

Christianity Today

The Transition to Disestablishment

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I have been asked to address you on the state of Christianity, a question which probably looks a lot simpler from the outside than it does from the inside. The more one is engaged in the events shaping the history of Christianity today, the more one is aware how fluid that history is, and how trying to sketch its portrait is like trying to paint on a flowing stream. In such circumstances, more important than cutting clear definitions is locating the most energetic points of change, and then trying to discern just where those changes are taking us. I assume that task this evening not as a representative *of* Christianity but only as one speaking *from* Christianity, and more particularly *from* the Catholic tradition. I insist on this distinction for two reasons.

First and most obvious, Christianity, even if restricted to its Catholic form, is too vast and too plural a phenomenon for an individual of so limited an experience as I to represent. The only honest representation is either that of a "symbolic personality" (as in the case of the pope of Rome) or a selection of delegates gathered in forum from around the world. In front of non-Christians, of course, Christians often set themselves up as representatives (the way an American, for instance, might present himself to a group of Japanese as an authority on American culture, or vice-versa), though this often amounts to little more than a way of stressing one's own belonging and the other's not-belonging. In front of their "own," few believers would dare to pose as representatives except for the smallest corner of the vast world of Christianity; nor I cannot bring myself to pose any differently before you. At the same time, I was raised within the Christian world and have no doubt absorbed a great deal of its influence—its virtues as well as its biases. Insofar as I have tried to reflect on this, I speak with some confidence as a representative from Catholic Christianity.

But there is a second reason why I decline to present myself as a representative of Christianity, and that is because I see the self-understanding Christianity being shaken at its depths. At the surface of this deep ground swell, the loyalties of those who choose to identify with the institutional church within the churches are divided between a "forward-looking" minority who welcome the change and a

“backward-looking” majority who regret it. I will explain these terms later, but for now it is enough to remark that I wish to identify myself with the minority view and it is from that part of the tradition that I speak.

The tone of what I shall have to say, as I am only too aware, is in the key of *fin de siècle*, and to some extent shares in the mystique that the dawn of a new millennium works on us. It puts questions to us we might not otherwise think of, questions about our most treasured traditions and moral values, and perhaps, too, makes major upheavals seem more plausible than they might otherwise seem. I myself have no particular prophetic gifts, but the growing sense of readiness for prophecy is very much in my mind as I take a quick rush through Christian history in order to sketch for you an outline of the transition to disestablishment I see taking hold in Christianity today.

CHRISTIAN FASCINATION WITH THE MILLENNIUM

For Christians, movements greeting the end of the world or the dawn of a new age are nothing new. Already among the earliest disciples of Jesus we find the belief that the world would end within their own lifetime—a belief that found its way into the records of Jesus’ own teachings. The postponement of the event to the “end of time” is echoed strongly in the visions of the Apocalypse, a book which has excited the imagination throughout Christianity’s long history and given rise to the most outlandish predictions and interpretations of events in the secular world. Figures from Hitler to the Pope of Rome to Henry Kissinger have been identified as the antichrist and beast of the apocalypse.¹

At the end of the twelfth century in Christian Europe, in the time of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, a number of fanatical groups rose up proclaiming the dawn of a “Third Age.” The idea was that after the First Age of the Old Testament (the Age of the Father, or Law) and the Second Age of the New Testament (the Age of the Son, or of Grace), the Age of the Spirit and of spiritual insight would escort history into its apotheosis. Behind it all stood a visionary named Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), who had proclaimed the dawn of an *Ecclesia Spiritualis* which would usher in the age of John the evangelist and outlast the church that traced its lineage back to Peter the apostle. At first encouraged by civil and church authorities, Joachim was later condemned as a heretic, though others continued to revere him as a saint. His ideas on the movement of history were influential from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Witness the fact, for example, that fulfillment of his prophecy regarding two new spiritual orders that would lead the church into the Third Age was claimed in the following centuries first by the Franciscans, then by Dominicans, Augustinians, and even by the Jesuits. The Holy Roman Empire itself, begun in 800 by Charlemagne, did not in fact end until 1806, with Napoleon’s victory at Jena. The night before that battle, Hegel completed his *Phenomenology of Mind* which ends, appropriately, with a scheme reminiscent of Joachim of Fiori’s announcement of a New Age of the Spirit to complete the Ages of the Father and the Son.

At the end of the fifteenth century Columbus proclaimed America the land of the millennium. He insisted to Ferdinand and Isabella that he had mapped his voyage in Isaiah 11:10–12. The cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, writing to Lorenzo de Medici, speaks of America (or what would later be so named in his honor) as a “New World.” It was only natural that the explorers who set out to claim the new territories for the crown would be accompanied by Christian missionaries to conquer the heart of its peoples for Catholicism.

In the early seventeenth century, Protestant scholars returned to the faith of the first Christians and their belief that Christ would come not to end time but to bring about the golden age and the millennium. With the advance of the European Enlightenment, this came to be identified with belief in progress.

In the 1960s in the United States, at the height of a movement of religious awareness, millennialism found its way into serious theology with the death-of-God theology of Thomas Altizer, who picked up on Hegel’s idea of the dawning of a new age of “self-consciousness of Spirit,” and has carried this theme consistently through his writings to this day. And today, of course, millennial cults and prophecies are already tripping over one another for the attention of the religiously gullible, and we can expect more of the same in the years to come.

In literal terms, these movements and interpretations have all proved wrong. But at the same time, they show a certain sensitivity to the fact that changes—even sea changes—do take place, and are mirrored in religious fanaticism as well as, if not better than, anywhere else. Thus while there will no doubt be a great deal of nonsense to repudiate in the years to come, this does not mean that we must simply dispense with the idea that Christianity is at the dawn of a new age.

CHRISTIANITY AT THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE

In a gesture that seems to run counter to what is going on in the Catholic Church at large, the Vatican has already announced preparations to celebrate the two-thousandth birthday of Christianity. The highest echelons of Catholic leadership have fallen badly out of touch with the spirit of the age, which it condemns as secular and misguided, with the result that those who breathe that spirit most energetically have come to think of the Catholic tradition as too narrow a receptacle for the religious consciousness of today. I will consider this in more detail later, but first I would like to take a quick rush through the two thousand years of Christian history in order to clarify what I see as the emergence of a new stage in that story.

1. *THE TEACHINGS OF CHRIST*

The first stage, obviously, was that of *Jesus’ teaching*. Though we may never come to a clear picture of precisely what constitutes Jesus’ own contribution and how much was added later, there is a substantial agreement on the main teachings, and also on the fact that, later interpretations and developments aside, there is

something of universal appeal in those teachings. Even the iconoclast Nietzsche maintained enough sympathy towards Jesus to proclaim that “there was only one Christian—and he died on the cross!”²

To be sure, it was only after Jesus’ death that his teachings were institutionalized, and hence altered to justify that institutionalization. Nietzsche’s point was not merely to draw a distinction between Christ and Christianity in order to pass judgment on the latter, but also to stress the fact that the teachings of Jesus that have come down to us were worked over by the evangelists and are thus forever lost to us in their original form. No doubt a variety of motivations in the early church contributed to the way Jesus and his ideas were remembered. But if there is no Jesus without the Christian community, neither is there any Christian community without Jesus. During the next formative period of Christianity, this mutuality was to be overshadowed by other concerns.

2. CHRISTIANISM

The second stage, *Christianism* (a word that rings unfamiliar in English but is still used in modern romance languages to indicate “Christianity” in general), is marked by the transformation of the teachings of Christ into a systematization of doctrines, practices, and structures. The coordination of the teachings into a more or less consistent body of doctrines, which began already in the first generation after the death of Jesus, was marked by an immense variety of opinion and very little uniformity. As the findings of the scrolls of Nag Hammadi have continued to show us, hardly any of the major traits that have separated the Christian churches and sects from one another in later history are not represented there. Indeed, a fair portion of the ideas that were later to be condemned as heresy were also present there.

What is more, this pluriformity spread beyond the teachings to include patterns for organization of the Christian communities. Some early leaders, like James the brother of Jesus, wanted to set religious leadership up along family lines. Even after his execution, this family principle remained around for a time, as witnessed in Jewish-Christian refugee churches after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE which were led by cousins of Jesus. More important, as it happened, was the idea of the primacy of Peter, based on the fact that he was the first witness of the Resurrection. In line with this mode, the three major apostles—Peter, James, and John—were all thought of as holding leading position in the community, with the other Apostles following in importance. The churches of the Diaspora outside of Palestine showed similar variety of structure. Some followed the Jewish synagogue principle of leadership through elders. Others had charismatic or spiritually influential figures and prophets as leaders. Still others had leaders elected by the congregation. In the midst of this great variety, the one unifying element, for both doctrine and organization, was the image of the resurrected Lord which brought the two together in a basic teaching. The whole community was envisaged as a single “body” that neither local differences nor the death of any particular

individuals could break up. This was symbolized in the key ritual of the Eucharistic meal.

But uniformity in structure and doctrine gradually came into force, marking the culmination of this second stage with the birth of what we now know as the hierarchical Church. This development was stimulated not only in reaction to the persecution of the Christian communities by the Roman authorities, but also by dissent in matters of organization and doctrine within the communities. Organizationally, Christianity settled on a hierarchical structure in the course of the second century. The Bishops led the worship services and administered the wealth of the churches. Doctrinally, disagreement with the Gnostic Christians served to solidify official doctrine and to eliminate nonconformity. In fact, this was done so effectively that virtually all we knew about the Gnostics until recently was by way of resume appearing in Christian attacks against them.

In any case, the clarification of doctrine and organization meant not only that tradition had been established, but that the pieces were in place for another major transition, a transition that would seal the fate of pluriformity in doctrine and structure for a thousand years.

3. CHRISTENDOM

The third stage, that of *Christendom*, shows the emergence of Christianity as a mode of civilization associated with the assumption of secular power. It is marked by two watershed events.

The first watershed was the conversion of Constantine the Great to Christianity in the early fourth century. (He was only formally baptized, however, shortly before his death.) In 313 Constantine proclaimed tolerance for the Christians and thereafter worked actively to transform the Roman empire into a Christian state, thus preparing the way for a distinctively Christian Western and Byzantine medieval culture. The result was that the church was set within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and that Christian apocalyptic expectations all but disappeared. Christendom, triumphant against persecution, now aligned itself with secular powers to become an earthly institution committed to maintain order in society.

The second watershed event is the crowning of Charlemagne, King of the Franks, as Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800. (He had already been crowned King of the Franks at age twelve by Pope Zacharias, thus settling a political dispute.) By the fifth century, the title of Roman Emperor had lapsed, but with its reinstatement the secular power of Christendom was sealed for the remainder of the middle ages. Modern historians speak of this as the “Holy Roman Empire” (a term that actually dates only from the mid-thirteenth century, though was never officially used), which lasted for fully a thousand years.

The transition to Christendom was a major shift for Christianity. In place of a multiformity of church structures, a uniform episcopal constitution anchored in imperial law took over. In place of a diversity of creeds, a uniform, imperial confession of faith (the Nicene Creed, still read today, which was settled at a

council convened in 325 by Charlemagne) was enforced as legally valid for all churches of the empire. In fact, it was in the early fourth century that the word “orthodoxy” was introduced by the Greek fathers. A uniform, officially sanctioned liturgy replaced former diversity. Monasticism was also standardized.

This new uniformity was not created out of nothing; it was built on the rubble of an earlier and very different idea of Christian unity. The imperially unified church came to be delineated by the territorial boundaries of the Roman Empire. Every deviation from orthodoxy (which was fixed at imperial synods) was considered a deviation from public order. Not surprisingly, missionary activity outside of imperial territories, first among Christians living in Asian lands, met with national and political opposition to the identification of the Church as a Roman imperial institution.

In the ninth century, with the Carolingian Empire, the process was repeated within the Germanic-Roman areas. In the monastic sphere, Italian Benedictine forms defeated the pluriformity that had existed in Celtic-Scotch-Irish origins and those of Asia Minor origins. A uniform Roman liturgy replaced the multiformity of the French, Spanish, and Ambrosian liturgies, all enforced by imperial councils. The use of the Latin language was enforced from the third century (a custom that was rescinded in Catholicism only in 1962). Political guarantees for the unity of Christendom was carried out by Spanish, Portuguese, and French missionaries during the conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century.

Neither the Orthodox schism of the eleventh century nor the Protestant reformation of the sixteenth century did much to alter this pattern. While these revolutions may have contributed to the weakening of the secular power of Roman Catholicism, they did not make any attempt to break with the ideal of Christendom or to forego all secular power for themselves, such as they had at the respective periods of their breaks from Rome.

4. CHRISTIAN RELIGION

The fourth stage belongs to our more recent past and marks the transition away from Christendom and towards seeing *Christianity as a religion*, as one religion in a multireligious world. If we were to single out a pivotal event for this turn, it would have to be the appearance of Darwin’s *Origins of the Species* in 1859. In the wake of its publication, which challenged with all the authority of scientific rigor the idea of world created out of nothing by divine edict and the direct creation of human beings in an already completed world, Western intellectuals took to looking at the evolution of everything from human consciousness to social structures. The “human” sciences of religion, anthropology, sociology, and psychology all grew up at this time. In this tempest of ideas, Christianity could no longer be seen as a single, superior, divinely instituted religion, but only as one among many, and in great part a cultural phenomenon that grew and evolved out of history.

Although the Holy Roman Empire, and with it the age of Christendom, came to an end with Napoleon, Christianity’s commitment to institutional strength did

not. Deprived of much of its secular power, the Roman Catholic Church was not ready simply to let go of the self-understanding that had grown up in the previous millennium. Nor has it ever been ready to do so. Its achievements during this time were, of course, immensely important to Western in particular and to the shape of world history in general, and it was on this basis that elements of Christendom have survived down to our own day.

This does not mean that Christianity was merely a passive victim, stripped against its will of a former glory. Positive steps to rethink its new role were taken in the first great wave of activity in the nineteenth century thorough a new missionary movement, first among the Protestants and then among the Catholics. In place of the sword of the conquerors of the New World, culture became the nineteenth-century weapon of choice. The sewing machine in India and the bicycle in China were introductions of the missionaries who saw them as useful catechetical aids. Convinced of the superiority of their culture and science, missionaries set out to colonize the world for the Christian religion, transplanting Western church structures and philosophic assumptions in the countries of Africa and Asia that remain to this day.

Christianity's self-understanding as a world religion followed the pattern of the West's understanding of itself as a world culture. It remained forever *the* religion, before which all others were false or at best incomplete. The rights of truth over falsehood had of course shifted from what they had been in the past. During the renaissance, Catholics who opposed the "divine right" of pontifical states were excommunicated. And back in the middle ages those who denied the right to torture heretics were also accused of heresy. No Catholic in the nineteenth century felt obliged by these laws and injunctions of Christendom, of course. But they did feel obliged to support the internal structures that remained as definitive for Christian religion—from papal nuncios to canon law to encyclicals and ecumenical councils.

Both within Catholicism and across the spectrum of Christianity as a whole, the consequences of this shift from Christendom to religion are still rippling in the Christian pond. Even so, there is sufficient consensus among Christian believers throughout the world to suggest that the pieces are in place for another major change, namely, a massive turn away from the vestiges of Christendom that linger in the self-understanding of Christianity as a religion. For the better part of this century, the critique of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard against the lingering vestiges of "Christendom" in Christian religious consciousness have rung true and inspired theologians, poets, dramatists, and philosophers of all stripes to hasten the coming. Not surprisingly, keepers of the structures of Christendom have remained intransigent in clinging to what can only be a lost cause. The signs are too many and too widespread to deny that a fourth stage of Christianity is already upon us.

5. *CHRISTIANNES*

The final stage, an era whose dawn, as I said, has already come, we might call with the Catalan philosopher of religion Raimon Panikkar, *Christianness*. By this I mean

a personal form of religious consciousness that identifies itself as Christian without belonging to a particular ecclesiastical institution. There are two modes to Christianness, both essential for this stage to have its full meaning.

The first mode is internal to Christianity. In an earlier age, one could hardly call oneself Christian without belonging to Christendom. With the European enlightenment, this identification began to be eroded, and this process of disassociation continued through the rise of science, technology, communications, and travel, until today more and more Christians are open to seeing themselves as Christian in view of some sort of “Christianness” rather than of any particular affiliation. This does not entail that Christianity be simply privatized as a matter for the individual alone. I am speaking in this first case of identifying oneself with the community of the Christian heritage in a self-critical way, confessing belief in the teachings of Jesus without extending that belief to the current forms of the Christian establishment.

Whatever the intentions of the individuals who assume such a belief, its spread neither requires nor encourages the abolition of Christian institutions altogether. The defining trait of disestablished Christianity is merely a distancing of oneself from interest in the preservation or reform of the institutional Church, or at least from identifying it as the primary meaning of “church.” My perception is that belonging to Christendom, whether in its conservative or reformist branches, is not an issue for the majority of Christian believers today. This does not imply a lack of concern with the political or social order, though there are forms of this Christianness that do so neglect it. Nor does it imply that the existing institution is beyond preservation and reform. It simply means that for the first time since the first century of Christianity, disestablished faith is no longer considered by great numbers of Christians an impediment to considering oneself fully Christian. Tradition retains its importance, but only selectively. Or more precisely, the principles of selection, which are always part of the preservation of tradition, are being viewed differently.

On the positive side, this internal mode of confession of Christian faith as a personal choice means adopting a Christ-consciousness in which Christ is the central symbol of one’s life. This, too, is part of the sociological fact that the church is no longer one with ecclesiastical institutions. But it is more than a fact; it is a deed in the making. And this deed is more than the polishing of private consciousness. It also shows up in Latin America and to some extent in countries like the Philippines in the building of alternative “grass-roots” communities not only to relocate institutional affiliation, but to save spirituality from the dangerous preoccupation with self which liberation theology has struggled to point out. Once again, the relationship between the new stage and the former stage is one of criticism, not of total erasure.

Panikkar puts the shift to Christianness this way:

There is undoubtedly in the world today a certain crisis of Christian identity. Although there are revivalist movements going back to the ideal of a modernized Christendom and other more theological tendencies striving for a reformed Christianity [i.e. as a religion], there is a growing number of

responsible persons who struggle to articulate a genuine Christian confession without being totally conditioned by the historical burden of the past and by the doctrinal strictures of tradition. They do not sponsor a privatization of Christian identity, although sometimes they are almost forced to it. They sponsor an exteriorization of their Christian identity that is the fruit more of inner experience than of historical and doctrinal inertias. More or less consciously aware that the world is undergoing a mutation, they are attempting to live this change at its deepest—that is, at the religious level of their consciousness and consciences. In simpler terms, a substantial number of contemporary Christians want to be religious, believers, and even Christians—but without the “contaminations” that they feel have been attached to those names.³

Christianness, however, is not something restricted to the consciousness of those who see Christ as their primary symbol of meaning for life. There is a second and no less important mode of Christianness, one which takes the Christian religion not only beyond the walls of ecclesiastical institutions, but beyond the frontiers of the primacy of Christ. For the turn from Christianity as a religion to Christianness also opens the possibility of those in other religions converting to Christianity without forsaking their own primary symbols or even their institutional affiliation. Conversely, it opens the possibility of Christians inheriting the religious riches of other religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, not as mere ideas, but into their own religious consciousness and practice. In short, the transition to Christianness does not do away with the Christian mission but alters its nature from a confrontation between religions to a synthesis within personal religious consciousness.

A CLASH OF VISIONS

It is premature to define this Christianness. What we can do is point to the contradictions and confrontations that accompany its birth, like the play of light and darkness meeting each other at dawn, in order to see more clear and decide on our own participation. For I believe it is not, in the end, something merely Christianity is engaged in, but something that Christianity is being swept up in—namely the birth of a new vision of reality within a tired and suffocating global civilization. I will single out a number of problems characteristic of present-day Christianity, in particular Catholicism, in which we can see Christianness taking shape. I will define these problems in terms of an antagonism of opposites.

Put in the most general of terms, I see two fundamental orientations at work within Christianity today, facing individual believers with a choice. It is not a dead choice about interpreting something from the past; it is a problem that has taken hold of us *in our belief*. In the measure in which we consider ourselves Christian, we are compelled towards it. It is, moreover, a momentous choice, one that affects the meaning of life and the role of religion in it. For Christians, this live, forced, momentous option has to do with how we face the coming millennium.

As I mentioned at the outset, the third millennium wears an aura of mystique that is enhanced by the great changes going on in religious consciousness in our

own day. Within Christian religion—that is to say, the realm out of which I believe Christianness is coming to birth—one finds people orienting themselves to this change in quite different ways. At one extreme are those who walk into the future backwards, and at the other, those who walk into the future head on. Although I shall align my sympathies here with the emergence of Christianness and its vision towards the future, I do not mean to identify entirely with either of the opposing positions I am about to distinguish. I set them up as extremes only to draw a spectrum along which one can identify one's own position. In the end, it is a question of orientation, not of a fixed stance.

By walking backwards, I mean facing the future with one's sight riveted on the past. One wants always to have the security of knowing where one has come from and of never losing sight of what has been accomplished in the past. New experiences are "backed into" with the models, assumptions, and expectations that one is already familiar with. The important values of history lie *behind* us, in what *has been*. This is hardly an attitude peculiar to stubborn, dogmatic religious institutions. The history of civilization's appropriation of tools, as Marshall MacLuhan pointed out so effectively a generation and more ago, shows us something similar. Technological innovations are met with habits of the technology they replace. In the sphere of religion, new adventures of the spirit are being measured by the yardstick of existing institutions, which only accents the differences and blinds one to the possibility of something radically new happening to the way Christianity establishes itself in human society.

By walking head on into the future, in contrast, I mean not being detained by the past, and indeed preferring to break with as much of it as necessary in order to create something new. The important values of history lie *ahead* of us, in what I will *be*. Insofar as this attitude is embraced unconsciously, the danger of traditional models surviving is in new dress, of course present. But insofar as the future is novel in a comprehensive sense, sooner or later it will have to find some way to embrace the past.

In either case, more and more Christian believers find themselves faced with this choice of orientation at the end of the century. The poles never so far apart, the numbers huddling in between have never been so numerous. The nature of the choice precludes a legislated response. In the end, it is up to each individual to invest feelings, imagination, and energies into the orientation of belief. The phenomena I am about to explain may be clearest in Europe and the Americas, where the confidence of standing up to the establishment in all its form is inbred in the establishment itself, but there are signs that this mood is coming to expression throughout the Christian world, including its other reaches in Japan.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: NEW-AGE SPIRITUALITIES VS. INSTITUTION

As noted above, the mistrust of institutions is at an all-time high within Catholic Christianity. There are many signs of this, including the familiar rebellion against structures and attempts at overturning them. But there is a new index which is still more threatening to the institution and foreboding of a change in Catholicism

itself: indifference. This is not an indifference that extends to religion in general, however, in that energies once devoted to the establishment are being deliberately rechanneled into a concern with personal religious experience.

Throughout its history, Christianity has nourished, deliberately, a distrust of religious experience. The *contemplatio* of the middle ages which encouraged discovery of God within and union with the divine led to opinions that often incurred condemnation and excommunication. Later ages, which saw the need to recognize what is of value in this tendency and yet to keep it at arm's length from mainstream Christianity, came to speak of it as "mysticism." The same Eckhart whose writings were condemned in his own lifetime—and to this day his condemnation has not been repealed by the Vatican—has become a hero of modern spirituality. Moreover, one sees a rediscovery of interest in the "love mysticism" of Hadewijch and Jan van Ruusbroec, as well as in the esoteric tradition that includes everything from witchcraft to alchemy, Christian and otherwise. In all of this, one sees a longing for direct religious experience, and by implication for direct contact with a Reality that has been imprisoned behind the iron bars of sacred texts and official doctrine.

There is much to applaud in such longing; but there is also something distressing about the so-called "new age spirituality" in Christianity (my impression is that it is strongest among those from the Catholic background) and about the industry that has arisen to feed on it. The interest in direct-access religious experience aimed at self-discovery and self-fulfillment, is no doubt an index of frustration with the intransigence and reactionary attitude of the organized churches. But it is also a sign of an epidemic of spiritual immaturity that afflicts our times. For one thing, the stress on personalism focuses on improving the quality of life of individuals, not of communities. Their optimism of "empowerment" and "transformation" is more a resignation to structural social evils than a real resistance. Taichi, art therapy, enneagrams, spiritual journals, Feldenkreis movement, psychosynthesis, body therapy, eco-spiritualities. It rejects institutional boundaries and standards both from religion and from science. As that keen observer of Catholic spirituality Eugene Kennedy has remarked recently, "this intense activity could not exist without the institutional Catholicism from whose groaning structures they provide seasonal escape.... This is nothing by McSpirituality, junk food for the soul.... It is Disneyland posing as Chartres."⁴

Obviously, this is not the whole picture of spirituality, but it is among the strongest energies in Catholicism today. The spiritual classics of the West are gathering dust while popularist manuals offering to "change your life" are taking their place for more and more people, including a sizable number of clergy and religious.

If religious maturity is not guaranteed by strong, impregnable institutions, neither is it the fruit of preoccupation with self-fulfillment. It is finally not about finding the self and enhancing its qualities but about seeing through the self and losing it. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the longing for direct religious

experience does serve to heighten the atmosphere in which Christianness is coming to birth. Neither self-centered spiritualities nor institutional intransigence do justice to the spirit of our times; they are both, ultimately, alternative ways of dropping out. Perhaps this is why the antagonism between the two rarely erupts into open confrontation. It is an antagonism of indifference. While the former continues to look to the past, the latter look less to the future than to themselves. The coming age of Christianness demands a revolution in spirituality, a maturing beyond these first steps to a vision that looks ahead and outside of the seer. I use the word “maturity” deliberately, because I continue to believe that it is out of the spiritual energies being dissipated on self-preoccupation that such a new spirituality will arise. This maturity is being prompted by other concerns, a number of which we will take up next.

INTERRELIGIOSITY: FUNDAMENTALISM VS. DIALOGUE

The Dalai Lama remarked in a session I attended last summer that “today and in the near future, there are two alternatives: fundamentalism or interreligious dialogue.” This is, to the best of my knowledge, the first time in history that a religious figure of his stature has made such a statement. While it may not represent the view of the masses of Buddhist believers, let alone of Tibetan Buddhists, it does, I believe, point to interreligiosity as an important ingredient in the spirituality that lies ahead for us.

The contrasting attitudes to other religions signalled by the terms fundamentalism and interreligious dialogue is very much alive in Christianity. There is a whole range of meanings carried by the term “fundamentalism,” but in the Christian context I take it to mean basically the following: that the Christian tradition has in its possession texts that constitute the truth of God’s salvific plan for all of creation and its sole complete source of reference; that these texts are without error and cannot be contradicted by discoveries of science or human experience of any kind; and that no other religion can lead to truth or salvation except it succumb to belief in these texts. In essentials, it is committed to walking backwards into all futures, including our own.

Dialogue, on the other hand, begins from a commitment to the plurality of religious ways and the development of religious truth. It does not imply a relativism of all religious ways—clearly some are better than others or wiser than others—nor does it deny the right of a body of religious truth to claim absoluteness for itself. What it does say is simply that all religious ways are “on the way,” developing, imperfect grasps of their own truth, and that hence a plurality of absolute religious claims need not end in a battle for conversion of each other’s members, but can lead to the ongoing maturity of each. It walks forward into the future not only because of a temperament that disposes it to do so, but because there is nowhere in the past to look for a road. In many matters, in fact, it *must* turn its back on the past in order to prepare for what lies ahead.

This does not mean that an interreligious spirituality abandons the goal of converting the world to Christ. The idea of converting the world to Christendom

or to the Christian religion may be an anachronism, but the hope of converting the world to Christianness is not. If dialogue takes place only at the level of turning theology towards the history of religions, of criticizing the narrow-minded, closed attitude of an earlier age, then it has not gotten beyond the vestibule of its responsibilities. The sacred task is that of mutual conversion, and this is a river in which current interreligious efforts have hardly gotten their feet wet. The world has now become mission territory for all religions, but we must not allow this to become like a market economy where some establishments reinforce themselves through the weakening of others. There are no “losers” in an interreligious world. But until we can redefine “winning,” the work of building such a world in earnest cannot begin.

The clash of visions between fundamentalism and dialogue is not something restricted to the circle of church theologians. It is a matter of importance for the masses of Christianity, and the gains go far beyond intellectual advance. And it is out of this clash that the Christianity of the future is taking shape.

KNOWLEDGE: DOCTRINE VS. SCIENCE

A third clash of visions within Christianity today has to do with the battle between doctrine and science for “true knowledge.” This is a battle that has been with us since the rise of modern science, but it has only become a popular problem for ordinary believers in our own century with the spread of scientific education and dependence on science in the workplace. On this issue Christianity is clearly divided, and this is a division that really goes to the heart of Western culture today. The technological civilization we live in is based on science, but when it comes to matters of religion we still prefer to turn away from science into traditional theological formulations.

Walking into the scientific future with one’s eyes on the religious doctrine of the past is, of course, a direct extension of religious fundamentalism. It views the revelations of the bible—and in the case of Catholicism, the pronouncements of church tradition also—as a standard for the advance of secular knowledge. But this is its weakest form. More dangerous still, and also more popular, is the view that after all religion does not have to do with the same subject matter as science. The world of “transhistorical” truth and “religious realities” transcend the advances of science and can never be challenged by it because science cannot have the tools to evaluate it. In both cases, religious knowledge keeps its gaze fixed on the past as the source of value and marches backwards into the future of Christianity. The problem is that when it comes to concrete moral judgments, the testing ground for all truth, the individual believer is left at a loss. Abstract doctrines floating in the air on the one hand, concrete fact weighing us down with their inevitability on the other.

But the schizophrenia cries out for a cure. One cannot depend on scientific knowledge for a livelihood, and then simply set it aside when it comes to matters of religion. The desire to escape this conundrum has given rise to comprehensive, “cosmic” visions of the most preposterous sorts that claim to accept all of science

and justify all of religion. They do so, of course, only by keeping clear of the rigors of both in order to create a kind of fairy-tale world that intellectual conscience cannot touch. The reasons for the success of such schemes are not entirely on the side of the new visionaries. Throughout this century, as science made inroads into traditional revealed truths, Christian churches of all stripes have taken a predominantly reactionary stance towards the scientific community. The reaction to evolutionary theory is still going on in parts of the fundamentalist world. And in the Catholic world, no less a brilliant science and religious thinker as Teilhard de Chardin was banished and his most important work condemned to be published only after his death. Today his thought is still a living inspiration for those who prefer to march forward into the future of Christianity. But even though his ideas have become part of theological training in Catholic seminaries across the world, official church theology has yet to catch up with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, much less with the still greater advances of our own age.

The more important result one expects from the clash is that somehow the teaching and person of Christ will guide our accumulating and use of knowledge, whatever its source, towards the good of all that lives. This requires a metanoia which, I believe, is another key ingredient in the advance towards Christianness. I cite Teilhard's words here, forbidden publication in the 1930's when they were written:

Our generation and the two that preceded it have heard little but talk of the conflict between science and faith; indeed it seemed at one moment a foregone conclusion that the former was destined to take the place of the latter.... After close on two centuries of passionate struggles, neither science nor faith has succeeded in discrediting its adversary. On the contrary, it becomes obvious that neither can develop normally without the other. And the reason is simple: the same life animates both.... For we are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.⁵

Such a metanoia sees that the primary scripture is life in all its forms, that the bible, the Buddhist canon, the Koran on the one hand, and the deliverances of science on the other, are chapters of it. Christianity must never forget its obligation to convert science, but that conversion is not to a doctrine that sets up certain *facts* around which science has to work. The conversion must rather be to Christianness, which does not represent a rock-solid "base" judging what is true knowledge and what is not, but a kind of "dome," an uplifting that turns the eyes of the working scientist away from the matter at hand and towards the greater context of life.

CULTURE: PARTICULARITY VS. UNIFORMITY

Finally, I would point to a clash of visions between those who see the universality of Christianity as the dominion of certain determined patterns, and those who see universalizing as a sacralization of the specific. Culture has become a weapon from which Christianity must learn to disarm itself. The churches of Asia, Africa, and Micronesia continue to set themselves up according to structures inherited from the West, and to train sacred ministers according to a class structure not only

several centuries out of date but from a history that has never been their own. The only explanation for the survival of such habits of thought is an unchallenged conviction of cultural superiority—be it conscious or unconscious—that is shared in by Christian leaders both in the West and outside of it.

This clash has produced so little in the way of concrete change from the central churches, as witnessed in the intransigence of the Vatican, that we find a generation of Christians growing up eager to take Christianity into their own hands and their own culture. In most cases, this leads to a breaking away from the official churches. If I am right and the spirituality of Christianness continues to take hold of more and more of the minds and hearts of Christians across the world, I suspect we will see more breakaway churches in the years to come. In the context of the clash between pluriformity and uniformity, this is almost inevitable.

Meantime within the official churches, the most forward-looking voices among the colonized Christians are still voices that rattle the chains of their captivity. Positive, creative responses are all too few. There are many, on the other hand, who see the “universality” of the church as a way of protecting the church from being swallowed up by the local culture, as for instance Protestantism was by Japanese militarism during the past war. But the fact that this “universalizing” is indelibly Western seems no more than a mild annoyance; indeed the otherness is welcomed, with the result that the impact on local cultures is minimized. In their case, walking backwards into the future, means keeping one’s eyes on the West, the countries from which Christianity first arrived. Walking forwards means taking Christianity where it has not yet gone—into the soul of culture of another religious background.

CONCLUSION

The conflicts I have pointed to above are very real, and the usual way of drawing the antagonisms—evangelicals and fundamentalists on the one side and liberal theologians on the other; Vatican curia on the one side, grass-roots communities on the other—is not mere fiction. Still, it has been my aim to cut across these usual divisions in order to suggest a clash of visions between those obedient enough to the age to hear (ob-audire) what it has to say, and those deaf to it.

Why should we listen to the age? Is it not all wrong, after all? Does religion not always have to stand against the saeculum now that our experiment with Christendom has been proven a disaster?

But the saeculum is never purely secular but always has its religious side—a kind of secular religiosity—and therefore prompts another set of questions in reply. Do not all religions believe in a kind of higher inspiration that transcends structures, individuals, and reason? If so, how are we to know about this except through individuals who take the trouble to think rationally about it? And how can it make a difference except people reorganize themselves around it in some way? Surely we need the counterbalance of looking for a positive *yearning* behind the

secularism of the age.

I remember many years ago being called into the office of the president of Nanzan University, Johannes Hirschmeier, to consult on some matter or other. After completing our business we sat down for a cup of tea and at one point he opened his wallet and read out the following passage to me:

Fathers grow accustomed to descend to the level of their sons and fear them, and the son is on a level with his father, having no respect or reverence for either of his parents. And this is his freedom. And foreign residents are equal with ordinary citizens and citizens with foreign residents, and visiting foreigners are as good as either of them.... Teachers fear and flatter their students, and students despise their teachers and tutors; there is no distinction between old and young; the young man is on a level with the old and is ready to compete with him in word or deed; and old men condescend to the young and are full of pleasantry and gaiety; fearing to become morose and authoritative, they adopt the manners of the young.... And of course we cannot forget to mention the liberty and equality of the sexes in relation to either other.⁶

He asked what I thought of it and I remarked that I was rather astonished to find a university president, whose influence weighs heavily on the young people entrusted to his care, carrying something so negative around with him. He laughed and told me I ought to know better. The passage had been photocopied from a page of Plato's *Republic*, and he kept it wherever he went in order to remind himself that so many of the problems advertised to us as new and unique to our time or our culture—and which we devote so much effort and thought to—are as old as human society itself, and must not derail our consciences into thinking we have grasped the real spirit of our age when we have only spent ourselves on the peripherals. Although our opinions differed on a great many things, the surprise was sobering. To this day, when I meet a university president, I cannot help but wonder if the only things he carries around in his wallet is his credit cards and money.

I believe the Dalai Lama is right about the need to choose between fundamentalism and dialogue, but I also believe that, in the Christian world and perhaps in the Buddhist as well, this choice belongs to something greater that is happening to our age—something that inspires sensitive spiritual leaders to say such things, something that nudges closed institutions of good will, almost against their will, to open up. And that something, that “spirit” must be named holy as we step into the next century. Otherwise, I see no way that we can face the great moral challenges posed to us by the megalopolis, the globalization of poverty, the dwindling protection of human rights, and the trashing of as much of the cosmos as our civilization can get its hands on. These are not in themselves religious problem, but they *are* problems for religion. Their appearance must not be used to justify turning us away from our age and back to old modes of thought. They are rather the final test of how holy our spirit will turn out to be.

Notes

- 1 Most recently a book entitled *The Choice: Islam and Christianity* by a certain Ahmed Deedat came into my hands. Privately published in the Republic of South Africa in 1993, it is already in its sixteenth printing and has run to 223,000 copies. Its opening pages identify the pope of Rome as the beast of the Apocalypse, setting the tone for the rest of the volume.
- 2 *The Antichrist*, sec. 39.
- 3 Raimon Panikkar, "Christianity and Christianness." Kuncheria Pathil, ed., *Church in the Third Millennium*, *Jeevadhara* 21 (1991):324–30. As it turns out, Panikkar's "neologism" is not so new. In the passage cited in the previous note, Nietzsche makes mention of "Christlichkeit."
- 4 "New Age Spirituality," *Notre Dame Magazine* (Spring 1992):22–3. See Kennedy's forthcoming book *Rediscovering Authority*.
- 5 *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 283ff.
- 6 Plato, *The Republic* IV [14], 562–3.