

## The future of Faith

Recently, while changing channels, I stopped on C-Span and Book Notes. Harvey Cox, the well known Harvard professor, recently retired and a Baptist Minister, was the guest. He reflected on his latest book, "The Future of Faith." Having read several of his books, especially his classic, "The Secular City" I was interested in his perspective of the future of faith.

Cox begins by stating that there are three things that are part of our "spiritual profile" today. First, there is the resurgence of religion both in public and private life – something that could not be foreseen due to the status given to science. Secondly, fundamentalism will continue to decline, especially its "insistence on obligatory belief systems." And thirdly, "the profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness." This involves a rediscovery of the sacred in the immanent.

He goes on to trace three stages of development in religion. First, he calls "the age of faith," the second, he calls the "Age of belief," and third, he calls the "Age of the Spirit." He develops these different "ages" throughout the rest of his book.

He suggests that faith starts with awe; a "mixture of wonder and fear all human beings feel toward the mystery that envelopes us. But awe becomes faith only as it ascribes some meaning to that mystery." He indicates that there are three ways we encounter the great mystery – the universe, the self and the other. "All leave us with a sense of uneasiness, incompleteness, and dissatisfaction. Do we have any clue to the question of why there is something and not nothing? Is time going anywhere? Or is it cyclical or maybe just illusory? What about the fracture I find in myself as both the subject and the object of my reflection, ad infinitum? Is that a permanent feature of being human? Is my hope that my encounter with the other need not always be a conquest, a capitulation, or a stand-off a futile one?"

He goes on to indicate that Fundamentalists collapse faith into belief; replacing faith with an insistence on holding to certain prescribed doctrinal ideas. He suggests that a fundamentalist must fight constantly the skepticism of those around them as well as the doubts within themselves. It becomes a losing battle.

Cox concludes that the "age of the Spirit" is being ushered in by Pentecostals. It is also reflected in the shift of the world's Christian population from the "north" to the "south." While fundamentalists are text-oriented literalists, Pentecostals rely more on a direct experience of the Holy Spirit. Still, he sees certain caveats in Pentecostalism. First of all, Pentecostals believe they are called to love and praise God, receive the gifts of the Spirit and exhort people to be in the world but not of the world. Consequently, they are not focused on influencing public policy. Secondly, Pentecostals have a tendency to emphasize their own charismatic gifts and this can make their leadership arbitrary, leading to a leadership of clientelism. Thirdly, Pentecostals, because they are good "list-makers," and know how to get people together, they can be seen as a threat to regimes in authoritarian countries. Finally, Cox says the biggest threat to the future of Pentecostalism is the American consumerism mentality. A "gospel of prosperity" mentality is espoused in certain Pentecostal quarters. "In a sense Pentecostals find themselves caught between the promise of citizenship and the seductive pressures of the empire of consumption...could become increasingly bitter and cynical. Some will begin to see that to live in a society in which their humanity is respected will require vigorous advocacy of structural change."

During question time, a questioner asked him what where the three most pivotal person in the Catholic Church in recent decades. First of all, he mentioned Pope John XXIII who had the foresight to see what was happening in the secular world and had the courage to invite the bishops of the world to Rome to see how the Church could engage the new secularism.

Secondly, he mentioned Dorothy Day, the founder of "The Catholic Worker" Movement and her impact on the social ministry of the Church through her work and her challenge to others to get involved in its social ministry.

Thirdly, he mentioned Thomas Merton, author of that famous classic conversion story, "The Seven Story Mountain." Merton tried to marry together Eastern and Western spirituality especially opening up to the West the riches of the Buddhist and Hindu spiritual traditions.