

REFLECTIONS ON...

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY



ROLLIE STANICH

The Future of Christianity

A Startling New Vision of Hope
for the 21st Century

DVD 1 - The Future of Christianity
Featuring Father Thomas Keating & Ken Wilber

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“Divine Therapy”
Featuring Father Thomas Keating

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DVD Book - Reflections on the Future of Christianity
By Rollie Stanich

Reflections on the Future of Christianity

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. ~John 1:1,14

The dust of twenty centuries has settled on a human life and a human death—of a man born into obscurity, who lived a hidden life for thirty years or so, taught for a time, and was executed for treason and heresy. That might have been the end of it, except for what happened next—what is perhaps best described as a radical event. Whatever we believe about that event, its central figure remains the most influential in human history.

In one sense, we might feel removed from the life of Jesus, from the time he walked the earth two millennia past. We might feel distant from the early community that, having been scattered at his death, nonetheless later gathered in his name, on fire with his message of love and ready to give their lives for their beliefs.

But in another sense, we are poised today to look upon Jesus with new eyes, to see and envision him as never before. Two thousand years have given us a kaleidoscope of perspectives on him, the insights of modern science, postmodern philosophy, and integral thought, and contact with all of the world's great religious traditions. We stand at a great confluence; we are witness to a new dawn rising over an immaculate spiritual landscape, its features emerging from the darkness before our very eyes. We can see the paths that humanity has walked—their peaks and their pitfalls—with new clarity. And we can see the path that lies ahead, and perhaps begin to walk it in a new way.

From this place, we can see that the ultimate goal of Christianity is that of *metanoia* or transformation—*transformation into Christ*. To experience Ultimate Reality or Spirit as Jesus did, as Abba (literally, “Daddy”). But the message has become obscured to some extent, lost in the medium. It is being redis-

covered, gathering enormous interest from some of the most profound thinkers and teachers of our time.

What is the future of Christianity? When we look upon this ancient tradition, blow the dust off the cover and read from its pages, what do we see from where we stand? How does the dialogue with other traditions inform our understanding and practice of Christianity? What do modernity and postmodernity have to say? And how is it viewed in the exquisite clarity of integral thought? We are beginning to understand what Jesus *meant*. But what does he *mean*, in our lives and our times?

G.K. Chesterton famously proclaimed, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” What does the Christian ideal look like, at the dawn of the 21st century? And, were it to be taken up, embodied and lived, what would be the implications for the world?

Fully Human, Fully Divine

One of the most astonishing teachings of Christianity is that the person of Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine. The most recent scholarship about his life concludes that, born into his humanity, he gradually awoke to his divinity, culminating in the startling proclamation, “I tell you solemnly, before Abraham was, I AM.” If we dare follow in his footsteps, what implications do his humanity and his divinity have for us?

First, we might ask, what is it to be fully human? While all beings can take perspectives, the complexity of perspectives that human beings can take makes us unique. In the past century, developmentalists have discerned the patterns in the unfolding of these perspectives—what are called *stages* of development. Human beings and human societies move through these stages, each in their own unique way, but each, in some predictable fashion. With new stages comes the capacity to take increasingly complex and inclusive perspectives.

The sorts of perspectives that Jesus took were remarkable,

for his day and for our own time as well. To draw a line in the sand and say to those who would stone the woman caught in adultery, “let the one among you who has not sinned cast the first stone” is to take an exceedingly enlightened perspective. And he frequently did so—silencing the Pharisees and even Pontius Pilate—such that his listeners declared, “never has one spoken like this.” Part of Jesus’ being fully human was the spaciousness of perspective from which he lived and moved in the world. And our own human journey takes us through stages, living and moving from deepening perspectives, ever expanding our circle of care and concern. To be our sister’s keeper, our brother’s keeper, until every being is our sister, our brother. To love our neighbor *as our self*, until every being is *our self*, and there is no other...

And what is it to be fully divine? Teilhard de Chardin wrote that we are not physical beings having a spiritual experience, but rather, spiritual beings having a physical experience. We often hear of the *soul* as our deeper identity; Thomas Merton writes of the true *Self* beyond the soul—the mysterious person who we truly are, in the eyes of God. Jesus speaks from yet a deeper place: “I and the Father are one.”

In fact, these deepening intuitions of who we truly are come through the experience of *states* of consciousness. These great states are experienced—though not with full awareness—by every one of us, every day and every night, as we journey from waking to dreaming to deep sleep and back. The world’s religious traditions, East and West, have sought to bring awareness to the journey, pushing wakefulness from the gross realm into the subtle realm of thoughts and dreams, into the causal realm where manifestation begins, and beyond.

Every human being, observes philosopher Ken Wilber, is on *both* of these journeys—through *stages* of development, and the ever-widening perspectives they provide, and through *states* of consciousness, and the ever-deepening understanding of who we are, and who God is. The insight is radical, and so is its importance...

Who do *You* Say that I Am?

*Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.
~Philippians 2:5*

We all see the world with colored glasses. While basically invisible to us, their lenses color the perception of all that we perceive. The ways in which we perceive deepen with our stage of development; it would be difficult to overstate the importance of these stages. They are the context in which all content arises, our basis for interpreting anything we experience, and the stage on which the dramas of our lives take place. “We don’t see things as *they* are,” says Anais Nin, “we see things as *we* are.”

This applies, first and foremost, to religious experience. Whatever *state* we experience of Ultimate Reality or Spirit—God, by any other name—we will interpret it according to the developmental *stage* at which we currently reside. Just as the view below can appear very differently from various outlooks along a mountain path, so too can an experience appear differently, depending upon the stage of development it is experienced from. Jesus’ question to his apostles, “who do *you* say that I am?” takes on a profound new relevance in this light. Our answer to that question, formed from the stage at which we find ourselves, is enormously influential to whom we perceive Jesus to be. We co-create the Jesus whom we experience in our midst.

As we move to a new stage of development, we quite literally die to our old selves—like a caterpillar in its cocoon, or a snake shedding its skin. We find ourselves between two worlds: a world that is slipping away and a world we can’t yet grasp, plunged into a chasm where meaning is hidden from us. Millions have left the traditional church in the transition from a mythic way of making meaning to a rational one. What is experienced as a very real crisis of faith may simply be the shedding of the mythic skin, in preparation for the new, more rational way of being. And there is no necessity to discard Christ, whom we encounter again from our new depth and who

remains ever before us...

Once we become aware of the dynamic of human development with respect to spirituality, we are compelled by compassion to ensure that the pathway is clear for all those on the journey, marked and brightly lit at its every bend. In Christianity, we can allow Jesus to “come again” in new and powerful ways to individuals at every stage in their journey. This is precisely the *conveyor belt* that Ken Wilber speaks of, the startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world. Perhaps “putting on the mind of Christ” means allowing ourselves and others to practice seeing the world through ever-deepening perspectives, until our perspective begins to approximate that of God. And in some sense, the one who looks through our eyes, touches with our hands, and loves with our hearts is Christ, living in us and as us.

The Greatest Story Never Told

Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above. ~John 3:3

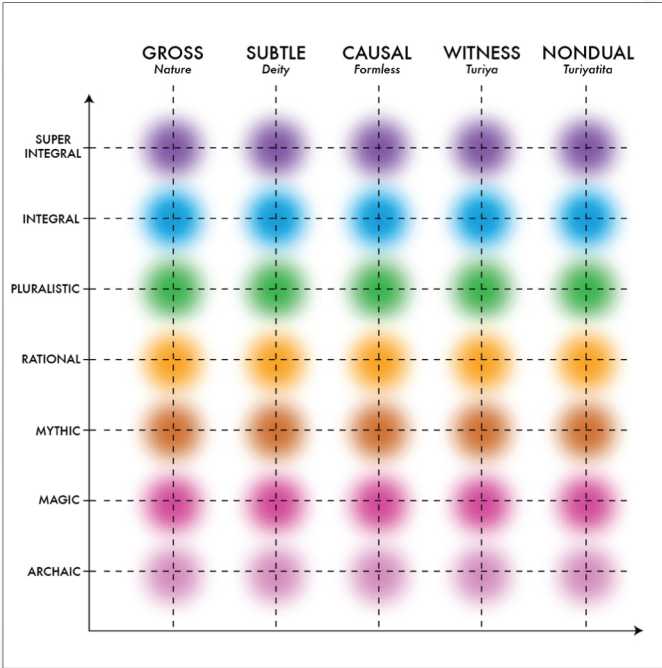
In the parable of “the pearl of great price,” Jesus tells of a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field, sells all of his possessions, and buys the field with great joy. The Christian tradition is such a field; it most definitely holds a treasure, and it is indeed hidden.

What is the treasure of Christianity? As our practice deepens, we begin to discover it in the riches of contemplative prayer. “Prayer,” says St. Therese of Lisieux, “is a surge of the heart, a simple look turned toward Heaven.” We come into God’s presence—*on God’s terms*—in humility and silence, to simply *listen*. This rich mystical tradition is deeply rooted in Judaism; it is the practice of Jesus, beautifully described in his teaching on prayer in secret: “When you pray, enter your inner room, close the door, pray to your Father in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Contemplation was the practice of the early Church; it flourished for sixteen centuries, but was largely forgotten in the wake of the Reformation. It

is being rediscovered in our time through the tireless work of Father Thomas Keating and others. Looking to the future, theologian Karl Rahner defines mysticism as “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence” and concludes, “the Christian of the future will be a mystic, or will not exist at all.”

Modern scholars are beginning to understand with increasing clarity what Jesus actually said. There is general agreement that central to his authentic teaching was his proclamation of the *Kingdom of God*. What he envisioned, says biblical scholar Marcus Borg, was a fully inclusive, unbrokered Kingdom of equals based on love, compassion, and socio-economic justice, informed by an *experience* of a loving God. Though the Kingdom is sometimes pictured as other-worldly and end-of-times, Jesus taught that “the Kingdom is within” and “the Kingdom is at hand.” In other words, the Kingdom of God is *here and now*, for those who have eyes to see it. As Jim Marion points out in *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, the Kingdom can be understood as a *state of consciousness*. Contemplation brings us to the threshold of this state, and there Christ reveals the Kingdom, transforming us into the love which we seek. “We are to become Heaven,” says Meister Eckhart, “so that God might find a home here.”

Being “born again” takes on a breathtaking new meaning in this light. Early in our lives we find ourselves in the gross realm, identified with our ego. Through spiritual practice, the path unfolds until we are “born again” from above, into the subtle realm of thoughts and dreams, awakening as our soul. With continued practice we might further be “born again” into the causal realm of deep sleep, awakening as our true Self. And in the course of our journey, we might indeed awaken to the nondual experience of the Kingdom of God, in which we echo with God and with Christ the mystical assertion: “I am who AM.” The realization of the Kingdom, everpresent in our midst, is the future of Christianity.



Shadow and Light

They say He gave sight to the blind and walking to the paralyzed, and that He drove devils out of madmen. Perchance blindness is but a dark thought that can be overcome by a burning thought. Perchance a withered limb is but idleness that can be quickened by energy. And perhaps the devils, these restless elements in our life, are driven out by the angels of peace and serenity. ~Kahlil Gibran

We might find the stories of Jesus' miracles—his healings and his casting out of demons—to be quaint, confusing, or even irrelevant. But what was taken to be possession in his day might well be understood as *shadow* in our own day. We

are no less haunted by these shadows than the demoniacs of Jesus' time. And we are no less in need of healing.

Development can become pathological, even in the best of circumstances and regardless of the best of intentions. With so many moving parts, something can always go wrong. As we journey through stages of development, part of us can fail to make the jump from an earlier stage to a later one. Part of the self splits off: a hidden self which remains indefinitely at the earlier stage, manifesting itself in painful symptoms that bubble up in our awareness. Similarly, as we journey through states of consciousness, we can become addicted and attached or averse and allergic to any state, bringing our development through them to a standstill.

In both of these cases, shadow emerges, and it can remain to haunt us throughout our lives, draining us of the energy needed to continue on our journey through later stages and deeper states. Some of the most important work we can do may well be to go back to the beginning and re-own those parts of ourselves that have split off along the way, continuing Christ's healing work in our own lives.

As we stand, moment-by-moment within the stream of experience, the self must choose to either consciously incorporate each experience as "I," or to block it out, making it part of a hidden "I." Too painful to be admitted as a 1st-person "I," the experience is displaced to a 2nd-person "you," and projected onto others ("I'm not angry—he is angry, she is angry"). A further projection can also occur, from a 2nd-person "you" to a 3rd-person "it," such that the quality of the experience is encountered in an inexplicable sense of irritation, fear, or aversion.

The integral approach gives us a beautiful, simple practice for bringing our shadows into the light. The way to wholeness is to re-own the projected quality, bringing it back along the path of perspectives through which it has been projected, perhaps in a journal or with a therapist, minister or close friend. If we have a recurring, frightening image in our dreams, we first face

it (3rd-person), noting its qualities and characteristics. Next, we enter into a 2nd-person dialogue with it (“What do you want? Why are you haunting me?”) and listen to what it has to say to us. Then we speak as it (1st-person), taking its perspective and giving it a voice. Having done so, we can begin to see the shadow for what it is—a part of who we are—and can begin to reincorporate it into the light of our conscious “I.” In short, *face it, talk to it, be it.*

God in Perspective

God's is the East, and God's is the West. Therefore look to the East, or look to the West, and there you shall see the Face of God. ~The Koran

In the thought of Ken Wilber, *perspectives* are the fundamental building blocks of reality. It is often supposed that the universe began with quantum fluctuations—i.e. the Big Bang. But even there, we might ask, *in whose perspective* did the Big Bang arise? Perspectives are prior to anything else; in the moment that anything arises, it does so through perspectives. Every experience takes place, irreducibly, within the consciousness of sentient beings (1st-person), within their shared experience (2nd-person), and in the externally observable, manifest universe (3rd-person). These perspectives go all the way up and all the way down. And when we look all the way up through any of them, there we shall behold one of the Three Faces of Spirit.

The primordial nature of these perspectives is evidenced by their auspicious appearance in religious traditions, East and West. In Hinduism, Spirit takes the form of *satchitananda* (Being, Knowledge, and Bliss). In Buddhism, Spirit manifests as Buddha (the Awakened One), Dharma (the Teaching), and Sangha (the Community). We find a lovely parallel in the Christian Trinity.

Spirit in 1st-person arises as “IAMness,” the simple feeling of being. When Moses encounters God in the Burning Bush and is sent to deliver God’s message to the Israelites, he asks,

“whom shall I say sent me?” God replies, “I am who AM.” Jesus echoes his unity with the Father when he declares to the crowds, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” In the stillness of our deepest center, when we fall silent in the Holy of Holies, we too might hear God’s voice resounding within: “I am who AM.”

Spirit arises in 2nd-person as our Divine Lover, in whose presence we know ourselves to be the Beloved. Often imagined as transcendent, God is equally and infinitely immanent—more present to us than we are to ourselves! We come into this presence with these selves, placing them before the Divine as our offering and our gift. And we allow ourselves to be beheld—with all our imperfections—and to be known—with all our secrets—in the light of Love. We surrender all of that to God, and we know that we are forgiven. And, united with our Divine Lover, there is nothing to do but to fall to our knees in adoration and worship, to experience Love’s ecstasy beyond all telling, to be emptied and poured out, filled and flowing over, a stream in the desert overflowing with divine love.

And Spirit arises in 3rd-person, animating all of creation, dancing amidst an infinity of mirrors, brilliantly reflected on all sides. We read in the Psalms: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of God’s hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.” In Genesis, the Spirit “hovers over the waters,” and at Pentecost, the Spirit “renews the face of the earth.” Christianity has long held that nature is a faithful reflection of God, another testament to God’s majesty.

Meister Eckhart taught that *even the Trinity emerges*, from absolute Godhead. And as it emerges, it does so through perspectives. More stunning yet was Eckhart’s next insight: that from the very same ground from which the Trinity emerges, *so do you*, and *so do I*. We share with God—God’s very Self—the hidden ground of Love...

The Way of Embodied Love

Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself... ~Philippians 2:6-7

Beneath their wonderfully diverse surfaces, their liturgies and vestments, their rituals and practices, the world's religious traditions also share a unity: each is a way to Spirit, a path along which its practitioners deepen in their identity with Spirit. But apart from their surface features and deep structures, each tradition brings with it a gift beyond price, an offering for a world desperately in need. What does Christianity bring to the table, to the great banquet of the world's religions?

In a word: love. The message is incorruptible and unmistakable. It is the love of *kenosis*, of self emptying, lived beautifully in the words and the deeds of Christ. He emptied himself of his very Self, of his soul, of his ego, and thus came into the fullness of his humanity, the fullness of his divinity. His love was sourced from the deepest of Sources—"he was in the form of God"—and was given faithfully in life, even unto death. He manifested love in body, mind, soul, and spirit. And he revealed himself as the Way of embodied love, for those who gather in his name. To "be another Christ" and to walk in his footsteps. To simply live as Love, in their particular case, in the Kingdom of God.

The heart of Christianity—its central moment—is the Incarnation, the wedding of Heaven and earth in Christ. *But that moment is this moment*, the only one we ever have. We witness the coming of Christ in the timeless present. And knowing ourselves to be utterly beloved, we reflect that love, a stone cast in a still pond, rippling to eternity and cascading to infinity, with incalculable effect.

What is the future of Christianity? This great river must deepen still, lovingly aware of its divine Source, sweetly embracing its every bend, deeply compassionate to those who gather on its shores, who come to the water, to drink from its

living streams. And so it will enfold the miracles of Jesus and their immediacy, and encircle the rituals and structures that preserved the faith through its dark ages. It will celebrate the soaring heights of rationality, and be deep in solidarity with its vision of social justice, inspired by Christ's teachings. It will flow with profound longing, a great river to a great ocean, open to its own unfolding, to the contours of its own tomorrow, to its role at evolution's leading edge, to its own ecstatic part in Spirit's majestic Dance.

The prophet Micah tells us: "This the Lord God asks of you, and only this: to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God." Let us act justly, with no apprehension, with no hesitation; with the gentleness of Jesus and the children; with the ferocity of Christ in the Temple. Let us love tenderly, loving our neighbor for who they truly are, *our very self*. Let us walk humbly, seeking always to embody the perspective of Christ, seeking to be transparent through the windows of ego, soul, and Self, that God might shine through us and as us, flooding the sanctuary of creation with divine light and illumination. Let us take care not to be the Pharisees of our time; let us take care not to neglect the lepers in our midst.

Let us seek the Face of God everywhere: in all of creation and all beings, as our own Beloved, and dwelling deeply within our own hearts. Let us acknowledge the miracle of the Incarnation—God becoming human—and embody it, reflect it, and live it in and as our own lives. Let us encounter the Word made flesh, fully human and fully divine, and dare to take up the injunction, "Come, follow me..."

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