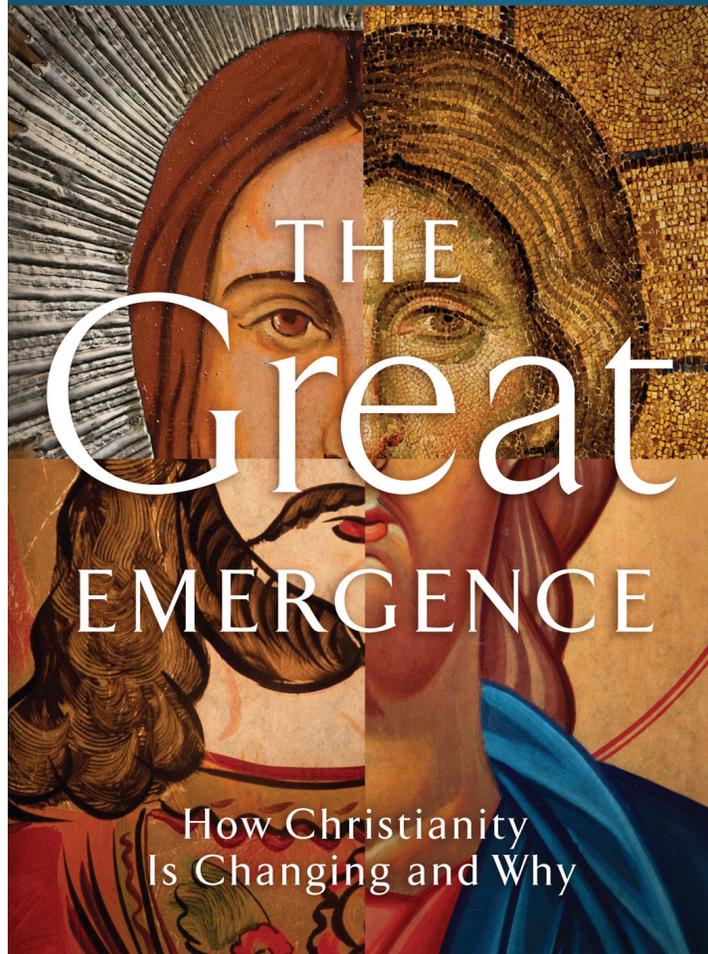


A Guide for Reading
and Discussing ...

PHYLLIS TICKLE



CREATED BY
DANIELLE SHROYER

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Introduction to This Guide

This is an exciting time to be alive. The world is changing rapidly, new frontiers are opening up in every area of life, the creative classes in the global world seem primed for a new Renaissance. At every corner—socially, politically, scientifically, economically, religiously—new and intriguing discoveries are being made, and one can hardly keep up with all the ways these discoveries are in the process of affecting everything else.

This is an exciting time to be alive; and yet, there are so many new things, so many paradigm-shattering discoveries, one cannot help but wake up some days with an intense desire to hide underneath the pillows and hope to hop off the dizzying merry-go-round. We live in the tension between these two poles—excitement and anxiety—sometimes ping-ponging back and forth in the course of a single day. It is an exciting time to be alive, there is no doubt. It is also overwhelming, burdensome, and disconcerting. Where does one begin? To what do we turn our attention? What problems and issues are most pressing? Where can we effect the most change? Who is in charge of this very chaotic rummage sale?

If you have ever stood in the middle of Times Square, you know it to be a sensory experience like no other, its glaring lights and gigantic faces of famous people bearing down upon you, cabs recklessly driving by and honking at pedestrians and each other, the smell of hot dogs and mixed-nut carts wafting between the stench of subway steam. Part of you wants to remain as alert as possible in order to take in every sight, sound, smell. Another part of you would very well rather run for cover into a quiet corner, or better, a calming day spa. This is perhaps an accurate description of life in the second millennium. It engages, pushes, ignites in us new possibilities; and yet, we have not yet come to understand how to handle its constant sensory onslaught, how to make meaning of all of its twists and turns, how to find rest in the middle of its square.

If you have picked up this book, chances are you consider the role of religion an important one in the unfurling of the Great Emergence. What we will say about God in the coming years will very much affect how we will live, what kind of people we will become, what kind of world our children will inherit. These are not issues of dinner party debate. They are serious issues, calling us to a place of awe-full responsibility. Pure faith aside, sociologists will be the first to remind us that the spiritual components of a given society create and preserve cultural meaning. In simplest terms, religion makes sense of the world for the faithful and the irreligious alike. This study guide is written in the hopes of creating space for us to make meaning in the contextual framework of this quite extraordinary book, to create structures that are best equipped to handle the complexities of modern life, to find ways to bring meaningful rhythms and practices into our global postmodern square.

Preface

Tickle refers to herself as a “sociologist of religion” who, through her post at *Publishers Weekly*, began to recognize trends in American religion she now sets forth in this book. How is her position as a professional observer a beneficial one? In what ways does it alter her perspective?

What position do you occupy as you read this book? How will your own perspective color the way you read and respond to this book?

Why are you reading this book? What questions do you have? What fears? What do you hope to gain?

PART ONE

THE GREAT EMERGENCE

What Is It?

Although the thrust of this book will focus on the Great Emergence as it relates to Christianity in North America, it is helpful to remember its place within the broader context of emergence theory. Although it is impossible to do justice to its complexity here, there are a few basic ideas that can provide a fair impression.

The word “emergence” has been used in disciplines as diverse as architecture, physics, biology, sociology, economics and politics. As far as we can tell, the word “emergent” was coined by psychologist George Henry Lewes in 1875 (the Great Emergence has indeed been emerging for a while now) in his book *The Problems of Life and Mind* to describe outcomes not derived from the sum or the difference of psychological forces. The outcomes Lewes described as emergent were new ones; that is, they were not expected causes or byproducts of what came before. In lay terms, this concept is not unlike the Gestalt idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The parts, when added together, create something more than simple addition can describe. Emergence theory, then, describes the phenomenon of truly novel structures and properties which arise from complex systems, seemingly out of nowhere, and quite literally often out of what looks like chaos. Emergence theory recognizes all the places and ways in the universe that the collective whole is greater than what we would have expected or assumed just by looking

at its individual parts. Black circles and white space are transformed into a three-dimensional picture right before our eyes.



Emergence theory is in many ways a response to modern reductionism, which sought to reduce everything into irreducible parts. Reductionism was such a dominant way of viewing the world that you can readily see evidence of it in the economics of modern industrialism. This is quite beneficial when attempting to produce affordable cars on an assembly line, and not as beneficial when asserted indiscriminately to the humanities. To place this idea closer to our topic of religion, you can see evidence of reductionism in modern systematic theology, where concepts of God were broken down until one came to what were considered “irreducible” truths. If liberal theology was a house, therefore, the foundation upon which the rest of the house was built was personal experience. The conservative theological concrete slab, then, rested upon Scripture (and, by extension, a particular way of interpreting and understanding said Scripture). Theology influenced by emergence theory rejects reductionism and foundationalism entirely, denouncing the modern project of “irreducible” truths in favor of what philosopher W. V. O. Quine calls holism.¹ If a house is the metaphor of modern theology, a web is the metaphor for postmodern theology. A web of many beliefs holds meaning together in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Great Emergence describes a shift away from the view that the world is a machine capable of being understood—and, in many ways, manipulated—by dissecting it into pieces. Emergence theory, in a dizzying array of disciplines, describes a view of the world that finds its power not in irreducible parts but in complex cohesion.²

We may not be aware of the effects of emergence theory on our daily lives, but we can be sure the effects are there. Emergence theory is changing what we know of the universe, how businesses are structured, how economics is done, and how we see our relationship to the environment. It will certainly affect the way we view—and “do”—theology, church and religion in general.

1. What are your reactions to Tickle’s immediate assertion that this “new season” of the Great Emergence affects every part of our lives?

1. For a brilliant and concise overview of this, see *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* by Nancey Murphy.
2. Brian McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* describes theology not as systematic, but as a cohesive summation of multiple traditions through which a new kind of Christianity emerges.

2. Where have you seen evidence of the Great Emergence? Where have you seen evidence to the contrary, and why do you think that is?

3. Should the Church's response to the Great Emergence differ from the response in other fields such as science, ecology or philosophy? If yes, how so, and why?

4. Does this shift towards an emerging worldview seem distant from your own understanding of the world, or does it support your understanding of the world? In what ways can you draw parallels between emergence theory and your own faith journey?

1: Rummage Sales

As a means of reference and review, the chart below describes the four “Greats” that have occurred between the early church and today. Discuss how future generations may reflect back upon the time of the Great Emergence and fill out the chart.

	Gregory the Great	The Great Schism	The Great Reformation	The Great Emergence
Dates	6th century	11th century	16th century	21st century
Central Theological Issues	Debate surrounding the human and divine natures of Jesus; status of Mary	Language and type of communion bread used in Mass; whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father or from the Father and the Son	Catholic indulgences, priesthood, accessibility of Bible to all	
Defining Event (if one)	Council of Chalcedon is the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451	The Patriarch of Constantinople and the Pope of Rome excommunicate one another in 1054	Martin Luther nails his “95 Theses” to the door of Wittenburg in 1517	
Societal Shifts in Broader Culture	Fall of the Roman Empire, beginning of Dark Ages	High Middle Ages, Crusades, fall of Byzantine Empire	Enlightenment, rationalism, industrialism	
Outcomes	Monastic traditions	Division of Eastern and Western Christianity	Protestant Christianity/Vatican II	

1. Tickle specifies three consistent results of the Church's rummage sale every five hundred years. What are they? How have these results transpired in past rummage sales?

2. It is notable that all three results Tickle describes are, upon completion, positive ones. This may be true at bird's eye view, but are there less positive results at ground level? How can congregations effectively handle the bumpier results during the transition?

3. Does Tickle's assertion that rummage sales do not entirely destroy old structures reassure you or cause you concern?

4. How do you respond to the idea of your ecclesial tradition being rummaged and perhaps sold in its current form?

5. For some, the metaphor of rummage sale may seem too demure. When the vestiges of faith you have known your entire life are being questioned, and changed, and perhaps even denounced, it can feel more like a wrecking ball coming through the walls of your house to make way for a new upstart development. In what ways does the metaphor of rummage sale ring true? In what ways does it feel more like a wrecking ball? In what ways does it feel like both, or neither?

6. Does the author's assertion that the previous "Greats" have led to a broader expansion of God's story provide you hope? How so, or why not?

2: The Cable of Meaning

Tickle begins the chapter by asserting that religion is a social construct. That is, religion is influenced by the larger culture as much as it influences culture. Using Tickle's metaphor, religion is the soul of culture and culture is the body through which religion acts. Religion is the bearer of meaning, the cable that connects humanity to something bigger than ourselves. When, during times of transition, we begin to question the story that encases this meaning, it results in what often feels a bit like schizophrenia as we bounce from old story to new story without really being capable of settling in either one. This can readily be observed in countless religious debates over the past number of years when the participants might say, "I believe we are talking about two very different things." Indeed, they likely are—one from the perspective of the old story, and one from the perspective of the emerging one. Talking past one another, quite literally from two different worlds, is one of the most frustrating challenges in transitioning times.

Language plays a particularly important role in this process. Just as the cable encases meaning, language functions as the vessel ferrying meaning back and forth. As we begin to question the community story, words move from having one generally agreed-upon meaning to an assortment of meanings, perhaps even contradictory ones, and certainly in flux. What one used to *mean* by the word *salvation* or *atonement* or *church* is not what one currently intends to say; and yet, what other word is available to describe it? "What do you mean by that?" becomes a question requiring us to pull out the strands of spirituality, corporeality and morality and discuss them ferociously. In this process, we are redefining in language what we *mean* to say as we attempt to re-story our understanding of the world.

1. Describe your experience of the cable of meaning. Does everything feel intact to you, or do you sense water seeping through?
2. Do you consider this current shift different than the standard generational gaps that seem to divide a parents' generation from their child's?
3. In what ways have you experienced the old story clashing with the new, emerging story? In what ways have you seen your local congregation or your faith tradition experience the clash of two competing community stories?

4. Have you experienced frustration as the meaning you intend when using a particular word or phrase is ferried back and forth in conversation with unpredictable outcomes?
5. What can we do to combat the difficulty of conversations that occur in the context of two different stories? How can we find ways to talk to one another rather than past one another?

PART TWO

THE GREAT EMERGENCE

How Did It Come To Be?

Tickle offers in Part Two a brief history lesson (or refresher, as the case may be) of the Great Reformation in order to help us understand how the Great Emergence came into being. She suggests that guilt is unproductive as well as unjustified when we realize we are caught up in a pattern that reaches far beyond the tips of our own proverbial noses. This is, however, much easier said than done.

1. Has guilt played, or does it play, a role in your unfurling understanding of the current religious landscape? In what ways has guilt been harmful? Helpful?
2. Although we may recognize ourselves as part of something much bigger going on, are there current religious and ecclesial structures or methods that are worth feeling guilty about? If so, how do we keep said guilt from being paralyzing, as is Tickle's concern, and instead view it as the birth of something healing and new?

3. How does it feel to place yourself in a larger cultural phenomenon? Encouraging? Overwhelming? Invigorating?

4. How do you think great reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin felt about their particular religious landscape? How do you think they were able to put their intuitions to positive use to effect lasting change?

3: The Great Reformation

A Prequel to Emergence

“Where now is the authority?” This question drives every reformation. Our societal cable of meaning is constructed in such a way as to keep this daunting question at bay, for the most part. However, every so often shifts in culture pock both the casing and the mesh sleeve simultaneously, and the question is unavoidable. Before discussing our responses to the chapter, let’s look briefly at how the question of authority during the Great Reformation led to the institution of *sola scriptura*, denominationalism, and cultural Renaissance.

During the time leading up to the Reformation, societal stressors began to beg the question of authority from all sides. It did not happen overnight, but looking back one can see how it could only mean the coming of a rummage sale. Much of the cohesion of the Middle Ages relied upon the concept of “corpus Christianum,” the ideal of a unified society derived from biblical images of the body of Christ. To our ears, the phrase “body of Christ” quite readily means “the church” in some form or fashion, but to medieval ears that phrase incorporated the whole of society. In many ways, this was a necessary concept as it provided a means of unification in the face of foreign invasion. It also benefited the role of the Pope, who stood atop the corpus Christianum, if not as the head, then certainly as the neck. The corpus Christianum relied upon the classification of people into three orders, or roles. There were workers, there were fighters and there were prayers, and each fulfilled their role in order to produce stability and harmony for the larger society.

The orders allowed for relative peace and societal growth, but with growth came massive changes. First, the appearance of merchants created a dilemma, as they defied classification by not “fitting” into any of the existing orders. These merchants then began congregating in geographically advantageous areas for both protection and greater commerce, which led to the development of

cities. Competition replaced cooperation, and the three orders of the *corpus Christianum* were eventually abandoned in favor of more specialized vocations. The economy began to shift from an exchange economy to a monetary one, and the significance and far-reaching effects of this shift cannot be overstated. Latin, once the universal language, was supplanted by local vernacular. People began to affiliate themselves with certain cities rather than the societal whole, and the rise of universities encouraged independent and individualized thinking. All of these changes began unraveling the ideal of *corpus Christianum*. Christianity as a religion was unprepared to handle such mobility, for it had based the past few hundred years almost exclusively on the premise of stability. What does a monotonous religion of stability have to offer a society so full of motion? Religion, in its current form, offered no meaningful way to engage or understand the vast societal shifts people were experiencing.

Issues troubling the papacy did not help matters. Papal abuses too numerous to mention became common knowledge, and the newly independent city dwellers were quick to criticize in ways their parents would not have dared. Although the role of the Pope had always been distinguished from the person holding said office, the now public offenses introduced an air of subjectivism to the papacy for the first time. When Boniface VIII issued the decree in 1302 called *Unam Sanctum*, declaring there was no salvation outside of the one true Catholic church, he inadvertently created a far-reaching existential crisis. As Tickle describes, the year 1378 began a forty-year span of multiple popes and mutual excommunications. If there was no salvation outside of the Church, and being a member in good standing required allegiance to the pope, the question of *which* pope quite literally became a question of eternal life and death. “Where now is the authority?” was not only a question for the religious. It was a question facing every facet of medieval society, shaking its foundations to the core. The demise of *corpus Christianum* prefigured a rummage sale then just as the demise of Western individualism predicts one now.

1. What parallels do you see between the cultural shifts and resulting questions of authority in the time of the Great Reformation and today?
2. How does the issue of authority in the face of multiple popes compare to current contemporary claims and debates of relativism?
3. Do you consider relativism a potential long-term result of postmodern society, or is it simply the state of affairs in hinge times? That is to say, are we questioning authority because it is a time of reformation, or is the skepticism of authority a new societal value of the Great Emergence?

4. Where is the authority in your church today? In your family? In your professional life? How are these shifting (if so)? How is authority in those places being resistant to change?

5. Tickle writes, “Denominationalism is a disunity in the body of Christ and, ironically, one that has a bloody history.” As denominations currently face decline, tensions seem to be rising rather than abating, as denominations clamber for a foothold. How do we address this problem today? How can our ecclesial structures become more peaceful?

6. Where do you see the shift toward individualized, autonomous society reflected in religious practices during and after the Reformation?

7. Do you see evidence today that the common illusion of Western individualism is losing ground? Why or why not?

8. Tickle mentions that tensions between Eastern and Western culture have been a noticeable mark of every hinge time, and they are often defined as religious tensions between Islam and Christianity. It is not difficult to see how this will certainly be the case during our current hinge time as well. How does our understanding of this (bloody) historical pattern affect whether and how we engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue?

9. Tickle delineates between two catalysts during times of reformation. Re-traditioners (a term coined by Diana Butler Bass) focus on changing the internal structure toward a renewed ideal, while innovators seek to create new external forms altogether. The

clash between these two “types” is often apparent at the local, congregational level as much as the national or global level. (Reminding ourselves that no rummage sale has obliterated the natal ecclesial structure is imperative, it would seem.) How can we find creative ways to bring innovators and re-traditioners together in mutually beneficial ways?

4: Questions of Re-formation

As Christianity splintered from one cohesive whole into multiple denominations, a new center of authority was needed. Denominational authorities wrote statements of orthodox doctrinal belief as a means of clarifying their positions, educating their members, and distinguishing themselves from other denominations. These confessions were then recognized by the state, providing political and social stability to the burgeoning groups. They provided the flesh, so to speak, on the bones of *sola scriptura*. In this way, confessions provided much needed normative expressions of authority.

The boundaries between denominational confessions and socio-political power were blurred at best. Many princes, dukes and city councilmen signed confessions not only to clarify their religious beliefs but, more importantly, to define their political allegiances. It is not difficult to see, then, how such statements coincided with the development of the modern state in its earliest form. Where unified allegiances once held during *Corpus Christianum*, localized allegiances were now being formed. Historically, at least, states and denominations share more than we often recognize.

These confessions or statements of doctrine also influenced the emergence of “professional” clergy as denominations began to require formal training, examinations and processes aimed at legitimizing those in the pulpit. These clergy, in turn, aided in solidifying the social influence of religion by providing social discipline through religious education, pastoral care and visitation, and the overall development of what has been deemed the “Protestant work ethic”: individual, responsible citizenship. A burgeoning market economy needed nothing less.

Protestant scholasticism blossomed during this era. With so many competing confessions, robust scholarship provided a means of defending and justifying one’s particular viewpoint. Systematic theology was an inevitable outcome as denominational leaders asked, “What is the Methodist view of the sacraments?” or “How do Anglicans view the Godhead?” The risky, questioning ways of the Reformers would soon be ossified into completed doctrinal works on a shelf, and systematic theology would provide the foundation of stability and authority quite handily in an era of Enlightenment objectivity and rationalism.

Developing theories of human consciousness and the scientific discoveries of Darwin, Faraday and others showed a growing fissure between religion and science, and, in even broader terms, between realms of sacred and secular which were in the process of quietly divorcing, with secular science getting the lion's share of the assets. Pietism further relegated religious experience to an internal, personal realm, while objective science pounded its chest and claimed the human mind as its sole territory. However, such a relationship would not last long without the question of authority beginning to rustle impatiently in the corner. The arena of Christian apologetics staged protest and set up camp squarely across the aisle from theories of human consciousness that did not require an explanation of God or supernatural beings. (Problematically, they did so using the same rules as science, a move which guaranteed difficulties down the road.) Joseph Campbell's stories of myth were bombarded by a unified fundamentalist voice arguing the Bible was literally and factually true, from beginning to end. These and other visceral reactions proved the foundations of authority were again beginning to shift and crack. People were once more asking questions of re-formation.

1. What are your biggest questions of re-formation today? What cracks have you seen in the answers to authority previously given?
2. What influence do you think the "Protestant work ethic" had on the spiritual disciplines? What kind of societal characteristic do you think will shape the spiritual disciplines in the Great Emergence?
3. The issue of space comes to the fore when Tickle describes the difference between listening to a sermon dressed up on a Sunday morning in church, and listening to a radio broadcast in your pajamas at home. Tickle writes that the mind comes out to play with the imagination in this relaxed atmosphere, while a more stoic environment keeps imagination tightly under wraps. This provokes thought in relation to the way we create space in our churches. Is your church a space where imagination is told to keep quiet and sit up straight, or is it a space where it is invited to come out and play? What are the dangers of both kinds of space? The benefits?

4. Tickle claims that one of the dominant questions facing us during the Great Emergence will be, “What is the relation of all religions to one another, or, how can we live responsibly as devout and faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions?” Although there have been noticeable measures to encourage an appreciation of cultural diversity and religious pluralism in our society, much of it can be described as domesticated politeness in the context of political correctness. Can political correctness, in its lowest form, provoke the kind of robust inter-religious dialogue necessary in our time? How can we become more reflective, intentional, and perhaps most importantly, honest, while maintaining our politeness?

5. It is important to realize we are living in a time when two people can quite literally be living in two different worlds—one in the old, pre-Emergence world, and one struggling to live into the coming world. Quite often, this happens in the same family, between parent and child, and certainly with great repetition between individuals in a church family. As we attempt dialogue in such a precarious and odd situation, we must realize we often feel just as estranged from members of our own religious tribe as we do members of other religious tribes. How can we address both within Christianity and between world religions the tension of disagreement on religious issues?

5: The Century of Emergence

During the peri-Emergence, we can see an almost thread-by-thread unraveling of those answers that worked so well during the time of the Reformation. The modern state and denominationalism in the Great Reformation give way to the global village and generous orthodoxy in the Great Emergence. Professional clergy lend credibility and stability to a burgeoning society after the Reformation, while professional clergy face loss of credibility and authenticity during this one.

So now we find ourselves at the five-hundred-year questions, once again, and we must create new answers to fit our emerging context. Tickle defines three overarching questions of the Great Emergence, each of which we will consider here.

First, where is the authority? While the Reformation answer to the question of authority was Scripture, it is Scripture that brings the question of authority to the fore during the Century of Emergence. As Tickle noted in chapter 4, Darwin’s theories of evolution began to poke at our consensual illusion, and it is quite possible the question of biblical interpretation bled first, and

most severely. The field of biblical historical criticism undermined certainties about the reliability of Scripture, questioning everything from authors and dates to the believability of particular events. This opened the door for an honest discussion of clashing interpretations of Scripture on issues such as the role of women and homosexuality. It also opened the door for the creation of fundamentalism, inerrancy and literalism. In addition, Pentecostalism strained the question of allegiance between the written Word and the experienced Spirit. Due to all of these shifts, Scripture is no longer monolithic enough to provide a general answer to the question of authority. And after the Heisenberg uncertainty principle (which claims one can measure position or measure speed, but one cannot measure both with accuracy), one can trace the eventual evolution of biblical interpretation from a modern, objective, rationalist framework to one that is forced to concede that the very act of observation (technically, in this case, reading) changes the reality of what is being observed (or read). Combine this paradigmatic shift with an increasingly diverse and connected world, and a massive fault line in *sola scriptura* erupts underfoot.

1. How is your community of faith responding to the question of scriptural authority?
Do you agree?
2. Tickle asserts Reformation Christianity was based upon “biblical literacy, the nuclear family, and the conserving effect of shared, multigenerational reading, theology and worship.” How are each of these bases changing?
3. Have churches sufficiently been reconfigured to account for a cultural shift toward biblical illiteracy? Why or why not?
4. How can we find meaningful ways to retell the story of God in the midst of a society filled with competing stories?
5. What effect does the diminishing role and stature of professional clergy have on the church’s call to discipleship? If the vetting processes for clergy are giving way to a

more openly structured form of authority, how can the church equip all people to think biblically, to ask the right questions, to engage issues creatively in a narrative biblical framework?

Second, what is human consciousness and/or the humanness of the human? Although the early modern period trumpeted the superiority of humanity, the events of World War I and World War II were devastating to Enlightenment optimism about humanity as crowning glory and savior of the world. You cannot experience Hiroshima or Auschwitz and continue to toot the horn of humanity too loudly. The question of humanity was not, therefore, only a psychologically individual one. It was, perhaps more substantially, a collective one. What is humanity, that it is capable of such evil? To ponder the depths of evil, particularly evil induced at the hands of humanity, continues to be the point of greatest despair in the time of the Great Emergence. Theodicy, as Tickle asserts, is one of urgency in our post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima, post-September 11 world.³ And it is one to which Christianity must respond if it is to be found worthwhile in a society where we know all too quickly about suffering in our cities, in our country, and in every part of our world. In addition, however, developments in psychology began to show the complexity of the human mind, and, increasingly, its interdependence upon the body. Questions regarding where the mind ends and the body begins became much more problematic in light of studies on human consciousness. Is humanity simply a brain? What constitutes life? Where does humanity begin and end? These and other questions will continue to pester us during the Great Emergence.

1. Discuss your thoughts on human consciousness. How do you respond to the above questions?
2. How can our communities honestly and appropriately address the issue of pain and suffering in the world? How does the crucifixion of Jesus inform our answer?
3. How can a reinvigorated study of the incarnation help us answer the question of our humanity?

3. p. 107

as loyal, supportive and generative. From teenagers to young professionals, the Great Emergence has seen a trend toward allegiance to peers and away from allegiance to family.

1. What societal difficulties arise when a younger generation does not have sufficient exposure and guidance from an older generation? How can the church assist in reintegrating generational diversity?
2. Describe what benefits and difficulties come with the urban tribe. How is the urban tribe adequately addressing a felt need? How is it inadequate?
3. How does the success of the small group church model connect with this overarching question regarding society's foundational unit? What critiques do you have of its answer?
4. How do you believe the church should respond to the shifting structure of families? What is the church's appropriate response now that the family no longer necessarily provides the narrative framework for a person's life? How can the church support and strengthen these new forms of family? How can the rituals and rhythms of congregational life provide context for meaning and purpose?

THE GREAT EMERGENCE

Where Is It Going?

Where is the Great Emergence going? And, similarly, where is it taking us as it goes? Both questions intuit two seemingly opposite yet complementary issues. On the one hand, it is our responsibility to make educated guesses about what is happening in our religious landscape and instigate what we hope to be productive measures for the future of the church. Action is needed, and it is needed now. On the other hand, we must be honest with ourselves that, like in any previous time of “Great” change, we are not fully in control of what is going on here. We are located in a far larger environment than our own ecclesial (and even religious) walls.

Perhaps surfing is an apt metaphor for the kind of dual action required of us. Though we may choose our surfboard, our spot in the ocean, and the wave we take, we are not, in the end, able to control the movement of the ocean. We cannot determine the tide, or the length of the wave, or its intensity. It is our duty to ride it, and ride it well, in hopes that we arrive safely (and, with a little luck, gracefully) on the shore.

1. What do you find most difficult about facing the changes of the Great Emergence?
Taking risks through particular actions, or relinquishing control and accepting limits?
2. What spiritual practices can best inform us as we learn to ride the wave of the Great Emergence?

6: The Gathering Center

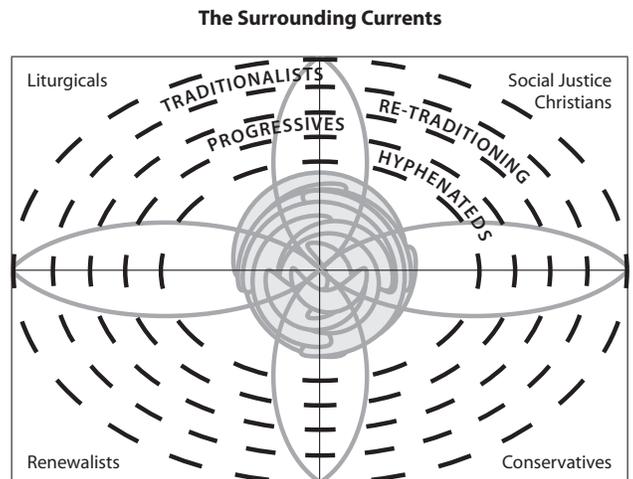
As we consider the changing religious landscape during the Great Emergence, the diagrams of the quadrilateral, the cruciform, the gathering center and the new rose are helpful ways of mapping

the responses and directions of particular religious traditions. Over and above and between all of these directional movements is centripetal force.

Centripetal force literally means “center seeking” in Latin. Centripetal force is absolutely necessary when matter begins moving in a circular direction. It is the only means by which movement toward the gathering center can be maintained. Each of us has experienced centripetal force when we have ridden in a car that suddenly turned while our bodies continued to go straight, shoving us into the passenger next to us or possibly the door or dashboard. It feels like we are being *pushed outward*, but this is not actually the case. We have been *pulled inward* toward the center of the turn. Our bodies sense a push outward despite the fact that we are not in any way moving outward, but what previously would have been straight. This is because during acceleration, Newton’s first two laws of motion no longer apply (think the Heisenberg principle). It is no wonder that many of us have a difficult time finding our directional bearings during this time of acceleration around the gathering center of American religious life. We are currently in the middle of the turn, and we are unsure which direction we are actually going. We also happen to be picking up new ideas, new people, new traditions en route, changing the size and shape of the center itself. There is hope, however, in Tickle’s assertion that we are perhaps being pulled inward by our common desire to become more incarnational.⁵ Before we are able to be pushed outward into “a new way of being Christian, into a new way of being Church,”⁶ perhaps we are gathered toward Jesus-the-Center through the guiding force of the Spirit.

1. How has the center-seeking centripetal force of the Great Emergence affected your faith? Your church? In what ways do you feel unsure of your direction? In what ways do you feel pulled toward Jesus-the-Center?

2. As you consider the final diagram in the chapter, where do you classify yourself? Did your classification change as the diagram shifted from the quadrilateral to its final surrounding currents? How can the diagram be used to help people describe their journeys of faith?



5. p. 135

6. p. 135

3. If you happen to be one of the “hyphenateds,” how are you navigating the tensions between the pull to the center and the pull to the corners?

4. After the Great Reformation, the process of drawing up systematic doctrines provided both cohesiveness and clarity to new denominational bodies. While the confessional age was based upon distinction, the age of emergence will likely be based upon collaboration. Though this is not without its difficulties, Protestantism’s “hallmark characteristic of divisiveness”⁷ is also being replaced by a significantly more harmonious one. Tickle uses the metaphor of a bursting geyser, gathering people from each corner and quadrant and spewing them upward into a new way of being Christian, to describe the gathering center phenomenon. What benefits and drawbacks do you see in the propelling force of the geyser? What are your greatest hopes for this “generous orthodoxy”⁸? Your greatest fears?

5. Tickle writes, “In the Great Emergence, reacting Christians are the ballast.”⁹ By reacting to the gathering center, they provide necessary stability as the center continues to take shape. If you happen to be someone nearer the center, how do you feel about those reacting most stringently against you as helpful, and even necessary? If you happen to be someone nearer the corners, how do you feel about stabilizing (if not strengthening) a movement with which you fervently disagree?

6. There has been marked tension in the Great Emergence, specifically in the interactions of those in Emergent Village, between a desire to speak freely of what one currently does/believes/perceives and a desire to speak against what one used to do/believe/perceive. How, if at all, have you experienced this tension? How does it correlate to the changes happening in the Great Emergence? How does this experience coincide with our Christian understanding of the tensions between the now and the not yet?

7. p. 134

8. This term has come into wide use through Brian McLaren’s book of the same title, which aptly and beautifully describes the kind of ecclesial collaboration that will likely become a hallmark of Great Emergence Christianity.

9. p. 138

7. Tickle claims the earliest assessment of the Great Emergence as simply a generational issue is an error that has since been recognized and understood. From your vantage point, do you and those you know agree, or do you continue to see the current religious changes as generational in nature? Why or why not?

8. If you agree the Great Emergence is not a generational issue, how can those in older generations seek to help rather than hinder the changes underfoot?

9. How can we focus on the emerging conversation not as one that rejects truth or tradition, but as a conversation seeking to create “new ways of being faithful in a new world?”¹⁰

7: The Way Ahead

The power of network theory can be summed up by the simple fact that interest in it has brought together physicists, sociologists, entrepreneurs, engineers, biologists, political campaign strategists and market analysts, just to name a few. The sheer volume of books written on the subject in the past number of years evidences a great desire to understand how the world is changing, and how network theory can enlighten people to effectively engage the new linked-in world.

Network theory quite simply refers to research being done to understand relationships, how they are formed, how they are strengthened or weakened, and what effects they have on individuals, groups and societies. At its most basic level, network theory can refer to two points, or nodes, connected by a line from one to the other. This line indicates the relationship between point A and point B. However, further inferences on what *kind* of relationship is happening between them can result in a variety of lines and arcs displaying mutuality, disagreement, commonality and proximity. Add a dozen or a hundred or thousands more nodes to these two at varying levels of complexity and you can see how quickly network theory books are needed if we are to make out the forest for the trees. And we must, for network theory is absolutely central in our quest to map the way ahead in the Great Emergence.

10. p. 123

As we return to the question of authority, network theory gives us the Great Emergence's first answer. Where now is the authority? It is in the network, running in between all the nodes and connectors, this way and that, in no particular pattern, and asking nobody for permission. Authority exists for the church when the network, a collection of Jesus followers who are linked together, shares information back and forth about Scripture and faith. This is why Tickle suggests that an emergent would respond that authority now lies "in Scripture and in the community."¹¹ This may be seen as a way emergents are reconciling the divorced parents of experience and Scripture. (Remember that experience was the foundational belief of modern liberal theology while a particular hermeneutic of Scripture was the foundational belief of modern conservative theology.) However, as Tickle describes, what we currently see in the Great Emergence is not a simple "patching together" of 1 + 1 but more specifically the emergence of something new, something greater than the sum of its parts. Emergence is not a bridge between the two warring houses of Scripture and experience. It is the demolition of both houses and the construction in its place of a highly networked web.

If we return to the concept of holism and the metaphor of a web of belief, which holds together what we deem true, then in the network theory world of the Great Emergence, there are multiple levels of webs, woven from the authors who wrote the Scriptures and people who experience the living God, the communities who preserved their writings and stories, a history of people who affirmed them, contemporary individuals, churches and denominational institutions that continue to believe them, and on and on. Therefore, authority that rests in both Scripture and the community suggests a network of two thousand years of relationships. Authority is held by each and every relationship strand, and yet is strong enough to withstand strands becoming broken by the sheer volume of the web. In this way, Scripture and community are not completely separate entities, but rather both are a means by which faith has been passed down to us and for us and with us.

As is always the case, parallels can be seen in the wider culture. Consider, as one quick example, Wikipedia. Previously, encyclopedias were painstakingly researched and written by experts, bound in leather and carted (quite weightily) around from door to door. In a world where even the morning newspaper could be hours late on reporting a breaking story that was sent all over the world in mere minutes over the Internet, the clumsy thick encyclopedia became the slowest turtle in the information race. It became impossible to keep encyclopedias up to date, for as soon as one was published the world had changed. Wikipedia not only provided much needed speed and editing capabilities to encyclopedic information. Perhaps more importantly, it proved that painstaking research by experts was no longer necessary. Regular, everyday people, using their own free time and without any payment, write, fill, edit and revise Wikipedia entries every single day. The network of relationships relaying information has become more impressive than the information itself.¹²

11. p. 151

12. If you find this interesting, you may enjoy reading *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom (Portfolio/Penguin, 2006); and *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams (Portfolio/Penguin, 2008).

1. What is most exciting to you about the idea of authority resting in the network of Scripture and community? What is most worrisome?

2. Tickle describes authority being worked out in how the message runs back and forth over the network hubs and “is tried and amended and tempered into wisdom and right action for effecting the Father’s will.”¹³ Have you seen evidence of this kind of action working in your own congregation? How does this movement mimic the Book of Acts?

3. Tickle suggests that emergents would define the Church as “a self-organizing system of relations.”¹⁴ How do you respond to this definition? How do you think previous eras would define the Church?

4. Tickle distinguishes between crowd sourcing and democracy, as crowd sourcing has flattened authority to a point democracy never dared.¹⁵ Crowd sourcing, she continues, rejects anything less than full egalitarianism, rejects capitalism, and rejects individualism. It should not surprise us that these traits were solidly implanted during the time of the Great Reformation, and are being rigorously dissolved in the century of Emergence. What does this do to the structure of the Church at ground level? At denominational level?

5. How does network theory inform Tickle’s discussion of the concepts of orthonomy and theonomy? Can correct harmoniousness be evidenced by holistic, networked, sustaining relationships? What role, if any, does the concept of the Trinity play in such an idea?

13. p. 153

14. p. 152

15. p. 152

6. Throughout the book, Tickle suggests that the role of the Holy Spirit, and our understanding of the movement of the Holy Spirit, will be essential in the unfurling of the Great Emergence. How do you see the Holy Spirit playing a role in the question of authority, the radicalization of the priesthood of the believers, and the future of the Church?

7. How does the shift from the bounded set of “believe-behave-belong” to the center set of “belong-behave-believe” affect the Church’s understanding and practice of membership and evangelism? Of discipleship?

8. Another marker along the way of Emergence so far is the shift toward narrative. This is not limited to theology, though narrative theology, preaching and the like is certainly evidence of it. It can also, and first, be seen in psychology in the works of Jerome S. Bruner and Donald J. Polkinghorne, who have discovered, much like Joseph Campbell, the significance of story on the human psyche. How can story serve as a helpful tool and guide for us in the Great Emergence? How can narrative theology disarm the difficulties and harmful carnage of the post-Constantinian Church?

9. As we move from an era of confessionalization to an era of collaboration, the concept of holism becomes central in describing how people and disciplines are shifting from the former to the latter. What once was held separate (whether one means the harmful distinctions between soul and body or the equally detrimental distinctions between humanity over and against the rest of creation, just to name two) is now moving toward one another, working to repair and re-network a relationship strand that had previously been severed. Holism is the natural paradigm of a world moving from one of competition and distinction to one of mutuality and collaboration. How does holism affect church practices? Doctrine? Structures? How does it connect us to a more Jewish worldview, over and against a Hellenistic one?

Bibliography

For further study in the broader societal reaches of the Great Emergence:

Science/Physics:

Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*

Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*

Philosophy:

See writings by Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Martin Heidegger, Jurgen Habermas

Economics/Politics:

Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*

Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*

Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty*

Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to the Poor*

Ecology:

William McDonough, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*

Sociology:

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

Theology:

Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*

Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*

Danielle Shroyer is pastor of Journey Community Church in Dallas, Texas (www.journeydallas.com). She is a graduate of Baylor University and Princeton Theological Seminary. She serves on the Emergent Village Coordinating Group and helps facilitate the Dallas Emergent Cohort. She and her husband Dan have two children.