

A Call for Commitment

“...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord
and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,
you will be saved.”

Rom 10:9

How Christianity got derailed, and the religion **of** Jesus became a religion **about** Jesus.

“Once Adam is no longer seen as an historical figure, the whole drama of salvation described by Paul in his letter to the Romans is undermined, and the whole soteriological edifice collapses...Salvation History, Christ as redeemer and saviour, and the church as the instrument of salvation. We are left with Jesus as the counter-prophet of a radical way of life, and with the personal challenge of his ethical idealism.”

Dominic Kirkham

To be part of a sustainable future, Christianity must change from a religion of belief to one of commitment, one that enlarges our vision of reality and thus possesses survival value. We have too long treated religions as belief systems, and Jesus' message has been trivialized by Paul and Luther, who championed salvation by faith alone – a notion alien to the prophet they claimed to represent. The Greek *pistis/pisteuo* (belief, faith, believe) is better rendered “trust” or “faithfulness”; but even these terms name states of mind rather than ethical response, and today we live in a time when not only our religious traditions but our very survival face grave challenges. Any realistic hope for a sustainable religious or ecological future demands an active **commitment** to *tikkum olam* – repairing the world.

The Christian tradition has always made suggestions along this line:

1. The parable of the leaven, Mt 13:33/Lk 13:20, 21: God's kingdom will come when the secular and sacred worlds are one. Save the planet to save humanity – and the very idea “God” – a belief shared by Confucians, Zoroastrians, and Sikhs; implied by Muhammad: < The best people are those who have best manners and character.>
2. Nazoreans 6: “...How can you say that you follow the Law and the Prophets? In the Law it says, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Look around you: many of your brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of Abraham, are living in filth and dying of hunger. Your house is full of good things and not a thing of yours gets out to them.” The coming of the kingdom calls for radical sharing of Earth's bounty.
3. Emperor and God: Mk 12:17/Thom 100: Spend your money and your life wisely.
4. Shrewd Steward: Lk 16:1-8a: Forgive! (For you have long swindled your tenants?)
5. Prodigal Son: Lk 15:11-32: God's kingdom goes by mothers' rules, not fathers'.
6. The Samaritan: Lk 10:30-35: Despise and hate foreigners at your mortal peril.

And we must forge a more syncretic and global view of religion – not only for the practical necessity of getting along in a shrinking world on an endangered planet, but to recognize some of our own flaws. Some good examples we might acknowledge in others:

1. Judaism: ethical monotheism, anthropomorphism denied, corporate salvation
2. Islam: “Submission,” refusal to deify founding prophet, pardon for charity, compassion
3. Hinduism: “Atman is Brahman”; honesty, respect, compassion
4. Buddhism: “Namaste”; universal spiritual kinship, search for reality
5. Zoroastrianism: “Good thoughts, good words, good actions; responsibility; single reality
6. Sikhism: selfless service, justice & prosperity for all, no monopoly on truth
7. Taoism: spiritual ground of reality, deity is process, not a being
8. Didache: deeds, not creeds; eucharist still thanksgiving, not a personal pass
9. Quakers: open creed, anti-war, community democracy, potluck replaces communion
10. Mormons: family and community values, unselfish dedication to faith

It is worth noting that from 1 to 4 November the Parliament of World Religions is meeting in Toronto for its 125th anniversary. (Religious progress comes slowly!) Theme: “The Promise of Inclusion, the Power of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliations, and Change.” The stated aim is to achieve a just, peaceful, and sustainable world. All in favor may say, “Amen” – and then, since the rain falls on Jew and Muslim alike and the sun shines on both Hindu and Buddhist, may well wonder why the hold-up.

One reason: religions are addicted to supernaturalism and to defining themselves by beliefs, which are cultural products of slowly evolving worldviews. Think of Paul assuring the Corinthians that any gospel other than the one revealed to him is false. Think of the Israelites’ belief that the one supreme God had made them his chosen people and had ordered Joshua’s genocide. (How ironic that Jesus (Yeshua) had the same name!) David Boulton explains: “Monotheism promotes imperialism.” Another reason: Christianity’s promise of eternal life is more attractive than Judaism’s combination of demanding ethics and corporate salvation.

We might do well to remember that this is the 21st century and seriously question whether the observable realities of everyday life in this world reflect the existence of definable spiritual entities, or whether supernatural beings are simply personified abstractions. Surely Satan is one of the latter, and must not God be another? And if the growing fellowship of genuinely religious non-theists is any indication, perhaps orthodox traditionalists of every sort should adopt a modicum of humility and join the growing ranks of progressive thinkers in many faiths who are ready to recognize the symbolic or metaphoric truth of others’ doctrines and sacred stories.

Having thus broken the theological ice, we might reexamine our own tradition; for as Don Cupitt has said, religious doctrines and practices must not imprison us, but set us free. Some elements need to be changed: e. g., the reincarnation concept and the narrative and practice of the Lord’s Supper. Some new ones added, like ecocentrism and solar ethics. Some subtracted:

supernaturalism and brokered religion – which as Bob Funk observed, produces passivity in all areas of life – note esp. the issues of free will and personal responsibility. Some must remain: the radical demands of love (universal justice, economic equity, forgiveness, compassion) and the authentic kingdom sayings and parables of Jesus.

But our religious problems are hardly as dire as the looming global crisis, for the latter threatens the very survival of millions now alive and the additional 2B predicted by 2050. A few examples should suffice: *8 Oct: PBS and other news sources report the real danger of a collapse of the CO₂ balance of the Amazon rain forest; 50 years or less to avoid global disaster. *Mother Jones 25 Sep: By 2090 sea level rise could displace 13M in US; 300M worldwide by 2050. *Nat Geo May '18: Population expansion in Yucatan endangering aquifers and wetlands; around the world people are wiping out habitats, changing climate, “impact of an invisible asteroid” – remember the dinosaurs? *TIME 8 May: Clashes between farmers and herders (remember Cain and Abel?) over increasingly scarce farmland claim 86 lives in Nigeria, where such conflicts have killed over 10K since 2011. *TIME Jul 9: by 2050 climate changes will force migration of between 25M and 1B. *UN report 8 Oct: eleven years to disaster. *Hear David Attenborough: “Not to do something about [diminishment of the biosphere] would be an act of extraordinary ingratitude.” The opposite of ingratitude is offering thanks, and we should remember that “Eucharist” originally meant giving thanks; today ‘a nip and a sip’ aims at reserving your bit of pie in the sky. Putting self ahead of humankind is deadly hubris; for the future of the planet depends on making common cause with people of different religious views.

Nevertheless, we can find some small signs of hope: *9 July, The Center for Process Studies, Claremont School of Theology; Conference in China: “Ecological Wisdom and Process Theology.” *Religion and Ecology Forum at Yale, where a combined master’s program in Religion and Forestry is 15 years old. *TIME 1 Oct: Swedish chef has a plan to cut food waste by 1/3, 1.2 B tons/year. *CNN 7 Oct: Indonesian group recycles food waste into meals for needy; taste-focused and largely plant-based, since 15% of greenhouse gas comes from livestock farming. *Nat Geo May '18: Queensland Agriculture Alliance uses LED lights to produce six generations of wheat per year; also working on urban farming, crop efficiency, genetic improvement. *Providence Journal 1 May: Hindu leader from Nevada offered prayer to open Oklahoma Senate’s observation of Interfaith Week; later prayed and read Sanskrit scripture before State Board of County Commissioners and Enid city council. *NBC News 29 Sep” Colorado teens sue the state for failure to cut CO₂ emissions; “You’re endangering our future health!” Out of the mouths of babes...

And the good news on the specifically religious front is that deeply committed leaders like Gretta Vosper, Robin Myers, Rex Hunt, Dominic Crossan and Lloyd Geering are hard at work trying to give an ancient tradition new life so that it may flourish in the 21st century. Doctrine and practice will have to change as never before; but above all we must answer the call to commitment and resolve to dedicate ourselves to the future of mankind and our only home.

For most that will mean a new concept of religious observances centered on protecting natural resources by minimizing waste. Thoreau may have been exaggerating a bit when he declared anything beyond food, clothing, shelter, and fuel to be a luxury, but survival now appears to call for moving in that direction. Get ready for sermons on the sinfulness of consumerism, secular demands to economize, and the powerful motivation of price increases! Get ready to look for a smaller home or heat less of the one you have. Insulate well. Change from fossil fuels to renewable energy; lower the thermostat, put on a sweater. Turn off the hot water at night and when away. Use LED lights and turn them off when not needed. Instead of relaxing in a full tub, take a quick “navy” shower or a sponge bath. And can we any longer justify night sporting events and floodlit auto sales lots, or will they be seen as sins against humanity? Move toward a plant-based diet. Stop using throwaway plastic bags. Avoid “stuff”. Repair, re-use and recycle diligently! Thoreau again: “Simplicity, simplicity!”

We might also survive without ostentatious church buildings and ceremonies if congregations were less focused on personal salvation and more committed to the survival of humankind. When we run up against the brick wall of reality – the one that several conference speakers in 2011 warned us was 15 or 20 years off – many who have been members of Jack Spong’s ‘Church Alumni Association’ will no doubt return out of fear and others will affiliate on principle. Churches and non-ecclesiastical communities like Ephesus must be prepared to welcome them and develop practices and programs to meet their needs and desire to serve. When the dualistic and supernatural elements of classical Christianity that drove many away are rejected or taken metaphorically, and a critical reading of scripture is adopted, more and more people will come to accept the lesson imparted by the parable of the Leaven and Zoroastrian and Sikh doctrines: that our spiritual and secular lives constitute a single reality. At that point we may begin to think and act our way into the perilous times ahead.

Although the problems confronting of the first-century Galilean peasantry were very different from the existential threats we face today, Jesus’ core teachings remain as valid as ever. And like his message, that of a hymn penned to protest the 1845 US war against Mexico has striking relevance. It begins, “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide...” and goes on to remind us that “New occasions teach new duties / Time makes ancient good uncouth.” Today that first line might end, “Do we make LIFE our commitment or commit mass suicide?”

Thomas Berry has wisely proposed that true religion is “...to live together graciously on this beautiful blue planet...and to pass it on to our children with the understanding that the great community of life can nourish, guide, and heal them as it has us.”

Or if you like alliteration, let this be your description of **religion for a sustainable future**:

Congregations committed to communal concerns and continued caretaking
of creation here in this critically crowded corner of the cosmos.