AVOIDING A BLIND ALLEY

Christianity is currently facing a crisis, a predicament which, could either end in disaster or, if radical and creative decisions are made, could lead to new and fruitful opportunities. The words “Christian Way” have been deliberately chosen, in preference to "Christianity", for reasons which will hopefully become clear and because they combine the two earliest references to what is today commonly called Christianity. In Acts 11:16 we read “And it was in Antioch that the disciples were for the first time called Christians”. In the same book we read “About that time there arose no little stir concerning the Way” (Acts 19:23). What identified these people called Christians was that they were walking a path of faith which was coming to be called quite simply “The Way”, and the word is used a number of times in Acts.

From the beginning, therefore, people called Christians saw themselves treading a path. A path implies movement, change, adventures and challenges. This simple word picture already shows a vitality and freedom of movement which are often absent from the common associations we have with the word “Christianity”. “Christianity” is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as the “doctrines of Christ and his apostles” or “the Christian religious system”. This suggests something fixed and permanent. (In what follows, wherever the word Christianity is used it is intended to refer to the doctrines and church institutions which have long become traditional and fairly fixed. The Christian Way is a wider and more fluid term).

Today's common view of Christianity as a set of unchangeable beliefs to which one is expected to give assent, turns out to be of quite recent origin and is seriously misleading. Even this use of the word “Christianity” is no more than 400 years old. All through the Middle Ages it never occurred to anyone to write a book about “Christianity”. Although the Latin word *Christianitas* was coined in the ancient world, it referred not to doctrines but to the total body of Christian people, the church. They were the people who had chosen to walk the Christian Way.

The path trodden by Christians through the last twenty centuries, has been a long and tortuous one. Some of the turning points we shall sketch in the next article. Here we focus on the fact that Christianity is facing a major crisis. Many Christians appear quite unaware of it and, if questioned, often strongly deny any crisis exists. They feel supremely confident about the Christian future.

Historian K.S.Latourette, in his book *A History of Christianity*, referred to the period 1815-1914 as “the greatest century which Christianity had thus far known”. So Christians confidently entered the 20th century with the slogan, “the evangelization of the world in this generation”, even expecting the whole world to become Christian during the course of this century. But as we approach the end of the 20th century the prognosis for Christianity looks very different.

If we simply examine absolute figures they may still look very impressive, for Christianity still retains a considerable momentum from its long and victorious past. It has been estimated that in the mid-1980's there were 1,500,000 Christian congregations, divided into 20,000 denominations, employing 3,750,000 clergy and other full-time workers, on a corporate budget of 75 billion dollars. Together they

distributed 43 million Bibles a year, read 20,000 religious periodicals and wrote more than 20,000 religious books a year. Those figures should be enough to make any organization, religious or secular, feel very confident about itself.

But those figures also have to be related to the total amount of human activity produced by more than five billion people, which became six billion in 1998. Human population is now expanding at an exponential rate and this hides the fact that the proportion which is Christian is declining very sharply. It was only when population growth began to slow down in New Zealand, as it did from the '60's onwards, that the crisis began to show itself in that country.

So many are the signs of the malaise which has been overtaking Christianity that few can fail to see them any more. Church buildings which, as recently as the 1920's, housed flourishing congregations, are now used for other purposes or have been dismantled altogether. In many of those which still function the congregations are very small compared with those which were regularly seen in earlier days and mainly consist of the middle-aged and elderly.

In the famous cathedrals of Europe one finds a regular stream of tourists who have come to admire the marvels of medieval architecture, but not the large congregations like those for which they were built. The cost of keeping the cathedrals in repair has become an impossible burden for the tiny congregations which now use them; indeed, their mission in life seems to have changed from one of going out "to make disciples of all nations" to that of becoming a "society for the preservation of historic monuments". The plight of the cathedrals may be regarded as symbolic of the current state of Christianity relative to its glorious past.

A recent survey in England revealed that only two and a half per cent of the population participate in the services of the Church of England, the national church. Moreover, during the decade of the '80's half a million people stopped going to church. In Lutheran Sweden only three percent of the people go to church regularly. The situation in the Catholic countries of Europe is not much better than that of the predominantly Protestant ones. The European country with the highest church-going population is Catholic Poland in spite of being until recently a Communist state.

In the Catholic Church worldwide there has been a very serious drop in the number entering the monastic orders. This fact had a detrimental effect on the Catholic education system, for it had come to depend financially on the service provided so economically by nuns and teaching brothers dedicated to a life of poverty. More recently this crisis has reached the priesthood and in two ways. A rapidly increasing number of priests have chosen to leave the priesthood, while the number seeking ordination has dramatically declined. Between 1963 and 1969 alone, 8,000 priests asked to be dispensed from their vows. A study commissioned a few years ago in Rome by the Sacred Congregation of the Faith estimated that within the following five years 20,000 would leave; the estimate proved to be far too conservative. A survey in the United States of America revealed that there were 17,000 ex-priests in that country alone and that the average age of those remaining in the priesthood was 54! To make matters worse the number of ordinands in training had dropped from 50,000 to 12,000 in only twenty years.

Christianity has been losing its public face. For centuries the ongoing life of the community was punctuated by the annual Christian festivals which served as a continual reminder of the Christian duties and aspirations which gave identity to European culture. Of the annual Christian festivals, Advent, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Whitsunday were the first to disappear from public celebration. Then Easter tended to become a purely secular holiday, leaving only Christmas to remain a community celebration yet with minimal reference to any Christian content.

Recent research in New Zealand has revealed that no more than 15% of the population attend church regularly. The percentage of people who claim some religious affiliation when filling in the Census returns is of course much higher; but most of this larger number are clearly only nominal in their church allegiance. And even there significant changes are beginning to show. The number who now openly acknowledge no religious interest at all has jumped from 10% to 25%. The group who may be called the “unchurched" constitute the sector of fastest growth on the religious spectrum. This in turn is reflected in the denominational figures. Anglicans have dropped from being 40% of the population to only 25%; Presbyterians have dropped from 24% to 18%. This decline is reflected in the internal figures of the Presbyterian Church, where the communicant membership has dropped from over 90,000, thirty years ago, to the current figure of 46,000.

For some time, even though adults had often ceased to be regular church attenders, they continued to send their children to Sunday School. This is no longer the case. Since 1960 Sunday School rolls have declined to one third of what they used to be. The situation is being reached for the first time, in which a significant proportion of the population under the age of 20 has had no direct contact with institutionalized Christianity or with specific Christian teaching. Between 1971 and 1991 the proportion of males aged between 20-29, who claimed to have no religion, more than doubled.

There are many other indications of the decline in active Christian interest. In the last two or three decades, church periodicals have often been reduced from weeklies to fortnightlies and then to monthlies before disappearing altogether. In the 1960's the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand operated five shops retailing religious books; today it has none. The broadcasting of church services and other devotional programmes on national radio and television has either been dropped or changed in character to become far less obviously Christian in the orthodox sense.

These few examples illustrate a decline of overt Christian allegiance so dramatic that, if it were universal to Christendom, it could be nothing less than catastrophic. It is true that the decline of Christianity in the West is compensated for, at least in part, by the fact that there are various areas, such as in some African nations, where Christian allegiance is growing quite rapidly. But in the West the decline is of such a magnitude that it can no longer be ignored even by those most strongly committed to the traditional church.

The decline has become unmistakably clear because in the last two or three decades it has begun to accelerate. The malaise itself actually began much earlier but while it was relatively slow it was hardly noticeable within the average life-span of people and so could be easily ignored. There were some pointers, however, though these were rarely sufficiently appreciated at the time. For example, a religious census to measure church attendance was taken in England in 1851. It was found, on a particular Sunday,

that less than half the adult population attended church. It caused such consternation that the Bishops in the House of Lords took measures to ensure that no such census should ever be repeated. This ostrich-like act is rather symbolic of the attitude which has been adopted by so many within the institutional church towards the problem. They have shut their eyes to the facts, refusing to acknowledge that the problem exists.

But the poet and lay theologian Matthew Arnold (1822-88) observed it in the mid-nineteenth century and mused on the phenomenon as he sat on Dover Beach; he likened the decline in faith to the retreating tide -

> The sea is calm tonight...
> Listen! you hear the grating roar
> Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
> At their return, up the high strand,
> Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
> With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
> The eternal note of sadness in.
>
> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

Of course there had previously been examples of an ebbing tide of interest but these had been followed by flowing tides of enthusiasm. The Protestant Reformation was itself a wave of great new vitality. By the end of the 17th century there was another period of low vitality and John Wesley breathed new life into the church through his Methodist movement. Then in the late 19th century there were the tent missions, or revival movement, of Moody and Sankey. This year we witnessed the missions conducted by Billy Graham. But when one looks back at these it is noticeable that each new wave was weaker than the previous one.

So what has caused this accumulative ebbing of the Sea of Faith?

It led T.S.Eliot to say:

> But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know just when, or why, or how, or where.
>
> Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before
>
> That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,
>
> And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.[1]

During the last three centuries, slowly at first but now with accelerating pace, there has been taking place a radical shift in human consciousness. We may speak of it as a series of Copernican revolutions.

First there was the cosmological revolution of Copernicus and Galileo. It displaced the earth from being the centre of the universe and incorporated the heavens above into the

same physical space-time universe in which we mortals live. The dwelling-place of God was secularized, leaving God quite literally with no sacred space of his own.

Then came the Darwinian revolution, in which humankind was displaced from being the creatures for whom this universe was especially made. We humans seem to be no more than an afterthought, products of chance, who in a universe 15 billion years old have emerged on the scene in the extremely recent past.

Darwinism was accompanied by the biblical revolution, in which the written form of the absolute Word of God lost its power and absolute authority, as it slowly turned out to be the fallible records of humans like ourselves, living in times and cultures very different from our own.

Fourthly there was the psychological revolution, initiated by Freud and Jung, in which we found we do not possess the mastery over our thoughts and decisions quite as absolutely as we had assumed, and by which we found that the voices or visions of "religious" experience had originated within us rather than from an external source.

All these, and the continuing changes which they have set in motion, mean that we are hurtling at speed into a new kind of world which seems increasingly divorced from the Christian world which seemed so self-evidently real to our forbears. The beliefs in which the Christian path of faith was long expressed have been successively subjected to criticism, erosion, and rejection, even to the point of being regarded as empty of meaning.

Sociologists of religion have for some time been studying the religious beliefs currently held across the spectrum of society. These studies reveal that diversity of personal belief is often just as great within a denomination as between the denominations. Radical Catholics feel more mutual kinship with radical Protestants than either do with the conservatives in their own denomination. Moreover, studies show that some of the beliefs traditionally regarded as basic to Christianity are no longer held by all who are still practising church-goers. Even odder is the fact that non-church goers sometimes continue to accept, as true, one or more of the orthodox Christian beliefs (such as the divinity of Christ, life after death or even belief in a personal God), which some church-goers say they have abandoned. Indeed the personal beliefs held by people in the modern Western world are much more diverse and chaotic than one would normally surmise from church affiliation patterns.

This diversity of personal belief may be illustrated by drawing upon the university study of New Zealanders already referred to. It found that, in the population as a whole, little more than a third believe God to be a personal being, an equal proportion opting to conceive of God as some kind of life force, the rest choosing to be agnostic or believing God to have no objective reality. Even among those who think of themselves as having some kind of denominational affiliation the traditional view of God as a personal supernatural being is rejected by 45% of Catholics and 67% of Anglicans and Presbyterians.

Another area of belief where there are some surprising results is in the issue of life after death, popularly taken to be an essential element of Christian doctrine. This belief is held by only 61% of Catholics, 43% of Anglicans and Methodists, and 37% of Presbyterians. The last figure is even lower than that for the population as a whole,

which is 43%. The section of the population where this belief is highest is among Baptists (79%).

The last mentioned fact points to another characteristic of the current decline in Christian allegiance; while the main-line churches are diminishing in size and influence the sects are growing and establishing a higher profile. By the "main-line churches" (only recently has this term come into common usage) are meant those ecclesiastical institutions into which Western Christendom fragmented from the Reformation onwards, viz. the Catholic (or continuing medieval) Church and the Protestant Churches (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Anglican, and later Methodist). The term "sect" has been commonly used to refer to the much smaller fragments which seceded from these churches from time to time and also for the new groups which emerged from the early 19th century onwards (such as the Brethren, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Salvation Army, the Mormons and others).

Following the suggestion first made by Max Weber and adopted by Ernst Troeltsch, it has been common for sociologists of religion to use the terms “church” and “sect” to make a useful distinction between two different types of religious organization. The Church is the type which tries to be universal to society, to stabilize the existing social order and to become an integral part of it. It has tended to identify with the ruling classes and/or with civil government. It has sought to put the stamp of its value-system on the whole of society, serving as the corporate voice of social conscience and to this end has sometimes been critical of civil government.

The sect, on the other hand, is a comparatively small group which fastens attention on the inward spiritual development of the individual and of the personal fellowship in which the members of the group are joined. The sect holds itself aloof from society at large, ignoring the social order or even showing hostility towards it. It is much more concerned with its own spiritual purity and eternal destiny than it is with the destiny of the society within which it temporarily lives.

Sociologists have observed that sects, as they grow in size and become more moderate and flexible in their convictions, tend to change from the strict stereotype of sect to that of the church. The primitive Christian movement itself originated as a Jewish sect but as it spread through the Graeco-Roman world, and finally was adopted by Constantine as the official religion of the Empire, became transformed into the structure and function of the church type of organization. Similarly, in the 19th century the Seventh Day Adventists, the Mormons and the Salvation Army had the character of sects at the time of their origin; since then they have been moving, at somewhat differing speeds, towards the style associated with the church type. The Closed Brethren, on the other hand, has rigidly retained the characteristics of sect. In the early 20th century the Pentecostalists and the Assemblies of God were clearly to be categorized as sects, yet already in the late 20th century they have moved some distance towards the church model.

This is not the whole story. As those groups which originated as sects have moved towards the church model, the so-called main-line denominations, as they have been shrinking in size and social influence, have already lost some of their distinctive character as churches and have become much less distinguishable from the sects, even though in their own eyes and because of their past history they no doubt still see themselves very differently. There is today not nearly so much difference in function

and status as there used to be between, say, Anglicans, Catholics and Presbyterians, on the one hand, and Pentecostalists, Assemblies of God and New Life Centres, on the other.

[While Webster and Perry conclude that it is still the case in New Zealand that "Church and sect relate differently to both religion and culture", their study shows that the Protestant main-line churches no longer constitute the main body of active church-goers as is commonly thought. The figure of approximately 16% of New Zealanders who attend church with some modicum of regularity breaks down into 5% Catholic, 3.4% the fundamentalist churches (commonly viewed as sects), 2.9% Anglicans, 2.5% Presbyterian and 1.9% Baptists. Thus two-thirds of today's regular worshippers in New Zealand are either Catholics or from the fundamentalist sects.]

The majority of those in the evangelical sects were previously active in the main-line churches. The fact that they could make the change reasonably readily is itself an indication that the gulf between sect and church has been diminishing. Moreover they leave behind them in the diminishing main-line churches cells of similarly minded people who prefer not to make the denominational switch but who, in so far as they have influence, consciously or unconsciously steer their denomination in the sectarian direction.

This phenomenon, so clearly evident in New Zealand Christianity today, fulfils a very interesting prophecy made in 1923 by Kirsopp Lake,[2] a biblical scholar of international repute. Writing shortly after the rise of the fundamentalist movement in USA, he noted that in the mainline Protestant churches there were to be discerned three main groups, whom he called the fundamentalists, the traditionalists and the experimentalists (among whom he numbered himself and whom today we would call the radicals). He prophesied that the traditionalists would force out the radicals and then they themselves would gradually be absorbed by the fundamentalists. Thus, he said, the church would shrink from left to right. That prophecy is today being realised in New Zealand, Britain and USA.

An important aspect of the fundamentalist churches is not only that they are very critical of the main-line churches (who incidentally were often hostile towards them in the days of their origin) but they are critical of them by virtue of the criteria they use to define genuine Christianity. In spite of the much longer history of the main-line churches the fundamentalist churches often regard themselves as the true guardians of Christianity. As they see it, it is they, and not the churches, who are the true spiritual successors of the Apostles and/or the Protestant Reformers. They accuse the churches of having departed from the unchangeable tenets of Christianity, allowing themselves to be tainted by secular modernity and weakened in their convictions and practices by liberalism and humanism. In thus making these claims they are rather like the traditional Catholic hierarchy, yet because they value their Protestant heritage they are usually also militantly anti-Catholic.

On the other hand, not involved in regular religious activities in either the sects or the churches, there is an increasingly large body of people who still think of themselves as Christians. They retain various elements of what was once the body of Christian teaching, particularly in ethics and in the virtues they aspire to. They speak of these as the Christian Values and are sometimes strongly committed to the aim of fostering them in family life, education, sport and civic life generally. In so far as such people

still see themselves as Christian even though they are not church-goers, they commonly draw a very clear distinction between Christianity and what they call Churchianity, which in their view is a defective form of Christianity or perhaps not even Christianity at all.

Thus, compared with the Christendom of earlier centuries, which was much more homogeneous with respect to religious beliefs, the situation in the Western world today is very different. It has been called the twilight of Christendom. It is said that we live in a post-Christian age. Such a phrase implies that the demise of Christianity has already taken place. Yet such a conclusion is altogether too premature. Even though the Christian bodies (whether church or sect) which give visibility to Christianity may be far less influential in Western society than they used to be, and they do not embrace the whole of society in the way the undivided institutional church once did, they still preserve considerable momentum from the past. Moreover, the ebbing tide of Christianity, as institutionalized in the church, has left behind a very distinctive residue of values, attitudes, goals and social patterns.

Historian of religion Robert Ellwood, in a recent book, [3] has proposed a model for our clearer understanding of the life cycle of the great religious traditions which originated during, or as a result of, the Axial Period some 2,500 years ago. The best examples of these Great Religions, as he calls them, are Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, for they, more than others, have become most international and transethnic. (Also regarded as Great religions are Hinduism and the Chinese blend of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, but these remained more obviously contained within ethnic boundaries.) In his model, a Great Religion passes through five consecutive stages of varying length; these he calls: (1) Apostolic, (2) Wisdom and Imperial, (3) Devotional (4) Reformation, and (5) Folk religion. By applying this model Ellwood comes to the general conclusion that during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Chinese religion and Buddhism are experiencing their demise, Christianity and Hinduism are reaching their Folk religion stage, and Islam is just entering the Reformation stage, comparable to what was happening to Christianity in the times of Luther, Calvin and Loyola.

As Ellwood readily concedes, the titles he has chosen for the first four stages reflect the history of Christianity rather more than the other traditions and that may be a weakness in trying to apply it universally. Nevertheless, since our immediate concern is with Christianity it is worth seeing what light it may throw on it. When Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Christian tradition certainly went through a radical transition. Pre-Constantinian Christianity (Ellwood's Apostolic Stage) was fluid and formative, living a vigorous but precarious existence because of strong competitors and the continual threat of persecution. Early in its next stage (Wisdom and Imperial) Christianity assumed its classical form doctrinally, as a result of the Ecumenical Councils from Nicaea to Chalcedon, and then assumed the mantle of authority left free by the Fall of Rome. What Ellwood calls the Devotional Stage stretched roughly from 1000 to 1500 AD, is represented by St. Francis and St. Bernard, and is manifested in the friars, the monastic institutions and the growing Marian devotion.

It was this devotionalism which provided the spiritual roots of the Reformation, as illustrated by Luther's intense search for the certain conviction of his salvation. Ellwood's fourth stage (Reformation) is not confined to the sixteenth century but

stretches from John Calvin to Karl Barth, with Vatican II bringing even Roman Catholicism into the Reformation. Liberal Protestantism, from Schleiermacher to Paul Tillich, Ellwood regards as “the last great intellectual effort of the faith”.

What, then, is the folk religion stage which, according to Ellwood, Christianity is now entering? It means that stage in which Christianity is no longer overtly practised and observed in the official organs of society, is no longer dominant in the intellectual leadership, nor does it provide the chief motivation of the ongoing culture. Yet Christianity continues to live at a popular level and is passed on through personal and family networks, being revived from time to time by charismatic preachers. The rise of Pentecostalism, and the spread of the charismatic movement, may be interpreted as the visible manifestation of the Folk Religion stage of Christianity.

In his history of Christianity Latourette acknowledged his own “profound conviction that the Christian Gospel is God's supreme act on man's behalf and that the history of Christianity is the history of what God has done for man through Christ and of man’s response[4]”; yet he conceded that “the losses in Europe in the present century might well appear to foreshadow the demise of Christianity”[5]. He attempted to reconcile these contradictory statements by affirming that, because Christianity has become more widely distributed on the globe and more influential in human affairs than any other religion "the weight of evidence appears to be on the side of those who maintain that Christianity is still only in the first flush of its history and that it is to have a growing place in the life of mankind"[6].

But what sort of future could that be and what form will it take? If Christianity is to have a future it will no longer be like that of the past nor will it be enclosed within ecclesiastical institutions. In the past Christianity was identified with the Church, even to the point where it was confidently claimed that there is no salvation for humans outside of the church. In these days, however, what may be called the Christian Way cannot be confined, either to any one church, or even to all the churches and sects taken as a whole. Moreover, there is no clear agreement among the various bodies claiming to be Christian as to what exactly is entailed in being a Christian.

The ecclesiastical institutions may be rapidly declining in size and vitality but the long Christian past has left embedded in modern western culture a much greater deposit than is usually recognized. Non-churchgoers, including humanists and atheists, have absorbed from their cultural background more of this Christian deposit than is commonly acknowledged. The self-professed guardians of Christianity are not the only surviving products of our Christian past. They may not even be the best judges of just what the Christian Way is, for it is they, after all, who have been most strongly divided on what it means to be Christian.

It is understandably debated whether the Western world can any longer be referred to as “the Christian West”. But even if it is now more properly termed “the post-Christian West”, it carries the clear marks of its strongly Christian past. The future of the Christian Way depends on what happens to this widespread deposit of what is commonly called "Christian values". To regard the future of the Christian Way as dependent on the survival of Christian orthodoxy, and of the institutional church, may in the long run lead to its demise. To adopt such a choice is to take the Christian path of faith into oblivion or at best into a static museum piece, of interest only to historians.

The history of religion is strewn with religious museum pieces which have become anchored to particular times and places.

"Christianity" may have become a fixed and unchangeable thing, but the Christian Way is not. It is a path of faith which must take into account the kind of world through which it is passing. We have entered a world radically different from anything humans have known in the past. To anchor the Christian path of faith to beliefs, practices and institutions which served it well in the past, because they were fashioned to suit the world which people then lived in, is to abandon the open-ended path of faith which it has more properly been hitherto. It is to lead the Christian Way into a blind alley. The Christian path of faith is at the crossroads where vital choices have to be made. To these we turn in later articles.

DECIDING AT THE CROSSROADS

The Christian Way has reached a crisis because of the radical shift in human consciousness which has been taking place in the last three hundred years. The Christian response to the new form of human consciousness has so far been uneven and quite diverse. At one extreme, as discussed in the first article, an increasing number of people have been led to disengage themselves from traditional church activities, while still often affirming what they call Christian values. At the other end the ecclesiastical officials, who see themselves as the guardians of the Christian Way, have been slow to adapt to the new consciousness and have stubbornly fought a rear-guard action in defence of traditional beliefs and practices.

At the official level, what was once experienced as a living movement, freely adapting itself to changing circumstances, has become frozen into something permanent and unchanging. But whatever fails to change is already beginning to die, for life means change. To the extent that the Christian Way becomes crystallised into some unchangeable thing called Christianity it is facing its demise. Those who choose not to change are taking a blind road.

All who insist that Christianity consists of certain irreducible concepts, beliefs and practices face this danger. A moderate set of irreducibles was affirmed in 1888 by the Lambeth Episcopal Conference of the Anglican Communion. It contended that there are four permanent pillars on which the Christian Church is founded - the Bible, the Creeds, the two Sacraments and the Episcopacy. These have become known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral.

From early in the 20th century fundamentalist Christians were even more rigid, declaring that, to be a Christian, one must embraced all of the following:

- the literal inerrancy of Holy Scripture
- the belief in a personal God
- the doctrine of the Holy Trinity
- the virginal birth of Jesus
- the divinity of Jesus Christ
- the bodily resurrection of Jesus, as an historical event
- belief in life after death

All who defend traditional Christianity cogently argue that if Christianity is to retain its true and recognisable identity it must preserve certain essential elements. Otherwise, if these are lost by radical changes, however admirable, what results can no longer be regarded as Christian. But perhaps we should not be asking what constitutes the *sine qua non* of Christian identity. That is to fall into the trap of assuming Christianity to be something fixed and irreducible. Rather we should be asking - "Where does the path of faith lead us to now?". Instead of talking about Christianity, we should be talking about the Christian path of faith, the Christian Way.

As soon as we do this the issue begins to look different. We find that the path trodden by our spiritual forbears, and which has brought us to this point, is a very long one, more than three thousand years old. And through nearly half of that path it was not even known as Christian. All Christians agree that the Bible is basic to the Christian Way, yet four-fifths of the Bible was written before the word Christian had ever been heard of.

In the three thousand and more years of the historical path of the Judeo-Christian tradition there have been any number of significant crises. By crisis is meant a turning-point or crossroads, which calls for a decision or shift of direction in order to restore it. Such turning points in the Judeo-Christian path of faith have usually involved, not only a change of direction but a change of content, change of emphasis and even change of name. Yet it has been one continuous path.

The Babylonian Exile of the Jews, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the impact of Hellenistic culture on the Gentile Church, the Fall of the Roman Empire, were all crises. Crisis involving radical change is therefore by no means novel even though, on each occasion, the people who lived through it feared their religious world was facing its end.

There has been a strong tendency for modern Christians to believe their path of faith originated with Jesus of Nazareth. That is not how the first Christians saw it. They saw Jesus not as the beginning of their path of faith but as the fulfilment of what had gone before and hence a radical turning-point. If the path had a beginning at all, it started with Abraham, a shadowy figure of the very ancient past. Jews see him as the pro-genitor of their race. Christians see him as the model man of faith. Muslims see him as the first Muslim. What started as one path of faith, long ago divided into three paths, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, all with much still in common.

The person of Jesus of Nazareth marks the point where the Jewish and Christian paths diverged. The decision to be made at that crossroads was this. What was to be made of the life, teachings, death and continuing influence of Jesus? Christians were those who decided to call him the Christ, or Messiah, and to follow him as a marker on the path of faith. That decision shaped the Christian Way, in contrast with the Jewish Way.

But that was not the last crisis. The next crisis came very soon after and is clearly documented in the New Testament itself. The first people to walk the Christian Way were all Jews and took it for granted that it implied they should observe the Jewish Law, as Jesus himself had done. But when Paul made Gentile converts he did not require them to observe the Jewish Law. A crisis arose which was never resolved. It was the parting of the ways for the Gentile Church and the original Jewish church. The Gentile-Christian path flourished and spread. It was the more liberal one. The Jewish

church accused Paul of abandoning things essential to the Christian Way. It actually lingered on for nearly five centuries but finally died out. It had evidently chosen a blind road even though it could claim the approval of the original Apostles.

But once Gentile Christianity broke with Judaism there were more problems. A charismatic leader called Marcion argued that Christians should drop the Jewish scriptures altogether and declare that what had preceded Jesus was a false and idolatrous path. Such a view could have caused the Christian path to have lost its sense of direction by thus abandoning the markers of where it had come from. By retaining the Jewish Scriptures, and adding the New Testament writings to form the Bible, the Christian path preserved continuity with the past. It is continuity, rather than keeping things unchanged, which provides the path of faith with its distinctive identity.

In the fifth century the ecumenical council of Chalcedon (451 AD) set the final stamp on the developing Creeds. These formulated the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and defined the person of Jesus Christ. But it was far from being unanimous. Although the decision made at that crossroads established what became Christian orthodoxy we can now say, with the gift of hindsight, that it was too restrictive and rigid. That decision meant that two sizable sections of Christians became thereafter separated from the main body. The Coptic Church of Egypt and Ethiopia has lived its own existence, with its own Pope, ever since. The Nestorian Church moved Eastward and flourished in Iran and China.

In 1054 the Eastern (or Orthodox) Church and the Western (or Catholic) Church excommunicated each other. That schism resulted from the long term effects of the Greek and Roman cultures through which the Christian Way had spread. It was Greek culture which gave the Eastern Church its ethos, and Roman culture which finally shaped the Western Church. The Western church, for example, inherited Rome's legal and institutional genius for power and authority, still clearly visible in Catholicism down to the present. Thus these two ancient cultures eventually so constrained the Christian Way that the two churches which were shaped by them became incompatible.

At the Protestant Reformation Western authority was challenged and the Christian Way divided still further. All through the medieval period the Catholic church, partly because of its authority and partly because of its catholicity, was able to contain diversity. It failed to do so at the Protestant Reformation. The fragmentation of Christendom marked the beginning of the modern world. The path of faith, long known as Christian, could no longer be contained within one institution. The ecclesiastical institutions began to lose catholicity and become sectarian. Protestantism fared little better than Catholicism even though it manifested considerable vitality and creativity. It became allied with the emerging spirit of nationalism to form national churches, each embracing the Lutheran or Calvinist forms of Protestantism best suited to their needs. In subsequent centuries, particularly the 19th century, many further divisions and subdivisions have taken place.

So the Christian path of faith has been far from straight, smooth or even unified. However much Christianity may today be regarded as a set of unchangeable beliefs, it is quite false to assert that these have been preserved in their pristine purity from the time of the Apostles. The Christian Way has been a developing process, often facing crossroads and being forced to make decisions. Past decisions have not been made unanimously and have not always been wholly wise and fruitful. There has never been

a time when all Christians believed and practised the same things. The Christian Way has diversified into a whole family of paths.

It is in the light of this we now turn to the cross-roads we face today owing to the radical shift in human consciousness already referred to. As Don Cupitt has already pertinently remarked, "When we go to church we re-enter a medieval universe which, so far as the outside world is concerned, finally passed away over three centuries ago".

For nearly two hundred years there have been some Christians trying to take the Christian path forward into the modern world. Many of them unfortunately have been so quickly ostracised and even excommunicated by church authorities that they have been quickly forgotten. One who was accepted in his own day, and who is often called the first modern theologian, is Schleiermacher, though even he has been forgotten through most of this century. Schleiermacher pioneered Protestant liberalism. For nearly a hundred years Protestant theologians were strongly influenced by him even though also critical of him. Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89), like Schleiermacher his mentor, condemned the notion of authoritative ecclesiastical dogma and made religious experience the base of theology. But Ritschl, along with many others, feared that Schleiermacher had made the Christian Way too vulnerable to human subjectivity and looked for something more objective. Ritschl appealed to the historical deposit inherited from the Christian past. He believed that the Bible, the Creeds and the historic Confessions, while no longer to be accepted as absolute and infallible authorities, nevertheless supplied the Christian with the objective and historical material without which faith would cease to be nurtured. Liberal Protestants were thus free to criticise the Creeds and to give fresh verbal expression to their beliefs and experience, in ways which took into account all current knowledge. They were free to examine the biblical material critically, to relate it back to its original cultural context rather than treating it as timeless truths of divine origin.

Towards the end of the 19th century liberal Protestant thinkers had enthusiastically embraced the new approach to the Bible, even accepting the new theory of biological evolution. They were completely confident that historical research would be able to confirm all that was essentially basic to Christianity and that such adjustments as appeared necessary in expressing Christian faith could readily be done. It was a confidence which conservative and traditionally orthodox Christians viewed with great alarm, condemning it as further manifestation of modern humankind's sinful rejection of divine authority.

Yet even in the 19th century the appeal to history was proving to be a two-edged sword. Once one removes from the Bible the protecting covering of sanctity which had previously guaranteed its every word, the material in it was not quite what it had seemed to be. The historian is always looking for first-hand extant evidence from the people and times being studied. That is how the Bible had been traditionally read. The Books of Moses came from Moses and the Gospels from the Apostles, who consequently were eye-witnesses of the events they recorded. All this proved to be a superficial veneer. Historical research showed that in both of these examples the material we now have was written by unknown authors some time after the events they narrate. But the full effects of this were not to be felt until the 20th century.

Exponents of Protestant Liberalism insisted that Christian theology is "Christian religious conviction endeavouring to think itself out, and to relate itself to all other

knowledge and opinion"[7]. Liberal Protestant thought may be said to have reached its peak in 1900, when Adolf Harnack (1851-1930), already internationally celebrated as church historian and theologian, delivered a series of public lectures in the University of Berlin. They were received so enthusiastically (by the exclusively male audience !) that when published under the title *What is Christianity?* they quickly became a best-seller, being translated into more than a dozen languages. It was exactly a century since Schleiermacher had published his epoch-making "Speeches *On Religion*". Both books were widely read, being intended to take theology out of academia into the public arena.

During this century, particularly after World War I, strong reaction to liberalism began to surface in the Protestant world, partly because liberal thought had never been satisfactorily transmitted from the academic classroom to the pulpit and the pew. The majority of practising Christians were left in the dark as to how the leading edge of religious thought was responding at the crossroads. This failure to pass on new religious thought led to the rise of fundamentalism, which takes its name from a series of 12 booklets entitled "The Fundamentals", written by conservative scholars and widely in the English-speaking world. These books violently attacked liberalism, Catholicism and the new sects; they affirmed the fundamental doctrines of seventeenth century Protestantism, which they identified as the only genuine form of Christianity.

Another reaction to Protestant liberalism and one very different from the fundamentalism, came from the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886 -1968). He condemned Protestant liberalism for what he regarded as its shallowness and its dependence on human reason: he reaffirmed Christian dependence on divine revelation. In more recent times the originally clear distinction between fundamentalism and Barthianism has greatly lessened. Conservative Christianity today combines the theology of Karl Barth with a view of the Bible somewhat more enlightened than that of the earlier fundamentalists.

Liberalism did not wholly die because of the reactionary forces. The person who best represents its continuation in the post-Barthian era was Paul Tillich (1886-1966). Hardly anyone outside of the church knew much of Karl Barth but Paul Tillich was read much more widely. Some of his phrases came into common usage, such as "ultimate concern", "the courage to be", "the God beyond God". During the middle of this century he was at the leading edge of Christian thought, intent on understanding the radical change taking place in Western culture, and endeavouring to reconnect Christian faith with the mainstream of intellectual thought in the west.

But now we must go back in time to sketch what had been happening in Catholicism. The Catholic response to modernity has to be told separately because at first it was quite different from the Protestant one. This was because Catholicism had retained its highly authoritative character, exercising absolute rule from the top.

From the Reformation onwards Papal authority had endeavoured to protect the faithful under its pastoral care from the dangerous ideas emerging from the birth of Protestantism onwards. To this end it had established in 1557 the Index of Forbidden Books and solemnly warned Catholics that the reading of such books would gravely imperil their eternal destiny. In addition the Catholic Church prevented its own teachers from spreading confusion, by insisting that they obtain the *Nihil Obstat* and the authoritative *Imprimatur* from church officials before the results of their study and

reflection could be published. All this made it more difficult for any one to step out of line, and ensured that the church always spoke publicly with one voice. But it also meant that fruitful dialogue among the church's own scholars was slowed down at the very time when the emergence of new thought was accelerating outside of the church.

It was the deliberate intention of the Catholic Church to insulate itself from all new and dangerous ideas which were in conflict with its own unchangeable teaching. This was particularly the case during the long reign of Pope Pius IX from 1846 to 1878. In his very first Encyclical, *Qui Pluribus*, 1846, he said, "You well know the monstrous errors and artifices which the children of this century make use of in order to wage relentless war against the Catholic faith, the divine authority of the Church, its laws, and to trample the rights of authority, ecclesiastic or civil. Such is the object of the execrable doctrine called communism: it is wholly contrary to natural law itself; nor could it establish itself without turning upside down all rights, all interests, the essence of property, and society itself".[8]

Pius IX thundered condemnation of all liberal thought. In 1864 he warned Catholics of the error of thinking that anyone outside of the Catholic Church, or who defied the authority of the Church, could gain eternal life. In the same year he drew up a Syllabus of (80) Errors. This declared it erroneous to believe such things as “Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion, which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true”, “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with, progress, liberalism and modern civilisation”.[9] The Syllabus was accompanied by an Encyclical in which, along with his predecessor Gregory XVI, he asserted the insanity of believing "that the liberty of conscience and of worship is the peculiar right of every man...and that citizens have the right to all kinds of liberty...by which they may be enabled to manifest publicly and openly their ideas, by word of mouth, through the press, or by any other means".[10]

At the very time when Protestant Liberal theologians were trying to help Protestantism keep pace with the changing world and adjust its thinking to rapidly expanding knowledge, the Pope was not only insulating Catholicism from the modern world but actually leading it further back into the medieval world. Protestantism and Catholicism were moving in opposite directions and the rift between the two was growing wider. For example, in 1854 Pius IX proclaimed a new Dogma which thereafter was "to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful". This Dogma of the Immaculate Conception declared that “the most blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception...was preserved free from all stain of original sin”[11].

To press this home a second new Dogma followed in 1870, as a result of the Vatican I Council called by Pius IX. After considerable debate, and vigorous opposition by a minority, the Council affirmed the Dogma of Papal Infallibility which states that “The Roman Pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra* is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining doctrine concerning faith and morals: and therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves”. This proved too much for some Catholics, who seceded from the Church and were known thereafter as the Old Catholics. Lord Acton, a devout Catholic and Professor of Modern History at Cambridge remarked, "The Church cannot now be reformed and become what it ought to be, unless it be destroyed and rebuilt".

In this ecclesiastical climate it may seem surprising that liberal thought surfaced at all within Catholicism. It did, but with disastrous consequences for those who spoke up. Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) was a French priest and a very able biblical scholar. The Catholic hierarchy already held Loisy under some suspicion because he had been attracted to the work of Ernst Renan (1823-92). Renan was a Catholic scholar who had caused a sensation in Europe when he published his *Life of Jesus* in 1863. This had repudiated all the supernatural elements in the story of Christ, so Renan was removed from his professorial chair at the College de France.

The storm broke when Loisy published his book *The Gospel and the Church* (1902) even though, quite ironically, its purpose was to defend Catholicism against the influence of Protestant Liberalism, particularly as that had been expounded in Harnack's *What is Christianity?* (the title of which in German meant "The Essence of Christianity"). In response to Harnack's attempt to reduce Christianity to it very essence, Loisy questioned whether Christianity does possess any unchangeable essence. Rather he saw Christianity as a living and ever changing process. Just as a man of fifty looks very different from the infant he was at birth, so Christianity could not be expected to remain in the Galilean form in which it originated. It was quite legitimate for Christianity to evolve, as it had done, into the fully-fledged form of Catholicism. He believed Harnack to be quite mistaken in thinking that, by stripping away what had developed over many centuries, he would find the unchangeable and primitive kernel of essential Christianity. "It cannot be too often repeated that the Gospel was not an absolute, abstract doctrine, directly applicable at all times and to all men by its essential virtue. It was a living faith, linked everywhere to the time and the circumstances that witnessed its birth. In order to preserve this faith in the world, a work of adaptation has been, and will be, perpetually necessary".

Loisy did not confine himself to a criticism of Harnack but paved the way for an essential reform in the interpretation of the Bible, in the whole of theology and even in Catholicism itself. Loisy later confessed that, as a result of his earlier biblical study, he had ceased to accept such traditional beliefs as the divinity of Christ and the conception of God as a personal being. Yet he remained a priest for a further twenty years in the hope that Catholicism would undergo radical change.

But though his book was welcomed by other liberally minded Catholics, Loisy soon found himself facing the full wrath of the Catholic hierarchy, who charged him with "denying the inspiration of Scripture, denying Jesus was the revealer of infallible truths, denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus by regarding it as myth, and undermining the authority of the Papacy and the Church's teaching office". Loisy and other liberal Catholic thinkers had been tolerated and even encouraged during the reign of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), who had real respect for academic scholarship. But his successor Pius X (1903-1914) distrusted this liberal movement from the beginning.

In 1907 the radical reform led by Loisy became officially termed Modernism and was condemned by Pope Pius X as "the synthesis of all heresies". In an encyclical (Lamentabili) and a decree (Pascendi) he set out the 65 errors of Modernism, one of which was that "Scientific progress demands that the concepts of Christian doctrine concerning God, creation, revelation, the Person of the Incarnate Word and Redemption be readjusted".[12] Loisy was excommunicated in 1908 but in 1909 was appointed to the Chair of the History of Religions at the College de France, the very

position from which Renan had been dismissed. From this position he continued to write about Christian origins for the next twenty years.

The leading Catholic Modernist in England was George Tyrrell (1861-1909). Reared as an evangelical Protestant in Dublin, Tyrrell was attracted to High Church Anglicanism. By 1879 he had become a Roman Catholic and in 1880 he entered the Jesuit novitiate. Remaining strongly attracted to the devotional aspects of Catholicism he became increasingly hostile to the orthodox Scholasticism, and began to publish his views with some vigour, contrasting living faith with dead theology. Refusing to repudiate his more provocative statements he was dismissed from the Jesuit Order in 1907. When the Pope issued his encyclical condemning Modernism, Tyrrell wrote letters to the London *Times* accusing the Pope of heresy. He was immediately excommunicated. He died in 1909 and was refused Catholic burial.

Tyrrell's views were set forth in *The Church at the Crossroads*, published posthumously in 1909. There he defined a Modernist as "a churchman of any sort who believes in the possibility of a synthesis between the essential truth of his religion and the essential truth of modernity". Like Loisy, he also was critical of the Protestant Liberals, remarking that "The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through 19 centuries of Catholic darkness is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face seen at the bottom of a deep well". In his view Catholic Modernism differed strongly from Protestant Liberalism in several important respects. The Protestants put the emphasis on historical records, and on the moral teaching of Jesus. Tyrrell believed that the changes being called for in the current age were of such a radical nature that it might be necessary for Catholicism to die, in order that it might rise again in a greater and grander form.

Pope Pius X was determined to root out all elements of Modernism from Catholicism and to this end in 1910 he required all priests to swear an anti-modernist oath in which they were to offer complete submission to his earlier condemnations of Modernism. Only forty priests refused. All ordinands were thereafter required to make a vow renouncing all Modernist tendencies. This marked the end of Catholic Modernism for the time being, driving underground all liberalising tendencies in the Catholic Church. They did not surface again until the 1940's and were to lead to the Vatican II Council called by Pope John XXIII.

In the meantime Modernism had taken root in Anglicanism and eventually came to be called the Modern Churchmen's Union. Its aim was to advance liberal religious thought and to acknowledge the legitimacy of reformulating Christian doctrine and revising forms of worship. Although many well-known priests, scholars and even bishops were members of the Union over the years, the one who became the chief leader and organiser of Anglican Modernism was Henry D. A. Major (1871-1961). After joining the Modern Churchmen's Union, he founded their journal *The Modern Churchman*. In 1912 he set forth the principles of Modernism in a book *The Gospel of Freedom*, and in 1915 privately circulated a pamphlet entitled "A Modern View of the Incarnation". This presented a non-miraculous view of Jesus, consistent with the modern non-miraculous view of the universe and the evolution of planetary life.

Major himself, in 1927, defined Modernism as "the claim of the modern mind to determine what is true, right and beautiful in the light of its own experience, even though its conclusions be in contradiction to those of tradition". He saw this as a mode

of human consciousness which would assume enormous proportions in the coming decades and was already making its presence felt in Jewry, Islam, Hindu and Chinese society.

The substance of Anglican Modernism as understood by Major may be summarised thus:

- Divine revelation and religious evolution are one and the same but viewed from different sides.
- Belief in miracles is a survival from the pre-scientific way of viewing the universe.
- The question of what God is like replaces in importance the question of whether God exists. Modernists acknowledge that their conception of God differs from the one traditionally held.
- The doctrine of original sin is denied.
- Modernists retain belief in some form of immortality, but reject the doctrine of everlasting punishment.
- Jesus was just as completely human as every other human being.
- The doctrine of the Virgin Birth is unnecessary and its historicity is not securely based.
- The Christian ethic will become increasingly important in enabling humanity to realise a true and beneficial democracy.
- Christianity is not a demonstrable certainty but a venture of faith.

Anglican Modernism, it seems, managed to go so far in reform and then ran out of steam. Major died in 1961 and did not live to see the more radical thought which began to emerge later. Shortly after his death a group of essays by Anglican Modernists, grouped with some others, was published under the title of *Soundings.* It was intended to mark the centenary of *Essays and Reviews* of 1861 but was too academic to make any impact. When more radical thought did break out publicly many of the Modernists were strangely critical.

This is what happened with John Robinson's *Honest to God*, 1963. The Editorial in the *Modern Churchman* said it was raising questions which the Modern Churchmen's Union has been discussing or advocating for fifty years. But other Modernists expressed their regret that Robinson "had fallen so completely under the influence of such extremists as Tillich, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann" and found his doctrine of God very suspect. Alan Richardson and Robert Leaney, both of them Modernists contributed to the little book *Four Anchors from the Stern*, which sharply rejected much of what was in *Honest to God*.

This led Don Cupitt to remark, "For two centuries liberal theologians have been proposing a revision and modernization of Christianity but there has been no real change. The lay person going to church finds the old world-view presupposed by almost everything that is said or sung".

Admittedly there has been at least **some** positive Christian acknowledgement of the times in which we live. There is much less reference in sermons and hymns to a world beyond and much more reference to life in the here and now. Sermons on current social

issues and everyday personal problems have replaced sermons threatening hell and brimstone. There has been a certain amount of change in the hymns sung.

Denominational rivalry has been replaced by co-operation. Catholic-Protestant relations have thawed after the four hundred year old freeze. Churches have become somewhat more democratic and less authoritarian. Women have been admitted to the ministry in most churches outside of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Since Vatican II, Catholicism has been changing quite rapidly at the grassroots even if the Papacy has remained stubbornly conservative.

But for an increasing number of people the changes have been too little, too late. As it was observed in the last article, many people have concluded that the Christian Way has nothing to offer them. Their choice to abandon the Christian Way is also a decision at the crossroads. It can be as dangerous as the one by which Christian orthodoxy chooses to come to a dead halt in a blind road. The great value of continuing to be guided by the markers on the path from which we have come is that it prevents us from going round in circles or even worse, perishing in the roadless sands of the desert.

Honest to God was one of the most widely read religious books of this century and it introduced to a wider public some appreciation of Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer, who were then at the growing edge of religious thought. But what is there to show for it today? The BBC marked the thirtieth anniversary of *Honest to God* with a series of radio talks. Ruth Robinson, John's widow, observed that the world is lost without a vision and the churches did once supply a vision to live by. She deplored the fact that the churches are failing to provide that vision by insisting on obscuring the original vision within an outmoded belief system. John Bowden, editor of the SCM Press which originally published *Honest to God*, believes the church missed out on a marvellous opportunity in 1963 and it did so because it suffered from a loss of nerve.

Today's crisis calls for moves more radical than any yet made, if the Christian Way, continuous with the past, is to go forward into the future. There appear to be objects anchoring it to the past, or alternatively they may be seen as roadblocks barring the way forward. We must turn to those in the next article.

REMOVING THE ROADBLOCKS

If the Christian Way is to continue into the future as a viable path of faith by which we can walk, it must be one which allows us to be fully aware of the kind of world we find ourselves living in. What are the chief obstacles which prevent it at present from fulfilling that function? They consist of those aspects of belief and ritual practice which continue to reflect the view of reality, which prevailed in the ancient or medieval worlds but which has now become obsolete.

To help us determine just what they are, let us start by sketching how we have come to see the universe today, and how we have come to understand the human condition. Then we shall turn to those elements in traditional Christianity which are in conflict with that general picture.

There is a body of general knowledge of the world and ourselves which we all share today to a greater or less extent. It is this which has been responsible for the radical shift in human consciousness already referred to. It is built on the pioneering work of such people as Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and hosts of

others, of which these are but a few notable examples. As a result of the accumulation of reliable knowledge which is based on their work, there is a common view of reality which we in the Western world already basically share. Moreover, through general education and the mass media, the rest of humankind is coming to share it also.

It is becoming universally acknowledged that we live on a tiny planet we call Earth. We revolve round a star we call the sun and this sun is only one of billions of stars in the star cluster we call the Milky Way. Our star cluster in turn is only one of billions of such star clusters we call nebulae. Thus the universe we find ourselves living in is so vast that our little human minds cannot really comprehend it. For the practical purposes of daily life we can afford to ignore the universe beyond this planet and commonly do so. But when we make belief statements about the universe as a whole, as our forbears were prone to do, we must be careful not to ignore that immense and mysterious universe. Much of what has been traditionally affirmed of God as Creator and Provider was tuned to a relatively tiny universe and becomes far less credible in relation to the vast space-time universe in which we now find ourselves.

Out of sheer curiosity we continue to ask the question of how the universe came to exist and whether it had a beginning. But since the evidence now indicates that the universe is at least fifteen billion years old that makes it so old that our minds cannot grasp that time scale either. Whether the universe had a beginning or not has become a question much less relevant to our short existence here. It has become a scientific and academic question rather than a religious or existential one.

Now let us turn to the Earth. From the same commonly accepted body of knowledge we learn that the earth is over four billion years old and there has probably been life of some form on this planet for three billion years. Common knowledge now leads us to believe that we human beings have evolved from lower and less complex living forms over aeons of time. We humans are very distantly related to all other living forms on this planet. We form part of the very thin spherical layer of life which surrounds the earth, which is now called the biosphere. We humans finding ourselves to be living organisms, one species only of innumerable species stretching from micro-organisms to mammals, all of whom are mutually interdependent in a complex ecological field of life. A very long evolutionary process lies behind the physiology of our bodies, some 98% of which we share with other species in the ape family.

But what really constitutes our humanity, what most definitely distinguishes us from all other earthly organisms is not so much the physiology of our bodies as the language and culture into which we are born and which enable us to become human. All this too has slowly evolved over a period of at last 50,000 years. It is this evolving culture which enables us to ask questions of who we are and why we are and what is our future.

This general picture of how we see the world and understand ourselves forms a common body of knowledge which underpins modern culture. But this body of knowledge has only become generally known in the last 150 years. How different it is from that which obtained in Western culture up until the middle of the 19th century. Until that time the universe was conceived as relatively small, assumed to be only a few thousand years old, and thought to have been made by a divine creator,

who at creation had designed all creatures, including humans, according to a fixed pattern. The traditional view of reality had taken shape in the ancient and/or medieval worlds and still seemed pretty convincing to most people in the West. It is now out of kilter with the current body of knowledge.

The new form of human consciousness has been leading us, often reluctantly, out of what we now see to be an altogether too narrow and confined view of reality. We are forced to acknowledge that the culture we have inherited from the past has been only one of many. Just as the human species has become divided into different races with different skin colours, so there have evolved different cultures, each with its own way of understanding reality.

Because we can only become human by being nurtured within a particular human culture we become products of that culture and naturally find it to be most congenial. We all tend to be cultural chauvinists, who find our own culture to be the best and the truest. So the cultural transition which the growing body of common knowledge is forcing us to take is proving a slow and painful one, as we come to terms with the fact that none of the past cultures, including our own, can claim to be the one and only final truth.

Fundamentalists of all religious faiths and cultures respond to the new and more comprehensive view of reality simply by rejecting it. When something is found to be psychologically very unsettling, there is an understandable attraction to the comfort and support provided by sheer familiarity of past tradition. As the ancient Hebrews, struggling through the rigours of the wilderness en route to the Promised Land, often longed to return to the certainties of Egypt even if it did mean slavery, so they prefer the apparent certainties of the past even if it does mean shutting one's eyes to new realities.

Christian fundamentalists feel confident in rejecting the new body of knowledge by taking their stand on the Bible which, if divinely revealed, must present the only true view of reality. The Bible, therefore, makes a useful starting point for us to examine, one by one, the most important aspects of traditional Christianity which have become the roadblocks barring the Christian Way from going forward.

It speaks volumes for the literary content of the Bible that for many centuries it supplied, among other things, such a convincing picture of the world and of the place of humans in it. For a long time it was regarded as the basic encyclopedia of life to which one referred for the truth about everything. To do so today means that, like the most rigid fundamentalist, one is left trying to show that modern scientific cosmology has got it wrong, that biological evolution is false, that the universe was made in six days about six thousand years ago, and so on.

The fact that the majority of Christians do not wish to ally themselves with fundamentalism but to interpret the Bible more liberally than that, does not mean that the problem is solved. Rather it is only then that the full impact of the problem comes into view. The fundamentalists really have a point when they say that if Christians once surrender the conviction that the Bible is the divinely revealed Word of God then they are stepping on to a slippery slope to which there seems to be no end.

We shall now look at that slippery slope. Incidentally it was also recognized by John Wesley 250 years ago. Because the Bible says, “You shall not suffer a witch to live”, he vigorously defended the practice of burning witches, saying, “The giving up of witchcraft is in effect giving up the Bible"; and it would have been self-evident to him that the giving up of the Bible entailed the giving up of Christianity.

In one sense Wesley was strangely right. We need reject only one thing in the Bible as no longer acceptable to us, in order to reveal that we ourselves have become the arbiters of what we shall accept or not accept as true. And that is one of the marks of the radical shift in human consciousness. We have become autonomous. We are no longer willing to submit blindly to the authority of others, whether they be kings or politicians, Pope or Holy Writings. We claim the right to make our own judgments and let the evidence convince us on its own merits. In successive stages we have first questioned and then abandoned the concept of divine revelation, as channelled through holy books or holy persons. The process began in the very century in which Wesley lived.

This does not prevent us from finding much of great value in the Bible. But we have become the judges of what we regard to be of value. What we find in the Bible must be read critically. Its value to us should depend on its inherent power to win our conviction and not on the fact that it is in the Bible. We need have no hesitation now in saying about certain biblical statements, quite simply, that they are false. In this respect the Bible is no different from any other book. It is a collection of books, written by fallible humans like ourselves and these books reflect the customs and culture of the age and place in which they were written. The first roadblock which has to be removed is the false veil of sanctity and authority which has grown up round the Bible.

Attention was drawn to this particular roadblock in a spectacular way in 1860 with the publication of *Essays and Reviews* by seven Anglican theologians. Benjamin Jowett, classical scholar, theologian and Master of Balliol College, Oxford, said in his essay “The Interpretation of Scripture”, that “the Bible should be interpreted like any other book”, adding his own conviction that, when this is done, the reader will still find there is no other book quite like it. *Essays and Reviews* brought forth a storm of protest. It was condemned by bishops, archbishop and synods. Eleven thousand clergy signed a protest, declaring their conviction in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. To this day not only fundamentalists but even most liberally minded Christians still assume that because something is said in the Bible it carries some additional authority. The fact that this is not so, must now be openly acknowledged.

But this is only the beginning. Prior to the emergence of modern consciousness our forbears had the feeling that there existed a set of fixed and unchangeable truths of which, if one knew them, one could be absolutely sure. We may call them the absolutes. Not only was the Bible the absolute Word of God and the Church the absolute creation of God, but social structures, class divisions and rule by monarchy, were all thought to be fixed for all time, resting on a divine foundation. All living species were fixed by divine decree. Above them all was God himself, the great Absolute.

But slowly we are coming to see that the fixed and absolute character of reality is an illusion. It arose early in human consciousness simply because, in the short life-span of human existence, so many things seem to remain constant. So it seemed natural to assume that on the six days of creation everything came into being in its permanent state.

The body of common general knowledge which is reshaping our thinking tells us, on the contrary, that everything in the universe is in the process of continuous change. There is nothing permanent and unchanging. There are few, if any, tangible absolutes. The story of this earth has been one of change, development, evolution. The only thing which seems to be constant is change itself. Even the speed of change is not constant, for it can accelerate, decelerate and go through quite sudden metamorphoses.

Now let us see where this takes us. The universe is an evolving process. The human species has evolved and is still evolving. The many human cultures have evolved and are still evolving. Some cultures have already died and others, particularly a global culture, are coming to birth. All is in process. There is nothing fixed or absolute in human culture.

This computer age has usefully supplied us with another analogy to help us understand this. The human nervous system centred on the brain may be likened to computer hardware. But computer hardware is useless without software. The language and culture which we absorb from infancy onwards constitute the software by means of which we construct our picture of reality and understand it. But just as there are many packages of software (and we are continually being offered much improved and more versatile ones) so there are many cultures. And through these cultures we humans have constructed reality differently. As there is no final and absolute package of computer software, so there are no absolutes in culture or language. Everything said or believed remains open to the possibility of change or revision.

At any one time, of course, there are many beliefs, stories, so-called truths, which we may find absolutely convincing. But we now have to allow for the fact that we are all children of our own time and place. We have been shaped by our culture. And though we may hold some aspects of it up to criticism (and this is something we are now increasingly doing), there is no way in which we can escape from the relativities of each human culture to some culturally neutral point. There is no such archimedean point within our reach. We humans are caught in a web of relativity in which there are no known absolutes.

When the modern scientific enterprise was in its first great flush of success and was undermining the traditional beliefs and absolutes of the religious past, it was commonly believed that science itself would provide a new set of absolutes. The mood is now changing in the scientific world. Not only do scientists always have to remain open to the possibility that new evidence may force them to revise their laws and findings, but it is now being acknowledged that all scientific endeavour is itself a human enterprise. Science itself is admittedly a new and very versatile package of computer software but it is still a humanly devised package and not a new set of absolutes.

The relative character of all cultures applies also to the dimension of culture we call religion, that dimension in which we ask and attempt to answer the deep existential questions of who we are and why we are here. Religion needs to be understood quite broadly, as in this definition by Carlo dela Casa, an Italian scholar, “Religion is a total mode of the interpreting and living of life”.

In the era in which humans saw themselves living within a world of absolutes, Christians very understandably claimed their Way, or path of faith, to be absolutely the only true way. So we still see on car-stickers, “Only one way - Christ”. That conviction stems, in part, from the words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me”. So the church through the ages asserted that there is no salvation for people outside of the church. The absolute claims made by the Christian tradition came under pressure during the missionary expansion of the 19th century when Christians proceeded in great confidence to convert the world to the absolute truths of the Gospel they believed they possessed. In doing so they encountered alternative paths of faith comparable to their own.

This encounter brought a turning point, exemplified by a book by the Lutheran theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) entitled *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*. Troeltsch set out to defend the absoluteness of Christianity but in the end was forced to concede that Christianity is just as relative to time and place as are its religious competitors. “History is no place for absolute religions or absolute personalities”[13], he said. He concluded that Christianity has no permanent and absolute essence and that it is a purely historical phenomenon with all the limitations to which historical phenomena are exposed. By 1923 Troeltsch was declaring his conviction that “Christianity is at a critical moment of its further development and very far-reaching changes are necessary, transcending anything that has yet been achieved”[14]. The second roadblock to be removed from the Christian Way is all claim to be the absolute and final truth.

But what does this do to the role that has been assigned in Christianity to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, whose title “Christ” is incorporated in the Christian Way? It means a number of things. It means that Jesus Christ can no longer be proclaimed as the one and only Saviour of humankind. It means that the mental image of a divine figure which Christians have constructed round the historical figure of Jesus has to be dismantled. It means that the complete humanity of the original Jesus has to be fully acknowledged. But just what that figure was really like and what he said have become a great enigma. The only records we have are in the New Testament, where already the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith have formed an amalgam from which it is impossible to recover the historical figure with either clarity or certainty.

One of the most provocative calls to abandon the absoluteness of Christ came from theologian Tom Driver of Union Seminary New York, in his book *Christ in a Changing World*, 1981. There he said that the words which the Gospel puts into the mouth of Jesus “‘No one comes to the Father except by me’ should be repudiated, along with the rest of that gospel's elitist, christocentric anti-Semitism"[15]. He points out that we have no reason to believe that Jesus ever preached his own centrality and eternity; he further implied that if Jesus had made such claims they would have to be declared false.

In a world where the existence of absolutes seemed self-evident it made some sense for Christians to make absolute claims for Jesus as the Christ. But in a world of relativity where there are no known absolutes, it no longer makes sense. "The ethical theological task of the churches today", said Driver, "is to find a christology that can be liberating in a world of relativity. Christ must be reconceived in relativistic terms"[16]. Thus the assertion of the divinity of Jesus and of his centrality to human history becomes one more roadblock to be removed.

If some or even most of what has been affirmed about Jesus as the Christ is no longer acceptable at face value why did it arise in the first place? To answer this we must look at the nature of religious language. But first of all we must recall the human origin of all language. Language was not there at the beginning of time waiting for us to learn it. Language evolved along with the human species. We humans created language, very slowly at first, and we are still doing it. As language evolved it diversified into a host of languages, like packages of computer software. Every language, every word, every concept we use is a human creation.

Not only are there many different languages but we use language in different ways. It has been all too easy at the popular level in the past to treat all language, in any one culture, as if it were always operating on one level, as if language is language is language. This can be very misleading. There are many different ways in which we can use the same words. There is the obvious difference between prose and poetry. But, further, sometimes we use language at face value, as when we describe something we can see or hear; and sometimes we use language symbolically or metaphorically, as when we are attempting to discuss something which cannot be seen or express something we feel. Metaphorical language has both a face-value meaning (often drawn from something tangible) and a deeper meaning, which is the one really intended.

It has become very important to distinguish between descriptive or face-value language (as used by science and history) and expressive or metaphorical language (as used by religion). Religious language may appear on the surface to be describing objects in the external world, when in fact it is expressing emotions, values, goals, and aspirations which are being felt inwardly.

We have no difficulty at all in acknowledging this about the hymns we sing. They are clearly poetical and metaphorical. If we sing, "Round the Lord in glory seated/Cherubim and seraphim/Filled His temple, and repeated/ Each to each the alternate hymn" we do not really imagine we are describing a scene which could have been seen with the human eye somewhere in the universe. If the scene is to be seen anywhere it is in the mind's eye, that is, in our own imagination. What we have too often failed to acknowledge is that nearly all religious language and concepts are of the order of poetry and metaphor. They are expressing something of what we feel and see inwardly. Religious language expresses verbally something about ourselves and how we relate to reality. It is not describing reality external to ourselves.

When the first Christians ascribed to Jesus such titles as "Messiah" and "Son of God" they were using metaphorical language to express how they felt about him, what role they saw him playing for them. They were not offering a description of him which would have been open to public enquiry by an investigative journalist of the day. To illustrate this we may point to the distinction to be made between these two

assertions in the Creed. “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried”, is a historical statement, a face-value statement which is open to historical investigation. “He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God” is a poetical, metaphorical statement not open to public investigation.

The reason why, for so many centuries, these two kinds of statement were thought to be of the same order is not just because they sat side by side in the Creed but because ancient and medieval consciousness had constructed reality in dualistic terms - a higher and a lower world, a spiritual and a material world, which were conceived to be equally real. If anything, the unseen world was the more real of the two by virtue of being eternal. It was further assumed that some kind of intercourse took place between the worlds as in prayer, miracles,and the hearing of the Word of God.

The reason why the unseen world seemed as real as the tangible world was that it was all part of the evolving culture of the West. It became part of the package of software which one embraced from birth. With the gift of hindsight from our current state of consciousness we can give an approximate explanation of why and how it all occurred. The internal mental pictures which our creative minds create to express our values, emotions and search for meaning were unconsciously projected on to the backdrop of the external world. Modern human consciousness acknowledges only one reality, a vast and very complex universe, but it is one. The failure to understand the traditional, dualistic view of reality for what it is, becomes another roadblock which has to be removed.

But if the unseen eternal world is only a language and possesses no ontological reality of its own (as the philosophers would say), what does this imply for human destiny? Traditionally Christians have seen themselves as having a foot in both parts of the dualistic reality, namely, a physical body which belongs to the lower world and a soul which is believed to have an eternal destiny in the higher world. In popular religious thought, if not always encouraged theologically, Christians often comforted themselves in bereavement with the thought that death was not the end of personal existence and they would meet up with their loved ones again “in the sweet bye-and-bye”.

It follows from the very nature of the one and only real world in which we live that human existence itself is temporal and finite. We too participate in the change and flux of this world where nothing is permanent, not even our selves. As soon as we come to realise that each of us has been shaped by the times and culture in which we live, we see it could not really be otherwise. The culture and age which shaped us constitute the only context in which we really feel at home. The destiny of each individual is limited to one's own age and culture. That does not mean that it cannot be lived in a way which brings a form of spiritual satisfaction which seems to transcend time.

The traditional view of human destiny, that this life is but a preparation for something even better beyond death in another world, is another roadblock which needs to be removed. Each of us lives one life and one life only. We are responsible for the way we live it and the meaning of life is to be found in the way we live it. That is the real and continuing meaning of the myth of the Last Judgment.

Only now do we come to what many will see as the most important issue of all - the reality we call God. This has been the linchpin of the religious world we inherited from the past. Because it is such a basic term the removal of this term does seem to threaten the complete collapse of the Christian world of meaning. People have been understandably reluctant to acknowledge that the concept we call God is a human concept. Yet the word or concept, "God", is of human origin. It was created by the human mind in the distant past and has been continually refashioned to meet changing needs. There is nothing eternal or absolute about the concept itself. This word has become the human way of referring to the ultimate foundation of reality, that supposed absolute which originated it and which holds it altogether.

But in a world in which there are no known absolutes the word "God" has no objective referent. It is not the name of some readily identifiable, supernatural, absolute being. "God" is a word, a humanly created word, a concept conceived by human imagination. That fact was unwittingly acknowledged by Archbishop Anselm in his famous argument for proving the existence of God. It starts off, "Let God be the name of that than which nothing greater can be conceived". That is, God is one who is conceived by the human mind. Even Martin Luther saw this; he said "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, your God". So all God-talk is a language, a very important language, by which we express and discuss that which is of supreme value to us.

Today we are in a better position than were our forbears to appreciate just how much the meaning and use of the word God has changed in the course of its long history. The word itself was created in pre-historic times and referred not to one reality but to a whole class of beings - the gods - who were believed to be the unseen forces behind all natural and mysterious phenomena. It is now nearly three thousand years since the first great radical change began to take place in the use of this word. The gods, as a class of beings, were banished from the human mind as having no substance and replaced by one of a different order, one who could not be visually represented but was to be experienced chiefly as a voice who spoke from within.

Even after this, the concept of God went through many changes. Karen Armstrong has published a study of these changes in a quite remarkable book *A History of God*.[17] It covers the way God has been conceived by Jew, Christian and Muslim through the centuries. If such a radical change as the replacement of the gods by God, could take place so long ago, it is hardly surprising that a similar change has become necessary and has been occurring in the last two hundred years in the transition to modern consciousness.

The traditional understanding of God which conceived God to be an objective spiritual being, Father, Creator, Benevolent Provider and Judge, has become another roadblock which has to be abandoned along with the heavenly spiritual world long thought to be his dwelling place. The whole concept of God, and the continuing use of God-language, is to day in crisis.

Some believe the concept has now outlived its usefulness altogether and should be abandoned. Others think it is such an important concept that once again we have to learn to how to use it in radically new ways. If we do continue to use it, it is essential to acknowledge it to be an expressive word and not a descriptive one. The traditional view of God in the Western world can be said to be descriptive or realist, in the sense

it assumes that there is an objective entity to which the term refers, and that the reality of this entity can be confirmed by reason or by personal experience. In the past, of course, it was thought to be confirmable by divine revelation, a method which no longer proves viable.

On the other hand, the expressive or non-realist view of God acknowledges that in using the term one is referring to human values, to human aspirations and to the human search for meaning. It is a symbolic word by which one refers to any or all of these. Moreover in using the word all remnants of the traditional dualist view of reality need to be abandoned.

By way of example of this non-realist view of God we may quote such modern definitions of God as those of Don Cupitt and Gordon Kaufman. Don Cupitt has said, "God is the mythical embodiment of all that one is concerned with in the spiritual life".[18] Gordon Kaufman has frequently ponted out that the symbol of God functions as our ultimate point of reference, that in terms of which everything else is to be understood.[19]

We have surveyed those aspects of traditional Christian belief which most conflict with that view of reality which is becoming increasingly common - the divine authority of the Bible, the assertion of unchangeable absolutes, the divinity of Jesus, the absolute uniqueness of Christianity, the dualistic view of reality, personal existence after death, and the external objectivity of God. These are some of the roadblocks barring the advance of the Christian Way into the world of the future.

In removing these roadblocks as no longer tenable, it will appear to many that, far from opening up a way to the future the loss of them only takes us down the slippery slope into a bottomless hole, which is sometimes known as nihilism. It is that fear which began to appear like a spectre over Europe in the late 19th century, the fear which the prophet Nietzsche so dramatically portrayed in his Parable of the Madman who announced that "God is dead". It is this fear which has also prompted many to return to what appears to them to be the safety of traditionalism, even to the point of fundamentalism.

Is their any alternative by which the Christian Way can continue to be trodden in the absence of these strong supports? What shape and direction will it take? How could it be seen to be a continuation of the Christian Way of the past? These questions we shall explore in the final article.

TAKING TO THE OPEN ROAD

Many of basic beliefs of traditional Christianity, far from being helpful in the modern world, have actually become liabilities. They are no longer avenues to faith but, for many people, they have become roadblocks barring the way to faith. We must distinguish clearly between beliefs and faith. There is an unfortunate impression abroad that faith, particularly Christian faith, consists of giving assent to a collection of beliefs, such as those referred. This is not so. No person has brought out the distinction between beliefs and faith more clearly than theologian and historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith. [20]

Cantwell Smith claims that the idea that believing is religiously important has arisen only in recent times and refers to it as the great modern heresy of the church. This

means that, to the degree that Christianity has come to be seen as a body of beliefs and doctrines, it is no longer the Christian Way of faith. It has been turned into an ideology, in much the same way as Marxism may be termed an ideology. Cantwell Smith goes on further to say 'No serious theological thinker has ever held and the Bible nowhere suggests that it is important to hold the opinion that God exists, whether that opinion be right or wrong'[21]. Faith is not to be confused with opinions. Beliefs are strongly held opinions. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'opinion' as 'a judgement or belief based on grounds short of proof, a provisional conviction, a view held as probable'. Now we all have beliefs or opinions and some of them we hold with great conviction. They may even be the form in which we choose to expression our faith verbally but they must never be identified with faith.

One reason for this is that there is nothing very permanent about beliefs. As we mature through life our beliefs change. We do not today hold the beliefs we held as children. Even in the last ten years probably some of our beliefs have changed. That is as it should be. Beliefs are continually changing. What happens with human individuals in our comparatively short lifetime occurs even more so in the course of a culture evolving over centuries.

There is no virtue at all in simply requiring Christians of today to affirm the beliefs of Christians of former centuries. Yet that is what we do, if we insist that today's Christians must be able to affirm the historic Creeds and Confessions, Those express the sincerely held opinions of Christians of former ages. To repeat them, as if they were our own, is to turn ourselves into a ventriloquist's dummy. As Cantwell Smith further said, one's beliefs belong to the century one lives in; what is really important in religion is faith.[22]

We must be free to express our own beliefs. And our beliefs will most likely relate to the cultural circumstances of our time. Some particular beliefs long regarded as basic to Christianity have in today's world become roadblocks to faith. Instead of leading people to an experience of freedom they actually threaten to make them feel imprisoned. Those who make the decision to abandon one or more of them quite suddenly often say they experience a sense of great liberation, as if a burden had suddenly fallen from their shoulders.

The path of faith we keep referring to as the Christian Way, and which is more than three thousand years old, is one which has, at its most decisive moments of growth, led people to experience freedom. For the ancient Hebrews in Egypt, the path meant freedom from slavery. For Paul and the Gentile Church it meant freedom from the Jewish legal system. For Luther and the Protestant movement it meant freedom from papal authority. On this side of the Enlightenment it has meant freedom from mental incarceration by an outmoded belief system. It was entirely appropriate that the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment were called free-thinkers.

So what is faith? Faith is an attitude and an activity of trust. Faith involves the whole person, the heart and the will as well as the mind. Faith does have a cognitive component and that is how it becomes entangled with beliefs. But beliefs are always secondary to faith; they follow from faith just as much as they precede it.

This is how Cantwell Smith defines faith - 'Faith is a quality of human living, which at its best has taken the form of serenity, courage and service; a quiet confidence and

joy that enables one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate'[23]. Faith is basic to religion and yet it is far from being an exclusively religious word in the narrow sense of that term. Faith is universal to the human condition. Everywhere and at all times people have lived by faith, both individually as persons and corporately as cultures.

We humans are all born with the capacity for faith. It's a gift which seems to come with our genes. We instinctively trust our mother at birth and, provided the family environment is as caring as it ought to be, that initial trust becomes nurtured into a more conscious and cognitive form of trust. On the other hand, unfortunate circumstances and experiences in early years can also crush or damage our natural capacity for faith.

We should not be surprised to find that faith is such a universal and everyday reality. Neither Christianity nor any other religious tradition has any monopoly over faith. Even such a simple thing as learning to swim becomes a very clear demonstration of what it means to have faith. The decision to take one's feet off the bottom, while still doubting if the water will really buoy one up, is a great act of faith. All the technical information which a swimming instructor could supply achieves nothing until the beginner makes the initial act of trust. Throughout life, and at every significant stage of further development, faith is being continually tested and stimulated to further growth.

Faith is basic to health, both physical and mental. Lack of faith can cause one's health to deteriorate and a new burst of faith can restore health. Jesus of Nazareth was drawing attention to a perfectly natural phenomenon when he said to a Jewish woman healed of a haemorrhage, 'Your faith has made you well'. When health or wholeness does result from faith it does not need to be interpreted as a supernatural miracle or be associated with religious hocus-pocus.

It is when the human capacity for faith is directed towards the great existential questions of life that its religious importance becomes so evident. All religion arises out of the response of faith to the demands which human existence thrusts upon us. That is why the great religious traditions are today often referred to as 'Paths of Faith'.

Each person's faith is a unique experience. Because we are all different we walk different paths of faith. But because we are also social creatures, who depend upon one another for our humanity and culture, our paths intertwine and form an ongoing evolving culture. Each culture with its accompanying religious dimension develops its own general identity, just as each of us develops a personal identity.

In these studies we are looking specifically at the Christian path of faith. In this last one we are exploring where this path may lead us in the modern world. The very first thing it is leading us to is the rediscovery of the meaning and of full significance of faith. One of the first persons to refocus Christian attention on the true nature of faith was the Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55). He likened faith to the activity of treading water which is twenty thousand fathoms deep. He saw that faith is inconsistent with the practice of relying on firm supports, guarantees, and assured knowledge. 'Without risk there is no faith, and the greater the risk, the greater the faith'.

In every path of faith there has been a tendency for faith to be replaced by various tangible crutches, such as fixed and absolute truths, which purport to provide certainty. ‘If I am capable of conceiving God in some objective way, I do not have faith’, Kierkegaard said, ‘It is precisely because I cannot conceive God objectively that I must have faith’. By the end of his life he had become a particularly harsh critic of the church of his day because, as he saw it, the Christianity preached by the church had become the very opposite of the Way of faith. The Church was proclaiming Christianity as a divinely revealed body of knowledge. It was prescribing an ecclesiastical ritual which would guarantee entry into heaven. He predicted a cultural revolution in Christendom in which people would fall away from Christianity by the millions. It has in fact been happening, though probably not for not quite the same reasons that he would have given.

Kierkegaard, the father of modern existentialism, was a strange man and must be understood in the cultural context of his time. Yet he was affirming what we have been calling the Christian Way and sharply distinguishing it from the Christianity it had become. He was declaring that it was time to throw away the ecclesiastical crutches and rediscover the significance of faith.

Iconoclast though he was, Kierkegaard never for one moment saw himself abandoning the Christian path of faith. He was rather clearing away the thick undergrowth which had grown up and which was concealing the path. The church had been proclaiming that to have faith one must believe the Christian dogmas; whereas the truth was the other way round - to be Christian one must have faith. So if we ask whether this more radical path into the future remains a genuine continuation of the past and not just the abandonment of it, we need only look back to the biblical tradition itself to realise that faith along with the iconoclastic destruction of idols have characterized it at all its crucial points.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the references found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament to the man whom Jew, Christian and Muslim all look back to as the beginning of their own path of faith. All three look back to Abraham as their model of what it means to have faith. Yet this is in spite of the fact that Abraham knew nothing of the Mosaic Law. He knew nothing of Jesus Christ. He knew nothing of the Qur'an. It was not his beliefs but his faith that mattered.

The New Testament expressed it in these words, which could perhaps be even accepted today by Jew and Muslim, ‘By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out, and he went out, not knowing where he was to go’. ‘Not knowing where he was to go’ is a dramatic way of pointing to the nature of faith. Abraham had no map of the way ahead. He did not even know what destination he was making for. He was simply responding to the voice within him which urged him to make the venture of faith.

Why was he leaving? The biblical story does not say and in any case it was written long after the time of Abraham. It is not so much a history of Abraham as a parable about the nature of faith. But in view of the iconoclastic destruction of idols which came to figure so prominently in the Commandments, and which kept being reaffirmed by the Israelite prophets, it is interesting to observe what the later Jewish legend gave as Abraham's reason for departing from Ur: it was the need to distance himself from the idolatry of the ancient city of Ur.

In a strange way the rejection of the Bible as a sacred object and an infallible source of truth is closer to the spirit of the Bible than any veneration of it. Those who make the Bible their God are paradoxically in direct conflict with the main thrust of the Bible. No sin is regarded so heinous in the Bible as idolatry, yet those who insist that certain beliefs must at all costs be honoured and embraced are idolizing an ideology.

It was by leaving the familiar and traditional things behind and venturing out in faith that Abraham marked the beginning of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic paths of faith. It was by moving out in faith from the rigid structures of Jewish legalism that Paul, following the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, initiated the Christian version of that path of faith. It was by faith that Muhammad, influenced by both the Jewish and Christian paths, led the Arab people away from their idolatrous practices into the Islamic path of faith. It was by abandoning the formal structures and dogmas of the medieval church that Luther opened the path to new freedom.

What happened at the Protestant Reformation has some surprising lessons to teach us, which are very relevant to today. They are lessons which have hardly been noted before and perhaps it is only in the light of subsequent events we are able to discern them. The Reformation did not so much reform the church as fragment it. For the next four hundred years Protestants and Catholics were engaged in bitter hostility, each claiming to be the only genuine manifestation of the Christian path of faith. So much was their attention focused on one another that they hardly noticed that the next burst of spiritual freedom was appearing from the very cracks opening up in fragmented Christendom. The 18th century Enlightenment marks the threshold of change in this process. The modern secular world, which looks to the scientific enterprise rather than to divinely revealed knowledge dates from this time.

What is too little appreciated is the fact that not only did modern secularization (i.e. the acknowledgement of the this-worldliness of reality) come out of the Christian West but in many ways it is the logical development of the Judeo-Christian path of faith. A number of theologians, such as Friedrich Gogarten, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Harvey Cox, have been drawing attention to this for some time but the church at its official level has steadily regarded secularity and secular humanism as an enemy to be held at bay; this is comparable to the way the ancient Jews rejected Christianity and the Catholic Church rejected Protestantism.

The next lesson to be learned from the Protestant Reformation is that it spelled the decline of the church as an institution of power and authority. The authority of the church, which was of course a moral authority rather than a magisterial one, rested on its claim to be the divinely appointed guardian of truth and morals. It acted like an earthly embassy of the heavenly court, through which God from his heavenly throne, revealed his will for human affairs. This is still clearly reflected in the way Pope John Paul II expects all Catholics to respond obediently and without dissent to his Encyclicals on morality. The slow erosion of that dualistic (heaven and earth) view of reality, coupled with the spread of human autonomy, has destroyed the very foundations by which the church assumed that authority. We should therefore not be surprised by the declining authority enjoyed by the church. It will not return. This is why the institutional church has already become sidelined from current affairs of central interest.

This does not mean that all aspects of church life will disappear. In any case the sheer momentum from the past is sufficient to carry the churches forward for quite some time into the future. It is within that time that the churches have to find their new role and mode of operation within the kind of the world we live in today. Robert Bellah, a sociologist with considerable theological expertise, wrote nearly 30 years ago in a book entitled *Beyond Belief*, 'Each individual must be free to work our his/her own ultimate solutions. The most the church can do is to provide a favourable environment for doing so without imposing on him/her a prefabricated set of answers.'[24]

The role of the church is no longer to supply the answers to the questions of the meaning of life. It is rather to assist people to walk the path of faith and to find their own answers. This means the future role of the church is to be what may be called the Open Church. An Open Church welcomes all people, irrespective of race, ideology or creed. It is based on our common humanity and exists to provide for people mutual support, encouragement and spiritual nurture.

An Open Church does not exist to compete with other paths of faith, to proselytize and make all people Christian. We do well to remember the harsh criticism Jesus is said to have delivered to the proselytizers of his day - 'You traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and then make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves'. An Open Church is Christian only to the extent that it has not deliberately cut itself off from the Christian heritage of the past, but continues to draw upon it for inspiration and guidance. But the Open Church is also free to draw from other religious traditions including humanism.

And what of the priesthood or ordained ministry in the Open Church? It is noticeable that the role of the Christian ministry has already begun to show significant change. Many clergy now see their role as non-directive counsellors rather than as authoritative prescribers of the path we are to walk in. In the Open Church there will still be a valuable role to be played by people who have special gifts and training as teachers, advisers, facilitators and resource persons. But the Open Church will not be ruled or dominated by a priesthood, as in the past. In so far as some kind of orderly organization is necessary it will operate democratically. Ever since the Protestant Reformation church life has been moving steadily towards the democratic model. The time is now past for authority to be exerted from above, as in Roman Catholic, Episcopal and even Presbyterian Churches.

It is strangely paradoxical that this model of the Open Church as a fluid organization with flexible membership, democratically organized, is remarkably close to the model of the Jewish synagogue from which primitive Christianity derived its first form of organization. The synagogue, quite unlike all other religious institutions of the ancient world, was a laypersons' institute. It was non-priestly and non-ritualistic. It was simply, as its Greek name tells us, a coming together for fellowship, mutual support, the reading of the Bible and spiritual exercises. Even though the Jewish synagogue did become more formalized through the centuries it has remained much closer to its original form even to this day. The Christian Church, by contrast, adopted patterns of power structures, first from the Roman Empire and subsequently from medieval feudalism. It is these which have become outmoded.

But what of the lay people who constitute the church? In our own personal search for meaning and spiritual fulfilment most of us are only too aware that we can do with all the mutual support and stimulation to further growth that we can receive from, and also give to, one another. We humans are social creatures. We face a road into the future which is now wider and more open than ever before. The future is unknown and is already darkened by ominous, threatening clouds.

This has been strikingly put by a Jewish rabbi who represents in the Jewish path of faith the radical counterpart to what has been here described as the Open Church in the Christian path. Rabbi Richard Rubenstein, along with other radical Jews, has abandoned the concept of an objective deity as a result of Jewish experience at Auschwitz. But he has not abandoned the Jewish path of faith saying, 'Judaism is the way we Jews share our lives in an unfeeling and silent cosmos. It is the flickering candle we have lit to enlighten and warm us'[25].

In similar vein Matthew Arnold, as he pondered on the ebbing tide of traditional Christianity, began the last verse of his poem 'Dover Beach' with the words:

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! for the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

The truth of those words is more evident in today's society than it was in that of Matthew Arnold. Human society, both at the national level and at the global level, has been in the process of breaking out of all the cultural and religious restraints which have promoted social bonds in the past. The world at large is moving to a form of human freedom never before experienced on this globe. Yet this freedom has brought in its train wars of unprecedented magnitude and cruelty. It has brought oppression and starvation for masses of people. On the national level the new freedom has opened the way for the rapid increase of crime and anti-social behaviour which we are now witnessing with alarm.

How do we go about being true to one another in the absence of certitude and facing a threatening future? It is the mission of the Open Church to provide a model for human community, one which accepts individual diversity and yet promotes the growth of personal trust and mutual respect. However much we value our individuality, our personal identity, our autonomous mode of life (and all this has become greatly accentuated in modern times) we must never lose sight of the fact that it has all been made possible by countless generations of community life; and community is based on bonds of mutual trust and goodwill. Community is the basis of the level of humanity we now experience and the key to further human development. This is why the Christian Way of the past placed so much emphasis on belonging to the 'people of God', and spoke of the church as the 'body of Christ'. Community was understood in terms of a living organism, whose individual organs retained their identity and function, yet worked harmoniously for the functioning of the whole.

Community is fostered and nurtured by focusing attention on the three supreme spiritual virtues - faith, hope and love. These may be called spiritual virtues for they are of a higher order than the ethical values such as honesty, justice, integrity, which are also extremely important for a healthy human community. We have already discussed the vital importance of faith. Closely associated with faith is hope. It is by the hope of goals yet to be reached that faith is sustained and stimulated in growth in facing the future. Both for the individual and for the society, hope must be able to find expression in some tangible form.

Love may be legitimately regarded as the greatest of the three spiritual virtues, as St. Paul declared, simply because it forms the cohesive power which draws us together. Love is to community what nuclear power is to the atom, and why the breakdown of love can be so explosive. Where the binding power of love is absent there can be no community, no family life, no church. Love, along with its associated virtues, such as compassion and self-sacrifice, constitutes the supreme value which humans have come to recognize and experience and is the reason why it has been said that 'God is love'. The history of the life of the church in the past has been far from perfect in manifesting love and yet, it has never ceased to affirm its importance. The role of the Open Church is both to nurture the bonds of love in society and to strive to provide a model of what a loving community can be.

The spiritual virtues provide the ingredients with which the Open Church can become a path-finder to society at a time when the road ahead is wider and more open than ever before. It can make no claim to be the only path-finder. But the reason why the church can be an effective path-finder is that, by deliberately seeking to preserve some continuity with the path which has led us to this point, it can provide some valuable markers as to how we got here and what has made us what we are. At the very least these can prevent society at large from going round in circles and becoming completely lost. To paraphrase a well-known saying, those who forget the lessons of their culture are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

One can learn from the past without being bound by the past. The path of faith from Jesus of Nazareth onwards preserved continuity with the past by retaining the Jewish Scriptures, referring to it as the Old Testament; so in our day the whole Bible and the subsequent Christian doctrines have become, as it were, our Old Testament.

As the first people to call themselves Christian were free to interpret the ancient Jewish Scriptures in the light of their new experience, so we are free to interpret the Christian heritage in the light of the vast body of new knowledge with which we have become surrounded in modern world. This Christian heritage permeates the whole of Western culture. It is just as damaging to us culturally to cut ourselves off from it completely as it is to make an idol of it.

In this respect we should view with some alarm the fact that in such a short time a whole generation has grown up who are now biblically illiterate. Since the biblical material conveyed in story form the traditional value system of our culture there is probably a correlation between that fact and the increasing amount of anti-social behaviour. It is to be hoped that the time will soon come for the Bible to find its own natural level, by which means it can be more widely read as a set of human documents of quite remarkable value, pointing to the historical origins and general character of western culture.

Central to the New Testament heritage is the person of Jesus, who became acclaimed as the Christ. Though the historical figure of Jesus is no longer easy to recover from behind the supernatural and divine cloak with which he became clothed by the church, it is clear that here was a remarkable man who can still be genuinely honoured as original and creative. He provides a model of a genuine path-finder, and that is why his later followers put into his mouth the words, 'I am the Way'. But he lived in very different times and circumstances. His way need not and cannot be our way. It is his role as path-finder that we can find encouraging. As such, he is one who, at that human level, can be honoured by all, whether they be Jew, Christian or humanist.

The path-finding role of the church will be advanced not by any claim to authority, as in the past, but simply by the intrinsic value of what it is seeking to do. This method will be quiet and unobtrusive, rather like that of which Jesus spoke when he likened the coming of the Kingdom of God to leaven, silently and invisibly permeating the lump of dough.

The role of the Open Church, therefore, is to be the leaven in society, raising the consciousness of society to the values and goals on which its viable future depends. Such a task will become increasingly urgent in the generations to come, for already we see the storm-clouds gathering. Indeed there is a certain parallel between conditions on the global scale today and those present in ancient Palestine at the time when the path of faith took its Christian shape. The first Christians saw themselves living at the end of the Age. They believed that the world as it had been known was coming imminently to an end and hopefully would be replaced by a new world, which they referred to as the New Heaven and the New Earth.

As we face a new millennium, there lie before us exciting new possibilities on the one hand, and on the other the threat of global disasters on an unprecedented scale. These first appeared as the threat of a global nuclear war. That fear has lessened in intensity and has been superseded by another which may be even more serious because it is less dramatic. Human activity on the earth is now seriously disturbing the delicate ecological balance upon which all planetary life depends. The various environmental dangers have already given rise to a variety of one-issue organisations.

An important social role for the Open Church is not only to encourage them all but also to provide a politically neutral umbrella which will help to co-ordinate them and enable them to work together for the common good. The word 'salvation', so central to the original Christian Gospel, has taken on a new lease of life in the current context. 'Save the planet', 'Save the whales', 'Save the black robins', might have appeared at first to have nothing to do with the traditional concern for salvation. Yet they turn out to be particular instances of the more general and far-reaching concern for the salvation of the biosphere. The responsible care of the biosphere, which is the matrix of all life including our own, has become the supreme religious duty of our time. As someone has said, 'We have to learn to care for the earth as diligently as people once served their gods'.

It is in this respect that some of the most distinctive values of the Christian tradition come fully into play. The chief reason for caring for the planet is not primarily for ourselves, for many of us will not live long enough to see and feel the full impact of

the destructive consequences of what humans are doing to the planet. The urgent work of saving the life of the planet is not so much for our personal benefit as for that of the generations to come.

It is just here that something central to the Christian Way becomes strikingly relevant. The central Christian symbol has always been the cross. Whatever else the way of the cross may have come to mean, it was strongly symbolic of the call to sacrifice one's own life and interests for the greater benefit of others. In today's world that means the readiness not only for us to accept human mortality but to live and die in such a way as to bring greatest benefit to all other living creatures.

Already a great conflict is growing between those who want to exploit the earth for short-terms gains and those who want to conserve the natural resources of the earth and develop policies which will be sustainable. We are becoming increasingly aware that political and economic power largely rests at the moment with those who are only too ready to opt for short-term gains rather than for the long-term goals of sustainability. The care of Mother Earth, with all which that involves, is to a large extent replacing the former sense of obedience to the Heavenly Father. The path of faith into the future must be one of caring for the earth and it will involve the kind of sacrifice of personal gains long symbolised in the Christian cross. It was the primitive Christian belief that the death of Jesus on the cross was not the utter disaster that it first appeared to be that gave rise to the affirmation that he had risen from the dead. It is the hope that every personal sacrifice we make today will bear fruit for the generations yet to come, which is the continuing significance of the symbolic Christian language of resurrection.

W. Cantwell Smith, in a book entitled *Towards a World Theology*, explored the way in which people of all cultures, all paths of faith, could work towards this common global objective. Each must start from the background of the cultural path which has shaped them to this point. In this context he wrote, ‘My aspiration is to participate Christianly (i.e. in a Christian Way) in the total life of humankind - the intellectual life, and the religious, as well as the economic and the political. And I invite others to do so Jewishly, Islamically, Buddhistically, or whatever - including humanistically. It will not be easy to build on earth a world community. It will not be possible, unless each of us brings to it the resources of his or her mind and his or her faith’[26]. To that we may all say Amen.

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