

# Belief, Faith, and the History of Christianity

a dialogue with Harvey Cox

Gene Marshall , 2015

In 2009 Harvey Cox published an accessible, well written book entitled *The Future of Faith*. I agree with his basic insight that the history of Christian religion can be meaningfully viewed in three overarching periods: (1) the early period before Constantine, (2) the period following Constantine until recently, and (3) a current period that is more like the first period than the second. Cox characterized that first period as an *age of faith*, the second period as an *age of belief*, and our present and future period as another *age of faith*. Cox is clear that faith is an act of our deep existence and that belief is a matter of images, stories, and doctrines of the mind. I agree that it is important to understand this distinction between faith and belief, and also the relationship between them. Cox's elaborations using this basic model are convincing and useful; nevertheless, I want to suggest that a still deeper perspective is needed. For example, Cox is clear that faith was not entirely dead in period two, and that the confusion of faith with belief existed in period one. Nevertheless, I will show how easy it is for Cox's readers to idealize period one and demonize period two. Though Cox does not, some Protestants have virtually claimed that faith died shortly after the Bible was written and was not recovered until the time of Luther. This view of Christian history is deeply wrong.

In order to proceed with a more accurate view of Christian history, the terms "faith" and "belief" need to be more clearly defined. Both terms, when carefully defined, have positive applications within all three periods. For example, while belief in rational content is an inadequate substitute for faith as a transrational action of our profound consciousness, a belief can be an expression of faith. In fact, there is no existence of faith without some effort to express that faith in self-understandings and cosmological understandings that amount to a set of beliefs. Both faith and belief are essential functions of being human, along with breathing.

My basic critique of Cox's book is that I believe he has too greatly idealized the first period of Christian religion, picturing it as too pure in its charismatic faith and too devoid of time-specific, problematical beliefs. Similarly, I believe he has pictured the middle period of Christianity as too devoid of faith and too lost in beliefs that are substituted for faith. If we view the Christian past more accurately, we will, I believe, enrich our view the future.

Also, for the sake of our projection of a viable future for Christianity, we have as much to learn from the second period as we have from the first. And we have as much to abandon in the first period and we do in the second. The best-case scenario that I see for the future of Christianity is a radical departure from both of these previous periods and a balanced appropriation of both of their respective gifts. This essay is a brief overview of this perspective.

## Definitions of Faith and Belief

A belief is something more than a passing thought. A belief involves commitment on the part of our core consciousness. A belief is more than an abstraction of the mind; it is a construct of thought that is considered to be, rightly or wrongly, an insight into what is real in the environment of living or in the inner life of the living person. When we say we believe something, we mean we are organizing and planning the living of our lives in the light of that piece of rational thought. In that regard, belief is not something to be minimized. We always have beliefs, and we could not live our lives without beliefs. However, a vital Christian theology must not make beliefs a substitute for faith. With regard to our beliefs themselves, the question is: are our beliefs true, partly true, or not true at all? And are our beliefs firmly held, casually assumed, or simply trucked along as mental baggage that means very little to us?

Faith, as clarified by Paul, Luther, and others, is not a set of beliefs. Faith is a risk of our entire lives upon something not seen with eye or mind. For Paul, Luther, and many others, “faith” means trusting in the trustworthiness of the Final Reality that we all confront. Faith is not simply content for the mind. Faith is a motion of the core of consciousness, constituting the life of the whole self. Faith is a deep response of our profound humanness. Faith is a “Yes” answer to such questions as these: Does the Source and Tomb of our existence love us? Is Final Reality doing all things well, or is this Final Upagaintness indifferent (or perhaps hostile) to us? And does Reality forgive us all our “unrealism” and offer us a genuine fresh start in a glorious “authenticity”? With our core existence, Christian faith answers “Yes” to these questions about Final Reality’s trustworthiness. This “Yes” answer is not given by the mind, but by a movement of our deep conscious freedom. The mind created its beliefs after not before this conscious leap of faith.

Therefore, Christian faith is not a rational conclusion based on some other truth; faith is a core relation to Reality that precedes all thinking about faith or about the consequences of living this faith. All our attempts to give a rational description of faith are time-specific and, therefore, limited descriptions—words that may be useful for a time and place, but inadequate to hold for all time the Eternal relatedness that faith is. Faith is a leap into the full face of Absolute Mystery. Thus faith can only serve as the starting point for all other acts of thought and body. Faith is a risk of our entire being in the fundamental either-or of living. Either Reality is *against* us. OR Reality is *for* us.

There cannot be a rational justification for faith, yet faith is not anti-intellectual. Human reason a part of the Overall Reality being trusted. This does not mean that all the products of reasoning are trustworthy, but that our natural capacity for rational appropriation of what is true is an aspect of the “good creation” of that trustworthy “Creator” we face in every event of our lives. So the core issue with regard to faith and reason is this: does faith use reason faithfully for the purposes of faith, or must faith bow to reason for some sort of justification of faith?

Any confidence for living the life of faith comes in the fruits of having opted to live the faith alternative. Many of those who have opted for faith have claimed that the life of faith has been given to them by Reality. We do choose to live faith, but faith is not a human invention. Faith is a basic part of the created cosmos that is given along with the cosmos itself. In other words, faith is the one and only realistic option for living. Every other option is a disaster working its way toward some hell of despair. Reflections like these are an expression of the confidence that Christian faith is experienced to be. Faith means a joining with the Reality that cannot be defeated. Such faith appears in other than Christian religions and in secular articulations as well.

Having been given faith and opted for faith, do we still sometimes doubt that Final Reality is doing all thing well on our behalf? Yes, we do. Faith is a journey in which the temptation to opt otherwise remains present. "Lead us not into temptation" is part of the Lord's prayer. Consider the Gospel stories about Jesus in his final garden of prayer as he is sweating his awareness that he will likely be handed over for crucifixion. Does he give up his faith that Final Reality is doing all things well? No. Is he tempted to do so? Yes. He is fully human in the orthodox stories; as such he is devastated by the coming torture as any human would be. I believe that Mark's rendering of this "sorrow unto death" implies that Jesus is on the verge of suicide.

But Jesus prays this through, rises and goes to face the coming day. His final act of faith in one of the Jesus stories is held in these words, "Into thy hands (Reality's keeping), I commend my consciousness." This Faith is characterized by a type of confidence that has to be maintained choice-by-choice in the face of all temptations to opt otherwise. This makes faith something different from belief, something more basic than any belief, something pre-rational to any reasoning about faith. All beliefs are subject to doubt, but faith is part of an either-or commitment of life, either: (1) the trust of Reality or (2) the mistrust of Reality.

Trust means "Yes" to realism as the best case scenario for our lives. When Mark's Jesus quotes the 22nd Psalm on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," this must not be interpreted as a lack of faith. The relation "My God" is being maintained in spite of whatever doubts are being felt in Jesus' beliefs. Why? asked to God is not a lack of faith, but an expression of faith. We do not know what the historical Jesus actually said on the cross. Mark's picture of Jesus finding meaning the 22nd Psalm is for Mark a picture of faith not unfaith. It pictures the sort of raw humanity in which it is still possible for faith to live, in spite of all doubts about beliefs in which that faith has been expressed up to now.

## **I. Faith and Belief in Period One**

It is clear to me that Cox is right about Period One being an age of emphasis on faith rather than belief. There were many beliefs seeking to give expression to the same faith. Cox describes the faith of the early Christian movement as a charismatic spirit that glued these persons together into an expanding movement. I believe this was true, yet the mental descriptions of this faith and its implications were surprisingly diverse in

these early centuries. As Cox rightly claims, there did not yet exist a universal system of beliefs to which a centralized authority expected all Christ-way disciples to agree.

We also, however, do well to notice that faith in this earliest period was being given some commonly viewed forms of poetic expression. The ancient Hebrew Scriptures concerning the basic human dialogue with Final Reality was revered. The Jesus Christ events were seen as a New Exodus of revelation about our alienation and restoration to that same Final Reality revealed in the Exodus—an Unfathomable Mystery about which we continue to learn. Jesus is pictured as asking his disciples to see this Final Reality as trustworthy, as caring for us more than sparrows and flowers. Indeed, that Final Reality is doing all things well. This “all-things-well doing” of Final Reality included a picture of the coming end of the “evil” empire of Rome and the coming to be of Final Reality’s own empire (God’s Kingdom). This enigmatic Kingdom (order of humanity) is coming in fullness on this Earth. This Kingdom is already appearing in the presence of a faithful humanity who is now trusting in Final Reality’s trustworthiness as proclaimed by Jesus. These “beliefs” express the Christian “faith” in these early years.

Furthermore, this faith in Final Reality’s “doing-all-things-well” included a belief about living “between-the-times” in which the evil will of the reigning empire of estrangement was being allowed to reject and even put to a torturous death the most faith-full sons and daughters of Final Reality. The Roman Empire maintained order through the fear of death, a crucified torture to death publicly displayed for all to see. “Being crucified with the Christ and raised up with him to newness of life” was an expression of faith that overcame the fear death. Such participate “in Christ,” meant an inward exit from the estranged humanity of the existing era and a resurrection into the coming era of freedom and love for all beings.

It is important to notice that the word “resurrection” was not pointing to a miracle that happened to Jesus, but a miracle that happened to his earliest devotees, men and women—including the “come-lately” Paul, and to everyone else who told us about resurrection. The “resurrection” is about Jesus in the sense that the essence of Jesus was still alive in the community of faith. If we imagine sitting in the circle of the first century faithful and looking around at the others sitting there, we see the presence of the Jesus. He is still here on this Earth wherever two three gather in this faith. The faith-full persons are his body, his historical presence in an ongoing fashion.

This experience of “resurrection” was also expressed in the belief that resurrection had a cosmic meaning: this Jesus Christ essence is pictured as sitting on the lap of the Final Reality in Eternity. This essence existed before the world began and would be the wrap when the world ended. The Jesus Christ event reveals the quality of true humanity in terms of which Final Reality judges all estrangement from Reality to be estrangement. In other words, the Jesus Christ event defines sin as well as righteousness.

All the above seemingly strange expressions were core poetic forms that expressed the faith of those first-century Christians. These rational forms are in themselves only temporal beliefs; they are no more than historically relevant beliefs that express a faith that was far, far, far more than mere beliefs.

The beliefs examined above were taken by me from the New Testament canon, a formalization of “right beliefs” that was already taking place in the pre-constantine period, but not completed until the second period. In those early centuries there were other *beliefs*, and indeed other *faiths*, that claimed to be loyal to the Jesus Christ revelation. So we have the ambiguity of deciding which of these early “faiths” we choose to call “Christian.” It was, I believe, the intent of the New Testament canonizers to separate writings that they believed expressed the true faith from those that did not express that faith, or tempted people to misunderstandings the faith.

For example, much is being made today about an early century manuscript credited to Thomas. We see some direct memories of the historical Jesus not found in the New Testament and insights about human life that we find true. Nevertheless, we can also see in the Thomas writing a quite different overall view than we find in the New Testament. In the Thomas text there is no emphasis on death and resurrection or even the Christ title for Jesus. We must assume that it was seen by the canonizers as expressing a different “faith” or at least a quite different picture of “faith” than the one the canonizers of the New Testament attempted to protect. It is possible for us to criticize the canonizers for excluding writings that could have been included or for including writings that we might want to exclude. Nevertheless, these canonizers were, I believe, persons of faith who were attempting to fence out misleading writings and fence in those writings most worthy to be read aloud in the circles of the faithful. Let us remember that those early Christians saw themselves as the body of Christ who thereby had the authority to see what was faith and what was not faith, not trust in this Jesus Christ revelation of how Reality IS in every event that happens to us.

Period one Christians also harbored many beliefs that cannot be understood to express that essential Christian faith that is beyond beliefs. For example, they believed that the sun rotated around the earth and that the earth was basically flat, unless they had been convinced by the Alexandrian philosopher, Claudius Ptolemy (100-170 CE) that the earth was spherical. I do not believe; I cannot believe in the truth of that ancient science. I can understand why they had their science, but their science cannot be my science.

Also, I cannot believe that there is going to be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of time, complete with reward for those who have kept the faith and gloom for those who have not. What I can believe is that Reality is going to win in the end over unreality—that fleeing or fighting with Reality is a futile way to live.

Similarly, I do not believe, as they did, that there is a place (either literal or spiritual or metaphorical) called “heaven” where Final Reality lives and can be usefully pictured as an all-powerful, humanoid Person who is attended with many angels (messengers) who, with their wings, can fly down to earth and appear to us in revelatory moments. I believe that this metaphorical way of thinking was useful to them. Nevertheless, it is a metaphorical way of thinking that has become obsolete for me. I can believe that Final Reality does “appear” to me in revelatory moments, not with flapping wings, but with states of awe that do blow me away with a truly flapping windiness in the core of my being.

First century Christians also forged ethical guidelines about slavery and about male-female relations that I do not feel required to believe—indeed, that I cannot believe. Furthermore, I am convinced that living the faith manifested by first century Christians in my twenty-first century context requires me to create my own ethical guidelines on most topics. These guidelines may differ greatly from those required of the first century faithful. At the same time, the guidelines that I am required to follow are not arbitrary, but are revealed to us by the intersection of faith with the history of our times. For example, to be a person of Christian faith today requires us to be feminists in the sense of giving full equality and respect to women and to women's experience within our still patriarchal culture that we are called to dismantle. Living Christian faith in our time also requires us to give up all forms of slavery, racial bias, or mistreatment of those who do not conform to our particular nativism. Similarly, living the faith in these times requires us to cease demeaning persons because of their physical, sexual, psychological, or cultural characteristics. Any failure to honor all persons as they are given to us by Reality is a violation of our own essential love for God and neighbor. Such faithful thoughtfulness can be carried forward into every aspect of human justice, peace, social effectiveness, as well as ecological care for an optimal life on this planet for humans as well as other life forms.

Using the writings of the Christian Bible to justify exceptions to these obvious contemporary affirmations of Reality is, I believe, a denial of the Christian faith. The New Testament writings (or any other writings of that period) did not drop down from some realm of super-rational truth into the minds of the first Christians. Rather, all their rational wording was created by themselves with the tools of their times and with the metaphors available to them and in response to the realistic social possibilities that they faced. We can find commonality with their essential faith in the trustworthiness of Final Reality without finding commonality with all their rational beliefs.

## **II. Faith and Belief in Period Two**

Christianity erupted into history as a movement of the Spirit, animated by faith—by hope and confidence in the dawning of an era of *shalom* that Jesus had demonstrated and announced. This “Reign of God” would include both Jews and Gentiles. The poor would be vindicated, the outsiders brought within. For nearly three centuries the Age of Faith thrived. Then, however, in a relatively short period of time, faith in this inclusive Reign faded, and what had begun as a vigorous popular movement curdled into a top-heavy edifice defined by obligatory beliefs enforced by a hierarchy. (Cox, page 73)

I believe that Cox is basically accurate in viewing as a turning point in the history of Christian practice the 313 CE edict of Constantine making Christianity legal within the Empire. Unlike Cox, however, I believe that the majority of Christian Bishops chose wisely to embrace this opportunity to do their witnessing work in a safer social environment. They chose to be a legal entity rather than losing many of their best members to the Roman addiction to violent entertainment, sometimes at the expense of

Christian scapegoats. They also opted for this wider opportunity to gather human and financial resources for expanding their program of evangelism.

There were other Bishops and monastic-type Christians who chose to reject cooperation with the Emperor. Many of these withdrew to a hermit style of life. Others simply had as little to do with imperial politics as possible. To say that the majority of Bishops chose wisely, does not mean that those who chose differently were not also witnessing to their faith. It has always been and still is a dynamic of Christian faith that its practitioners are called to be “not of this world.” But it is also a dynamic of Christian faith that its practitioners are called to be “servants of this world.” The majority of the Bishops chose to emphasize the latter, to participate in transforming the culture, politics, and economics of the Roman world. Viewing the majority of second-period Christians as engaged in transforming their temporal world is an important example for Christians in the 21st Century who overemphasize the individual.

At the time of the Constantine edict, Christianity was still a minority movement. A century later, Christianity was expanding rapidly: it was on its way toward accomplishing in later centuries the placing of clerics (often nuns and monks as well) in every village in Europe. And the financial resources to do such a “social miracle” were being provided by wealthy Christians who understood that a significant portion of their wealth was owed to the poor and to the building of churches. Such a role for wealthy Christians was affirmed by Augustine, who in doing so won one of his key disagreements with Pelagius. Pelagius had argued that a true Christian was called to renounce his or her wealth.

It may be that Christians helped Constantine unify his governance of a hierarchical empire, but in the following centuries the empire also helped Christians build a quite different culture. By the time of the high Middle ages (1200 CE), that culture was markedly different, though still supported by a imperial political order and economy. After 313 the social organization of Christianity changed deeply, but I disagree with Cox that these 4th and 5th Century Christian Bishops made a bad choice. Nor was that choice a shift from an emphasis on faith. The emphasis on beliefs within the early post-Constantine era was an emphasis on what beliefs best gave expression to the faith. Later in Western history, it is true that the dynamic of correct beliefs become a substitute for faith in the lives of many, perhaps most, people. This confusion between faith and beliefs and how these two dynamics relate to each other remains to this day an unresolved topic for many Christians. I am thankful to Cox for emphasizing this topic. My disagreements with Cox are an attempt to further clarify the nature of this challenge to see clearly the priority of faith over beliefs.

I also disagree with Cox with regard to his view that the hierarchical ordering of the Christian church was a poor choice. Whatever may have been its grim outcomes centuries later, a hierarchical church was needed for evangelizing and transforming the then-existing hierarchical society. Full democratization is a relatively recent trend. Democratic influence has always been a dynamic in human society: the populous is never without some influence. And this democratic dynamic bubbled up into relative prominence in the classical period of Athens Greece. But democracy as a solid

challenge to world-wide monarchy did not come into being until the 18th century political revolutions. Indeed, monarchy and oligarchy are still powerful in the 21st Century. Nevertheless, billions of people today have embraced the vision of democracy and have a longing for democracy in the place where they live. This cultural development is quite recent. Let us not condemn our 12th century Christians for their lack of democracy.

The history of hierarchical civilization began about 4500 BCE and has continued to be the dominant form of social organization until the present day. Democracy has moderated hierarchy somewhat, but the current U.S. society is far from being fully democratic. The 2016 U.S. is ruled, in very large measure, by a wealthy oligarchy through a top-down fabric of decisions that are made before any democratic voting takes place. Nevertheless, it is now an appropriate vision for both world society and Christian community to become fully democratic. But because this vision is relatively recent, it is misleading to fault the 4th and 5th century Christian Bishops for creating a hierarchical church. Instead, we can credit these Bishops and other Christian leaders with making effective choices toward fulfilling their calling to evangelize and transform their world. This does not mean that Christians today should be making choices that support hierarchical order. Period three Christians are awakening to the truth that different choices are appropriate for different times.

Also, I believe that the hierarchical ordering of Christianity was already well underway before 313. Constantine's edict only intensified a trend that was already happening. Here is why that change was already taking place: the organizing glue of charismatic faith had its limits. In the second and third centuries of Christianity, there were many different "charismatic spirits" operating within the canopy of Christian practice. Choices needed to be made as to which "spirits" were aspects of the "Holy Spirit" of the original revelation. Some spirits were clearly departures that robbed Christian practice of its truthfulness and healing power. The teachings of Marcion of Sinope is a prime example. This imaginative and somewhat "charismatic" person wanted to do away with the Sovereign Creator of nature that dominated the Old Testament. He wanted Christians to worship a kinder God that he mistakenly found in a misreading of Paul and Luke. The earliest Bishops came into being to protect their local communities of Christians from such teachings. These guardians of the people, it has been said, were more like bouncers than all-powerful rulers. They kept the rowdy charismatics out of the Christ-way meeting room. However we characterize these first Bishops, such steps toward hierarchical order were deemed necessary to protect the essence of faith (trust) in the essential Jesus-Christ *showing* of Final Reality. In the Marcion case, these early Bishops were protecting a devotion to "The Almighty Final Reality, maker of heaven and earth." Today, we can view these credal words as an effort to protect a thoroughgoing affirmation of the human body, planet Earth, and all other aspects of our temporal lives.

The Constantine edict did, however, intensify this trend toward a more intense hierarchical ordering of the diversified Christian community. When it became clear that some version of "Christianity" was going to have the emperor's support, it behooved



Christians to ask which version that was going to be. This was not simply a sell-out of faith for status and money. It was a fight for which version of faith was going to dominate the future. This historical challenge occasioned vigorous fights (even skullduggery) to create clear creedal definitions of the boundaries of what could be included as “Christian,” and what could not. This challenge evolved into the formal task of defining “heresy”—a practice that later was perverted into the brutalities of the Inquisition against all challenges to the established beliefs of the church hierarchy. But in the early Middle Ages, the main concern of this empire-cooperating Christian movement was, I believe, standardizing the training of leadership for the ongoing organization of Christianity and for the appropriate restructuring of the whole culture in some workable, post-Roman-Empire directions.

These early Bishops were surely aware that deciding to be a movement that was favored by the Emperor would bring temptations toward making accommodations with an empire that they had appropriately analyzed as “evil” for three centuries. Accommodations with a number of imperial qualities were made, but that is not the whole story. These same Bishops who consented to work with this emperor were a scrappy bunch who tested the patience of Constantine and everyone else in that society with their obstinate passion for their unconventional truth about human life.

Constantine, I believe, was a rather shallow Christian. He had respect for the Christian movement and what it was doing for the invigoration, enrichment, and unification of the poor, but he himself did not give up all his pagan practices. Christian inputs were simply added to his pagan practice. I count as superstition, rather than faith, his belief that having placed a cross on the shields of his army was significant in winning his final victory to unify his empire. And let us not exaggerate what his edict was. He only made Christianity legal. He did not recommend that everyone become a Christian. He even discouraged the wealthy aristocracy from becoming clergy, for he wanted their wealth to be retained for the promotion of his empire.

I give Constantine credit for being an aggressive, energetic, and innovative ruler, far more sensible than many of his predecessors, but he must have been quite surprised at the passion for the truth of faith that was demonstrated at the Nicene Council in 325 CE. I do not believe that Constantine understood what the fight with the Arian form of Christian expression was all about. I believe his energy in calling for the first empire-wide Christian Council, financing it, and facilitating it was more about his concern for the unity for the empire than his own religious purity.

Concerning the issue of substituting belief for faith, the Nicene Council may appear to be a step in that direction, for the decision boiled down to a single letter in one syllable of one word. But beneath that tiny linguistic difference lay a whole world of theological difference. Here is my summary of that difference put in my contemporary language. Arias and his followers held that what was revealed in the Jesus Christ event did not show us the Final Infinite Reality itself, but a “creation” of that Ultimate Creator. The opponents of Arias held that it was the Final Reality that met us in Jesus Christ. This anti-Arian view was, I believe, resonate with a core view about what it means to “meet God” in the Hebrew scriptures. The fullness of Yahweh was understood to have been

met in a burning bush, a braying ass, a flood, a whirlwind, a small interior voice, and in the hammer-blow words of a long string of prophets, so why could the fullness of Final Reality not be met in Jesus who was deemed to be the Messiah for all time? Of course the burning bush was not itself Final Reality. And Jesus the man was not Final Reality either. Final Reality was met in the man Jesus. The anti-Arian view was that the Word (Logos or Meaning of it All) that was met in Jesus was the Word of Final Reality and this Word was Final Reality. The Arian view was that this Word (Logos) was a creature of Final Reality.

The anti-Arian view was consistent, I believe, with the first chapter of the Gospel of John which says clearly that the Word was God and that this Word was with God in the creation of the cosmos. However we explain the meaning of this controversy, it was a serious struggle to define what is meant by “faith,” not a departure from faith to a preoccupation with beliefs.

Here are three more stories about belief and faith from the next dozen centuries of the Constantinian era. The teachings of the following three pivotal figures are illuminating: Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and Martin Luther (1483-1546). Each of these persons wrote a whole library of books. These many words might suggest to some readers that they were more interested in beliefs than in faith, but this was not the case.

Augustine clarified his understand of faith and beliefs in this simple summary statement that is found in the introduction to his Confessions: *“Our hearts are restless until this rest in Thee, Oh God.”* By “heart” he does not mean the mind and its beliefs. “Heart” means that core of our consciousness that generates our ultimate loyalty. And by “God” Augustine does not mean only an idea in our minds; “God” points to a Mysterious Infinity of Power that births us, sustains us, limits us, and brings us to our deaths. We meet this God in every event of our lives, whether we are paying attention to this “Presence” or not. And by “rest in God” Augustine does not mean taking a nap; he means a core of consciousness surrender to being loyal to this Final Reality with all our heart, mind, consciousness, and strength. This loyalty is “rest” because every other loyalty means restlessness. Faith is clearly Augustine’s preoccupation, not beliefs. Augustine does give a type of loyalty to the vast deposit of scriptures, creeds, witnesses, traditions, and other assemblages of “beliefs” that were carried by the orthodox church of his times. But his understanding of this gift to him was related to how that body of works addressed him personally with a self-understanding for his own concrete life. For him his loyalty to this written tradition is not a mind-trip into authoritarian submission, but a faith discovery. His first impression of many Christian scriptures was negative; he objected to the literal content he found in those texts. But when Bishop Ambrose provided him with a personally relevant means of scripture interpretation, this body of materials became *authoritative* for him, because this poetry pointed him to an *authenticity* for living that vastly exceeded, in his conscious experience, the messages he was receiving from the classical philosophical works which also had their value for him. However that may be, it is certainly not accurate to say that Augustine’s writings focused on replacing the early faith with medieval beliefs.

Augustine's articulation of faith played a primary role in the whole of European culture for the next 800 years. Benedict, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis and Clair of Assisi were all Augustinians in their basic theology. Luther was an Augustinian monk, and Augustine is still avidly read by both Catholics and Protestants to this day. Certainly, this enduring attention is not because of his 5th century beliefs, but because of the faith that was expressed in those hundreds of pages of writing. Rather than viewing those writings as beliefs, we can interpret them as articulations that point beyond themselves to a heart-felt faith.

Thomas Aquinas has been more cherished, as well as more hated, for his seeming emphasis on correct beliefs, but reading him between the lines rather than at simple face value reveals another person of deep faith. Here is a simple example: When discussing the topic of Eternal Law and natural law, he makes the comment that Eternal Law is not known to the human mind. Natural law is that part of Eternal Law that the mind can grasp. Thomas was clear in his way the using the word "Law" to point to the Eternal is analogical thinking; that is, we don't directly experience an Eternal King and His Law. Such talk is using our temporal experience of an earthly king promulgating governance over his temporal kingdom, and then applying that image *by analogy* to a "*supposed*" Eternal King who promulgates governance over all of nature and historical events. Thomas' faith is present in his assertion that this Eternal King (this Unknown Mysterious Final Reality) does only good governance with his Eternal Law. The meaning here is quite similar to Augustine's and Luther's insistence that God (the Final Reality) does all things well. Such a self-understanding is faith, not belief.

Finally, Luther pulls the term "faith" out of this long tradition and gives it a thorough workout. His conclusion is that faith is not belief or any achievement of human mind or body. Faith is a gift of God, and this gift is our essential nature that trusts with our whole heart in God's trustworthiness. Luther states that the Final Reality that meets us in every event is doing all things well. "There is no greater honoring of this Final Reality," says Luther, "than attributing to this Final Reality trustworthiness." Such an understanding of faith is not unique to Luther. Such faith is witnessed to by many other memorable men and women, such as Julian of Norwich before Luther, and after Luther by John Calvin and other Reformation figures. We also find this view of faith in the Spanish monasticism of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, as well as still later in John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.

So did Christianity compromise with the Roman Empire, or did that fourth century Roman Empire do most of the compromising with Christianity? It was certainly both. Here is one example Rome compromising with Christianity: a hundred years after Constantine's edict, the conversion of Augustine's best friend to Christianity was entangled with breaking that man's addiction to the violent entertainment taking place in the Roman games. Over time, Christianity moderated that sort of entertainment. Joisting contests sometimes killed someone, but killing was not the game.

As Christianity became more dominant, many deep changes took place, such as the widespread replacement of the Roman form of slavery with the much more humane role of serf. A medieval serf enjoyed far less freedom than most citizens of a

contemporary democracy, but for bottom-rung members in the early Roman empire, such changes were a huge upgrade. I give the Christian presence credit for this.

I also believe that Roman-style patriarchy was somewhat moderated by the Christian presence. The ministries of Jesus and Paul attracted many women to a new freedom and respect. Also, through the development of women's religious orders many lower class women kept rising to remarkable status within the general society. Women like Hildegard of Bingham were not elected pope, but they were major educators and powerful inspiration for both popes and laity. Julian of Norwich, and Teresa of Avila, also made enormous contributions. Most of these women had to renounce family life and become monastics in order to reach their potential. Such limitations witnessed to the enduring power of the patriarchy, but the presence of Christianity did improve the lives of many women.

But of course, patriarchy was not done away with in Medieval Europe. Furthermore, ruthless backlashes of patriarchal oppression took place in period two as they still do today in period three. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the presence of Christian faith moderated patriarchy in spite of the fact that many Christians have further aggravated this ancient malady. Moderation is too little today: we are called to a thoroughgoing liberation of women. Nevertheless, the deep currents of the Christian revelation made a difference in period two and has provided period three with encouragement to end the patriarchal nightmare. Modern feminists can count the prophetic emphasis in ancient Judaism and Christianity as encouragement for their more thoroughgoing feminist revolution.

In his evaluation of the Middle Ages, Cox implies that life would have been better if the Bishops had opted for continuing the 2nd and 3rd century charismatic emphasis rather than entangling the Christian movement with rebuilding Roman civilization. I believe that it is more likely that if Christian Bishops had rejected Constantine's opportunity for expanded safety and support, we European descendants might never have heard of Christianity or its witness that Final Reality is doing all things well. Christianity might now be a minor sect in some out-of-the-way place, along with other first century religions we have never heard about. Also the Christians of Christendom passed on to us an important aspect of living the Christian faith: namely, assuming total responsibility for every aspect of human society—from economic and political responsibility to the culture's life style, education, and yes its religious practices. Top down authority over religious practices turned out to be a tyranny in the late Middle Ages, but in the early Middle Ages the religious aspect of the cultural shift was clearly part of the overall social progress.

### **III. Faith and Belief in Period Three**

When Cox calls the Christian period before 313 CE "the era of faith" and the period after 313 the "era of belief," he is idealizing the first period and demonizing the second. He admits this to some degree. He knows that faith was never entirely absent in the second period. And he knows that the hierarchical organization of Christianity began before the 313 edict. If Cox and I sat down to talk about it, we could probably agree that

the turning point dated 313 began at least a hundred years earlier and it took a hundred years after 313 to get into full operation. Such is the nature of most major transitions.

My comments on period two are meant to indicate the extent to which faith, along with belief, played a major role in the years between 313 and let's say 1850. I certainly do not wish to whitewash that second major period of Christian practice. I agree with the following quote about Medieval Christian beliefs from James P. Carse's book *The Religious Case Against Belief*.

(Galileo's) inquisitors were not exactly suicide bombers, but they held their views with the same intensity. Torture, long terms of imprisonment in appalling conditions, and death by the most painful means possible were the recommended treatment of unbelievers, even those who deviated but slightly from the standards of orthodoxy. . . . The pope's (Urban VIII) Thirty Years War was a horror, but it hardly compares to Stalin's starvation of the kulaks and Mao's Cultural Revolution, and certainly not to the unspeakable crimes of the Holocaust. For true believers, it is a short distance from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first. (pages 21 & 22)

What this quote indicates is that every age is an age of belief, and that beliefs can indeed have profoundly evil consequences. The underlying issue about beliefs is whether a belief is a simple lack of information or a willful ignorance in defense of some preferred untruth. Also, a belief can be quite profound—such as the belief that all beliefs are temporal creations that fall short of Absolute Truth. In relation to the Christian faith indicated in the New Testament writings, it is important to “believe” that no belief can substitute for the trusting relationship with Final Reality that is the Christian faith.

Faith comes into play in the space of emptiness that is created by the temporality, and thus uncertainty, that is the nature of all rational beliefs. Christian faith is about whether the Absolutely Unknown and Unknowable is *for* us or *against* us, *loves* us or is basically *indifferent* towards us. In either of these two options, we are talking about a leap of faith. Christian faith is the leap of trust of the Absolutely Unknown and Unknowable Final Reality. Such faith is a risk of our whole lives, and becomes thereby a confidence for all our living. Many of our beliefs are the result of scientific discovery or contemplative inquiry. Although these beliefs manifest a relative certainty, the confidence of faith has another order of magnitude. The relative certainty of beliefs can never be a substitute for the confidence of faith.

Yet, we actually experience no contradiction between our Christian faith and whatever it is that we validly know (relatively speaking) through our scientific discoveries or contemplative inquiries. If the evolution of our species from simpler life forms in what we validly know through our scientific openness to the data of our actual experience, then from the point of view of Christian faith we are only experiencing a picture of how Final Reality has done and is still doing all things well. Similarly, if our contemplative inquiry has checked out with other inquirers to be relatively enriching for our living, it does not contradict our Christian faith. Our Christian faith is simply about living in trust that Final Reality's “doing all things well.” We are thus obliged to include our contemplative insights and our current scientific knowledge (including

evolution) in Final Reality's "doing all things well." That is, the science of evolution takes precedence over the ancient science assumed by the writers of the Biblical poetry.

This much-discussed issue of biblical interpretation can be easily resolved by noticing and believing that the Bible is more poetry than science. And this biblical poetry is about our overall relations with self, others, nature, history, everything. It need not also be about our objective knowledge of nature or history. The writers of the Bible can be viewed as inspired about basic relations with the Infinite and still be temporal citizens of their times who believe in an old science that is today thoroughly out of date.

These same principles of interpretation can be applied to our discussion of creedal beliefs. We can view these creeds as poetic forms used to fence in a general area of veracity within which Christian faith was assumed to reside. We can honor this fencing and still understand that these creedal beliefs were temporal creations for conducting a given era of discussion and political decision making. We can believe that those fences were needed for those years of Christian living without confusing the fences themselves with the faith they were fencing. We can even benefit from that fencing by understanding the human meaning of those grand poems and thereby noticing the faith that these fences were fencing. But we do not need to worship the fences, then or now. We do not need to attribute a lasting veracity to these creeds, or even a contemporary usefulness to these ancient fences. We can respect our ancestors and learn from them without repeating their specific ways of thinking and problem solving.

My experience with trying to appropriate one of these old creeds first occurred when I, as a high school student, was sitting in the choir of my Methodist church coughing through part of the orally spoken Apostles' Creed. My biggest objection to that creed was that I did not see how Jesus could be an example for me when his virgin birth gave him such a head start on me. It took me many years before I could understand that the virgin birth poetry was pointing not only to Jesus, but to me. Both Jesus and I (all of us) are born from a particular woman in temporal history as well as "virgin born" by an Eternal parentage. When we enter into the Jesus Christ revelation we enter into his "virgin berth." This is actually stated clearly in the opening chapter of the Gospel to John.

As another example of my respect for creeds, I came to see that a belief in "God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" meant protecting nature and my temporal body from disrespect. This line of the Apostle's Creed (and other creeds) fenced out the gnostic understanding that viewed the suffering-and-dying temporal world as created by another Source than the God served by Jesus, Paul, Mark, Luke, and others.

Another key to understanding the aliveness of faith in period two is seeing the extent to which literalism was not present. Talking metaphorically was customary even though many people did not have a word for "metaphorical" or the philosophical facility for distinguishing literal from metaphorical. (Some clever Christian thinkers did understand this distinction, but they nevertheless used the metaphorical poetry to communicate their messages.) This attitude toward metaphorical talk changed in the

last few centuries. Modern science precisely defined and illustrated what is meant by “literal,” which often resulted in demoting the humanities and their metaphorical talk, poetry, and fiction to second place in relation to this devotion of scientific certitude.

Biblical literalism is simply a misunderstanding of the metaphorical talk of the Bible in a scientifically literal fashion. In period three of the history of Christian religion, we have encountered the courage of biblical scholars who provoke us to face what is literally true about the writing of Christian scriptures, and thereby face what is metaphorical in these texts. This liberates us to enter into a genuine discussion on what those metaphors were used to reveal. Interpreting these ancient metaphorical writings in terms of our deep existential questions and inquires is a core characteristic of this third period of Christian religion. Such an interpretive skill was not required of Christians in the two earlier periods.

The Canadian theologian John Douglas Hall wrote a beautiful little book entitled *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*. Following his insights, I take “Christendom” as a good name for period two.<sup>1</sup> By “Christendom” Hall means more than pre-Luther Catholicism. He points out the qualities of Christendom in the post-Luther “fingers” of Protestantism. These many fingers of Christendom extending from the Medieval “hand” include the “finger” that Roman Catholicism became after the Reformation. In other words, the Reformation was not the end of Christendom, but a reform of Christendom that resulted in a wider diversity of expressions of the core characteristics of Christendom. All these fingers of Christendom (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) have indeed maintained what Harvey Cox calls “a top-heavy edifice defined by obligatory beliefs enforced by a hierarchy.”<sup>2</sup>

While I count Cox’s book useful, I believe he overlooks something when he characterized the Christendom period as “a vigorous popular movement curdled into a top-heavy edifice defined by obligatory beliefs enforced by a hierarchy.” It is true that the Christian practice of religion is now moving beyond top-heavy edifice, obligatory beliefs, and hierarchy. But that does not imply that Christendom was not a necessary and creative period in the Christian unfoldment. Furthermore, most Christians are finding it quite shocking and painful to give up the core qualities of Christendom that still characterize, to a large extent, all the denominations of Christianity. I will spell this out more clearly in the following sections: (a) *Beyond Obligatory Beliefs*, (b) *Beyond Hierarchy*, and (c) *Beyond Successful*.

### **(a) Beyond Obligatory Beliefs**

In period three of the Christian religion, obligatory beliefs will be a thing of the past. Theologizing will be seen as an ongoing, never-ending application of the Jesus Christ revelation to every event of our now and future situations of living. Great methods of

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<sup>1</sup> I also resonate deeply Søren Kierkegaard’s *Attack on “Christendom.”* I count Kierkegaard as perhaps the first serious thinker who is announcing a coming era of Christian practice that moves entirely beyond Christendom.

<sup>2</sup> The Quakers and some others can be viewed as exceptions to the top-heavy polity characterization.

both scientific and existential thoughtfulness about all of Christian history, texts, and rituals will provide a sort of glue and guide to our ongoing understandings of faith and authentic Spirit. In this third era of Christian religion, there will be no political power moving against this or that heresy. We will need to get along with an ongoing compassionate critique of one another, combined with a commonly held lucidity that all our understandings of the faith—shallow, sentimental, rationalistic, moralistic, mean, and superstitious—are being audited the by the fire of Final Reality's *judgements* upon our waywardness and Final Reality's ongoing *showings* of our situations and callings for action within current history.

Scientific knowledge of the Biblical writings will be respected and the poetic and metaphorical meanings of these texts honestly pursued. For example, according to scientific history, we know almost nothing certain about the historical Jesus. Beyond the four distinctly different portraits of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels, we have dozens of Jesus portraits still being created and revered in the 21st century. Further, we have noticed that these contemporary portraits of Jesus say more about the ideals of their "writers" than about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, or even about the four early Jesus portraits in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

So how does our scientific objectivity help us with this topic of who Jesus was and why such a fuss has been made about him. By doing careful *form* analysis of the texts of the Synoptic Gospels (and a very few other sources), we can sort out, in an approximate manner, the most ancient layers of the inherited texts. What we find in that earliest layer does not contain a portrait of Jesus separate from the experience of Jesus held by his first followers. In that oldest layer of text we have what the first followers experienced of Jesus mingled with whatever teachings and deeds of Jesus that they correctly recalled. It also contains those earliest Christians' further elaboration of what Jesus said and did. We can, however, treat that mixture of human witnessing as the original record of the Christian revelation we seek. We can examine those objective texts for the life meanings that were meant in the context of that earliest time and place. Then we can translate those verbalizations from the metaphorical talk used in that time into metaphorical talk that speaks to our times. This process is exactly what Rudolf Bultmann did in his priceless little book *Jesus and the Word*. I recommend that all teachers of Christianity own and reread that book frequently.

A similar objective work can be done with the Gospel of Mark, seeing Mark's particular portrait of Jesus and the meaning this portrait had for Mark's life and the lives of his listeners. This results in an independent and augmenting enrichment of the original revelation that is present in the earliest layer of New Testament memory. Similar work can be done with Matthew, Luke, and John as well as with the authentic letters of Paul. Employing such careful thought, we are not without relative certainty about the human meanings that characterized these earliest witnesses. This relative certainty with regard these early beliefs can prompt us to our own confidence of faith in Final Reality doing all things well in their times and in ours.

Such a solution to the relation between faith and beliefs is being fully explored in this third period of the Christian religion.



## (b) Beyond Hierarchy

In this third period, hierarchy is ceasing to be the mode of social ordering and operation for both Christian community and the social life of humanity at large. Christian community is “called” to lead human society in this regard, showing the larger orders of humanity how to live in this startlingly innovative way. Beyond hierarchy means democratic decision-making that moves from the sociological workabilities of local persons to the wider workabilities for regions, continents, and the planet, instead of having a privileged aristocracy sending thought and action instructions down the social ladder to be robotically implemented by the submissive “peasants.” In the coming period three, we will be renouncing the pattern of being managed by a hierarchy of the wealth-empowered. All Christians (as well as all members of society) will become the workers, the managers, and the investors in projects that we do in common. When some people play the managerial roles more than the other roles, this will not be viewed as another class of people (or rewarded with excessive wealth power with which to control the peons). Instead, those who play the managerial roles will simply be our popular selection of the “quarterbacks” we need for our various teams of living. I am recommending that Christians and others actually learn to take with dread seriousness the following rather shocking teaching of Mark’s Jesus:

Jesus called them all (the disciples) to him, and said, “You know that the so-called rulers of the heathen world lord it over the ruled and their great men have absolute power. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must become the servant of you all, and if he wants to be first among you, he must be the slave of all men. For the Son of Man himself has not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life to set many others free.” (Mark 10: 42-45 J.B Phillips Translation)

The term “Son of Man” means the “New Adam,” a new humanity of men and women. (Note: the post-patriarchal context of our future discourse requires us to cease using “man” to mean “humanity.” Clearly, this text is referring to a fresh manifestation of authentic humanity replacing the “Adam & Eve” departure from authenticity in which both sexes share with a New Adam and a New Eve.) While the “New Adam” phrase referred to Jesus, it also referred to all men and women who share in this breakthrough.) Being “in Christ” (as Paul so often called it) means being a *servant* among the rest of those who are being freed to be their true humanity, as well as being a creative *slave* of all humanity. Of course “slave” is an over-strong word with current overtones we do not mean. But the original teaching meant to use a strong word. Even though we must be clear that we are choosing with our own freedom to take our instructions from Final Reality, not human masters, the Christian life is an obedience not a doing-whatever-we-feel-like-or-want-to-do. We may learn to prefer this Reality obedience, but the word “prefer” will have been deeply transformed when this “slavery” to Reality (as our God) is our mode of living. Paradoxically, such “slavery” is

freedom from all persons, principles, and circumstances. It is freedom from all modes of hierarchy. It is a freedom to love creatively.

Specifically, this “servant” teaching leads us to reject having popes, cardinals, bishops, and even clergy. It is true that Christians have rationalized that such power positions can also be servant positions, and there have indeed been a few popes and many clergy who have been “servants”—even “slaves of all humanity.” (Perhaps Pope Francis is trying, and surely, Martin Luther King Jr. was both clergy-person and servant.) We certainly do not want to discourage Christian practitioners from aspiring to take on the various power roles in society or in Christian community. And since we still live in a hierarchically structured world, we need not harbor objections to having Christian “servants” in the roles of president, congressperson, governor, CEO, clergy, bishop, and yes even pope.

But, as we project our imaginations toward a viable and vital future Christianity (as well as a viable and vital restructuring of humanity), we need to oppose strongly putting near absolute power in the hands of “the few” who then allocated power downward to the virtually powerless at the bottom of the pyramid. The social pyramid, a 6000-year old structure, is now being phased out and replaced by thoroughgoing democratic patterns. This same vastly different direction for the future also needs to be realized among the members of Christian communities, who thereby lead the way for entire societies on planet Earth. As H. Richard Niebuhr stated so clearly, the true church is called to be a *social pioneer* for the world at large.

So what Cox refers to as the “top-heavy edifice” of the churches does need to be ended. Hierarchy is part of Christendom’s obsolescence. A fully realized third-period Christianity, will have no popes, infallible or otherwise. Likewise, there will be no clergy, monks, or nuns as first-class Christians alongside a second-class laity who simply take their nurture and instruction from these first-class Christians. Each Christian will be expected to answer the call to first-class Christian intensity, a total call to the full ministry of serving the awakening of all persons and justice in the fabrics of all human societies.

We will surely have Christian leaders who manifest unusual Spirit maturity, and they will be valued, celebrated, and supported for the services they will provide to the rest of us. But no one will play the role of “Your Holiness,” or “Father” or “Mother,” in the sense of being a separate class of Christians. Whether this means that every Christian is *clergy* or every Christian is *laity* does not matter, for both of these terms, “clergy” and “laity” will be simply relegated to a past period of Christian practice. If “being the religious” means a full commitment to a religious practice and to spirit realization, then every Christian will be “the religious,” not just monks and nuns. Neither celibacy nor a special garb will be required. These third period “religious” ones will most often be *incognito*, secret catalyzers of authenticity and justice for all persons and societies.

The call for this huge change must not be dismissed as the imposition of radical ideals from a few egg-head theologians. We are all called to be an obedient response to the God of history that all Christians are called to serve. The established fabrics of

Christendom are being eroded by the course of history and they cannot be reinvigorated. This coming end of Christendom is Final Reality doing all things well. In the coming era, our Christian obedience to Final Reality will include intentionally dismantling the obsolete, hierarchical forms of Christian organization that have served us both well and poorly for at least 16 centuries. The harder part of this reorganization challenge is to replace hierarchical organization with something better—something that actually serves the times in which we live.

### **(c) Beyond Successful**

In the era of Christendom, Christianity has been a social success by the world's standards of success. Christians have built huge temples to take the place of the old "pagan" ones, a creative wonder that did communicate faith. Christians have accessed or raised enormous wealth and hired millions of full-time workers. Christians have built expensive monasteries, networks of people, publishing houses, universities, pre-schools, etc. Christendom now owns multiple buildings in almost every neighborhood of the U.S. and a number of other nations. All this success is coming to an end. Third-period Christianity will indeed look more like pre-Constantine Christianity in this regard. We will often meet in homes, in hotel rooms, perhaps in stadiums sometimes. We will not be a secret organization or bury our dead in catacombs, but we will be social outsiders who, nevertheless, function as social revolutionaries. We will not be aloof from social responsibilities, we will continue being outsiders because of the revolutionary intensity of our social engagements.

*It is becoming clear that the emerging style of Christian living demanded by the God of history will entail a smaller percentage of the population claiming to do a Christian practice.*

Most members of the remaining fingers of Christendom will continue to be strongly resistant to becoming part of a revolutionary minority. But those who are living a true Christian faith are already a minority—a minority trapped in the decaying carcass of Christendom. As Christendom finishes collapsing around us, we will be faced with building new wineskins that hold the Holy wine of faith. Each new Christian wineskin will be one religion among many other religious practices in each culture. The essential social process called "religion" will hereafter be characterized as an interreligious cooperation that brings the gifts of all functional religions into a healing relation with all the aspects of culture, politics, and economics. This die is set; there will be no continuation of Christendom. Indeed, no piece of geography will hereafter be called "Christian." The culture-building that Christians will do in this third era will be done alongside and in cooperation with the practitioners of other religions. Furthermore, there will be many strands of Christian practice, with no overlord of hierarchy to hold them together. Yet, this next Christianity will be stronger than the currently decaying Christendom. Each of the strands of this next Christianity will feel the call to focus on the revolutionary faith that characterized period one; if they do not, they will disappear or perhaps become overtly destructive. So let us who love Christian history grieve, if we must, our departure from Christendom, but let us also rejoice in the birth of a viable

and vital future. As we depart this 1700-year-old, diverse form of Christianity, let us also thank the Christians of Christendom for pioneering on our behalf the thoughtfulness and persistence in taking responsibility for whole cultures of human life, including political ordering and economic workability.

#### **IV. Finishing Period Three**

This coming third period of Christian religion will be something much more than a return to period one. Though we will be returning to a focus on early Christianity's charismatic faith, we will also be concerned to forge beliefs that are appropriate for our contemporary culture. All beliefs are time-specific and incapable of holding the Eternal truth of faith; nevertheless, beliefs that are relatively true in our time in history are important topics of concern for a healthy culture. We will need to use the best beliefs of contemporary science, history, good literature, philosophy and more for sharing the good news of the Christian breakthrough with the people of our century. Also the best beliefs of our time will be needed to guild the works of Christian love in the healing of personal despair and in forging social patterns of justice for humanity and the Earth.

In the light of this need for true beliefs, here are four important ways that this emerging third period of Christian religion will be significantly different from both period one Christianity and period two Christianity: (a) We must replace a basic religious metaphor that was used in both of the earlier periods, (b) We must conduct a vigorous interreligious dialogue and cooperation that was impossible and unnecessary in the earlier periods, (c) We must appropriate in a fresh way the entire biblical and theological heritage of Christianity, and (d) We must create a mode of total responsibility for the whole of humanity and the entire Earth from the position of a minority status for the Christian community of faith.

##### **(a) Moving Away from the Transcendence Metaphor**

All twenty centuries of the Christian religion were in the grip of a very old metaphor having to do with two realms of Reality: heaven and earth (or heaven/hell and earth), Supernature and ordinary nature, Eternity and temporality, spirit and material. These pairs are pictured as separate realms of Reality. I am calling this language custom "the transcendence metaphor." The Eternal realm transcends the temporal realm. The Eternal is pictured as above the temporal, like the stars are above the Earth. Using this metaphor for speaking of profound matters has been in vogue for at least 25 thousand years. It was used in every chapter of the Old and New Testaments, in every century of Christian theologizing, and is still used by most Christians, many of whom mistake this metaphor for a literal truth. But now this metaphor is empty of any usefulness whatsoever for communicating the Christian faith. It is indeed dead already, and it is steadily dying in the minds of Christian practitioners. This old metaphor is obsolete. It is obsolete to the same extent as: (a) requiring obligatory beliefs and (b) organizing Christian community in a hierarchical manner, including that insidious form of hierarchical ordering we called "patriarchy."

So do we have a metaphor for speaking of the Eternal truth of Christian faith that can take the place of the transcendence metaphor? Yes, we do. I call it the “transparency metaphor,” a notion that is already widespread among the best Christian theologizers and among many thinkers in other religions. Here is the essence of this new metaphor: instead of picturing our experience of the Eternal as visiting us in the temporal from “above” the temporal, we picture our experience of the Eternal as a “seeing” through the temporal. The temporal is like transparent glass to the Eternal light. This “light” is not from another realm, but is the intensification of this one realm of Reality.

Even this so-called “seeing” is a metaphor, for we are not speaking of a literal operation of the eyes or even a literal operation of the human mind. This “seeing” is a transrational awareness performed by our core consciousness—where consciousness is not conscious mind or conscious emotions, but a consciousness that is conscious of mind, of emotions, and of Eternity. This core consciousness “sees” the Eternal, but this “seeing” does not alter the Truth that the Eternal is an Absolute Mystery as far as the human mind is concerned. The Eternal is also an Absolute opaqueness as far as the physical senses are concerned.

This transition from the transcendence metaphor to the transparency metaphor deeply distinguishes the third era of Christian practice from the first two. This transition is even more radical than the transition between periods one and two. Furthermore, this transition is not just a transition in Christianity; it is a transition in all religions, worldwide and history long. It is a turning point in human history comparable with the Axial Age in religion (800-200 BCE), described by Karl Jaspers. This widely occurring Axial-Age featured the appearance of Zoroaster, the Hindu masters of the Upanishads, the Buddha, the major prophets of Israel, and the great philosophers of Greece, and others who saw beyond the cultural canopy of their civilization into both the wonder of the solitary person and the wonder of the whole of Reality. The shift to the transparency metaphor has a similar kind of far reaching power.

The transparency metaphor not only yields for us a new view of the wonder of the solitary person and the whole of Reality, the transparency metaphor also provides a method for translating the spirit juice from both periods one and two of the Christian religion into spirit wisdom for Christian-period three. I call this method “metaphorical translation,” a method for seeing the deep personal meaning of all that old poetry about angels and devils, the Word of God, the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of Satan, and every other scrape of religious language from sin to sanctification, from karma to nirvana, from spirit suffering to enlightenment, and more.

## **(b) Moving into a Deeper Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation**

In the late centuries of period two, most Christians lived in geographic places in which Christianity was the majority practice, but today Christians increasing live among populations who practice almost every long-term religious practice created by

the human species. Much dialogue is taking place among these religions, especially between western-rooted Jews and Christians with eastern-rooted Buddhists and Hindus. Also Islam and Taoism are becoming more familiar to Jews and Christians in western cities and universities. Tai Chi exercises have even reached the elders in rural towns. In the U.S., Native American practices as well as ancient Goddess practices are also making their impressions on Christian practice.

Such dialogue is more than a passing fad. We are seeing the unfolding of an important characteristic of the future of religious life on this planet. Many practitioners of every one of these long-standing religious heritages are facing transformations that are similar to those described above for Christians. For example, the shift in basic metaphor from transcendence to transparency is important for all religions. Christians who are participating in this transition are finding resonance among those who are embracing similar transitions in the other long-standing religions. Such Christians may feel closer to these “progressives” in other religions than they do with the “reactionary” members of their own Christian religion. This deepening interreligious dialogue has become inescapable, and it is enriching those who share in it, giving them better understandings of their own religion. Nothing like this existed in the two earlier periods of Christian history. In period one, Christians faced many non-Christian practices, but their focus was on clarifying their own Jesus-Christ revelation of Reality in relation to those other practices. Also, it is good to note that those earliest Christians boldly borrowed insights from these other religious practices whenever those practices helped them express their own faith. In period two, most Christians lived in Christian-created cultural canopies that protected them, to a large extent, from effective contact with competitive religious cultures.

### **(c) Finding a New Way into the Depths of Christian Heritage**

In spite of the temptation to become a religion-hopper who samples a number of religions in a superficial way, we also have the option of seeking a deep experience of the Christian revelation. Seeking depth is a major characteristic of this religious era, but such deepening is not easily done. We can no longer experience being nurtured in the faith by simply hearing the Christian Scriptures read aloud in Sunday services, or joining in saying aloud one of the creeds, or responsively reading one of the Psalms. These writings are still potentially powerful, but they were written in transcendent-metaphorical language, with hierarchical and patriarchal overtones. Without skillful, in-depth commentary, these written materials are like a closed book written in code. We need proper methods in order to hear the Eternal Word of Final Reality that these old written materials could address to people today. Most of those who think they understand these old texts are taking them literally; thus they are hearing something quite alien to the original meaning of these texts.

But despite these difficulties, it is important for a viable Christian practice to hear the scriptures as well as the ancient and contemporary theologizing about these scriptures. I am assuming that members of a viable and vital Christian practice need to

spend an hour a week in heritage study. This might be a group of five or twelve persons meeting in a home for two hours a week, who spend one hour of their time in heritage study. If this third-period transition is taking place within an inherited congregation, every member of this effort needs to be asked to spend, in addition to the worship hour, a second hour each week on Christian heritage study—perhaps in a Sunday-morning-church-school class, or in a week-night arrangement. A viable future for an effective Christianity practice cannot come about without at least this much regular discipline on the part of its members.

So, how do we adequately hear the *Word of Eternity* in the words of Christian Scriptures? (1) We need to begin with understanding the biblical words within their historical setting—what those words and sentences meant to the people who first heard them. (2) Then the obsolete transcendence metaphorical language needs to be translated into our current transparency mode of speech and meaning. (3) Thirdly, each person in the discussion needs to be encouraged to say what they hear in relation to their own life issues about the address of Final Reality to them at this time—about the living of the Christian faith today. I will spell out these three levels of effective scriptural study in more detail.

(1) **Historical Setting.** This is a scholarly task that requires help for most of us. For example, if we are studying the 40th chapter of Isaiah, we need to know that these words were written by an unnamed prophet living in Babylonia toward the very end of the Exile of the Jewish people when the Persian Emperor Cyrus is conquering Babylonia and instituting new policies that allow exiled peoples to return to their homelands. This prophet views these historical events as an encounter with the Final Reality that calls the faithful to pick up their lives, walk across the hot desert, and rebuild a society that reflects the wisdom of the Mosaic people.

If we are studying the first chapter of John we need to know that this gospel writer is writing toward the end of first century. This writer is addressing a population who are farther removed from the Hellenistic Judaism addressed by the other three Gospels. The John author is using Greek heritage language like “Logos” (most often translated “Word” in English Bibles), but in the first century “Logos” meant something like “the meaning of it all.” It was “the meaning of it all” that, according to John, was with God in the creation of the cosmos and that “meaning of it all” came among us in human flesh.

(2) **Metaphorical Translation.** In the first verse of Isaiah 40 we read: “ ‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God.” In contemporary transparency language, here is the meaning that prophet was communicating: “Final Reality, your core devotion, is confronting you in the Persian conquests with an end to your travail.” We can say that differently, but however we say it, we need to make clear to ourselves and other contemporary hearers that this passage is about hearing a “Word from the Infinite” coming to us through real temporal happenings in world history.

In the opening chapter of John when we hear that “the meaning of it all” became flesh and dwelt among us, we need to make clear to people that John is saying a very

strange thing: that the Eternal meaning of the whole course of human history has become present to us in a human being—that is, that the Jesus Christ revelation has shown us the meaning of what is happening in every event that is happening in our personal lives and in the entire history of this planet.

(3) **A Word of Eternity to us:** The Isaiah passage might be saying to us personally something like: “Watch our own international news for a clue to Final Reality’s calling to us to act.” Climate crisis is happening. Democracy is being decimated by big money. Fossil fuels can now be replaced in a couple of decades. Such events may be speaking to us the Word of God. And such events are speaking personally and uniquely to each of us. A prophetic voice for our time will be those voices that issue a call for obedience that is coming to us from the Final Reality confronting us in our temporal history.

And what is the personal Word of Eternity to each of us today that we are hearing in that first chapter of John. Maybe it is just the importance of this core perspective that the Word of Eternity has and can indeed come among us through an ordinary human being telling us the plain truth we may or may not want to hear plus the wondrous good news that an unlimited forgiveness is being extended for all our greed, cowardice, gullibility, sloth, etc. and a fresh start in realistic living is right here before us for the taking.

This threefold dynamic of heritage interpretation can be nurture for us in surprising ways each week of our lives. Without a weekly practice of hearing the Infinite Word in the words of the Bible, a fully vital third period of Christianity is not being realized.

#### **(d) Creating Total Responsibility for the Earth from a Minority Status**

It is still important to ask, “What have the Christians of period three to learn from Christians in those two earlier periods?”

The early centuries can guide us into a full astonishment with the Jesus Christ revelation and how it illuminates every event that has happened, is happening, and may happen to us in the future.

The second period, the Christendom era, shows us the implications of Christian faith for doing down-to-Earth works of love for the entire fabric of all human societies. The second period gives us clues for our own persistent action in every aspect of cultural, political, and economic life. This period emphasized social responsibility without ceasing to communicate the *good news* of depth healing to any and every solitary person. The inclusive care for whole societies is the positive meaning of the opportunity opened to Christianity by Constantine. Some forms of Protestantism have attempted to avoid the *justice* aspect of taking responsibility for whole societies. Most forms of Catholicism have maintained an emphasis on social responsibility, but have taken a triumphalist attitude that include imposing law, morality, rituals, and yes beliefs that the masses do not understand, but might “catch on to” over time. That mode of *evangelism* is no longer tolerated. It must be admitted, however, that the triumphalist means of “spreading of the good news” did work when having a “Christian culture”



was feasible. But today, people generally know that there is no such thing as a Christian culture, whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. No culture is Christian in the sense of a being a necessary container for faith or a substitute for that radical faith that is always deeper than any culture can contain.

More and more, Christians are moving beyond Christendom in all its forms, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. And there will be no return to an old form of Christendom. Nor will there be a going forward to some new form of Christendom. Christians will hereafter never be a majority, or even be in charge of the majority. History, the God of history, has given us a new period of Christian religion in which Christians will be a minority, a strange minority who are, nevertheless, strong enough to be fully engaged in this world as servants—activists of their own choosing for how all humans are to be served by them. We are coming to see how it has been true that faith-filled Christians have always been a minority, have always been “not-of-this-world,” have always been “in this world” as its servants. In this already present and still coming third-period of Christianity, Christians are being given a chance to be *true to Christianity* again.

I want to say a few more words about the social responsibility of Christians in this impending third era. We are not being called to merely provide pre-schools, meeting places for AA meetings, and other gap-filling services. We are called to show up on the lead edges of historical evolution. Here are examples: climate crisis moderation, a post-fossil-fuel energy infrastructure, fresh water, fresh air, fresh food for everyone, species diversity, full democracy not ruled by the wealthy few, a living wage for every full-time employment, economic equity, equal rights before the law (including its application and enforcement), and many more such challenges in the now and future destiny of this planet and its life forms.

Finally, I want to make one more response to Harvey Cox’s provocative book *The Future of Faith*. In the next to last chapter, Cox points out that the numerically growing regions of contemporary Christianity are appearing in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. This is mostly happening among Pentecostals (Cox notes that Pentecostals are not to be confused with the typical U.S. fundamentalists). Cox also points out the “spirited” movements among the non-European and non-North American Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches. I agree that these growing movements are manifesting a revolt against the hierarchical and imposed beliefs aspects of Christendom. They are seeking a liveliness that is more personal and authentic. This is a challenge to Western Christians who are still clinging to Christendom.

And I want to point out that we also need to notice that these vigorous non-Western movements still manifest many hangovers of Christendom—many misleading interpretations of the Christian past and many restricted visions of the required future for a fully relevant Christian witness to our times. Such needed enrichments will include greater theological clarity as well as a stronger communal life and a keen, thoughtful, well-informed ethical relevance to the times in which we live.

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This essay is barely a beginning toward answering how all the emerging third-period qualities mentioned above become fully realized in these non-Western spirit upwellings. Equally open-ended is our vision about what is happening in the way of replacements for the old and dying forms of Christianity in Europe and North America. This extended essay is a prayer for a full emergence of a widespread practice of a Christianity that powerfully recovers the confidence, authenticity, and freedom turned loose in century one—a heartfelt trust in and vigorous obedience to that Final Reality that does all things well.

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