

One God, One Christ, One World - Christians Are Quite Content With What Is

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"From first to last," says the Christian theologian Jurgen Moltmann in his book *Theology of Hope*, "Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the flow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day."

And yet I find that when I have the opportunity to talk with Christians while doing lay missionary work with the Unification Church, most of them are quite content with what is, content to be Methodists or Presbyterians or Catholics or Baptists, content that their faith is sufficient, content with what their leaders are telling them. For example, at the Bicentennial Conference on Religious Liberty which I attended last spring, many of those participating seemed intent on preserving their right to be Methodists or Presbyterians or Catholics or Baptists, without wondering at all whether it was God's will for them to remain separated thus. The same could be said of the other religions represented.

Dr. Robert Gordis, professor at Jewish Theological Seminary, stated: "The first and oldest aspect of religious liberty is the right which a group claims for itself to practice its faith without interference from others." The Vatican II declaration has a similar definition: "In matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly..."

It's not that these statements are not valid as far as they go. However, I feel they indicate too great a concern with the status quo, rather than with the eschatological hope of "transforming the present." I think Dr. Franklin Littell, professor of religion at Temple University, was closer to the point when he pointed out in his paper at the conference, "In the view of most of our fathers... the affirmation of a God-given religious liberty freed the churches to fulfill their rightful high calling. That high calling was to proclaim the truth, to prophesy freely and to live faithfully, and not to be used to shore up ancient power structures."

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:4-6) Yet today what do we find: more than 400 denominations of Christianity differing in their creeds on issues large and small. The recent split in the Lutheran Church between moderate and conservative elements is a striking example. Is this what Christ intended when he began gathering his flock of disciples? Jesus had no body of doctrine. His basic commandments were to love God and to love your neighbor. It was only after his death that his followers began to interpret the things he had said and done and build a system of beliefs around them.

When the apostles began to spread the gospel beyond the Jews to include the pagan world, this marked

the beginning of their work of establishing a universal, catholic church for all men. "There is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," said Paul.

But already the divisions had begun. Dissension emerged over such issues as remarriage and adultery, orthodoxy and heresy, forgiveness and rigidity. There were no officially authorized texts at first, and many stories and "gospels" were in circulation. What today are designated "apocrypha" were widely distributed among early converts. It was not easy to know who or what to believe. Eventually many writings were declared inspired and became accepted as gospels; others were rejected. What later came to be considered creed sometimes began as a rebuttal to pagan beliefs or an appeal to Hellenistic thinking.

In *The Early Christian Church*, J.G. Davies describes the tendency of the Church in the second century to "legalize Christian behavior and to regulate it by a series of injunctions, thus turning conduct into obedience to a system of precepts rather than allowing it to remain a creative response to the encounter with God; the Christian way is in the process of becoming the observance of a set of rules."

Centuries later, the fervent catholic faith had become the tradition-bound Catholic Church. If the teachings of Jesus had been truly adhered to, then God could have continued to work through the Church. Instead, widespread corruption necessitated a Reformation, an opening up of the channels by which each individual could find a relationship with Christ and with God. In a sense, it was a manifestation of the desire to return to the faith of the early Christian church, emphasizing the individual seeking to find and fulfill the will of God.

But neither are Protestantism and religious pluralism the final resting place of God's work among men. We are still awaiting the kingdom of God on earth and in that kingdom there will be no more Methodists and Presbyterians and Catholics and Baptists. Nor will there be Jews and Christians and Moslems and Buddhists, for that matter. In our concern for preserving religious liberty, we have perhaps overlooked that true freedom comes when man is perfected and is completely one with his God. At that point, there will be no need for religion, only a God-I relationship.

Many people feel threatened by this idea. If my religion is right, then the others must be wrong. How can I adopt some creed which I believe to be wrong? Or, how can I give up something which I hold to be true? Then too, events in history have made us wary of the establishment of a state religion, much less of having a world religion imposed on us. But these are not the only alternatives to be considered.

Everyone who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast to my covenant -- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God. (Isaiah 56:6-8)

History is pointing in this direction. The late historian Arnold Toynbee pointed out in his *Study of History* that man is on the road toward unity. From the 21-26 major cultural/religious spheres once to be found, the number has been reduced steadily as the superior absorbed the inferior, until there are now four -- the Far Eastern (dominated by Confucianism and Buddhism), Hinduism, Islam, and Judeo-Christianity.

The central role in history has moved from one nation to another, in each case shifting to a country that elevated religion more than the previous one. Christianity, as the fullest revelation of God's word to man, was given the mission of teaching all the people of the world when Jesus instructed his disciples to spread the gospel. The message of Christianity is now being preached in every corner of the globe. One level of preparation for the second coming of the Messiah has been laid. But would we want the Messiah to return to find a Christianity weakened by internal divisions and strife, or a unified Christianity working together to fulfill God's will?

This is also the time in which all forms of religion are being threatened by an atheistic ideology that has as its aim the extermination of belief in God. Christians, Moslems, Jews and all believers are persecuted in the Soviet Union today. Religions must realize they have a common foe against whom to unite, rather than competing with one another.

God's desire has always been to bring mankind back to Him. To do this, at different times and places He set up religions appropriate for those times and places. But His eternal purpose has been a unified world of one family under God, with no distinctions among peoples, whether on the basis of race, nationality, or creed. Religious pluralism provides the atmosphere in which His word can be heard today when His son returns. But nevertheless the Lord God says, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples."