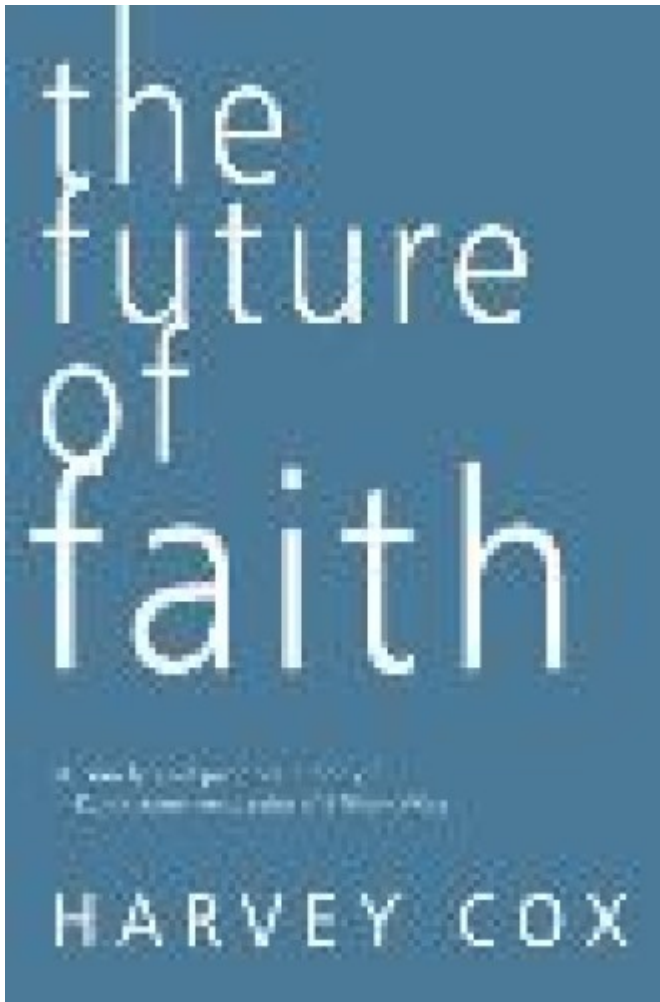


The Future of Faith

reviewed by [Randall Balmer](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

In Review



The Future of Faith

Harvey Cox

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Harvey Cox is nothing if not nimble. His 1965 book, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in The ological Perspective*, will forever be Exhibit A for the “Christ

of Culture” perspective outlined in H. Richard Niebuhr’s typology. Later, however, Cox was forced to reconsider the alignment between faith and secular culture. The advance of secularism had not unfolded as he predicted, so in *Religion in the Secular City* he sought to explain why. In the 1978 book *Turning East* (the first book for which I ever published a review, if memory serves) Cox reported on his tasting tour of Eastern and Native American religions, and in *Fire from Heaven* (1994) he provided a learned and perceptive look at Pentecostalism throughout the Americas.

In *The Future of Faith*, Cox trains his sights on the future. The initial paragraph, however, is less than auspicious. Cox opens with three observations about religion early in the 21st century: he remarks on “the unanticipated resurgence of religion in both public and private life around the globe,” asserts that fundamentalism “is dying” and predicts “a profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness.”

One out of three may get you into the baseball hall of fame, but it’s hardly an enviable average for a scholar. Who says the resurgence of religion in the 21st century was unanticipated? Did Cox learn nothing from his *Secular City—Religion in the Secular City* turnabout? And fundamentalism is dying? Tell that to the folks in Egypt or Turkey or Afghanistan or Colorado Springs—or Congress, for that matter. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but sorely lacking in empirical evidence. That leaves us with “a profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness.” Well, OK. This sort of exploration has always been Cox’s forte, so he deserves a hearing—and, it turns out, such a hearing is amply rewarded.

Cox ushers the reader on an excursion through church history, which he divides into three eras: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief and the Age of Spirit. Like the restorationists, Cox admires the early years of Christianity, which, he says, had “no standardized theology, no single pattern of governance, no uniform liturgy, and no commonly accepted scripture.” More important, the early church had no “clerical caste” during this Age of Faith, which lasted until early in the fourth century, when Constantine converted to Christianity. The identification of religion with empire triggered the transition from faith to belief, as a clerical elite with dubious claims (Cox says) to apostolic authority sought to enforce uniformity of belief. “This tendency to replicate the structure of empire,” Cox writes, “helps explain why so much of the Christian movement, which began as the persecuted victim of the Roman empire and provided an alternative to it, then became a sycophantic mimic of that empire and finally its obsequious acolyte.”

During the Age of Belief, which has prevailed (with some exceptions) to the present, Christianity “curdled into a top-heavy edifice defined by obligatory beliefs enforced by a hierarchy.” Cox understands belief as the adherence to propositional truth that forms the basis for fundamentalism: “Faith had been coarsened into belief, and Christianity has been hobbled by this distortion ever since.”

Whereas early Christians allowed for multiple understandings and expressions of faith, Christianity in this Age of Belief demanded conformity. Christianity, “a loose network of local congregations, with varied forms of leadership, congealed into a rigid class structure with a privileged clerical caste at the top ruling over an increasingly disenfranchised laity on the bottom.” Women, “who played such a vital leadership role in the earliest days, were pushed to the underside and the edges.”

But even amid the theological sludge of the Age of Belief, various spiritual adventurers pushed their way to the surface. Cox cites the mystics and the Pentecostals (though he neglects the Camisards). “Mystics always make prelates nervous,” Cox writes, “but they are always with us.”

Due in part to the vision and courage of these dissenters, Cox believes, Christianity now stands on the cusp of the Age of Spirit, which is characterized by a return to faith over belief, a renewed concern for the poor and an openness to the Spirit. Cox insists that the real catalyst is the shifting of the center of Christianity from the West to Africa, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region. “In those countries where the clerical leadership clings to the older model, the churches are empty,” he writes. “But in those areas of the world where creeds and hierarchies have been set aside to make way for the Spirit, like the stone rolled away from Christ’s grave in the Easter story, one senses life and energy.” Cox is especially enamored of liberation theology and Pentecostalism (although he neglects to note that the latter has largely eclipsed the former as the “theology of the people” in Latin America).

If all this sounds a bit too tidy and schematic, it probably is. One might expect that Cox, a Baptist—though admittedly an extraordinarily ecumenical Baptist—would take a jaundiced view of apostolic succession and church hierarchy. An alternative reading of church history might credit sociological inevitability for the institutionalization of Christianity rather than mere clerical grasping for power. This routinization began with St. Paul, who assumed the task of bringing a modicum of order to a dispersed and disparate faith. And while it is undeniable that fundamentalists and others throughout church history have fixated on the apostle’s

moral strictures at the expense of his affirmations of grace, the institutionalization of Christianity probably saved it from utter dissipation.

Still, it's difficult at times to resist being swept up in Cox's vision about the dawning Age of Spirit. "Religious people today are more interested in ethical guidelines and spiritual disciplines than in doctrines," he rhapsodizes. "They are also becoming less patriarchal, as women assume leadership positions in religions that have barred them for centuries, sometimes for millennia."

But isn't this precisely what has transpired for some time now in mainline Protestantism, that sector of Christianity once given up for dead? Doctrine gave way to ethics long ago, in a process arguably set in motion in 1847 by Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*. Patriarchalism was more stubborn, but the ordination and leadership of women is now a matter beyond debate—or controversy—for most mainline denominations. The current enterprise of eliminating barriers based on sexual identity could very well be interpreted as a response to the promptings of the Spirit rather than continued allegiance to tired dogma or calcified tradition. The price of these changes has been cultural marginalization and a diminution of numbers. But isn't that the cost of faithfulness, and doesn't that marginalization bring us closer to the ideal of early Christianity that Cox so admires?

Institutions are remarkably poor vessels for faith, much less piety. In a far-from-perfect world, however, they provide structure and draw on a collective wisdom that saves us from the worst excesses of individualism. The wind blows where it will, and so too the Spirit. Even, at times—and contrary to all expectations—within these old forms.