

The Christian century: Take two: A living tradition the century mark

From the Editors in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

Are you going to change the name of the magazine in the year 2000? That's a question we've heard often in recent months. The questioners have been eager to remind us of the large hopes that gripped the editors of this magazine a hundred years ago, and to remind us also—in case we hadn't noticed—that those hopes were unfulfilled. The Christian century? It didn't turn out that way, did it?

We might allow for some conscious hyperbole on the part of those editors of 1900 who renamed their magazine the *Christian Century*. Victorians were fond of grand, earnest gestures which today, for better or worse, could not be made without irony. If the editors were overreaching with the *Christian Century*, consider the name of the predecessor magazine: the *Christian Oracle*.

In any case, it's true that the early editors were a confident bunch. In introducing the new name on January 4, 1900, they declared that only a "carping critic" could find the title pretentious. They pointed to the expansion in worldwide Christianity during the 19th century and looked for more growth in both the numbers of Christians and the vitality of Christian witness. Expressing hope "in God and Christian people, and especially the God-fearing liberty-loving brotherhood that pleads for the unity of God's children," they dared to believe that "the most Christian of all the centuries so far" lay ahead of them. And they wanted to help turn that vision into reality.

A laughable expectation? Perhaps. But those who think so might want to consider the motives and the implications of their glee.

Of course, now we know what happened: the 20th century was marked by class conflicts, economic crises, two world wars, brutal dictatorships, systematic slaughter, nuclear bombs, racial hatred and ethnic cleansing. So much for the "Christianization" of the social order. As for the advance of Christianity, over the course of the century the vitality of the non-Christian world became abundantly evident, and Christians in the U.S. increasingly experienced religious diversity—and

secularization—in their own backyards.

This story of dashed hopes is familiar to all students of American religion and theology. It is part of a larger tale about how at the end of the 19th century American Protestants were seized by the idea of the coming kingdom of God, and many believed that God's purposes were increasingly manifesting themselves in history through the advance of scientific knowledge and democratic principles. As the new century unfolded, however, events made it clear that these thinkers had been naïve and overly optimistic about human progress, rationality and goodness. They were theologically mistaken as well. They had overlooked the power of sin and too closely identified God's purposes with historical events. That story has been told many times—and often in these pages—thanks in large part to the powerful critique of the social gospel movement issued by Reinhold Niebuhr and other neo-orthodox and “realist” theologians at midcentury and their many descendants.

But that version of theological history leaves out some significant elements, ones that are especially pertinent as we mark the 100th anniversary of the naming of the *Christian Century*. The account leaves out, for one thing, the fact that the editors of 1900 and their social-gospel friends were minority voices in their day. They saw themselves not as people riding the crest of history but as prophets summoning the church and an ostensibly Christian culture to more compelling forms of Christian witness.

More significant is the fact that most critics of the social gospel, including Niebuhr himself, were deeply indebted to it. While they indicted the social gospel for naïve optimism, they had no intention of turning aside from the task of exploring and addressing the structures, conditions and intellectual currents of modern life. Rather, they sought to develop a deeper and more sophisticated form of Christian engagement with those realities. They, too, believed that the gospel was profoundly relevant to all aspects of life and that close attention to the particulars of historical and social reality would help illuminate the scope of that relevance and the practical tasks of the life of faith.

The same might be said for the assortment of liberals, neoconservatives and liberationists who have struggled to define Christian social witness in recent decades and whose presence has been felt in these pages. While they disagree with one another over how Christian convictions should be brought to bear on society, few Christians doubt that such engagement is both possible and desirable. Even many

conservative evangelicals, who once derided the so-called liberal interest in social problems, now emphasize holistic mission and call attention to issues of poverty, injustice and exploitation.

In this respect, the editors of 1900 have won the argument. They were critical of Christians who sought to be rescued out of the world rather than follow Christ within it. They thought their faith called them to care about economic inequalities, growing pockets of urban poverty, and the struggles of workers to assert their dignity in the face of powerful corporate interests. They were impatient with churches that were preoccupied with questions of right doctrine and indifferent to questions of right action. Weary of theological disputes, they wanted to focus on “the application of Christian principles to character and social problems.” They sought to turn attention from “the metaphysics of the creed” to “the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.” And they made their case.

Indeed, they made the case so well that by the late 20th century some Christians tended to define Christian faith solely in terms of social action. A new imbalance arose: some segments of the church that were committed to social witness gradually lost intimate contact with the Christian story and the tradition it forms. And when the details of the Christian story become fuzzy, so do the features of Christian identity.

This crisis of identity has been shaped also by the moral and religious pluralism of U.S. society. At the beginning of the century and for several decades thereafter, *Century* editors assumed that public discussion would be informed by a fundamental moral consensus grounded in Christian piety. It's clear now that there is very little public moral consensus of any kind. What consensus exists is often grounded in a utilitarian ethic or in simplistic notions of individual freedom.

Such developments underscore the need for a truly theological vision of human nature and destiny. Without such a vision, it is all too easy to succumb to the cost-benefit analyses and the appeals to self-fulfillment that rule contemporary moral and economic life. Many Christians have learned that right belief and right action go hand in hand; the creed, it turns out, has a lot to do with ethics.

Aware of these challenges, and seeking to uncover neglected riches of their own tradition, many Protestants have given renewed attention to the biblical texts, to classic theological questions, and to the church's task of spiritual formation. This

emphasis has certainly been reflected in this magazine in recent years.

On these points, as on many others, the *Century's* witness today differs significantly from that of 1900 (or, for that matter, of 1940 or 1960). Both the churches and the world they inhabit are different. Nevertheless, the *Century* remains very much a part of the tradition of Christian social witness that was launched at the turn of the century. Like any living tradition, it consists not of an unchanging program of action, but of an extended and embodied argument—in this case, an argument about the shape of Christian witness amid the promise and the peril of the modern world.

The turn from a Christian “oracle” to a Christian “century” had this to be said for it: it represented the turn from disembodied wisdom to the historically concrete witness of God’s people. We will have occasion in the coming year to look back at some of the ways Christian witness was embodied in these pages over the past century (see, for example, the following account of the *Century's* early years by Mark Toulouse). It is the witness of Christians in their time and place that constitutes the “Christian century.”

More important, we will have occasion to assess the current state of that tradition. We will identify the challenges that face those who seek in the coming century to embody their faith, who believe that God is active outside and inside the church, and who believe that the gospel illumines the world and calls us to a full engagement with it.

The founders of this magazine gave us a peculiar name, but it is a name that links us to a vital tradition of Christian commitment, debate and action. Unlike our founders, we don’t believe that we know the divine timetable, and we won’t make any predictions about the century ahead—except to say that God will be at work through the Spirit in the next century as in the previous ones. That is to say, it will be a Christian century, just as every century since Christ’s birth has been a Christian century.