

Christian Faith, by Peter C. Hodgson

reviewed by [Thomas Woehrle](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

*Christian Faith: A Brief Introduction*. By Peter C. Hodgson. Westminster John Knox, 184 pp., \$14.95 paperback.

Peter Hodgson here continues the project of constructing the postmodern Christian theology he first set forth in *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (1994). He identifies three challenges that interpretations of the Christian faith must address: ecological and cosmological awareness; the struggle for justice; and, cultural and religious pluralism. As Hodgson constructs a fresh interpretation of the Christian trinitarian God, he discusses five central themes of Christian faith: thinking theologically; the interaction of God and the world; human nature and evil; Jesus and the redeeming Christ of today; and living in the age of the Spirit.

Thinking theologically now requires us to bring together scientific and theological thought. Though such a project meets resistance from both scientists and theologians, Hodgson is unwilling to take the postliberal approach of dealing only with traditional Christian texts, stories and practices. Theology must interpret these resources in the context of current challenges arising from multiple cultural encounters. It must be sensitive to the active power of the Spirit teaching within the church today.

Since a dualistic conception of God and the world no longer works, Hodgson develops a unitary "Creative-Trinitarian" view of God in which God and the world are interdependent. God is an inherently creative power, and this creativity includes but is not limited to creation as understood by natural science. Thus God cannot be understood as a being distinct from creation; "God is an ultimate mystery whose mode of being remains beyond human comprehension." As with the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH, God is noun and verb, both "personal subject and creative-redemptive power." God's triune nature consists of God as inherently creative godself; Christ, the free, redemptive love that is transforming the world into God's body; and the Spirit, the consummation of the union of the whole creation with God.

Human beings are a part of God's creative-evolutionary process. Language and self-consciousness give us freedom, distinguishing us as beings created in the "image of God." Our human freedom is an embodied freedom, enabling us to enter into personal, interpersonal, social and transpersonal relationships. Transpersonal freedom opens us to transcendence, the only means by which we can achieve final happiness. Being inherently dissatisfied with what we can physically acquire and achieve and desiring to escape our finite existence, we are tragically vulnerable. We deceive others and ourselves, thus disrupting our relationships and stifling our freedom. As sinful, idolatrous, fearful, alienated and guilty persons we need a saving knowledge to make us whole. Evil is a force that magnifies our sin and embodies it in unjust social relationships that cannot be remedied by a simple change of heart.

For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is both a historical figure and the "saving event" that happens here and now. Since traditional models of interpreting Jesus as the Christ are under severe attack as being "ethnocentric, patriarchal, misogynist, anti-Judaic, exclusivist and triumphalist," a new model is required. To interpret Jesus as the incarnation of God's wisdom, Hodgson rejects the traditional Chalcedonian doctrine of Jesus the Christ as having two natures—divine and human. Instead he employs the German concept "gestalt" that signifies "a pattern or integrated structure."

God does not intervene and interrupt the flow of natural and historical causes, but operates by means of a gestalt that shapes and builds redeeming structures in the world. This gestalt became incarnate in the person of Jesus. "The Christ-gestalt empowers the authentic being of human being, which is a way of being in the world as a communion of free and compassionate persons before God." The wisdom of God was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth and associated with the images of basileia, cross and resurrection.

For other religions, this gestalt assumed other forms. Today Christianity needs to break out of its Western mode. While Christians ought to proclaim to people of all religions Jesus as God's universal manifestation of saving truth and grace, we need to acknowledge that truth may be manifested in other religions as well.

We are living in the Age of the Spirit, a time when human spirit, world spirit and divine spirit are experienced in a variety of fresh ways. The Spirit emerges from the interaction of God and the world. The Christian community knows the Spirit through its "concrete configuration of the Christ-gestalt in Jesus of Nazareth." Both ecology

and science have generated spirits that need to be taken up into a broader understanding of God's Spirit working in the cosmos. A renewed spirit of social justice seeking more humane political and economic institutions is a dimension of the emerging Spirit.

The opening of other world religions to Christians is a mark of the Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus Christ enables Christians to be open to truth wherever it emerges. Ultimately the Spirit is shaping a community that is becoming "God's own communal being as whole or all that encompasses all that is, but we are also raised into the world as God's body, so that our embodiment after death becomes pancosmic rather than acosmic."

Each chapter of *Christian Faith* is followed by numerous discussion-stimulating exercises designed for classroom or study-group use. While a helpful glossary and comprehensive bibliography are provided, the lack of footnotes and an index make it difficult for serious students to identify Hodgson's sources precisely.

But anyone interested in theology will find Hodgson's latest work a stimulating and rewarding read.