

Session 3

The Last Days of Christendom

Christian practice is undergoing a huge transition that began a century and a half ago with the philosophical and theological work of Søren Kierkegaard. He introduced an existential interpretation of Christian heritage that yielded a host of successors. In 1922 Karl Barth “rang a bell” with his *The Epistle to the Romans*. Others followed in his wake. Prominent among them were: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and H. Richard Niebuhr. Contemplative writers such as Simone Weil and Thomas Merton enriched this ferment. Millions of women and men, laity and clergy have participated in this awakening

Even though most Christian-identified persons have not absorbed this Christian awakening, a profound and contemporary Christian theology is now a well-laid foundation. In spite of its detractors and those who water down the radical nature of this “revelation,” theological reflection upon the essence of the Christian breakthrough is now an established reality.

I have attempted to summarize and make more accessible this profound theological clarification in these books (listed in order of their accessibility): (1) *The Call of the Awe: Rediscovering Christian Profundity in an Interreligious Era*, (2) *Great Paragraphs of Protestant Theology: A Commentary on the 20th Century Theological Revolution and its Implication for 21st Century Theology*, and (3) *Jacob’s Dream: A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization*. Although more theological writing will be done and needs to be done, the basic theological foundation for the practice of a renewed Christianity has been laid. The focus of Christian reconstruction has shifted from clarifying the gospel to constructing new forms of Christian community.

The first step in that reconstruction is to realize that the social forms of the typical congregation and denomination are old wineskins that no longer hold the new wine of the gospel recovery. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley experienced a similar disquiet with the established Anglican Church in which he was ordained. He was giving theological talks in the open fields that challenged the established woodenness taking place in sanctuaries. He came to see that his sermons needed to be followed up with new forms of community. He did not want to give any talks that were not followed up with regular, small, intimate “class meetings” of practitioners. This is similar to what many of us are discovering in the 21st Century: our theological awakening events need to be followed up with small circles of regular religious practice. Hence, our foremost challenge is shaping the specific practices of these new forms of Christian life together.

From 1962 until the late seventies, I participated in the Order:Ecumenical, founded by Joseph W. Mathews. This family order of over a thousand adults and their children focused on a renewed Christian life together and its appropriate mission. For the last 25 years, I, my wife Joyce, and friends have been meeting weekly in small groups for innovative Christian practice. For the last 10 years we have been promoting the replication of this weekly practice. This practice begins with 5 to 12 people who are awake or awakening to the recovered gospel. They meet weekly for two hours, using their own bodies, minds, emotions, and Spirit experience for ongoing research. In the beginning we called these groups “House Churches”; we now call them “Christian Resurgence Circles” (CRCs). Eventually, practitioners may call them something else. In any case, having a name for these intimate circles does not mean that the research task is done. We have only begun what is perhaps a hundred-year task.

Organizing and conducting local, grassroots, intimate Christian Resurgence Circles is a beginning but is not the only task of Christian Reconstruction. We must also

reconstruct the global forms of the Church, forms that hold all the juice of 2000 years of Christian invention. But grassroots experimentation is the first task because the new form needs to have a bottom-up rather than a topdown organization. In fact, bottom-and-top, up-and-down are obsolete metaphors. We are learning to talk in geographical (local, regional, continental, planetary) rather than hierarchical terms. The local and the planetary each has its own functional autonomy. Neither rules over the other. Nevertheless, the grassroots or local is primary in reconstructing the church because that is where each solitary soul lives. Unless the communal riches of the Christian life take place at least weekly at the grassroots scope, no reconstruction of Christian communal life is taking place.

We already know a great deal about the forms and methods of a vital CRC. Yet the CRC remains a research project in its early stages. We continue to experiment and share among CRC experimenters what we are learning. We are creating a network of CRCs with common theological insight and methodological savvy. We envision a network of regional and continental assemblies, research symposia, and training schools, a network operating with a democratic polity. We will also be developing the social mission of individual CRCs and of the whole network. We expect to work out an economic model that supports prophetic social mission as well as profound nurture. Such nurture and such mission are often controversial in ways that the older Christian institutions do not support. Following is some historical perspective within which this ongoing work is taking place.

The Future Sociological Form of Christian Practice is Beyond Christendom

Just as the vitality of humanity requires moving beyond civilization to a new mode of social organization, so the vitality of Christian practice requires moving beyond Christendom to a new era of Christianity.

By “civilization” we mean all the familiar forms of topdown, hierarchically organized society. By “beyond civilization” we mean a social mode we are calling “Eco-Democracy,” for ecology and democracy are foundational for constructing a viable presence of the human species on this planet. Establishing full democracy will mean the dismantling of civilization, for civilization has always been a hierarchical, topdown, aristocracy-to-peon mode of organization. And ecological transformation will also mean a dismantling of civilization, for civilization has always been a tyranny over the natural world, given to recurring instances of catastrophic misuse. This overall critique does not mean that everything created in the era of civilization has been bad. Treasures need to be preserved – including the basic impetus of democracy, racial justice, equality for women, equal rights for those forging same-sex relationships, and the gifts of the empirical sciences. But the basic framework of civilization is coming to an end and must come to an end for human life to survive and thrive.

Christendom came into being in the era of civilization. Its structures were appropriate for that era. But now, as the human population moves beyond civilization, the designers of vital Christian community must move beyond Christendom. Such a Next Christianity will be able to assist humanity with its transition beyond civilization.

“Christendom” can be understood in different ways, but within this paper, we mean by “Christendom” the form of the Christian Church that began in earnest in the 4th century and reached completion about the 12th century. It was not profoundly challenged until the 16th century Reformation. Martin Luther did not do away with Christendom; he reformed it. “Reformation” is the appropriate name for what he and others achieved.

Luther’s action was a far-reaching reform; he did away with the Pope in his sector of

Christendom, emptied monasteries, married a nun, redid the sacraments, and promoted a literate and biblically knowledgeable laity. But Luther did not do away with the State Church or the professional clergy. To his credit, he initiated “the priesthood of all believers,” a first step toward democratization of the Christian community. But with few exceptions, rulership of the clergy has continued to be the basic polity of Protestant denominations as well as Roman Catholicism and Orthodox bodies.

Even more important, Luther retained the idea of a Christian culture, including a disdain for Jews, Muslims, and the remnants of the various religious practices of old Europe. In the United States, even though the State Church has been abandoned or defanged and the notion of “no religious establishment” written into the U.S. Constitution, Christians still have a nostalgia for a Christian culture and many conservative Christians claim that the United States is a Christian nation. Many U.S. citizens still allow or insist upon Christian prayers at secular meetings, a leftover from Christendom. These obsolete notions are evasions of the reality that we have entered an era of “secular” cultures that encompass many different religious practices and healing therapies. “Secular” in this context does not mean anti-religious; it means that no one religion has the right to dominate the culture and degrade other religious inventions.

Also, most Protestants as well as Catholics have retained attitudes toward church buildings, money-raising, and correct doctrine that tacitly assume Christendom and make no sense without it. The Reformation (as well as the Counter-Reformation) has been a reform of Christendom, not the end of Christendom. Eastern Orthodox Churches also continued a type of Christendom into this century.

Here are **five qualities of Christendom that are detrimental to a vital future for Christian community**: (1) the notion of Christian culture, (2) the clergy/laity split, (3) the edifice complex, (4) the economic mollifier, and (5) the notion of Christian beliefs. I will explain why we must move beyond each of these to have a vital Christian practice in this unfolding century.

1. The End of Christian Culture

The notion of Christian culture, the core quality that has made Christendom Christendom, needs special attention. Christendom spread a Christian canopy over everyone within its sponsoring territories, exiling non-Christians to disrespected ghettos. When the defenders of this Christian canopy were seriously threatened, they instituted such horrific actions as the Inquisitions. It has taken us painful centuries to realize that no real-world culture can be viewed as Christian, just as no economics can be Christian, and no toilet can be Christian. The adjective “Christian” points to finite religious practices, not to something absolute. However true it may be that practitioners of a Christian religion may access Eternal states, the Christian religion itself has no overarching status. Furthermore, it is pretentious for Christians to assume that a culture will be depraved if not ruled by Christian institutions. Quite the opposite is true; an imposed Christian culture discredits Christianity and robs the individual person of responsibility for his or her own religious practice and Spirit maturity.

In spite of these obvious truths, the ideal of a rulership over an entire culture by Christian organizations is still strongly held by both conservative Catholics and conservative Protestants as well as conservatives in the Eastern Orthodox bodies. Atheists, Buddhists, Muslims, etc. feel the tyranny in this notion of a Christian culture. Indeed, this notion is a root cause of the widespread contempt by Christians of the Jewish religion, the Muslim religion, African culture, same-sex relationships, Native American folkways, and more. And a Christian culture that includes patriarchy also oppresses women.

Today, in our pluralistic societies in which every city is home to almost every religious practice, a Christian culture is oppressive, disrespectful toward other religions, and downright impractical and foolish. Christians must become more humble before that Final Reality they claim to serve; for today, living our actual lives includes seeing the practice of Christianity as one among many religious practices that make up the whole of any society. Promoting a Christian culture has become obsolete, unnecessary, and oppressive.

And Christian culture is not a minor form of oppression. It explains why so many German Christians could go along with Adolph Hitler in the horrific oppression of the Jewish subculture. In the beginning, only a few European Christians grasped that support for the Nazis could not be Christian. Ironically, many citizens of contemporary Israel favor a Jewish culture rather than a secular nation that honors the Jewish majority as well as others. Israel's most violent opponents favor an Islamic culture. Humanity as a whole has not yet learned that all cultures always were, are now, and ever shall be secular, with an ongoing diversity of religious practices. "Theocratic" societies are a human perversion anywhere. Christians need to lead, not follow, in giving up commitment to a religious culture – embracing the wisdom of a secular cultural canopy that houses many religious practices.

2. The End of the Clergy/Laity Split

The initiators of future forms of Christian community are being challenged to abandon the hierarchical distinction between clergy and laity. This distinction tends to promote Spirit laziness among the laity and make pompous fools out of the clergy, dividing the Christian community into orators and listeners, writers and readers, helpers and helped, rulers and ruled. The ex-laity of Christian churches need to become competent theologians -- as well as orators, teachers, writers, Spirit counselors, and organizers -- as their talents permit. A seminary-depth education needs to be offered to the entire Christian community. The ex-pastors need to demote themselves to ordinary Christians without losing any of their actual talents and Spirit maturity for serving Christian communities and the secular world. This change is a tall order for both clergy and laity. Leaning on Luther's "priesthood of all believers" I have sometimes described the members of a local Christian Resurgence Circle as "co-pastors," but simply "members" is good enough.

There will be leadership roles in the post-Christendom church. There will be Spirit-mature people who anchor the life of each Christian Circle and each Network of Circles, but pastor, clergy, priest, bishop, cardinal, and pope are obsolete institutions that will indeed pass away. In whatever way we work through the roles of leadership within Christian Circles and within the Global Network of Christian Circles, we will be working on a pattern of living that leaves behind the clergy/laity split. This journey cannot take place within the existing denominational congregations. With the exception of some groups, such as the Quakers, these inherited organizations will have clergy for the remainder of their days. But the days of clericalized denominations are numbered. Christians will move beyond clergy and beyond clericalized congregations into networks of Christian Circles in which every member is a priest, a pastor, a guru, a guide, a shaman, a Spirit servant of his or her companions.

3. The End of the Edifice Complex

The European Middle Ages made building cathedrals a major part of its overall culture. The wealth of the aristocracy and the Church/State compact made vast buildings possible. In modern secular nations, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians have continued putting Christian church buildings in every neighborhood,

now financing them with member donations. New multimillion dollar structures go up every year. It is claimed that such facilities are needed for reaching large numbers of people and creating communities of care and moral preservation for their respective neighborhoods. But most of these buildings stand almost empty much of the week and may be the biggest waste of money ever conceived by the Christian-identified population. We could count this “holy waste” if these institutions were actually awakening and nurturing the Spirit depths of humanity. But often these building projects are supported by moralistic, sentimental, and rationalistic forces that do not want to be awakened to any relevant Spirit controversy.

Since we have so identified being Christian with a building, we may find it difficult to imagine being without one. To think our way out of the edifice complex, let us suppose that the future church meets every week in Circles of, say, 12 members, and every quarter in rallies of perhaps 500. No new buildings are needed; for we already have living rooms and conference rooms for such meetings. Doing without the traditional buildings would save billions of dollars that could be devoted to pioneering ministries on behalf of full social justice and true Spirit awakening. Also, our justice and social benevolence work can be done along with other religious and service-oriented bodies through secularly organized institutions. If we have moved beyond the illusion of Christian culture, we don't need Christian preschools; we just need preschools. We don't need Christian drug rehab centers; we just need rehab centers. It is important for those who manage such services to be Spirit-sensitive people, but they don't have to be Christians. And Christians don't have to prove themselves or draw people to themselves by promoting their own social services.

4. The End of the Economic Mollifier

The cost of buildings and salaries for pastors, choir directors, secretaries, janitors, and others places a huge load on the members of most congregations. Raising money becomes a challenge of such importance that almost everything else becomes secondary.

The tragedy is that controversial issues have to be downplayed to hold together a constituency large enough to pay these bills. Jesus, we might remember, felt no such restrictions on being controversial. Nor did Paul and the early church feel such restrictions. Paul raised money in the wealthier communities to assist the poor and persecuted ones, but this was secondary and supportive to spreading a radical gospel. Such a mission-centered stewardship of wealth is no longer typical. Instead of raising money for needed missions, the typical practice is to ignore social mission or to find some safe, non-controversial missions that help raise money for the institution.

Wealth rules in those congregations; the gospel is secondary. Profound Spirit teaching and true social justice are less important than meeting the institutional budget. The most relevant controversies are avoided. This does not enable Christian nurture and mission. A well-organized small-group network can emphasize Spirit life and its radical implications. Money can then support rather than rule. Contributing and raising money can be directed solely toward the nurture and mission of the Christian community.

5. The End of Christian Beliefs

In most New Testament translations, “Faith” is not a synonym for “belief” but for “trust.” Trust is a transrational movement of our core consciousness toward an open affirmation of the always mysterious Reality coming at us. We use our minds to talk about this. We may even create courses and catechisms to spell out the life of trust, but they need not result in Christian beliefs. Just as there are no Christian politics or

Christian economics, so there are no Christian religious beliefs.

A vital post-Christendom Christianity must carry forward the 20th Century theological revolution which freed Christians from the tyranny of beliefs. A vital Christian network is founded upon a vibrant recovery of the New Testament gospel. But this is not the same as having a set of Christian beliefs. After reading Stephen Bachelor's book *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, I became keenly aware that true Christian community is "Christianity without beliefs." All the books about what Methodists believe or what Catholics believe or what Lutherans believe need to be assigned to the attic. Christians use their minds and words to communicate the New Testament breakthrough, but this "revelation" is not a matter of the mind and cannot be reduced to a book or doctrine. The mind can only stand by and describe this breakthrough in basic awareness over and over again in the languages of people being addressed. There is no final Christian theology or set of beliefs.

The typical denominational congregation of Christendom is firmly committed to the security of Christian beliefs. This disqualifies these congregations as a useful containers for the future of Christian life together.

Conclusions

Christians and whole nations have been leaving the Christian Middle Ages for many centuries, but most Christian-identified persons have not finished leaving. The existing denominations of Christian formation will probably last another century, about as long as industrial civilization endures. They carry treasures that need to be preserved and renewed for the future. But the current institutions cannot be the containers for this renewal. To preserve those treasures, they will need to pass them on to new communal Christian social formations. Christian heritage is a huge treasure chest of Spirit experimentation, insight, and Spirit methods worth preserving. The basic framework of the denominational congregation is an aspect of Christendom. And Christendom itself is obsolete and passing away in all its forms. A vital future for Christian community includes an exodus from Christendom.

This exodus is first of all an interior journey, a detachment from the old patterns. It also means stepping out into fresh forms of Christian community. Taking these steps need not mean ignoring or dismissing the relatively good things that a few congregations are doing. It certainly does not mean that we hold in contempt the long heritage that the existing Christian bodies preserve. But it does mean making our witness that these carryovers of Medieval Christendom are not the future sociological form for a vital Christian practice.