

The Samaritan Institute
at
The Sunshine Cathedral

***Remedial Christianity**

A Six Week Course

*Course curriculum designed and prepared by
The Reverend Dr. Durrell Watkins based primarily on Paul A. Laughlin's
book, *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know about
the Faith but Probably Doesn't* (Polebridge Press)

*"Here at the Sunshine Cathedral, we are
seekers and students of Truth, empowered
by Spirit, sharing the Light with the World"*

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Class Title:

Remedial Christianity

Topics:

Week 1: The Bible in Historical Perspective

Week 2: Christian Views of the Divine

Week 3: Jesus & the Origins of Christianity

Week 4: The Christ of Faith

Week 5: Sin, Human Nature, Grace, & Salvation in the Christian Tradition

Week 6: The Church, Churches, World Religions, & the Future of Faith

Recommended Text (Required for instructor or group facilitator):

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

About the author: Dr. Laughlin was first ordained in the United Methodist Church and later as a Unity minister. He is a professor of religion at Otterbein College and holds a PhD from Emory University.

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LESSON 1: THE BIBLE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Recommended Text:

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

Additional Reading to learn more about the bible:

From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors (James Rowe Adams, Rising Star Press 2005)

Not God's People: Insiders & Outsiders in the Biblical World (Lawrence Wills, Rowman & Littlefield 2008)

Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction (Lawrence Boadt, Paulist Press 1984)

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture (John S. Spong, HarperSanFrancisco 1991)

Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Phyllis Trible, Fortress Press 1984)

The Bible (Karen Armstrong, Grove Press 2007)

The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings (Bart D. Ehrman, Oxford University Press 2000/2004)

The Queer Bible Commentary (Guest, West, Bohache, eds., SCM 2006)

The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love (John S. Spong, HarperSanFrancisco 2005)

The Women's Bible Commentary (Newsom & Ringe, eds., Westminster/John Knox 1992)

Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals (John A. Buehrens, Beacon Press 2003)

Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth (Burton Mack, Harper Collins 1995)

{Other recommendations can be found in the book, p. 38}

It is also a good idea to compare biblical translations when studying scripture. It's good to have three different translations (not paraphrases) to compare. Some recommended biblical translations:

The Inclusive Bible (Priests for Equality, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2007)

The New American Bible (Catholic Book Publishing Co.)

Holy Bible From the Ancient Eastern Text: George M. Lamsa's Translation from the Aramaic of the Peshitta (Harper Collins)

The Jewish Study Bible (Jewish Publication Society)

The Peoples' Bible (New Revised Standard Version, Fortress Press 2009)

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From Remedial Christianity...

The Bible

“No aspect of Christianity is more misunderstood and misused by Christians themselves than the bible” (Laughlin).

“The bible is not a book...but a collection of individual writings” Laughlin).

What does “bible” mean? (Gr., *ta biblia*, “the books”).

“[The bible is a collection of writings] taken from a much larger number of ancient Hebrew and Christian writings...They speak out of different contexts, with distinctive voices, and from divergent viewpoints. Yet...we [have been] led to believe that the bible is the product of a single mind; that it is thus completely coherent and consistent, infallible and inerrant; that its contents therefore admit only one possible interpretation; and that to deny or even to question any of these premises is to negate not only the importance of ‘God’s word,’ but the validity of the faith itself” (Laughlin).

“The truth is that the bible is a treasure trove of literature exhibiting a wide variety in genre, style, vocabulary, theology and quality...its contents as well as its inspiration and authority are open to more than one understanding, and it not only invites but withstands a wide range of interpretation” (Laughlin).

“Every Christian should know what the bible really is; for only then will it be truly useful as a religious standard and spiritual guide” (Laughlin).

“The bible did not one day ‘drop out of heaven’ like some divine telegram...It is a collection of largely separate writing, a kind of library of ancient literature, which gradually came together over many centuries in response to real human needs and desires, eventually gained widespread acceptance, and finally evolved into the literary monument...that it is today. The bible is, in short, the product of a process...” (Laughlin).

“The bible exhibits the same kind of variety that one would expect to find in any anthology” (Laughlin).

“One unfortunate shortcoming of the bible from a modern perspective is its androcentricity (male-centeredness).” This reflects the patriarchal cultures in which the texts were written. Women are often unnamed, or they are overshadowed by the male figures of the bible. Most of the

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writers were men, and while there are feminine descriptions of the divine in scripture, they are often overlooked or downplayed in favor of the masculine descriptions. This is an “injustice that modern biblical interpretation is working very hard to redress”.

The bible has many authors: “some named, some claimed, and some anonymous.” They reflect a variety of viewpoints; even a variety of theologies.

“The bible exhibits the same kind of inconsistencies and downright contradictions that one would expect when many authors are involved” (Laughlin).

Notice the TWO creation stories (written THREE centuries apart). Notice how they contradict each other in almost every detail.

Notice that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have Jesus speaking in brief lessons and parables and making almost no claims of self-importance. **In contrast**, John has Jesus speaking in “long, convoluted, and sometimes abstruse (difficult to understand) discourses...constantly calling attention to himself (e.g., the 7 ‘I AM’ assertions all come from John).”

Matthew, Mark, and Luke have Jesus’ ministry lasting at MOST a year, with only one career ending trip to Jerusalem. John has Jesus making three trips to Jerusalem over a period of 2-3 years.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to the Last Supper as a Passover Meal, while John refers to it as a “common” meal PRIOR to Passover.

Only two of the gospels include a birth narrative for Jesus, and they disagree in detail.

Paul, Mark, Matthew/Luke, and John each have Jesus “becoming” the Christ in different ways and at different times.

Each of the gospels have different details about who was at Jesus’ tomb and when and what they did afterward (including disagreement about the presence of angels).

How Matthew, Mark, and Luke are related:

Q Source (common, non-Markan material in Matthew and Luke).

Probably a written source, no longer extant.

Mark (common material in Mark, Matthew, and Luke). c. 70 CE

M (material unique to Matthew) c. 80-85 CE

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L (material unique to Luke) We used to date Luke around 85 CE, but some scholars now place it as late as 120 CE.

Read Luke 1.1-4

Notice Luke seems to think he is writing by his own choice in the tradition of others who shared their views by their own free will. There is no mention of divine authorship.

Of course, claims that the bible is the “inerrant, inspired word of God” are often based on 2 Timothy 3.16. But “all scripture” at face value would mean ALL scripture (Hindu scripture, Buddhist scripture, Taoist scripture, Muslim scripture, etc.). So, “literalists” don’t seem to take that verse literally. In all probability, “all scripture” referred to the scriptures that the author knew, which would have been the Hebrew scriptures (our “Old Testament”). It could not have referred to the New Testament which did not yet exist and would not be canonized for a very long time to come.

John – written c. 90-100 CE, apparently didn’t use many of the same sources as the other writers.

Paul’s writings are older than the gospels. Paul wrote in the 50s and 60s.

Important dates:

4 BCE – Jesus born

29 CE – Jesus executed

35 CE – Paul’s conversion

64 CE – Paul’s death

70 CE – Jerusalem/Temple destroyed; Mark

85 CE – Matthew (Luke?)

96 CE – Revelation

90/100 CE – John

120 CE – Luke

Hebrews (anonymous)

7 of the 13 books attributed to Paul actually written by him

Other 6 are “Deutero-Pauline”

Deutero-Pauline Literature written after Paul’s life...late first century to early/mid-second century

Acts is the sequel to Luke.

James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude are simply “Non-Pauline” neither written by nor attributed to Paul.

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See p. 26 in Laughlin for How NT Came to be.

Discuss some problematic texts:

Abraham/Isaac (Genesis),
Lot/Daughters (Genesis 19),
Jephthah/Daughter (Judges),
Romans 1,
Leviticus,
Judges 19,
Drowning the Egyptians (Exodus 14),
Others???

Torah (Yawist, Eloist, Deuteronomic, and Priestly writers/editors)

Oldest OT book: either Amos or Job

Last OT book written: Daniel

Why are there “extra” books in Catholic bibles?

Why is the Council of Jamnia (90 CE) significant?

Prophets were not prognosticators...they were social critics.

Apocalyptic writers did imagine and call for a dramatic change in the social order, but even that was not future-telling; it was, in their opinion, “truth-telling” (suggesting the way things were happened to be unjust and unacceptable).

Job is fiction

The psalms are hymns/poems

Song of Songs is a medley of wedding songs (highly erotic)

Proverbs is a collection of pithy sayings

Ecclesiastes is philosophical.

Song of Songs and Esther appear to be secular texts (never mentioning God at all).

Revelation & Mark may have been performance pieces performed by an orator/narrator/story-teller.

Much of the bible (especially the apocalyptic literature) is highly symbolic and is best understood allegorically.

Many writings (from faithful communities) were used by Christians but did not finally end up in the canon.

Views that were part of early Christian diversity that were largely (though not entirely) eliminated or excluded from the canon include the belief that humans are innately divine (rather than innately sinful) and that reincarnation was a definite possibility.

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As other views won out as “dominant” these parts of the tradition were largely silenced, labeled heterodox or heretical, and those who dared to consider them have often risked censure, exclusion, or severe punishment (what do we think of any idea that has to be protected by harsh and extreme means?).

There are many translations of the bible.

Discuss problems of translation.

Notice the irony of the KJV (named for a homosexual!). KJV is probably inferior as a translation to most contemporary translations.

See p. 32 – Typical positions on inspiration and authority

Notice inconsistencies of fundamentalism (text, p. 33)

Discuss:

“Spirit” (rather than letter) of texts.

Broad interpretations.

Value of myth and metaphor.

Importance of story without ignoring science or reason.

Value of taking scripture SERIOUSLY rather than LITERALLY.

How can the document be holy if it is human in origin?

Can we embrace new knowledges and still appreciate ancient texts?

Read Conclusion (text, p. 36)

Time permitting, consider questions on p. 37

LESSON 2: CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF THE DIVINE

Recommended Text:

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

Theology

Additional Reading to learn more about theology ("God-Talk"):

Alternatives: New Approaches to Traditional Christian Beliefs

(William L. Fischer, Unity Books 1980)

A Theology of Liberation (Gustavo Gutierrez, Orbis 1971)

Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's

Liberation (Mary Daly, Beacon Press 1973)

Divine Science: Its Principle & Practice (compiled from the works of

Fannie James & Malinda Cramer, Divine Science Federation International 1957)

Friends in High Places: Tracing the Family of New Thought

Christianity (iUniverse 2004)

How to Think Theologically (Howard Stone & James Duke, Fortress

Press 1996)

Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision (Peter C. Hodgson, Fortress

Press 2007)

Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, & the Bible (Nancy L. Wilson,

Harper Collins 1995)

Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology (Kwok Pui-lan,

Westminster/John Knox Press 2005)

Science & the Search for God (Gary Kowalski, Lantern Books 2003)

Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk

(Delores S. Williams, Orbis 1993)

So You Think You're Not Religious?: A Thinking Person's Guide to the Church (James R. Adams, Cowley Publications 1989)

Taking A Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, & Their Lovers, Families, & Friends (John J. McNeill, Beacon Press 1988)

The Death of the Mythic God: The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality

(Jim Marion, Hampton Roads 2004)

The Healing Light (Agnes Sanford, Ballantine 1947)

The New Thought Christian (William Warch, DeVors Publications

1977)

The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology (Alan Richardson & John Bowden, eds., Westminster Press 1983)

Theology from the Belly of the Whale: A Frederick Herzog Reader

(Joerg Rieger, ed., Trinity Press 1999)

When We Talk About God Let's Be Honest (R. Kirby Godsey, Smyth & Helwys 1996)

Who Needs God? (Harold Kushner, Simon & Schuster 1990)

Why Bad Things Happen to Good People (Harold Kushner, Schocken Books 1981)

{Other recommendations can be found in the book, pp. 71-72}

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God-Talk
(Theology, the study of divinity)

Is God transcendent (“beyond”) or is God immanent (within, near-by, accessible)?

What are some ways we have tried to make/allow God to be both transcendent AND immanent?

R. Kirby Godsey says, “Doubt is the growing edge of faith.” He also tells us, “all of our speaking of God is metaphor. Since we cannot get our mental arms around God, we turn to image and symbol. Turning to myth and symbol is never wrong unless we stop there. Golden calves and crosses become troublesome when we cannot see beyond them to the God beyond our gods. All of our symbols testify that we cannot get our arms around God. The beginning of faith is learning that God’s arms are around us.” Dr. Godsey further instructs, “doubting is a crucial part of believing. Without the courage to doubt, it is very difficult to sustain the will to believe” (from *When We Talk About God, Let’s Be Honest*).

What is theism? Is this a Christian view?	Active God/above creation
What is deism? Is this a Christian view?	Uninvolved God (some early American founders were deists)
What is pantheism? Is this a Christian view?	God is or in everything
What is panentheism? Is this a Christian view?	Everything in God (like a fish in the ocean), see Laughlin, p. 55 (and see Acts 17.28)
What is atheism? Is this a Christian view?	No God
What is agnosticism? Is this a Christian view?	Uncertain about God
What is henotheism? Is this a Christian view?	One supreme god superior to other gods (we do see henotheism in parts of the Old Testament)

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What is Universalism? Is this a Christian view? No one is "unsaved" ...divine grace & mercy must ultimately embrace all souls

What is Unitarianism? Is this a Christian view? God is one

What is Trinitarianism? Is this a Christian view? God is somehow three but also one/three-in-one/three-as-one...a trinity (a doctrine from the 4th century; not explicit in scripture)

What is Monism? Is this a Christian view? There is One Substance for All Reality, material and/or idealistic (Body and Mind/Spirit)...There is One Something (a power or principle) expressing as All that is. Everything consists of one thing or one kind of thing ("stuff"). *Material monists* think the one thing is matter. *Idealistic monists* think the one thing is Mind or Spirit, while *neutral monists* believe the one thing is an unknown something else

Consider Monistic Panentheism! Is this a Christian view?

Goes beyond pantheism to include the transcendent and immanent; all the principles and laws of existence as well as physical matter, energy, and any spiritual realms which may exist. More

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than fish/ocean, God embraces all the principles of chemistry and physics by which the ocean exists and operates. God is, therefore, Mind, Idea, and Expression (see Trinitarianism).
Shepherd, 192

What is polytheism? Is this a Christian view? Multiple Gods (?) see Laughlin, p. 52

What is monotheism? Is this a Christian view? One God

Islam and Judaism are strictly monotheistic.
How has Christianity compromised the monotheistic ideal? (unique incarnation, trinity, satan, etc.)

"Life in [West Texas] taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love." Butch Hancock

What are some of our beliefs about God that contradict each other?

What are some of our beliefs about God that we really "don't" wholeheartedly believe?

What are some of our beliefs about God that we might find, on close inspection, to be problematic?

Some names/images for God: YHWH, Elohim, El Shaddai, Adonai, Shekinah (presence), Sophia (companion/creation/emanation of...see also Logos), Rainbow, Rock, Castle, Abba, Mother, (Mother) Eagle, Spirit

Discuss theodicy (Laughlin, pp. 62 – 65)

Discuss the divine O's – omnipresent (implications?), omnipotent (Can God make a rock so heavy that even God can't lift it?), omniscient,

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omniactive (not for deists obviously), and omnibenevolent (which begs the question of theodicy).

Another twist: Is God Omnipresent? Or Omnipresence?! Omnipotent (all-powerful)? Or Omnipotence (All Power)?! Omniscient (all-knowing)? Or Omniscience (All Knowledge)?! Omniactive (everywhere busy)? Or Omniactivity (All Action, Movement, Expression)?! Omnibenevolent (Good to everyone)? Or Omnibenevolence (All Good, All Good-ness)?! Apparently, one need not be strictly theistic to embrace the divine O's!

What is process theology?

What are the benefits and challenges of myth, metaphor, symbolism, and allegory?

What are the limitations of language?

What are some of the problems of patriarchal language? See Laughlin, pp. 68 – 69

Discuss questions A, B, & C on p. 71 of Laughlin's text.

LESSON 3: JESUS & THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

Recommended Text:

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

Christian Beginnings

Additional Reading:

A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story (Diana Butler Bass, HarperOne 2009)

Church History: An Essential Guide (Justo Gonzalez, Abingdon Press 1996)

God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now (John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne 2008)

Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition [chapters 1 – 3] (Barbara J. MacHaffie, Fortress 1986)

Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium (Robert W. Funk, HarperSanFrancisco 1996)

Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (John Dominic Crossan, HarperSanFrancisco 1994)

Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary (Marcus Borg, HarperOne 2008)

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith (Marcus Borg, HarperOne 1995)

"The Universal Christ in Television & Film", ***Sharing the Light: A Journal of Progressive, Positive, & Practical Theology*** (Durrell Watkins, Light University Press, Lent/Easter 2010)

The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth (Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne 2007)

The Gospel According to Jesus: A New Translation and Guide to His Essential Teachings for Believers & Unbelievers (Stephen Mitchell, Harper Collins 1991)

The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne 1993)

The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives (Jane Schaberg, Harper & Row 1987)

The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation [Story of Christianity] (Justo Gonzalez, HarperOne 1984)

Who Is Jesus?: Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus (John Dominic Crossan, Westminster John Knox Press 1999)

{Other recommendations can be found in the book, p. 105}

Jesus' "career" only lasted from 1 to 3 years (probably closer to 1) and his activities were confined to his own homeland. And yet, this man who died young, whose ministry was brief, and who very rarely even ventured beyond his own "neighborhood" has sparked interest, debate, controversy, devotion, and a lot of creative imagination all over the world for two millennia and counting. This makes him one of the most significant figures in recorded human history to date.

Much of what people *believe* about Jesus comes more from the myths that enshroud him, created by people who never met him; and yet, that people would write stories, hymns, poems, dramas, sermons, letters, and create works of art about the Jesus of their imaginations shows that there must have been something remarkable about the original, historical, "real" first century Galilean prophet/peasant known to us as *Jesus*.

Jesus authored no scrolls (some scholars doubt if he was literate, and if he was, he would have been one of only 5% of his community who were...so even if he had been able to write, who would have read his works?).

He apparently spoke in parables (stories, illustrations, fictional accounts to make a moral point) rather than speaking plainly and directly most of the time.

He founded no institution (though a huge and lasting movement turned institution has certainly grown up and endured claiming him as its head and inspiration).

And other than some moral guidelines and anti-oppression work (compatible with almost every spiritual system known to humanity), he left no clear agenda to be followed.

"Complicating the situation is the fact that most of what we know about Jesus is based on New Testament writings that were composed long after the fact, are very sketchy and often contradictory, and are already biased by several layers of Christian belief, interpretation, and intent." (Laughlin, p. 75)

Laughlin says, "It is no wonder, then, that successive generations have remembered this man in a variety of ways, refashioning him time and again in their own images. He has been portrayed as everything from a simple rabbi to a deluded religious fanatic to a revolutionary zealot to the

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redeemer of all humanity. He has been reconceived in every culture and age according to its own standards and values, hopes and aspirations, and by countless individuals in light of their own predispositions, preferences, and prejudices. Historians...have shown again and again how views of and beliefs about Jesus have grown, developed, changed, and been codified (and sometimes condemned) in doctrines and dogmas over the centuries.”

Some views of Jesus today:

Jesus the mystic

Jesus the wisdom teacher

Jesus the counter-cultural, peaceful revolutionary

Jesus the healer

Jesus the magician/miracle worker

Jesus the prophet

Jesus the Jewish reformer

Jesus the victim

Jesus the over-comer

Jesus the symbol of compassion (suffering with all who suffer)

Jesus the symbol of resistance (“Lord”)

Jesus the unique manifestation of divinity

Jesus the example that all people (and maybe all life) are manifestations of divinity

Jesus the moral example (see Abelard)

Jesus the Logos (see John 1, compare to Heraclitus’ Logos philosophy, and to Sophia in the book of Proverbs; also, consider Far Eastern translations of John which read, “In the beginning was the Tao...”)

Jesus the sacrifice (vicarious for “satisfaction” - see Anselm, or “deserved penalty” – see Luther/Calvin, or ransom – see Origen, etc.)

Jesus the symbol and teacher of God’s universal reign

Jesus the tragic (mythological, archetypal) hero

Jesus the cosmic warrior

Jesus the symbol of unending life

To name just a few!!!!

In the last couple of hundred years, theologians and historians have often made a distinction between the Jesus of history (the “real” first century Palestinian who may have said and done some, but probably not all, of the things attributed to him in sacred literature) and the Christ of faith (the object of devotion).

{I wonder if Jesus of history/Christ of faith is a helpful distinction, since even the historical Jesus requires a good bit of imagination and comfort with ambiguity to piece together...See article in *Sharing the Light*, Lent/Easter 2010, pp. 22-23 - DW}

Sources

There are enough Roman historical (non-Christian) documents to verify not only the possibility but the probability of Jesus' historical existence, and that he was indeed executed and that he did inspire a movement that persisted beyond his death. Beyond these sources, we have Christian writings (both the New Testament and several works that did not make it into the New Testament) that show devotion to Jesus. These Christian writings were written long after Jesus' life and ministry (Paul...a generation after, Mark...two generations after, Matthew...almost three generations after, John...three generations after, deuterio-Paul...four generations after, Luke...three or four generations after, etc.). And, everything written after Paul, was written after the destruction of the Temple, a major event that colors what is written and how Jesus is portrayed in those writings.

There are no writings in Jesus' hand, or from people who actually witnessed much (if any) of what they are writing about. And, there are no original texts in existence. So, not only were the texts written in another language, hand copied (with many opportunities for error), and collected and canonized by a political process, but they were all written one to four generations after Jesus, are already at the time they are being written full of interpretive spin (which is fair enough...they were never meant to be value neutral journalistic reports), and the oldest copies still in existence are hand copies of hand copies of hand copies, etc.

These insights do not diminish the power of these ancient sacred texts...but they may change the way in which they are for us powerful, important, useful, relevant, and sacred.

Distinguish between the Jesus Movements and the Christ Cults.

Paul gives very little biographical information (at this time, discuss even what "biography" as a literary genre was in antiquity).

His biographical details are limited to:

Jesus was Jewish (Gal. 3.16)

He had a mother (Gal. 4.4)

He was descended from David (Rom. 1.3)

His ministry was inclusive (Rom. 15.8)

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Didn't approve of divorce (1 Cor. 7.10-11)...why do you think that might be?

Shared a supper on the night of his arrest (1 Cor. 11.23-25)

Was executed (Gal. 2.20, 3.1, 1 Cor. 1.23, Phil. 2.8)

And somehow didn't stay dead (1 Cor. 9.1, 15.4-8, Gal. 1.12 & 16)

That's 21 verses Paul gives to the life (including resurrection) of Jesus. Paul never personally knew Jesus, and even the few biographical "facts" he shares he learned second hand.

The gospels provide much more biographical details, but only Matthew and Luke share any information about Jesus prior to his adulthood (Matthew a birth narrative, Luke a very different birth narrative and a story of Jesus lagging behind on a family trip...and that's it for pre-adult details) and all of the gospels were written from 41 to 91 years after Jesus' life). And, remember, there are gospels that didn't make it into our canon but were considered sacred by various faith communities in the early days of the movement. So many different texts about Jesus, including the ones that were canonized, show that there have always been a variety of views held about Jesus, even among the faithful.

Yeshua & the Galileans

"As fond as many Christians are of 'calling upon the name of Jesus,' the first step in coming to terms with the historical person of Jesus is the recognition that his name wasn't Jesus. 'Jesus' is the English equivalent of the Latin version of the Greek rendering of his original Aramaic name, which was Jeheshua, or Jeshua, and was probably pronounced (and may actually be spelled) 'Yeshua.' It is the exact equivalent of the name of the Old Testament prophet Joshua...no one ever called Jesus 'Jesus' in his lifetime...It simply wasn't his name. (While we are at it, his mother's name wasn't Mary, either, but Miriam)" (Laughlin, p. 77).

The Jesus we think we know often looks like us, thinks like us, and shares our values...and yet, in reality, he comes from a time very long ago, half a world away, from a culture and a worldview with which we share very little in common. He is so foreign to the world we live in (a world he knew nothing about), his name (in his own context) isn't even the name by which we call him! And yet we have sometimes stubbornly insisted that "we" know the truth about him, and only those who share our understanding of him can be in right relationship with God.

Examining the historical origins of Jesus, however, calls such hubris into question.

Yeshua, the modestly educated (at best), Aramaic speaking, rural Jew of uncertain paternity, living in Roman controlled Palestine, was very different than the European looking, American acting Jesus we have often claimed as our most central symbol of faith.

In any case, Jesus was apparently Galilean. Galilee was remote from the provincial capital, Jerusalem. Galileans were considered uncultured and less than “pure” (a racist insult, suggesting that they had been too compromised or had “mingled” with too many other cultures). Revolutionaries often came from that region.

The Jewish people had been dominated by Egypt, Syria, the Babylonians, and the Assyrian Empire, all before Roman conquest.

Galileans, while Jewish, were still diverse in their Judaism. There were the priestly Sadducees, the lay reform movement called the Pharisees, the ascetic Essenes, and the politically radical Zealots (remember the Apostle Simon the Zealot?).

Among the people, there were two great hopes for liberation from imperial oppression. One was a *messianic* hope...an expectation that a messiah (an anointed, military leader) would rise up and lead the Jewish homeland to independence and greatness.

The other was an *apocalyptic* hope...the belief that a cosmic “son of man” or chosen one (as is seen in the Book of Daniel) might magically appear to bring peace, justice, and prosperity to the whole world. Some, it seems, thought Jesus might be the fulfillment of their messianic hopes...others seemed to believe that a post-crucifixion/resurrected Jesus might be the fulfillment of their apocalyptic hopes. Over time, the stories tend to blend together.

Born of a Virgin

Only Matthew and Luke (neither of whom knew Jesus as a child and certainly were not present for his birth) mention this bizarre tale. Matthew’s version comes first, and seems to be based on a mistranslation of a prophecy from Isaiah which he applies (700 years after the prophecy was written) to Jesus. Other than saying Jesus was born of a woman (not a virgin), Paul says nothing of Jesus’ birth, nor does Mark (the oldest gospel) and neither does John (who arguably offers the highest Christology of all).

Miraculous birth stories were common in antiquity and were meant to suggest that the person the story was about was truly a remarkable man

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or woman. In Greek and Roman paganism, gods and humans often copulated, producing god-humans (demi-gods), and such stories seemed more plausible before the discovery of the egg cell three centuries ago (we now know where babies come from).

It is entirely possible that we have placed far too much emphasis on a **story that only two people in scripture even cared to mention (the others may not have even known of such a story), that is biologically improbable, and that was originally based on a mistranslation.** We have made a rather minor (according to the attention paid to it in scripture itself) story a key doctrinal sticking point...which has deterred some critical thinking people from taking what our tradition has to offer seriously. Those who want to take the story literally are free to do so, of course, but this is probably not something we should ever have insisted be a requirement for Church membership (after all, there is no evidence that Paul, Mark, John, or even Jesus himself knew anything about it or considered it a prime article of faith).

Additionally, consider how the story has been used to demean human sexuality...if Jesus can only be holy if he isn't conceived in a natural way, then that suggests that sexual intercourse is sinful, dirty, or disordered. Also, a male dominated church that has venerated the "virgin" Mary as the ideal feminine image has again suggested that sexuality is something other than a natural part of God's good creation. Those of us who believe spirituality can be sex-positive and body-positive may need to rethink the legendary virginal conception if only to be consistent with our embodied theology.

For alternative hypotheses of Jesus' paternity (such as the possibility that Mary was abused by a Roman soldier), see Laughlin, p. 80. Some also say that Joseph could have been the father, while still others (i.e., Spong) suggest that Joseph is a fictional character, created out of whole cloth.

Luke has angels and shepherds at the birth scene, while Matthew has Persian astrologers following a star that seems to rest right above the house where Mary and Jesus (sans shepherds, angels, or even Joseph) happen to be (not only inconsistent, but astronomically questionable).

The Nature of Jesus

What about Jesus' sexuality? Some have suggested he married Mary Magdalene (Laughlin, p. 84), while others think Jesus may have had a same-gender loving relationship (John? Lazarus? Are they the same person?).

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Of course, there is no way to really know if Jesus was celibate, married, or gay...but what keeps us from at least asking the questions? Does Jesus have to be asexual in order to be a God-filled symbol of faith, hope, courage, and holiness?

See Laughlin, p. 85 for statements in the Christian gospels that sound a lot like beliefs from older, Far Eastern traditions.

Consider John 14.6

Taoism...Way

Buddhism...Dharma (Truth)

Jainism...Ahimsa (Sacred Life)

Judaism...YHWH (I Am)

Burton Mack suggests that John's audience is meant to identify with John's Jesus. *I Am* is each of us.

From a liberation standpoint, Caesar's way is the only way...a way over against Caesar's is meant to bring hope...Caesar's way is hostile, controlling, exclusive, and abusive...but the Jesus way is loving, inclusive, empowering (power with rather than power over) and life-giving. Sadly, Christians have often used that verse to implement Caesar's way (only people who agree with us get in, everyone else is excluded).

When does Jesus become Christ?

Romans...Ascension

Mark...Baptism

Matthew/Luke...Conception

John...in the beginning (of "linear" time)

What does Jesus teach?

Dominion/Kin-dom/Commonwealth/Presence of God...HERE

Requirement for discipleship? Give it all away (Mark)

Greatest Commandment...LOVE

Golden Rule...that's the point of the Scriptures (Matthew)

Legalism? Sabbath [Religion] made for us, not us for it. (Mark 2.27)

See Laughlin, p. 90 for some interesting sayings attributed to Jesus

In the synoptics, Jesus points to God and God's domain (*why do you call me good, there is none good but God*), not to himself.

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In John, Jesus points to himself (do we find that attractive?). John is a later gospel and the least historical. It is also highly symbolic/allegorical. As pointed out previously, when John's Jesus says, "I am", it may be suggesting a universal I Am...we are all one with the divine, we are all expressions of the divine way/truth/life, etc.

See Laughlin, p. 96...why argue over titles, when in fact they may be too restrictive, no matter how glorious they are meant to be.

First creed: Jesus is Lord (what does that mean?)

How subversive is it in a world where Caesar is Lord to call anyone else Lord?

And why are titles attributed to Jesus after his life that he may never have claimed for himself?

Resurrection Possibilities

Same as ascension?

Bodily resuscitation? (consider Pharisees belief in resurrection)...would be especially appealing to people who did not share the Greek idea of "soul"

Act of sedition? (you killed our guy, but he didn't stay dead)

A trick? (self-induced trance/coma?)

Buried not quite dead and then rescued?

Spirit lives on in ritual and story, giving life to body (politic) of believers here and now...perhaps the church is the resurrected body of Christ

Self-initiated act (he rose)

God initiated act (he has been raised)

Again...there are many of views...all of them faithful and empowering.

Read the conclusion of the chapter (Laughlin, pp. 102 – 103)

LESSON 4: THE CHRIST OF FAITH

Recommended Text:

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

Christ of Faith

Additional Reading:

A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story

(Diana Butler Bass, HarperOne 2009)

Born Divine: The Births of Jesus & Other Sons of God (Robert J.

Miller, Polebridge Press 2003)

Church History: An Essential Guide (Justo Gonzalez, Abingdon

Press 1996)

One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, but Many (Gregory J. Riley, HarperSanFrancisco 1997)

Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in

Feminist Christology (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Continuum 1994)

Mind: The Master Power (Charles Roth, Unity Books 1974)

Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to be Christian (Carter Heyward, Fortress 1999)

The Coming of the Cosmic Christ (Matthew Fox, Harper & Row 1988)

The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology

(M. Thomas Thangaraj, Abingdon Press 1994)

{Other recommendations can be found in the book, pp. 137-138}

“Any religion that has managed to survive more than a generation or two is bound to be a complex of traditions, that is, of beliefs and practices handed down and received, adopted and adapted, then handed on again... Thus, despite some claims to the contrary, not even in its most conservative or ‘orthodox’ expression is any of the world’s religions today what it was when it first emerged.” (Laughlin, p.109).

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish people in a particular region who saw him as a healer, a teacher, possibly a reformer, and some may have hoped he would be a political revolutionary leader. He was a charismatic speaker and teacher who developed an energetic following within a Jewish framework.

Within a couple of generations after Jesus’ execution, the “primitive” church, that is the earliest organized groups that held him as a primary symbol of faith, had developed some very simple “creeds” about Jesus.

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The original followers of Jesus were interested in what Jesus had to say about God. Within a few decades after his death, the movement was interested in what the movement's leaders were saying about Jesus. See the shift that took place very early?

The simple creeds or affirmations of faith of the primitive church were that "Jesus is Lord" and/or "Jesus is the Messiah" and/or "Jesus is the son of God."

Within a couple of hundred years, those simple affirmations had snowballed into complex creeds, dogmas, doctrines, and traditions. And over the last couple of millennia, those beliefs and traditions have been reinterpreted (many times), and new ones have been added to the mix. It is a natural evolutionary process, but we must be aware that it has, however inevitably, taken place.

Since the 5th century or so, the rich and complex beliefs "about" Christ have been much more dogmatic than the simple affirmations of the 2nd century, or the curiosity, interest, and desire to follow Jesus that was taking place in the early 1st century.

"Every Christian should know at least that the basic tenets of the Christian faith did not one day fall fully formed from heaven, nor did they issue forth from the lips of Jesus, nor are they even located in scripture (though the makings certainly are). Rather, they emerged slowly and evolved gradually in a process of thinking and rethinking, conflict and compromise..." (Laughlin, p. 109).

Periods of Christian History

Ancient/Initial Definition...29 CE (birth of Jesus) to 500 CE (The Christological Era)

During these first 5 centuries, the missions of Paul took place and his letters were written (50s and 60s).

There were periods of persecution

Some of the first strong voices shaping the institutional identity of the church emerged

Constantine legalized the movement and gave it "legitimacy"

Councils met to put down diversity of opinion and to "agree" (even if by force) on a single "orthodox" position on matters of doctrine, and so the creeds came into being.

Controversies arose around "Gnostics" and other "heretics" (people who felt free to choose their beliefs)

Theology of Augustine

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Rise of monasticism

Middle Ages/Development and Dominance...500 CE to 1400 CE

Charlemagne, first Holy Roman Emperor

Split between Western Church and Eastern Church (Eastern Orthodoxy)

Rise and spread of Islam

Crusades

Clashes between Popes and kings

Important theologians (Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, etc.)

Mystics, e.g., Hildegard and Eckhart

Inquisition

Renaissance & Reformation/Dissent & Dissolution...1400 CE to 1650 CE

Copernicus

Michaelangelo

Erasmus/humanism

Individualism

Luther, Calvin, Zwingli (reformation)

Anglicanism

Council of Trent

Anabaptists

Contemporary/Diversity & Doubt...1650 CE to present

Explosion of denominations

Enlightenment

Modern Science

Newton, Bacon, Locke (empiricism), Freud, Jung, Marx, Darwin

Historical-critical method of biblical scholarship

Liberalism and fundamentalism

Awareness of other cultures and religions

Pluralism and relativism

The New Thought Movement

Positive Thinking

Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Teilhard, Rahner, Kung, etc.

Quantum Theory

Feminist theology

Process theology

Liberation theology

Black theology

Queer theology

Mujerista theology

Asian Feminist theology

Creation spirituality

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“Progressive Christianity”

Notice how each age presents a different world view, and how one’s world view impacts one’s religious experience. Attempting to hold a middle ages view of Christ in a post-modern era is bound to cause cognitive dissonance (a psychological term that is familiar within “our” worldview).

Jesus Movement vs. Christ Cult
Synoptics/Acts...Jesus Movement?
Paul/John...Christ Cult?

Remember, Paul had not been a follower of Jesus, and unless we take his word that he had a mystical, resurrection experience of Jesus, he never even met him. And yet, his teachings about Jesus have been very persuasive for most of Christian history. Paul and Augustine (who came much later), may be the most influential voices in Christian history, and neither of them had a personal relationship with the living, human Jesus. What questions might this raise for us?

From 150 CE (and maybe from as early as 96 CE) to 500 CE, we see Greek Philosophy entering into our Christian identity (odd, for what started out as a wholly Jewish movement).

Blending Roman traditions (from about the early 300s) with Greek philosophy and Jewish traditions (which had picked up some Greek and Persian ideas along the way as well), shows how innately *pluralistic* Christianity has in fact, if not in affirmation, always been.

We also see that from the beginning, some Christian ideas did not really work out...the parousia (so-called “second-coming”), which was believed to be something that would immediately happen, never did (in a literal sense).

The Councils (involving debate, compromise, and even a few dirty tricks and political heavy handedness) produced the creeds in 325 and 451 (hundreds of years after Jesus) that have defined “orthodoxy” for us ever since.

How did we get from “Follow me” to “Jesus is Lord” (without much explanation as to what that even really meant or how it might be true) to the lengthy, complex Nicene Creed? And in a scientific world, some of the affirmations of the 4th and 5th centuries may be difficult for us to

make, and yet “follow me” and “Jesus is Lord” may still be statements that most Christians can honor and attempt to live out.

The Pauline corpus (including the deutero-Pauline literature), gives us an ethereal or esoteric Christ, an eternal, impersonal, cosmic Christ image that is very different from the flesh and blood, living, loving, suffering, courageous sage, prophet, healer and teacher that Jesus was...but then again, Paul knows Jesus in only an imaginative way...he never had a physical experience of Jesus, and so his Christ is not terribly embodied. This means Paul's Christ comes across as being divine, but not very human. Paul doesn't give us an historical Jesus, but describes a Christ of faith.

Jesus, the prophet, teacher, healer, reformer, non-conformist is the person of history that we may want to rediscover. Christ, the cosmic, divine principle represented in stories “about” Jesus is Paul's focus, and maybe John's, and it would seem, the Church's for the most part.

Remember, there was no Trinity in the earliest Christian dialogues...so Christological debates were not Trinitarian debates until quite late in the institutional evolution.

A possible contemporary affirmation of faith:

“We believe in the reign of God, and in the love, equality, justice, and peace for which it stands; and in Jesus, who proclaimed, and enacted, and embodied its spirit, and taught us all to live as God's children, and to help the poor and helpless and hopeless; and who died because the world was not ready for his message” (Laughlin, p. 125).

“Jesus completely expressed the Christ, and he opened the way for us to do the same. Jesus was...our Elder Brother...If the eldest received permission to drive at sixteen, the second-born almost takes it for granted that the same goes for him [or her]...In a spiritual way, Jesus is our Elder Brother. He broke the ground for us. He is our trailblazer. He learned, practiced, and fulfilled the laws governing the growth of the Christ in [all people]. And he taught us how to accomplish what he accomplished.” Charles Roth, *Mind: The Master Power*, Unity Books 1974, pp. 20-21

“After a hundred years or so, the religion of Jesus became a religion about Jesus, even though [Jesus] plainly taught that the same [God] and the same power that indwelt him and enabled him to do what he did is

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the [God] of every person and will enable anyone to do the seemingly impossible. Most people didn't really believe this, and remained content to build statues of Jesus and to think of him as having a special dispensation from God. This happened in spite of his teachings that we all have the same [God] he had, therefore we are all children of God, spiritual beings with the infinite potentialities of Spirit at our command." Roth, pp. 109 - 100

Jesus became divine 300 years after his execution (see Laughlin, p. 126).

Some people, having trouble with this divine/human paradox (a very un-Jewish doctrine), have tended to either lean toward Jesus' humanity, or to his divinity...trying to make them equally true (which is the "orthodox" position) has proven problematic for all these centuries.

Some insisted Jesus' "divinity" merely meant he was divinely called to live the life that he lived...**his divinity was merely a human life living out a divine calling.**

Others insisted that Jesus was a divine being, like the gods of Olympus, and he merely "appeared" to be human...wearing a human *disguise*, as it were (and while many would not articulate it just that way today, they do seem to believe this to be the case).

In 451, the matter was put to rest (as if!) by declaring that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. This incomprehensible doctrine has sometimes left us with a human Jesus, or with a deity choosing to look human, but has never been able to adequately accomplish its intentions....of having two things occupy the same space at the same time (which, scientifically, we now know to be highly improbable anyway).

Because of the ambiguity and claims beyond what could ever be reasonable, people have always attributed whatever they needed to Christ...and so, Christ has been seen in as many variations as human-beings experience. *He's been an ethicist, a miracle worker, a "poet of the spirit," a symbol of personal empowerment, an opponent of unjust power structures, a liberator, a weapon to maintain the status quo as well as an irritant to upset the status quo!* Because the Church moved from having the faith OF Jesus to having faith IN Jesus, from practicing the spirituality OF Jesus to making a religion ABOUT Jesus, the Jesus in question has changed to meet the needs of almost every Christian community...and so it goes with the Christ of faith!

Consider Laughlin's "Third Millennium" Christ images

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Mythical Christ (pp. 132 – 133)

Mystical Christ (pp. 133 – 134)

What does Laughlin mean by “Monistic Mutuality”? (p. 134)

Why consider the various historical views of Christ?

Why deconstruct (and possibly reconstruct) our own views?

Why is such effort beneficial (and perhaps necessary) for the Christian?

If we believe only what we were told as children...what does that say for people who were told something very different?

Any faith that we haven't wrestled with, can't be ours, and if it isn't truly ours, how can it be of any benefit to us?

Read Laughlin's chapter Conclusion on pp. 135 – 136

LESSON 5: SIN, HUMAN NATURE, GRACE, & SALVATION

Recommended Text:

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

Additional Reading:

If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person (Philip Gulley & James Mulholland, HarperSanFrancisco 2003)

Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality (Matthew Fox, Bear & Co. 1983)

Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us (Rita Nakashim Brock & Rebecca Ann Parker, Beacon Press 2001)

The Myth Maker: Paul & the Invention of Christianity (Harper & Row 1986)

The Origin of Satan (Elaine Pagels, Random House 1995)

The Phoenix Affirmations: A New Vision for the Future of Christianity (Eric Elnes, Jossey-Bass 2006)

What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell?: Wrestling With the Traditional View (Randy Klassen, Pandora Press U.S. 2001)

{Other recommendations can be found in the book, pp. 168-169 and 199-200}

Sin, Salvation, Christ

"If being is by nature holy there is no salvation except of *everything* that exists." Teilhard de Chardin (French philosopher & Jesuit priest)

"This, then, is salvation: When we marvel at the beauty of created things and praise their beautiful Creator." Meister Eckhart (Christian mystic in the Middle Ages)

"One God, the maker of all; this is the first and foremost article of our faith." Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons, late 2nd century)

"Salvation is about healing, and just as the cosmos itself can be ruptured and torn apart by injustice, so too it can be healed by all human efforts to bring justice, which is balance, back to human relationships, to earth, air, fire, water, and one another." Matthew Fox (former Dominican, author and teacher of Creation Spirituality)

"The cross does not offer us any explanatory model that would make us understand what salvation is and how it itself might be salvation. Instead

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it invites us to participate in a process within which we can actually experience history as salvation.” Jon Sobrino (Liberation theologian)

“[Humanity’s] capacity for evil...is less a positive capacity, for all its horrendous activity, than a failure to develop [humanity’s] most human function, the imagination, to its fullness, and consequently a failure to develop compassion.” Denise Levertov (poet)

“Beauty is eternity here below.” Simone Weil (philosopher & social activist)

“Humankind...is God’s work. Humankind...is called to assist God. Humankind is called to co-create. With nature’s help, humankind can set into creation all that is necessary and life-sustaining.” Hildegarde of Bingen (12th century Benedictine)

“A spirituality that preaches resignation under official brutalities...and total submission to organized injustice is one which has lost interest in holiness and remains concerned only with a spurious notion of ‘order.’” Thomas Merton (20th century Trappist monk)

“Joy was in fact the most characteristic result of all Jesus’ activity amongst the poor and the oppressed.” Albert Nolan

“The glory of God is the glory of people fully alive.” Irenaeus

“Goodness is God.” Julian of Norwich (Christian mystic in the Middle Ages)

According to Matthew Fox, the following differences in Fall/Redemption/Original Sin theology (Augustine, Thomas a Kempis) & Creation-Centered/Original Blessing theology (Irenaeus, Hildegarde, Eckhart, Julian, Teilhard, feminist & liberation theologians) are noteworthy:

Original Sin

Faith = belief

Patriarchal

Ascetic

Control of passions

God is **father**

Suffering is **punishment** for sin

Death is **punishment**

Holiness = perfection

Original Blessing

Faith = trust

Feminist

Aesthetic

Celebration of ecstasy

God is **mother & father & child** & more

Suffering is **birth pangs** of the universe

Death is a **natural** event

Holiness is wholeness & hospitality

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Begins with **sin**
Egological
Natural **Science unimportant**

Dualistic (either/or)
Suspicious of body/
"soul makes war on body"
Augustine

Humility is to despise oneself
Pessimistic
Climbing Jacob's ladder
Elitist
Some are saved
Emphasizes Jesus' exclusive
divinity over his humanity

Personal salvation
Kingdom = church

Human as **sinner**

Struggle to be **good**

Time is about the lost
perfection of the past or
the future perfection of heaven

Mysticism = mortify the senses

Repent = sorrow
Eternal Life is afterlife
Contemplation is spiritual goal

Emphasizes the **cross**

Obedience

Duty

Guilt

Purity

Supports **status quo** or an
idealized past

Soul is in the *body*

Humanity is flawed

Begins with divine **creative energy**
Ecological and cosmic
Natural **Science teaches us about**
God

Dialectal (both/and)
Welcoming of the body/
"soul loves the body"
Eckhart

Humility is to befriend one's earthiness
Hopeful

Dancing Sarah's dance

Egalitarian

Universalist

Emphasizes Jesus as prophet, teacher,
story-teller/artist, child of God **calling**
others to their divinity/holiness

Healing of all people and the cosmos
Kingdom = **kin-dom**, community, the
world, the cosmos

Human as person of power who can
make **choices**

Struggle to bring **justice** where there
has been injustice

Time is NOW, making heaven begin
now

Mysticism = let go of preconceived
Ideologies

Repent = change/transformation

Eternal Life is now

Compassion, justice, and celebration
are spiritual goals

Emphasizes the **Resurrection**

Creativity

Beauty

Praise

Hospitality

Prophetic, i.e., critical of the status quo

Body is in the **Soul**

Humanity is good in Nature but is
capable of good or bad choices, of
living into divine potential or behaving in
ways that seem demonic

Faith is in the **intellect**
Theistic

Faith is in the **imagination**
Pantheistic

Sin means “missing the mark”. In Eastern religions, the “sin” of humanity is ignorance...not realizing our oneness with Ultimate Reality.

In Judaism and Islam, “sin” amounts to mistakes that can be corrected with repentance.

Are we punished “for” our sins, or “by” them (cause and effect? Touch hot stove, get burned...not because the stove gods are angry, but because stoves are hot, and if we mistakenly touch a hot stove, it will hurt)? We obviously all make mistakes, but could any mistake separate us from the love of God? And can't we be basically good even if we don't always behave in ways that are wise and helpful?

For illustration of “original sin” see Laughlin, p. 158.

Christian views of sin come largely from Augustine's theology. But before Augustine, there were Christian thinkers such as Origen, Pelagius, and Irenaeus who had much more progressive ideas on human nature. There has always been more than one way to view any issue, even in Christianity.

Imago Dei

“Apparently, the ‘image of God’ can be whatever anyone believes makes us uniquely human and divinely connected.” (Laughlin, p. 142)

In the Genesis creation myths, Gen. 3 is the “Fall” story...it is a continuation of Gen. 2 (beginning with verse 4), which is the older of the two creation myths. In Genesis 2-3, humanity “seizes” the divine image by eating the magical fruit from the forbidden tree. Genesis chapter 1, by contrast, is a newer tale than Gen. 2-3, and in Genesis 1, there is no Fall, but rather humanity is “created” in the divine image. Which of these two traditions more closely reflect your understanding (or your evolving understanding)?

In the Fall story, God is human in appearance (what does that do to the second commandment?!) and contrary to contemporary piety, S/He is not omniscient. The Fall story, as Laughlin points out (p. 142) calls into question the divine moral character much more than the righteousness of the infantile primordial couple!

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Most ideas of the need for a divine-human sacrifice to “save” humankind come from a literal reading of the “Fall” story; but a careful reading of the story shows God to be neither omnipotent nor omniscient (nor even omnipresent) and shows God to be limited not only in ability but in wisdom and in moral character! All of that is before we notice it is the second (well, chronologically, the first) of TWO very different creation stories, neither of which can be supported by the sciences that have developed since those stories were first imagined! Without a literal Fall, notions of sin and salvation may need to be reconsidered as well. Maybe that is exactly what the creator of Genesis 1 did when he or she concluded that humanity was made in the divine image and that God called all of creation (including humanity) VERY Good!

Evil

What is evil?

How much is “evil” determined by cultural norms?

Is alcohol evil?

Is marijuana evil?

Is tobacco evil?

Is swearing evil?

Is abortion evil?

Is sex before marriage evil?

Is same-gender love and attraction evil?

Is capitol punishment evil?

Is waging war evil?

Is eating meat on Fridays evil?

Is eating pork or shellfish evil?

In any given class or group of people, there will probably be very little consensus on these questions!!!

Theories of Evil:

1. Evil is a value judgment (“one person’s ‘terrorist’ is another’s ‘freedom fighter.’” The person we called “General” Washington may have been called something very different by King George III)
2. Evil is the lack of or deviation of the Good (all people are basically good, but circumstances can cause some people to move away from their innate goodness toward something less worthy...the Good gone bad!).
3. Evil is an aspect of the over-all Good (wine can be both good for the heart and bad for the liver)

4. Evil is a force opposed to the Good (those who do evil are agents of a malevolent force, e.g. "the devil." They are wicked and deserve to be destroyed).

See Laughlin, pp. 144-145 for examples.

In the ancient scriptures, evil is attributed to God! In the story of Job, Satan ("the accuser") has access to the heavenly court, has a collegial relationship with God, and it is God who allows Job to suffer to prove a point to Satan! Likewise, God tells Abraham (or so Abraham thinks) to sacrifice his child, Isaac. God makes King Saul crazy. God drowns the Egyptians and kills their first-born children. In the Old Testament, it isn't a force opposed to God that causes evil; it is actually God doing most of the mischief!

Princeton University professor Elaine Pagels says in her book, *The Origin of Satan*, that in the Christian tradition, "Satan" evolved from its Jewish roots (where Satan is rarely mentioned and is always subject to God) to a social construct within Christianity primarily as a way of demonizing their enemies, e.g., Pharisees, Pagans, Gnostics, etc.

Again, if Satan is largely a late social construct, from "what" do we who are made in the divine image need to be saved?

Remember, by the time of the New Testament writings, Zoroastrian influences (dualistic, a good deity and an evil deity, or one deity with both good and mischievous aspects) had entered into the thinking of the people who would become Jewish-Christians. This may explain why Christian views of God and Satan were able to evolve in ways that are so different from their Judaic ancestors (see Laughlin, p. 148-149). However, once Satan started taking the heat for evil in Christian thinking, God became a bit friendlier too (again, similar to Zoroastrian thinking).

Myth = Truth IN Fiction

What is the difference between "truth" and "fact"?

How can something that is not factual be true?

In the Fall Myth, there is no Satan (the snake is just a snake, though a chatty one).

The snake is not deceptive, but God is.

The fruit is unnamed (it could have easily been a fig as an apple).

God is not all-knowing, all-wise, or everywhere present.

There is no sin committed by morally mature adults; there is merely disobedience by two innocent and youthful creatures who don't yet know

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good from evil (and does the resulting punishment REALLY fit the so-called crime?).

The naïve couple do not cause evil to come into the world...it is already there; they simply become aware of it by eating the magic fruit.

We also see a jealous and petty God who harshly punishes the couple for disobeying a command (not for doing anything that was intrinsically evil); the deity punishes not only the couple, but all humanity for all time (and later theologies suggest that God can only get over it by causing, or at least allowing, one perfect person to be tortured and brutally slain).

If that myth is factual (and for so many reasons it obviously isn't), it doesn't paint a flattering picture of God at all! But if it is indeed a myth, a fictional story that is meant to communicate something that is spiritually or metaphysically true, then we can wrestle with it and find some good message in it for us. But to literalize it is to make God a monster and us little more than God's helpless victims. That can't be religion at its best.

Compare to Greek myth of Prometheus.

Did we fall from perfection, or are we evolving toward it?

Hell

Is fear of punishment in an afterlife prison a very noble reason for behaving in certain ways, belonging to a certain group, or claiming to believe certain things? If religion boils down to "fire-insurance" is that really a very lofty view of faith? Does a God who punishes people without end pass any sort of moral test at all?

Most of what we believe about Hell comes from the art and literature of the middle ages. What little is said about Hell in the New Testament may actually have been added later by the early Church. And any notion of a good God overseeing a Cosmic Country Club (exclusive and restricted) vs. a bad spirit overseeing an everlasting dungeon was likely borrowed from Zoroastrianism.

Read Laughlin, p. 167.

Answer questions C & E on p. 168

What is salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2.8)?

Could it mean that salvation (wholeness) is by grace (unmerited favor, given to all creatures) through faith (the faith that the divine has in us!)?

Could God so trust the creation that God has called very good, that such faith/trust enfolds us all in grace that assures our ultimate wholeness?
Is salvation a matter of both God's grace AND God's faith?

Do good deeds matter?
Do beliefs/opinions matter?
Does religious affiliation matter?

Atonement = at-one-ment

Do we need to do or believe something to be accepted by God, or do we need to realize, wake up to the fact, that we are already in comm-union with the divine? Do we need to atone, or did Jesus need to atone for us, or does Jesus teach us that we are innately *at-one* with the divine?

Remember the Ransom, Satisfaction, Penal, Substitution, Moral Example, Liberation (and more) atonement theories. Aren't they all trying to get at a union/unity with the divine?

"Adam" falls asleep in 2nd (but older) creation story. We are never told that he wakes up! Maybe atonement is merely Adam (the earth-being) finally waking up to his/her divine potential/sacred value (at-one-ment).

What are the problems (and appeal) of predestination theories?

What does Salvation mean to you?

Who is it for?

Do you know someone who practices another religion (or none)? Can you see holiness/goodness in that person? Would you ever reject that person for eternity? Do you believe God would?

Do you believe in an afterlife?

What do you imagine it will be like?

When Jesus says, "In my Parent's house are many rooms," does that mean there may be a variety of experiences possible beyond this life (just as there are many possibilities "in" this life)?

Could it be true that divine Love excludes no one for any reason and all people should be able to live with peace and joy without fear of worlds beyond our own?

Read Laughlin's conclusion on pp. 197-198

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LESSON 6: *The Church, Churches, World Religions, & the Future of Faith*

Recommended Text:

Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't (Paul Alan Laughlin, Polebridge Press 2000)

Additional Reading:

Associations, Synagogues, & Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society (Philip A. Harland, Fortress 2003)

Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church (Letty Russell, Westminster John Knox Press 1993)

Crisis & Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse (Adela Yarbro Collins, Westminster 1984)

Everyone is Right: A New Look at Comparative Religion and its Relation to Science (Roland Peterson, DeVorss 1986)

Finding Your Religion When the Faith You Grew Up with Has Lost Its Meaning (Scotty McLennan, HarperSanFrancisco 1999)

Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission & Global Responsibility (Paul F. Knitter, Orbis 1996)

One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility (Paul F. Knitter, Orbis 1995)

Oneness: Great Principles Shared by All Religions (Jeffrey Moss, Ballantine 1989/2002)

One River, Many Wells: Wisdom Springing from Global Faiths (Matthew Fox, Tarcher/Putnam 2000)

The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are (Alan Watts, Vintage 1966)

The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God (Carlton Pearson, Azusa Press 2006)

The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity (Martin Palmer, Ballantine/Wellspring 2001)

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation (Barbara R. Rossing, Basic Books 2004)

Introducing Theologies of Religions (Paul F. Knitter, Orbis 2002)

Welcome to the Wisdom of the World & Its Meaning for You: Universal Spiritual Insights Distilled from Five Religious Traditions (Joan Chittester, Eerdmans 2007)

Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian (Paul F. Knitter, OneWorld 2009)

{Other recommendations can be found in the book, pp. 226-227 and 254-255}

Church

What does church mean?

Ekklesia = gathering, assembly, congregation

Jesus' teachings have almost nothing to do with building a new religion. The word "church" is attributed to him only three times, all three times in Matthew's gospel (written some 50 years after Jesus' death).

Paul's description of the Church as "the body of Christ" refers to the body politic (not a well organized, hierarchical institution)...a "loosely organized association of people..."(Laughlin, p. 204).

"The initial growth of the Church as an institution was spurred by two factors. First, the second coming of Christ, which most early Christians expected, didn't occur. As long as Jesus' return was anticipated, there was no reason to get organized, since he would surely establish a new order that would render all human institutions obsolete. Second, when Constantine became both the emperor and a Christian in 313 CE, Christianity was legalized" (Laughlin, p. 205).

So, three centuries AFTER Jesus, Christians finally had the "psychological 'space'" to organize - "hammering out beliefs, defining ministerial offices, formalizing ritual practices, and determining their canon of scriptures. Only then did there appear ecumenical councils, elaborate creeds, the first dedicated church buildings, and the makings of hierarchical clergy" (p. 205). And even after the church was officially institutionalized, it would still take another century for the Church to look "Episcopal" (governed by bishops) in any "modern sense."

Part of the institutional Church's mythology was "unity" (supposedly meaning "one in Christ" but later represented by papal authority), "catholicity" (the Church as a whole being the focus rather than allowing individual congregations to be autonomous), "holiness" (presence of holy Spirit, associated with sacraments that evolved to be mediators of divine grace), and apostolicity (derived from the assumption that Church leaders could trace a lineage all the way back to the original apostles).

After the Protestant Reformation (16th century), "unity" and "apostolic succession" were downplayed, reinterpreted, or rejected by those who no longer affiliated with the Roman Church. The Protestants kept the sacraments, but reduced them from 7 to 2, and placed their primary focus on the proclaimed word (based on their understanding of the bible).

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Soon, more “radical” reformers came along (Anabaptist, Quakers, etc.) who abandoned sacraments all together (though some observed “ordinances” of Communion & Baptism) and defined holiness as personal piety and self-discipline. These “free” churches tended to see the bible (from their perspective), a personal experience of the Spirit, or the consensus of the local congregation as being authoritative rather than an hierarchical, “universal” Church.

Still, for these theological and organizational differences, most Christian denominations have agreed, to some extent, on four functions of “the Church”:

1. Kerygma (proclamation, outreach)
2. Didache (teaching, discipleship)
3. Koinonia (community-building, offering encouragement, support, and friendship to those within the congregation)
4. Diakonia (offering ministry, assistance, missions of mercy to people in need beyond the congregation)

These are, of course, noble ideas that various groups have given differing amount of attention to, and it is probably the case that no group has done complete justice to any of the four functions.

Women

See Galatians 3.28

For Paul, a first century Jewish Palestinian man to say that there could be any circumstances wherein there was “neither male nor female; for all...are one in Christ” is extraordinary. In Paul’s culture, women, children, slaves, and “gentiles” were not highly regarded.

Of course, he seems to contradict his noble and liberating statement of Gal. 3.28 when he tells Corinthian women to dress a certain way in order to be active in worship and to remain quiet in the assembly (some have guessed why Paul might have been coming down on a few women in the Corinthian congregation, but unfortunately, his speaking to those few women for whatever reason has been used as an excuse to silent and demean women and to exclude them from church leadership), and when later writers borrowing his name support the Roman household codes say that slaves should obey masters, wives should submit to husbands, children should obey their parents, and that a woman’s salvation takes place through childbirth! (so much for all are one in Christ!).

Some denominations refuse to ordain women.

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Others do, but relegate women ministers to certain roles (assistant pastor, Religious Education director, Youth minister, interim minister, small church/mission pastor, chaplain, etc.). Some churches now have elevated women ministers to leadership roles within the denomination (such as “bishop”), but usually in such small numbers that they are still by far out-numbered by their male colleagues.

However, Jesus associated with women in public, and spoke out for at least some of their rights, and included them among his inner circle. Scholars now insist that even in Paul’s day, women were present in every level of Christian leadership. So, our sexism (which is not justifiable in any case) can not really be blamed on scripture or tradition.

Fragmentation

Institutional bodies with 10k members or more that also have a national or international headquarters is around 200 (this includes MCC). In addition to these 200 groups, we might add all the independent, non-denominational store-front churches, house churches, and even mega-churches and we would have tens of thousands of expressions of Christianity in this country alone! The diversity of Christian understanding and practice is staggering.

The US is also the birthplace of some new denominations (some of which are now global), e.g., the Mormons, the 7th Day Adventists, the Christian Scientists, the New Thought movement and its denominations (Divine Science, Unity, Home of Truth, Church of Truth, Religious Science, Universal Foundation for Better Living, etc.). The Pentecostal movement began in the US, as did Metropolitan Community Churches!

Christian denominations and sects can be divided into 4 groupings:

Catholic (Roman, Byzantine, Anglo-Catholic)

Ethnic (Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, Thomas Christians, Syrian)

Protestant/Reformation (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican/Episcopal, Methodist, Mennonite, Baptist, Quakers, Congregationalists)

Sectarian (from 19th century on: Latter Day Saints/Mormons, Restoration Churches/Disciples of Christ/Churches of Christ, New Thought, Christian Science, Pentecostal/Assemblies of God/Foursquare/Church of God – Cleveland/Church of God of Prophecy/Church of God in Christ, Holiness/Nazarenes/Salvation Army/Adventists)

High Church Characteristics (usually high Christology and high liturgy):

Sacramental

Structured worship

Vestments, ornaments, bright colors, music, candles, sometimes incense

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Hierarchical polity

Piety focused on majesty and mercy of God (usually, an external God)

Examples: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican/Episcopal, Some Lutherans

Low Church Characteristics:

Non-Sacramental

Spontaneous/flexible worship

Iconoclastic

Congregational polity

Subjective piety (God or Christ or Spirit within, personal experience of the believer is the focus)

Examples: Baptists, Pentecostal, Holiness

Mixed Characteristics (some high, some low):

Examples: Some Lutherans, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Methodists, United Church of Christ

Missiology

How have Christian missions been problematic?

Is there really only one way to be in relationship with God?

And is "our" way really that way?

How is such an attitude not helpful?

How is such an attitude unkind or disrespectful to the experiences and cultures of others?

For "us" Christianity may be the best expression of faith (though, as we have seen, there are MANY ways to be Christian!), but it is not the only expression of faith, and not everyone will agree that it is the best expression for them.

Can we offer missions of mercy and mutuality without demanding that the recipients of our care and concern abandon their cultural and religious identities?

What are your thoughts about the "myth" of the theocratic, Puritan pilgrims coming to the New World for religious "freedom"? Did they extend such freedom to Quakers? Catholics? Jews? (Laughlin, p. 218)

Parousia

Discuss the "second-coming" that never occurred?

Or did it?

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And if it hasn't, will it?

Did the first believers in that doctrine simply get it wrong?

Are there non-literal ways to understand the parousia?

Augustine (and Agnes Sanford) believed the Parousia occurred in the First Century! (See the Pentecost story in the Book of Acts)

Mark of the Beast

This bit of thrilling science fiction has turned some people away from Christianity and has turned other Christians into mean-spirited worshippers of horror! Forgetting that the book of Revelation is an ancient book from the once popular Apocalyptic genre that uses metaphor and symbolism to present its case, some people pretend to take the book literally as a prognostication of end of the world.

Dragons, crowns, multiple eyes, double heads, monsters, anti-Christ, beasts, scary equestrians, cosmic battles, numerology, thrones and more illustrate Revelation. It has much more to do with the events at the time it was written than with anything to come (though, history does seem to repeat itself, so parts of it always seem to be strangely current).

The mark of the beast (666) has been interpreted to mean Hitler (clearly, a disturbed and horrifying figure of human cruelty). But, as long as we are playing with numerology, it could mean anything or anybody (notice p. 223 where Laughlin shows how it can even mean Barney the dinosaur!).

In all probability, it was referring to Nero Caesar.

Discuss question E on p. 226 of Laughlin's book.

Now What?

Discuss the doubts raised by Christian liberalism?

Can such doubting Christians be considered faithful?

Is there any Christian dogma that has troubled you?

Salvation only for some?

Hellish torments for those who can't believe certain teachings?

The unique divinity of Jesus?

The Trinity?

Does it help to pretend that your doubts don't exist?

Does it help to admit them?

Does it help to simply discard any doctrine that you don't find useful?

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Does it help to understand much of Christian teachings as symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, and open to a variety of interpretations and understandings?

What do you think about Gnostic spirituality as Laughlin describes it on p. 238 of his book?

What do you know about Eastern Orthodoxy?

What is something you like (or find intriguing) about Quakerism?

Do you know anything about New Thought spirituality (or the Positive Thinking movement it inspired within Protestant Christianity and beyond)?

What are your thoughts about Christian dialogue with non-Christian traditions? Can Christians become better Christians by learning from Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, etc.? Can we share without converting? Can we learn without defending? Is God big enough to be experienced in, by, through many traditions?

Read the conclusion on pp. 257-258 in Laughlin's book.

After learning that your tradition has been influenced by many voices, that your expression of the tradition may in fact be quite young compared to others, that the tradition has never been static and has resulted from an on-going process that may still in fact be in motion...how do you understand Christianity now?

What does it mean to be a Christian?

How has your faith been encouraged by knowing more about its history and development and diversity?

What do you intend to do with what you've learned over the last six weeks.

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