Constructing Spiritualities Responsive to Our Age
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In another article in this issue of *dialog*[1] my colleague Stephen Ellingson usefully summarizes social science findings about the character of spirituality and religious belief and practice among young adults in the United States today. Especially characteristic of their emerging consciousness, he notes, is the separation between personal spirituality and organized, official, institutionalized religion, on the one hand, and their "re-grounding of religious authority in experience and practice instead of in belief and doctrine," on the other. Although Ellingson sees both "problems and possibilities" in the new forms of spirituality that he describes, he focuses on "the theological and ecclesiological challenges posed by the new religious context." In this article I will explore their positive possibilities.

The positive possibilities in the changes Ellingson and other social scientists are recording reside in the evidence they provide that the practical everyday consciousness of ordinary Americans is beginning to catch up with the cataclysmic changes to our cultural environment begun with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and only intensified by the information and cybernetic revolution of the late twentieth century—changes associated with the arrival of what we have come to call "the modern world," even now, "a post-modern world." The inadequacy of traditional Christianity to construct human meaning in such a new cultural environment was manifested decades earlier in Europe, where Christendom was long ago replaced by a largely "post-Christian" culture. In the United States we have prided ourselves on the tenacity with which traditional Christian religiosity has continued to sustain its popularity among Americans even as we have tended to lament and deride the "dead" secularity of our European cousins.

But the evidence Ellingson cites illustrates now the belated, yet unmistakable, waning of traditional Christianity in the United States. I wager that many of the readers of this journal can confirm the validity of the social science research by simply noting the disinterest shown by our own children in the forms and practices of the Christianity in which we raised them. The lobbying efforts of the Christian Right in the United States in support of public policy that would legislate traditional Christian beliefs and practices, including the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools, permission for Christian prayers at public school athletic events, and prevention of legal and economic recognition of same-sex unions, do not contradict the trend; they represent rear guard attempts to stave off the inevitable dissolution of the traditional Christian hegemony. Our vocation as Lutherans is not to join such efforts to turn back the clock. Luther himself led the movement to abolish an earlier hegemony, creating thereby a reforming church and planting the seeds for the very changes associated with modernity that the Christian Right is now attempting to suppress.

It needs to be said at the outset, however, that whatever changes in religious consciousness and commitment we may be witnessing, according to sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists we have no reason to fear that religion itself will become extinct in the foreseeable future of our species. As the emerging field of evolutionary psychology has begun to establish and its founder Edward O. Wilson has articulated,

> The mental processes of religious belief—consecration of personal and group identity, attention to charismatic leaders, mythopoeism, and others—represent programmed predispositions whose self-sufficient components were incorporated into the neural apparatus of the brain by thousands of generations of genetic evolution. As such they are powerful, ineradicable, and at the center of human social existence.[2]

Natural selection has hardwired human beings with numerous "innate epigenetic rules" of reasoning—what appears to be an "ensemble of many algorithms whose interlocking activities guide the mind across a landscape of nuanced moods and choices." These innate rules, emergent in human beings out of millions of years of natural selection, "the inherited regularities of mental development," according to Wilson, "are the genetic biases in the way

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[1] Stephen Ellingson, "Theology Update: The New Spirituality from a Social Science Perspective," *dialog*. Winter 40:4 (2001) 257-263.

[2] Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Harvard, 1978), 206.

our senses perceive the world, the symbolic coding by which we represent the world, the options we open to ourselves, and the responses we find easiest and most rewarding to make."[3] Moreover, they display themselves in moral sentiments and issue both in ethical codes and in religious myth and ritual.   We humans are drawn by these genetic biases to conceive of a moral agent (or agents) somehow managing the universe and holding us accountable, and we form communities with others to address that moral agent and gain its favor. These proclivities natural selection has favored in us, preserved for us, hardwired into us. They helped our ancestors to s urvive. According to Wilson,

> There is a hereditary selective advantage to membership in a powerful group united by devout belief and purpose. Even when individuals subordinate themselves and risk death in common cause, their genes are more likely to be transmitted to the next generation than are those of competing groups who lack equivalent resolve.[4]

In brief, "the human mind evolved to believe in the gods,"[5] and humans, even baby boomers and generation X-ers, can scarcely live without them. "People need a sacred narrative," Wilson writes. "They must have a sense of a larger purpose, in one form or another, however intellectualized. They will refuse to yield to the despair of animal mortality."[6] As Wilson describes the challenge implicit in the changing religious consciousness of young Americans, "Religion will possess strength to the extent that it codifies and puts into enduring, poetic form the highest values of humanity consistent with empirical knowledge."[7]

According to Ellingson, Wade Clark Roof has catalogued "some of the key changes in religion: from an emphasis on community to an emphasis on personal growth; from an external, transcendent God to a God found within the individual; from a reliance on the institution to a reliance on the self in matters of conscience; from right belief to right practice." All these changes express culturally the transformation from traditional, pre-modern modes of thought to modernity and post-modernity. Psychologically they express, according to Harvard psychologis t Robert Kegan, the development of the self from a "third order of consciousness" predominant in traditional societies to fourth and fifth "orders of consciousness" more congruent with modern and post-modern societies.[8]

In Kegan's theory of psychological development, the core task of every human being is to find a personal identity, a definition of self, in relation to the external world. That identity unfolds through successive and progressively more complex reformulations of the relationship of self to other which Kegan has come to call "orders of consciousness." In adolescence or early adulthood most human beings in all cultures attain to the "third order of consciousness," during which an individual's identity derives from association with significant others—parents, peer group, communities such as fraternities or sororities, clubs, unions, nations, churches —with whom the individual identifies. From such communities individuals functioning at the third order of consciousness find a "homogeneous fabric of value and belief, a shared sense of how the world works and how we should live in it,"[9] as well as a "source of order, direction, vision, role-creation, limit-setting, boundary-management, and developmental facilitation."[10] The characteristics of a third order of consciousness shape the life of traditional societies such as those in which the great world religions, including Christianity were born, matured, and flourished. In the modern

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[3] Edward O. W ilson quoted in Ken Gewertz, "A 'Consilience' of Science and Poetry at PBK Exercises," *Harvard College Gazette* (July 1998), 5. For an introduction to the current scholarly research providing evidence for Wilson's generalization, see Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, & John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (Oxford, 1992).

[4] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (Knopf, 1998), 258.

[5] Ibid., 262.

[6] Ibid., 264f.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Harvard, 1994). See also *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Harvard, 1982).

[9] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 103.

[10] Ibid., 104.

context they constitute "fundamentalism" and "orthodoxy," terms Kegan himself applies to this form of consciousness,[11] or "naïve world-construction," as Ted Peters has described it.[12]

Kegan writes that he does not mean either "to celebrate [or] to disparage the arrangements of the Traditional Community past or present." But that community is no longer "the context in which most present-day Americans find themselves." Rather, "the essence of today's pluralistic, privatistic, individualistic, and secular modernity is to fragment the mental monolith of the Tradition."[13] In such a "modern" world human beings require a "fourth order of consciousness," a self-understanding which provides the capacity, not simply to accept and honor the values, practices, and roles from Tradition, but to exercise critical judgment with respect to the resources proffered by many traditions, to make reasoned choices from among them, and even to author one's own—to find an identity that is self-authoring, and self-authorizing rather than merely loyal and obedient to the authority of the Traditional Community. Peters refers to this "modern" order of consciousness in terms of "critical deconstruction."[14]

The reader may recognize the degree to which Kegan's third order of consciousness correlates with James Fowler's "synthetic-conventional faith" (i.e. inward and implicit appropriation of a symbol/belief system and unquestioning commitment to observances prescribed by traditional authority within one's group), while fourth order consciousness correlates with Fowler's "individuative-reflective faith" (i.e. demythologizing self-authorship of a religious world-view expressed in an explicit theology).[15]

Although Peters may well be right that "postmodernity as an independent mode of consciousness is not here yet,"[16] Kegan has claimed to find it exemplified in his "fifth order of consciousness," which he associates with post-modernity and which is analogous to Peters' "postcritical reconstruction"[17] and Fowler's "conjunctive faith" (i.e. a "second naïveté" [Ricoeur] open to many voices within one's own self and in the other[s]; ability to live passionately out of one perspective without claiming ultimacy for it). Implicit in this construction of reality is a rejection of absolutes, an accepting recognition of the self-serving function of every frame of thought and discourse, and a celebration of difference:

> [P]ostmodernity means a resolute emancipation from the characteristically modern urge to overcome difference and promote sameness. . . In the plural and pluralistic world of postmodernity, every form of life is *permitted on principle*; or, rather, no agreed principles are evident which may render any form of life impermissible.[18]

I recount all of this to illustrate that the "key changes in religion" which Roof and other sociologists have catalogued and which Ellingson describes are symptomatic of shifts in the way human beings are increasingly coming to conceptualize or "construct" reality as the complexities of modern (post-modern?) life have nudged them to emerge from a third order to a fourth or even fifth order of consciousness. These cultural and psychological changes constitutes a substantial body of the "empirical knowledge" with which religion must do business if, as Wilson asserts above, it is to "possess strength." I propose that the Church's best response is to integrate Christian faith and practice with these increasingly dominant forms of consciousness, rather than to try to resist or subvert them.[19]

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[11] Ibid., 103f.

[12] Ted Peters, *God—the World's Future* (Fortress, 1992), 20.

[13] Kegan, 105.

[14] Peters, *God—the World's Future*, 20.

[15] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper & Row, 1981).

[16] Peters, *God—the World's Future*, 14.

[17] Ibid., 20.

[18] N.C. Burbules & S. Rice, "Dialogue across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61 (1991), 393-416. Quoted in Kegan, 326.

[19] I have tried to illustrate such an integration in my article, "Sin—An Abusive Doctrine?" and "Response to My Responders," *dialog* 38:4 (1999), 294-297, 303-305.

From within a quite traditional Christian framework Elizabeth Liebert has helpfully illustrated such an integration of spiritual direction with Jane Loevinger's stages of ego development, which are similar to Kegan's orders of consciousness.[20] In the spirit of Liebert's formulation—although I take it somewhat further than I believe she would—I want to suggest a posture of profound and respectful openness to the varieties of ways people today experience and express their religious sensitivities and, in particular, to the varieties of ways Christians construct their relationship to Jesus and to "God." There will always be adults who remain lifelong at the third order of consciousness, and third order Christians will likely continue to sustain a traditional Christianity with belief in the God "out there" of supernatural theism and loyal concurrence with traditional, orthodox teachings about the nature of Christ, revelation, sin, grace, atonement, prayer, miracles, heaven and hell. Many of them fill the pews of our congregations. Probably a remnant of traditional Christianity will continue to speak to them, as it has to their European counterparts, for the foreseeable future. The more reflective among them, however, are discomfited by the cognitive dissonance they experience between the teachings of traditional Christian catechesis and the modern assumptions that frame their everyday lives. They feel constrained to suppress their discomfort in order to remain loyal to the community of faith with which they identify. If these same communities—*their* religious communities—were to revise their teachings and practices to reduce their inconsistency with "empirical knowledge," many of these more reflective third-order church members would loyally and gratefully follow along.

At the same time, the proportion of Christian adults functioning at the fourth and fifth orders of consciousness has been increasing in response to universal higher education and exposure to the diversity of global culture via travel, television, the Internet, or conversations with the Muslim or Buddhist family that just moved in next door. They are unlikely to suppress for long their own experience of cognitive dissonance between church and world. While third order Christians may not experience the teachings and practices of their churches as wholly adequate to their needs, because they cannot imagine an identity outside the church they tend to remain with it even when it falters. If fourth and fifth order Christians fail to find new, more adequate, constructions of their faith, however, they will more likely abandon it altogether.

Some, like Marcus Borg, adopt a panentheistic concept of God, stressing the immanence of God "in, with, and under" the cosmos. And in Borg's terms, they may replace a pre-modern "monarchical" Christianity with a more modern, democratic, relational version of it.[21] Other Christians—particularly those with an ecological or "New Age" psychological bent—may adopt a pantheistic concept of God, identifying "God" with the cosmos itself, on the one hand, and seeking God in each person, on the other. Pantheistic versions of Christianity may also appear in polytheistic forms as fourth and fifth order searchers focus on the multiple manifestations of divinity they experience in varieties of natural phenomena. Some Christians will embrace one or another version of atheism. Unable to find any way to reconcile traditional God concepts with empirical knowledge, they will abandon the concept altogether and in more thoughtfully articulated versions pronounce the "death" of God[22] and the liberation of the cosmos (and themselves!) into autonomy and freedom. Of course, theologians are proposing any number of highly sophisticated ways to construe "God" which cut across these categories.[23]

Rather than attempting to control Christians and force their spirituality into a particular form, while declaring the others unacceptable or even heretical, the role of the Church and its leaders is to explore the depths of meaning—both positive and negative—in each manifestation and to see how it expresses—or fails adequately to meet!—the psychological/spiritual needs of their adherents.[24] A non-monarchical, relational Church committed

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[20] Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction* (Paulist, 1992). See Jane Loevinger, *Ego Development: Conceptions and Theories* (Jossey-Bass, 1976). Cp. James W. Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Fortress, 1987).

[21] Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (Harper Collins, 1997).

[22] For example, Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: the Culture of our Post-Christian Era* (Braziller, 1961).

[23] E.g. , Philip J. Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Fortress, 1993); Ted Peters, ed., *Science & Theology: The New Consonance* (Westview, 1998); Russell Stannard, ed., *God for the 21st Century* (Templeton, 2000).

[24] By focusing on "psychological/spiritual needs" I do not intend to ignore the social/ethical dimensions of religious faith and practice. In fact, I would contend that a religious orientation that contributes to the development of a mature social conscience and appropriate patterns of commitment to the other's welfare is meeting

more to compassion than to regulation of orthodoxy will not focus its energy on legislating and enforcing doctrinal uniformity (a manifestly pre-modern, pre-democratic agenda), but on extending its caring concern to "the nations," the whole range of humans who function at diverse orders of consciousness.

Jewish philosopher/theologian Alvin Reines has suggested the term "polydoxy" to evoke this compassionate embrace of pluralistic perspectives.[25] In response to what he poses as the "impending annihilation" of the "Jewish religious complex," Reines goes so far as to argue "the ultimate *right* [emphasis added] of the individual to religious autonomy,"[26] thereby concretizing freedom as "the highest ideal possible to the modern religious community" and creating an environment for "the creativity and experimentation necessary to meet the conditions of a radical and unknown future." "Deanthropomorphized and demythologized options of belief and observance" must, he writes, be made widely available. The educational—and pastoral?—ideal of Judaism must abandon "endoctrining instruction in theistic absolutism and metaphenomenal providence to education in the soterial, ethical, and theological choices of an open religion."[27] I believe that Reines' proposal speaks as aptly to the diverse Christian "religious complex" as it does to the Jewish.

How, then, shall a Christian spirituality be defined within such an "open" and receptive perspective? In a deceptively modest early work, Robert Jenson linked Christian identity to the promise inherent in a particular story, the "gospel," which Jenson summarized as follows: "There has lived a man wholly for others, all the way to death; and he has risen, so that his self-giving will finally triumph."[28] A Christian "believer," then, is "one who has heard something of the gospel, something destiny-clueing about Jesus, and cannot any longer get away from what he has heard." A Christian is someone "hooked on the story about Jesus." Jenson continues:

> Some ways of relating to the gospel will obviously be more appropriate to the nature of the gospel than others; the whole of a book like this is an attempt to work that out. But when we want to say who a believer is and who is not, such further considerations are out of place.[29]

If we wish to define a Christian, I suggest we ask whether a person's construction of self and other is somehow inextricably linked to the gospel story about Jesus. The particular form of that construction and its adequacy as a report of that story, translation of the gospel, and foundation for personal spirituality is a matter for conversation. Particularly in a world that recognizes and respects the varieties of capacities individuals display for construction of meaning—some more naïve, some more complex and nuanced—no particular form of constructing reality in terms of the gospel need be repudiated out of hand. Rather, an open Christianity receptive of the newly emerging meaning constructions and spiritual sensitivities of young and old, rather than resistant to them, repositions itself as a vital, curious, non-anxious community prepared to take up creatively and confidently E. O. Wilson's challenge to religion to put "into enduring, poetic form the highest values of humanity consistent with empirical knowledge."

At the beginning of this essay I said I was going to explore the positive possibilities posed by the new forms of spirituality emerging among young adults today. I regard what I have written as a positive attempt to understand the foundations for those new spiritualities. My proposed response implies that these changes are not phenomena to be feared, but windows into transformations of Christian faith and practice which have as much promise to revitalize Christianity for the newly emerging 21st century as the transformations which accompanied the Reformation revitalized Western Christianity in the 16th century. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. "The Church must always be in process of reform." I have suggested here what I believe to be some of the terms of its current reformation.

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psychological/spiritual needs of its adherents. A developmental theory such as Kegan's, which focuses on the relationship between self and other, necessarily carries social/ethical implications. Cf. Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., "The Christian Message and Mental Health," chap. in *Mental Health Through Christian Community* (Abingdon, 1965), 26-54.

[25] Alvin J. Reines, *Polydoxy: Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion* (Prometheus 1987).

[26] Ibid., 155.

[27] Ibid., 198.

[28] Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (Fortress, 1973), 1.

[29] Ibid., 2.

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