

Looking for Hope ... all over the place

Anniversaries are moments of pause looking back at the expectations with which one began a journey and checking out the realities of the present. This month is the anniversary of the 1968 May workers and student uprisings in Paris that spread across Europe and the Atlantic, creating for some governments the fear of revolution. These events were driven by a faith that street protest, sit ins, and occupations would re-make history. They would realize the hope of a new kind of West by ending the hegemony of elites, ending colonialisms and tearing down prevailing systems of political, economic and social controls. Some believed that these events were the first steps to ending the nation state. This revolt of students (different from the revolt of the factory workers, who were pressing not for a new politics but better wages and working conditions) believed they were ushering in a new era of people-based democratization and a radically individualized, freedom-shaped liberalization. What is clear from the vantage of half a century is that the hope of the 1960s for revolutionary transformation, for a new age, did not occur. History's trajectories are never in our hands and declarations of a new world are usually premature.

Mitchell Abidor, in a recent *New York Times Sunday Review*, writes: 'The uprising was not simply a fight *against* something...It was a fight *for* something – for a new way of arranging society, for new forms of economic and social and class relations'.^[1] In spite of its naivety it's important just now to remember the environment of hope and possibility that drove those young students and factory workers some fifty years ago. There's a lot one could write about; the failure of their dreams, about the overblown reality of the 1960s. But their sense of hope and possibility is sorely needed today. Fifty years on it's hard to see that much has actually changed. The generation of protest became, mostly, wildly successful middle-class bourgeoisie; they became the richest generation the world has ever known, to the point that this idealistic 'Baby-boom' generation is now the most resented generation of our time, by the vast numbers of younger adults trying to get a toe hold in a deeply divergent social reality.^[2] In the midst of returning fascisms, unravelling democratic processes and accelerating economic disparities in a post truth era, 1968 seems like another illustration of the illusory nature of idealized revolutions from the elites (the students)^[3]. That being said, what is important about those times is not the specific imaginaries of revolutionary change but a restless awareness that there needed to be a refounding of Western societies, with a desire to risk and to test, in the midst of a hope that there could be better ways. That has surely been borne out in 2018. There was a longing among those young adults to be part of a community in which, together, people tried to make a better world. For a brief period, they sought to form such communities, not so much for themselves, as to test out alternative ways of making a better world. I do not want to lose sight of these instincts; they seem like remote possibilities at this moment in time.

Looking back, the 60s was a time when traditions and established structures were rejected. At the same time, the instincts driving those street protests and the attempts to build a new kind of community had deeply Christian roots. It may have been a secularized eschatology that shaped their actions but, nevertheless, the Christian narrative they were rejecting is what shaped their imagination. The desire for community and the building of a better, different world were sourced from the Western Christian tradition. It is, for me, these elements of May 68 that need to be

remembered because, today, they are mostly lost to a large part of the Euro-tribal churches. In this moment of post-truth, culture wars, the fear and anxiety of loss, these churches have turned in on themselves in a search to save and fix themselves, to redefine their identities and remake their 'essence'. They seem obsessed with finding new clergy forms, new planting methods and new techniques to innovate. But, overall, it's ecclesiocentric technique driven by fear and anxiety rather than hope in the God who makes all things new.^[4]

Recently, the general meeting of a North American denomination directed its national staff to discover why there continued to be a precipitous decline in membership and come back with recommendations to develop strategies to reverse the decline, through church renewal and church planting (along with the prospect of millions of dollars to underwrite these actions). This directive is illustrative of the focus - making the church work again - that misses the point and misses the larger vocation of God's people to be centers of the hope for the remaking of society. The students in the streets in the 60s were driven by something greater than their own survival. They wanted to refound the basis of Western societies, often unaware that the imagination driving them was deeply Christian. At one level, I fear that too many of the Euro-tribal churches have lost that imagination. They need their own refounding. The churches need to be delivered from the church for them to discover their calling to be the people of God whose vocation involves the reweaving of the social fabric. Something far more than renewal and church planting is needed today. There needs to be a refounding!^[5] It was what those students sensed on the streets in the 60s.

^[1] *New York Times Sunday Review*, May 6, 2018, 4-5.

^[2] See *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 08 May 2018, 'Give millennials £10,000 each to tackle the generation gap, says think tank' (<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2018/may/08/give-millennials-10000-each-to-tackle-generation-gap-says-thinktank>)

^[3] One would not get this perspective reading Claus Leggewie and Daniel Cohn-Bendit's interview '1968: Power to the Imagination' in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LXV, No. 8, (May 10, 2018) 4-8.

^[4] See Alan J Roxburgh, *Joining God* (NY: Church Publishing, 2016)

^[5] See Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People* (NY: Church Publishing, 2018)