

Three Christianities

By Brian D. McLaren

CHIRSTIANITY OF THE FUTURE will almost certainly be at least two things. I hope and pray that it will be a third as well. First, Christianity of the future will be people, congregations, and denominations doing exactly what they're doing now. Whether they're *piano-and-stained-glass chapels-in-the-country*, or *rock-and-roll-big-screen-megachurches-in-the-suburbs*, or *big-steeple-and-pipe-organ-cathedrals-in-the-city*, they'll keep doing what they've been doing because they're sincere traditionalists and that's what traditionalists do.

Sure, they'll make a concession here or there as times change, but I don't doubt for a minute that a hundred years from now, there will still be Christian communities doubling down on traditional doctrine, hierarchy, liturgy, polity, and style.

If they're more conservative traditionalists, we can expect them to continue keeping women "in their place" and LGBTQIA + people in the closet (or out the door). We can expect them to recite the same dogma, world without end, faithfully answering questions of the fourth or seventeenth centuries while remaining oblivious to the

pressing questions of today. We can expect them to proclaim the same evacuation gospel (aka a “sin-management gospel”) that seeks first and foremost to enter heaven after death rather than seeking first God’s reign and justice here and now on earth. We can expect them to remain centered on buildings and budgets, pulpits and organs (or bands and lighting), and committees and bylaws (or brands and target markets).

This traditionalist sector will be sure to keep the buildings open, even though fewer and fewer people come; to keep the liturgy going, even though fewer and fewer people have much idea why; and to keep their pastors employed (often, barely), even though the purpose of their employment will be less and less clear. Their work won’t be easy, but they will pour their hearts into it, sincerely, because “doing what we’ve always done” is all they’ve been taught to do.

“Doing what we’ve always done” will likely lead to continuing numerical decline by a few percentage points (or more) with each new generation, but I don’t doubt this traditionalist sector will last a long, long time, doing much good along the way. (Among many reasons for its longevity, this form of Christianity has so much wealth that it can simply liquidate assets to keep serving a dwindling clientele and sustaining a professional clergy for a long, long, long time.)

Second, along with a traditionalist sector, Christianity of the future will almost certainly contain a regressive, authoritarian wing: hyper-patriarchal, anti-immigrant, xenophobic, homophobic, Islamophobic, nationalist, white supremacist, and militarist. We see this nostalgic/regressive strain of Christianity growing right now in many places in the world.

Here in America, we see it in Catholics more devoted to the teachings of Steve Bannon, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity than Fr. Richard Rohr, Sr. Simone Campbell, or Sr. Joan Chittister (or even Pope Francis). Similarly, we see a majority of Evangelicals and other Protestants proud to join Jerry Falwell, John Hagee, Franklin Graham, and Robert Jeffress as fervent followers of Donald Trump, resurrecting what many have called the old “slaveholder religion” of the American South.

Meanwhile, in Russia and elsewhere, we see regressive Orthodox Christians striking deals with Vladimir Putin and other authoritarian strongmen, trading political protection and favors for a willingness to remain silent about political corruption and violations of human rights (including religious freedom) for ethnic and religious minorities.

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This kind of racialized, regressive Christianity (some call it Christo-fascism) has proven very useful to dictators and demagogues through the centuries, not to mention their corporate associates. For that reason, it will probably gain strength in the coming turbulent years, attracting the anxious who find comfort in authoritarian leadership, while driving many, especially the young, away from any kind of Christianity (or organized religion) for good.

Obviously, these two Christianities, traditionalist and regressive, already overlap and, in some places, they will probably merge in the not-too-distant future. The open question is to what degree they will “ruin the brand” of Christianity before they are either reformed or destroy themselves (and perhaps civilization along with them).

That’s why more and more of us are hoping, praying, and dedicating ourselves to a third form of Christianity. This new kind of Christianity can only emerge as a *trans-denominational movement of contemplative spiritual activism.*

Although the signs of its emergence are already visible in many places, we should remember that movements are fragile in their early stages, which means that this fledgling movement may be suppressed, set back, or squashed for years, decades, or longer by traditional and regressive sectors of the Christian community that see it as a threat. It also may make fatal errors that cause it to self-sabotage, if not self-destruct. Either way, a major collapse of one or both of the first two forms of Christianity may need to happen before the third comes into full fruition. (I hope that will not be necessary.)

This third possible Christian future has seized my imagination for decades now, and I’ve written thousands of pages about it. I’d like to mention just three characteristics of it that strike me as deeply important.

First, this emerging or emergence Christianity (as Fr. Richard Rohr and I have called it, along with Phyllis Tickle and many others)

will be *decentralized and diverse* rather than centralized and uniform. In other words, it will have the shape of a movement rather than an institution. It will be drawn together, not by external uniformity of doctrine, hierarchy, polity, liturgy, or style, but by internal unity of way of life, mission, practices, and vision for the common good.

In his article “Powering Down,” Fr. Richard makes a bold claim in this regard: On a small planet with an exploding human population, human institutions must go through a radical shift in paradigm. Instead of hoarding and centralizing resources like expertise, education, mentoring, and authority, we need to multiply them and democratize them.

This, of course, was Jesus’ original approach. He never announced to his disciples: “Hey folks, we’re going to start a new, centralized, institutional religion and name it after me.” Instead, he played the role of a nonviolent leader and launched his movement with the classic words of movement, “Follow me” (see Matthew 4:19, for example). He used his power to empower others. He did great things to inspire his followers to do even greater things. Rather than demand uniformity, he reminded his disciples that he had “sheep of other folds” (John 10:16) and that “whoever is not against us is for us” (Luke 9:50). He recruited diverse disciples who learned—by heart—his core vision and way of life. Then he sent these disciples out as apostles to teach and multiply his vision and way of life among “all the nations” (Matthew 28:19).

As he repeatedly explained, the dangerous, turbulent, uncertain times, together with the failure of existing institutions, made this strategy essential: “The time is ripe,” he said (Luke 10:2, slightly paraphrased), “and we need more laborers.” (This pattern of multiplying leader/teacher/practitioners is exactly the pattern we find, not only with Jesus in the Gospels, but also with Paul throughout the New Testament, in places like 2 Timothy 2:2 and 1 Corinthians 11:1.)

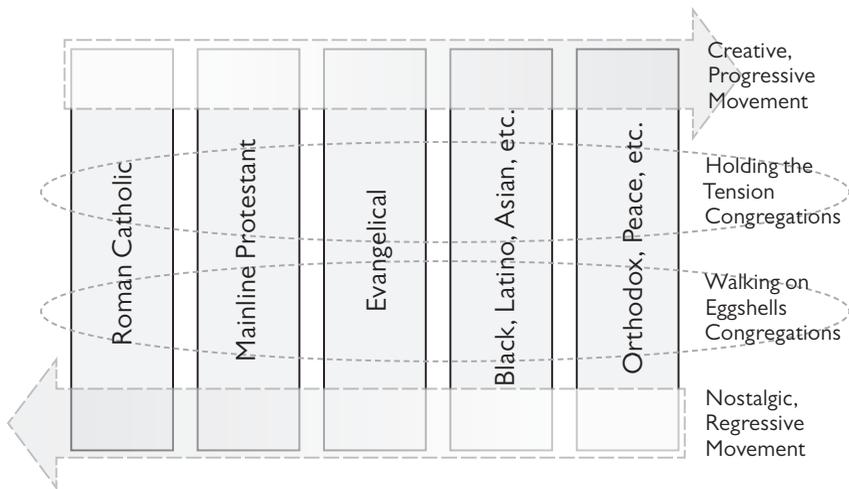
As in Jesus’ day, so in ours. Each day, climate change and other ecological crises converge with an obscenely wide and fast-growing gap between the elite classes and the struggling masses. With each day, a global weapons industry converges with militarist national economies around the world to produce more and more weapons with more and more kill-power. In light of this death-dealing convergence, we need an alternative life-giving convergence capable of rapid adaptation and evolution, a vital new kind of Christianity that spreads a message of good news for the planet, for the poor, and for those who long for peace.

That’s why, in dangerous times like these, we can’t afford to produce nice, quiet, compliant Christians on the one hand, or angry, oppositional, fear-driven reactionaries on the other. Instead, we have to produce generations of dedicated, courageous, and creative contemplative activists who will join God to bring radical healing and change to this damaged world, before it’s too late.

We need this movement—not someday, maybe, but right now, definitely.

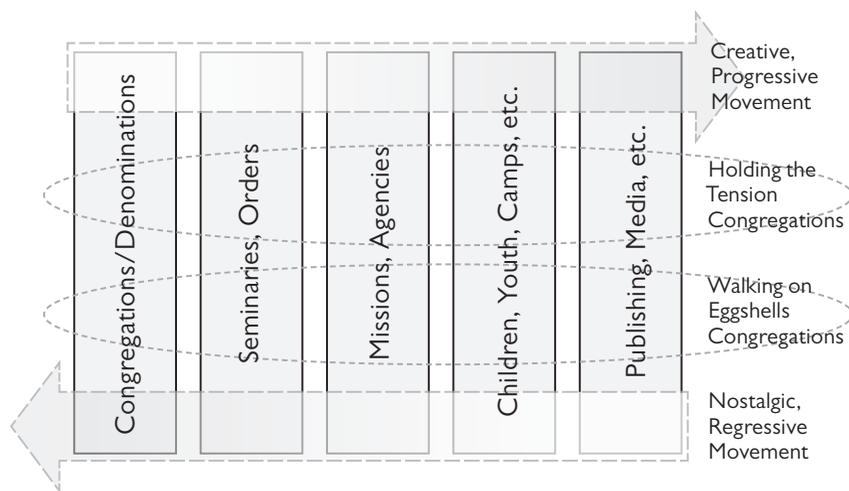
That brings us to the second characteristic I’d like to name: The diverse and decentralized movement we need will be *radically collaborative*, working with, across, and, when necessary, outside of and in spite of existing institutions to seek the common good. It will not be *anti-institutional* because institutions are necessary for human survival, but neither will it be *institutional*, in the sense that it is preoccupied with its own survival or bringing benefits only to its members. Rather, it will be *trans-institutional*, working across institutions, both religious and non-religious, seeking the common good of those inside and outside the movement and the institutions it involves.

If we picture our existing denominational and institutional structures as a set of vertical silos, we could picture this movement mobilizing and aligning across the forward-leaning wing of all of the silos—not eradicating them, not competing with them, but, instead, coexisting with them and using their support wherever possible for mutual advantage (and, when necessary, ignoring their pretensions of sovereignty).



The fact is, this creative and progressive movement for a new kind of Christianity provides an alternative to three other stances present across institutional silos: (1) the well-organized and sometimes militant nostalgic/regressive movement of the religious right, (2) the “walking on eggshells” privatized religion that fears offending major donors and so always plays it safe, saying and doing little to nothing deemed controversial, and (3) the “holding the tension” churches that are caught in the middle, trying to find a way forward:

We could adapt the diagram slightly to acknowledge the reality and importance of other institutions within the Christian community, including religious orders, seminaries, colleges, organizations for children and youth, publishing, media, and other para-church ministries.



Across the religious landscape, the two centrist groupings comprise the traditionalist churches that are walking on eggshells and holding the tension created by the progressive and regressive wings moving in opposite directions. I doubt that the future will get easier for them, as two very different visions for the future of Christianity play out. The ruptures we see in some denominations represent in large part an inability or refusal for traditionalists to coexist with two such different movements. Some are pulled forward, others back. In this way, the word *division* accurately represents two divergent visions of what a Christian community is and should be.

The third and most important aspect of this third form of Christianity in the future is simple, obvious, and yet radical: it is about love, as Jesus taught and embodied.

Not long ago, someone quoted a statement that went something like this: “Our founder was focused on love but we have, instead, been focused on our founder. When will we realize that the best way to honor our founder is not to be about him, but, rather, to be about what he was about?” The statement reflects Jesus’ own concern about those who say, “Lord! Lord!” but don’t do what he taught (Matthew 7:21).

There’s no question what Jesus was about. He didn’t say, “By this will all people know you are my disciples: by your doctrinal purity.” Nor did he say, “This is the first and greatest commandment: to carry out the liturgy faithfully every Sunday.” Nor did he say, “This is my new commandment, that you sing lots of songs and say ‘Praise Jesus! a lot!’” Nor do we find Paul writing, “Now, these three things remain: liturgy, polity, and inerrancy (papal or biblical), and the greatest of these is inerrancy.”

No. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Jesus was about love first and foremost, in word and deed. Jesus began with love for God, but inseparably linked that love with love for neighbor, with the understanding that neighbor includes the other, the outsider, the outcast, the last, the least, the lost, the disgraced, the dispossessed, and the enemy. This love for neighbor was, in turn, inextricably related to an appropriate love for self. In fact, to love neighbor as oneself leads to the realization that oneself and one’s neighbor are actually distinct yet inseparable realities. In today’s world, we must add that, for Jesus, God’s love extends to the wildflower, the meadow grass, the sparrow,

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and the raven. He saw all of God's creatures as part of one heavenly realm, as did dear St. Francis, and as do more and more of us.

When I think of this third kind of Christianity of the future, then, I think of a movement of revolutionary love. I see it as distinctively Christian, but not in any exclusive way, because if we truly see love as Jesus' point and passion, then the depth of our devotion to Christ will always lead us to love our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Indigenous, nonreligious, agnostic, atheist, and other neighbors *as ourselves*.

In fact, the robust pneumatology of this new kind of Christianity will send us into the world, expecting to see the Spirit of love at work everywhere: not just in our religion, but in other religions; and not just in religion in general, but in the arts, in business, in education, in agriculture, in government, in philosophy, in sport, in science, in homemaking, in family, and in every other dimension of human life. (In fact, we could easily put these labels on the silos in the diagrams above.)

Our job will be to decisively and continually surrender our lives as living sacrifices, to offer ourselves to be ongoing embodiments of the cosmic Christ, so we can play the little musical instrument of our bodies for our little time on the stage in this ever-expanding cosmic symphony of love.

In this desirable future, every willing Christian congregation makes every competing interest subsidiary to love, which is the fruit of all contemplation and the goal of all action. If we embody this third form of Christianity, if we make real this alternative Franciscan orthodoxy, if we become the seeds of a movement of contemplative activism in the Spirit of Christ, I can imagine hundreds of thousands of congregations, whether comprised of two or three, or two or three thousand, each a locally and globally engaged school of love, teaching future generations to discover, practice, and live in love: love for our neighbor, love for ourselves, love for all creatures and all creation—all comprising love for God, who is all in all in all. ♦