

Christianity in Change

an invitation to deeper dialogue

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Table of Contents

Introduction: What Sort of Change?

Part One: An Overview of the Changes

- 1. A Transformation in Theology**
- 2. A Transformation in Communal Life**
- 3. A Transformation in Mode of Service**
- 4. A Transformation in Liturgical Practice**

Part Two: Probing Key Theological Topics

5. Knowing the Unknown God

a response to John Cobb

6. Christianity Beyond Beliefs

a response to Stephen Batchelor

- a. Awakenment and Salvation**
- b. Agnosticism and the Trinity**
- c. Anguish and Despair**
- d. Death and Eternal Life**
- e. Building a Culture of Christian Practice**

7. The Gifts of Christian Heritage

Afterword: An Invitation to Perpetual Transformation

Introduction: What Sort of Change?

Every time is a time of change, but some times require more change than others. Change is a normal and inevitable part of life; nevertheless, everyone tends to resist change, especially big change in their religious practice. What type of change do Christian-identified people confront if they want to participate in a vital expression of their heritage?

Religious traditions, like human societies, undergo different types of change. I want to use the word “reform” for those types of change in which the continuities far exceed the discontinuities. When discontinuities predominate, I will use the word “transform.” Here are a few dictionary definitions of these two words.

to reform: to improve or amend what is wrong, corrupt, unsatisfactory

to transform: to make over to a radically different form; to metamorphize; to mutate

Christians today, I believe, face something more drastic than reform. The image of “radically different form” seems to me to describe the type of change that Christianity must undergo in order to be a vital presence in our current culture.

The changes in Christian understanding which have resulted in the organization of Protestant churches, has been called “The Reformation.” I believe that Martin Luther, in the beginning at least, felt that he was conducting a rather limited reform of some specific, corrupt practices taking place in his religious establishment. He may have been as surprised as everyone else at the radicality of his basic shift in perception. Surely the unfolding of drastic conflicts, overthrows, and even warfare did not occur to him in the beginning. But from our perspective centuries later, Luther was the initiator of something far greater than a minor reform. It was a very deep transformation in Christian self-understanding and practice.

There have been only two other changes in Christian history as major as the Reformation: (1) the decision to act upon Constantine’s invitation and build medieval Christendom, and (2) the birth of Christianity itself. These two changes plus the Reformation can certainly be described as “transformations” in the history of Christian practice.

Let us note, however, that even these huge transformations also manifest strong continuities. For most of the first century of its existence, Christianity was a movement of reform within Judaism; and that basic Hebraic background, held in what Christians call the “Old Testament,” has characterized Christianity throughout its history. In retrospect, the medieval church seems very different from the ancient church; yet its step-by-step construction was based on the theological foundations that had been firmly laid in the three centuries before. The Reformation also manifested much continuity. The Reformation affirmed continuity with the more ancient layers of Christian tradition while instigating stress with those layers of Christian tradition that had developed later. All transformations include much continuity, but it is their extensive discontinuity that gives transformations their characteristic quality.

With these images of Christian history in our minds, let us ask again, “What is Christianity facing today?” Are we in a period of transformation or a period of reform?

Many voices within Christianity today support the need for what I am calling “transformation.” Bishop John Shelby Spong supports the image of transformation in his book entitled *Christianity Must Change or Die*. Douglas John Hall does also in his book entitled *The End*

of Christendom and the Future of Christianity. Both of these books are effective in showing us how radical are the changes that Christianity faces. Yet though the writings of both Spong and Hall identify with challenging clarity what we need to move **from**, they do not clarify to my satisfaction what we need to move **to**.

For example, I find myself striving with both Spong and Hall for a different quality of continuity with what I perceive to be the basic biblical foundations. The issue of a more adequate continuity first comes into focus around what we mean by the word “God.” I agree with Spong that we must reject the antiquated metaphors used by the biblical writers to speak of “God.” But Spong does not honor, to my satisfaction, continuity with the biblical breakthrough on this topic. I will say more about this important topic in the chapter entitled “Knowing the Unknown God.”

Yet mostly, I find myself siding with Spong and Hall and others in the strift with the more conservative Christian thinkers. I want far more discontinuity than most Christian renewal forces seek in all these areas: in theology, in communal life, in missional mode, and in liturgical practice. I see the discontinuities needed today as more thoroughgoing than those of the Reformation. I find myself challenging a basic mode of religious poetry that was used thousands of years before Moses and is still primary in the practice of most Christians today. I find myself opposing the clergy-dominated mode of community life that has existed as the basic pattern of Christian community for at least seventeen centuries. I find the modes of Christian service inherited from our evangelical past to be authoritatively oppressive and disastrously otherworldly. I find the modes of Christian service we have inherited from our social gospel past to be superficial; they are means of remedial repair on obsolete social systems that need to be entirely replaced. I find that the very best of our inherited liturgies hold in place sentimental nostalgias and doctrinal irrelevancies. In these ways, I find myself involved in what seems to me to be a thoroughgoing religious transformation. I find myself identifying deeply with Paul, Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John in their challenge to imagine and create a type of religious community that did not previously exist.

So this is my context for the writing of this book: we who wish to be Christians face transformative changes if we are to participate in a vital continuation of this heritage. In the following chart, I summarize my current perception of these vast changes in Christian practice. This chart pictures my vision of the basic shifts **from** where we have recently been **to** where we must soon go. In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to clarify what I mean by each of the shifts indicated in this chart. But first, I want to invite you, the reader, to fasten this chart on your refrigerator door. Martin Luther, you may recall, began the Protestant Reformation by nailing a sheet of recommended changes on the door of a church building. Following Luther’s example, I invite you to a thorough debate on these topics.

A Transformation in Theology

From

To

God as Supernatural Being	God as Unavoidable Presence in all Events
Nature as a Temporary Earth-suit	Nature as the Speech of a Trusted Infinity
A Set of Authoritative Beliefs	An Experience-Illuminated Heritage
The Idolization of Jesus Christ	Restoring Humans to the Form of Jesus Christ

A Transformation in Communal Life

From

To

Individual Salvation and Morality	Communal Authenticity and Maturation
Clergy-dominated Institutions	Consensus-built Alliances of Covenanted Circles
Ordained Professionals	Ordinary and Spirit-empowered Servants
Marketing Religious Products	Sharing Prophetic Breakthroughs

A Transformation in Mode of Service

From

To

The Mission of Preparing People for the World to Come	The Mission of Awakening and Maturing People for Abundantly Living their Life on Earth
The Mission of Remedial Service for the Socially Disadvantaged within our Flawed Social Systems	The Mission of Reeducating the Entire Human Population for Perpetual Participation in Radical Social Transformation
Serving Social Needs through “Christian” Institutions	Serving Social Needs through appropriate Secular Institutions and Movements
Applying Moral Absolutes	Living Contextual Thoughtfulness

A Transformation in Liturgical Practice

From

To

Untranslated Antiquated Poetry	Meaningful Decoding of the Ancient Heritage
Professionally Designed Pageantry	Organically Derived Group Celebrations
Semi-Magical Ceremonies	Appropriate Acknowledgements of Life Passages
Manipulating the Group Mindset	Facilitating Group Thoughtfulness and Study

Part One:

An Overview

of the Changes