

12. Kierkegaard's Descendants and the Social Gospel

What does it mean to claim that the obscure Dane, Søren Kierkegaard, was the beginning of a whole new era in Christian history – a turning point as deep or deeper than the turning points represented by Paul, the Gospel of John, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther. Here are four mid-twentieth century theologians whom I believe to have most fully embodied the wake created by Kierkegaard – Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976), Paul Tillich (1886-1965), H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). Two other prominent mid-twentieth century Protestant theologians were also deeply influenced by Kierkegaard – Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) and Karl Barth (1886-1968). In this same period two existential theologians within the Roman Catholic community also stand out: Karl Rahner (1904-1984) and Jacques Maritain (1882-1976). There were renowned mid-twentieth century women who also breathed the air of this new flow of Christian resurgence – Simone Weil (1909-1943) a French woman of Jewish origins who became captivated by the best of Roman Catholic existentialism, but refused to be baptized because of her critique of Roman Catholic authoritarianism; and Suzanne de Dietrich (1891-1981) another French woman who was deeply impacted by Protestant neo-orthodoxy, an organizer of the Student Christian Movement, a social activist, a feminist, and a renowned teacher of Biblical writings. And somewhat later, Mary Daly (1928-2010) added to the Kierkegaardian attack on Christendom an equality skillful attack on the patriarchal qualities of Christendom. Obviously, there are many other prominent persons within this Kierkegaardian wake – including the teachers, colleagues, and students of the luminaries mentioned.

All of these mid-twentieth century theologians moved beyond Kierkegaard in their emphasis on social justice. Kierkegaard lived in a quiet place in a quiet century. He did not live to see the communist critique of capitalism, two world wars, deep economic crisis, horrific poverty issues, global uprisings, feminist critiques, racial protests, ecological crisis and much more. Theologically, Kierkegaard did not live to be impacted by the work of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), initiator of the Social Gospel Movement in which sin was effectively restated as a social matter and redemption enmeshed with the fight for justice for the poor. This social gospel theme was powerful carried forward by Reinhold Niebuhr who might be characterized as a Rauschenbusch, Kierkegaardian existentialist. H. Richard Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Karl Barth also support this emphasis on social justice and a disciplined communal life that fights for justice as well as nurtures individual Christians.

Later in the 20th century, further work was done within this stream of communal life and social justice. Much Christian renewal has taken place in the areas of feminism, racism, economic equity, and ecological responsibility. Mary Daly gave a colorful and powerful impetus to the importance of women's experience and equality as a necessary correction in Christian practice. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) was a student of Reinhold Niebuhr. He applied Niebuhr's social passion as well as Gandhi's to U.S. racial justice. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and Thomas Berry (1914-2009) are prominent Christian ecologists. And there are still others that could be mentioned, including the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928-), the initiator of Liberation Theology, who among others developed further the Christian response to hierarchical rule and grueling poverty. Liberation theology thinking has now been applied to racism, the oppression of women, the oppressions of gay and lesbian persons, and so on. All these names and thousands of others can be said to have moved beyond Kierkegaard's more personal focus toward the communal life and social justice aspects of a fully developed Next Christian practice. Nevertheless, these twentieth and twenty-first century developments are not a rejection of Kierkegaard; they indeed owe a debt of gratitude for their lucidity to this not-so-dismal Dane. Also, we might say that Søren

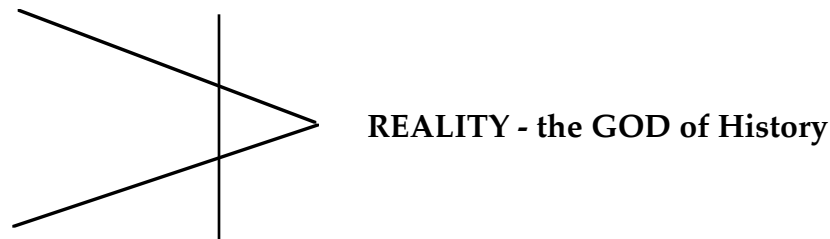
Kierkegaard was himself a social revolutionary in his headlong attack on the basic philosophical and intellectual structures of Western society.

The Church as Social Pioneer

Operating in the wake of the Kierkegaardian breakthroughs, H. Richard Niebuhr focused on the community of faith and on the ethical thought and action of this faith community. One of his most startling contributions was his redefinition of the true church and how it includes being pioneers in social history. By “pioneer” he meant moving first into a new arena, similar to a scientist leading a new frontier of rational understanding or an artist pushing into a new edge in beauty or realism. The true church is a pioneer in social wisdom and justice. Niebuhr writes:

It (the true Church) is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole. It is that group which hears the Word of God, which sees His judgments, which has the vision of the resurrection. In its relations with God it is the pioneer part of society that responds to God on behalf of the whole society.¹

If some part of the Roman Catholic organization is sensitive and responsive, that part, not the whole of it, is the Church. If some part of the Southern Baptist Convention is sensitive and responsive, that part, not the whole of it, is the Church. If some part of the United States of America is sensitive and responsive, that part, not the whole of it, is the Church. Clearly Niebuhr is developing a view of being the Church that is at variance with the popular view. According to Niebuhr’s view, the true Church is not a specific set of religious organizations; it is a dynamic in human history. Sometimes we use the term “invisible Church” to point to what Niebuhr is indicating, but Niebuhr is pushing beyond the way that most of us use the term “invisible Church.” The Church is a direction of response – toward God, the Final Reality. The Church is the sensitive and responsive portion of the entire human species, those who are sensitive and responsive to the Final Reality faced by us all. Notice that this means that the true Church is a dynamic in history in which people who are not practicing Christians may also participate. This dynamic of the sensitive and responsive portion of humanity defines the term “Church.” The People of God are those who serve God. This means that engaged Buddhists may be the people of God, and that Jews and Christians who hang back from such sensitivity and responsiveness are not the People of God. The following diagram has been helpful.



The vertical line divides any group of humans or humankind as a whole into two parts. The part on the right side of the vertical line is moving toward God on behalf of the whole society. The part on the left side of the vertical line is not moving toward God. The front portion of this “wedge” of humanity is sensitive and responsive in Trust of the REAL – sensitive and responsive in Love toward the REAL, toward all humankind, toward the whole Earth – sensitive and responsive in the boldness of the Freedom found in such Trust and Love toward the REAL.

All this language needs to be made concrete in terms of the historical issues that confront us. In the essay quoted above Niebuhr spells that out:

¹ “The Responsibility of the Church for Society” Chapter 5 *The Gospel, The World and the Church* ed. Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harper Bros. 1949)

In ethics it (the Church) is the first to repent for the sins of a society and it repents on behalf of all. When it becomes apparent that slavery is a transgression of the divine commandment, then the Church repents of it, turns its back upon it, abolishes it within itself. It does this, not as the holy community separate from the world, but as the pioneer and representative. It repents for the sin of the whole society and leads in the social act of repentance. When the property institutions of society are subject to question because innocent suffering illuminates their antagonism to the will of God, then the Church undertakes to change its own use of these institutions and to lead society in their reformation. So also the Church becomes a pioneer and representative of society in the practice of equality before God, in the reformation of institutions of rulership, in the acceptance of mutual responsibility of individuals for one another.

Women, The Earth, and the East

H. Richard Niebuhr spoke passionately about racism, nationalism, and economic imperialism, but he said virtually nothing about the oppression of women or ecological ruin. He lived slightly before the full flowering of these two challenges. The first issue of Gloria Steinem's radical-feminist MS. Magazine appeared in 1971. A radical feminist movement was already underway at that time, but the startling effects of that movement were still in the future when Niebuhr was alive. The effects of that movement have now become huge: every woman, man, and child in North America and Europe have been deeply affected. Even the reactionary minority that still opposes this trend have been affected: they use the gifts that this movement has brought them to oppose its further expression. And the liberation of women is spreading to every patriarchal village in the furthest corners of the planet. The women who launched and sustain this movement were and are pioneers. Some of them were practicing Christians, and some of those Christians brought with them the pioneering spirit articulated by H. Richard Niebuhr. And the pioneering on this topic is far from over. Honored standing and civil rights for gay and lesbian citizens is a companion movement along with the honoring of women's experience, its contributions, and its role within human society.

A similar story can be told about ecology. Ecological sanity has now become a critical topic among the challenges, the vision, and the action of every progressive person and the clearest articulators of Christian ethics. Those of us who are fighting the deniers of climate crisis or the foot-draggers on reducing untenable pollution are the pioneers on these topics. The many ecological movements are another expression of the true Church within which many practicing Christians are participating as part of their pioneering Christian practice. Furthermore, the lead edge in the climate crisis portion of this ecological pioneering has moved into a new intensity. Completely shutting down the tar sands industry is being actively pursued. A movement has been built that proposes a moratorium on coal mining and burning. Investment in oil and gas industries is being successfully discouraged within public institutions as well as within statedly "green" organizations. However strong the difficulties and the opposition to change in this area may be, and however insidious the lying on the part of fossil fuel companies and their supporters will continue to be, moderating global warming has become an edge issue that the People of God are raising to the level of slavery abolition. Indeed, a type of civil war will surely be fought on ending the fossil fuel addiction and building an alternative energy infrastructure.

A third movement of crucial importance is the impact of the Eastern religions upon the consciousness of the Western world. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. have helped us redefine religion as a practice that assists us to access our true human essence. Christianity, at its best, is also such a practice. And the human essence that any effective religious practice assists us to access, is the same human essence accessed through an effective Christianity. Whether we call this essence "true humanness," "Holy Spirit,"

“enlightenment,” or some other positive name may not matter, for what matters most is our participation in this profound humanness, not the name we call it. Such an understanding provides a fresh foundation for meaningful interreligious dialogue. All the religions of the world are learning from each other in a truly amazing way and extent. Religions have always learned from one other, but for many centuries there was considerable isolation of the Western religious heritages from those of the East. Today, however, every large world city houses almost every religious practice on the planet. Among the early-to-mid-20th-century Christian theologians, very few dealt with this interreligious development. Paul Tillich wrote his last essay on Buddhism. Most of the other mid-twentieth century theologians gave even less attention to this development. But in the 21st Century, the dialogue between Christian practitioners and Buddhist practitioners (as well as other religious heritages) is a virtual necessity for being a pioneer in religious formation.

The Meaning of Revelation

In a book entitled *“The Meaning of Revelation”* H. Richard Niebuhr provides much clarity about how we need to think about “revelation” in the context of our future Christian thought. Other religious communities may use the term “revelation” differently, but within the Christian community, we need to distinguish this important term from a number of other usages. We do not mean hearing a piece of news as in “What Alfred said was a revelation to me.” Also, we need to give up the idea that Christian revelation means a magical implant of Hebrew or Greek words into the minds of our primal authorities. Also, inadequate is the notion that Christian revelation is an unusual psychological experience of strong emotional or visionary content. And we need to clarify that Christian revelation is not an arms-length experience, such as a new discovery in the empirical sciences. Christian revelation happens to persons, to our stories about what it means to be human, and to what it means to be humanly related to other humans, and to history as a whole.

Christian revelation is about historical events that happen to communities of people. The individual persons of those communities are involved of course, but the revelation is a public rather than a private happening. Also, the revelation is about an event that reveals Reality (God) to that community in such a way that it entails an understanding that can be applied to every event. Such a revelation challenges our current mental pictures of Reality, so it would be wrong to say that we arrive at a revelation through the exercise of our reason. Yet it would also be wrong to say that a revelation opposes reason or that revelation is of such a nature that no thought can be given to it. Rather, a revelation is meaningful in such a way that it can become the basis for much thoughtful application to all the events of our lives.

For example, the Exodus from Egypt was a revelatory event. In saying this we are not talking about an arms-length scientific-history approach to what factually happened in (according to one plausible guess) 1290 BCE. We are talking about what happened to a group of people in their understanding of Reality as a whole. Our scientific knowledge of this ancient event is very scant and quite approximate. Indeed, the historical scholars disagree about almost every aspect of answering the question, “What actually happened?” But let us suppose that we have this much common agreement about what factually happened: A group of slaves made it out Egypt, ineffectively pursued by the Egyptian military, into the eastern wilderness where they wandered southward toward mountain foothills where they stopped to reflect on this matter. In this bare-bones scientific depiction, the event is entirely meaningless.

To see the revelation that these people saw entails joining with these people in their interior experience – joining with them in the dawning that dawned on them about the way that Reality works in all the events of their lives and ours. So what dawned? What

dawning can be gleaned from this many-layered, told and retold story?

First of all, an experience of history-making freedom had dawned on them. They saw that Reality is not some sort of recorded drama just playing out its grooves, that humans can make choices that thoroughly change the conditions under which they are living. They further saw that they could choose to trust this freedom-supplying Reality to be their Benefactor in the future. They saw themselves as chosen for freedom by Reality and they choose to choose Reality back. As they prepared to live out this fresh understanding, they realized that their lives did not have to be organized in the same way that their lives were organized back in Egypt. Their new basic rules opened with the deeply interior “commandment” to trust this freedom-providing God over all the other loyalties that Egyptian society had offered them. Further, they saw that their freedom enabled them to give first-rate standing to every member of their group. They did not need one set of rules for the all-powerful and another set of rules for the un-powerful. One set of rules will do. We don’t know what those very first set of rules were. The rule-delivering story was elaborated over many centuries. But let us guess that those first rules (or very old ones) included: Don’t kill one another; Don’t steal from one another, Don’t mess with another’s spouse; Don’t lie before a settlement judge. Added to this quite basic stuff were some recommended inward attitudes that also took the place of their Egyptian training. Perhaps we can claim that they discovered that anarchy would not do, that their new won freedom did not mean living with no rules at all, just as it did not mean returning to hierarchical civilization’s style of rule-making. It meant a fundamentally fresh approach to rule-making – one that was rooted in the WAY IT IS, as far as they could see into that Mystery in their specific times.

As the history of this people proceeds some of their attempts to make rules that are based on loyalty to Reality may seem pretty weird to us today, even gross. They were creating social order for another time and place. The core Exodus revelation is not about the legal details – each century brought its own struggle with fresh challenges and the invention of additional legal details. The Major prophets like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah were working with problems that come up when you have a royalty and a aristocracy. Jeremiah handled this interesting topic: What does our Exodus blessing mean when our nation is being carried away into exile? Jeremiah announced the “Word of God” that a religious community loyal to Reality can exist without a nation, living in the midst of a foreign land. God, he preached, is going to establish a new covenant, one written on our hearts rather than rooted in a nation.

I can resonate with all of this. I grasp myself as a member of this community. These are my ancestors in religious practice. It does not matter that I was born in Oklahoma of ex-Europeans, or if my parents had come from Africa. Moses and Deborah and Amos and so on are my people. This is my religious group. This revelation of Reality has happened to me. And this revelation applies to all the events in my life. Reality for me is still a freedom-giving Power that respects me and expects me to use that freedom to establish a workable social order.

Similarly, Jesus, seen as the Christ, is another revelatory event. It is my revelatory event because I have chosen to make those who have experienced this event my people. I find this revelatory event shows me something true about every event that is happening to me and that is happening to my species of life. While the depth of meaning in this event is still unfurling with ever new implications, here are some things that have already clarified for me. It is possible for me and for humanity to experience a more inward exodus from a still deeper slavery – the exit from our estrangement from Reality and the despair that estrangement occasions. The healing of my estrangement is not complete, nor is it complete for humanity as a whole, but being among those to whom the Jesus Christ event has happened, we are in some measure

dead to estrangement and raised up to newness of life. This sort of healing is what is taking place in every event. Nothing can separate us from the “Love” of this healing process that characterizes every event in the ongoing flow of real time happenings. I, or anyone else, who can see our estrangements and their tragic consequence, can also see that we are all welcomed home to Reality. We can see that I or you do not have to become a new species or a different sex or anything like that. As we are, we are welcome home to Reality, and we can welcome this Welcome as the context for all our living.

A Redefinition of Christian Theology

In the wake of the post-Kierkegaardian turning point in Christian history, the meaning of “theology” has come into question. Etiologically, the word “theology” means the study of God. But if by the word “God” we mean Reality in its most inclusive, awesome, totally mysterious quality, then “theology” is simply “the study of Reality” with a capital “R.” Theology is *Real-ology*. Christian theology is the study of Reality as each and every event of Reality as *revealed* through the revelatory event symbolized by words “Jesus Christ.”

This Real-ology includes the insight that a valid Christian theology is not an abstract philosophical pursuit by a systematic thinker who wishes to complete his or her rational worldview. Christian theology is not about a worldview, it is about witnessing to an event of revelation that happened to a community of people. Further, Christian theology is not an individual pursuit, even though theologians are individuals and every individual can be challenged to construct his or her theology. Nevertheless, the task of each individual Christian theologian is a communal task – the inclusive understanding of what has happened to a community of people who are witnessing to a particular historical event that is a revelation of Reality as Reality encounters us in every event. Such theology is an ongoing task. It is never finished, because life moves on. Each new learning in each new moment of history must be integrated within this revealed perspective that governs the life of this specific communal body within which theologizing functions as an aid to total living.

Let us examine in more detail what these statements in the above paragraph mean. Not all, but many religious heritages have revelatory events which call its members into being. This is certainly true of Judaism and its view of the Exodus. Islam sees the teachings of Mohammed as such an event. Buddhism refers to the Bodhi tree moment in the life of Siddhartha as the dawn of the Awake One or Buddha. Buddhists may not see themselves as doing theology, but they practice a form of theoretics or Dharma teaching which accomplishes the function that theology accomplishes in Christian communities. Each of these revelations of Reality can be meaningful and useful to each of us, but the practice of a Christian practice with other Christian practitioners requires a Christian theology that prioritizes the Jesus Christ event as a window into the nature of Reality as Reality confronts us in every event.

Is the word “theology” appropriate for the religious theoretics of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and other religious traditions that do not use the word “God” to mean a devotional relation to Reality with a capital “R”? My answer is, “No.” Is “theology” a good word for the theoretics, past and future, of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? My answer is, “Yes.” All three of these traditions are rooted in the ancient Arabic/Hebraic heritage that discussed Final Reality as the “object” of their use of the devotional word “God.” In all three of these vast heritages, there is a type of atheism at work. Here is a way of dramatizing the core teaching of the Islamic heritage: “There are *no gods*, (long pause) save the Final Reality.”

Christian Theology and Philosophy

The Jewish theological heritage exists prior and independent from the Greek heritage usage of gods, goddesses, and God. Eventually, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam mingled their God-theoretics with the philosophical works of Plato, Aristotle, and their philosophical descendants. This has created the term “philosophical theology.” Philosophy and theology have a close relation because they both seek to clarify basic life truths and seek to do so in an all encompassing way. Nevertheless, the term “philosophical theology” breeds misunderstandings with regard to the Christian theology needed for a viable Next Christianity. In the definition of “Christian theology” that I am recommending for a vital Next Christianity, it is important, I am convinced, to strictly distinguish philosophy from theology. So what is philosophy?

Philosophy is the attempt to build an overview of thought for a specific culture at a specific time in history. We can describe three branches or modes of philosophical thought that have distinguished themselves in recent centuries: (1) **analytical philosophy** which focuses on the meaning of words in the culture as well as a clarification of logic and the quest for objective factual grounding, (2) **existential philosophy** which focuses on the description of the inner experience of the person in his/her intimacy with other persons and his/her personal relations with the world, nature, the cosmos (i.e. Reality as a whole), and (3) **metabilt philosophy** (also called systematic philosophy or metaphysics) which focuses on pulling together in some sort of cultural overview the analytical and existential approaches to truth. In this paragraph I am doing some metabilt philosophy by attempting to sketch an overview of philosophy itself. However interesting it might be to dwell more thoroughly on such philosophizing, my aim here is simply to say that **theology is not** any one of these three modes of philosophical theoretics.

Let me put this point as emphatically as I can. To speak of a philosophical theology is as inappropriate and confusing as to speak of a feline dog or a canine cat. We can authentically speak of a philosophy of religion (or even of a philosophy of religious theoretics), for philosophy has the job of reflecting upon anything and everything in order to put together illuminating overviews of thought. But a philosophy of religion is not a theology. A philosophy of religion holds religion at arms length, even though some participation in the topic of religion is needed to philosophize about it. But theology does not hold its religious insights at arms length. Theology is about the truth of personal commitment, a truth to live by, a truth to be devoted to, to die for, to give meaning to my life, my work, my birth, my being, my death, and to the entire life of my theological community as well as my planet and humanity as a whole.

Perhaps there have been and are philosophers who have made philosophy their religion, their primary life passion, but such a “religion” is, from the perspective of a fully clear Christian theology, an idolatrous religion. Philosophy is a creation of the human mind, and any human creation is an idol when it takes the place of devotion to that Power that creates the human and all the potentials for human creation. This demotion of philosophy from the role of ultimate concern does not mean a contempt for philosophy. Indeed, once demoted, philosophy becomes a critical part of living along with music, politics, and sewage disposal.

Like philosophy, Christian theology is also a work of the human mind. So theology itself cannot be our Christian God. Theology points to God, and begins its reasoning from its core revelation of God. Theological reason, as H. Richard Niebuhr so aptly put it, is a reason of the heart: it begins with a heart felt response to the truth about Reality revealed in the Jesus Christ address. “Christian theology,” as that term is used in the Kierkegaardian wake, begins with a heartfelt commitment and then uses the skills of the human mind for thinking through what that commitment means with respect to

every aspect of everyday, down-to-Earth living. Such theology does not become our ultimate concern, it is a work of obedience to our Ultimate Concern and like all finite things it is ongoing and changing. Indeed, there is no Christian theology; there is just Christian theologizing.

So why do theologians get mixed up with philosophers and philosophy? Theologians speak to themselves and others as cultural beings, so they are impelled to theologize about everything: a society's philosophies, sociologies, psychologies, economics, politics, everything. Paul Tillich wrote a book entitled *Theology of Culture*. This book was not a philosophy of culture; it was a theology of culture, including the philosophizing that was going on in Tillich's culture. Tillich, Bultmann and other theologians have been very clear about the fact that theology has two poles: (1) the revelatory event in which their theology is rooted and their devotion grounded and (2) the cultural scope of meanings held by the people to whom they intend to address with their "Word of God." They do not want to reduce the Word of God to the insights of their culture. And they do not want to speak the Word of God in a language or style that addressed some other culture of humans but cannot address the current culture to whom they are speaking.

For example, Bultmann has been accused by some of his critics of reducing the New Testament message to a 20th Century existential philosophy. But this is not at all true. In fact, Bultmann has also been criticized by some existentialist thinkers for being too preoccupied with the New Testament proclamation. Bultmann is, above all else, an exegete of New Testament texts. His *Theology of the New Testament* is his classic work. He is being a theologian, not a philosopher, in his work of rendering those New Testament texts meaningful for 20th and 21st Century persons.

Here is another way that Christian theology is different from philosophy. Theology is rooted in a specific **community of commitment**. We can speak of Jewish theology, Christian theology, and Muslim Theology. We can break this communal nature of theology down further to Roman Catholic theology, Protestant theology, Lutheran theology, Methodist theology, and so on. In each of these cases the theologian, though an individual, speaks on behalf of a community, to that community, and for that community to the world. We can also speak of an Old Testament theology, a New Testament theology, a Second Isaiahian theology, a Pauline Theology, a Markian theology, a Johannine theology, an Augustinian theology, a Tillichian theology, a Bultmannian theology, and so on. Such theologies, named for an individual person are also communal in nature; these theologians drew from and spoke to a community of people. And these theologians speak on behalf of that community of faith to the wider world. I myself in this book am doing theological writing on behalf of a community that I am calling "a Next Christianity." I am using what I have learned from the many theologians mentioned above, plus adding and subtracting what I believe I have experienced with regard to these common topics.

It is important to say once more that Christian theology is an **unending task**. It should perhaps be called "theologizing." Bultmann died in 1976 at the ripe old age of 92. My key mentor Joseph Wesley Mathews died a year later at the age of 66. I am writing theology more than three decades beyond the ministry of these mid-twentieth century theologians that I count as great warriors of God within the Søren Kierkegaard wake. But in this wake, theologizing continues. Even though I have learned from these giants at least 90% of what I say in my Christian theologizing, I speak to a later historical community of Christians and others living within 21st Century encounters. And I speak on behalf of my community of Christians as it journeys into a future beyond me.

Finally, though Christian theology is communal in nature, it is also **universal** in its emphasis. The job of Christian theology is to articulate what it means to be loyal to a

Jesus Christ understanding of the Final Reality that is operative in *every* event. So Christian theology can and is called to speak about everything: every theologian, every religion, every philosophy, every culture, every science, every humanity, every political and economic issue, everything. But the Christian theologian speaks about everything from a point of view that is rooted in a specific revelatory event in history – namely, Jesus understood as the Christ and spelled out in the New Testament, carried through many centuries, and powerfully revived through the interpretations of that revelation as updated by the post-Kierkegaardian theologians I have cited.

* * * * *

In summary, Christian theology is a work of thought, a rational theoretic about everything from the viewpoint of a revelatory event in relation to which a community of people are witnessing to what is Real. Christian Theology is a “Real-ology” that uses hot symbols like God, Messiah, Jesus Christ, cross, resurrection, sin, grace, and others. This theology must interpret those hot symbols for 21st century people and their approaches to truth. We are required to think of these theological interpretations not as dogmas or literal history, but as witnessing to our personal experience in a manner that awakens the personal experience of others and allows us to understand the healing power of the original interpretations of Jesus as the Christ as a “Word of Reality” to us today. Theology is ongoing and changing because everything is changing.

I have already mentioned how important for recent theologizing have been: (1) the changes in perception about women’s experience and women’s equality, (2) the ecological crises, and (3) the impact of Eastern religions. We could also mention increased awareness about the scandal of needless poverty, inept money systems, and the challenge to develop a polity and an economy that is thoroughly post-hierarchical. The theology of a Next Christianity will be our reasoned witness in relation to how this Reality-inspired pouring-out-of-life can be appropriately lived in the 21st Century. As the Gospel of John put it: the Jesus Christ revelation shows us “The Truth, the Way, and the Life.” We theologians are called to creatively think through what that primal essence of living means for each new decade. This “thinking through” defines the meaning of the term “Christian theology.” Theology’s role within a vital Next Christianity will be to see our pressing challenges through the lens of this basic Christ-Jesus breakthrough and then creatively interpret and live our current challenges from that point of view. Such theology will be in dialogue with every historical event, every other religious community, every insight that crops up from any source. I repeat, in the post-Kierkegaardian era, *Christian theology is not a fixed set of doctrines. It is an ongoing invention of fresh understanding of this religious community’s grand heritage and of the fresh communication of this Christ-Jesus Way of living within our era and our everyday moments of living.*