

A Study Course on
The Next Christianity
An Ongoing Action in Religious Invention
(The October 2010 edition)

**This is a ten session course crafted to be taught in
ten successive Christian Resurgence Circle Meetings.
Each session can be conducted in 50 minutes
using the methods outlined on page 4.**

The ten essays for this course have been freshly rewritten by Gene Marshall with much editing, critique, and rewriting assistance from Joyce Marshall and Alan Richard. Also contributing significant help were Marsha Buck, John Howell, Paula Brennecke, Nate Custer, and others.

Session Topics

1. Religion as a Sociological Process
2. History, Depravity & Restoration
3. A Time of Christian Reconstruction
4. A Communal Resurrection
5. The Dynamics of Christian Community
6. Worship
7. Study
8. Witnessing Love
9. Justing Love
10. Discipline

Essay Titles

- Infinite Awe & Finite Religion*
- From Jesus and Paul to You and Me*
- The Last Days of Christendom*
- The Communal Quality of Christian Practice*
- Nurture, Mission, and Discipline*
- The Re-form-ation of Christian Worship*
- The Why, How, and What of Study*
- Witnessing Love*
- Contributing to Social and Ecological Justice*
- An Adventure in Discipline*

Acknowledgments

This course owes a huge debt of gratitude to the creativity of Joseph Wesley Mathews whom I count as my mentor from 1953 until his death in 1977. I also owe much thanks to the Order:Ecumenical, a family order in whose practices I participated from 1962 to 1976. These methods and contexts for Christian communal life were further refined in the last 35 years through the explorations into Christian communal experiences with my marriage partner Joyce and our colleagues in the work of Realistic Living, The Symposium on Christian Resurgence, and the Bonham Christian Resurgence Circle.

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Introduction to this Course

Writing an introduction to this course is difficult because the entire course is an introduction. Step-by-step these essays develop a fresh image of Christian practice. This introduction will share some of the presuppositions that have occasioned the emergence of this course.

First of all, we have some basic theological presuppositions which are part of a still-raging revolution, difficult to summarize without oversimplification. Nevertheless, enough consensus about the basic message of the Christian breakthrough has become clear to ground us in creating new forms of "Christian Life Together." Having attempted for several decades to renew the old forms of denominational and congregational life, it has dawned on us that a more radical transformation of Christian social forms is in order.

This course is also based on some presuppositions about the essence of religion generally, including the notion that all religion is a practice before it is a theoretic or a set of institutional forms. Good religion is a personal, intellectual, and sociological practice that seeks to access something profound. Good religion seeks to access our true nature, our essence as human beings. Good religion also seeks to access an experience of what we point to with the word Reality with a capital "R" – the sort of Reality that does not change, that is the same century after century, indeed from everlasting to everlasting. The need to enable one another in the realistic living of Reality is a key presupposition of this course. It is further presupposed that religion has come into being as part of every human society in order to access Reality and the authentic living of our lives. This basic purpose can be accomplished by many religious practices, not just Christian practices.

So here is another key presupposition: Christian practice is only one among many religious practices. Christianity has no absolute standing as a religion, but like any "good" religion, an alive form of Christian practice is a means of accessing that which is Absolute. The proclamation of the Christian good news is therefore paradoxical: it seeks to connect humans with that which is Absolute, yet it does not assume that its specific religious practices are themselves Absolute. This also means that religious creativity has been and continues to be openly encouraged for awake Christian practitioners. If our Christianity is not working to accomplish what all good religion needs to accomplish, then we can change it. We can conceive of a Next Christianity. This need not mean that the long complex heritage is abandoned; rather the Christian heritage can be transformed through and through as it is recodified for its next historical adventure.

Our particular recodification has its own history and rich tradition of common insights and treasured practices. It begins with an upheaval in Protestant seminary education in the 1940s and 50s. I am referring to the United States, but much of the ferment began in Europe as the horror of fascism, World War II, and the relevance of existential thought were taking place. In the United States, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr as well as European immigrant Paul Tillich began moving the theoretical shifts in Christian understanding toward local practice and ordinary citizen involvement. One student of these teachers, Joseph Wesley Mathews, left his seminary teaching post to devise curriculum and religious practice for college students in Austin, Texas. Mathews and his companions expanded this work to include the adult laity and the clergy of local churches. Later Mathews was one of the founders of a religious order of families, most of whom became excellent teachers of theology and religious methods that were taught to tens of thousands of people. At least 1500 people joined this religious order which at its height had houses and projects in over a hundred places.

Most of us who have put together this course on The Next Christianity were members of that ferment and have carried that enthusiasm forward. Others have

joined later through a research organization called The Symposium on Christian Resurgence for Century Twenty One. Over its eleven-year history this group has focused on theological edge, social transformation, and the local circles of life together. We have named these local circles “Christian Resurgence Circles” (CRCs), and we have created working papers, organizing manuals, songs, songbooks, courses, solitary manuals, and study books for these Circles. The word “Resurgence” means coming back from a dull or dying state. It assumes that the original Christian fire upon the Earth needs to be “resurrected” for our times. The qualities of a CRC will be spelled out in the following essays. Here is a basic picture: A CRC meets every week for at least two hours and has at least 5 members. Twelve is an optimal membership. At 17 members, forming two groups begins to be considered.

The basic theology we want to carry forward in these Circles might be boiled down to these simple affirmations:

Affirmation 1 • God is a devotional word for Reality: Faith in God is not belief in anything, but Trust in Reality. Reality includes both living and dying. Reality includes both the gifts of being and the limitations of being. Reality in its fullness is Absolute Mystery. All our scientific knowledge of Reality (past, present, and future) as well as our contemplative wisdom is but a scratch on the rock of this Mystery. Our pictures of reality are not Reality in the sense of that Mystery that never goes away. So we have no models or images of God, just pointers and symbols of our devotion. When we speak of God as a rock or foundation or shepherd or father or mother or friend, we are speaking of our relationship with the Final Mystery, not about the character of that Mystery.

Affirmation 2 • Jesus Christ is the space/time event in human history where/when the Real and the Good intersect (a paraphrase of Bonhoeffer): Jesus Christ is a community of people to whom this event of Real/Good has happened. This event includes Moses and the prophets without whom there is no Jesus, no Paul, no Mark-Matthew-Luke-and-John, no Christianity, no Body of Christ in which you and I might participate. Mark-Matthew-Luke-and-John are, for the most part, fictitious stories about the death and resurrection experience of becoming members of this Body of Christ (that is, death to unreality and resurrection to Reality). This Body of Christ includes people who have never heard of Jesus; it includes anyone to whom the death/resurrection experience has happened. The self-conscious Body of Christ are those who remember Jesus as well as the still living heritage that has emerged from this founding breakthrough.

Affirmation 3 • Holy Spirit is Realistic living: Realistic living includes Trust in Reality, Love of Reality (including self and neighbor), and Freedom as obedience to Reality. In other words, Holy Spirit is simply our true nature, our deep essence as human beings. It is because our lives are estranged from our essence that Holy Spirit seems to blow through our lives from some other realm. Actually, Holy Spirit is simply the reemergence of the “true me” amidst the escapes from our true nature and from the despair caused by attempting to escape the inescapable.

Obviously, such a summation raises as many questions as it answers. For a further exploration of the theology we are still developing, we recommend two books: *The Call of the Awe: Rediscovering Christian Profundity in an Interreligious Era* and *Jacob’s Dream: A Christian Inquiry into Spirit Realization*. Gene W. Marshall is the author of these books, but the ferment articulated in these books has been shared, discussed, studied, and improved by several dozen people. For further information about these books and ordering instructions see: **RealisticLiving.org**.

Religious methodology as well as theology has been an important part of this “resurgence” effort. Following are some recommended teaching methods for use with the essays of this course.

A Useful Teaching Process for this Written Material

Plan an opening remark that places the study in context for the group. If appropriate, ask each person to say what struck them about this study document.

Have a chart of the paper already on the white board (or other visible device). Explain what the chart means and how you came to decide upon the divisions. (A full explanation of the charting method is available from Realistic Living.)

Point out the places you want to ground with experiences from the lives of the group. Ask for other points that it would be good to ground.

Use these grounding steps:

1. Clarify the point to be grounded either by
 - a. asking for someone to clarify what it is
 - b. giving your own clarification
 - c. reading or having someone read a portion from the paper.
2. Plan a grounding question that gets at this point and is useful to enable people to mix their life experience with that point.
3. As needed on each occasion, invent additional “push” questions.

Plan how to allocate the time spent on each section to fit within a 50 minute session.

Plan a way of ending the teaching session. Do one of the following:

1. Ask a concluding go-round question. (Time has to be planned for this.)
2. Read a bit of the paper that is poetic in nature and summarizes the study.
3. Give a brief closing remark on the topic.

Rational and Existential Aims

The selection of appropriate points for grounding (as well as the quality of the grounding process) is greatly enhanced by some clear thinking about aims. There are two types of aims that guide the teacher.

Rational Aims are summaries of the content that the teacher wants to communicate and clarify with this study. For example, in session one a rational aim might be: to make plain that religion is a finite social process and Spirit is an Eternal Reality that religion may, in the best case scenario, call to our attention.

Existential Aims are insights into the inner changes within the lives of the participants that might be assisted by this study. For example, in session one an existential aim might be: to loosen the hold of “old-time” religion and create space for the awesome challenge of creating religion anew.