

15. Post-Christendom Institutionalization

Religious institutions, especially Christian religious institutions, have earned a bad reputation. Many of these institutions have become turned-in upon themselves, corrupted by their need for money, overly accommodated to the shallowness, sentimentality, and bigotries of their communities, and often so authoritarian in style that honest thought is almost entirely excluded.

Also, many liberal Christians and Christian alumni have become so individualistic in their sensibilities that every sort of disciplined community or institutional form has become suspect (i.e. oppressive until proven otherwise). Some Christian-identified persons who have embraced a relatively sound 21st century theology have resisted membership in any Christian religious institution or group. Therefore, a proposal to envision a next institutionalization of the Christian religion may seem questionable, old fashion, Medieval, just plain futile, or wrong.

No Next Christian Institution can be Authoritative

As pointed out in Chapter 11, the deep currents of 20th Century Christian theology have become lucidly aware that no Christian institutions can be authoritative for all Christians. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants Conservatives who still hold the notion that their institution of religion is the one and only Christianity are being dismissed as bigots by most thoughtful people. Furthermore, in this era of planet-wide interreligious dialogue, it is becoming preposterous to claim that a Christian practice of any sort is the one and only valid religion. The more clear we become about what “valid religion” means, the more clear we become that every long-standing religious tradition has become “long-standing” through centuries of cultural change precisely because of its many elements of “validness.” I have recently written a whole book (*The Enigma of Consciousness*) aimed at defining “religious validness” as any finite, humanly-invented symbolic practice that enables us to become more “accident prone” to experiencing the accident of recovering aspects of our profound humanness. In other words, religious formation has been a continually emerging part of human societies because there is an enduring need for some sort of restoration from our illusions to our authenticity. We need that dynamic for our survival, thriving, realism, justice, courage, and other elemental aspects of being true to the depths of our humanity.

We now have abundant Christian theological writing that has clarified how the deepest dynamics of Christianity are revelations of how human life is for all humans in their essential state. Therefore, it is not surprising that these same dynamics show up in other religions. H. Richard Niebuhr defined the true Church as that part of any society that is sensitive and responsive to the depths of what is going on in history. This means that “the true church” is a term that points to a dynamic of history, not a religious institution. Nor is the true church confined to a specific set of religious institutions; it is a cosmic dynamic of sensitivity and responsiveness to WHAT IS HAPPENING. This means that Christians must become clear that the “true church” or “communion of saints” is not the same as membership in a particular religious group. A Christian religious group can be defined sociologically, but no sociologically defined group can be the boundary within which “true church” exists.

So how does this vision of the “invisible true church” relate to the task of building a Next visible institutional form of the Christian religion? Clearly, the builders of a Next Christianity will need to seek to give institutional form to this universal dynamic of “true church,” and at the same time be an embodiment of Christianity’s core revelatory event – that is, clear about what the Jesus as Messiah witness means with regard to being fully human in relation to the Fully Real. Clearly, this is a challenging calling, but

a doable one.

We who take on this task will also need to remain clear that a sociological reconstruction of the historical tradition of Christianity is no more important than a sociological reconstruction of Buddhism or any other religious tradition. Nevertheless, a reconstruction of Christianity can be viewed as important for millions of people. It can even be viewed as important for enriching the ongoing interreligious dialogue. Indeed, let us approach the task of Christian reconstruction with the understanding that the Christian pool of Holy journeying has something to contribute to the overall discussion that is needed by humanity as a whole.

As soon as we begin to see what fresh Christian institutions are needed, we confront a barrier within ourselves and within our general culture. Many of us, perhaps most of us, have come to distrust institutions of any sort.

What is an Institution?

The need for institutions in human life needs some undergirding for many people. The very word “institution” makes us think of organizations we could do without. But let us look at the concept “institution” more carefully. The English language is an social institution. If English is our only language, we could hardly recommend doing without it. Indeed, we require some language institution in order to pursue any life that we have in mind. Art is likewise a set of social institutions. Education is a set of institutions. We are not usually opposed to having such institutions. Typically, we are more friendly toward cultural institutions like language, art, and education than we are toward economic and political institutions. Religious institutions are also cultural institutions, but we often distrust them the most.

Every essential social process of human socialization needs to be institutionalized in order to become a real life functioning. For example, the economic aspect of every human society can be described as three sets of essential processes: resource processes, production processes, and distribution processes. Each society institutionalizes these essential processes differently, but no society can escape organizing all three in some manner in order to: (1) access from the Earth needed riches, (2) produce those riches into products and services people need and want, and (3) invent effective ways of distributed those products and services to those who use or consume them. Similarly, the term “Religious formation” can be the name for an essential social process that every fully functional society needs to institutionalize for the benefit of that society.

In other words, our sensibility to our profound humanness and the sharing of those sensibilities with others needs to be institutionalized in order for this essential social dynamics to become fully manifest. Satisfying this need does not mean settling for the failed institutions of religion that still hang around. And correcting this state of religious decay can mean more than reforming the old institutions. It may mean creating whole new styles of religious institutions – institutions that fit our experience of how profound humanness is experienced today and how people access that humanness. Accessing our profound humanness has many names: enlightenment, salvation, blessedness, holiness, the quest for our essential wonder, and more. For such terms to be filled with meaning and rescued from misunderstandings, we need institutions in which we house effective practices, relevant ethics, workable communal associations, and the supportive theoretics needed for the task of realizing, nurturing, and living out the implications of our discoveries in profound humanness.

So What is Religion?

Religion is a social institution that gives form to the essential religious formation process of accessing our profound humanness. Every long-standing religious tradition has had its force in human life because it was a creation of social institutions that

assisted people toward their need for a profound embodiment of their humanness. It has happened in 20th century Western culture that our institutions of research physics assisted some people to access aspects of their essential awe and wonder. To the extent that this was so, those research physics institutions were also religious institutions. But research physics does not usually define its essential function as awe accessing. Other institutions do define accessing the profound awe of being human as their essential function. Such institutions can be properly called "religion." Of course many religious institutions fail to perform the above stated essential function and even misdefine themselves as having some other function. They may even lie about the function they are performing, which is all too often creating an escape from the sobering awe of human authenticity and focusing instead on some sort of superficial, socially undisturbing, tensionless irrelevance.

As an example of religious organizations that are fulfilling the religious function, many creative institutions of Buddhist practice are now taking root in Western societies. The practice of meditation is being taught with the expectation of enabling some sort of profound accessing of our true humanity. A student asked his Buddhist teacher if practicing meditation would cause enlightenment. "No," said the teacher, "enlightenment is an accident, but meditation will make you more accident prone." I view this statement as helpful in forming a general definition of religion. Religion is a humanly invented practice that makes you more accident prone to your essential awe, wonder, true being, profound humanness, enlightenment, depth healing, salvation – choose your term and define it with your honest experience.

The word "religion" has often been abandoned in favor of the word "spirituality." People say that they hate practicing a religion, but they claim to have a spirituality. If, however, "spirituality" means a practice that enables one to access profound humanness, then "spirituality" and "religion" have the same meaning. I prefer the word "religion" to "spirituality" because "religion" has a more down-to-Earth quality. "Spirituality" can too easily drift off into intellectualism, individualism, and sentimentality. The word "Religion" has a chance of meaning a crass down-to-Earth social process, a regular group practice and a regular solitary practice that we do daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly for a lifetime. So defined, religion is one more social practice along with education or sewage disposal: religion is something we do, join, enact, in a word *practice*. "Religion," so defined, is not merely a set of beliefs or a worldview, although it is true that a religious practice typically includes thinking and systems of thinking about the practices in which such thinking plays a part. Further, "religion" is not merely a set of moralities, although it is true that the profound humanness that a religion assists us to access does become manifest in moral patterns. Religion is a finite social process with the purpose of assisting us to access the INFINITE.

What is a Christian Religion?

A Christian religion is a religious practice that has roots in the Christian heritage. Christianity is a long history of effective practices (as well as perverted practices). And like meditation these practices can make one more accident prone to the accident of our essential profound humanness. Christianity at its best has been clear about the importance of the communal life of a religious practice. This includes an understanding of the difference between Christianity as a "communion of saints" and Christianity as a religious institution. While the older theologies sometimes claimed that the communion of saints only existed inside a Christian Institution, we now know that this is not true. As John's Jesus says, "I have sheep who are not of this fold." That sentence can be allowed to mean that whatever Christian institution we come up with, the communion of saints (i.e. the Body of Christ) will include people who are outside that

finite grouping. “The Body of Christ” can be allowed to mean “the Awed Ones,” wherever these dedicated-to-profound-humanness people appear through that enigmatic accident of “second birth” occasioned by the Awesome Almightyness that is operative in the whole of human history.

The rebuilding of a Next Christian religion must surely be done by Awed Ones who treasure the core of Christian heritage. But let us not forget that we who are these Awed Christianity rebuilders must not claim that Awed Ones appear only in the institutions we are building. We need to retain the principle that “God only knows” who are the members of the communion of the Awed Ones – thus its invisibility to the eyes of humans. That is, we are experiencing a fresh definition of “the communion of saints” as all those of whatever religious practice or lack of religious practice who are indeed Awe-sensitive and Awe-responsive to the Awesome and thereby being the Awed Ones in history leading all humans toward an Awe-filled Commonwealth of realistic living. If we use the New Testament term, the Awed Ones are the “Kingdom of God.”

As we proceed with building Next institutions of Christian practice, we must also maintain our awareness of yet another deep mystery – namely, that all the people within whatever institutions we build will be sinners, that is persons deeply or somewhat estranged from their membership in the communion of saints. The religious institutions we build will be hospitals for the *sin-sick* as well as places for communion among those who are *being healed* of their sin-sickness – their despair over Reality, their malice toward all, and their bondage to the compulsions of misdirected willfulness.

Church as a Communion of Saints

The *communion-of-saints* vision of the Christian Church remains primary in our understanding of the past, present, and future of Christianity. Jesus did not see his task as founding a new religion. He was calling his followers to be a communion of saints, a new Israel, a true Israel. His call was to become members of an Eternity-based Kingdom being established right now on Earth by the God of History. Paul likewise saw his task as creating communities of saints that included both circumcised Judeans and uncircumcised Gentiles. Both groups of people were manifesting the same communion of Holy Spirit. Paul initiated other novel religious practices, but all this was taking place within a Hellenistic/Hebraic subculture that was not yet calling itself “Judaism.” In fact, in Paul’s lifetime neither Judaism nor Christianity had emerged as separate religions. Paul was initiating first steps beyond the Hebraic subculture, but first steps that did not mean “new religion” to Paul.

Church as Religious Institutions

Chapters 6 through 11 contains illustrations of how the original communion-of-Christian saints, as it moved through history, built religious institutions. So when we use the word “Church” today (as in “What Church do you attend?”), we typically mean a religious institution. As already indicated, religious institutions are needed in order to sustain over time the teachings and practices that are useful for accessing our own communion-of-saints qualities and for awakening others to this possibility being offered to humanity from the Sovereign Power confronted in the flow of history. So here is the key point: *Within our current era of Christian history, a new style of religious institution is needed. We need Christian institutions in which **authenticity** rather than **authority** is the ruling emphasis.*

Many people who are clear about the inadequacies of our inherited Christian institutions have stopped participating in those institutions and become what is often called “Christian alumni.” These alumni plus many Christian reformers and revolutionaries who retain active roles in the inherited institutions have become averse

to religious institutions. Their jaws tighten up when someone even suggests building new and better Christian institutions. These antiauthoritarian, freedom-loving, spirited, independent revolutionary souls are the hope for a Next Christianity, but like the preverbal “cats,” they will not be easily herded. And *herding* is not what we want to do. We want a community of free, creative, independent thinking Christians. Yet, what we find to be our first obstacle toward establishing a Next Christianity is that the very people who can build a Next Christianity see religious institutionalization as a form of “herding” people. One key to countering this “fear of herding” is to make sure that our next institutional forms have a thoroughly open-ended quality, and that the members have genuine responsibility for the unending emergence of the needed institutional changes.

And here is a second hitch to successful Christian institution building: our overcommitment to rigid views of democratic process. The quality of these new Christian institutions needs to be derived, maintained, and improved from the living experience of being a communion of saints – people who are experiencing their profound humanness and creatively leading from the perspective of that profound humanness. Not everyone experiences this communion of saints with the same intensity. Many members of any group will be strongly resistant to precisely those religious methods, communal forms, disciplines, and social missions that are most needed. Therefore, well-enforced religious patterns are needed to create healing communities and radical missional impacts upon the general society. So how do we handle that resistance to effective forms and methods?

Here is part of the answer to that question: The deep seriousness that arises from our profound humanness needs to be balanced with a form of consensus building that replaces all the topdown church politics of the Medieval and Modern centuries. So what does this new polity look like? Consensus need not mean total agreement by everyone involved. It can mean statements of direction that a group can go along with for now without flying apart. A disagreeing person can *stand aside* from supporting a decision without leaving the group. If a disagreeing person feels that a given direction is some sort of life-or-death violation of what it means to be part of the Christianity rebuilding effort, then that person can vigorously ask the group to reconsider the controversial direction. And if the group cannot be convinced to do so, then that disagreeing person can simply leave that group and create something else. Consensus building must be understood to be that serious and that honest. Such consensus building is not a topdown oppression and must not be accused of being so. If everyone is given their opportunity to be heard and every issue is approached within the notion that truth is something being discovered in our own experience of living, then overt oppression need not be the outcome.

Also such consensus building will include rejecting rigid beliefs as the unifying structure. It also means abandoning huge buildings or regional temples that form an economic anchor around our revolutionary necks. It means maintaining the Spirit or Awe-level inspiration for a disciplined cooperativeness that is purely voluntary, but open to useful order. It means a deep humility about honoring the authenticity and skills in one another without falling into the illusion that all saints are equally saintly or equally skilled. To start with, it means opening our minds to the need for these new institutions and opening our creative imaginations toward the unprecedented social forms that will be needed.

Leadership within this new direction becomes *the* (I repeat *the*) most challenging topic. First of all, it means abandoning the old model of an ordained clergy; the old clergy/laity split cries out to be abandoned. Full responsibility falls on all members of the here envisioned Next Christian practice. There must not be two levels of commitment. This means taking with new seriousness the well-worn Lutheran slogan

of "the priesthood of all believers." That phrase traditionally meant a rejection of the Roman Catholic version of clericalism. It was an argument for release from subservient dependence upon "Church" authority for interpreting the tradition, and thus an opening for each lay Christian to read the Bible in his or her native language and think through for himself or herself the implications for Christian living. But a majority of Protestants have not yet fully challenged Protestant clericalism. Some Protestant laity have retained a subjugation to their clergy that is even more oppressive than the Roman Catholic version.

Other laity and clergy have misinterpreted "the priesthood of all believers" to mean that each person, clergy or laity, can simply think and act however they like with no truth-demanding obedience to a core Revelation. That would be a departure from a key aspect of Christian wisdom. The Medieval authoritarian pattern did have the virtue of maintaining the understanding that a revealed Truth for our living had entered history through the Jesus-Christ event. Our understanding of "the priesthood of all believers" need not mean an anarchy of individualistic overemphasis.

Rather, we will need to emphasize the "priesthood" word in that phrase. "Priesthood" implies a Spirit maturity and a set of theological and interpersonal skills. Priesthood implies that we hear the Word of God and know how to address the Word of God to other human beings. To embrace "the priesthood" of all members of a Next Christian community of persons means that every member has the responsibility of thoroughness in their own Spirit journey and in their own skills of witnessing and living from that ruling Word of God that undergirds this entire effort. Also, it means facing up to the inevitable fact that some members will be more skilled and more mature in Spirit and in an appropriate sociological journey than others. So while all members are leaders, all members are also followers of the leadership of others. While it is true that a recent member to the Christian journey may address the Word of God to the most mature member, it also remains true that the most mature member has more leadership calling than those who have just begun to put their Christian living together.

Also, the entire structure of a Next Christian institution depends upon favoring strongly the most mature members in the ongoing task of creating the new designs and maintaining their effective application and improvements. And all this means a new intensity of awareness on the part of everyone about who is providing Spirit quality leadership and who is relatively naive or confused about the difference between ego-based and Spirit-based behavior. Being obedient to the Spirit of Christ is a possibility that a group of people can obey, but this direction will challenge us and ask us for a humility and a wisdom that is very far from customary.

Therefore, What Next?

So what do these intuitions of fresh sociological directions tell us about the social forms for a Next Christianity? The following three chapters provide some responses to that question: (1) We need to see that the commonality of the Next Christianity is in large measure composed of effective **religious methods** well learned and applied by trained leadership, (2) We need to view at least the following four forms of gathering as primary structures: **Circles, Assemblies, Guilds, and Retreats**. And (3) we need to remain clear that our new communal forms and religious methods are not means of being aloof from world history, but forms of nurture, training, and planning for responses to world history – that is, for "**The Eternal Mission to Planet Earth.**"