

Creative Dissent

In any endeavor, the existence of a variety of thought yields tension.

Starting in ancient Hebrew Scriptures, we find no perfectly moral people. We read of a back-and-forth dialogue of assertions and dissents. A big part of those ancient stories reflects the Jewish people's choice to feature harsh, big-headed kings and censorious prophets. The stories do not serve to remind the Jewish people of their greatness; instead we hear of their group's limitations and of God's faithfulness. These writings break ground for self-assessment within a religious group.

The New Testament continues the trajectory. The early Christians could not claim the triumphant victory of having all things figured out. For starters, consider Jesus' critique of the religious context of His time. Then, Paul's pointed words called the early Christians to cohesive discipleship despite a plethora of local leadership strategists. We see a multiplicity of ways to join *The Way*. Paul met with Roman leaders. Dorcas sewed. John had mystical experiences.

In the British Isles, dissent and dialogue persisted, starting with St. Patrick's evangelism in Ireland, where he led a creative encounter with pre-Christian Druidic religion, transforming it to what came to be known as Celtic Christianity. Later, during a time of dissension as Romanism met Celtic Christianity, Cuthbert of Lindisfarne lived in the struggle as he led the Northumberland Church at the border of what is now England and Scotland.

The Celtic habits of searching for the good in all nature and appreciating the presence of God in all situations were divergent from a Roman hierarchical endeavor that prioritized categorization of good and evil and demarcation of sacred and profane. This can be described as a collision between a church founded on the Apostle Peter (the rock) and one founded on the Apostle John (the beloved), whose head rested on Jesus' chest. J. Philip Newell describes this Celtic strand as one that "listens for the heartbeat of God."¹

In mid-19th-century Scotland, Norman MacLeod lived creative dissent. The wholistic idea that God was present in all life, and bigger than time and four

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church walls, provided a basis for MacLeod's objection to a legalistic Sabbatarianism that included such things as mandatory Sunday closings of the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens. For some Scottish Christians, all life was sacred, and draconian government interventions seemed counter to the heart of Christianity.

A Christianity without questions is one that is disembodied from the way of Jesus. The team at *Spectrum* seeks to spring out of settled, established stagnation. Could the meaning of worship on a seventh-day Sabbath be transformed to be more than merely a matter of correct timing? What if worship on the seventh day was brought into a present truth that recalibrated back to the Hebrew meaning of Sabbath as shalom? What if the Church considered Amy Sherman's new book, *Agents of Flourishing*, to help unfold meanings of Sabbath/shalom relevance that would provide heft to the notion that Sabbath keeping is relevant and more than a badge of morality?²

Dissent makes way for positive change. A heretic may simply be one who speaks truth earlier than the dominant group. Self-criticism in a religious group is rare but powerful, especially now when many display veneers of shiny pseudo-perfection.

Here's my prayer: God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change and the courage to offer creative dissent for things that we can. Remove our obtuse certitude. Keep us humble.

Endnotes

1. J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).
2. Amy Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing: Pursuing Shalom in Every Corner of Society* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2022).