Christianity in the 21st Century

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A new millennium is drawing near. Within a few short years Christians will celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of a Jewish baby in an obscure province of the Roman Empire. That empire is long since gone, but those who claim allegiance to the one who was born in that stable now number over two billion.

What shape will Christianity assume in the next millennium? No one can say for sure, for in no other sphere is the unexpected more the norm than in matters of the Spirit. Still, I would like to discuss in this Tanner-McMurrin Lecture four major impulses already underway that could well re-shape the future of Christianity. One is the worldwide emergence of a form of Christian life based on a direct experience of the Holy Spirit, often accompanied by such "gifts of the Spirit" as healing and what adherents claim is speaking or praying in unknown tongues. This "Pentecostal" movement is named for the account in the second chapter of Acts of the Apostles of the descent of the Holy Spirit that took place on the Jewish feast of Pentecost shortly after Jesus' resurrection. The movement began in a black mission church in Los Angeles in 1906, springing from both black and poor white circles of Christians. It spread quickly among the less privileged strata of the society, leaped to other countries, and is now the fastest growing movement in Christianity. So quickly are Pentecostal churches multiplying that by the third decade of the next millennium their numbers could well equal those of all Protestants put together.

The second trend is the appearance of various "theologies of liberation" all over the Christian world, but especially among the more marginalized population. Cutting across protestant, catholic and Pentecostal lines, liberation theology emphasizes the presence of the living Christ today among the poor and the powerless, and insists that God is not neutral, but takes the side of the oppressed in their struggles for freedom, dignity and a just share of the necessities of life. Beginning in Latin America in the 1960's, liberation theology soon spread to South Africa, Korea, and the Philippines—anywhere Christians find themselves victimized by unjust social structures, economic oppression, or racial prejudice.

The third major current enlivening Christianity at the close of the second millennium is the emergence of women into unprecedented roles in church leadership, theology, and Christian life in general. Of course women have always played a prominent role in Christian history, beginning with the women who discovered the empty tomb and become the first to proclaim the news of Christ's resurrection. But women have more often than not been barred from theological study, ordination and other expressions of leadership. Today that is changing very rapidly in many churches.

The fourth major trend is the deepening sense of dialogue and reciprocity that is developing—at least in some places—between Christians and members of the other major religious groups in
the world. What are the possible implications of these currents for the future of Christianity?

1. The Pentecostal Explosion

   In a run-down section of Los Angeles in the spring of 1906 a self-educated African American pastor named William Joseph Seymour assumed the leadership of a tiny mission congregation made up mainly of domestic workers, laborer, and custodians. Seymour, influenced by the Holiness Movement in the American South and by the rhythms of African spirituality, taught his people that a new descent of the Holy Spirit was about to take place, one that would restore the lost unity of the church, reclaim the first century vitality and purge it of the curse of racial division. It was in this humble setting, in a rented building on Azusa Street that had once been used as a stable, that the Pentecostal movement was born. Actually there had been instances of ecstatic speech and healing throughout Christian history and before, so Seymour's experience was not unique. But the "Azusa Street revival" marks the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement, which suddenly began to grow and spread until it reached around the world. Seymour led a series of historic Pentecostal meetings and by the outbreak of World War I in 1914 Pentecostalism had reached dozens of countries. After World War II it had another growth spurt in Latin America and Asia. It is growing today in China. It has been gaining members ever since.

   The symbolism of the birth and early history of Pentecostalism is striking. It sprang to life not in one of the great centers of learning but among poor and emarginated people. Its most famous early leader, William Seymour, was described by a contemporary as "...a colored man, very plain, spiritual and humble.... He was blind in one eye."

   Although it eventually reached out to include middle-class people as well, Pentecostalism traces its infancy to a slum and a one-eyed black man, and has continued to appeal disproportionately to women, minorities and disabled people ever since. Very often Pentecostal lists were spurned and taunted by people of the more established churches as "holy rollers" (because of their emotionally explicit and sometimes ecstatic forms of worship.) But their movement persisted and grew, and has sometimes been characterized as a religious revolution comparable in importance with the original Church of the apostles or with the Protestant Reformation. In recent years the growth of Pentecostalism has been especially dramatic in the "Third World", with some observers predicting that whole countries in Latin America could have Pentecostal majorities by 2020 A.D.

   What are we to make of this startling explosion? And how are we to judge the claims of at least some Pentecostals that God is once more providing the capacity to heal sickness and to speak in other tongues?

   As for the healing, there can be little doubt that although some of those who claim to be cured soon relapse to their previous state, much of it is also real and lasting. This has been carefully documented by medical specialists. Pentecostalism is not only in making its claim—increasingly accepted by many doctors—that there is a wide variety of different forms of healing that go beyond the parameters of modern scientific medicine. Historically most religions have linked faith with healing. In Christianity there have always been shrines such as those at St. Anne in Quebec and Lourdes in France where people travel to pray for healing. Christian Scientists have always insisted that healing is principally a spiritual rather than a merely physical
matter. Virtually all Christians believe it is efficacious to pray for the sick. Pentecostals are not alone, and now that such previously suspect modes of healing as acupuncture and meditation are more widely accepted, Pentecostal healing should perhaps be seen as merely a somewhat more dramatic variant of this more general phenomenon.

The claim to be speaking in what are actually languages the individual does not know is harder to understand, and indeed today many Pentecostals do not claim to be doing so. They teach rather that God's Spirit enables us to leave behind the constraints of ordinary speech (and thus of conventional discourse) and to express our love for God and each other in a more direct and unencumbered way. Thus, Pentecostals may be practicing at a popular level what others do when they participate in so-called "primal scream therapy" or invent neologisms (new words) as James Joyce did in his novels. All these are ways to protest the limits of existing speech patterns. In any case, "speaking in tongues" (or "glossolalia" as it is called by outsiders) obviously provides some people with a joyous and life-enhancing mode of communication that seems to free them from the rigidity of more formal and linguistically conventional modes of worship.

Some critics have contended that Pentecostalism leads to a kind of social irresponsibility, directing people's religious energy toward individual transport and other-worldliness rather than toward seeking solutions to the actual problems of the world. The fact is, however, that all religions contain a mixture of both this worldly and otherworldly elements, and of mystical and rational dimensions. Pentecostalism is no exception. Further, in recent years Pentecostals have become increasingly concerned with the social outreach of faith. They have done extraordinary work in combating drugs and corruption, and have even begun in some places (Latin America and South Africa) to construct their own types of liberation theology. This latter development should really not come as a complete surprise since both Pentecostalism and liberation theology function as correctives against the "over-spiritualization" of Christianity. Both stress that the material, whether in bodily health or in political and economic well-being, is also a channel of God's grace.

There is a final observation to be made about Pentecostalism as a prominent trend within Christianity in the third millennium. Because it focuses on the Spirit, it opens up more possibilities of interaction with other religions than its founding fathers and mothers might have anticipated. Pentecostal practices have begun to appear in other Protestant churches and even in the Roman Catholic church. This so-called "charismatic movement" (meaning "gifts of the Spirit") has become a significant stream in these churches. Most Christians have claimed for years to believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the full potential of this third person of the Trinity has never been developed or even imagined. The Spirit is notoriously resistant to channeling and control, and the possible links of this Holy Spirit with the Divine Spirit present in other faiths has never been fully probed. Observers of Third World Pentecostalism, especially among indigenous peoples such as tribal groups in South America, note that its open style of praise allows indigenous peoples to reclaim elements of their pre-Christian heritage that were excluded by more traditional Catholic and Protestant modes of worship. Other scholars believe Pentecostalism can be understood as the Christian wing of a more comprehensive worldwide change in religion, one that signals a move toward more emotional, imaginative, and pragmatic (immediately useful) forms of spirituality. If this is true, Pentecostalism, much to the surprise of those who mistakenly view it as a sub-group within biblical fundamentalism, could be in the vanguard of Christianity's new and reciprocal ways of interacting with other faiths. Whatever
happens, this vigorous movement of the Spirit, coming like Jesus himself from a scorned quarter and a despised people, will surely be one of the principal actors in 21st century Christianity.

2. Liberation Theologies

For many centuries Christian churches have existed in Ethiopia, in some parts of Asia, and, since the European invasion of the 16th century, in Latin America as well. But as the 20th century neared its end a seismic shift in the global composition of Christianity took place. Now the majority of Christians no longer lived within the old borders of European "Christendom" and its North American extension but in the post-colonial "Third World" of the southern hemisphere. As this massive change occurred it was to be expected that new Christian theologies would emerge from these areas that had for so long been viewed as peripheral by "northern" Christians. The most significant of these new theologies by far is called the "theology of liberation".

Liberation theology first appeared in the late 1960's in Latin America. Although precursors had existed before, it was given its name in a book called *The Theology of Liberation* written by a Peruvian Catholic priest named Gustavo Gutierrez in 1970. During the next three decades this vital theology (or theologies since there are many variants) radiated into all parts of the world, stimulating comparable currents in other religions such as Judaism and Buddhism. What then are the main characteristics of the liberation theologies?

In 1962 Pope John XXIII called a meeting of all the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church to think together about how that church would face the future and to ask what changes were needed in the church. The pope told the bishops his own prayer was that the Catholic Church could be, in a special way, "the church of the poor". When the Roman Catholic bishops of Latin America met in 1968 in Medellin, Colombia to consider what this "Second Vatican Council" would mean for the hungry and downtrodden people of their own continent they agreed on one basic point: their church would have to forego the role of mere arbiter between the oppressed and the oppressors. It would now place itself on the side of the desperate, the wounded, and the emarginated. This decision soon came to be known as the "preferential option for the poor", a phrase which became the new theology's watchword as Christians tried to understand Christ's message from the perspective of the most disprivileged people in the society.

It was a momentous change, not in the content of Christian teaching but in both the method applied to the interpretation of the Bible and in the kinds of people who did the interpreting. For centuries the power to interpret had rested almost exclusively in the hands of certain privileged elites of the educated strata, usually men. Now, however, it was recognized that poor people, persecuted racial minorities, women, and other dispossessed persons could correct the distortion this elite interpretive minority had inevitably perpetuated. The liberation theologies arose from voices that had been silenced or ignored for centuries. Although they differed with each other from region to region, these theologies all had a single basic element in common. They all read the Bible as an assurance that the same God who had delivered the Israelites form their slavery in Egypt still sides with the weak and the disinherit today. And they reasoned that if Jesus Christ, who was himself part of the tyrannized people, had demonstrated a consistent "preferential option" for the impoverished crowds, despised lepers, subjugated women and religious outcasts of his day, then he must have that same position today. Taken together, these insights inspired countless people living in what appeared to be hopeless
conditions to cast off despair and claim the liberating promise of God's Word. Within a few decades the theology of liberation had become the most energetic, vital—, and controversial— of any in contemporary Christianity.

The key for understanding liberation theologies is to see them as holistic. They teach a Christianity that is not restricted to the interior or the personal but that encompasses society as well as the individual, this life as well as the next, and the material as well as the spiritual. Liberation theologies do not address themselves mainly to nonbelievers of their cultures (as almost all modern and many earlier theologies did), but to those Gutierrez refers to as the "non-persons", the people whom the prevailing prejudices in a society denigrate as somehow less than fully human.

It is important to note that although trained theologians write about and interpret liberation theologies, they did not invent them out of whole cloth. In Latin America and in the rest of the post-colonial world these theologies grew in part out of small, grass roots communities of faith often called "Christian Base communities". These "CEB's" (so-named for the Portuguese "communidades eclesiales de base" since they first appeared in Brazil) bring together handfuls of people from the lower social strata to sing, pray, study the Bible, share daily experiences and devise ways to tackle the pervasive injustice that warps their lives. Many CEB's were first organized by trained church leaders, but most are now led by lay people, a significant proportion by women. The members of CEB's do not think of themselves as "leaving the church" but as having found a new way "to be the church". These CEB’s provided the soil from which liberation theologies, seeded by biblical scholarship and trained leaders grow to fruition.

As might be expected, neither the CEB's nor the liberation theologies have escaped opposition, even persecution. Both within the churches and among the ruling groups of the regions in which they have sprung up, they have often been criticized and attacked for posing a threat to the ecclesial and societal powers-that-be. Sometimes this opposition to liberation theology has turned violent. Archbishop Oscar Romero and most of the priests, sisters, and lay church leaders who have been killed in Central America in recent years were advocates of liberation theology and base communities.

What is the future of base communities and liberation theology? Liberation theology has already spread to Asia and Africa and has influenced movements in the United States aimed toward the liberation of those who also have been persecuted for reasons of race, gender, or sexual preference. Still, as the center of gravity in Christianity shifts from the largely more prosperous "North" to the poorer and more populous "South" of the globe, the process one Brazilian calls the "de-northification of theology" will inevitably continue. This radical rethinking of Christianity from the perspective of the former "outsiders and down-siders" will inevitably produces more liberation theologies. However, even as they multiply, these theologies are changing. Once sometimes exhilarated by the hope for a relatively rapid change in their condition, the people in the CEB's are now viewing the process of liberation as a much larger and longer one. In many places they are also digging into their local cultures and customs more seriously in an effort to implant the Gospel more firmly. Still other CEB's have begun to adopt some of the more vibrant and emotionally expressive modes of worship introduced by Pentecostals. Indeed if, in the next century—as some observers foresee—a certain creative synthesis of liberation theology and Pentecostal spirituality emerges as the dominant form of Christianity, it will constitute a powerful new vehicle for the message of Jesus in the third
millennium after his birth.

3. The New Role of Women

On February 11, 1989 in a huge auditorium in Boston, an event of historic importance took place. The Reverend Barbara Harris, an Episcopal priest, was consecrated a bishop of her church in the diocese of Massachusetts. Thousands of people gathered for the colorful and festive event, to which three choirs, a long winding procession, and multi-colored, deep-dyed liturgical vestments lent an air of grandeur and solemnity. During the ceremony, at the moment when she was invested with the cope and mitre, ancient symbols of the bishop's office, a gasp seemed to rise from the congregation. The reason was not hard to fathom, for there before the eyes of those in attendance now stood a person who had broken a century’s long taboo. The Episcopal (Anglican) church represents one of the "catholic" traditions. It puts considerable emphasis on the long unbroken line of continuity, the "apostolic succession" which—it is believed—links its current bishops to Christ's own disciples. But not in all these 20 centuries nor among these thousands of bishops, had a woman stood before the altar and taken vows to be a bishop and faithful shepherd of God's people.

It was a major turning point in Christian history. Women had held leadership posts before, and some non-catholic denominations had been ordaining them as ministers for many years. The Episcopal Church itself had begun ordaining women priests fifteen years earlier. In Africa, where new Christian movements are growing rapidly in the form of "Independent" churches, women often assume significant roles as healers and prophets, and in thousands of storefront and small unaffiliated congregations women have preached and led for many years." Still, this was the first woman to become a bishop, a successor to the apostles, in a church that claimed to be catholic.

As with most symbolic events the repercussions of this consecration went far beyond its immediate meaning. It brought into public awareness a dramatic change that was occurring throughout most of Christianity: women were beginning to exercise all the gifts of the Spirit, not just the ones men thought appropriate, and they were claiming an equal place in an institution that had kept them as second-class Christians for centuries. Even in the Roman Catholic church, which does not yet permit them to be ordained, women were teaching and writing theology, serving as chaplains, leading Christian base communities and exercising many other leadership roles.

But the consecration of Bishop Harris also symbolized more than that. Just as in the various liberation theologies, those who had once been excluded from the opportunity to shape and interpret Christianity were now beginning to do so, women were also subtly changing the very both men, and women understand the reality of God. In the liturgical traditions of Christianity the priest who celebrates communion to some extent symbolizes God. Indeed in the document in which he rejected the possibility that women could be ordained as priests in the Roman Catholic church, Pope John Paul II declared that a priest must bear a "natural resemblance" to Jesus Christ. But some Christians read this resemblance another way. If God transcends sex and gender differences, then there was no need for priests always to be male. Indeed an all male priesthood, they contended, falsified the reality of the divine. Now, as women priests and a woman bishop began serving at the altar it began to become clear to
thousands of worshipers that their own mental image of God had been too restricted, that God encompasses qualities we have usually associated with both man and woman. Therefore having both men and women priests seemed a more, not less, adequate symbolization of God.

As women began serving in larger numbers as priests and ministers, an analogous evolution was underway in the various fields of Christian theological scholarship. In biblical studies, ethics, theology, and other branches of the discipline women were beginning to overturn centuries of male domination and to raise sharp questions about distortions and misreading that monopoly had perpetrated. Women scholars pointed out that many references in both the Old and the New Testament permit us to think of God as both a mother and a father. This means that the effort in many churches to develop "inclusive language" prayers and hymns that refer to God as both masculine and feminine has a solidly biblical basis. Women studying the early Christian period have shown that some of the so-called "Gnostic" gospels that were excluded from the New Testament by a male hierarchy contain more references to women among Jesus' followers, especially to Mary Magdalene, and also picture God as having more of the qualities that are sometimes thought of as feminine. When they turn to later Christian history women scholars find that men have often downplayed the contributions of women who headed convents, penned mystical treatises, organized dissenting Christian movements and in many other ways shared with men in the shaping of that history.

The feminist revolution in contemporary Christian life has left little unchanged or unchallenged. The prayers we pray, the hymns we sing, the physical appearance of those who lead us in worship, the insights, and imagination of those who write our theological books are all changing. For some people, both men and women, the change has happened too quickly. It has jarred long-standing patterns and upset established sensibilities. For others, again both men and women, the changes are long overdue, and have opened completely new vistas in our understanding of who God is and what Jesus intends us to do and to be.

Will Christianity ever shed its patriarchal shell and rid itself of the predominantly masculine categories that have narrowed and restricted it in the past? If the unanticipated changes of the past two decades are any indication, a Christianity cleansed of sexist distortion may not be as far away as it once seemed.

4. Christians and People of Other Faiths

Christians have always lived in the presence of people of other religious faiths. Jesus himself was a religious Jew and continued to practice his own religion throughout his life, albeit giving it his own distinctive stamp and interpretation. The earliest Christians lived as a minority in a predominantly Jewish culture. Later Christianity became one of the many "new religions" in the declining years of the Roman Empire. During the medieval period when Christianity was centered mainly—but not exclusively—in Europe, many Christians were aware that some of their neighbors such as Jews, or (in some regions) Muslims did not share their faith. Indeed for centuries Christians, Jews and Muslims lived together on the Iberian peninsula sometimes harmoniously, sometimes fighting, but always borrowing architectural features and spiritual practices from each other. St. John of the Cross, for example, the Spanish Catholic mystic, may well have derived some of his images of the "dark night of the soul" from Muslim Sufi sources. But except for a rare Marco Polo, Europeans know virtually nothing about the Asian religions
such as Hinduism and Buddhism. With the coming of the Renaissance and the period of European explorations, all that changed. Christians now became aware for the first time that there were whole nations of peoples who were neither Christians nor Jews nor Muslims. What were they to make of the Buddhists they met in Southeast Asia, the Hindus in India and the Mayans and Aztecs of South America? How did the people who did not share faith in Jesus Christ and had neither the Old Testament nor the Koran fit into the overall providence of God?

There has never been a clear consensus about the answer to this question. Some Christians have insisted that the Gospel mandate requires that every human being be confronted with the message of Christ and that ideally every person in the entire world should become a Christian. A second and much larger group has accepted the plurality of religions as part of reality if not part of God's plan, and has not attempted to incorporate people of other religious traditions within the church. A third position the one that is probably held by most people—falls somewhere in between. It suggests that on the one hand God's love and mercy shown through Jesus Christ belongs to everyone in the world without exception and that the Gospel message of God's reconciliation is not just for Westerners or for people born and raised in Christian cultures. On the other hand, people who hold this position also affirm that God can also be present in the other religious traditions, and that Christians have a responsibility not only to respect people of other faiths, but also to learn from them, and to give thanks together with them that all people are created by a single God.

As Christianity neared the completion of 2000 years of history one of the most important changes going on within the church was in Christian attitudes toward men and women of other religious faiths. In many local communities interfaith councils and meetings for dialogue among adherents of varying religious traditions were organized. At the national level in the United States, Christians and Jews, Muslims and Hindus, and people representing other religious persuasions were meeting together to try to understand each other better and to minimize the danger of prejudice and intolerance. At the global level the World Council of Churches, which represents mainly Protestant and Orthodox Christian bodies, had spawned an ambitious program in interfaith dialogue. The Vatican had established official organs to encourage conversation between Roman Catholics and people of non-Christian faiths. There was room for genuine hope that in some areas at least religious distrust and animosity might be waning.

But there was another side to the picture as well. Not only in Christianity but also in some other religions a so-called "fundamentalist" wing characterized by vehement opposition to such interfaith dialogue had sprung up. This anti-dialogical tendency was growing stronger not only in some Christian groups but also among some Muslims, Hindus, and Jews. The result of these two antagonistic currents was somewhat paradoxical. It seemed that within each religious tradition there was at the same time more openness to fruitful interaction with those of other faiths and at the same time a growing recalcitrance and opposition to such conversation. Sometimes the tensions between the dialogical and the anti-dialogical wings within Christianity became more severe than any tensions between Christianity and its sister faiths.

As Christians encounter people from other religions they have learned to begin to differentiate among the sister faiths. For Christians, for example, there will always be a special tie with Judaism that makes the Jewish-Christian relationship different from the interaction of Christians with any of the other faiths. Christianity was born in the milieu of Judaism. Jesus and
the disciples were Jews. Christians accept the entire Jewish Scripture as the Old Testament and therefore, as an integral part of their Bible. It is a fundamental conviction among Christians that the same God who created the world, who delivered the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, sent the prophets and gave human beings the Ten Commandments has continued to be present in Jesus Christ—extending and widening the divine initiative so that those who previously had been excluded—namely, the Gentiles—could now become a part of the covenant people. At the same time, it is also recognized by an increasing number of Christians that God’s original covenant with the Jewish people has never been abrogated but remains in full effect. It is, as St. Paul says in Romans 11:29 “irrevocable”.

Indeed a new respect for post-biblical Judaism that has developed among Christians in recent decades. In part, it is a result of the painful realization, on the part of at least some Christians, that centuries of Christian anti-Judaism may have contributed to an atmosphere that made Auschwitz and the Jewish Holocaust possible. For this reason, it seemed increasingly clear to many Christians in the twentieth century that it was wrong for Christians to expect Jews to accept Christianity. Rather, learning how to live together as two children of the same mother seemed a more fitting form of relationship.

On the other hand, the relationship of Christianity to Islam is perhaps the most vexing and problematical of all the interreligious relations. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that Islam began 600 years after the birth of Christianity, and incorporated into its teachings much that Christians had already taught. Islam honors the Old Testament prophets and Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, in much Islamic literature and poetry Jesus is celebrated and praised. Christians, on the other hand, have generally held a very negative attitude toward Mohammed. There is a famous passage in Dante’s Inferno in which this prophet and founder of Islam is pictured suffering in one of the lower circles of hell. The relationship between Christianity and Islam was further damaged by the Muslim expansion into southern and eastern Europe and by the Christian attempt to wrench parts of the Middle East out of Muslim control during the crusades. The wounds and the animosity of these painful collisions remain in the collective memories of both people, but they are especially strong among Muslims who have now smarted for a century under the humiliation of Western occupation and colonial control.

Still, there are signs of hope recently that after centuries of unmitigated suspicion, a genuine Christian-Muslim dialogue has begun. The Koran, the holy book of Islam, teaches that Christians and Jews are "people of the book" and therefore have a special relation to Muslims. Some Christians have begun to speak of the "three Abrahamic faiths", meaning Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all of which trace their origins back to the patriarch, Abraham. The Diaspora of Muslim peoples in the Western world has enhanced the opportunity for interaction between Muslims and people of other faith including Christians. At the same time, the rise of both Christian and Muslim fundamentalism has dampened the appetite for such conversation. Still, the situation continues to appear more hopeful and many observers think that a settlement of the antagonism between the state of Israel and its Arab neighbors might well lay the groundwork for more fruitful relations between these three faiths in the future. Others note that better relations between these three faiths might contribute to such a settlement.

What will be the significance of Christianity’s "special relationship" to Judaism for its interaction with the other, historically more distinct faiths, like Buddhism and Hinduism? There
are some who believe that because of the insistent monotheism Christians share with Jews, the special link could make that larger dialogue more difficult. However, the opposite is probably more likely. As Christians begin to recognize that God made a special covenant with the Jews at Sinai and that the same God also revealed himself in Jesus Christ without annulling the earlier bond, it seems consistent to believe this same God could also reveal himself to Buddhists, Hindus and others. What seem required of Christians are a measure of humility and a sharp awareness of the magnitude and mystery of God. In the 12th chapter of his Epistle to the Romans St. Paul quotes the ancient Jewish prophet Isaiah's words,

For who has known the mind of the
    Lord, or who has been his counselor?

Then St. Paul comments himself in a kind of exclamation about God's power and reach:

  0 the depth of the riches and
  wisdom and knowledge of God! How
  unsearchable are his judgments and
  how inscrutable his ways!

Thus St. Paul by drawing on the genius of Judaism, not ignoring or minimizing it, and by underlining the vast wisdom of God, challenges those Christians who insist with considerable pretentiousness and against the evidence—that God could not or would not also reveal himself among Buddhists and Muslims. He exposes the real danger of second-guessing God, of Christians claiming to decide what God can and cannot do. Recognizing that the biblical God could reveal himself elsewhere does not, however, solve all the questions. What remains is the difficult issue of how Christians integrate their faith in the Risen Christ with the facets of God's "unsearchable and inscrutable" reality that are expressed in other religious traditions. But this is a task that—given a humble recognition of the infinite scope of God's mercy—can and should be undertaken with joy and confidence. In fact it is already well underway. Christians have been exploring the intriguing similarities and differences between the central Buddhist notion of divine "emptiness" and the Christian sense of God's self-emptying. Catholic priests are practicing Zen meditation. At the same time other Christians are trying to grasp the inner meaning of what at first appear to be strange Hindu devotional practices by patiently listening, watching, and entering into them in whatever way they can. Some Christians claim that in these rites they discover hints of the feminine energy of the divine and of the spiritual significance of the erotic that they had not found as clearly in biblical faith. The same "dialogue" is unfolding with followers of Shinto, with Sikhs, with people who practice local Spirit-centered religions (such as Native Americans) and with many others. Most Christians who have participated in such dialogues, and have shared prayer and made efforts at mutual understanding testify that instead of weakening their Christian faith these ventures have matured it. Some say that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the traditional Christian trinity provides a secure Christian basis for expecting to find God in religious practices other than our own. For as Jesus himself said, "the Spirit blows where it will..." and as mere human beings we
do not have the wisdom to make judgments on "whence it comes or whither it goes". Religions, including Christianity, grow and change through the centuries. Those that do not grow wither and die. Religions also live within world history; they do not dwell in a realm set apart. In our time jet travel, the Internet, migration, and high mobility are shrinking the globe daily. We are all neighbors, if not always-good ones.

The rise of the Pentecostal movement, the appearance of liberation theologies, the emergence of women, interfaith dialogue—all these are critical trends, which will shape the future. But perhaps the most daunting trend of all is that for the first time in human history, not only Christianity but also all religions are beginning to share a common religious history. The interaction of the faiths, whether rancorous or sympathetic, open or dismissive, is now becoming an integral part of the history of each faith, and of all of them. The role of women and the place of the poor in any one of them becomes an influence in all of them. The traditional religious groupings, furthermore are no longer conveniently centered in somewhat isolated geographical terrains—Buddhists in Southeast Asia, Muslims in the Middle East, and Hindus in India. Now there are adherents of all these traditions on all the continents. The cities of the northern hemisphere have become multi-colored collages of religious diversity, fulfilling in some measure, the Pentecostal vision. "Inter-faith dialogue", once a very specialized activity carried on by experts, is now required of ordinary people, including Christians, on a day-to-day basis.

These tidal changes in both the secular and the common religious milieu in which Christians live are no longer simply part of the external history of Christianity. They are now part of its internal story, an integral dimension of its own identity. Thus the answer to our question of what Christianity will be like in the next millennium cannot be answered without listening carefully to what God is doing and saying among those who were once excluded and among those who do not call themselves Christians.

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