

Part Three: A Reconstruction of Christian Practice

The transition to Part Three is the most important transition in this proposed manifesto. It is a transition from interpreting the past for the sake of the future to the task of envisioning a specific sociological future with the help of the past and in terms of our current challenges in the present. You might want to read that sentence again.

So far in this book I have been describing a particular past, not the whole past of Christian forms in all places. Diarmaid MacCulloch does that more inclusive job quite well in his 1184-page book *Christianity for the First Three Thousand Years*. But my visit to the past has been more specialized and in many respects quite different from MacCulloch's. I am thinking on behalf of a particular thread of memory and my hope of extending that thread into the future.

I have been looking back through the eyes of my primary mentor Joe Mathews and his primary mentors and mine: H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann. And looking through these luminaries, I have examined the importance to me and to them of the lives and work of Søren Kierkegaard, John Wesley, Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas, Benedict, Augustine, John, Luke, Matthew, Mark, Paul, Jesus, the Old Testament Prophets, the Genesis Texts, and Moses. That list leaves out a number of people in this thread of history that have also influenced me significantly, such as John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. I have also treasured to a considerable degree, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but the whole history of Spain and its horrific Moorish and Jewish conflicts I have omitted from my story. I have also omitted the whole Eastern Church. My story has been a Western story. I have also omitted within this Western story the Post-Lutheran Counterreformation, Pope John's Second Vatican Council, and much else which I have noticed and learned from, but do not count central to my story.

My projection of a Next Christianity is deeply Protestant, exclusively Western, and selectively Western with great emphasis on Paul, the Gospels, and the Prophets. This is why I am naming the future that I am going to envision "a" not "the" reconstruction of Christian practice. Also, the word "reconstruction" needs a bit of definition. I do not mean a return to some previously constructed Christianity. The Next Christianity that I will describe is post-Christendom, post-Roman-Catholic, and post-Protestant. I am also envisioning this Next Christianity to be in service of building and sustaining a social world that I call "post-civilization" – that is, a post-imperial era that I have described, with help from my friends, in a book we named: *The Road from Empire to Eco-Democracy*.

I am envisioning an almost entirely new sociological reconstruction of Christian religious practice. I see this sociological reconstruction illuminated by a Christian theology that is in a number of ways post-Joe-Mathews and post mid-twentieth century. Much change has happened to my world and to me over that last 37 years. I have seen the need for greater justice for women, gay and lesbian persons, and racial groups. I have benefited from reading and knowing some great religious women – Simone Weil, Mary Daly, Charlene Spretnak, and others. Promoting ecological sanity has been a deep influence. Much new depth has entered my life through interreligious dialogue – the ministries of reformed Buddhist teachings and the psychological/spirit illuminations of A. H. Almaas. Nevertheless, I firmly remain a practitioner of a Christian theology and religious practice. I am committed to an experience-based conviction that this heritage has contributions to make that only this heritage is likely to make to both interreligious dialogue and to the inner qualities of the emerging secular world.

Therefore, I ask you to read the following chapters in the understanding that a Christian practice need not be seen as your or my or anyone's only religious option. Furthermore, the mode of Christianity I will suggest need not be seen as anyone's only Christian option. And it will surely be true that even those of us who choose to create a Next Christianity within the above-described stream of influences will disagree about many matters, and I believe new and better directions will emerge from these disagreements. Nevertheless, I am projecting my best vision. I want to envision a Next Christianity that is appropriate for me and many others with similar experience-based convictions about the need for a Next Christianity.

13. An Existential Trinitarianism

As we turn our attention to the future of Christianity, we need a fresh view of the Trinity. We can no longer talk about three Persons in a metaphorical heaven and convince ourselves that this has something to do with our lives or with a meaningful Christian practice. We cannot say to ourselves too many times that *another world* beyond the stars, whether real or metaphorical, is no longer meaningful talk. Angels and devils, God and Satan, gremlins and fairies are all as questionable to us as the tooth fairy. We have to begin a vital Christian resurgence with at least this much honesty.

For those of us who have moved into this “post-two-story” universe of theological thought, one difficult challenge is understanding how that old mythical thinking was meaningful to our Christian ancestors. Early Christians were talking about their Spirit lives. In that sense they were existentialists, just as much as we super-scientific and post-Kierkegaardian contemporaries. So let us inquire into how we can talk about our experience of the Trinity in our own lives, and do so in such a way that enables us to see what our ancestors were talking about in their own lives. To create a viable Next Christian practices, we need to be able to share with our world the same experience earlier Christians were sharing with their world, even though our talk and their talk will be very different.

The Three Faces of God

Here is my one sentence 21st Century summary of an existential understanding of the Triune heritage:

The Experience of God has three faces: The Awesome, The Awed Ones, and the Awe itself.

In this simplified statement we can see how these three “Faces” belong together as parts of one experience. How can there be Awe without the Awesome that is Awe-ing us? How can there be either the Awesome or the Awe without the human beings who are the Awed Ones?

The **Awesome** is the first face, the Almighty mystery of it all, the Parent of all things, the primal Source, the Void of origin and the Void of ending, the Fullness of overall connectedness, the Power that powers the coming into being of all things and the going out of being of all things.

The **Awed Ones** are those human beings who are participants in the community of the Awed. Christianly speaking, they are the Body of the risen Christ. Jesus, understood as the Christ, is the first comer, the ultimate exemplar, an elder brother of the sons and daughters who comprise the Awed Ones. Each Awed One is entirely human and entirely “reborn” – “virgin born” by the Awesome Almightyness of it all. As we join Jesus in devotion to the Awesome, we become the Awed Ones along with Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and other Awed Ones who preceded Jesus as well as those who follow Jesus in the Christian story of the People of God. And there are members of the Awed Ones who are not members of the Christian fold. As the Gospel of John’s Jesus was given to say, “I have sheep who are not of this fold.” Jesus Christ is symbolism for a cosmic, planet-wide, communion of the Awed Ones. The membership boundaries of this communion are unknown to any human being.

The **Awe** itself is the depth of the whole experience of the Triune God. Without the Awe there is no experience of the Awesome and there are no Awed Ones. Awe is the inner Spirit Reality of the whole Triune Happening in our lives. In our 21st Century understanding of the Trinity, we need to understand first of all what we mean by “Awe.” This, and this alone, tells us what we mean by “Holy Spirit.” Holy Spirit is not an enigmatic spook from some other realm. Holy Spirit is that down-to-Earth

profound humanness that occurs in real human beings when the Awesome occasions Awe in the Awed Ones. Awe is not a psychological or sociological creation of humanity, but the advent of the Eternal in the temporal human.

Awe is dread of the Awesome Almightyness, and Awe is fascination with our powerful relationship with the Awesome Almightyness. Thirdly, Awe includes accessing our courage to be this intensity of dread and fascination. In Awe we dread the Almighty; we are fascinated with the Spirit power of this relatedness, and we access our courage to be the Awed human in our specific history.

There is a reductionistic form of mysticism that views the experience of Awe as entirely passive. It is true that dread and fascination happen to us and are not caused by us, but without the courage of living that dread and fascination, it is as if these intensities never happened. This is why we can say, and must say, that Christian trust is a deed, an act of courage, a risk of a person's whole life, freely taken by the person involved. Without that courageous, freely-taken deed of trust in Awesome Reality – no Awe happens. The possibility of Awe may have happened, but the possibility was not embraced.

AWE **as Trust, Love, and Freedom**

Awe is not one state of being, but a whole ocean of states of being: Awe include TRUST in WHAT IS happening to us. Awe also includes LOVE of self, others, and the Ground of our Being. And Awe includes FREEDOM from egoic compulsions, superegoic restraints, and fatalistic cop-outs. Embracing Awe means living a healed, liberated, bold, history-bending life.

Trust

Awe includes Trust in the Awesome encounters of our lives, a Trust that is given to us by the Awesome Source of our Being. This Trust is a our entry into the community of the Awe Ones. This Trust begins with some consciously experienced despair that turns out to be the doorway that leads from some devotional falseness toward a dedication to that All powerful Void that is the source of all things and the Tomb of all things. This Trust is the dawning of the good news (perhaps proclaimed to us by an Awe One) that we are forgiven, welcome home to Reality – Reality as our home, our gift and demand for realistic living. We are welcome home in spite of our prodigal escapades into the swamps of debauchery, arrogance, addiction, foolishness, malice, emotional hardness, terror, despair, hopelessness, and other wording that points to illusory living. This Trust completes its manifestation in our lives with our courageous willingness to be forgiven, our true deed of welcoming our welcome home to Reality.

This waking up to Reality, experiencing our welcome home, and welcoming the welcome is a drama that manifests in simple everyday experiences. Following is a story, taken from many years ago in my life, that illustrates the above dynamics of Trust.

I was a young Chaplain in the U.S. Army stationed in Bad Hersfeld Germany guarding the East German border with a Armored Calvary Battalion. It was a small base with one chapel. I and my one assistant and jeep driver were responsible for this building and all the activities that were to go on in it. The core of this story developed on the occasion of a Three-Star General inspecting our base, including my chapel. He came to my chapel trailed by three others, including my base colonel. My assistant and I, each being an over-mental type, had made too many halfway preparations for this inspection. There was a pile of song books on a back bench that should have been in their racks. There was a pile of materials in the back hall with an Army blanket thrown over them. The General made notes about this and give them to my colonel. The next

day I was called into my colonel's office. I don't remember all that he said to me, but I remember this one line, "Captain Marshall you are probably the most well-educated man on this base, but sometimes you remind me of an immature little boy." I may have gotten out of that office without breaking into tears, but that holding-it-together condition did not last. I tried to dismiss what he said by angrily noting that this colonel never attended chapel, but that did not work to get rid of the truth of what he said. I was experiencing the opening of a "despair doorway" in my life, having to do with my not paying attention to all the details of my life. This external set of happenings was occasioning an internal crisis in my life, raising the deep question "Who am I?" I was clearly in denial about having a good bit of growing up to do. At such a moment we can try patching up the shattered world, getting drunk to forget all about it, and so on. Suicide seemed a bit extreme to me for this particular jolt.

Fortunately, I recalled from my Christian heritage that my life is forgiven. I, the immature little boy, was welcome home to Reality. The whole world had not come to an end. I was just facing some growing up I needed to do. Life is still livable. I can open to an unfamiliar future, one in which I become better at paying attention rather than sweeping the details under some blanket. When such real happenings confront you or me, they need not wipe us out. Reality remains trustworthy.

Such an mundane story illustrates the cosmic (Holy) yet down-to-Earth dynamics of Trust – that ever-deepening Trust that can for every anticipated future carry us through even the most horrendous doorways of despair into a thoroughgoing "welcome home" "uttered" to each of us by the WAY LIFE IS.

Love

Awe (Holy Spirit) also manifests as Love. This love is a love of my own self in my deepest self-reality and it is a love that loves the neighbor with the same love that the self is loved. This love is also a love of the Ground of our Being that supports all things in being as well as yawns before us as the Grave on all beings. This love is an enchantment with Being as a Whole, a curiosity to know the Truth, an openness to live Real Life, and a willingness to walk the Way of Spirit Love. Like Trust, this Love is a gift. It cannot be achieved. It happens to us as we are rocked by the hot intensity of life into an existential crisis that raises this core existential question: How be I? What style, what presence, is possible for me as I walk through all the moments of my life. And like the life of Trust, the life of Love must be chosen by me. It is a gift, but this gift must be assertively accepted.

Sometimes fiction describes the hot moments of Spirit Love better than our biographical memories. In *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien tells about how an experience of "Spirit Love" appears in the life of the hero of his story, Frodo.

The scene is a council meeting in which the topic is: who will carry the dangerous ring to the mountain of doom and cast it in? The young hobbit Frodo is among those at this meeting. He has been bearing the ring, and the more powerful figures at the council are not good candidates to do so, for the ring bestows such power that it tends to turn these rather superlative persons into evil forces. So, during the pause after this question was asked, Tolkien tells us about Frodo's inner workings:

All the council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him (Frodo), as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken.

An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. "I will take the ring," he said, "though I do not know the way."

This is a fine expression of how our true nature of universal Love can break through our ordinary states of consciousness and becomes the orientation of our lives. "It is like some other will." Tolkien says. Yes, our comfort-oriented will resists such callings, such tasks of love. But our deep Self, our Awe Self, our Spirit blown "no-self" can appear, can arise from the deepest realms of our being. Such love is not unnatural or otherworldly. Such love is simply our true being. Yet to receive this Love as the active force in our living, our familiar self-constructed self must be set aside. As Frodo does his task of love, he has to fight with his own inner feelings and mental stories. And he has to fight the same temptations in the lives of his companions. Love is an action, a task, a living that contradicts the greed and ambition, moralism and sloth, power craze and sentimentality that can and does so often rule our living.

Freedom

Freedom is the raw answer to the question, "What do I?" "What do I with this one life?" Freedom, like Trust and Love, is a gift of our true nature not an accomplishment. As we first awaken, we find that our wills are bound to some narrow purposes or addictions. The challenges of Reality viewed through the Message of a forgiven past and an open future provide us with the possibility to step forth into our essential Freedom. This essential Freedom is a liberation from the passions of the ego-self, the qualms and habits of the superego, and the pessimism of our excuse-making fatalism. This liberation opens us to the incredible power and emphatic persistence that characterized essential Freedom. Freedom appears as responsible actions constructed and carried out by our own selves, without dependence on the advise or approval of others, or on the seeming dictates of our circumstances, or on whatever principles that constrain our minds. Freedom is an act that is self-created out of nothing except the raw depth of Freedom itself. And each Free act is performed within the ambiguity that every real situation spreads over our longed-for but never present moral certainty. And finally, we can notice that though Freedom is a gift from Reality, it must be freely chosen in order for it to be the character of our living. Freedom is a gift, but it does not manifest as something passive. It feels like a possibility that has to be risked – perhaps with an agony of struggle over against my still tempting forces of bondage.

I will illustrate the feel of this Freedom with my experience of choosing to end my first marriage and begin marriage with my current wife. My first wife and I were members of a religious order of families. We had four children and were prominent members who had been with this order from its beginning. This marriage had not been a horrible arrangement; there had been love and common purpose. But for the previous eight years I had been holding together a marriage with which I did not feel comfortable. The two of us were not on the same page in our sensitivities and responsiveness with regard to what we were "called" to do with the rest our lives. Also, I had fallen in love with a woman whom I felt was as ideal partner for my anticipated "rest of my life." My religious order was not opposed to all divorces, but they did not favor breaking up marriages in which both members were committed to staying in the order, especially marriages of our "antiquity" (23 years). To make a long story short, I was constrained by the order to maintain my current marriage or leave the order. The order had been the first truly satisfying vocation of my life. Leaving this work and this beloved group of friends was almost unthinkable. I had some criticisms of the order concerning its polity, its moralism, and some of its policies, but I could have remained in the order as a reformer of all these matters. Perhaps that is enough detail to illuminate the ambiguities in relation to these two options: reconstruct my marriage life at the expense of leaving the order or stay in the order and maintaining a marriage with which I was not happy.

I was alone with this decision. Who could I ask? Neither my parents nor my children could understand. Only a very few members of the order understand my

situation and supported my perspective on remarriage, but they could not make this decision for me. Furthermore, both options were plausible in their own way. The remarriage had great promise in terms of a new intensity of nurture and growth, but it entailed a reconstructing of my vocation from scratch. I had only a vague idea about how that would work out. Staying in the order would preserve a meaningful vocation that might be further improved, but this direction entailed in a number of subtle and grievous psychological downsides. There was no right answer, or perhaps there were two right answers. So I had to leap into the unknown, for there was no final rationalization that could with absolute certainty support the leap. I knew by that stage in my life that such Freedom was a characteristic of the Holy life, but that did not lessen the Awe of this deep transitional challenge.

Freedom like Trust and Love is an Awe experience, a bubbling up from the depths of life that is Infinitely mysterious, dreadful, fascinating, and requiring a maximum expression of courage.

The AWESOME as Void, Demand, and Fullness

In one of his books (I can't remember which one), Søren Kierkegaard defined Spirit (and therefore Awe) as this happening:

When an external situation occasions an internal crisis, raising an existential question, from which we want only to flee, we are having a Spirit experience.

On the next page I have drawn a chart that spells out what this Kierkegaardian sentence means to me after so many years of thinking about it. This chart is content for a thousand sermons, but I will only comment briefly on how the Awesome operates in history to occasion our opportunities for Awe filled living.

HOW THE AWESOME OCCASIONS AWE

<i>Awe</i> / <i>The Awesome</i> <i>Dynamics</i>	No-Thing-Ness VOID	Eternal Presence DEMAND	Every-Thing-Ness FULLNESS
Awe happens when the External Situation	Endings Insecurity Loss Solitude Mystery Frustration Guilt	Intensity Aliveness Glory Engulfed Inspired Called Anointed	Beginnings Possibility Giftedness Camaraderie Clarification Victories Significance
occasions an Internal Crisis	Emptiness Too little hope	Scalded Too intense aliveness	Overwhelmed Too much possibility
calling forth an Existential Question	Who am I?	How be I?	What do I?
from which we wish only to Escape.	Hanging onto the past Hiding from awareness	Fogging over the Now Defense of old habits	Waiting for the future Floating above engagement
The JC Event			
The opportunity and willingness to open to Spirit rather than escape from Spirit means:	Oblivion is my name. Trust is my Being. Lucidity Forgiveness Letting Be	Equanimity is my style. Love is my Being. Strength Enchantment Compassion	Resurgence is my vocation. Freedom is my Being. Liberation Boldness Attuned

No-Thing-Ness – Complete VOID

These words point to a mysterious Power operating within every event in the cosmos, the fragileness of every being, the vulnerability of every being. We are seared with the inescapable consciousness that endings, endings of all sorts, take place in our lives. It is as if Death walks with us in every event. And this is not just our own death.

It is the End of the cosmos. Every moment is an apocalypse. The end of the World is happening now. Every finite thing is coming to naught, is being naughted, is returning to the Abyss out of which it arose. As the various forms of endings assault our lives, we keep asking afresh, "Who am I now?" My parents die: Who am I now? I loose my job: Who am I now? My view of my essential self comes undone: Who am I now? This is our first core existential question from which we tend to flee.

We hang on to the past or hide our heads from these naughting experiences. But if we accept the Jesus-Christ Word of forgiveness, restoring us to a fresh-start in Reality, we discover that the oblivion experimenter is just who I am. Trust in the Almighty Void is my true Being. And, I can continue in an unending journey into lucidity, forgiveness, and letting-be WHAT-IS.

Eternal Presence – Scalding DEMAND

These words point to the Mysterious Presence of an intensity of aliveness that can feel scalding to our aloofness or ontic sloth. Such intensity is the appearance of a "How to Be" that answers the question of "How Be I?" for all time. But we flee from this Infinite Demand into our favorite forms of fogging out. But if I open to this Demand, then equanimity is my style. Love is my being. I am enchanted with this too intense aliveness with which Reality is loving me. I am strong with an unheralded strength we might describe as a "courageous heart." I love myself and all other selves and wish for them to enjoy this same state of strength and enchantment that has captivated and is captivating me. Compassion for the sin-sick humanity from whom I am emerging (and among whom I dwell) fills the "heart" of my devotion to Reality.

Every-thing-Ness – Overwhelming FULLNESS

These words point to the Mysterious appearing of possibilities so overwhelming that I flee into all sorts of postponements and floating above the fray of real engagement. I hear the dreadful question, "What do I?", but I do not answer with doing the Freedom that I am being set free to be. I hear Jesus challenging me about moving mountains with a grain of Trust, but I do not want to embrace such visions. I hear Jesus saying to Peter, "Feed my sheep," but I prefer to feed my ego. When loving Reality is our passion, we can see that every new possibility is a great gift. We can see that "Resurgence in my vocation." "Freedom is my being." I am on a journey into still further liberation, boldness, and attuned working within the actual course of history that is taking place.

The AWED ONES as Hospital, Communion, & Vanguard

As a community of people, the Awed Ones are like a **hospital** for the despair-sick, malice-sick, bondage-sick persons who contact this community of Awe Ones. We are all sick in these ways, so this hospital function never goes away. It is primary. It is both the introduction of people into the community of the Awed Ones, and it is an ongoing nurture of their Awe-health over the long haul of their lives. Forgiveness and a fresh start is the never ending message of this hospital ministry.

The Awed Ones are also a **communion** of saints. We usually think of "sainthood" as the state of the very few who meet certain outstanding criteria, but the communion of saints, as first introduced by Paul, was actually composed of ordinary, quite humble people, very few of whom were outstanding in a public way. Anyone who has received the gift of being in Awe is an Awed One. The Awe Ones are the Body of Jesus Christ in its full glory. We cannot take credit for being an Awe One. It is a gift. It happens to us and what has happened is nothing more or less than the appearance of

our profound humanness. We have to receive profound humanness consciously and live it intentionally. But even the capacity to opt for this profound humanness is a gift of the profound humanness for which the opting is being made. In other words, the main quality of the communion of saints is noticing and accepting our forgiveness for all the estrangement that has and may still characterize much of our living. The saints are those who have joined in living contact with the Awe Ones of history and thus experience this “righteousness” that was imparted at our creation and is being reimpacted as we accept our forgiveness for all our tragic departures. As saints we are still sinners, but as Paul put it we Awed Ones “press on toward the full stature of Christ Jesus.” This “pressing on” does not mean “accomplishing,” for this “righteousness in Christ Jesus” remains a gift. “Pressing on” means further openness to receiving this gift of “righteousness,” – this gift of the essential profound humanness of Awe-filled living.

Thirdly, the Awed Ones are a **vanguard** force in the course of history. Through their dedication to realistic living they become part of a key minority within humankind – a minority that leads in the progressive movement toward greater realism, sanity, and justice. I will say more on this topic in the next chapter. But for now let us notice that this vanguard of Awed Ones are not all Christians, in the sense of practicing a Christian religion. Any person, practicing any religion or no religion, who is Awed by the Awesome and consents to be Awed is a member of the Awed Ones. And these Awed Ones are the key vanguard in the positive bending of history. In Christian language the Awed Ones are *the resurrected body of Christ Jesus*.

Such religious language is the talk of Christians, but this Christian talk is about a dynamic that is cosmic and historical – the Awed Ones includes millions who do not talk Christian talk. *Those of us who do choose to talk the Christian talk and theologize relevantly will find much help in this Existential Trinitarianism of the Awesome, the Awed Ones, and the Awe itself.*