

What is Conrad up to in A Church Dismantled?  
Mike Schwartz

*Note from Conrad: Mike has been a friend for two decades with whom I have had richer and more meaningful conversations about the church than with anyone else, usually as we biked or while Heidi and I walked with Mike slowly riding alongside of us. Mike grew up Jewish in a predominantly Protestant neighborhood, and his rich insights in part emerged from his marginal position. Mike is somewhere between identifying as agnostic or atheist which again allows him to "see" in ways that I am blinded. Mike is one of the best sociological theorists I've encountered. This is a piece he wrote describing what, from his perspective, he observes that I am up to in A Church Dismantled.*

The epidemic has had its impacts. All of us have been inconvenienced. Many of us have suffered. Some have us have suffered greatly. However, there has been an impact that is arguably more universal than any inconvenience or any suffering that we may have experienced.

It is inarguable that the pandemic has disrupted our daily routines, the places we go, the people we see, and the way we do things. When disruptions such as these do not last long, they are usually perceived of as only an inconvenience. When they last longer, they are more than just an inconvenience. Most of our lives, the ways we think and act, are automatic. You may think about what you want to eat for dinner, but you just accept the fact that you are going to eat dinner. For many, when awaking on a Sunday morning you automatically get ready for church. If you see someone being noisy at a movie, you don't have to think about it, you just accept that it's not right. When you talk about "church", you center your images around the congregation and the building that houses it. All of this is automatic. It doesn't imply that you don't deviate from these scripts on occasion, it just means that all of this is taken-for-granted most of the time. If you think about it, having most of your life taken-for-granted is socially and biologically necessary. We would be a mess if life were not structured this way. We couldn't leave our house or interact with others if things were not taken-for-granted. It would just be too difficult. Automatic cognitions are part of being human. We don't decide to make things simpler, it is imposed upon us both by biology and living in a culture. The pandemic has disrupted some of the taken-for-granted, not all, but enough that it is more than an inconvenience. The taken-for-granted is no longer automatic. What do we do when the taken-for-granted is disrupted?

When the taken-for-granted is disrupted, our first impulse is to try to recapture it and make the disruption fit into what is just automatic. That itself is automatic. There are rubber bands all around us. Rubber bands that tug us back to what we know as what "is". There are rubber bands in what we believe is true, the organizations in which we live, and the taken-for-granted in our minds. On the outside of our minds, the rubber bands keep the structures of society stable and predictable. Rubber bands make life predictable and comfortable. So our first inclination is to ignore the disruption or try to make it fit. But what happens if the disruption lasts too long to ignore or we can't make it fit?

When that happens, we are confronted with a more severe challenge. It is what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is when two things in our minds don't fit together. Psychologists tell us that there are two ways to rid ourselves of dissonance. One is to ignore it. We have already determined that such a solution is not viable here. The other is to change the way we think about one of the two things that don't fit together. In the case of the epidemic, those two things are the disruption coming from the epidemic and the taken-for-granted that is being disrupted.

With the epidemic the disruption is not a private matter but a public one. So the dissonance is a shared one and not just a private matter. That adds another element to the resolution of the dissonance. In a shared disruption, the resolution can take the form of a social movement. We have witnessed that among some of those who chose to change their perception of the disruption rather than changing the taken-for-granted. A Keep America Open social movement emerged that has redefined the epidemic as trivial and the disruption as an overreaction of those who imposed the disruption on us. Social movements are more effective when there is a defined enemy, so the movement has become as much a reaction to the decision makers as it has to changing the response to the epidemic. For those who chose to realize that the taken-for-granted can no longer be taken-for-granted, it was more a private matter. A matter for which we can offer no universal solution. We can however suggest that the resulting dissonance can provide an opportunity.

When we are confronted with major disruptions in our lives like a divorce, a significant residential relocation, the loss of a job, a serious illness, or the death of a loved one we are also confronted with a disruption in the taken-for-granted. Just like with the epidemic, we are forced to resolve the dissonance between the new circumstances and that which we have taken-for-granted. Also just like with the epidemic, we cling to what has been taken-for-granted and eventually find that it no longer fits. And just like the epidemic, we have some dissonance to resolve. You might find that you no longer wake up with the same person everyday and live every day based on what you have shared together for many years. It no longer works to live life as a "we" and attempting to do so causes more suffering than that which is presented by the dissonance alone. That is when the realization that redefining the disruption will not work sets in and, for most, a redefinition of the taken-for-granted starts to occur. After some time, it becomes a challenge and an opportunity. It is hitting a reset button and building a new screen in your mind. Even though the disruption was unwanted, it provided an opportunity for reassessment. A kind of reassessment that was not possible when the rubber bands of the taken-for-granted were tugging so hard that it maintained things the way they were. These kinds of resets are most often forced upon us by circumstance, but occasionally we choose to attempt them as a volitional reset. So it is with the epidemic. Even though the disruptions caused by the epidemic may pass, we have acquired a new light to imagine what a reset would look. It is a challenge. It is not easy. The rubber bands never stop tugging. Yet it is both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity for a reset under a new light and it is a challenge since the rubber bands of the taken-for-granted never stop pulling. Engaging in such an endeavor doesn't mean we will change, it just means that we have new light to see what a change might look like and, more importantly, a new light to evaluate what we have just accepted. It is an opportunity that doesn't pass our way every day.

However, this is not a story about the epidemic, cognitive dissonance, or the challenges of daily living. Rather it is a story about the church. It is a story about the opportunity to examine the taken-for-granted surrounding the church. Since the normal routines of church going have been disrupted we have been forced to remedy the dissonance that has result from it. It not only includes those that have chosen to remedy the dissonance by evaluating the taken-for-granted, but it also includes those that have chosen the other alternative of making their perception of the disruption fit the existing taken-for-granted. The disruption has been in church-going, but religion itself can also be considered. It is fairly easy to identify that, for the time being, church doesn't mean showing up on Sunday and listening to a sermon and meeting with others in the congregation. These are the things that we just took for granted and that defined what the church was for us. But what else did we take-for-granted? What for me as a parishioner was just automatic? What for me as a pastor or a church leader was automatic? What framed the way our current theology developed? The task is to discover just what is being taken-for-granted, ask how did it become so, and then ask, "Is this what is best?". This is no mean feat because the

rubber bands of the taken-for-granted are constantly tugging at us telling us that this is what is and urging us to not upset the cart.

Even though the disruptions from the epidemic have waxed and waned, it is an ideal time for us to make an attempt at bracketing the taken-for-granted and look at the church and religion anew. The more time that elapses between the disruption and attempting this bracketing, the more difficult it will be to bracket the taken-for-granted and produce an evaluation untethered to it. We shouldn't commence this endeavor seeking or expecting a change, nor should we commence this endeavor permitting the taken-for-granted to tug as back to the usual, as is its want. It should be a fresh evaluation and we should let the chips fall where they may.

Bracketing the taken-for-granted is a deconstruction. It's pulling apart the pieces, washing away what we have added to the pieces over time, and then inspecting the essence of what remains. After we perform this bracketing, we then can ask, "Is the evolution of our perception of the essences, our taken-for-granted, been a good thing or a bad thing?" and "Is it time for a change?". This is not a new method, in philosophy it is known as a phenomenological reduction. Although it is not a traditional theological hermeneutic, it is a broader hermeneutic that considers how historical and contemporary culture has influenced our taken-for-granted about faith, religion, and the church.

Deconstructing the entirety of faith, religion, and the church is a monumental task. Library upon library has been filled by those attempting to do so. Our task here is designed to be more manageable. Our focus will be on the effects of the historical institutionalization of the church and theology. The task begins by attempting to identify what the church and theology is in its most minimal form, i.e., its essence. At this point, it is appropriate to offer a disclaimer. The deconstruction and bracketing required to identify an essence may vary from deconstructor to deconstructor and, consequently, what will be considered an essence will also vary. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the phenomenological essences of our interest can be reduced to: (1) religion is a relationship between a person and God, and (2) a church is a group of people coming together to share that relationship. From that point of departure, we can then ask, "How has the institutionalization of the church and theology over time resulted in what we take-for-granted today?".

It is important that what we mean by "institutionalization" is well-defined. There are two senses of the concept of institutionalization that we are invoking here. The first is the process by which things become taken-for-granted. In this sense, an institution is the same as a taken-for-granted. It is not by accident that we refer to the taken-for-granted as "things". In our minds a taken-for-granted is not unlike a physical object. We don't doubt the existence of the chair on which we are sitting and, in a similar way, we don't doubt the existence of a social taken-for-granted. It just is. It is just like a physical object. When thoughts and behaviors become taken-for-granted we treat them as objects and say that they have become objectified. An institution is an object in that sense and, concomitantly, we also say it has become institutionalized. The other sense of institutionalization is the development of the rules, roles, and structures within an organization. Organizations begin with minimal rules and rather undifferentiated roles for the people within them. Over time, the rules become more numerous and complex and roles within the organization also become more numerous and complex. Organizations never get simpler, they always get more complex. So that is what we mean by institutionalization. It is not about content, but about form and structure. It refers to both the complexity of the church organization and the objectiveness and taken-for-grantedness of the theology that emerges from it.

So the fundamental questions are: "How has institutionalization (understood in this manner) affected what we take-for-granted today?", "How has it affected our relationship with God?", and "How has it affected what we believe as a theology?". From these fundamental questions, more specific and more practically useful questions can be derived. The answer to these questions will allow us to decide if our current taken-for-granted is as good as it could be, or if it is even good, and how far it has deviated from the essence of religion and the church. This is not a simple task, it is more of a program, perhaps a life-long program. As a consequence, the answers to these questions will not be found on these few pages. However, we can begin by suggesting a few derivative questions.

With respect to the current taken-for granted theology, we may turn our attention to an important historical moment that affected protestant theology and has become institutionalized in the evangelical church. In the last days of the 19th century and the early days of the 20th century, many social thinkers and some theologians considered the increasing individualism of the newly emerging modern society troubling. The call from the theologians was for a "fundamentalism" that bracketed away the emerging modernism of the day and focused solely on a literalist interpretation of the bible. In time, the effects of this moment led to a division between evangelical and progressive denominations. The fundamentalism that is embraced by the evangelical church today and which has become institutionalized is, in part, an artifact of the origins of the fundamentalist movement of the early days of the 20th century. That is, it developed as a response to the liberalism and individualism that was growing in secular society, not just within the church. The theology, like all theology, was influenced by a specific time and place in history. If we bracket the taken-for-granted of today and consider this social history, we can ask our first derivative question: "Is the social theology which is taken-for-granted today and which has its origins in the social conditions of 1900 appropriate for the 21st century?".

Over time, rules and theological mandates increase in number and complexity. Rules and mandates by their very essence are proscriptions. They tell us what we can't do and, when they tell us what we should do, they imply what we shouldn't. Consequently, the second derivative question that can be asked is, "Does the increasing institutionalization of rules lead to a theology that is disproportionately judgmental and punitive and, concomitantly, has redemption invaded the space occupied by love and good faith in the world of taken-for-granted theology?".

Finally we may ask "How has the institutionalization of the church affected a follower's personal relationship with God?". Sociologists have developed a concept which they call goal displacement. Goal displacement is when the strategies intended to serve an original purpose become goals in themselves. So we should ask, "Does the rule-laden church and theology push us further away from a close relationship with God and direct our attention away from a relationship and more toward complying with the rules?".

Under normal circumstances, we would never think of asking these questions. The rubber bands of the taken-for-granted would be tugging on us too hard. Although we are not untethered to the rubber bands of the taken-for-granted, our current situation alerts us to their existence and allows us to more freely ask questions like these. When all the dust has settled, we may find that we fully embrace the current taken-for granted, or we may find that much of it is not ideal, or we may find something in-between. Whatever the outcome, it will be a journey worth the trip.

