

Place, Choice, and Public Culture
A Response to Charles Mathewes

William Johnson Everett

Prof. Mathewes has given us a sweeping but also empirically grounded overview of the most recent upheavals of religious life in the ever-changing American social and political landscape. The contest between established churches of the European colonists and the frontier assemblies of yeoman farmers and tradesmen has been with us from the beginning. The theological visions of apocalypse and settlement in Zion have yielded dozens of religious innovations from shakers to Mormons, Pentecostals to versions of American Orthodoxy. The “ecumenical” combination of the older churches has also yielded a variety of rich theological and ecclesiological formulations. We are indebted to Prof. Mathewes for this rich snapshot of our present time of turning into a probable new phase in this tumultuous history.

Out of his observations I would like to pursue two lines of inquiry that I think can be fruitful for our formulation of visions of where religious life in America might go from here. The first arises out of his brief allusion to the tension between *place* and *choice* in religious and social life. The second takes up the thread of concerns formulated in H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic *Christ and Culture*, even though Mathewes does not cite that book specifically.

Prof. Mathewes, in discussing the ecclesiological impact of wider societal changes in America, describes a future church that is “deterritorialized”—based on the logic of choice, not place. In contrast to the parish-based ecclesiology of past established churches (Anglican or Catholic, as well as New England Congregational), the emerging church is a congeries of voluntary assemblies arising out of the individual, consumer-like choices of participants. It is a church in which “distance has gone away.” In this sense, the emerging church is just a sociological and ecclesiological working out of the logic of separation of religion from the state, hence making religion voluntary, that began with our Constitutional founding.

However, this voluntarism, so vaunted by James Luther Adams himself, now hits two enormous breakwaters: the internet and catastrophic climate change. The internet, with its algorithms of consumer sorting, and the ecological crisis, with its increasing limits on transportation of people and goods, call into question the meaning of moving from place to choice, and indeed, I would like to suggest, a new way of claiming place in the midst of a world of soften illusory choice.

Prof. Mathewes has already indicated the way the internet, as presently constituted, makes of seeming choice a new labyrinth of tribal cocoons and bubbles which undermine efforts at creating and maintaining a more expansive public sphere founded on reasonable argument. However, equally important is the way that survival of our climate crisis means a renewed attention to localities and regions, biospheres and watersheds. The placedness of historical religion was due to the absence of technologies and energy for transportation as well

as to the significance of land to an agrarian culture. Now, the ecological crisis makes a renewed attention to place not only a desideratum but a near necessity if we are to sustain the kind of world in which we arose a million years ago. And this has immediate consequences for the churches, who will have to give up their parking lots and global travel to cultivate sustainable communities. In the digital age we can well see a church that is more “parochial” in an ecological sense but also, in a digital world, more global. But this represents not only a different sense of place but of choice as well.

Indeed, feverish embrace of choice and the ethics of rights that surrounds free choice stands in the way of creating communities of sustainable life embracing not only humans but plants, animals, atmospheres, and waters. It is here, at the limits of rights and choices, that we might see a renewal of a covenantal ethic in which participation, obligation, mutuality, honoring of promises, and opening of our own actions to the actions of others, of the creation, and of the Creator become foundational for both church and wider public. This covenantal way is, indeed, firmly lodged in American history in a myriad of forms, some of them distorted indeed, but it is a cultural treasure that can be renewed and redeemed in the face of the limits of choice and the demands of place. It is a line of inquiry that Adams himself would have warmly embraced. A renewed sense of covenant that takes the land seriously might even be a point of convergence between the new congregationalism, the digital revolution, and the climate crisis.

Renewing the culture of covenantal thought takes us to the second set of questions, those concerning the relation of Christ to culture, as Niebuhr put it, or, more specifically, in my language, between “cult” and culture. American Christianity, especially in its Protestant and subsequent Evangelical branches, has, it seems to me, always been a kind of “Christ of culture” in Niebuhr’s terms, but, as Mathewes points out, the Mainline sought to legitimate and transform it in accordance with a future ideal, while what became the “Religious Right” sought to reclaim an ideal from the past. Thus, we came to think of the former as “Christ transforming Culture” (Niebuhr’s preference) and “Christ against culture” (the sectarian option).

What they could agree on was not the support or opposition to specific interest groups or movements (abolition, labor unions, temperance, etc.) but on a common cultural formation that Sidney Mead, Robert Bellah and others came to call American civil religion. It is this civil religion that has been increasingly torn apart and fragmented in the last years, especially as manifested at the nation’s Capitol on January 6. Just as a rigid interest-group advocacy has delegitimated the churches’ message as simply cloaking ethnic or economic interests, so has the jingoistic or white ethnic hegemony of traditional Civil Religion been exposed with its clay and now melting feet. Ideology-critique cuts through all these forms for legitimating public and ecclesial life. And so we come to the Constitutional crisis we are in. The question of legitimation lies at the heart of the church and society relationship. The patterns of ecclesial and civil “cult” lie at the heart of legitimation.

In the core symbolism of both the churches’ worship and the nation’s civil religion, that is, in our “cultic core,” we now find two deeply contested images of proper social order: white

patriarchy and ecological domination. They are at the roots of both the Religious Right's longing for reprimating the original America and the Mainline's enmeshment in corporate exploitation of the earth for the sake of the market. Conflicts over these two governing images speak deeply not only to the interior life of the churches, namely their worship and spiritual formation, but also to the cultural glue embodied in the civil religion at the heart of constitutional order.

In light of Prof. Mathewe's analysis and sketch of a possible future, what cues might we draw from the tensions of place and choice, of civil and uncivil religion, of Christian cult and American culture? Here are two lines of possible exploration. First, I have been continually intrigued over the years in the way churches are "little publics," indeed, *ecclesia* originally meant public assembly. Returning to a sense of being a "people of place" under the impact of the ecological crisis creates a new sense of being a public tied to limits and conditions that embrace us over time. In these little publics, especially as they contain many voluntaristic elements, we have to learn how to speak and listen, argue toward common claims, respect the presence of others different from us but tied to a common earth. It is these face-to-face enduring assemblies that can wear away our prejudices and narrow loyalties. In crises that compel mutual assistance we can be expanded beyond our self-concerns. This is the cultivation of virtues that Mathewes sees as so important but so besieged by voluntarism, mobility, and internet manipulation. What makes an enormous difference is whether the new congregationalism of place rehearses the adulation of a celebrity or the celebration of the very Spirit of Creation is the decisive question about this arena for the formation of our private and public lives. Specifically, can the cultic life of these little publics actually imagine, in a symbolic way, the forms of a "city [or republic] yet to come" rather than the monarchical panoply that still shapes worship in both Mainline and Religious Right churches?

Secondly, this resurgence of ecological "placedness" need not simply be the return of blind localism but of a care for humans and the earth that is tied to every other place on earth, just as air pollution is not tied to a locality. What form this interconnectedness takes must reshape in some way the existing republican and federalist structures relating states, cities and national governments, whether in the forms of the United States or those of the European Union, India, or Africa and the Americas generally. Here, again, the covenantal heritage that underlies federalism might offer us some visions and theoretical materials for this task by opening up our political structures to the wider covenant with earth and its dynamic Creator. As a hint of this move, I can only note the long work of Ronald Engel, one of Adams's students, in development of the Earth Charter. The present situation, with its near apocalyptic threats, offers some possible openings to a more resilient and hopeful future. Whether we can pursue them is not merely a question of technological skill but of a renewed imagination in the worship of local assemblies and general publics.