

# **THE FUTURE OF FAITH**

## **A HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL STUDY**

**BASED ON**

***THE FUTURE OF FAITH***

**BY**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE FUTURE OF FAITH

### (THE SACRED IN THE SECULAR)

#### INTRODUCTION

Question: What does the future hold for faith in a transcendent God? What will this mean for Christianity? . . . for the religions of the world?

**I. AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW MELLENIUM, THREE QUALITIES MARKED THE WORLD'S SPIRITUAL PROFILE. ALL THREE WILL INFLUENCE US FOR MANY DECADES TO COME.**

- A. The first is the surprising resurgence of religion in both public and private life all over the globe.
  
- B. The second is that Fundamentalism or Dogmatism and divisionism, so prominent in the 1900's, is dying and being replaced by a search for relationships between the faiths.
  
- C. But the third and most important, though often unnoticed, is a profound change in the very nature of what it means to be "religious."

## II. THE RESURGENCE OF RELIGION WAS NOT EXPECTED.

A. On the contrary, nearly every thoughtful writer, philosopher, and scientist confidently predicted the Death of Religion and especially the Christian religion.

1. The mantra of the 1900's was: "Science, literacy, and more education will soon dispel the miasma of superstition and obscurantism religion has caused to darken the world.
2. "If religion, or a life of faith in a transcendent Being survives at all, it will do so in family rituals of the poor and illiterate, quaint folk festivals and exotic references in literature, art, and music." (Cited by Cox, p.1)
3. We were assured by the "20<sup>th</sup> Century Man" that "Religion would never again influence politics or shape culture."

B. The "sophists" were wrong!

1. Instead of disappearing, religion is now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century exploding with new vitality all around the world and swaying politics and all the corridors of power.
2. This is not only true in the United States and the West, but in Muslim countries, Hindu India, Buddhist Japan, and atheist China.

C. Many observers in the Church and the media confuse this resurgence of religion with "fundamentalism" or Dogmatism – a closed religious system.

1. This, I believe, is in error.
2. The violence of Al Qaeda and Hamas in Islam as well as the raging arguments between the “Far Left” and the “Far Right” in the United States are really death throes in evidence.

**D. “Fundamentalism” itself is waning, even dying, as the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds.**

1. The four characteristics of Dogmatic religion in general are:
  - a. An obligatory belief system
  - b. A mythical uncorrupted past
  - c. An exclusive grasp on truth
  - d. And, sometimes a propensity for violence
2. It is these qualities that have been so plainly displayed in the past century.
  - a. There is a growing disgust at the use of these; the disgust is global.
  - b. Islamic terrorism is in its final season, gasping for breath.
  - c. “Right Wing” and “Left Wing” elements are sickening true Americans, real patriots.
3. Although it is easy to forget what is truly happening, and bewail and fear these partisan, dogmatic expressions, we must see them for what they are:

Violent gasps for air  
in the throes of death.

4. There is a slow but sweeping tidal wave underway and generating more energy every day that will suffocate “fundamentalism” around the world.
5. Its essential core and most powerful stimulus is found in the third quality mentioned above:

The change in the nature of what  
it means to be “religious.”

6. This is the greatest movement taking place in the world today!

**III. NOT ONLY HAS RELIGION RE-EMERGED AS AN INFLUENTIAL DIMENSION OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LIFE, BUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE “RELIGIOUS” IS SHIFTING FROM WHAT IT MEANT 50 – 60 YEARS AGO.**

**A. Due to technology, travel and a host of other reasons, religions are interacting with each other in a global culture. This is shaking and influencing all of them.**

1. Christianity is showing results of the shift.
2. “In the past 50 years (2009), Christianity has entered into its most momentous transformation since its transition in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. from what had begun as a tiny Jewish sect into the religious ideology of the Roman Empire.” (Cox)

3. “People are turning to religion for support in their daily lives in this world to make it better and less to prepare for the next.” (Cox)
4. The pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs.

**B. For most people, “faith” and “belief” are two words for the same thing.**

1. They are not the same!
2. In order to grasp the magnitude of what God is doing now, we must clarify the difference.

**C. Faith is about deep-seated confidence.**

1. We apply it to people we trust or values we treasure.
2. Paul Tillich (Harvard theologian 1886-1865) spoke about “ultimate concern.” It is heart-trust.

**D. Belief is more like opinion.**

1. We say, “I don’t know for sure, but I believe something may be so.”
2. Beliefs can be held lightly or intensely.
3. But they are propositional rather than existential.

4. We can believe something to be true without it making much difference to us.

5. But we place our faith only in something that is vital for the way we live.

**E. People still confuse the two: faith and belief, but if we really want to understand the tectonic shift in Christianity today, we must understand the distinction between them.**

#### **IV. CREEDS ARE CLUSTERS OF BELIEFS.**

**A. However, the history of Christianity is not a history of creeds.**

1. It is the story of a people of faith who often put together creeds out of their beliefs at a point in time.

2. These same people of faith also often questioned and altered or changed their creeds, even discarded them as they lived and grew in their faith.

**B. It is the same with their architecture.**

1. Church buildings – all of them genuine – range from clapboard chapels and store-front halls to Gothic cathedrals and sumptuous convention centers.

2. Symbols by which Christians at times re-present their faith.

3. But both the creedal canons and the architectural constructions are means to an end, not the faith itself.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THREE PERIODS OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The nearly 2,000 years of Christian history can be divided into three uneven periods.

- “The Age of Faith”
- “The Age of Belief”
- “The Age of the Spirit”

#### **I. THE FIRST MIGHT BE CALLED “THE AGE OF FAITH.”**

**A. This period began with Jesus and His immediate disciples when a buoyant faith propelled the movement He initiated.**

1. Two qualities characterize this initial period: explosive growth and brutal persecution.
2. Two qualities characterize the people of this early period.
  - They shared in the living Spirit of Christ uniting them as one, and
  - “Faith” to them meant hope and assurance in the coming of a new kingdom, a new era of freedom, healing, and compassion that Jesus had demonstrated.

**B. To be a “Christian” meant to live in His Spirit, embrace His promise in hope, and to join Him in the works He had begun.**

1. These are the elements at the core of the people of “the way before any institution emerged.
2. Their faith was in Jesus and His central message of a coming Kingdom of God upon earth.
3. Their passion was to see the answer to the prayer He taught them to pray.

“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

## **II. THE SECOND PERIOD IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY MIGHT BE CALLED “THE AGE OF BELIEF.”**

**A. The seeds of its beginning appeared in a few sort decades after Jesus’ resurrection and the birth of the *Ekklesia* on the Day of Pentecost.**

1. Church leaders began to formulate notes of His teachings and orientation programs for new believers who had not known Jesus or His original disciples personally.
2. The emphasis began to move from experiencing Him by His Spirit to believing in what He taught.

3. The early notes and instruction kits turned into catechism and eventually replaced faith in Jesus with beliefs about Him.
4. Even before the end of the first century during “The Age of Faith,” the tension between faith and belief was already creeping in.

**B. This took place gradually as eyewitnesses of Jesus died and first-hand testimonies were no longer available.**

1. Toward the end of the third century (200’s), an elite class began to take shape, the clerical class – “clergy.”
2. These “specialists” distilled the teaching manuals into “lists of beliefs” in every geographical region where the Church spread.
3. But the lists differed widely from region to region and by the fourth century (300’s), there was still no single creed for all.
4. The scattered congregations/*ekklesias* were still united by a common Spirit with a wide range of theologians.
5. The turning point came when Emperor Constantine made the decision to use Christianity to tighten his grip on the Roman Empire.
6. He declared this outlawed religion legal even though he worshipped the sun god Helios, the faith of the Emperor. This changed everything!

### III. CONSTANTINE VIRTUALLY TOOK OVER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH AS SOON AS HE BECAME EMPEROR.

#### A. He began to appoint and dismiss bishops, paying salaries, funding building projects, and giving out great sums of money and favours.

1. Constantine, the Emperor, not Sylvester, the Pope, was the real head of the Church. (Sylvester was not called Pope at that time, neither did he attend the Council of Nicea but sent two priests to represent him.
2. The first Bishop of Rome to be called “Pope” (Latin pappas) was Damasus (366-384 A.D).
3. Constantine declared Christianity a tolerated religion. It was the Emperor Theodosius (347-305) who made it the official religion of the Roman Empire.
4. They hoped this would help save the crumbling dominion of the Empire, but in the long run, it did not work.
5. “But for Christianity it proved to be a disaster; its enthronement actually degraded it.” (Cox)
6. From a great movement of faith Christianity became a system of required beliefs. This laid the foundation for the “Dark Ages.”

#### B. The Empire became “Christian” and the Church became “Imperial.”

1. Thousands hurried to join the Church they earlier despised and desecrated.
2. Bishops gained quasi-Imperial powers and began living like Imperial elites.

3. During the “Constantine Era,” Christianity froze into a system of mandatory precepts certified into creeds and strictly monitored by powerful Imperial decrees.

**C. A crossroad occurred in 385 A.D. when Priscillian of Avila and six of his followers were condemned for heresy and beheaded by order of the Emperor Maximus. His “heresy”?**

1. Avoid eating meat and wine.
2. Study the Scriptures.
3. Praise God in the Spirit (*Charismatic*).
4. Read the Apocrypha for history but not doctrine.

**D. He was the first Christian to be executed by his fellow Christians for his beliefs.**

1. In two- and one-half centuries after Constantine, 25,000 Christians were put to death and many thousands more banished because of their beliefs.
2. As time passed, “Imperial Christianity” came to dominate the culture and politics of Europe.
3. It lasted throughout the Middle Ages, a time of both bane and blessing.

**E. Neither the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) nor the Reformation did much to alter “The Age of Belief.”**

1. “The Age of Belief” lasted roughly 1,500 years.
2. Even during that dark period, spiritual movements and personalities continued to live by faith and the Spirit.
3. The vast majority of people were illiterate and did not understand hearing the language of the clerics.
4. While the clerics pranced in their finery and chanted in Latin, the people kept their confidence in Christ and hope for His Kingdom.
5. Most accepted the official belief codes of the Church without much thought while others ignored them and lived on the pageantry, the festivals and the stories of the saints.

**F. Others rejected some of the dogma and endured the punishment as heretics and schisms.**

1. “The Age of Belief” was also, for many believers, a spiritually vital “age of faith” as well.
2. But now we are in a new place; God is turning the pages to a new chapter in Christian history.
3. In chapter three we will explore “The Age of the Spirit”.

## **CHAPTER THREE THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**A. We stand now at the beginning of the third millennium on the threshold of a new chapter of the Christian story.**

1. Against all forecasts of decline, Christianity is now growing faster than ever before.
2. This growth is mainly outside the West and in movements that ascent the Holy Spirit and spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope.
3. These movements pay little attention to creeds, liturgies, and clerical hierarchies.

**B. We are witnessing what theologian Harvey Cox calls “a Post-Constantinian Era.”**

1. “Christians on five continents are shaking off the residues of ‘The Age of Belief’ and negotiating a bumpy transition into a fresh era.”
2. This new era he names: “The Age of the Spirit.”

## I. REASONS FOR THE NAME: “THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT.”

### A. For centuries, Christians have claimed that the Holy Spirit was just as much God as the Father and the Son.

1. In reality, the Holy Spirit has been ignored or feared as “too unpredictable.”
2. John 3:8 says the Holy Spirit “blows where He wills” and is unwilling to be contained.
3. However, the most dynamic and growing movements in the world today all celebrate Holy Spirit, charismatic praise and worship!
4. Christians in the Global South, aka “The Third World” (Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania – usually of low income and politically marginalized) are inspired and attracted to the Holy Spirit and charismatic worship.
5. Women occupy leadership positions and influence in these movements.
6. Pentecostals are by far the fastest growing sector of Christianity with their emphasis in every individual’s direct experience of the Spirit.
7. Cox says: “It is almost as though the Spirit, muted and muffled for centuries is breaking its silence and staging a delayed “return of the repressed.”

### B. A second reason is that an increasing number of people no longer call themselves “religious” but prefer to be called “spiritual.”

1. This means they want to distance themselves from the institutional or doctrinal aspects of any and all religions.



2. They say: “I’m a spiritual person, but not religious.”
3. What does this mean? Over the decades it came to mean “the subjective aspect of faith as opposed to the objective teachings, rituals, or structures.”
4. In the Roman church, “spirituality” indicated the different ways the religious orders practiced their faith: “Jesuit spirituality,” “Franciscan spirituality,” “Ignatian spirituality,” and “Carmelite spirituality,” and “Dominican spirituality.” P. 21
5. In modern times such awesome leaders as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Roman Catholic, (1881 – 1955), the most far-sighted Catholic theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw the entire sweep of cosmic history as the process of “spiritualization.” The German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (1906 – 1945) dreamed from his Gestapo prison all of a “religion-less Christianity,” liberated from its dogmatic tethers!
6. These and many others were the forerunners of “The Age of the Spirit.”

## II. **THREE REASONS WHY THE TERM “SPIRITUALITY” IS IN SUCH WIDE USE.**

### A. **First: It is a form of protest.**

- It shows the discontent of the masses with shrinking religion, especially Christianity, into a package of dogmatic propositions and the religious corporations (denominations and networks) that box and distribute such packages.

### B. **Second: It is an attempt to voice the awe and wonder of God and of nature that is essential to human life without stuffing them into clichés.**

- C. **Third: It recognizes the porous borders between the different religious traditions, and like the early apostolic *ekklesia*, looks more like the future than the past.**
- D. **More than anything else, the use of the term “spirituality” masks the transition underway right now from “The Age of Belief” into a new and exciting “Age of the Spirit.”**
1. People today are freer to shape their faith expressions in a wide spectrum of ways and still feel authentically Christian.
  2. It exposes Dogmatism for the distortion of faith that it really is.
  3. The old struggle between “Fundamentalism” which reduces faith to a list of beliefs and Charismatic Christianity with its emphasis on the open leadership of the Spirit continues within Evangelical circles.
  4. The atmosphere today is different from what it was just five decades ago. It is more like that of the early Church with an energizing openness to the coming “Age of the Spirit.”

### **III. CHRISTIANITY IS MOVING AWKWARDLY BUT IRREVERSIBLY INTO THIS NEW AGE OF THE SPIRIT.**

- A. **Those who are pushing into this new frontier are looking also backward to the Early Church and “The Age of Faith” for inspiration and guidance (Cox, 19).**
1. This does not surprise anyone. There are many similarities between the first and emerging third age.
  2. Here a few:

- Creeds did not exist then; they are fading in importance now.
- Hierarchies had not appeared then; they are wobbling today.
- Faith as a way of life was central then; it is growing again now.
- Experiencing God was the core value then; it is displacing theories about Him now.

**B. It is no wonder that the atmosphere in the exploding churches of Asia and Africa feels more like first-century Corinth or Ephesus.**

1. Early Apostolic Christianity and the emerging Apostolic Movement today look, sound, and feel alike.
2. What will this third millennial move of God mean for the shape of Christianity and its influence on the (other) religions of the world as the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds?