
Spirited Away

The Future of Faith

by *Harvey Cox*

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245 pages.

Reviewed by Tomer Persico

In September of last year, a Pew Forum survey revealed that 45 percent of Catholics in the United States are unaware of their church's teaching that, during Mass, the bread and wine of which they partake do not merely symbolize, but actually become, the flesh and blood of Christ. In other words, transubstantiation—a central tenet of the Catholic faith, in the name of whose authority countless have been slaughtered throughout history—is unknown to a significant portion of American Catholics. Needless to say, their knowledge of other religions' beliefs is even more limited.

These figures should perhaps be cause for concern to the heads of the Catholic Church, but Harvey Cox, one of today's leading American theologians, has good reason to embrace them. After all, they lend

support to the thesis of his latest book, *The Future of Faith*, published at the end of 2009. "Not only has religion re-emerged as an influential dimension of twenty-first-century life," he writes, but "what it means to be 'religious' is shifting significantly from what it meant as little as a half century ago." According to Cox, the masses of Christian believers are losing interest in theology, dogma, and texts, and are opting instead to experience their religion in a more spiritual, subjective, and intimate way. "The pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs," he proclaims.

Far from lamenting a lost tradition, Cox is awed by this transformation of religiosity in general and Christianity in particular. More accurately, he welcomes the "Coming Age of the Spirit" with open arms. But the celebrations are premature. Cox knows how to market intellectual merchandise, and to cover it with an appealing veneer. But a close inspection reveals quite a few defects. His argument speaks

to the heart—but the mind remains unimpressed.

Cox's star first rose in 1965 with the publication of *The Secular City*, an overnight bestseller that stirred vigorous debate within American Christian circles. In many ways, the ideas he presented there laid the groundwork for his current book, and therefore serve as a suitable place to begin an examination of his theology.

The Secular City attracted widespread attention not just on account of its arguments, but also because of the identity of their author. Cox, who at the time had just received his Ph.D. from Harvard in the history and philosophy of religion, was also an ordained Baptist minister—a credential that intensified his book's impact. He suggested that the process of secularization should be viewed not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity for an authentic religious life. Secularization, he wrote, elevated man from simple tribal life to the more sophisticated existence of the town, and later to the complexity of the city, or what he calls the "technopolis." While during the period of tribal life, human consciousness had evolved from a belief in multiple mythical forces to a more advanced, monotheistic religion, the town—the place, critically, where books were printed—enabled mankind to think

more rationally. But it was only in the modern city that humanity achieved what Cox likened to the Exodus: The ability to stand before its God as free beings.

But free from what, exactly? From traditional religion, Cox maintains, namely a "commending system of personal and cosmic values and explanations" that opposes not only the scientific worldview, but also our acceptance of the Other. For Cox, secularization put an end to religious metaphysics and exclusivism, thereby opening the door to tolerance and pluralism. As he put it, no one is in possession of the "blueprint of the heavenly city"—including Christians.

Significantly, Cox believes that secularization is the legitimate, and perhaps inevitable, progeny of the Church. Christianity itself, he insisted in *The Secular City*, paved the way for it by distinguishing between what is "Caesar's" and what is "God's," and by transforming the Jewish concept of redemption from a national event into a personal experience. But while Cox perceived secularization as the outcome of God's involvement in history, he described the process in an almost naturalistic fashion: An ongoing enhancement of the spiritual attributes with which mankind was graced. This is a crucial point in understanding Cox's worldview: His perspective is not merely historical,

but also evolutionary. As a loyal follower of the Judeo-Christian tradition, he describes an ever-improving world whose deity is “the God of promise,” always directed toward the future; as a no-less-loyal adherent of Pauline theology, Cox identifies this development with the gradual release from the clutches of the religious establishment, heteronomous authority, metaphysical structure, and law.

But what form will the new religiosity take once it sheds its traditional skin? And where will we direct our hearts once we’ve removed the yoke of what Cox calls the “tyrant God”? In a bout of enlightened progressivism, Cox replies that today, God is revealed for us in acts of social change, and through our day-to-day interactions with our neighbors. Accordingly, he applauded Liberation Theology, which made waves in the Christian world, and particularly in South America, during the 1960s: The social (some would say “socialist”) gospel of this popular movement, which interpreted the teachings of Jesus Christ as a call for the emancipation of the wretched and the downtrodden, lies, from Cox’s perspective, at the very heart of Christianity’s vision for the future.

These themes, on which Cox expanded in the nearly one dozen books he’s penned over the course of his long career, also play a prominent

role in *The Future of Faith*. Indeed, as his oeuvre demonstrates, he’s nothing if not consistent: He repeatedly sketches the same, multi-phase outline of history, in which the transition to the next era is always a positive development, always directed by God, and always characterized by the “purification” of religion from metaphysics and authority. His latest book sums up this worldview, presenting the current era as the culmination of the spiritual evolution of mankind—an age, that is, in which man takes the task of redemption into his own hands.

The Future of Faith opens with a proclamation:

At the beginning of the new millennium three qualities mark the world’s spiritual profile, all tracing trajectories that will reach into the coming decades. The first is the unanticipated resurgence of religion in both public and private life around the globe. The second is that fundamentalism, the bane of the twentieth century, is dying. But the third and most important, though often unnoticed, is a profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness.

Cox sees the coming change in the nature of religiousness as the “most momentous transformation since its transition in the fourth century C.E. from what had begun as a tiny Jewish sect into the religious ideology of the

Roman Empire.” He defines this process as “the rediscovery of the sacred *in* the immanent, the spiritual *within* the secular.” (Emphasis in original.)

In tracing the path of this rediscovery, Cox presents a historical-eschatological schema. The two millennia of Christianity, he claims, can be divided into three periods. The first, the Age of Faith, began with the appearance of Jesus and his immediate disciples, and continued for 300 years after the crucifixion. During this period, which was marked by the rapid growth of the new faith as well as the brutal persecution of its adherents, the early Christians were “sharing in the living Spirit of Christ.” They were imbued with the sense of being on the threshold of a new era, one in which Creation would be purified by the grace brought into the world by the Son of God.

After the Age of Faith came the Age of Belief, which began in the fourth century with Christianity’s ascendance to power as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. The distinction between faith and belief, insists Cox, is of critical importance, since while the former reflects a “deep-seated confidence,” the latter merely indicates an opinion. Yet it was in the Age of Belief that the Church fathers began establishing dogmas; these, in turn, were presented to the flock as uncontestable creed. Cox believes

that for Christianity, this was a disaster: “From an energetic movement of faith it coagulated into a phalanx of required beliefs, thereby laying the foundation for every succeeding Christian fundamentalism for centuries to come.”

This was no faceless tragedy, however. Every good story needs a villain, and Cox finds his in the form of Constantine I. The ruler of the Roman Empire during the first decades of the fourth century, Constantine is blamed for transforming Christianity from a loose group of popular movements suffused with messianic fervor into a single, dogmatic religion that imposed an assortment of doctrines on its adherents. Realizing that the age-old Roman polytheism had lost its vitality, and could no longer guarantee the empire’s might, Constantine found a ready substitute in Christianity, which was, Cox writes, “strictly monitored by a powerful hierarchy and imperial decrees.” This new arrangement would no longer tolerate the internal dissensions that lent early Christianity such zeal: In 385 C.E., the first “heretics”—a man by the name of Priscillian and his six followers—were beheaded by order of the emperor Maximus; untold many would share their fate in subsequent generations.

The Age of Belief was to last for more than 1,500 years. During this time, there were glimmers of

faith—Cox mentions in this regard mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Jan Hus, and Giordano Bruno—but they were few in number, and their influence limited; many of them, including Hus and Bruno, paid for their faith with their lives. The Age of Belief finally began to wane with the coming of the Enlightenment, which launched a process of brisk secularization. “Now,” declares Cox, “we stand on the threshold of a new chapter in the Christian story.” He explains:

Christianity is growing faster than it ever has before, but mainly outside the West and in movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies. We are now witnessing the beginning of a “post-Constantinian era.”

The present era, to which Cox refers as the Age of the Spirit, brings us back, in many respects, to the original innocence of faith: It is marked by the search for direct religious experience and the repudiation of dogmatism. Cox identifies this age in two main phenomena. The first are the dramatic changes taking place in the Christian world, particularly the meteoric rise of Pentecostal Christianity in South America and East Asia (e.g., Korea). Pentecostals exhibit an ecstatic and ardent religiosity, culminating in heightened spiritual states

such as “baptism in the Holy Spirit” and “speaking in tongues.” While often identified with fundamentalism, Cox insists that the Pentecostals in truth represent an entirely different approach:

Fundamentalists are text-oriented literalists who insist that the inerrant Bible is the sole authority. Pentecostals, on the other hand, although they accept biblical authority, rely more on a direct experience of the Holy Spirit.... Fundamentalists insist on a hard core of nonnegotiable doctrines one must hold to unquestioningly. Pentecostals generally dislike doctrinal tests and reject what they call “man-made creeds and lifeless rituals.”

Cox claims that the vast, non-American majority of Pentecostals is not fundamentalist. While fundamentalism is a “toxin,” writes Cox, Pentecostals are “a living example of the new Age of the Spirit.” He pays a similar compliment to Liberation Theology, which he perceives as the true heir to early Christianity, having drawn inspiration from Jesus himself—and not from the oppressive establishment that claimed to speak in his name.

The second mass phenomenon in which Cox sees the Age of the Spirit at work is the flourishing New Age subculture: All those movements, practices, and products that offer an enticing combination of cosmic

optimism and eclectic spirituality. New Age experiences are not generally bound up with a stiff normative code; on the contrary, they tend to advocate for the personal experience of the individual at the expense of traditional dictates, communal frameworks, and the old religious establishment. From Cox's viewpoint, this is yet more proof that the age of doctrinaire darkness has come to an end; the future, he proclaims, "will be a future of faith."

Cox's book conforms well to contemporary intellectual vogue. Having spent years on the fringes of academic discourse, Christianity has in the past decade returned to center stage. Philosophers and theorists increasingly use concepts derived from Christian theology to analyze political and cultural phenomena that, just a short time ago, had seemingly nothing to do with religion at all. Thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, for example, find in Paul a source of inspiration for their radical views. Meanwhile, historians and anthropologists show a growing interest in Christianity's surprising resurgence in the southern hemisphere. Indeed, in recent times, Christianity has achieved tremendous success in South America, Africa, and South Asia—a trend that strengthens its status as the world's largest reli-

gion, with nearly two billion followers. During the past hundred years alone, the number of Christians in Africa has grown from 10 million to almost 400 million—almost half the population on that continent. Two-thirds of the members of the Catholic Church now live in the southern hemisphere, and the Anglican community in Nigeria alone numbers more than 25 million followers. In the not-too-distant future, it could conceivably eclipse its parent church in England. Brazil is already home to more Pentecostals than any other country. According to predictions, in 2025 Africa and South America will vie for the title of the Christian continent—though an awakening of Christianity in China could see Asia taking the lead.

As a clergyman and academic scholar, Cox is well aware of these developments, and writes about them at length. He guides us through a two-stage approach. First, he cites encouraging figures on the proliferation of Christian faith in the global south in order to present an optimistic thesis—seemingly factual, but in fact pointedly theological—regarding the future of Christianity in particular and the world in general. Then, to delineate the utopian horizon that awaits us, he turns to Christianity's beginnings, portraying them as an idyllic past from which we can—and

should—draw inspiration. His is a world-spanning theological drama that fires the imagination. It is unfortunate, then, that the facts do not support the impression Cox is trying to convey.

A salient example of the problem is Cox's attempt to paint southern-hemisphere Christianity in enlightened strokes. As Philip Jenkins's seminal 2002 book, *The Next Christianity: The Rise of Global Christianity*, demonstrates, the story is in fact very different. According to Jenkins, the new Christianity may be graced with incredible vitality, but is neither liberal nor pluralistic, and has no intention of forgoing doctrine in the name of free spirituality. Indeed, Jenkins shows that many of the Christians living in the southern hemisphere are far *more* conservative in their beliefs and standards of morality than the central churches of the global north. A clear illustration of this was the crisis that shook the Pentecostal Church in 2003, after the General Convention confirmed the ordination of Gene Robinson, an open homosexual, as a bishop. In the conservative vanguard opposing the move, American bishops stood side-by-side with clergymen from Singapore and Rwanda. And last October, at the Third Lausanne Congress in Cape Town, Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican

Church in North America took the opportunity, during his speech, to thank his colleagues in the southern hemisphere for helping his group combat the "aggressive liberalism" of the American Episcopal Church.

Nor is southern-hemisphere Christianity in any rush to supplant folklore and traditional rituals with a "purer spirituality." On the contrary, it tends to assimilate local beliefs and supernatural ceremonies with a distinctly pagan bent. In countries where it is thriving, Jenkins notes, miracle healing, prophetic dreams, and exorcisms are routine, along with the belief that evil is a tangible, active entity. In Korea, for example, Christian shamans are perceived as vessels for the Holy Spirit, and in Asia it is not uncommon to find small shrines honoring the spirit of ancestors in the homes of devout Pentecostals.

Clearly, these findings do not mesh with Cox's ambitious vision. His depiction of early Christianity as a spiritual fiddler's green is also factually flawed. For example, his claims regarding the tolerant character of Christianity in the pre-Constantine period are based on what can only be called a very selective reading of the historical record. Cox writes that the concept of heresy was unknown to early Christianity. But in doing so, he overlooks the fact that the Greek work *hairesis* already appears in a

critical context in the Epistles of Paul, and later, during the second century, in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Clement of Alexandria, all of whom severely condemned the Gnostic Christian sects.

In general, Cox's portrayal of early Christianity is based on the widespread—and wholly mistaken—parallel so often drawn between the intense religious activity of the Second Temple period and the spiritual awakening taking place today, both among Christians in the southern hemisphere and in New Age circles. However, as noted above, Christian movements now spreading in Africa, Asia, and South America are a far cry from the progressive, anti-authority ideal Cox extols; if there is any semblance whatsoever between them and early Christianity, it surely lies in the shared belief in sorcery and demons. The comparison between the spiritual culture of the New Age and the multitude of religious movements active in the Mediterranean at the beginnings of Christianity—from the Judean Desert sect to the Gnostics—is no more persuasive: While New Age offers a very personal form of spirituality—one that is experiential, optimistic in nature, monistic from a metaphysical standpoint, and largely exoteric and inclusive—the religious movements of the first centuries of the common era were characterized

by communal spirituality, a pessimistic, apocalyptic worldview, an exclusive, esoteric approach that exalted the chosen few over the masses, and a dualistic cosmic viewpoint that distinguished between metaphysical good and evil. It is hard to imagine worldviews more divergent than these.

In sum, Cox does not present a reliable historical picture of Christianity, in either its past or its present form. We would therefore do well to set aside scholarly pretense, and instead evaluate the book solely on its theological merits. In so doing, we find that Cox is in fact advancing an age-old perspective whose origins can be traced as far back as Paul, the spiritual father of Christianity: namely, the idea that religion develops as it lets go of laws and commandments.

As is well known, Paul was largely responsible for the universalization of the Christian faith. In particular, his theological renovations are credited with turning a small, sequestered cult into a worldwide religion. In typical Hellenistic spirit, Paul envisioned humanity united around a common essence. The message heralded by the Son of God, so he believed, was meant for all of mankind, regardless of the differences and hierarchies established by social conditions. The universal addressee of the gospel is man's spiritual

core, which in turn must become the focus of a living faith—that is, instead of the empty, external gestures the body carries out while performing the commandments. From the very start, then, Christianity sanctified the obligations of the heart, and not those of the limbs.

And indeed, since the first century of the Common Era, the Pauline ideal has continued to compel and stimulate Christianity (although its authorities were not always pleased with the outcome). Every generation has given rise to Christians who have claimed that the Church has been defiled; that it has become too institutionalized, too hierarchical, too ritualistic. Every generation has seen Christians exhorting spiritual renewal, and demanding that the promise of rarefied faith be realized.

Among these Christians was the medieval monk Joachim of Fiore, whose deep impact on religious thought has not been accorded the recognition it deserves. Joachim lent the Pauline view a historical-evolutionary aspect. He divided time into three periods: the Age of the Father, in which mankind obeyed the laws of God; the Age of the Son, signified by the appearance of the man-god crucified on earth; and the Age of the Spirit, in which humanity would come in direct contact with the Divine, without need for laws or the

mediation of the Church. The third era, according to Joachim, was supposed to begin in 1260. Fortunately for the visionary monk, he died a natural death before he was declared a heretic by the Holy See.

The imprint of Joachim of Fiore's ideas on *The Future of Faith* is easy to discern. Cox adopts not only the motif of the three eras, but also the Pauline-Joachimite view of history as a continual progression toward an ever "purer" spirituality. After its long confinement to the institution of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, Christianity finally throws off the shackles of structure and hierarchy and becomes truly universal. The outer limits of the inner religious experience are no more.

The beauty of this vision is undeniable. John Lennon asked us to imagine a world in which there is "no religion," but Cox goes one step further, claiming that, in practice, the *absence* of religion is a precondition for genuine religiosity. Now, there is no denying that placing the internal over the external, the experience over the ritual, is a sign of the times. Precisely this brand of spirituality is spreading like wildfire throughout the Western world, thanks to the tremendous popularity of New Age movements. Yet even in the New Age subculture, not to mention in Pentecostalism, one would be hard pressed

to find the sweeping, binary division between spirit and law about which Cox waxes so enthusiastic.

And if the story regarding these movements is complex, how much more so when it comes to Judaism. The small, exclusive religion that gave birth to Christianity shows an ongoing, uncompromising adherence to God's commandments. It insists that Torah and faith, law and spirit, are inseparable. Over the course of the generations the Jewish world, too, has sprouted its fair share of charismatic figures who extolled the virtues of unmediated faith. Yet the Pauline vision has been unable to take root

in this soil; Orthodox Judaism, in its various forms, defends the authority of halacha with a vengeance, and even the Reform movement, which flirted for a time with antinomian ideas, is in no rush to turn its back on the commandments altogether. Indeed, had Cox devoted his attention to contemporary developments in Jewish circles, he might have shown a very different view of "the future of faith."

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