

7. The Gifts of Christian Heritage

Would anything be lost if we simply abandoned Christianity to the tomb which bigoted and defensive Christians have built for it? My answer is “Yes!” Something would be lost, but what? In this chapter I am going to seed this vast theological topic by comparing my understanding of the best of Christianity with my understanding of the best of Buddhism.

On the following page is a chart comparing Buddhism and Christianity in a manner that holds both their similarities and their differences. It is clear to me that each of these religions is giving witness to the basic dynamics in the center of this chart. In this respect these religions are similar. But when we examine the ways in which each religion has historically manifested these basic dynamics, they are significantly different. It is within these differences in historical manifestation that the unique gifts of Christianity can be seen.

The **center** column of the chart indicates the religiously **contentless** or universal dynamics of REALITY to which each of these religions witnesses. The **second** column from the left, **Buddhist core dynamics**, gives the Buddhist names for these three dynamics: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The **sixth** column from the left, **Christian core dynamics**, gives the Christian names for these these dynamics: Holy Spirit, God Almighty, and Jesus Christ. The other columns contain what I will call “historical religious content.” This is the task of Christian resurgence--to reinvent historical religious content that expresses these universal dynamics of REALITY. Columns **five** and **seven** contain some of the elements of a reinvention of Christian content and practice. Columns **one** and **three** contain some of the elements of the companion task of reinventing Buddhist content and practice.

This chart illuminates a truth about the Christian heritage that is quite strange to most Christians and non-Christians alike. As you can see, the term “Jesus Christ” appears in the third row of the chart rather than in the first row paralleling the Buddha. I mean to indicate by this that Jesus Christ is part of the “We” approach to reality rather than an “I” approach to reality which is held by “Holy Spirit.” The term “Jesus Christ” was understood in the early decades of Christianity to mean something more than an individual person. The coming of “Christ” meant a culmination of the people of Israel. Jesus Christ meant the beginning of a new humanity (the ecclesia). The teachings of Jesus himself did not focus upon solitary practices for individual persons but upon a sociological dawning, “the kingdom of God.” In order to emphasize the sociological overtones in this phrase “the kingdom of God,” we might translate it as “the reign of REALITY” or “the commonwealth of TRUTH.” “The kingdom of God” is clearly a sociological not a psychological concept. Furthermore, those who received Jesus’ “illumination” were said to be his body. The body of Christ is a community of people. Herein is our clue to the basic meaning of the resurrection symbolism: the trusting community is the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. When two or three are gathered together in this “name,” Jesus Christ (a living flesh and blood body) is there. The resurrection symbolism of the New Testament is not about the presence of Jesus Christ as a mere mental idea or a special emotional feeling or any other merely interior state. The Jesus Christ presence is a flesh and blood presence--an intimate presence within the Christian community as its members encounter with one another. This body of Jesus Christ is also a sociological reality in the ongoing process of history.

This striking “we-emphasis” means that you cannot be a Christian by yourself. I cannot be a Christian by myself. Being a Christian means being a member of a body, the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. Being a Christian means being, in the living now, the life that was in Jesus, the Christ. It means acting as Jesus Christ creating the religious forms, the communal practices, the witnesses, the Earth-missions that reduplicate the Jesus Christ presence on Earth.

This is a rather big difference between the Christian and Buddhist historical manifestations. The strength of Buddhism, at its best, has been its psychological insight. Buddhism has emphasized the individual person. The Buddha is the ultimate individual human. The communal or sangha dimension of Buddhism has been present, but it has had nowhere near the emphasis that Christianity, at its best, has applied to the communal dimension. In Buddhism even the sangha tends to be focused on the individual realization of Buddhahood by the individual sangha members.

The strength of Christianity, at its best, has been its communal intensity, its sociological ethics, its concern for justice in the entire fabric of social life, its calling to be the mission of playing a key role in the history of humanity, of the planet, of the cosmos. Though being “in Christ” does include being an individual human on a journey toward full human realization, the emphasis is sociological. The emphasis is being part of a community, being the vanguard, being the people of God who respond to God on behalf of all people, thereby being a blessing to all the peoples of the Earth.

Both ends of the polarity, individual/communal, are present in both Christianity and Buddhism, but this difference in emphasis characterizes their unique historical manifestations.

A Buddhist-Christian Comparison							
Buddhist			Contentless Dynamics	Christian			
Religious Practice	Core Dynamics	Religious Content		Religious Content	Core Dynamics	Religious Practice	
Mindfulness Meditation	Buddha	Siddhartha Gautama, the Awake One The potential in all humans for Awakening Enlightenment Buddhahood	Authenticity Freedom Compassion Trust Equanimity Peace Tranquility Bliss Joy	The wind of the Infinite Silence blowing in humanity	Holy Spirit	Devotional Dialogue Contemplative Attentiveness Intentional Prayer	
Teaching and Learning	Dharma	The Teachings of the Buddha The Lineages of Buddhist Teachings The Laws of Reality		THE WAY IT IS	The Infinite Silence the Mystery the Source of all the Tomb of all the Judge of all the Promise to all	God Almighty	Communal Confession Communal Celebration Communal Dedication
Meetings and Retreats	Sangha	Groups of meditators Buddhist communities		The League	Proclamation of the Kingdom (the Reign of REALITY) Healing Communal Events The Body of the True Human	Jesus Christ	Communal Presence Contemporary Witness Inclusive Justice

The chart organizes the comparisons I am going to discuss in the remainder of this chapter. I will begin with the top row of the chart.

AUTHENTICITY: The Buddha and the Holy Spirit

In the upper left portion of the chart is the term “mindfulness meditation.” This is a name for the solitary practice that is central to Buddhism. Thousands of books have been written on how to meditate. To understand this emphasis, we need to understand meditation as a method of inquiry, an inquiry beyond the rational, beyond the emotional, beyond the sensate, into a personally experienced certainty about THE WAY IT IS.

At the present time, Buddhist meditation is making a phenomenal contribution to the lives of people in Western cultures. This may be so because the preoccupations of people in contemporary Western cultures are so imbalanced in the direction of rational understandings and action programs. To sit still and look one’s own experience of RAW REALITY in the face is a refreshing corrective to the standard rat-races that absorb so many of us in Western cultures.

Christianity also developed solitary practices. In the upper right portion of the chart are three terms: “devotional dialogue,” “contemplative attentiveness,” and “intentional prayer.” All three of these solitary practices have vast traditions in Christian heritage. The middle one, “contemplative attentiveness,” is the one most similar to Buddhist “mindfulness meditation.” Some Christian contemplative orders have given their entire lives to silent contemplation. But in their solitary practices, most Christians have placed more emphasis on prayer and on devotional dialogue with Christian scriptures and other writings.

Prayer has been so deeply misunderstood in recent times, that we should not even say the word without adding some immediate explanation. “Prayer,” properly understood, is not about pulling on the tail of some magical deity in the sky to get something our addictive cravings desire. To understand prayer we need to see how “asking” is an act of freedom, an exercise of our freedom muscles. Asking for something for ourselves means being open to having or not having what we are asking for. Asking for something for others means being open to doing something for those other persons; it also means being open to those persons having or not having what we are asking for on their behalf. Prayer is freedom engaging in the course of history, realizing that we humans both have power in history and that we are finally powerless--we are dependent upon the ACTION OF POWER greater than ourselves. A wise understanding of Christian prayer grants us permission to have whatever desires and passions and loves we have and to ask for whatever we wish rather than to suppress these wishes. But Christian prayer wisdom also instructs us to include in our passionate pleas a release from attachment indicated by the formula “THY WILL be done.” Prayer is a dialogue with REALITY--receiving and asking and receiving and asking and receiving and asking and receiving. Receiving the ACTION OF REALITY is both the first and last word of this dialogue.

Prayer also includes asking for forgiveness and expressing gratitude for forgiveness and for life itself. Forgiveness and gratitude are big parts of our Christian dialogue with REALITY. Asking for forgiveness is also called a prayer of confession. Confession means owning up to what is real in our lives. In our actual lives, we don’t live up to our ideals or our principles; therefore, honesty means confessing these failings. An even deeper confession is the confession of our delusions about our ideals and principles. For example, we may have the delusion that our ideals and principles are inviolate or that our ideals and principles need to be followed in all cases. We may also be deluded in believing that we can achieve some kind of merit in the structure of the cosmos by obeying our own ideals and principles. In other words, confession means honesty, a full owning up to the way it is in our lives. Such confession is an act of freedom. The free act of confession is also the free act of receiving forgiveness. Forgiveness is a cosmic ingredient in the Christian dialogue with REALITY. In the perspective of Christian trust, REALITY does not hold against us all our past deeds, but offers us freedom in the present moment of decision. This dual dynamic of confession and forgiveness means turning loose of our past and embracing the possibilities within the living present.

Gratitudinal prayer is also an act of freedom. Feelings of gratitude well up within us whenever fortunate things happen to us or misfortune is avoided. Gratitudinal prayer is the decision to allow these grateful feelings their rightful place in our lives. The meaning of being grateful deepens as we apply gratitudinal prayer to our disappointments and misfortunes. Here the decision quality comes to the fore; we practice gratitude even when feelings of gratitude are not welling up. Such gratitude is a happy dialogue with the whole of REALITY. Such gratitude is the willingness to live victoriously whatever life we are being given. The opposite of being grateful is despairing over our lives. In each moment of our lives, our deep freedom is challenged to be grateful or not. Freedom's deepest challenge is to be grateful for freedom itself and for the life issues within which this freedom is constrained to operate. Such free acts are gratitudinal prayer.

Petition for ourselves, intercession for others, confession of our actual states, and gratitude for our lives is the Christian practice of prayer. These dynamics can also be found in Buddhist practice, but they are far more prominent in Christian solitary practice.

Christians also emphasize **devotional dialogue** with REALITY. Buddhists may speak of "union" with REALITY, but "dialogue" is not their favorite metaphor. As much as prayer, Christians emphasize devotional dialogue in their solitary practice. Reading the Christian scriptures, Christian theologians, and other Spirit evoking writings is a large part of Christian solitary practice. Brooding on these writings and sometimes writing in our journals also plays a prominent role. To understand devotional dialogue deeply we need to explore the relationship between dialogue with human writings and dialogue with REALITY. In the midst of reading or hearing some human words, we may also hear the WORD of REALITY, THE SPEECH OF THE INFINITE SILENCE. I like that phrase "speech of the Infinite Silence" because it indicates so clearly the paradox of hearing a "WORD" from REALITY. REALITY does not say anything in human words, and yet human words may be the medium through which REALITY says what REALITY is saying in all that REALITY is doing. Such imagery is deeply rooted in the writings of the biblical prophets as well as in the writings of the New Testament.

Buddhists also read human writings, the teaching of the Buddha and other dharma teachings through the centuries. And they expect these Buddhist writings to bring them into touch with REALITY, not just with the opinions of these teachers. But in Christianity, hearing words that may become the WORD of GOD is a primary emphasis. For Christians, it is not meditation but hearing the WORD that is the main path to healing or enlightenment.

Many Christians are finding great benefit in Buddhist meditation. I believe it is also true that a full recovery of Christian solitary practice has gifts for Buddhists and for all religions. These gifts are present in a vital recovery of what I am pointing to with these terms "intentional prayer" and "devotional dialogue."

For Christians the aim of solitary religious practices is to cultivate Holy Spirit in the same sense that the aim of Buddhist meditation is to cultivate enlightenment or Buddhahood. Both Holy Spirit and Buddhahood point to a religiously contentless dynamic which I have named "**authenticity.**" Authenticity can be spelled out by describing in a religiously contentless fashion what we mean by freedom, compassion, trust, equanimity, peace, tranquility, bliss, joy. When I use the word "contentless" I mean religiously contentless, culturally contentless, rationally contentless. Religion, culture, and rationality are part of the world-of-made rather than the world-of-born. The human-made contents of reason can point to these contentless realities, but authenticity itself is not synonymous with the human-made means of communication we devise to talk about it.

The religious content of Buddhism describes authenticity in terms of the Awake one or the enlightened one. The Buddha, an actual historical figure, is the touch-stone for describing the authentic human being. A key element in the Buddha's enlightenment is the realization of the transient nature of the human self. Enlightenment is nirvana or "no self." Enlightenment is the end

of our identification with our passing selves. This is our freedom, freedom from self and its cravings and aversions. Compassion in the Buddhist heritage is a return from this empty nirvana of no-self to an earthly life of kindness toward our own sequence of finite selves in all their struggles and journeys. This kindness extends to all sentient beings. Compassion for the enlightenment of all humans is part of enlightenment. The best of Buddhism maintains both ends of the nirvana/compassion polarity. Nirvana without compassion is ascetic arrogance. Compassion without nirvana is sentimentality.

The religious content of Christianity describes authenticity in terms of Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is also a type of no-self, a transcendence of self, a coming into our lives of a Great Self that is at first experienced as “not me.” One of the most powerful images for the Holy Spirit is that of a mysterious wind that blows through our finite lives making every leaf on our finite tree wave and shake in a mysterious manner. The wind blows where it wills. We do not know where it comes from or where it is going. Freedom and compassion and all the other qualities of human authenticity have this quality. These qualities are not human-made, they are not humanly achieved. They are gifts from REALITY. They are the wind of GOD, the wind of the Infinite Silence blowing in human life.

These reflections on the **Authenticity** row of the above chart clarify for me some of the key differences between these two heritages. The chart also helps us see how these two religious heritages are like two moths flying around the same fire.

THE WAY IT IS: Dharma and God Almighty

The middle row of the chart suggests that **the dharma** of Buddhism and **God Almighty** in Christianity are also surprisingly similar. The dharma points to the teachings of the Buddha as well as many long lineages of Buddhist teachings. But more profoundly, the Dharma points to the laws of REALITY. The aim of all dharma teaching is to attest to and assist each of us to attest to THE WAY IT IS. The dharma is THE WAY IT IS.

Christian theism, when understood in the manner I elaborated in chapter 5, is also about THE WAY IT IS. The I-THOU dialogue of Biblical symbology is a dialogue with THE WAY IT IS. In Christianity THE WAY IT IS is often depicted in personal metaphors like Creator, King, Judge, and Father as well as in more impersonal metaphors like Mystery, Silence, Source, and Tomb. But this symbolic language is pointing to THE WAY IT IS the very same WAY IT IS that Dharma teachers are indicating when they speak of the Dharma as the religiously contentless laws of REALITY.

Buddhism, at its best, remains clear that REALITY means a human experience not some objective something in some other realm with which we have no immediate connection. Good Christian theology is also clear that our knowledge of human life and our knowledge of God are two ends of the same knowledge. God is not an object way off somewhere. God is that Mysterious Presence in relationship to which we humans are who we are.

In religious practices, however, Buddhism and Christianity manifest great differences. Most lineages of Buddhism do not emphasize communal worship. In all forms of Buddhism, the instruction of a teacher is important and the support of a meditating community may also be important, but liturgical practice may be very limited.

In Christian heritage communal worship, done at least weekly, is a primary practice. Such “worship” is focused on rehearsing the Ultimate Message or Word by which the Christian community proposes to live its entire life. We might diagram classical Christian worship as a drama in three acts. Act one is a drama of confessing our failures to live in terms of this Word. Act two is a drama of hearing and celebrating this judging and forgiving Word. Act three is a drama of dedicating ourselves to live our whole lives in this Word. This Word is understood to be the Word of

THE WAY IT IS. This Word is related to the words of the Scriptures and the words of the preacher, but this Word only happens through human words; it is not synonymous with them. The healing power of communal worship is found in its being of assistance of the worshiper in having a present-time encounter with THE WAY IT IS. The faithful worshiper asks, "What is "THE WAY IT IS" saying to us this week?"

The Christian Word is also related to Jesus Christ, but we must keep in mind that Jesus Christ is not just Jesus, an individual person, but the entire community of those who have been AWED by THE WAY IT IS. What it means to be in this relationship is symbolically grounded in the life and death of Jesus and the Christ interpretation of Jesus; nevertheless, Christians, operating at their best, do not stand apart from Jesus and simply admire him. They see themselves as participants in Jesus, the Christ. Such Christian worshipers go to communal worship in order to more fully enter into the community of those who are AWED by THE WAY IT IS.

For Christians, communal worship is often more important than any sort of solitary exercise. Encountering the WORD of THE WAY IT IS in the words of the worshiping neighbor is the main path of Christian liberation or healing. Sitting in meditative silence or prayer or devotional dialogue is also important, but secondary to communal worship.

Buddhism also understands that hearing the dharma teachings is a path to liberation, but the emphasis, even within the dharma itself, is upon the need for self-discovery in solitary practice.

THE LEAGUE: Sangha and Jesus Christ

I have taken the term "the league" from the imaginative writing of Herman Hess in his classic devotional book *Journey to the East*. I find "the league" a wonderful term for holding before us an image of the contentless sociological dynamic of which both a vital Buddhist sangha and a vital circle of Christian resurgence are specific manifestations. Saying that "the league" is a contentless dynamic means that it transcends any religious or cultural content. The league is that part of the human family which honors THE WAY IT IS and embodies human authenticity. As such, the league exists in every human community to some extent. The league is humanity reemerging from its perversions. The league is that part of humanity that is leading humanity back to the TRUTH of being human. The league is a rather wispy, mysterious, hard-to-pin-down dynamic. Its boundaries are invisible even to its most mature members. Its modes of manifestation are endless. Its reappearance in strength is unpredictable.

The Buddhist movements to which I am most attracted are, I believe, creating strong experiences of the league. Buddhists call these communal experiences "sangha". Sangha can happen on a three-day Buddhist meditation retreat--or a ten-day, a thirty-day retreat. "Sangha" can also mean groups of meditators who meet for mutual support on a regular basis. This emphasis on Buddhist community building is stronger than one might guess from Buddhism's strong emphasis on the enlightenment of the individual person. The forces of Christian resurgence can learn from Buddhism in both the solitary and the communal arenas.

True Christian community is also a manifestation of this same universal league. As I have already indicated, the Christian breakthrough, when fully recovered, is an emphasis on communal life to a degree that is shocking to our strongly individualistic culture. Jesus did not proclaim individual enlightenment but the dawn of the Kingdom of God. This was the very heart of Jesus' teachings--the proclamation of the immediate coming of a fresh sociological expression of human living. "The kingdom of God" did not mean for Jesus and his followers an after-death flight off this planet to some better place. The kingdom or "reign" of God was coming in human history as a defeat of and replacement for the reign of Satan.

And "Satan" must not be understood as some literal king of gremlins coming into our lives from

some literal nether-world. Satan is real because Satan is humanity in its communal organization as rebellion from being authentic humanity. Satan is the capacity of the human species to lie about the truth--to value self-created and delusory self-images to the extent of murdering truth-speaking witnesses who oppose their lies. Almost every ancient religious heritage, including Buddhism, has invented a satanic figure or pantheon of such figures to symbolize this capacity of humans to be inhuman.

So “the reign of God” in Jesus’ teachings is a sociological replacement for the equally sociological “reign of Satan.” Jesus was the hub for a new communal expression of Israel. “Israel” means those who wrestle with God. “Israel” means the people of God, the people who make THE WAY IT IS their devotion, their worship, their loyalty, their “king” to use that now out-of-date metaphor. Entering the kingdom of God is a personal transformation, but it is also a transformation of all one’s communal ties. It may separate us from mother and father, sister and brother and join us with poor people, lepers, harlots, tax collectors, and Samaritans. We may find that this new community is led by ex-fishermen, ex-tax office crooks, and women recently rescued from ill repute. This new league of Israel is a scandal because its members live in a head-on collision with the pretensions and hidden evils of the established religious community. Toward the end of his life, Jesus led a throng of followers in a protest against perversions in the cultural capitol. He taught in the central temple of a people who he felt were failing in their call to be the people of God. It is hard to overemphasize the extent to which these blatantly sociological images have been downplayed in modern Christianity.

When seen as the Christ, Jesus was understood as a transformative event in history. The coming of the Messiah meant a history-turning event. So Jesus, as the Christ, is not primarily a solitary individual but an event in the history of Israel, an event in the history of humanity, indeed an event in the emergence of the cosmos. And this event continues to happen beyond Jesus’ death. Whenever a person is healed of some perversion of humanness, Jesus Christ is said to be happening. The healed person is said to be entering the living body of Christ. “In Christ” is a term that points to this healed body of humanity. “In Christ” also points to being in a process of historical events in which healing is taking place.

A Buddhist sangha also manifests these same dynamics, but the overt symbolism of the Buddhist heritage does not emphasize transformative historical events and communal participation to the extent found in Christianity at its inception and at its best. Herein is found one of the most important gifts of Christian heritage. Every religion and every secular movement can learn from Christianity about communal life and about the healing, transformative events of communal life.

This deep gift of Christianity is, however, obscured by contemporary perversions. The most conservative parts of contemporary Christianity have become bigoted in-groups of sectarian exclusivity, and the most liberal parts of contemporary Christianity have lost almost entirely the New Testament emphasis on intense communal life and on being a continual presence of healing events in the history of humanity.

But a vital resurgence of Christianity will recover Jesus Christ as a manifestation of “The League.” Being “in Christ” will again mean being in a communal dynamic in which humans are indeed being healed of their inauthentic human living. And “In Christ” means being in this healing dynamic, not necessarily in a community of Christian belief, for “in Christ” there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither religious nor secular, but one body of healed and healing humanity. “In Christ” there are Buddhist sanghas as well as Christian resurgence circles. Such statements are shocking to conservative Christians only because they have never grasped what “being in Christ” means. Jesus is not the coming of the Messiah because he founded a Christian religious sect. (Indeed, Jesus of Nazareth was not a founder of a new religion at all, but rather a call to renewal within an old religion.) Jesus was for the earliest ecclesia the coming of the Messiah because through his being and words and action human beings are restored to being human. To be “in Christ” is to become part of this humanity and this humanity-restoring dynamic. Wherever that dynamic is taking place, through whatever

religious teachings and practices or the lack of them, Jesus Christ is happening. I need to underline this: **“In Christ” does not mean being in the Christian religion; it means being in that communal healing dynamic and communal restoration process that is being pointed to by this Christian code-language.**

In the lower right-hand corner of the above chart, we find the words **“Communal Presence,” “Contemporary Witness,”** and **“Inclusive Justice.”** These terms are intended to summarize how an operative Christian religious practice has and can embody the strong communal emphasis indicated throughout this chapter.

Communal Presence

In what I will refer to as “a Christian resurgence circle,” we can begin to recovery that long history of being a communal covenant with THE WAY IT IS. The term “covenant” includes a tone of seriousness. Somewhere in the distant antiquity symbolized by the names “Moses” and “Joshua,” the idea of “covenant” was formed. It means serious discipline, serious responsibility to be a people who are loyal to the TRUTH, to THE WAY IT IS. The challenge of this ancient heritage is to hang in there through thick and thin in order to continue being a part of that part of the human community who are loyal to the THE WAY IT IS on behalf of all the nations of the Earth.

Each of the prophets of Israel restored and clarified this heritage of covenant with THE WAY IT IS on behalf of all humanity. The prophets made clear that this covenant means bearing contemporary witness to the TRUTH in each and every historical moment and promoting inclusive justice for all members of the larger community, indeed bringing justice to all the peoples of the entire Earth.

The followers of Jesus claimed that they had been gathered into a new covenant with the same God that Moses and the prophets worshiped. The old symbols surrounding the Exodus covenant were transcended, renewed, and included in a new set of symbols. **Death** to the sinful body of Adam or Satan replaced the symbols surrounding the departure from Egypt. **Resurrection** in the body of Christ replaced the symbols of communal formation in the desert of Sinai. These old symbols informed the new ones, and the new ones revealed clarities hidden in the old. Early Christianity saw itself as a Messianic Judaism, a new Israel witnessing to a new Exodus leading to a new community and a new covenant entailing very serious discipline and responsibility.

How difficult it is for our twenty-first century circles of Christian resurgence to even consider making such a serious covenant with one another or with THE WAY IT IS! How difficult it seems even to set aside one evening every week for a Christian resurgence circle meeting! Are we contemporary humans made of inferior stock from those ancient covenanting people who created and preserved for us the Christian heritage? No, we are just unclear that the busy panic of modern living is another expression of the kingdom of Satan that needs to be overcome no matter what the cost. We are unclear that the healing of our Spirit lives is more important than anything else we might have in mind for that weekly two hours of our time. And meeting together is only the beginning. The quality of that meeting needs to be such that it challenges the delusions that reign in the whole of our lives. The courage to join the servants of TRUTH in the midst of an apathetic society of unconscious liars is dreadfully frightening to most comfort-addicted persons in the modern world. We may long for authenticity in our better moments, but we dread it more. And this dread wins most of the time. Perhaps the first act of a vital Christian resurgence circle is to confess that we are all cowards and thereby begin learning how to be patient with one another as we climb toehold by toehold out of this slimy pit of mostly irrelevant business.

Contemporary Witness

While we must for our own sakes become an intense community of healing and self care, we do this not for our own sakes alone, but for the sake of all the other human beings among whom we

dwell. In our covenant with one another and with THE WAY IT IS, we take on a responsibility for everyone. And the first element in that responsibility is bearing witness to the TRUTH as we have ourselves experienced it. Such witnessing to the TRUTH is not about increasing the membership of our particular expression of Christian community. It is about bringing the TRUTH which everyone tends to be fleeing into plain view so that these fleeing people can be encouraged to stop fleeing, and start living their own actual lives. For the doing of this task, the current establishments of religion may be of no assistance whatsoever. Rather, they may be our enemies who actively work to reclothe in lies any TRUTH we manage to communicate. How are we going to get busy-body modern comfort-seekers to sit still long enough to hear anything seriously alternative or prophetic? This question will endure as a perpetual challenge to the deepest layers of our creativity and audacity. But this is our job, and this is one of the topics upon which we must spend time brooding, praying, and strategizing when we get together.

Yet it is not the style of the body of Christ to descend into gloom and contempt for the sleeping masses. Humans in general are essentially no different from those of us in these Christian resurgence circles. We are at best only a few steps away from the same lies that others are still harboring. The key qualities we need in our witnessing is empathy, forgiveness, patience, and persistence. We ourselves are part of the problem as well as part of its solution. Indeed, we are the problem realizing that there is a problem and creating solution after solution out of the thin air of our own freedom.

This contemporary witnessing to the TRUTH is a second image of the character of a vital Christian religious practice. Inclusive justice is a third image.

Inclusive Justice

The prophetic heritage is foundational for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is one of the most important religious treasures in the history of humanity. And it is one of the most misunderstood. The prophet is not a magical predictor of the future. The prophet is simply open to TRUTH wherever that TRUTH might be coming from--invading Assyrians, horrific injustices, narrow escapes, deportations, hearing the stories of old, learning from some alien culture. A prophet sees the future better only because he or she sees the present better. The prophet sees new visions of justice only because he or she sees the lies in the present systems of injustice. A contemporary prophet might see how to resolve the ecological dilemmas of our planet because he or she sees the lies and foolish persistence of the needless patterns in our current Earth-destructive living. There is nothing magical about a prophetic person or a prophetic community. This prophetic quality is simply an automatic outgrowth of the "in Christ" covenantal relationship with THE WAY IT IS.

Christianity, at its best, it is a strong embodiment of the prophetic heritage. This is manifest in these three very interesting strengths of the Christian heritage: (1) its capacity for self criticism, (2) its openness to other religious heritages, and (3) its commitment to truth and justice for every human being and for the other forms of life as well.

(1) Christianity's **capacity for self criticism** is dramatically illustrated in the work of Christian biblical scholars who have for decades performed a thorough scientific and historical critique of Christian scriptures and dogma. However confusing and disconcerting much of this work has been for many Christians, this self-critique of Christian heritage continues with a strength seldom if ever before matched in the history of a human religion. The Reformation was also an almost unbelievably powerful self-critique. Monastic orders throughout the middle ages of Christendom, even though forced to be loyal to the pope, were often extremely radical movements of religious self-critique and reform. The dawn of Christianity itself was a prophetic self-critique of a Judaism that had become spiritless and tyrannical in its moralistic striving.

(2) Christianity's **openness to other religious heritages** has been eclipsed by recent doctrinaire

Protestants and Catholics. But in its beginnings, Christianity was a surprisingly synchronistic religious movement. In spite of enduring loyalty to Hebraic cultural roots, the apostle Paul incorporated a surprising amount of Greek mythology in his interpretation of the Christ breakthrough. By the end of the first hundred years of its existence, Christianity, though still a deeply Hebraic movement, had embraced Greek heritage with a thoroughness that is astonishing. In spite of deep tensions with the Renaissance movement, most Reformation Christians took this recovery of autonomous reason into their Christian practice. Today, we see many Christian monks, scholars, and lay persons taking thoroughgoing interest in Asian Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism as well as in the nature-connectedness of Native American heritage, Australian aborigine culture, African musical and vocal vitalities, feminine elements from early and recent times, and this list goes on. Such openness does not mean that Christians have lost touch with their own heritage; it means that they are rediscovering one of the great gifts of Christian heritage--openness to truth from whatever source it comes. Such openness is an openness to the "God" that Christians are covenanted to serve.

(3) Christianity's **commitment to truth and justice for every human being and other forms of life** is likewise eclipsed by contemporary Christianity's accommodation to middle class addictions and delusions. As vital forms of Christian expression reemerge, these old passions for justice reemerge as well. The impact of liberation theology in the Roman Catholic wing of Christianity is an example. Equally amazing has been the impact of the Protestant social gospel movement of the nineteenth century and its further developments in the middle and late twentieth century. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement that he led is only one of the many manifestations of this Protestant social-gospel emphasis. The current ecological challenge is gathering strong participation from both Catholics and Protestants. A full recovery of the depths of Christian heritage will further magnify the recovery of this passion for inclusive justice and ecological integrity.

Buddhism, at its best, is also a religion of deep compassion. What some are calling "engaged Buddhism" is strong in the arenas of social justice and ecological integrity. In a best case scenario, engaged Buddhism and resurgent Christianity will inspire each other in the promotion of greater justice and ecological integrity for human life and the whole Earth.

Nevertheless, it is also true that most Asian cultures have tended to be sociologically pessimistic relative to supporting thorough-going social transformations. Christian heritage (as well as Judaism and Islam) have more fully carried a relentless optimism relative to social transformation. Let us call this Christian contribution "resurrectional optimism" in order to distinguish it from the false and inordinate optimism we have called "inevitable progress." Inevitable progress is a perversion of the more sober and realistic optimism supported by a valid recovery of the Christian heritage. In a proper understanding of the prophetic component of Christian heritage, change for the better is not inevitable. The prophet confronts us with key choices between realism and delusion, integrity and degradation. Inevitable progress thinking tends to view the movement of history from tribal life to civilized life to industrial civilization as a path still ascending toward a technological wonderworld in which every human is happy by virtue of an abundant economic life. Inevitable progress thinking may also focus on the increase in scientific knowledge and human consciousness. There is truth in the observation that scientific knowledge tends to move toward more powerful forms. Contemplative consciousness also tends to become more and more lucid. But more prosperity, more knowledge, and more consciousness are not the heart of the matter in Christianity's "resurrectional optimism."

Christianity's resurrectional optimism. includes a tragic vision: it sees that all human institutions and all human knowledge are finite human inventions. Societies come into being and societies go out of being. And in between their coming and going, all human institutions are corrupted by the characteristic qualities of an unenlightened or estranged humanity. Christianity's optimism focuses on the "Spirit dynamic" of overcoming this deep estrangement. Overcoming estrangement means overcoming our fear of death and thus finding a mode of living that can overcome death itself. This

is Christianity's resurrectional optimism. Estranged humanity can be resurrected to its essential health. Dying societies can be resurrected. Humans and their societies always stand in this fruitful crisis: choose estrangement or health, choose new life or doom.

A fully recovered Christian vision sees humanity living in a We-Thou dialogue with the stern yet forgiving WAY IT IS. It is always true that more tragic circumstances loom before us. Deeper human corruption is always a possibility. But the option of dying to these tragic trends and embracing the resurrection of new opportunities is also at the heart of a fully appropriated Christian vision. Such Christians hope where there is no hope, humanly speaking. Such Christians see hope in the midst of seemingly impossible situations. Such Christians look for how THE WAY IT IS is saying to us "Behold I make all things new." Such Christians know in their own experience of judgment and forgiveness and new beginnings that this is what all of us are always facing--the opportunity to repent and trust in the seemingly impossible good news that death can be overcome in a down-to-Earth, bodily fashion. Historically real resurrection is being offered to us here and now by that stern but ever merciful WAY IT IS.

No religious heritage gives stronger support for this sober optimism. Among all the gifts of the Christian heritage mentioned in this chapter, none are more important than this one. And this gift is important not only for Christians, and not only for Western cultures, but for all the peoples of the Earth.

Afterword: An Invitation to Perpetual Transformation

Since no religious forms are eternal, the specifics of Christian formation will be in perpetual transformation until the end of life on this planet or any other planet. We never can say that our particular formation of this heritage is the last--a permanent recovery applicable to all times in the future.

There may be periods of relative stability in Christian forms. This is not one of them. Deep changes are being called for every year, every decade; and there is no hope for stability any time soon. I have been writing books on this subject for seventeen years and each one of these books has been significantly different from the earlier ones.

Not only is the interior culture of the Christian community in transformation, but the general cultural forms of our entire planet are also in a time of overwhelming change. Never before has the human race had to deal with an ecological crisis encompassing the entire planet. Not since the dawn of civilization has human society undergone a social transition this fundamental. I do not tire of saying that human social history can be pictured as three modes of human society: (1) the mode of tribal society, (2) the mode of civilization, and (3) the next mode, whatever we choose to call it.

Transformations in cultural, political, and economic forms call forth vanguards of people who are willing to detach themselves from the obsolete forms and test alternative forms for a future that cannot yet be clearly envisioned. This vanguard quality of life has been manifest in the lives of the Old Testament prophets and their followers, in the life of Jesus and his followers, and in a long series of communities and movements of Christians throughout the entire history of this heritage.

This vanguard quality of life has also been manifest in the Buddha and his followers, in innumerable other religious movements, and in innumerable secular movements as well. Christians do not own the vanguard quality of life. And sadly most Christian-identified persons today do not strongly manifest this quality.

But those of us within the Christian lineage who do manifest the vanguard quality of living, need to do so not only on behalf of restoring the Christian heritage but also on behalf of the entire destiny of the planet. Vanguard Christians are not the whole vanguard, but they can be a significant part of that more general vanguard.

Though this calling to be the vanguard of perpetual transformation is not a calling for Christians only, it is a Christian calling. If we who are Christians falter in our calling to be this vanguard quality of living, the whole of Christianity suffers; and even more important, the whole of human history is significantly impoverished.

So why do we even hesitate? We hesitate because we see that the vanguard path passes through insecurities and misunderstandings and painful rejections. We hesitate because we have not been clear that in the Christian heritage "the cross" means embracing humanity's insecurities, and thus facing misunderstandings and rejections from that same humanity. The cross is not merely decor hanging in some peaceful sanctuary. The cross is the entire life of that part of humanity who has the courage to be the vanguard--to be that part of the human race which discards what is obsolete and invents what is needed. I am not talking about progress in the conservative ways of defining "progress;" I am talking about manifesting and witnessing to a newness of living that is rooted in a relationship that is permanent--namely our relationship to the UNKNOWN UNKNOWN MYSTERIOUSNESS that is the SOURCE and DESTINY of all things. It is this "God" who calls us to vanguard living, to perpetual transformation, to a cross that is our entire lives.

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