

# **The Future of Mainline Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century©**

**By**

**Dick Rauscher, M.Div, Fellow AAPC, Licensed NYS Mental Health Counselor**

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**Abstract:** *The future survival and relevance of both Christianity and other imperialistic mainline religions as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is doubtful. They are emerging as a primary source of the intolerance, conflict, and violence we are experiencing in the world today. Their claims of “ultimate truth” based on theologies created by ancient superstitious, pre-modern cultures, and their total disregard or rejection of 300 years of modern biblical scholarship and its undeniable dismantling of all conservative claims of scriptural inerrancy, are a deep embarrassment to any reasonably informed 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness.*

*A growing number of people are no longer willing to remain silent and suffer the embarrassment they feel when intolerant, conservative and fundamental church members presume to speak for them. The intolerance and lack of compassion that conservatives feel for those they label as sub-human, and their black-and-white unwillingness to embrace modern scientific knowledge and over three hundred years of modern biblical scholarship represent a form of ignorance that a post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness can no longer safely tolerate or accept.*

*The article ends with seven reforms that will be needed by all mainline religions if they wish to institutionally survive and reestablish relevance for a post-modern consciousness.*

## **Introduction**

I will be talking about the future, or lack of one, for *all* mainline churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. I will focus primarily on the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, however, given my education and experience as an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church I will confine the majority of my comments and discussion to issues within the Christian Church.

Despite the Christian focus of this article, all of the comments and observations made about Christianity will apply with equal validity to the conservative and fundamental Churches in *all* of the worlds mainline religions; especially the monotheistic religions of Judaism, and Islam. There is little doubt that all of our imperialistic mainline religions appear to be rapidly approaching the end of their 2500 year reign.

Because many readers will undoubtedly find these articles challenging and perhaps disturbing, I want to state clearly that I am not anti-religion, nor am I anti-faith. I believe deeply in the formation of a compassionate, enlightened middlepath spirituality.

At the end of this article I will include a brief discussion of seven reforms and changes that I believe are urgently needed in our mainline religions if they are to successfully survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **The Danger of Imperialism in The Theology of Mainline Religion**

The conservative child-like, black-and-white primitive ego thinking process that the pre-modern faith beliefs of virtually every mainline religion are built upon, and their imperialistic claims of scriptural and creedal superiority renders them incapable of manifesting a sustained non-judgmental compassion. Such imperialistic claims to religious superiority are the primary cause of conflict and violence in today’s world, and threaten the very foundations of our human society; perhaps even our survival as a species.

There is a growing consciousness globally that conservative black-and-white claims of religious scriptural or creedal superiority are simply becoming too dangerous to be ignored or tolerated by the rest of the civilized world. These narcissistic claims of religious superiority make our mainline churches incapable of effectively supporting or ethically guiding humanity in the creation of a non-judgmental, compassionate global culture.

Stated simply, narcissistic primitive ego dualistic thinking that assumes the “absolute certainty” of one’s faith beliefs inevitably creates an environment of intolerance, conflict, and violence, and is therefore the very antithesis of empathy and compassion. *The ability to manifest compassion while using the rigidity of black-and-white thinking is not possible; it reflects a fundamental contradiction in terms.* Because of these realities, our willingness as a species to tolerate or ignore the high level of conflict and violence currently being created by the religious intolerance of our mainline religions is rapidly fading.

Despite the fact that conservative and evangelical mainline churches represent an alarming lack of intellectual integrity, and a significant level of self-imposed ignorance in their pre-modern faith beliefs, it appears likely that they are going to continue to grow and project their dangerous imperialism and judgmental intolerance into the world for at least another generation; perhaps longer. These conservative churches are growing because they offer their members the balm of absolute certainty to alleviate the primitive ego anxiety that comes from uncertainty and “not knowing.”

The conservatives and fundamentalists may represent a small minority of religious people in the world, and the primitive ego thinking and simplistic faith beliefs of their theologies may reflect a significant lack of intellectual integrity, but at this moment in time, they are currently the primary voices of faith and religion shaping the religious landscape.

For example, a recent poll reported that 83% of Americans believe in the virgin birth and only 29% believe in evolution. The New York Times editorial writer Garry Wills responded to the results of this poll with the question “Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an enlightened nation?” Theologian Robert W. Funk believes that “We will not make significant inroads into the hegemony of fundamentalism and literalism unless or until we break into the dominance of public rhetoric by the Christian right and their political cronies.” I would also include the public rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalists.

To summarize, there is little doubt that the need for voluntary, internal theological reform, intellectual integrity, and scriptural literacy in our mainline religions is urgent and critical. It is becoming clear that humanity will be unable to create a viable and compassionate global culture until the immature primitive ego thinking process of childhood currently used in our social, political, and especially our mainline religious institutions, is transformed into the matured observing ego of a more enlightened consciousness.

### **The Imperialistic Intolerance of Conservative Theologies Will Hasten the Demise of Mainline Religions**

There are many individual pastors and laity in all denominations of our mainline religions who are working diligently and tirelessly to bring compassion and tolerance into the world. Unfortunately,

they are engaged in a spiritual struggle they may never win. True compassion and unconditional love can *only* be built on a foundation of “emptiness of ego” called “not-knowing”. As a result, the imperialistic faith beliefs of their particular religion and the assumption that those faith beliefs represent “ultimate truth” *will never be* compatible with true compassion.

In other words, the good that these dedicated people struggle to accomplish is being silently undermined by the cancer cells of ignorance and evil created by their religion’s imperialistic faith beliefs and conservative theologies. I see this as especially true for all of the monotheistic mainline religions.

Whenever our primitive ego insists that “*our*” faith beliefs are “*right*” and represent absolute truth, our proselytizing automatically creates a judgmental criticism that arrogantly assumes that the faith beliefs of others are “*wrong*” or inferior. Making disciples for Christ, or Islamic threats against the “infidels” are excellent examples of this kind of religious imperialism. There is no way we can avoid deeply offending people of other faiths or religious beliefs and making them angry when we manifest such narcissistic arrogance.

When this kind of deeply offended anger begins to grow inside another nations religious culture, it can easily escalate into global violence. To pretend that we do not understand the judgmentalism and anger we are creating with our religious superiority is nothing more than intentional and calculated primitive ego ignorance. No normally intelligent person is that illogical or insensitive.

No matter how hard we try to ignore the reality, it is becoming painfully clear that the current black-and-white primitive ego thinking process, upon which virtually every mainline religion is currently constructed, appears to be incapable of guiding humanity in the creation a compassionate global culture. Their primitive ego based need for “the absolute certainty of their *unverifiable* faith beliefs” creates an intolerance that causes them to lose contact with their hearts.

Although all three mainline religions make the claim, neither Islam, Judaism, or Christianity has the “one true path” to God. *All paths to God are valid.* And even though it seems to work reasonably well for some countries in the Western world, democracy is not the *only* way to govern a country; especially when it is forced onto other countries militarily. When any government, or any religion, attempts to force their ideologies or theologies onto others, they are manifesting an arrogant and dangerous fundamentalism that assumes that they, and they alone, possess absolute truth.

Of course, this reality is easier to see and understand when we are talking about Islamic terrorism. It is always easier to see when it is someone else’s issue. Regardless of who is generating the violence, our tolerance as a species for the violence created by religious or political institutions that insist that truth can only be found in their particular religion or political ideology is growing thin. *It is not going to be long before the civilized nations of the world are going to have to decisively confront this kind of thinking.*

The violence and judgmental “otherness” created by dualistic primitive ego thinking is currently found in virtually all of our conservative mainline religions. It is becoming clear that compassion cannot simply be a goal for each of us as individuals; it must quickly become the primary goal of each of our mainline religions. The founder of every mainline religion taught the importance of

compassion, and unless our mainline religions rapidly and voluntarily return to those roots, the option for voluntary reform will ultimately be taken out of their hands.

To briefly summarize, the indifference that human culture has shown in the past toward religious intolerance is ending. Unless the imperialistic mainline religions of the world voluntarily undergo significant *voluntary* theological reform, the social and political institutions of the world will have no choice but to impose legal and economic sanctions to curtail their power and influence. It is obvious that religious imperialism is an evil that threatens our very existence as a species and will soon need to be dealt with. It is universally accepted that it is simply a matter of time before mainline religious terrorists, whose mandate for violence comes directly from God, get their hands on weapons of mass destruction.

### **Reformations of the World's Mainline Religions is Inevitable**

The growing consciousness of the modern world is beginning to recognize that the path our mainline religion are currently leading us down is simply too dangerous and unstable; our current global tolerance and indifference toward black-and-white primitive ego claims of absolute truth in our mainline churches "*unverifiable religious faith beliefs*" needs to end.

Because religious fundamentalism is simply too dangerous to be ignored or tolerated in a global culture, the high level of conflict and violence that will continue to be created by these conservative churches will eventually force the world's social and political institutions to take action and bring an end to their power and ability to create instability in the world. It will only be a matter of time before our mainline churches lose the social and financial privileges they depend upon for their survival.

The world's religious institutions could soon be subjected to the same rules and social constraints that other secular institutions currently have to obey. For example, churches could eventually be required to report and pay income tax on all forms of income and gifts, pay property and school taxes on all real-estate holdings, and pay sales tax on all purchases. Such legislation is already being publicly debated and could eventually bring an end to both the viability and influence of our mainline churches.

To avoid outside secular economic and political restraints, institutional churches of all mainline religions are eventually going to have to voluntarily adopt, and then show that they are self-enforcing the religious reforms listed in Appendix B at the end of this article.

The younger generation of voters in Europe and America, unlike earlier generations, are more conscious of the fact that we are rapidly becoming a global, systemically interconnected, human culture that must quickly learn to move beyond the divisive issues of race, religion, and political tribalism that are creating so much conflict. These young people understand that the survival of our human civilization depends on our ability to work cooperatively with others. Virtually every political institution in the world is, out of necessity, beginning to wrestle with this important reality. The backlash of fear and concern generated by the Bush administration's efforts to create an American Christian theocracy is already accelerating a growing secular restraint on religious institutions here in the United States. The following article in the New York Times is a recent example of this growing social backlash.

In Cathedral City, California Jim Nimmons, pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church crawled onto the roof of his church recently with a can of red paint and simply wrote the word “eternity” across its shingles. In part, because of the religious imperialism implied, the town board is taking the church to court for violation of the town’s “advertising” laws.

Social restraint on the worlds mainline religions will not come about over night. It will undoubtedly take years for political institutions to develop the will to make these kinds of change; but they are coming. The awakening of human consciousness is growing. We are no longer a medieval, uneducated, superstitiously based species that relies on educated religious leadership to keep us informed. Even the poorest and least educated know that the world is not flat, the earth does not revolve around the sun, and that the stars in the sky are not holes through which the glory of heaven is shining.

Our willingness as a species to ignore intellectual integrity in our mainline religions, and tolerate the current religious intolerance that comes from religious imperialism is rapidly fading. It no longer makes sense to our emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century global consciousness. There is a growing concern that the secular backlash directed at the conservative religious imperialism of our mainline religions could be severe. Fear tends to create its own violence.

### **The Ineffective Role of Liberal Mainline Churches and Their Inability to Generate The Needed Theological Reforms**

As stated earlier in this paper, *“a primitive ego ‘absolute certainty’ in one’s faith beliefs inevitably creates intolerance and conflict and is the anthesis of empathy and compassion.”*

Because of this simple but obvious reality, mainline churches that want to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to demonstrate a willingness to radically reinvent themselves. This is especially true in Christianity. Most of the mainline denominations in the Christian church are declining in vitality and strength as elderly members die, and others, feeling forced to adopt the religious beliefs of an ancient pre-modern worldview in order to have a faith, elect to drop their membership. Bishop John Shelby Spong refers to these people as members of the Christian Alumni Association.

These members of the Christian alumni association live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and are demanding a faith that speaks with intellectual integrity to their 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness. They know that the issues and problems we face in the creation of a modern global culture cannot be effectively addressed, ethically or morally, using faith beliefs created by ancient pre-modern cultures.

Liberal Christian churches tend to be intellectually open minded and concerned with social justice but their worship and basic theology is still very traditional, there is very little attention given to feminism, the marginalized such as gay and lesbians, authentic spiritual growth, or a true and open acceptance of truths contained in other religions.

Liberal religions embrace everything but they also studiously avoid offending *anyone*.

To avoid looking intolerant, liberal Christian churches are unwilling to take a firm stand on important moral and ethical issues such as intolerance and injustice. When they do take a stand on these issues, they rarely enforce the new guidelines they legislate. For example, these churches may

vote to prohibit the ordination of women or homosexual clergy using the concept of “equal but separate”, but at the same time they will affirm the sanctity of women and gays. They refer to this middle of the road avoidance of offense as taking a “pastoral” approach. In liberal Christian churches, maintaining membership and unity of thought routinely takes priority over compassion and justice.

Any religion that refuses to take a clear stand on the important issues of justice and compassion is a religion that ultimately will not survive. It will become ideologically irrelevant and eventually fade away. The bottom line; it really does not make any difference whether they survive or not because no one knows what they really stand for anyway. Conservative and evangelical churches are growing because they *do* take clear stands on issues; despite the fact that they openly and publicly endorse intolerance and injustice in their imperialistic, black-and-white primitive ego faith beliefs.

To be a member of a Christian church should mean that *your ultimate goal in life is to manifest compassion and perform concrete acts of loving-kindness*. This is the theological bottom line of Christianity. In other words, *all* members of any Christian denomination should be willing to take a *firm, unequivocal stand against any form of intolerance*. And since the manifestation of compassion and justice is the stated goal and foundational belief of every mainline religion in the world, it should be reasonable to expect that every member of *any* mainline religion should also be willing to take a clear and unwavering ethical stand against intolerance and injustice.

In other words, a person of faith in *any* mainline church should *always* be willing to fully accept and offer compassion to others. *At the same time*, they should be willing to take a clear stand *against* the intolerance, judgmentalism, prejudice, bias, injustice, beliefs, or behaviors of any institution, groups, or individuals that cause pain or suffering to others, creates injustice, or assumes that other persons are in any way sub-human.

To avoid taking such a stand and then calling it “pastoral” as is commonly the case in liberal Christian churches means that they are willing to place the intolerance and injustice of black-and-white primitive ego thinking above compassion and acts of kindness. As a result, the ethical and moral values of their faith beliefs have become meaningless.

In most liberal churches, women are still often not allowed to be ordained, homosexuals are not allowed to be ordained, same sex marriages are prohibited, it is a sin for people with AIDS to use a condom, and in the name of patriotism, the torture of prisoners is accepted, and they openly condone preemptive war against countries accused of harboring terrorists.

Since the end always justifies the means in black-and-white primitive ego thinking, the collateral damage or death and maiming of tens-of-thousands of non-combatant women, children, and the elderly as a result of these preemptive wars, is ignored or tolerated because the “patriotic” war being waged is fighting the “evil” intolerant and violent terrorists that want to do us harm. They are unable to see or acknowledge the beam in their own eye.

A person of faith in any mainline religion, especially Christians, should be willing to take a clear and unequivocal stand to support compassion and justice. Until they do, they may claim to be

religious, Christian, or “pastoral”, but the intolerance and suffering of others will not change. Faith is not about beliefs, it is about compassion and how one acts in the face of intolerance and injustice.

Liberal churches attempt to ignore the fact that simply ignoring or condoning intolerance, to avoid offending the intolerant members of their congregation, simply leaves the intolerant members of their church in a position of power; a power that will continue to create conflict and violence to those who are the unfortunate targets of their intolerance and bigotry.

As one writer put it “there is no moral obligation or duty for a tolerant person to tolerate intolerance.” Intolerant people play by different rules. They are unconcerned about compassion and justice. Only their beliefs are important.

Liberal churches avoid “offending” their intolerant religiously conservative members because they fear that they might cause these people to leave the church. Yet virtually no clergy or laity in any liberal mainline church would deny that their churches are in the process of slowly dying and fading away. Membership is down, tithing is down, and the majority of their members are retired and elderly. The holy “spirit” has left the building.

One has to wonder, and be willing to pose the question, if the church is dying anyways, why not take a clear stand against intolerance even if it means losing a few more members. Perhaps if our liberal mainline churches could find the will and courage to steadfastly and firmly stand against the evil and injustice of intolerance and prejudice, they might actually find their membership beginning to grow.

Taking a clear stand against the primitive ego dualism that creates bigotry and intolerance could not hurt, and it just might help. For members of liberal mainline churches to live with spiritual veracity would simply mean learning to challenge intolerance and manifesting a truly compassionate, non-judgmental loving kindness for others.; even when the intolerance is found in their own faith beliefs.

### **Mainline Religions Must Learn to Embrace the Reality of Change and Veracity**

For our mainline religions to embrace the concept of veracity would mean accepting the primary reality that it is change that drives all of creation and all living systems. Living with veracity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means openly embracing change; the diversification and evolution of all creation. Every species, culture, institution, religion, government, and biological life form, is always in a constant process of evolution and sub-division into new species, new life forms, new sub-cultures, and new religions. *Even mainline religions are subject to these fundamental realities.*

For any religion to insist that it has never changed, that it has not evolved, or that its scriptures are the direct unchanging eternal words of God, is a form of ignorance that attempts to deny or ignore the reality of change. To openly make such claims not only rejects the concept of intellectual integrity; it is essentially an admission that the religion in question is already in a process of decline. *Any living system that claims to have stopped changing or growing is a system that is either dying or already dead.* Stated simply, the louder and more aggressively a religion claims that it alone possess absolute unchanging truth in its creeds and scriptures, the closer that religion is to death and irrelevance.

Insisting on veracity; the ability to live fully engaged in the world we know and the willingness to embrace the reality of change, evolution, and intellectual integrity is critically important whether we are talking about religion, politics, or media reporting. Without veracity we are condemned to live in a psychotic world at the mercy of those who would use power and mis-direction to control us. Only truth found in the embrace of veracity has the power to enable us to wrestle effectively with the important social and scientific decisions and choices we need to make in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if we are to successfully evolve as a species.

We never know what the future will look like until it arrives, but it is fair to assume that simple black-and-white faith beliefs designed by a pre-modern primitive ego thinking process to reduce anxiety will no longer be accepted as “absolute truths.” Our mainline churches of the future will embrace veracity and incorporate three hundred years of modern biblical scholarship in their reformed faith beliefs.

We can assume that mainline religions of the future will teach that because of reflexive consciousness in the human species we have the ability to create form. Embracing veracity will mean that mainline religions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will teach its members that it is our job as Co-creators to work with the Initiating Consciousness of the Universe in the creation of new forms. Those new forms will include increased tolerance, growth in human consciousness, the ability to manifest compassion through an intentional growth in self-awareness, and improvement in our stewardship of the earth and our environment.

In the future, credible mainline religions will need to manifest a Co-creative spirituality that no longer waits for God to show up and fix everything. They will know that God is already present, but “It” does not tinker with reality. Free will is free will. As reflexively conscious Co-creators of form with God, mainline religions of the future will hold us fully responsible for the forms we choose to create; both individually and collectively.

We can assume that since complexity is never effectively managed using a rigid black and white thinking process, our mainline churches of the future will have evolved theologically and spirituality into middlepath religious institutions open to new information, and be willing to dialogue and employ critical thinking. They will no longer need to psychologically manipulate their membership using shame and guilt, fear, threats of hell, or the promise of rewards of heaven.

The immature primitive ego thinking of childhood will have transformed itself into a more matured and enlightened adult consciousness; dualism will have given way to middlepath thinking; and the violence created by dualistic, black-and-white thinking will have been replaced by tolerance and compassion.

To summarize, it is fair to say with certainty that mainline religions of the future will not be based on rigid, child-like, black-and-white, primitive ego generated faith beliefs that are touted as absolute, eternal, unchanging truths. Such religions are far too rigid and brittle to survive or withstand the powerful forces of change that will be encountered in a rapidly emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century global culture.

**Hope for The Future: The Emerging Progressive Church Movement in Mainline Religion**

While the future for our world's mainline churches appears to be rather grim, there is one small but growing light of hope. A quiet, yet powerful, revolution is taking place in Christianity and other mainline religions around the world. Although institutionally un-organized, small progressive churches are springing up in cities and communities all over the world. No longer comfortable with traditional imperialistic theologies and intolerant faith beliefs, these open-minded, openhearted progressive churches have been quietly germinating and growing at a grass root level for the last 15 to 20 years.

Representing virtually every mainline religious denomination, these progressive churches are open advocates for theological reform, the causes of women, the rights of homosexuals, the transgendered, the bi-sexual, and pro-active protection of the environment. Their primary focus is on the development of a vital, authentic middlepath spirituality based on intellectual integrity and a deep sense of social justice for those marginalized by intolerant social, political, and religious institutions.

They reject the simplistic dualism of black-and-white primitive ego thinking and choose instead to employ a more mature, observing ego consciousness; a consciousness theologically comfortable with a middlepath spirituality based on not knowing, uncertainty, the built-in complexity of diversity, and the inherent paradoxes contained in all truths.

Unlike liberal Christian churches, these small progressive churches tend to be physically and emotionally expressive in their worship, and less focused on traditional left brain preaching. Worship often includes meditation, artistic forms of worship such as ethnic music and dance, and includes rituals from Eastern, African, and Native American religions. They are intellectually curious and willing to openly challenge and explore their traditional faith beliefs so-as-to redefine them and thereby introduce new and fresh ways of understanding traditional Christian faith beliefs.

Enthusiastically grounded in a modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness that is comfortable with biblical scholarship, advances in science, new understandings and ways of talking about God, and the belief that all paths to God are valid and contain truths that need to be understood and incorporated into their own faith beliefs, these progressive churches openly reject, and are willing to confront, all forms of theological imperialism, intolerance, and bigotry.

Unlike traditional mainline churches that focus primarily on God and faith beliefs, these progressive churches are not focused on changing or converting others to their beliefs. They are committed to growth in self-awareness and the spiritual work of personal transformation. Their outreach ministries are based primarily on helping their own members, and the unchurched in the larger community, cope with the struggles and problems of day-to-day life. They tend to be open, welcoming to persons of other faiths, and "non-religious" in their style of worship. They offer a spiritual consciousness that is enlightened and hopeful for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While these small progressive churches offer a theology that is relevant, refreshing, has intellectual integrity, and offers a new vision for the future of mainline religion that is indeed hopeful, it is important to remember that this movement is still in its infancy. Without significant help, support, and encouragement from liberal mainline churches, they are unlikely to exert a significant impact on the reformation of mainline religion in the near future.

The one bright ray of hope that these small progressive churches do offer however is the possibility that when the liberal and conservative churches of our mainline religions eventually decline in importance and influence, they might be in a position to preserve the wisdom and spiritual insights contained in our mainline religions. As seekers of truth rather than defenders of previous post-modern definitions of truth, these small progressive churches may be well positioned to offer a 21<sup>st</sup> century mainline faith experience in a religious and spiritual context that makes sense for the spiritually hungry people of future generations.

### **Final Thoughts: Will Christianity Survive The 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**

Progressive churches are attracting people looking for post-modern religious doctrines and scriptures that offer both intellectual integrity and a middlepath spirituality that makes sense to their 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness.

At the same time, there are very few church leaders in any of the mainline religions that would deny that their churches are struggling with a critical decline in both membership and financial resources. The average age of pastors, priests, and active laity is often over sixty years of age, and the number of new clergy graduating from seminaries to replace dying and retiring clergy is well below the number required to insure that all churches have a resident pastor and the number of seminary candidates for ordained ministry are continuing to decline.

Given these well-documented realities, it is safe to say the future survival of our mainline churches beyond more than a few generations is doubtful. Despite the loud and defensive rhetoric of fundamental and conservative churches, it is clear that our mainline religions are rapidly losing religious and social relevance.

The future for our mainline religions is grim, but I believe that we may be missing an important and powerful reality embedded in the human psyche; the need for hope. Throughout history, humans have demonstrated a deep spiritual hunger for mythical heroes\* in whom we can find ultimate meaning and who offer a useful spiritual template for our own lives. Our spiritual heroes simply have to both embody an accurate reflection of our own deeply held human desire to become more than we are, and represent a meaningful spiritual archetype we can use as a model or pattern for our own life. It is also important to note that these mythical heroes do not “*have*” to be real or based on real people to exert a profound positive influence.

The life and ministry of the historical Jesus, the Buddha, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa have all had a significant influence on my spiritual formation, but I would also have to include Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda from Star Wars, and Isaac Asimov’s famous robot R. Daniel Olivar. Each was an important spiritual teacher in my spiritual formation. But far-and-away the most powerful single influence that shaped my spiritual life was “grasshopper” the Buddhist Shaolin priest Kwai Chang Caine played by David Carodine in the 1970’s TV series Kung Fu. More than any other, “grasshopper” was the spiritual teacher who encouraged me to walk the spiritual path in life.

I am convinced that Christianity has survived for 2000 years and will survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century not because the historical Jesus literally did all the things that traditional Christianity says he did, but because the mythological Christ that the institutional Christian Church “*created*” for humanity over a period of five hundred years became a powerful mythical hero and template; a spiritual example of what every human being could hope and aspire to become. Using the historical Jesus, the early Christian church “*created*” Jesus Christ to reflect the ultimate, superhuman, holy human being; the son of God himself. A human created in the image of God.

For Jesus Christ to survive as one of our mythical heroes, however, I am convinced that he will need to a) be removed from the current destructive and embarrassing myth that he is the founder of a sin and shame based religion for humanity that offers spiritual salvation through his barbaric sacrificial death as the son of God, b) he will need to be taken out of the context of the current petty, jealous, angry, violent scriptural definitions of a revengeful God, and c) Christians will need to abandon the literal understanding of Jesus and come to understand how the historical person we know as Jesus was mythologized into the all-powerful Christ of faith by the early Christian church.

I believe that the age-old Christian message of hope and meaning “*will*” successfully survive the death of these traditional pre-modern faith beliefs. *No relevant religion is ever based on the factual or historical literalness of its faith beliefs. Any religion that survives to influence humanity is always based on a mythology that offers its believers a spiritual message of hope.*

Christianity, the religion “*about*” Jesus as Christ, has always been based on the radical and transformative ministry “*of*” Jesus; the man who brought a message of hope to the poor, the outcast, the sick, the prisoners, and to those marginalized by the culture in which he lived. His God was an unconditionally loving father fully present in a Kingdom of God that was real and present. His God was a God that did not recognize human definitions or boundaries that separated people or created sub-human categories. Jesus taught humanity to see the Kingdom of God that surrounds us. He taught, that unlike the stories in the Old Testament, God is unconditionally loving. Through his message and ministry of compassion, Jesus brought hope to those who had given up hope.

A religion that speaks to the potential future humanity of its members and brings hope and meaning does not need ancient, out-moded, pre-modern rigid faith beliefs to survive. It does not need to be an imperialistic religion that bullies others into unity of thought. It simply has to offer hope. Jesus taught his disciples about a way of life, not about how to start a new religion. Living a life of unconditional love and trusting in God *was* his religion of hope.

All that is needed for Christianity to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a reinterpretation of the Christian myth to embrace a post-modern worldview. The old supernatural myths of a theistic God that sits in heaven and takes notes on whether we have been “good or bad” is a God that our human ancestors created and is no longer credible. We need to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian mythology.

We need to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century definition of God beyond theism. I believe that the ministry “of” *Jesus* that brought justice and unconditional love to so many people will continue to be a powerful religion of hope. But all of our mainline religions, including Christianity, will survive only if they are willing to undergo reform. Every path to the Creator is valid. The imperialistic claims regarding the superiority of Christianity as the only true religion must end.

There are those who fear that reform of our mainline religions will lead to the death of not only religion, but the death of God itself. This belief is a good example of the narcissism and arrogance of our primitive ego. There is no way that a simple human definition of God could ever lead to the death of the Initiating Consciousness of the universe. God is simply God. But how humanity understands God can make the difference between a world of unconditional love and enlightenment and a world filled with imperialistic violence.

The Christ of Christian faith is nothing more than a myth created by humans to attempt to capture the radical ministry “of” *Jesus* and preserved it for future generations of humanity as a message of hope and possibility. The ministry “of” *Jesus* brought far more to the mystery of spirituality than mere human creeds and religious beliefs. He taught us that we too could grow spiritually and learn to embrace a life of unconditional love, compassion, meaning, and purpose. *Jesus the Christ* represents the hope and belief that we too can evolve beyond our primitive ego and find the “*Christ nature*” within ourselves; *the hope that we too can discover our essential or authentic observing ego self and learn to bring hope, unconditional love, and compassion to others.*

Whether we are referring to our Christ nature, or our Buddha nature, we are referring to an authentic self based on a deeply self-aware observing ego; an enlightened spiritual consciousness that has evolved well beyond the outmoded knee-jerk beliefs of the current traditional mainline religions that were created by humanity’s pre-modern collective primitive ego. This is the hope for our species that will allow Christianity to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Conclusion**

To insist that any one religion is the only true path to the Creator, that any one scripture is inerrant or represents the literal “word of God” only reflects the ignorance of the individual or institution making such claims.

Religious institutions or religious authorities that insist on a literal interpretation of their scriptures, and who insist on teaching the ethics and morality of a world view 3500 years deceased, no longer have much of value to teach a 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness. Because they already have possession of “ultimate truths”, they do not need to be open to new truths. The result of such imperialistic thinking is they have become brittle and lifeless relics of the past. They are no longer relevant to a modern consciousness.

It should not be necessary to expect a person to suspend his or her intelligence and be required to adopt the consciousness of a pre-modern culture in order to have a belief or faith in a higher power. It should not be necessary for an educated or intelligent 21<sup>st</sup> century member of a mainline church to feel embarrassment when they admit or

publically acknowledge that they are Jewish, or Christian, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist.

It is time that we openly recognize and accept the reality that the pre-modern beliefs that our mainline religions are based on not only represent an alarming lack intellectual integrity, their theological imperialism is extremely dangerous for the future evolution and well-being of our species and our human civilization. Only an enlightened middlepath spirituality will assure the future survival of our species and the survival of our modern civilization.

It is time for a radical reformation in the faith beliefs, scriptures, and theologies of all of the world's mainline religious institutions. Our antiquated, obsolete, pre-modern dualistic, primitive ego understandings of God must be abandoned to make room for a more enlightened, compassionate, 21<sup>st</sup> century, adult observing ego understanding of God; an immanent God that is embedded in all of creation thereby making all of creation sacred.

I wrote this article on Future of Mainline Religion in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century to bring an increased awareness and consciousness to the dangerous lack of intellectual integrity and critical thinking that exists in our mainline line religions. What I have tried to point out is the unacceptable danger of allowing our primitive egos to assume that *unverifiable* faith beliefs represent "absolute truth" just because we "*think*" they are true. We have the right to believe whatever faith beliefs we want to believe as long as we understand that they represent *only* our own subjective understandings of truth; not "absolute truth" itself.

The greatest evolutionary gift we possess is our reflexive consciousness; the ability to think about what we think about. If we give up the ability to think critically about our beliefs, especially our faith beliefs, we are literally giving up the very thing that makes us human.

Most of our religious faith beliefs were created to manage the anxiety that comes from our fear of the unknown, and our fear of death. It is important to the future of our species to remind ourselves that, as humans, we know "for certain" *absolutely nothing* of what exists beyond the veil of death. Our ignorance includes the myths known as heaven, whether we even have a soul, the reality or existence of angels, the usefulness of prayer, the factual existence of God, or what the future holds for us; other than death.

To assume that we "know for certain" the answer to any of these unknowns, or to assume that we in any way possess "absolute truth" about any of these subjects only reflects the narcissistic pathology of our primitive ego, or a form of mental illness called psychosis.

When we grow in self-awareness and develop the ability to intentionally pay self-attention, we can not prove them, but our more adult and matured observing ego intuitively knows the following realities to be true; absolute truth is an illusion, only relative truths are real, and rigid absolute truths and compassion are not compatible.

I am convinced that unless we learn to mature our human consciousness, give up primitive ego black-and-white thinking, and learn to live with veracity and find the courage to embrace the

realities that face us in the world we actually live in, the future survival of our species will be problematic at best.

\* For an excellent treatment of the power of mythological spiritual teachers and the formation of religion see *The Once and Future Christ of Faith: Promising Options Beyond the History-Faith Dichotomy*, by Paul Alan Laughlin, *The Fourth R*, March-April, 2005)

## **APPENDIX A: REFORMS THAT WILL BE NEEDED TO INSURE THE SURVIVAL OF OUR MAINLINE CHURCHES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

The following seven reforms are areas that I believe will need to be addressed by all of our mainline religions and religious denominations. The order in which the reforms are presented does not indicate their relative importance. They are all inter-related and I believe they are all going to be required, in one form or another, for the mainline churches of the world to survive without outside interference, and provide humanity with effective moral and ethical guidelines that are going to be needed to manage the inevitable changes that are coming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The reforms suggested below, and the implications of each reform, are in no way meant to represent a complete list. They are offered only as a rough guideline to facilitate further reading and discussion on the reformation needed in all of our mainline religions.

### **A SUMMARY LIST OF THE SEVEN REFORMS THAT WILL BE NEEDED**

#### **Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:**

- 1) teach that true spirituality and authentic spiritual growth are always about enlightenment, growth in self-awareness, and compassion; that compassion and rigid *unverifiable* faith beliefs are not compatible.
- 2) practice and teach a matured middlepath consciousness; an enlightened observing ego thinking process that struggles to eliminate primitive ego black-and-white dualism by searching for the truth in all positions.
- 3) embrace the concept of veracity (embracing reality); in other words, the ability to fully embrace change, grow, and live “*in*” the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 4) shift their focus, priority, and institutional resources from the current goal of institutional survival, to the support and encouragement of authentic spiritual growth in their clergy and laity
- 5) adopt a leadership role in the creation of 21st century ethical and moral guidelines for humanity.
- 6) change their theistic definition of God from that of a “Person” or “Being” created in our human image to a more Immanent God that creates through the creative evolutionary process itself. They must teach that *all* creation is sacred, and support the development of a responsible Co-creative relationship with the Initiating Consciousness we call God.
- 7) teach that all paths to the Initiating Consciousness of the Universe are valid and contain truth. Authentic spiritual growth should include an intentional study of the knowledge and wisdom contained in other religions.

## **APPENDIX B: A DETAILED DISCUSSION ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SEVEN REFORMS THAT WILL BE NEEDED**

**Reform #1) Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to teach that true spirituality and authentic spiritual growth are always about enlightenment, growth in self-awareness, and compassion; that compassion and rigid *unverifiable* faith beliefs are not compatible.**

The stated goal of all mainline religions, especially Christianity, is the ability to manifest compassion. Thus, the only true measure of a 21<sup>st</sup> century religion's spiritual growth effectiveness will have little to do with religious beliefs or unity of thought; it will be based *primarily* on the sustained ability of its members to manifest concrete acts of loving-kindness.

It seems to me that the right of any religious institution to publicly ridicule or criticize the religious beliefs of another religious faith by insisting that it alone is the "one true path to God" is a narcissistic form of ignorance simply too dangerous and irresponsible to be allowed to continue.

### **Implications of Reform #1:**

A healthy and viable church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to teach that:

- An authentic spirituality is empathic and sensitive to the needs of others,
- Authentic spirituality is based on an emptiness of ego referred to as an attitude of "not knowing",
- An authentic spirituality is rarely individually or institutionally self-focused or self-serving,
- Authentic spiritual growth is the result of intentional spiritual practices that are focused on the development of a deep self-consciousness and self-knowledge; in other words, a focus on the beam in one's own eye,
- An authentic spirituality is about the transformation of self, *never* about changing others.

**Reform #2) Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to practice and teach a matured middlepath consciousness; an enlightened observing ego thinking process that struggles to eliminate primitive ego black-and-white dualism by searching for the truth in all positions.**

Middlepath spirituality, or a middlepath consciousness, simply means finding the gray, middle ground between the black and white extremes of any issue. Articulating the dualistic outer extremes of any issue is always helpful as a way to define the limits of an issue. However, there are *always* aspects of truth on both sides of an issue that need to be embraced and acknowledged. Paraphrasing the well-known author and philosopher Wendell Berry 'the extremes of any issue are helpful in that they define the territory, but one cannot live on the outer boundaries, one can only live in the territory between them.'

The middlepath is not a place or a literal path; it is an attitude; a way of being. It is an enlightened place of peace, non-judgmental oneness and unity, silence, listening, openness, a "not knowing" or

“emptiness of ego”, non-violent, conflict free, compassion, community, and unconditional love. One can encounter God, the Initiating Consciousness of the Creator *only* on the middlepath.

### **Implications of Reform #2:**

Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:

- Understand and teach that labels or beliefs that create a sense of “otherness” will always lead to conflict, pain, and suffering;
- Middlepath spirituality is learning to live with “what is”, not what our egos think reality “*should*” be, to experience reality directly without needing to change it;
- Recognize the when there is an aspect of reality that is unjust or creates pain and needs to change, that change happens best when the old ways simply no longer make any sense, and that all change happens only when we are willing to *become* the change that is required.
- That a middlepath consciousness means knowing that there are no objective absolute truths in this finite human world, only subjective relative truths. When we embrace middlepath spirituality, we are choosing to live without certainty as mature adults; to live with the gray of paradox and uncertainty.
- To understand that the middlepath is an attitude, not a place. That the middlepath is where we encounter God.
- Teach the middlepath skills and matured behaviors required for the formation of peaceful human community; including active listening, empathy, finding the truth in the other persons point of view, and a willingness to set one’s ego aside and embrace not-knowing, an emptiness of ego
- Middlepath is a place of humility,
- That middlepath spirituality means that we do not “do” compassion, we “become” compassion, and that compassion, unity, and unconditional love are found “only” on the middlepath,
- Teach the importance of embracing the inclusiveness and diversity of systemic thinking; the concept that all of creation is connected and inter-dependent; that nothing in creation stands alone or can survive alone,
- Encourage independent thinking and open inquiry and dialog on all religious beliefs,
- Teach that no human construct, including religious scriptures, are inerrant,
- Teach that no human beings, including the Pope or other theocratic religious leaders, are inerrant, infallible, or have a direct phone line to God.

**Reform #3) Mainline religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to embrace the concept veracity (embracing reality); in other words, the ability to fully embrace change, grow, and live “*in*” the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

Veracity is the willingness to live in the moment with the reality of “what is”. A commitment to see and accept things exactly as they are; to fully embrace reality. A commitment to live in the world we “*know*” means, for example, having the courage to live as mature, fully conscious adults in a world where there are no absolute black-and-white human truths; only relative and subjective truths.

No matter how strongly an individual or institution might believe that “absolute truth” exists, reality does not change; “absolute truth” is still an illusion of the primitive ego; a false belief. There are only “relative truths” in the human world. Because they are relative *and* subjective, all human beliefs need to be open to inquiry and verification.

It is important to note that some beliefs are called “faith” beliefs *because* they are not verifiable. They *have* to be taken on faith. Thus, to insist that a faith belief represents the illusion called “absolute truth” is not only psychotic thinking; it is a radical contradiction in terms. A belief cannot logically represent both “faith” *and* “absolute truth”.

### **Implications of Reform #3:**

Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:

- Embrace the changes that come with modern scientific advancements such as evolution, astronomy, biology, physics, and electronics.
- Embrace the changes that come with modern biblical scholarship and organizations such as the Jesus Seminar.
- Abandon the literal interpretation of sacred scriptures and faith beliefs.
- Learn to metaphorically interpret sacred scriptures and adopt cosmologies and worldviews so as to be relevant and meaningful to an educated 21<sup>st</sup> century consciousness.
- Require rigorous evidence, verifiability, and open inquiry of all faith beliefs that claim to represent literal truth.
- Teach that all claims of absolute “truth” in human beliefs are an illusion; all human beliefs, including faith beliefs, are always subjective and relative.
- No longer interpret scriptural mythology as literal or actual history.
- Reject the teaching of miracles that negate natural laws.
- Teach that all church doctrine and scriptures are the creation of human beings, not God.
- Recognize that mainline church members want to be told the truth, not pre-modern superstitious beliefs.
- Embrace an intellectual integrity where questions and skepticism are both accepted and encouraged, and education is considered more important than ancient doctrines.

**Reform # 4) Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to shift their focus, priority, and institutional resources from the current goal of institutional survival, to the support and encouragement of authentic spiritual growth in their clergy and laity.**

There is a significant lack of focus and support for the authentic spiritual growth and spiritual formation needs of both individual clergy and laity in virtually all mainline religions. The majority of Christian institutional resources, focus, time, energy, programs, policies, and priorities are currently directed primarily towards growth in membership, the maintenance of power, and institutional survival.

There is a clear connection between institutional discouragements of authentic spiritual growth and the declining health and vitality of our mainline churches. Nevertheless, clergy and laity who attempt to reform their institutional structures and encourage allocating more resources toward authentic spiritual growth often find themselves quickly marginalized. The development of spiritual skills such as silence, meditation, listening, growth in self-awareness, and simplicity are discouraged if it means that the institutional resources of the church are diverted from issues of survival, proselytizing, and maintaining unity of thought.

#### **Implications of Reform #4:**

Institutional religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:

- Abandon their focus on institutional survival and redirect their institutional resources on supporting the authentic spiritual growth of clergy and laity as they struggle to grow in self-awareness and learn to deal with the beam in their own eye.
- Recognize that unity of thought, growth in membership, and the issue of tithing are of lesser importance than compassion and concrete acts of kindness.
- Be willing to abandon all programming that is not directly focused on compassion, authentic spiritual growth, and concrete acts of kindness.
- Return to the concept that all religious institutions are based on compassion, feeding the poor, healing the sick, and tending to those unable to care for themselves. Any other application of institutional resources is essentially a distraction that limits the primary goal of bringing concrete acts of loving-kindness into the world.
- Teach the skills of silence, calm, quiet, simplicity, and meditation---all of which come from an emptiness of primitive ego and support growth in personal self-awareness.
- Teach that authentic spiritual growth is about transformation of self, not the conversion of others to religious beliefs that claim to represent the “truth”.
- Recognize that going into the world to make disciples for a particular religion is a form of intolerance and religious imperialism that assumes that the other person’s religion or religious beliefs or spiritual path is inadequate or inferior or flawed. These intolerant assumptions are critical and judgmental and will inevitably lead to conflict and violence.

#### **Reform # 5) Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must learn to adopt a leadership role in the creation of 21st century ethical and moral guidelines for humanity.**

The mainline religions must undergo a significant reformation of their theologies and faith beliefs if they are to provide effective leadership in the creation of ethical and moral guidelines for a global culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Because many of the *unverifiable* faith beliefs of our mainline religions are presented as “absolute truth”, religion is currently obstructing critically needed changes and growth in human culture.

Our mainline churches need to embrace veracity, embrace reality, and stop interfering with humanity’s need to ethically and morally address the critical issues that face us as a species as we

move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; racism, feminism, stem cell research, AIDS, environmental care of our planet, genocide, human rights violations, justice, population growth, collateral damage, and a more equitable distribution of the world's wealth to the poor.

### **Implications of Reform #5:**

Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:

- Accept that the world's uncontrolled population growth is one of the major issues threatening the future of human civilization and our ability to survive as a species. Rigid religious prohibitions against the use of condoms and other methods of birth control; including their use in the prevention and spread of AIDS, to protect a "soul" we do not know actually exists, is not only immoral and unethical, it simply does not make sense. Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must learn to create effective 21<sup>st</sup> century moral and ethical guidelines to address this issue.
- Accept that the use of torture for any military or intelligence agency is a form of evil that must end. We must have enforceable moral and ethical guidelines to prevent the inhuman treatment of any human being. Our current administration recently vetoed a bill to block the use of torture by the American military and intelligence agencies. Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must learn to create effective 21<sup>st</sup> century moral and ethical guidelines to address this issue.
- Understand that all collateral war damage to non-combatants; including women, children, and the elderly in places such as Iraq, Darfur, and Afghanistan, is a form of evil that must be addressed. Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must learn to create effective 21<sup>st</sup> century moral and ethical guidelines to address this issue.
- Understand that direct or covert religious manipulation of any political, economic, legal, medical, or financial institution to perpetuate the black-and-white primitive ego prejudices or intolerance of faith beliefs created by ancient pre-modern cultures is clearly a form of evil. Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must learn to create effective 21<sup>st</sup> century moral and ethical guidelines to address this issue.
- Human knowledge is said to be doubling every ten years. Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must develop the ability to embrace all modern and postmodern approaches to human knowledge. Labeling advances in human knowledge as dangerous or irrelevant, disregarding advances in human knowledge, or attempting to stop advances in human knowledge simply to satisfy the religious beliefs of any ancient pre-modern culture must end. Instead of attempting to stop human knowledge and progress, religions must take a leadership role to establish an effective ethical and moral foundation for the incorporation of all existing and future advancements of human knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Recognize that a religion that cannot provide effective moral and ethical guidelines for a rapidly growing 21<sup>st</sup> century human consciousness is already irrelevant and outdated.
- Labeling women, homosexuals, and AIDS victims as sub-human, blocking biological advances in stem cell research that could bring cures and healing to the sick or labeling such technology as sinful, forcing compliance with the sexual values and beliefs of a pre-modern culture, are all forms of ignorance. When they create pain and suffering for people, they represent evil. Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must learn to effectively create the moral and ethical guidelines to address all growth in the human community.

**Reform #6) Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be open to changing their definition of God from that of a theistic holy “Person” or “Being” created in our human image to a more Immanent God that creates through the creative evolutionary process itself. They must teach that *all* creation is sacred, and support the development of a responsible Co-creative relationship with the Initiating Consciousness we call God.**

We must abandon our present tribal, monotheistic definition of God and adopt a global definition of God that is more immanent and spirit based as in Native American spirituality. The monotheistic tribal definition of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam encourages right/wrong dualistic thinking regarding who’s God is “right”? Which God is the “real” God? Which mainline religion represents the “true” path to God?

Most of the violence and conflict we are currently experiencing around the world has its roots firmly embedded in the assumption that the fundamentalist group of each mainline church possess the one true faith and understanding of God. A belief in the Oneness of an Immanent God would eliminate virtually all of the current religious violence and conflict.

What ever God is, “It” is certainly not a “white, bearded, male, being” created in our human image sitting on a throne in a place called heaven meting out reward for obedience, and severe and violent punishment to “His” followers who disobey “Him”.

To assume that the religious scriptures of our mainline religions are anything other than a human creation is also form of ignorance. To affirm “this is the Word of God” following the reading of any mainline scripture is meaningless. Virtually all credible academic biblical scholars believe that the scriptures of our mainline churches were written and then edited, modified, and rewritten over several thousand years by many human authors.

None of these scriptural authors, no individual religious leader, and no religious institution have ever had a direct phone line to God. To assume so is absurd. All paths to the Initiating Consciousness of the universe are valid.

### **Implications of Reform #6:**

Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:

- embrace Panentheism, the concept that God, the Initiating Consciousness is present in all of creation and that all of creation is therefore sacred. There is no part of creation that is not sacred. The dualistic concept of sacred vs. profane is meaningless.
- teach that the Initiating Consciousness we call Creator is the Life Force and Consciousness present in the creative evolutionary process itself. The pure energy released at the moment of the big bang contained all of the physical laws of the universe, all of the basic elements of matter, and the DNA seeds for life and reflexive consciousness.
- understand that God is not a parental person or being, created in our human image, sitting on a throne in heaven judging our behaviors and meting out rewards and punishment. Only a faith in an immanent God; a God that is contained in all forms and aspects of creation, is a faith capable of manifesting true compassion,

- non-violence, and non-judgment. The theistic definition of God embraced in monotheistic mainline religions leads to an inevitable dualism between reward and punishment, good and evil, and right and wrong.
- understand that heaven is not the reward for living a just and meaningful life. There is no verifiable proof that heaven even exists. Meaning and purpose in life will come from what we choose to do in our lives and the contribution we make when we work as Co-creators “with” the Initiating Consciousness of the universe in the creative evolutionary process itself.
  - teach a morality and ethical definition for our species that is more evolution friendly regarding the global ecology and environment of the planet that birthed us, the survival of other life forms, the rapid depletion of our natural resources, the pollution of our air and water, and global warming. Mainline religions must teach that we were “not” put here by “God” to use the resources of our “birth mother” and support the myth and illusion called unlimited economic expansion.
  - recognize that the evolution of reflexive consciousness (our ability to be conscious of our consciousness) gives all humans the ability to create form; in-other-words, consciousness precedes the creation of all form. Because of our reflexively conscious ability to create form, we are full Co-creators “with” the Initiating Consciousness of the universe. We are individually and collectively responsible for the forms we create. We can create justice and compassion or we can create pain and suffering. The Initiating Consciousness of the universe is not going to “fix” our mistakes. We are fully responsible for the consequences of our choices and behaviors.
  - teach that “God” does not answer prayer. God is not the personal property of one tribal religion. God does not tinker with the laws of the universe. The purpose of prayer is a verbal expression of our intention to be in a Co-creative relationship with the Initiating Consciousness.
  - through prayer and the gift of human consciousness which allows us to be Co-creators “with” God, we are responsible “with” God for the on-going creation of this universe. This is the responsibility that provides ultimate meaning and purpose for our lives. What we contribute or fail to contribute is the gift of immortality we give ourselves; immortality has nothing to do with going to heaven. The concept of heaven was a superstitious illusion created to support the authority and power of our mainline religions.
  - understand that we can no longer continue to exist as helpless, immature children waiting for our “parental” God to reward or punish us, fix our problems, or give us eternity in heaven if we are good and do not annoy “Him” or make “Him” angry. We must learn to take full responsibility for the consequences of our choices and the forms we create and stop waiting for God to come and fix them for us.
  - be willing to rewrite all mainline scriptures and remove all violence in them and all references to a tribal based, violent, punishing, theistic God. God does not kill newborns, God does not annihilate whole peoples, God does not take sides in a war, and God does not support any one particular religion. Our mainline religious scriptures condone and legitimize violence when they foster belief in a male, bearded, Santa Claus God that is incredibly cruel and vengeful.

- recognize that the male reference to God found in all the scriptures of our monotheistic mainline religions is a result of male dominance that existed in the human culture when those scriptures were written. Sexist language for God is demeaning and prejudicial against women. A God defined in sexist terms is clearly a God created in our own human image. To state that we were created in God's image means that as reflexively conscious beings, we too have the Co-creative ability to create form; especially compassion.
- fully embrace the interconnectedness and systemic interrelationship of all of creation. There is no part of human creation that can be labeled as sub-human; including all categories of race, sex, or sexual orientation. To assume that any one group is sub-human is merely a reflection of intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry.
- God is paradox; the *unity* of all creation, and the *diversity* of all creation.

**Reform #7) Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to teach that all paths to the Initiating Consciousness of the Universe are valid and contain truth. Authentic spiritual growth should include an intentional study of the knowledge and wisdom contained in other religions.**

A large part of the problem in the conflict between our world's mainline religions is the reality that members in each religion know virtually nothing about the wisdom contained in the other mainline religions. Not only have they not read the scriptures of other religions, *they have rarely read the scriptures of their own religions.* Yet they do not hesitate to assume that only the faith beliefs of their own religion represent absolute truth!

One recent religious pole of Christians in the United States conducted by Stephen Prothero and reported in his book Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to know---and Doesn't discovered that a large majority of those polled thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple, that Joan of Arc was married to Noah, and that half of American adults could not name even one of the four gospels in the Christian bible. Most Christians have never heard of the Gospel of Thomas, and those who were familiar with it knew nothing about the wisdom or insights contained in the gospel; or even where it came from.

This level of biblical illiteracy is amazing given that America is a Christian nation and the significant influence Christianity has had on American politics for the last two hundred and fifty years. It has even supported and aggressively shaped the creation of a power hungry imperialistic Christian theocracy in Washington for the last eight years.

Until all of our mainline religions relinquish the narcissistic, primitive ego driven imperialistic belief that they alone represent the "one true path to God" and actively encourage their members to read the scriptures of the other mainline religions so they can come to understand and value the wisdom contained in them, we will continue to experience the current global violence and conflict created by humanity's *unverifiable* religious faith beliefs.

**Implications of Reform #7:**

Mainline religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to:

- teach that all paths to the Initiating Consciousness of the universe and the life force that permeates the universe are valid. Tribal thinking must give way to global thinking. No one tribe, or religion owns God.
- work with other mainline religions, eliminate their narcissistic judgmental primitive ego thinking, and embrace the teachings of the other mainline churches.
- teach that a rigid faith based on *unverifiable* religious beliefs that are presented as *absolute truth* always creates intolerance. Mainline religions should teach that no forms of intolerance are acceptable.
- understand that only a primitive ego thinking process uses vertical power to rule over others. Compassion always uses cooperation, teamwork, horizontal power, the inclusive diversity of community, and systemic thinking.
- must learn to teach the importance of honoring all of the true spiritual teachers of history and of modern times.
- encourage the reading of scriptures from other mainline religions so the truths and wisdom contained in them is both understood and valued.
- teach that the primary requisite of all mainline religions is to manifest compassion. Any belief or behavior that obstructs the manifestation of compassion and loving kindness should not be tolerated. Compassion is based on not knowing and emptiness of primitive ego. To make claims of absolute certainty regarding any religious belief is simply a reflection of ignorance, evil, and religious imperialism.

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See other articles on the Stonyhill web page ([www.stonyhill.com](http://www.stonyhill.com)) for more articles on our inner-child's primitive ego, happiness, compassion, authentic spiritual growth, evolutionary and middlepath spirituality, and The Primitive Ego Theory of Human Social and Spiritual Development©.

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