

1. A Transformation in Theology

From

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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

God as Unavoidable Presence in all Events

The belief in a Supreme or Supernatural Being is assumed not only by most Christian-identified people but by the Boy Scouts of America. Even most secular critics of Christianity assume that not believing in God means not believing in a Supreme Being. Theologians such as Paul Tillich and others have insisted that the word “God,” as used in the biblical heritage, is best illuminated by understanding “God” not as “a being” but as “the ground of all being.” Theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and others have insisted that the entire image of natural and supernatural (earth and heaven) is a myth, an obsolete myth that is no longer useful in our interpretation of the Christian heritage. Even though this huge transformation in Christian theology has been underway for many decades, most contemporary Christian theologians still cling, in some way or another, to a view of God as some sort of extraordinary reality existing alongside rather than experienced in and through the ordinary realities of our lives.

The ways in which most Christians, renowned theologians included, avoid the full implications of this transformation are so subtle that much careful effort is needed to clarify this primal shift. In part two of this book I have included an essay entitled “Knowing the Unknown God.” This essay, which is a response to the theologian John Cobb, is about this shift from God as a Supernatural Being to God as unavoidable Presence in all events.

Nature as the Speech of a Trusted Infinity

Along with the two-story view of earth below and God above, goes the two-story view of our human nature--body below and soul above. This dualism of an immortal soul living in a mortal body has been part of Christian reflection ever since Christianity began interpreting its message in the context of Greek culture. It is still new information to most Christians that the notion of “immortal soul” played no role in the ancient Hebrew scriptures nor in the first century of Christian formation.

Modern culture, like ancient Hebrew culture, supports a holistic view of human existence. Holding the Greek dualistic view today results in a subtle and not-so-subtle contempt for our physical bodies as well as for the entire natural world. Ecological thinkers are justified in rooting part of our culture’s tolerance for ecological devastation in this dualistic understanding of our bodies as Earth-suits that our real person will one day shed and fly way to some finer place.

A full recovery of our biblical heritage supports not only a respect for our own bodies, but a vision of the sacredness of nature. I am holding this positive vision of nature with this phrase: “nature as the speech of a trusted Infinity.” This theme will also be further developed in the essays contained in part two of this book.

An Experience-Illuminated Heritage

Christianity is also weakened when it is understood as a set of beliefs. What do Methodists believe? What do Catholics believe? What do Unitarians believe? These have been considered valid questions. So to suggest that Christianity is not a set of beliefs is a shift in perception for many people. Now of course beliefs of all sorts have attended the history of Christianity, so what we mean by a “Christianity beyond beliefs” is the realization that the essence of the Christian witness is to a foundational experience that anyone can have. This experience is prior to expressing that experience in rational beliefs.

Also included in part two of this book is a collection of brief essays entitled “Christianity Beyond Beliefs.” These responses to Stephen Batchelor’s book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* deal primarily with this shift from a set of authoritative beliefs to an experience-illuminated heritage.

Restoring Humans to the Form of Jesus Christ

Finally, most Christians today have placed Jesus on a pedestal making him remote from the lives of ordinary human beings. Conservative Christians tend to consider Jesus Christ as some sort of Infinite Being come into our midst from outer space. Liberal Christians tend to make of Jesus some sort of ideal human toward which we need to evolve. I am attempting to cut over against both of these views with the phrase “restoring humans to the form of Jesus Christ.” I realize this is cryptic language. In order to understand what I am pointing to and also to create some context for chapters 2, 3, and 4, I will include in this space an essay that I recently distributed under the title “A Theology of Christian Formation.”

A Theology of Christian Formation Restoring Humans to the Form of Jesus Christ

One of the focal points of my life at this time is the formation of Christian Resurgence Circles. I see these Circles as experiments in forming genuine Christian community. I see these Circles as constructive steps beyond the denominational congregation. The denominational congregation has made many contributions in the past and will continue to provide services in the future. Nevertheless, I have come to believe strongly that the denominational congregation is an obsolete form of Christian community, a wineskin that cannot hold the new wine of the next expression of the Christian breakloose of Spirit.

Supporters of the denominational congregation often think backwards about Christian formation. They ask how Christian Spirit might be infused into these existing institutions rather than asking how institutions might be formed that give expression to Christian Spirit. Such thinking puts Christian Spirit into a straitjacket. Spirit is restricted to a form of expression that does not create stress in the existing institutions. By “stress” I mean such things as: undermining the economic base, threatening a building program, putting in jeopardy the salaries of paid staff, or simply inciting uncomfortable controversies.

Further, when we leave the congregational context and begin to ask what a constructive theology of Christian formation might look like, we find ourselves in need of wisdom that we don’t readily have. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has inspired me to write afresh on this topic. I want to reflect on this one sentence from Bonhoeffer’s writings: “Formation comes about only by being drawn into the form and figure of Jesus Christ, *by being formed in accordance with the singular form and figure of the Incarnate, Crucified, and Resurrected.*”¹

¹ *Meditations on the Cross*, (Westminster John Knox Press:1998), page 56

The Form of the Incarnate

Jesus Christ is an ordinary but genuine human being; furthermore, every genuine or authentic human being is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is a symbol for the humanity that stands before the Awesome Infinite Silence of Boundless Mystery and says, "Hello, my trusted Parent who loves me and all other beings." Jesus Christ is a symbol for the humanity that embraces the Awe of freedom, compassion, and tranquility within the actual grimy and glorious realities of down-to-Earth, everyday human living. This ordinary humanity of Jesus Christ is a foundational assertion without which the entire Christian breakthrough is negated. Jesus Christ is Adam and Eve before their fall. Jesus Christ is humanity restored to its created glory. If we are following Jesus Christ, we are following the call to simply and fully be our ordinary humanity.

This call to be human means that every attempt to be more than human or less than human must be discarded. Being formed to the form of Jesus Christ does not mean being superhuman. It does not mean evolving beyond our humanity. It does not mean being a demigod or a superhero or a super-heroine. It does not mean living up to some ideal. It does not mean fitting into the accepted uniformities of some nation or race or religious group. Such attempts to be somebody are untrue. They are lies. They are attempts to be what we are not and will never be. Following the call of Jesus Christ means, according to Bonhoeffer, that there is "no more pretense, hypocrisy, cramped coercion to be something other than what one is, something better, something more ideal."² We, along with Jesus Christ, are real human beings. The call to walk the walk of being in Christ is the call to be the real human beings we are.

Christian formation is giving form to being humanity, incarnate humanity.

The Form of the Crucified

Second, Jesus Christ symbolizes submitting to death, submitting to the death sentence under which all human beings are fated to live. This submission includes an empathy, but a detached empathy, with humanity in its denial of death; its fear of death; its willingness to lie, cheat, and kill to avoid death; its willingness to store up goods for itself in the illusion that something owned will make us immortal. Submitting to death includes submitting to every aspect of our finitude: the limitations of our security, the impermanence of our pleasures, the inescapable reality of our pains, the alonenesses in which we live in spite of all companionships, the basic ignorance we experience in spite of all our wisdom, the failure that characterizes our lives in spite of all our successes, and the irresponsible violations of our own standards of goodness in spite of all our efforts to do our best to follow our principles and do our duties.

Perhaps guilt is our deepest experience of limitation. And perhaps our flight from guilt is our most vigorous flight from allowing ourselves to be formed by the form of Jesus Christ. We avoid seeing the extent of our guilt by restricting our images of our guilt to individualistic violations of our own moralities. But each of us is more than our own individual lives. Each of us is humanity as a whole. If humanity is destroying this planet as a viable habitat for reptiles, birds, mammals, humans, and other forms of life, we are guilty of this thoughtless spasm of ecological destructiveness. We participate in this ecological guilt through all the ways we participate in modern industrial civilization. If humanity is indulging a few persons with billions of units of wealth while threatening billions of other persons with no sustenance at all, we are guilty of all this ludicrous injustice. If humanity is oppressing women or children or races or religious groups, we are guilty of all that meanness. All the weird, horrific attitudes, violences, and delusory actions of humanity comprise a huge ocean of guilt in which each of us

² Ibid. page 57

unavoidably dwells. I don't mean feeling guilty, I mean being guilty. Each of us is totally guilty and there is nothing we can do to change that. We can admit our guilt, and we can begin moving in some different directions, but we will remain totally guilty for the rest of our lives.

Following the Crucified means following the form of the one who bears all this guilt as his or her own. Following the Crucified means submitting not only to the truth that humanity is going to die but also to the truth that humanity is guilty in its dealings with both death and life. Following the Crucified means standing within this grim truth even though humanity is offended to the core by such an attack on its illusions of righteousness. Following the form of the Crucified means living our lives in conformity with the full force of the plain truth that we are all part of a guilty humanity, and that we are all doomed to die. Following the form of the Crucified means holding fast to this truth. It may even mean putting one's own life in jeopardy in order to proclaim this grim truth to everyone, a truth no one, in the first instance, wants to hear. Indeed, standing for this truth may make us unpopular to the extent of being viewed as a criminal-- perhaps seen as fit only to be executed in the most horrific manner imaginable.

Furthermore, following the form of the Crucified does not mean complaining about our grim destiny, or putting the Infinite in the wrong for requiring such sacrifices of us. We can pray as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane for an easier path, but following him also means ending our prayers with "Thy will be done."

Furthermore, following the form of the Crucified means forgiving ourselves for failing to follow the form of the Crucified one, for indeed helping crucify those who do. Following the form of the Crucified also means forgiving our supporting companions for all of their cowardly non-support. And most grueling of all, following the form of the Crucified means forgiving all those who reject us, frustrate us, and perhaps actively persecute us and threaten us because of the unwelcome truth we bring to them.

Such all-encompassing forgiveness is seldom understood properly. Forgiveness does not in any way lessen the seriousness of what is being forgiven. This forgiveness is not a wild belief in some sort of cosmic indulgence of us in the continuance of our persistent failings. The forgiveness of which Jesus speaks is a forgiveness offered by the Awesome Infinite Silence of Boundless Mystery which Jesus called "Papa." This forgiveness is something like a plain fact, an actuality of life along with gravity and the speed of light. We, in spite of all our horrific violations of the wholesomeness and potentialities of our own humanity, are right now being welcomed home to our actual lives by that same Infinite Source which puts us into life. If we accept this "welcome home" we will find such acceptance demanding, for it means surrendering our past and opening to our actual future. In the acceptance of this welcome home, we see that our past no longer belongs to us (it never did). We can derive no honor from our past. We can derive no blame from our past. Our past is not ours. It is owned by the Infinite Silence. (Just try to get it back!) The Infinite Silence will be the determiner of whatever consequences will issue from your or my past. Your or my only power is the power of decision in the present moment about the potentialities of the future toward which you or I are going to open or not open. This is what it means to hang in there with Jesus and say, "Papa, forgive them," to all that vast sea of humanity who cling to their delusions and crucify the truth. We can participate in announcing this all-encompassing forgiveness by revealing the truth and, at the same time, welcoming home to the truth all those who are currently intent on killing the truth. We do this realizing that those who are killing the truth may not treat kindly those who are bearing the truth in their living and speaking and actions.

Christian formation is giving form to being the crucified.

The Form of the Resurrected

Finally, Jesus Christ symbolizes resurrection from the dead, overcoming death, overcoming guilt, overcoming finitude. We, following the example of Jesus, do not overcome death by denying death, or by believing that death is not real, or by hoping for a reward in some heavenly realm for our scraps of meritorious living. Rather, we overcome death and the fear of death by facing death head on, by submitting to death, by accepting our death and the uncertain time and nature of our dying as part of our glorious destiny, a destiny being provided to us by the Mysterious Papa/Mama who has constituted us. We overcome guilt and the fear of guilt by accepting the fact that the Eternal Mysteriousness welcomes us home to our honest, actual, grim, and glorious lives. We overcome finitude and our fear of finitude by surrendering our despair-producing hope that we might be immortal. Formation in resurrection means living NOW that unconquerable life that Jesus manifested and that we can also manifest when we stop craving for a life different from the one we are being given and start fully embracing all our grim limitations and vast potentialities.

This glorious life which was in Jesus has been raised from the grave. It lives in the life of the community of those who celebrate the crucified Jesus as the Christ--as the Messiah who showed humanity what true deliverance from evil actually means. Our deliverance from evil does not mean leaving our nasty Earth-suit of a body behind and flying away to some more pleasant disembodied mode of being. Our body is the place where deliverance takes place. Our deliverance is a resurrection of the body. When Paul and others said that we who follow the crucified Jesus were the "body of Christ," he was speaking about the resurrection. The life that was in Jesus is now in us--in our bodies--our male and female bodies, our old and young bodies, our healthy/sick and dying bodies. The victory is this: death cannot terminate this quality of life. Death, the old arch-enemy of all hope for immortality, has now become laughable, indeed impotent in the face of the type of life we have as a part of the continuing body of Christ.

Christian formation is giving form to being resurrected.

Christian Resurgence Circles

So what does this "theology of Christian formation" have to do with the practical formation of Christian Resurgence Circles? The first thing to notice is that being a Christian is being the body of Christ. Being a Christian is a "we-reality." You cannot be a Christian by yourself. "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be there in the midst of them." That means, that when two or three of us are gathered together in the formation indicated by incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, the living Christ is present in the lives of that group. And this living Christ is not a magical spook hovering over us or entering into our inner being like some alien from outer space. No, Jesus Christ is our essential humanity restored to us. Jesus Christ is present in the flesh and blood bodies of those persons who have gathered in this incarnation/crucifixion/resurrection formation. So how is our true humanity restored to us? This healing takes place through the presence of the Speech of the Infinite Silence in the words and deeds and presence of these Christian companions. A companion who is formed by the incarnation/crucifixion/resurrection formation is the Ultimate Message of love and forgiveness to each of us gathered in this group. This Ultimate Message comes from the Infinite Silence, but it is speaking to us through the everyday relevant messages spoken to our actual lives by our companions in the Christian formation. The Word of God is not a set of ideas, it is an address delivered by a human companion. This address, human though it be, carries within it the Truth or Speech that comes from the Infinite Silence. Giving human expression to this Speech through our words, celebrations, communal life, and outward mission is being the body of Christ, the formation of incarnation/crucifixion/resurrection.

Using the classical terminology, we meet God in these plain flesh and blood companions. Each of these companions (not just the historical Jesus) is the God/man or God/woman if he or she is allowing incarnation/crucifixion/resurrection to form their lives.

This, then, is the first priority for the Christian Resurgence Circle: to allow our lives to be formed by the incarnation/crucifixion/resurrections formation. The Circle is both a hospital for our Spirit sicknesses and a communion of saints who have the power to heal such sicknesses. Each of us is the sick patient and each of us the Spirit physician. Insofar as we are in Christ, we are the physician. Insofar as we are not in Christ, we are the patient. We join the Circle and we attend every week because we want to mature in this form of Christ-formation. We also attend because we want to assist others to also mature in this way.

The Christian Resurgence Circle is also the presence of Christ in its local community. It bears witness to the healing message that convicts and forgives everyone and potentially restores everyone to their authentic humanity. This outward commission to heal the whole world feeds back into the internal life of the Circle where study and discussion take place on how best to witness to the Truth of Christ.

Being the Circle also means being the people of God in all of history. Being the Circle means being among those in our place and on our planet who are sensitive and responsive to the practical needs of people and the planet as a whole. The Circle brings its gifts of clarity and aliveness to the practical struggles for ecological wellbeing, social justice, and practical care for the lives of all human persons and living creatures. Whatever God is sustaining in being, the Circle also participates in sustaining and enriching. The Circle joins God in the creation of the next moments and decades of the created world. This outward commission to the whole world feeds back into the internal life of the Circle, where study and discussion take place on how to best serve the world.

So the Circle is much more than what we normally mean by a religious practice, though it includes that. The Circle is the place (or at least a place) where the entire purpose of our lives is generated, restored, and matured. All of us pursue many finite purposes in our lives: we maintain our existences and the finite qualities thereof; we nurture our deepest Spirit; and we make contributions to our times. All these many purposes provide us meaning. But the calling to be a formation of incarnation/crucifixion/resurrection can give meaning to all these other meanings. As a fresh formation of incarnation/crucifixion/resurrection, the Circle grounds us in this singular purpose: whatever promotes Spirit maturity in ourselves and in persons throughout the planet is what we are doing in the midst of all that we are doing. And whatever impedes such Spirit maturity is what we avoid doing.

Perhaps in these thoughts, we have a beginning toward a theology of Christian formation.