increasing equilibrium and control and steadily decreasing interaction with the environment. After the chaotic pioneering days—when our founders and foundresses braved the rigors of frontier life using everything that came to hand, secular and profane included, to survive personally and institutionally—American religious life settled into a rigidly defined and tightly controlled pattern within an increasingly battened-down ecclesiastical institution. Interchange with the environment was ever more stringently controlled and, to the extent possible, eliminated. We understood our congregations as Newtonian machine-like systems composed of virtually identical parts, operating according to established laws of motion codified in Rules and customs books and functioning best when no part acted in original, that is, “singular” ways. Leaders functioned somewhat like factory managers maintaining strict control (erroneously seen as order) for the sake of spiritual and ministerial efficiency.

Newtonian physics, which supplied this machine model for all systems, also gave us the laws of thermodynamics which govern such systems. The second law of thermodynamics tells us that, when a system reaches equilibrium, entropy or disintegration...
sets in. We moderns learned that this law of increasing entropy or the inevitable wearing down of systems was also characteristic of living things (which we understood as basically very complicated machines) and certainly true of organizations such as religious congregations. What the new science is telling us is that social organizations are not entropic like machines, but more like living organisms, which are autopoietic, that is, self-renewing. The basis of autopoiesis or self-re-creation is the openness of organisms to their environment. As Wheatley says,

Each structure has a unique identity, a clear boundary, yet it is merged with its environment. . . . What we observe . . . in all living entities, are boundaries that both preserve us from and connect us to the infinite complexity of the outside world. Autopoiesis, then, points to a different universe. Not the fragile, fragmented world we attempt to hold together, but a universe rich in processes that support growth and coherence, individuality and community.

When we look at religious congregations of the 1950s, we see relatively hermetically sealed organizations operating according to the quantitative laws of mechanics. Numbers, material resources, institutional agencies of influence, and hierarchical control of all operations were the sources of efficiency. The cataclysm of Vatican II and its immediate predecessors in religious life such as the Sister Formation Movement suddenly opened these closed systems to their environment. New information of all kinds flooded the system. Sisters studied new disciplines in secular as well as religious universities and interacted with a variety of people they formerly would never have encountered in any meaningful way. The mass media and the uncensored contents of libraries burst through the boundaries of the closed system. And then Vatican II called on congregations to reevaluate those old-world traditions which had so effectively kept religious out of the mainstream of American culture. Ministries changed dramatically and, with them, living situations. Contacts with other religious and with the laity, stringently rationed in previous times, broadened and deepened. In short, religious congregations suddenly drew deep breaths of fresh air and discovered that they were not ecclesiastical robots but sociospiritual organisms, living systems in vital interaction with their environment.

Increasingly congregations, and their relatively uniform members, began to exhibit the characteristics of autopoietic structures.
Perhaps the most unsettling characteristic is that a healthy living system is in a continuous state of disequilibrium. New information, constantly flowing into the system from the environment, challenges it to respond, to change, and to develop without loss of integrity or identity. There is no settling down, no way to call off the bombardment of the new and just be. There are no permanently right answers, no one correct way to do things, no absolute authority. The organism is always off balance. Local chaos is the normal condition out of which global order is continuously being both threatened and resourced.

Another characteristic of autopoietic structures, precisely because they are not in balance but precariously poised in the turbulence of a constantly changing ambiance, is that very small influences can have very significant effects on the system. In mechanical entities, significant change is usually proportionate to the mass of the influencing agents. Large groups, sizable funds, long-range plans are necessary to alter the status quo. But in a living system a small agent, for example, a virus, can have tremendous impact because it can galvanize the whole organism into response. The effect of one book like *The Nun in the Modern World*, or one speaker like Theresa Kane, is out of all proportion to the mass of the cause. One person generating negative energy can immobilize a whole assembly while one visionary chapter proposal can propel the whole congregation into self-renewal.

A third feature of living systems is that they are programmed toward life. In this respect they are the very antithesis of the machine. Once entropy has set in, the machine inevitably and irreversibly winds down toward disintegration. But, even when very diminished, very endangered, the living system is mobilized toward self-renewal, toward regeneration. I think the merging of some small communities and the combining of facilities among others are examples of this salmon-like burst of upstream energy characteristic of open systems.

Fourth, self-organizing systems are bundles of competencies, "portfolios of skills," rather than collections of optimally functioning units. This feature has been very prominent in post-conciliar congregations. When individual religious or congregations decide that a particular institution or form of ministry no longer responds to the environment and they reconfigure competencies to meet new needs, it seems to me that they are manifesting an organic self-understanding, not, as some seem to think, a des-
perate need to find something useful to do until the corporate lights go out.

Fifth, as Wheatley says, self-renewing systems are “structures that seem capable of maintaining an identity while changing form.” They exhibit “global stability” over time even as their subsystems undergo enormous, seemingly chaotic, change. I was struck by this feature of living systems when I first saw the Great Barrier Reef, the largest organism on earth. This enormous living system has a form that makes it so distinct from its oceanic environment that it is even recognizable from the moon, and yet every cell of its vast expanse is undergoing incessant change. Most religious can remember the stupendous resistance to even minor, external changes in religious congregations on the eve of Vatican II. We could hardly conceive of a maintenance of identity through incessant change, and any attempt to engage the environment seemed like a sellout to secularity. But autopoietic structures maintain their identity precisely by changing in response to environmental influence.

Obviously not all living systems survive, much less thrive. What determines whether an organism will successfully negotiate what Wheatley calls the “bifurcation point” where the choice between death and transformation occurs? Wheatley maintains that the deciding factor is what she calls the principle of “self-reference.” Healthy organisms do not change randomly or in any and all directions. Rather, they change in ways that are both responsive to the environment and consistent with their own already established identity. A firmly established identity makes the organism both responsive and resilient, both dialogical and autonomous. Whereas a static system constructs external boundaries, fences designed to keep out the influence of the environment and hold the assemblage of units together, the healthy organism develops organic boundaries which make it increasingly autonomous in relation to external pressures even as it remains deeply involved in the ongoing process of interchange. Unlike a fence which simply walls out the “other,” the organic surface of the Great Barrier Reef is both a resource for relationship with the environment and a self-defining boundary. “Self-reference is what facilitates orderly change in turbulent environments.”

This raises directly the question of identity. If religious life itself, religious congregations, and individual religious are open, autopoietic systems whose incessant interaction with the envi-
ronment is governed by the principle of self-reference, that is, fidelity to core identity in the midst of continual disequilibrium, what establishes that identity? How is it recognized and maintained?

**Fields**

To begin to get some purchase on this issue, I want to introduce a second metaphor from the new science, the familiar but mysterious category of “field.” Religious life has always involved the creation by some Christians, “religious virtuosi” in the terminology of sociologist Patricia Wittberg,\(^{16}\) of an alternative “world” within which to live their faith, whether that was a sociological, geographical, or institutional reality construction.\(^{17}\) The expression so often used for entering religious life, namely, “leaving the world,” was a negative articulation of the positive act of choosing an alternative arena for one’s life.

Today, speaking of entering religious life as “leaving the world” is so problematic as to be counterproductive. Nevertheless, there is something about religious life which distinguishes it from other forms of life. It has an identity. Like the Great Barrier Reef, it stands out from its cultural and ecclesiastical environment even while being involved in continuous interchange with it. Perhaps a better metaphor or model for understanding the identity of religious life than the quasi-geographical one of alternative world is the category of “fields.”

Science has made us aware that reality is composed not primarily of substances but of space. Space, however, is not empty. Rather, “space everywhere is now thought to be filled with fields, invisible, non-material structures that are the basic substance of the universe.”\(^{18}\) Fields are invisible geometries structuring space, invisible media of connection bringing matter and/or energy into form. We cannot see fields any more than we can see space, but we can observe the effects of fields on that which comes within their influence. We have all seen this mysterious phenomenon in operation when iron filings come within the field of magnetic

*Perhaps a better metaphor or model for understanding the identity of religious life is the category of “fields.”*
influence and arrange themselves in certain patterns. Wheatley hypothesizes that personal and corporate space is also filled with fields, both positive and negative, and that, when the personal fields of the people in an organization intersect with the corporate fields of the organization itself, certain predictable behaviors are manifest.

I find this metaphor very descriptive of a frequently experienced phenomenon, namely, that the same people behave very differently in situations which do not, exteriorly, differ noticeably. Something "in the air" (or, perhaps more accurately, "in the space") affects them, for good or ill, and often everyone in the situation is similarly affected. We sometimes call it morale, or good or bad energy, or social climate. Sometimes we even speak of being "in good or bad space." We also know that an individual who is personally "in bad space" either can be pulled out of it by entering positive corporate space or can cause positive space to curdle. Social space, in our experience, seems to be really invisibly structured.

Perhaps this metaphor of fields could help illuminate the issues of corporate and personal identity that religious have struggled with for years under the rubrics of "charism" and "vocation" and their intersection in the mysterious corporate identity principle called the "spirit of the congregation." Probably the only thing we have agreed on in regard to charism is that it is a mysterious something that generates a certain recognizable congregational identity. Some have tried to equate it with the congregation's traditional ministry, or to identify it as a grace given to the foundress which was somehow passed on to later members, or to find it embodied in a characteristic spirituality. None of these explanations has proved very satisfactory, and all fail in relation to one or another congregation.

Wheatley suggests that social fields are generated as people converse, share their visions and hopes, work out their problems, develop modes of interacting, participate in common projects, elaborate symbols and myths to articulate their shared identity and experience.\(^9\) In other words, groups create or generate fields. When coherent fields are generated in corporate space, people are drawn together; they begin to act in corporate ways. Eventually the group ethos can be recognized in the members. This sounds very much like what we mean by charism, an invisible structuring of corporate space which manifests itself in the
indefinable "something common" that is visible in the attitudes and behaviors of all the members. Furthermore, fields, once generated, can outlast the individuals or groups that generated them. Perhaps what comes down through history from our foundations is not some work, set of rules, or uniform spirituality to which new members must conform, but a structured shared space that continues to give common form to ever new energy coming into the congregation in new members.

When a new individual comes into this space, her own personal fields intersect with the corporate fields of the congregation and the person is either drawn into and energized by this corporate space or not. If vocation were understood as a certain constellation of overlapping fields in an individual personality's inner space, structuring that person's energy and behavior, her entering a congregation would involve the intersection of her personal vocational field with the fields of the particular congregation, especially its charism. Vocational discernment could be understood, then, as trying to discover if her personal fields and the congregation's corporate fields are mutually compatible and enriching or not.

When the fields that structure the inner space of an individual (that is, her own vocation or life call) intersect creatively and harmoniously with the fields that structure the corporate space of a congregation (that is, its charism and other characteristic features), we often say that the person has "the spirit of the congregation." When the members of a congregation are together in "good space," they often feel "the spirit of the congregation." Perhaps what we mean by the spirit of the congregation is the global identity of the group as it manifests itself within the complex of fields that invisibly but really structures the personal into the corporate.20

To use this field metaphor for understanding charism, vocation, and the spirit of the congregation does not reduce these realities to the purely natural any more than accounting for the universe by the theory of the "big bang" or for human emergence by evolution denies the divine role in creation. The metaphor simply offers us a more organic way of understanding the human
experience of stable and shared congregational identity in the midst of incessant change.

It also provides a possible answer to the question about self-reference as the key to coherence for an open, autopoietic system experiencing continuous life-giving disequilibrium. In a sense, nothing observable in the congregation remains the same—type of ministry, horarium and content of spiritual exercises, community lifestyle, dress codes, financial practices, patterns of interacting—but the field, the spirit of the congregation, in which all the change takes place can account for the ever new order which arises out of the seemingly chaotic pluralism and incessant variation that characterize the community’s day-to-day life over time.

The Strange Attractor

A third possibly illuminating metaphor, drawn from the new science, is that of the “strange attractor,” a simple example of which many of us have seen as the computer screen saver of incessantly changing lines and curves which maintain a moving form that is never repeated. Wheatley says this about the “strange attractor”:

Chaos theory has given us images of “strange attractors”—computer pictures of swirling motion that trace the evolution of a system. A system is defined as chaotic when it becomes impossible to know where it will be next. There is no predictability; the system never is in the same place twice. But as chaos theory shows, if we look at such a system long enough and with the perspective of time, it always demonstrates its inherent orderliness. The most chaotic of systems never goes beyond certain boundaries; it stays contained within a shape that we can recognize as the system’s strange attractor. ...21

This description seems very pertinent to the history of religious life, not to mention that of individual congregations. Religious life has undergone so much movement, so much deep-level change, that it is indeed impossible to know where it will be next. It is never in the same place twice. At times it seems to be in total disarray. And yet, over its nearly two-thousand-year history, it demonstrates a moving pattern which makes it recognizable, distinguishable against the background field of ecclesial life. What, we may ask, is the strange attractor of religious life?

A strange attractor is a basin for the system’s activity that
pulls all activity within the system into a form or shape but without immobilizing the system or reducing its inner variety to predictability. The strange attractor itself is not visible. It manifests itself by its power to allow a few simple "instructions," for example, equations, to repeat and intersect as they feed back upon themselves in an infinite variety of ways so that these iterations create analogous forms at finer and finer levels. These forms are what we call fractals, repetitions at various levels of scale that manifest the whole in each part. Our most homely example is probably a head of broccoli in which each flowerette, down to the tiniest, repeats the pattern of the whole head. But we can see it also in the computer image of lines and curves, or in the clouds, or in a branch of fern.

Wheatley was moved to ask the question about the strange attractor when she observed that, in terminally dysfunctional systems verging on collapse, where almost everyone had psychologically abandoned ship and survival had become the only agenda, there were some individuals within the dysfunctional system who continued to be personally centered, creative, and productive. Amid corporate disintegration, personal order. She also observed—in healthy organizations which allowed maximum autonomy, even seeming chaos, at the local level—that the seemingly chaotic variety at the local level did not lead to disintegration, but to a kind of global order and stability. Out of local chaos, global order. Somehow the creative individuals in the disintegrating systems and the healthy organizations permitting high levels of local autonomy were pulled into coherence as if a strange attractor were at work. Her highly suggestive conclusion is that the strange attractor in both cases is meaning generated by a "frame of reference," that is, a coherent vision and pattern of values, which gives direction to all the seemingly disparate activity.

Meaning, vision, values, however, are formal categories. What vision, what values, what meaning might be the strange attractor of religious life that accounts for its self-identity and coherence, its fractal wholeness and beauty, through nearly two millennia of chaotic movement in an often dysfunctional church? More importantly, is the strange attractor still at work, still generating a recognizable lifeform today in what might be one of the most chaotic periods of development in the history of religious life? Are there a few "equations" that have iterated throughout these two millennia in thousands of different fractal realizations man-
ifestating the strange attractor that keeps this lifeform coherent and true to itself?

From the time of the 1st-century virgins until it was proclaimed anew by Vatican II, the basic principle, the fundamental “equation,” has been that religious life is essentially gospel life. The pattern of the life has been the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, perhaps the ultimate instance of order out of chaos, that is, life out of death. Of course, religious life shares this determining equation with all Christian life. But religious life has also always been distinguished from lay Christian life by the particular way religious have entered into the paschal mystery of Christ, by the specifically religious “equation,” namely, by the life of consecrated celibacy lived in community and mission.

The strange attractor of religious life, then, may be a particular kind of gospel-based relationship with Jesus Christ, expressed in freely chosen lifelong celibacy, lived in community and mission, that has generated a lifeform which is distinct and recognizable despite enormous variety. It has reinvented itself endlessly, but from a distance and over time we can note the repeated patterns, its fractal wholeness. The effect of the strange attractor is a global stability and self-identity through incessant change, a particular and recognizable order out of chaos.

Christian Spirituality and Congregational Leadership

If these metaphors drawn from the new science—that is, the congregation as an open and autopoietic system invisibly structured by the corporate fields that manifest in the spirit of the congregation within the shaping influence of the strange attractor of celibate living of the Gospel in community and mission—are illuminating of our current experience of religious life in our particular congregations, we can ask what light they throw on the problematic of leadership. Does such a postmodern model of religious life based on metaphors drawn from the new science suggest anything helpful in understanding what leadership in such systems might mean today?

Obviously, the image of the leader as manager whose task is to minimize disequilibrium by control of all personnel, policy, and practice is obsolete. But probably the image of the leader as the lone visionary who boldly imagines and projects goals to galvanize the membership toward the future is also obsolete. This is
not because care of the community and corporate vision are not as important today as they have always been, but because we increasingly realize that they are the shared responsibility of the entire congregation. What is characteristic of the context of leadership today is that the kinds of systems over which leaders preside are situations which are not only uncontrollable in fact, but chaotic in principle. Chaos is the system's "steady state." Whatever leaders do today, it cannot be imagined realistically as merely the direction of reliable resources toward clearly perceived objectives. It has to have something to do with the creative potential of chaos itself. Even while managing the modern social systems that our congregations, at one level, certainly are, leaders are challenged to engage the deep dynamics of meaning in the increasingly postmodern systems that we are becoming.

It seems to me that religious life today is at the bifurcation point between death and transformation, between entropy and self-renewal, and therefore that the responsibility of leaders in relation to the deep dynamics of meaning has to do with the principle of self-reference which Wheatley identifies as the most important single determinant of self-renewal in autopoietic structures. The science of autopoietic systems suggests that, if the congregation (or religious life as a lifeform) is true to itself, in touch with and living out of its own identity, it will continue to renew itself even in the face of the massive material and ecclesiastical challenges of this historical period. If it is the case that the identity of religious life lies in the celibate living of the gospel in community and mission within the spirit of the particular congregation, we are at the heart of the issue. And the issue is faith.

In what follows I am relying heavily on a remarkable 1995 study by a British theologian, Denys Turner, of the apophatic element in the Christian mystical tradition. In this book Turner is dealing with what I suspect is the most challenging issue for all of us in religious life today, but perhaps especially for those charged with the care of the community as a whole, namely, the meaning, reality, and integrity of Christian faith today.

Religious life is fundamentally a faith reality, and the faith in question is not simply a generalized conviction that there is more to reality than meets the eye. Christian faith is both an unthemematized openness to the ineffable Divine Mystery that has no name and a thematized participation in a particular religious tra-
dition which believes that this Holy Mystery is both revealed and encountered in Jesus of Nazareth risen from the dead whose life is communicated to us in and through the gift of his Holy Spirit within the community called church. A major question today for Christians, including religious, and especially women, is whether these two aspects of faith, unthemematized openness to Divine Mystery (which is not necessarily Christian) and thematic adherence to a particular religious tradition (namely, Christianity), are or need necessarily be related and, if they are related, how that can be personally experienced and authentically lived.

Many postmodern Christians are caught in an experiential disjunction between their God-experience on the one hand and, on the other, their participation in the particular faith tradition, that is, the religion, within which they were initiated into that God-experience and which still claims to mediate it. In other words, there is an experienced disjunction between spirituality as lived faith experience and religion as articulated tradition. This may be partially due to the sudden (at least historically speaking) reversal of our evaluation of the role of experience in spirituality that coincided with the upheavals in religion of the conciliar era. Let me trace this development in broad strokes.

For several centuries Christians were educated to discount feeling in the practice of religion in favor of a kind of blind faith and naked exercise of will. It was not the person who believed but the intellect; not the person who loved but the will. The body with its emotions was that which had to be overcome and subjected in order for the soul to seek God. This approach to the spiritual life, which effectively reduced spirituality to religious practice, was seriously challenged by at least three developments in the middle of this century.

First, for all kinds of reasons that were psychological and cultural as well as theological, the radical wholeness of the human person began to resurface, and many believers began to reclaim the importance, perhaps even priority, of feeling in religious practice. Retreat directors learned to ask people how they felt, not what they thought. Retreatants learned to be attentive to subjective states of consolation and desolation. Discernment began to take into account the person's felt response to alternative possibilities. Rather than considering felt religious experience unreliable or even suspect, people began to consider it the touchstone, even the essence, of genuine spirituality. Desiring such experi-
ence, seeking it, trusting it, living from it was no longer an aber-
ration but the norm.

Second, the feminist movement took hold among Catholic
women, and its analysis of patriarchy enabled women to name
and claim their experience of oppression in the church and to
trace ecclesiastical sexism to its theological roots in Scripture and
tradition. Women's experience of the
Catholic religious tradition became
laced with negative feeling just as they
were learning that feeling was not
irrelevant, but a valid and important
indicator of the real. Many concluded
that, if Catholic religion feels deeply
alienating, Catholic spirituality may be
highly suspect.

Third, Catholics, for the first time,
came into meaningful appreciative
contact with non-Christian religious
traditions where they encountered
spiritualities that counteracted some of the very aspects of
Christianity that were becoming increasingly problematic. The
nature-affirming rituals of native American spirituality countered
the overcerebral otherworldliness of traditional Catholic wor-
ship. The nondualistic, nondogmatic meditation practices of
Eastern mystical traditions offered an attractive alternative to the
rationalistic and mechanical prayer practices of ordinary Catholic
piety.

Thus, at the very time that experience was becoming the
touchstone of truth in the sphere of religion, both negative and
positive experiences in the realm of spirituality converged to
undermine adherence to the Roman Catholic Christian tradition.
This has led some, perhaps many, religious to seriously question
whether Catholic Christianity offers an adequate, much less a
preferable, access to Holy Mystery or compelling motivation for
ministry. For many the God of Christianity seems too small, too
violent, and too male; the focus on Jesus Christ seems narrow
and exclusive; the resurrection seems mythological if not incred-
ible and, in any case, irrelevant to a world in anguish; the insti-
tutional church seems hopelessly medieval, sexist, and clerical;
liturgy is alienating; morality is out of touch with reality; and
church ministry is a continual battle with male hostility and power

There is an experienced
disjunction between
spirituality as lived faith
experience and religion
as articulated tradition.
dynamics. Spirituality centered in personal experience was increasingly engrossing while religion, especially the Catholic religion, was increasingly alienating.

After a certain amount of experimentation, many religious have settled into a kind of personal, often highly eclectic, spirituality within the context of a nominal Christianity whose central tenets and practices are of little practical import in their lives. Their God may no longer be the God of Jesus Christ, but a non-personal, benevolent cosmic energy holding reality together in some mysterious way. Jesus may have been consigned to history as one of many prophetic figures whose memory remains motivating although they themselves are long dead. The Bible may no longer be, for them, revelatory or normative Scripture, but one religious classic among others. Christian sacraments may be quarries of symbolic elements which can be combined with analogous elements from other traditions in the formulation of meaningful rituals. Prayer may be any practice from listening to music, to Zen sitting or Tai Chi, to hiking or massage which is calming and focusing and helps one keep a balance in a crazy world.

In religious communities the effect of these developments in spirituality is profoundly disintegrative. It can no longer be taken for granted that the members share the same faith, a serious situation for a lifeform which is based not only on faith but specifically on Christian faith. Members for whom Christian faith remains normative may hesitate to speak in explicitly Christian terms lest they be branded reactionary or dismissed as out of touch with contemporary reality, while post-Christian or selectively Christian members may hesitate to voice their spirituality lest they shock their hearers or find themselves branded as heretics. Christian liturgical celebration at congregational events is sometimes so divisive as to be impossible.

Nevertheless, wherever they are on the Christian map, religious women continue to be resolutely religious, seeking God in disciplined spiritual practice, making retreats, engaging seriously in spiritual direction, reading widely and deeply in theology and spirituality, attending workshops and renewal programs. Those religious who have survived the postconciliar exodus and are still committed to both community and ministry are not indifferent to the God quest that brought them to religious life in the first place. This is the point at which the disjuncture between spirituality which is a matter of passionate concern and religion which is a
locus of struggle and alienation is apparent; and, in my opinion, this may be the bifurcation point at which the choice between death and transformation is going to be made. We cannot afford to ignore this situation or pretend it does not really matter as long as people are sincere and committed. What is in jeopardy is not control but self-reference, the congregation's response to its strange attractor, that is, to religious life itself as a faith reality.

It seems to me that what many religious are attempting is not to dispense with faith, but to find God in a kind of personal mystical quest that bypasses what are experienced as the superficialities and hypocrisies, and even the violence, of the official structures of institutional Catholic Christianity. In particular, many are trying to find in the Christian mystical tradition itself guidance for developing an apophatic or nonthematic contemplative spirituality that is experientially satisfying and motivating, but that bypasses the concreteness of the Christian cataphatic tradition with its specifically religious beliefs, liturgy, and practice. In short, it is an attempt to develop a spirituality without religion.

Denys Turner wrote his treatise on the Christian mystical tradition, *The Darkness of God*, as a challenge to this contemporary development, which he calls spiritual "experientialism" and which he sees as widespread among Christians in general. Turner regards this experientialism as a kind of modernist positivism in the arena of spirituality. In other words, felt religious experience has become the "hard data" of authentic spirituality analogous to the observable results of laboratory experiments in modern science or the quantifiable data of sociological surveys. Personal experience has become the nonnegotiable criterion of validity in the arena of faith. The practice of contemplation, yielding direct experience of either the delightful presence or the painful absence of Holy Mystery, has become for many the sufficient, if minimal, structure, content, and dynamics of their spirituality, augmented perhaps by a symbolic and ritual eclecticism that draws from various religious and nonreligious traditions. This experience of Holy Mystery is believed to be "apophatic," that is, unencumbered by

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specific religious doctrines, images, symbols, liturgical traditions, and so on.

Against this misguided turn to experience Turner maintains, with impressive support from the data of the tradition, that there is no such thing as "apophatic experience." This is a contradiction in terms. The experience of the absence of God is just as much an experience, that is, just as cataphatic, as is the experience of God's presence even though it might be less enjoyable. It is the quest for mystical experience itself, and especially reliance upon it as the touchstone of faith, which is the problem, Turner maintains. Furthermore, following Bernard McGinn, Turner points out that no one who is serious about the God quest, especially not the mystics (at least not until very recent times), attempts to "practice mysticism." People practice Christianity or Buddhism or Judaism. The mystical is a moment in the practice of these traditions, but there is no freestanding mysticism or pure apophatic practice.

The development of this kind of experience-oriented, religiously decontextualized spirituality has been encouraged in recent years by a tendency in popular books on spirituality to talk of an apophatic and a cataphatic "way" as if there were two types of spirituality, one of which, the cataphatic, proceeds through the use of the theological symbols, images, rituals, and practices of a religious tradition and one of which, the apophatic, makes no use of these "externals" and reaches directly to the Divine Mystery that transcends all human institutions. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to suggest that these "ways" are a matter of personal choice and so one might decide to bypass the cataphatic and plunge into the darkness of the apophatic way, where God would be met in pure spiritual nakedness. There has been much talk of foolproof methods by which to achieve mystical emptiness and union, often without or before any serious ascetical training, theological formation, or liturgical involvement.

What Turner exposes is the basic fallacy of this whole "experientialist" turn in spirituality. All spirituality, insofar as it can be practiced or pursued, is cataphatic, and all religious experience is by definition cataphatic. The apophatic is not a "way" or a "practice," much less a kind of "experience." It is a moment of negativity, of nonexperience, at the heart of genuine, ordinary religious faith and practice. This moment is, by definition, not something one can experience at all. The apophatic or mystical is precisely the negativity, the total darkness which cannot itself be seen or felt. It is
the absence of experience, the "hole" at the heart of religious experience, the place of the Holy Mystery which is utterly beyond our experiencing, attainment, knowing, or naming. Mysticism is not negative (or positive) religious experience, says Turner, but the negativity of all religious experience. If I can experience it at all, it is not God in Godself that I am experiencing.

If Turner is right, this attempt to bypass religious practice of the Christian tradition in search of some direct experience of the Holy Mystery is wrongheaded and futile, and it can end only in self-delusion of the kind pilloried by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Insofar as the apophatic moment occurs, it is absolutely nonexperienceable and hidden. And it occurs only within the cataphatic context of resolutely faithful Christian practice, which may at times overflow in the exaltation of spiritual peak experiences or generate the psychologically devastating suffering of the "dark night" described by John of the Cross. But, as all the mystics have maintained, such graces of light or darkness are neither the content nor the criterion of genuine spirituality. As Turner says,

> the deformations of the "experientialist" derive . . . from the error of understanding that which is a "moment" of reserve, of denial and unknowing within worship, prayer and sacrament as if it were a rival practice which displaces that Christian ordinariness. "Experientialism" in its most extreme forms is therefore the displacement of a sense of the negativity of all religious experience with the pursuit of some goal of achieving negative experiences.

In other words, a purely mystical spirituality is not a viable alternative to full participation in the religious tradition. The mystical, insofar as it is spiritually significant and transformative (as opposed to momentary experiences of oceanic bliss which may be caused by any number of stimuli from drugs to trance) is available only within some ongoing, ordinary, everyday cataphatic practice. The alternative to being imprisoned within the rigidities of an overmaterialized tradition is not the flight into a disembodied, decontextualized, and individualistic pseudomysticism. The deeply interior life of the serious postmodern Christian requires the shaping influence of a tradition worked out over centuries by saints and scholars, mystics and martyrs, even as the tradition itself requires the critical challenge of its postmodern adherents, whose new insights into reality must refine the tradition of its historical dross.
Let us return now to the framework of meaning that has supplied us with the important principle of self-reference. If the focus of self-reference of religious congregations and their members is the gospel-based celibate living of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ in community and mission within the spirit of the particular congregation, and if the self-renewal and continued flourishing of religious life and the particular congregation depend on this self-reference, then nothing is more important than the authenticity of the spirituality of religious.

Obviously, people can form and live community and altruistically serve others without being either Christian or Catholic. And a religious congregation can certainly transform itself into such a community of life and service, leaving behind its specifically Catholic identity and affirming whatever religious affiliation, or lack thereof, its individual members espouse. That is, it can cease to be a religious congregation and continue as an intentional community with or without religious roots. My concern is with congregations which have not, or not yet, made that choice, but are struggling to maintain their Catholic Christian identity in a highly dysfunctional ecclesiastical context. For such communities the quiet sidelining of Christian identity believed and practiced in the church is not compatible with their ongoing life and self-renewal as a religious congregation. And perhaps the most important task of leadership in such congregations is helping the congregation to negotiate the moment of bifurcation between congregational death through the abandonment of that identity and congregational transformation through the critical reappropriation of its Christian identity.

There can be no question, in a postmodern context, of dealing with this issue by fiat. The present state of spirituality in many religious congregations is highly chaotic, and attempting to abolish chaos by control is, as we have seen, the kiss of death. Hope lies not in the exercise of coercive power, but in the realization that the current disequilibrium is potentially far more creative than the kind of static uniformity that prevailed in the spirituality of most preconciliar communities.

But how do leaders facilitate the emergence of new spiritual order from religious chaos? The analogies from the new science suggest several possible leads. First, a climate has to be created in which divergent theological views and spiritual practices can rise to visibility and articulation and be seriously and respectfully...
engaged. The unspoken agreement not to talk about anything that could cause dissension and not to use any ritual with which someone might be uncomfortable—and to substitute therapeutic methods and organizational techniques for theological engagement with controversies in the area of faith—is analogous to maintaining tight managerial control in a dysfunctional organization.

The upheaval in spirituality at the individual and local level needs to be articulated, recognized, and owned. Within it lies the potential, not for a restoration of preconciliar uniformity of doctrine and practice, but for a self-renewing reclaiming of the tradition in very new, perhaps even startlingly new, forms. Any Christianity that can be relevant and life-giving in a postmodern context is simply not going to look like, or be like, the Catholicism of the Middle Ages or even of the 1950s.

Second, the basic framework of meaning needs to be rearticulated, but in ways that take seriously the problems which have led to its practical collapse. This basic framework is the gospel in all its depth and breadth, and that means the theological and liturgical, moral and socially transformative riches of the Christian tradition in dialogue with the postmodern culture emerging in our time. The Christian tradition that has become alienating for so many is not the gospel itself, but the moribund formulations of post-Tridentine Vatican institutionalism. The extraordinary response of so many, especially women religious, to the work of theologians like Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine LaCugna, biblical scholars like Carolyn Osiek and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, liturgists like Mary Catherine Hilkert, ecumenists like Rosemary Radford Ruether, moral theologians like Lisa Sowle Cahill, and scholars of spirituality like Constance FitzGerald and Joann Wolski Conn—along with the rediscovery of the Christian mystics themselves—suggests that the tradition has the potential to be reappropriated and renewed in feminist, ecological, and pluralistic patterns if the meeting between the postmodern religious and contemporary theology can be facilitated. A system converts local chaos to global order by the infusion of new information which can be appropriated within a coherent frame of reference. Access to theological resources and also deep engagement with the new science, feminist thought and practice, and ecological and social theory by all the members of a congregation would seem to be an absolute requirement for the development of an authentic postmodern Catholic Christian spirituality that would be adequate.
for religious life in the 21st century. If religious develop such a spirituality, we can expect resistance from the official exercisers of institutional control. But, if religious fail to develop such a spirituality, we can expect religious congregations to disintegrate from within as their spirituality unravels and becomes a tangle of idiosyncratic and individualistic syncretisms.

Third, the interaction between the whole and the parts has to be facilitated so that what is emerging in the spirituality of the members appears in a corporate spirituality that breaks the verbal and ritual silence at the global level and also transforms the global frame of reference itself so that it is not a religious strait-jacket but a flexible focus of self-reference. In preconciliar days, most communities had a repertoire of symbols, myths, celebrations, and ceremonies which integrated the spirituality of the individual members with the spirituality of the congregation. How can we experience this local-to-global articulation today? The order at the global level, which is not dogmatic uniformity but deep unity in shared faith and spirituality, can be authentic only if it emerges from the lived variety and ferment at the local level, among the individuals and groups that make up the community.

In recent years some congregations have begun processes of getting religiously sensitive issues out on the table and seeking ways to bring theological resources into dialogue with personal religious experience in the context of open sharing of faith. This is very risky business. But in many cases it has resulted in unusual experiences of renewal of the spirit of the community. Perhaps, having negotiated so many of the more “external” issues of lifestyle and even ministry, many religious are eager, even if fearful, to engage the deeper issues of faith, religious identity, and spirituality. Congregational leadership may be challenged today to take the initiative in helping the congregation address the fundamental issue of Catholic faith and spirituality, that is, the issue of identity and self-reference.

Conclusion

Let me briefly summarize and conclude. What leadership means and how it is exercised depends essentially on how one understands the social system one is leading. I have tried to suggest that the quasi-mechanical modern model of the religious congregation is giving way to an organic postmodern model of
community. I have explored a few features of this new model, namely, the conception of the community itself as an autopoietic or self-renewing organic structure; the category of fields as a way of understanding the unifying forces of charism, vocation, and the spirit of the congregation; and the strange attractor as a way of understanding the quintessential role of the gospel lived in consecrated celibacy in community and mission as the principle of self-reference of religious life.

I then tried to suggest that the role of leadership today may be neither primarily social maintenance nor ministerial goal setting, but the facilitation of the congregation's self-renewing process through attention to its core identity, its framework of meaning. This framework of meaning is not a uniform religiosity nor a particular type of ministry. It is Christian paschal spirituality, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, lived celibately in community and mission, a spirituality which cannot bypass the Christian theological, liturgical, moral, and socially transformative tradition within the believing community we call church.

But in a postmodern context such spirituality cannot be legislated or enforced. Nor are leaders, in all probability, any less caught up in doubt, alienation, and theological-religious confusion than the other members of their congregations. What we ask of our leaders today is not that they supply us with the correct answers, or even that they pioneer the road to the future, but that they mediate the creative interchange between local and global levels, helping us to own the real questions and search honestly, together, for appropriate responses, and thus facilitate the life-giving interaction between the religious congregation and the real world in which we live and minister. When Peter, that first leader of the Christian community, asked Jesus for a clear fix on church order and ministry by inquiring what role his apparent rival, the Beloved Disciple, was to have, Jesus replied, “That’s not your problem. What you need to do is follow me,” that is, become a beloved disciple and thereby become capable of the ministry to which you are called. Perhaps for all of us, leaders and followers, it is both that simple and that difficult.

Notes

1 On this issue of the importance of worldview and the character of the emerging worldview with which I am concerned in this paper, see the very provocative thesis of Danah Zohar in collaboration with I.N. Marshall, The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the January-February 1998


Zohar, The Quantum Self, p. 234, speaks of the new worldview challenging the modernist dualisms which split subject and object (mind and body), individual from relationships, and culture from nature. This is a slightly different focus on what I am talking about in more humanistic-religious terms.


Cited in Wheatley, Leadership, p. 18.

Much of the following description of U.S. religious life from the 1800s until Vatican II is well illustrated in the volume, coauthored by a team of IHM sisters, Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, ed. Margaret Susan Thompson (Syracuse: University Press, 1997).

It is interesting that sociological theory of organizations has applied these Newtonian principles to social systems, leading theorists like Helen Rose F. Ebaugh, in Women in the Vanishing Cloister: Organizational Decline in Catholic Religious Orders in the United States (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), to confidently predict the immi-
nent demise of religious life, not because the spirituality of religious has died, but because the organizations seem to have lost their niche in the social, economic, and occupational machinery. If I understand Wheatley’s thesis, she is convinced that the mechanistic understanding of organizations that underlies much organizational and management theory is inappropriate to the kind of entity such organizations are. I think Wheatley’s thesis is applicable to religious life in general and religious congregations in particular.


11 When I hear religious wearily predicting the demise of their congregations as simply inevitable since decline in one or more areas seems to have set in and, in the long run, decline cannot be arrested or reversed, I am struck by the mechanistic character of their image of religious congregations.


14 Before reading Wheatley, who uses this very expression, “death or transformation,” in relation to living organisms, I was looking at this same phenomenon in religious life in terms of the mystical tradition, the “bifurcation point” represented by the “dark night.” See Sandra M. Schneiders, “Contemporary Religious Life: Death or Transformation?” Cross Currents 46 (Winter 1996-1997): 510-535.


17 In the earliest period of church life, the choice of lifelong virginity created an alternative to the sociological givens of society in the 1st century of the Christian era. In the 3rd and 4th centuries, the desert ascetics moved geographically out of the overacculturated church of late antiquity. In the Middle Ages cenobitic monasticism was an institutional alternative to life in the cities. The “leaving the world” motif continued in the closed lifestyles of apostolic religious congregations right up to Vatican II.


20 I think this dynamic metaphor might have some potential for discussions of the issues of belonging and membership. For example, if every individual is a distinct constellation of overlapping and intersecting fields (family, personal friends, professional associations, ministerial involvements, and so forth) which structure her personal identity and which

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intersect with the fields of other members and the corporate constellation of fields of the congregation, we have to expect that ways of belonging and participating in community life are going to be very diverse and that this need not lead to disintegration.

Likewise, there may be significant but not determining intersection between the field of some person and the congregational field, leading to a considerable sense of "belonging" on the part of this person who, nevertheless, does not feel called to become a member in the full sense of the word.


22 The amount of chaos within religious life and the sometimes overwhelmingly dysfunctional character of the ecclesiastical settings in which the life survived and even thrived over the centuries is strikingly chronicled by Jo Ann Kay McNamara in Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

23 I do not mean to suggest that leadership does not play a special role in maintenance and mission. In fact, I suspect leadership in these arenas is even more important today than it was in the recent past when ecclesiastical control dictated virtually all major decisions about mission and stable financial procedures and reliable resources assured maintenance. I want to suggest, however, that these functions, although facilitated by leadership, are largely handled by specialists or by congregational structures that do not depend exclusively on leaders.

24 Wheatley, Leadership, p. 146: "More than any other science principle I've encountered, self-reference strikes me as the most important. . . . As an operating principle, it decisively separates living organisms from machines."


26 Turner, Darkness of God, p. 262. Turner says (p. 259): "Experientialism is . . . the 'positivism' of Christian spirituality. It abhors the experiential vacuum of the apophatic, rushing to fill it with the plenum of the psychologistic."


28 Although there is much of value in Diarmuid O'Murchu's latest book, Quantum Theology (New York: Crossroad, 1997), I have serious hesitations about his facile dismissal of religion as a dispensable human invention (see esp. pp. 7-12). He is right to point out the distinction between spirituality, religion, and theology, but I doubt that the direct leap from spirituality to theology is possible because, while the categories of theology can be enriched by science, I doubt that they can be supplied
without recourse to sacred texts and liturgical ritual. It is indeed part of the function of theology to purify religion of its excesses; but it is also part of the function of religious tradition to criticize theology.


32 In speaking of religious congregations, I am using the term theologically and not canonically. I am talking about the faith reality that constitutes religious life, not juridical requirements of any particular period in history.