A Mystical Christian Credo
From Experience to Expression

Paul Alan Laughlin

Following the publication of my two Polebridge Press books, *Remedial Christianity* (2000) and *Getting Oriented* (2005), my several presentations at Westar meetings, and my recent articles in *The Fourth R*, a number of people have asked me to formulate a definitive statement of what I believe. The first book, after all, was largely deconstructive in that it analyzed and criticized key Christian doctrines, and thus was more an indication of what I do not believe than a positive statement of faith—though its final chapter on alternative Christian views dropped major hints about my inclination toward mystical spirituality and progressive thought. *Getting Oriented* picked up those threads and, following a brief survey of three major Eastern religious traditions— Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Chinese nexus of Taoism and Confucianism—presented a tentative constructive Christian theology based on the mystical spirituality and monistic philosophy found in those traditions. The articles and presentations added a few clues about my thinking, but were narrowly focused in their scope. It was not my intention to be coy in any of these endeavors. I merely adopted the strategy of broaching several new ideas for consideration without defining my own position.

I have heretofore avoided crafting a personal statement of faith for two reasons. First of all, my belief system has always been too fluid and flexible to fashion into a credo, whose very form suggests a fixed and finished perspective. Second, as a teacher, I have always found the role of devil's advocate most effective, and accordingly have largely avoided disclosing my personal beliefs to students, lest I curtail their own seeking with the impression that I had everything already figured out and settled. But having recently attained (at least according to Chinese standards) the status of elder by turning sixty, and being thus obliged to face the fact that I'm entering the twilight of my career as a professional educator, the time seems right to set forth some sort of clear and concise statement of everything I currently believe with some sense of certainty. I do so under the banner of "a mystical Christianity" because from beginning to end, my credo reflects the spiritual orientation toward introspection, inwardness, deep-self-understanding, and self-affirmation that since middle age (at least) has become a kind of equilibrium for me.[1]

What follows, therefore, is a very personal and no doubt idiosyncratic affirmation of faith. It comprises nine articles, starting with conceptual or doctrinal consider-ations (1 through 4) and proceeding to the more practical matters—spiritual practice, ethics, community, interfaith relations, and faith development (Articles 5 through 9).

1. I believe in God the Mystery Eternal, Source and Essence of all that is; and in God the Manifest Expres-sion, the Identity-in-Diffusion, the Unity-in-Diversity, the One and All that is in one and all.[2]

2. I believe in Nature and Humanity as manifestations and expressions of the profoundly immanent and in-carnate God, whose Pervasive Presence and Power are active and unfailing, though often subtle and elusive.

3. I believe in Jesus Christ, historical and mythical, metaphysical and archetypal, the perfect image of a fully realized person, complete humanity wholly and seamlessly interfused with pure divinity.

4. I believe in the Bible and all inspired scripture as fal-lible, finite words that imperfectly convey the Infinite Word that brings both the peace of our unity with the Absolute and the passion to sow hope, joy, and love.

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1. The original working title of this article was "An Enlightened Christian Credo" because it keyed on the last chapter of my *Getting Oriented*, where "an enlightened Christianity" meant simply a Christianity viewed *in light of* Eastern mystical spiritual and philosophical traditions. But *Fourth R* editor Bob Miller rightly pointed out to me that at face value, "enlightened" sounded presumptuous or even smug, suggesting (unintentionally) that other forms of Christianity were *de facto* unen-lightened and therefore inferior. The word "mystical" is therefore better because it implies no such thing *and* is more accurate and descriptive, especially as I use it throughout this article. For a fuller definition of this and other technical terms used in this article, see p. 9.

2. Here and throughout the credo and the article, nouns, pronouns, and phrases that are intended as synonymous with or alternative meta-phors for "God" and words that identify traditional formal Christian doctrines are capitalized.

5. I believe in the importance of intentional spiritual practices that may lead to the direct experience of the Spirit that sustains us, the Light that illumines us, and the Love that connects us to all persons and things.

6. I believe that our inward spirituality must be demonstrated in a radical acceptance and affirmation of the planet and all of its inhabitants, and in a burning passion to work for their welfare, justice, and wellbeing.

7. I believe in the universal spiritual community of open-minded seekers and compassionate servants, whether it be manifested in formal symbols, rituals, and institutions or in more informal, impromptu ways.

8. I believe in the necessity of appreciating, honoring, and learning from other humane and life-affirming religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions, and of recognizing that none of us has a special claim to the truth.

9. I believe in continuous personal growth, psychological development, intellectual edification, and spiritual transformation; and in the right to change one's mind at any point along the way.

That statement certainly looks rather formal and final, but the very last line indicates the contrary: every article in it is negotiable, open to tinkering or torpedoing. Nor is this credo an invitation to a new orthodoxy. Christianity may have many needs, but a new orthodoxy is not one of them. What the credo really constitutes is a personal statement and an invitation and stimulus to further thought and discussion on the part of the reader, either with me or with valued friends and acquaintances. It is, admittedly, a very tightly packed conceptual suitcase, which I shall now proceed to unpack one article at a time.

> *Christianity may have many needs, but a new orthodoxy is not one of them.*

Article 1 An Immanent, Emanating God

I believe in God the Mystery Eternal, Source and Essence of all that is; and in God the Manifest Expression, the Identity-in-Diffusion, the Unity-in-Diversity, the One and All that is in one and all.

The credo begins with the central theological issue: the basic nature of God. It reflects a fundamentally mystical spirituality, which in its highest expressions (mostly found in Eastern religions) is typically characterized by a profound intuitive experience of the unity of all things. In Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism—where mysticism is more honored and highly developed than in the West—this experience has typically been expressed philosophically as a particular sort of *monism*, which is the belief in a single ultimate principle, being, force, etc., in contrast to dualism, which posits two constituent elements (usually

matter and mind), or *pluralism*, which postulates three or more. The specific type of monism found in the philosophies generated by these religions is best termed *neutral monism*[3] because the Ultimate that they attest is neither physical nor psychical, these latter qualities being but manifestations of the One Something. Neutral monism very closely resembles pantheism, which is the belief that everything is God (and vice versa) or essentially God—or, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it: "that God is immanent in or identical with the universe." The Eastern religions are not really pantheistic, however, since their respective Ultimate Realities—*Brahman, Shunyata*, and *Tao*—are not conceived as God (though Hindus occasionally call *Brahman* that as a concession to Christian and Muslim sensibilities). Christians who embrace neutral monism, however, may rightly be called *pantheists* if they continue to use the traditional name "God" for their untraditional view of the Ultimate Reality.

The most important characteristic of the *monistic-pantheistic* God of our first article is Its immanence. I use "Its" intentionally because the God described here is non-personal or, more accurately put, is beyond any such distinction as personal versus impersonal. All of the synonyms for God contained in the article are therefore non-personal, as imagistic representations (for example, metaphors) should be as well. "Immanence" literally means "within-ness," and in monism-pantheism, the Ultimate-God profoundly indwells nature and human nature—innately, inherently, and indelibly. This God is *transcendent* as well, but only in the relatively weak sense of being *beyond* our normal abilities to perceive, comprehend, or express It verbally—transcendent, in other words, not by virtue of the Divine nature *per se*, but due to our limited human capacities.[4]

The God of Article 1, then, stands in stark contrast to the monotheistic God of traditional Christianity, Who is personal and profoundly transcends nature and human nature as an Other Being "above and beyond" even the cosmos itself. This is divine transcendence in its most profound sense: an *essential*—or in fancy philosophical terms, ontological—otherness that renders this God not natural, but supernatural. As monotheists, traditional Christians

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3. The term was coined by William James in the first decade of the twentieth century, but reflects a viewpoint that dates back at least to Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth.

4. A mystical Christianity is also compatible with the relatively new theology of panentheism, which posits two aspects for God, one transcendent and the other immanent, both adhering to the Divine nature. My only real problem with this model is that, however aesthetically pleasing it may be, it appears to be *purely* an intellectually-based construct (and compromise!) rather than an articulation of a specific spirituality or spiritual experience.

have quickly followed up with an affirmation of God's *immanence* in its weaker sense of active intervention and involvement in the world's affairs and events—or the ability to be somehow present here, there, and everywhere—but without compromising the profound otherness of God's nature *vis-à-vis* nature and human nature.

Reconceiving God in a monistic or pantheistic way will certainly be a stumbling block to some Christians. For others, however, it may well be the crucial modification that will allow them to keep the faith, either because it makes more sense than the traditional Father Sky God or, even better, because it comports with their own spiritual intimations or experiences of Ultimacy. An immanent God may also reframe our thinking about the relationship between faith and science in very helpful ways, for Its quality as a Principle, Power, or Force that is thoroughly within the universe avoids positing a supernatural realm that is empirically inaccessible and thus impervious to analytic and experimental investigation.

Article 2 Nature and Humanity as Divine Manifestations

I believe in Nature and Humanity as manifestations and expressions of the profoundly immanent and incarnate God, whose Pervasive Presence and Power are active and unfailing, though often subtle and elusive.

A mystical Christianity typically treats nature and human nature as being a part of, rather than apart from, God, as traditionalists would have it. In keeping with the preceding article, therefore, nature and human nature are seen here not as creations of an ontologically transcendent God, but as emanations of an ontologically immanent God, comparable to photons of light that are simply given off by the sun as part and parcel of its inherent thermonuclear process. Creation-language implies a discontinuity between Creator and the created order (including its creatures), and thus establishes a relationship between the two. It further opens up the possibility—if not the inevitability—of an alienation, which traditional Christianity has framed theologically in terms of *sin*. That in turn becomes the premise for a soteriology (that is, a doctrine of salvation) and Christology (the so-called Person and Work of Christ, which is to say the doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement). In contrast, emanation bespeaks continuity and thus entails not simply an intimate relationship between God and the believer, but an essential identity. That identity is not obvious, of course, for it lies at a spiritual level much deeper than the ego-self; hence, the "subtle and elusive" phrase that closes this article. Hinduism's

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Upanishads say that the Ultimate *Brahman* is hidden in the world the way cream is hidden in milk or salt in salt water. These images work just as well for the mystically-conceived Christian God with regard to nature and human nature.

This second article, in effect, universalizes the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, which says that God was "enfleshed" in the man Jesus, who therefore and uniquely had in his one integral person two complete natures: one human and one divine, seamlessly fused. A mystical Christianity sees God as Incarnate—suffused or interfused—throughout the cosmos and all its constituents as, in effect, their Inner Spirit or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "the Soul of the whole."[5] The acknowledgement that this Pervasive Presence is "subtle and elusive" is a simple recognition that detection and awareness of this Divine Within are not automatic—hence the need for specific spiritual practices designed to access It.

Article 3 The Multifaceted "Messiah"

I believe in Jesus Christ, historical and mythical, metaphysical and archetypal, the perfect image of a fully realized person, complete humanity wholly and seamlessly interfused with pure divinity.

My unorthodox views on Jesus, Christ, and Jesus-as-the-Christ have been well documented in Chapters 3 and 4 in my *Remedial Christianity*, Chapter 5 of my *Getting Oriented*, and three recent articles in *The Fourth R*. To offer a brief summary, I believe that the common distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, methodologically useful as it is for New Testament research, is a false dichotomy and too simplistic to fill the needs of the wide variety of dispositions and spiritualities found within the Christian faith. In my article entitled "The Once and Future Christ of Faith: Beyond the History-Faith Dichotomy" (*Fourth R* 18,2 Mar-Apr 2005), I argued the virtues of the historical Jesus, the fictional narrative Jesus, the celestial Christ, and the archetypal Christ. In this creed, however, I exclude the third of these images because the celestial Christ is an object of heartfelt devotional faith in and love of an Other (either a god or a unique representative or representation thereof), and is therefore of little use to a mystically-based (and therefore introverted) faith. In place of "celestial," therefore, I insert the word "metaphysical" to indicate that it is entirely

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5. Properly understood, such references to Spirit and Soul do not reintroduce a dualism to the picture, for they are merely terms for one aspect or dimension of a single, unified Reality. The relationship between matter and energy (as matter-energy) posited in modern physics is analogous.

proper for a mystic to understand the word "Christ" as referring to every person's inner-spiritual aspect that is waiting to be touched and tapped—what Buddhists call our "Buddha-nature" and Taoists our "Inner-Nature." This article, then, reinforces the universalization of the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation implied in Article 2.

Decidedly absent here is the sin-redemption model upon which the traditional doctrine of the Atonement is based. Like Incarnation, Atonement (At-one-ment) is universalized as the truth about all of us and the universe that we inhabit: we are literally "at one"—a Unity. In a fundamentally monistic system, all is one by definition. Any sense of multiplicity and duality—to say nothing of alienation—is illusory at best. The human predicament is framed in terms of ignorance of one's truly divine nature rather than sin; and with sin no longer the problem, the notion of assuaging it through a blood sacrifice of any kind is stripped of meaning, and self-knowledge replaces propitiation as the appropriate fix for our existential plight. If ignorance is the root problem, the solution will necessarily be something on the order of *enlightenment.*

Article 4 Scriptures as Word-Windows

I believe in the Bible and all inspired scripture as fallible, finite words that imperfectly convey the Infinite Word that brings both the peace of our unity with the Absolute and the passion to sow hope, joy, and love.

The fact that my version of Christianity is mystically based means that the locus of authority is shifted from outside the believer or practitioner to within. Put another way, we move from a situation of heteronomy, in which we are ruled by external authorities (for example, scriptures, creeds, and clergy), to one of autonomy, in which we become our own authorities based on our own experiences and reason. The issue with the Bible then becomes not a matter of its authority, but of its *authenticity*—by which I mean not its historical accuracy, but rather the extent to which it resonates with the world, existence, and spirituality as we experience and understand them. The related issue of inspiration also takes on new meaning: a scripture is "inspired" only to the extent that its reader finds it inspiring. Our new-found autonomy also allows us to look for authenticity in the scriptures of other world religions, especially those that have proven inspiring to many readers over time and across cultures. Our motto at this point might be: "The more you like scripture, the more scriptures you'll like."

The use of "Word" here simply introduces another synonym for the monistic-pantheistic God we saw in Article 1. It also picks up on the Greek term *logos* in the opening verses of the first chapter of the Gospel of John:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *Logos* is a complex concept derived from the Greek philosophical tradition and connotes, among many other things, a cosmic organizing Principle not unlike the monistic-pantheistic God of our Article 1. While this brief discussion cannot do the term justice, let me simply note that when the American Bible Society translated John 1 into Chinese, the word they used for *logos* was *tao* (or *dao*), the ultimate Way of Taoism. A mystical Christianity allows for the possibility of a variety of scriptures—as well as other literature not generally considered as scripture—to serve as, in effect, windows to this Word-Way.

Article 5 Practice as Prerequisite

I believe in the importance of intentional spiritual practices that may lead to the direct experience of the Spirit that sustains us, the Light that illumines us, and the Love that connects us to all persons and things.

With this article, we turn from the theoretical (theological-philosophical) to the practical issue of spiritual discipline. In so doing we come to the very heart of mystical Christianity: the ongoing quest for the direct, unmediated experience of the immanent God discussed in the first four articles. The God of a mystical Christianity, you see, is not simply a concept to be considered, weighed, and accepted because of its plausibility or aesthetic appeal. On the contrary, It is the innermost aspect of the whole of reality and of every individual constituent; and It is both accessed and verified empirically, not so much with the five senses and intellect (though they are by no means excluded in the search) as with the *intuition*—the right hemisphere of the brain, as it were. The search for the immanent Ultimate within defines mysticism, at least in its most radical expressions, as found in Eastern religions and a few notable Christian examples (especially the medieval German Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart). Mystical spirituality is by nature introverted and introspective. It entails a journey within oneself in search of the radical At-one-ment that already resides there.

The terms "Spirit," "Light," and "Love" are not exclusive, but merely suggestive, adding to the pool of non-personal images already used for God in the Credo: Absolute, All, Essence, Identity-in-Diffusion, Infinite Word, Manifest Expression, Mystery Eternal, One, Pervasive Presence and Power, Source, and Unity-in-Diversity. Other possibilities include Cosmic Consciousness, Divine, Force, Holy, Logos, Mind, Sacred, Self, Supreme, or simply Ultimate. Such terms have been suggested by Christian mystics who practiced and wrote before knowledge about the Eastern religions traditions was common; they appear in the works of such great medieval mystics of the Catholic spiritual

tradition as Julian of Norwich, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, and the aforementioned Meister Eckhart. They are also found, among other places, in the profoundly mystical Celtic Christianity, whose premier theologian, the ninth-century John Scotus Eriugena, famously (and pantheistically!) declared that God is "the essence of the whole universe and its substance"; and in Quaker Christianity, whose founder, George Fox, taught that we are all possessed of a spark of the Divine he called the "Inner Light." Such imagery for God was also employed by modern Christian mystics like Thomas Merton and Anthony de Mello, both of whom were obviously familiar with and appreciative of Eastern mysticism.

Such images of the Ultimate suggest an essential continuity between the human and the Divine, and therefore imply that the purest experience of It would be direct. It would be wrong, however, to exaggerate the unmediated nature of mysticism. Indeed, the desire for such experiences can be triggered by many things. A mentor, a book, or even a credo like this one, for example, may be instrumental in this regard—not because they are authoritative in any heteronomous sense, but simply because they ring true as authentic. Even common experiences may provide mystical moments spontaneously and without being recognized as such. I believe, in fact, that such episodes are much more commonplace than most people imagine. They occur in moments of extraordinary depth: while making a special connection with nature or another person, or being absorbed in a piece of music, or a painting, or a dance, or even a sport (whether as performer-artist-player or as audience-spectator). In short, the only thoroughgoing non-mystics, if such people exist, would be people who live purely superficial lives in a vapid flatland of everydayness and ordinariness, blithely unaware of any depth dimension to human existence.

Article 6 World Affirmation and Amelioration

I believe that our inward spirituality must be demonstrated in a radical acceptance and affirmation of the planet and all of its inhabitants, and in a burning passion to work for their welfare, justice, and wellbeing.

One of the gross misperceptions and misrepresentations of Eastern mysticism is that it is escapist and world-denying. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such a misunderstanding is grounded, of course, in the spiritual trajectory of mysticism, which is away from the ego-self and its physical environs—what Hinduism and Buddhism call the realm of *samsara*—and into the inner sanctum of the True or Deep Self, which turns out to be none other than the Ultimate One. Mystics do not abide there, however. In fact, quite the opposite: they return to the plane of worldly existence better able to see it for what it is, to

cope with its vicissitudes, and to engage it with compassion for other people and creatures and the planet itself. Meditation, then, is best thought of as a temporary tactical withdrawal.

Article 6 consciously distances itself from the charge of the God of Genesis 1 to the male and female archetypes just created in the divine image: "Have dominion over the earth and subdue it." With or without this injunction in mind, we human beings have accomplished this task with such a vengeance that we have not only estranged ourselves from the nature of which we are obviously a part, but made ourselves its worst enemies (and thus, ironically, our own). I affirm here something very different: our continuity with nature, which, by virtue of our theology of immanence, is itself inherently divine, rather than purely secular (i.e., unsacred) "stuff" to be used (and abused and used up) and manipulated at our whim.

For some inspiration from within the Christian tradition at this point, we may turn to those of the Psalms that extol nature and our integral place in it (e.g., Psalms 148 and 104—except verse 35); the nature mystic St. Francis of Assisi, who called the sun "Brother" and moon "Sister;" and to the imaginative and innovative theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who saw Spirit-Consciousness and nature intimately connected in a cosmic process of mutual evolution. We might also want to look outside our tradition (in good mystical-Christian fashion) to Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and his notion of "Interbeing," which is based on the classic Buddhist doctrine of "Dependent Co-arising," which in turn maintains that all things and beings are profoundly interrelated in an intimate nexus, such that all constituent parts are causally connected to all others. This sort of interconnectedness is reflected in Albert Einstein's famous dictum that "A falling leaf affects the farthest star," and in modern systems theory's epigram to the effect that a butterfly flapping its wings anywhere affects the weather everywhere.

The other (but not unrelated) side of this article is the ideal of justice, which may be the point at which Christianity could most return the favor, so to speak, and inform and benefit Eastern thought. Hinduism especially speaks less in terms of justice as a human goal and obligation and more in terms of an ongoing cosmic adjustment spelled out in terms of *karma*, in which deeds automatically and inevitably reap their appropriate deserts *eventually* and without the need of human intervention. Such a view can and often does lead to a kind of resignation and complacency in the face of apparent injustice and the suffering that it engenders, on the premise that both are somehow deserved and, in the grand scheme of things, temporary. Gandhi, of course, is a notable exception in his intentional, activist, yet non-violent fight for social and political justice in India. Buddhism, while largely adopting

the Hindu notion of *karma* and its sometimes stultifying effects, nevertheless has found inspiration toward activism and engagement in its affirmation of the need for *karuna* (compassion) and *metta* (loving kindness) toward all in the wake of personal, individual self-realization.

But Christianity has a much more deliberate, self-conscious impetus toward social justice by virtue of its grounding in the Hebrew prophetic tradition, which counsels believers to "Let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:4), a theme taken up in the teachings of the historical Jesus, where concern for the poor, the hungry, the widowed, and other socially oppressed and outcast people is expressed again and again. (Note especially the implicit social critique in the "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke 6:17–49 and the dire warnings about the consequences of ignoring the needs of members of the social underclass in Matthew 25:31–46.) Admittedly, this pro-justice dynamic is often ignored by those who claim Jesus as their source of inspiration, but it is there and clear and unavoidable for those who truly "have ears to hear," and no Christian affirmation—mystical or otherwise—should be without it.

Article 7 Communal Considerations

I believe in the universal spiritual community of open-minded seekers and compassionate servants, whether it be manifested in formal symbols, rituals, and institutions or in more informal, impromptu ways.

This article raises (without really settling) the classic Christian doctrine of the Church. Its first line suggests that people who are on this particular spiritual and conceptual wavelength already belong to a universal community, one perhaps analogous to "The Body of Christ" of St. Paul, "the holy catholic Church" of the Apostles' Creed, and the "mystic sweet communion" posited in the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" to include even the like-minded dead. Testimony to the reality of such a seemingly abstract entity has come to me in the form of communiques from all over the world; sent by fans of the kind of spirituality sketched out in *Getting Oriented*, they indicate a widespread recognition that we not only are but probably long have been in the same spiritual-conceptual circle or set, whether we knew it or not.

The credo leaves completely open the issue of whether people who embrace this or a similar affirmation need to associate with one another either physically or at a distance (e.g., via telephone or correspondence). It is entirely conceivable that some mystically-oriented individuals—by virtue of having reached a satisfactory spiritual plateau—might feel no need for an actual spiritual community, content perhaps with the virtual, universal one intuitively realized in spiritual practice. But we humans seem to be social creatures, so I suspect that most would want ongoing personal relationships and interactions, if only informally as regular lunch mates, or Internet friends, book clubs, or study groups. In my experience, the ongoing sharing of experiences and discussion of their meaning promotes spiritual growth. But some people also seem to require more formal social structure than that, and even institutions, as well as set ritual expressions of their shared spiritual orientation and experiences. They may well want to build institutions around their mystical Christianity.

If they do, they will probably need to devise new sets of symbols and rituals, as well as communal spiritual practices, or at least to reconfigure old ones. The traditional cross and crucifix, for example, will have to be dispensed with or radically redesigned and reinterpreted to eliminate the connection with blood-sacrifice atonement. Something suggesting Light might be appropriate, perhaps within a circle, since circles suggest centers and a mystical Christianity is all about spiritual centering. Rituals involving circles, would seem fitting—circumambulation or circle-dancing, perhaps. Prayer as communication with an Other would have to go, replaced by a Quaker-style silent introspection, Zen-like meditation, Father Thomas Keating's centering prayer, or some such affirmative *mantra* as "I AM the One and the All."

Article 8 Pluralism in Practice

I believe in the necessity of appreciating, honoring, and learning from other humane and life-affirming religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions, and of recognizing that none of us has a special claim to the truth.

This article is an appreciative nod to the fact that we live in a world of globalization and pluralism. A fair definition of globalization might be this: *the already profound and ever-increasing interconnection and interdependency of the world's peoples, nations, cultures, politics, economies, and technologies.* Two of the prime causes of globalization are the increasing ease of international travel and transportation and the instantaneous worldwide communication of thoughts, data, and feelings via the Internet. The upshot of globalization is the sense that the world is getting smaller. Pluralism is the handmaiden of globalization in two senses. First, pluralism as a *condition* of modern life is the coexistence of different ethnic, cultural, and/or religious groups (and their competing beliefs and practices) within a society. Second, pluralism is an *attitude* of acceptance and perhaps even appreciation of that situation.

A Christianity that draws upon mystical strains in Eastern religious traditions is inherently pluralistic. Its choice of autonomy over heteronomy and its preference for authenticity over authority (all discussed under Article 4 above) free its adherents to search for spiritual truth wherever it might be found. In so doing, it values rational inquiry and critical thinking as well as the more intui-

tive and imaginative mental processes that are typically less appreciated in spiritually based philosophies of the West than those of the East. But the wording of the article suggests that mystical Christians should not be indiscriminate, gullible, or so open-minded as to be swayed by any spiritual system or claim that clamors for acceptance. On the contrary, a mystical Christianity rejects out of hand any faith system that is intellectually unsustainable or, for that matter, that is inhumane or physically or psychologically harmful in thought or practice, or that promotes itself via fear, intimidation, guilt, or shame.

Article 9 Spiritual Stages and Dynamic Development

I believe in continuous personal growth, psychological development, intellectual edification, and spiritual transformation; and in the right to change one's mind at any point along the way.

Excellent work has been done in the area of faith development over the past quarter century or so, thanks largely to James W. Fowler of Emory University. His highly regarded and widely used Faith Development Theory is based on the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, but draws heavily on the work of Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg, whose model of moral development was a major component of an excellent paper presented by Harry Coverston at the Fall 2005 Westar meeting.

It is impossible to do Fowler's schema for faith development justice in an article like this, and a simple Google search of his name and the phrase "faith development" will provide many excellent summaries. For the present, let it suffice to say that Fowler lays out six stages (preceded by an infantile pre-stage) of normative faith development that takes one from birth to late adulthood. They move from (1) messy fluidity of thought in early childhood, to (2) the tidy, literal certainty of late childhood, to (3) the conformist and largely unexamined peer-consensus faith of adolescence, to (4) the critical and often skeptical reflection and doubt of early-to-mid-adulthood, to (5) a re-embracing of items discarded in the previous stage,

Glossary of Technical Terms

A Short Theological Primer

(An asterisk [*] denotes a cross-reference within the list of terms.)

Autonomy (from the Greek *autos* + *nomos* = "self" + "law"; *autonomia* = self-regulation; adj. **autonomous**)—(1) independence, as in "being a law unto oneself"; (2) in a religious context, being one's own authority in matters of belief and doctrine, mainly through the use of such internal barometers as reason, intuition, and experience in lieu of (or with less weight allotted to) such common external norms as scriptures, creeds, councils, and clergy; its opposite is *heteronomy**

Emanation (from the Latin *emanare* = "to flow"; vb. **emanate**)—(1) to flow or issue forth from a source (e.g., water from a spring or heat from a stove) *naturally*, i.e., as a result of what the source *is* rather than what it does; (2) in theology, an alternative to *creation*, which requires a clear *ontological** distinction between an intentional creator and what is created

Heteronomy (from the Greek *heteros* + *nomos* = "other" + "law"; *heteronomia* = external regulation; adj. **heteronomous**)—(1) dependence, as in "being governed by another"; (2) in religion, bowing to other people (e.g., authority figures or bodies) or things (e.g., official doctrines, sacred writings) in matters of belief and practice; its opposite is *autonomy**

Immanence (from the Latin *immanere* = "to indwell"; adj. **immanent**)—(1) inherence, "withinness"; (2) in theology, the quality of a deity that (a) [strong sense] abides within the world and its constituents essentially (*ontologically**), i.e., as their true identity and nature; or (b) [weak sense] as an active presence impinging on the world and its constituents from beyond and perhaps abiding in them for a time, affecting them but without altering them essentially (*ontologically**)

Metaphysics (from the Greek *meta* + *physis* = "beyond" + "nature and constitution"; adj. **metaphysical**)—(1) the branch of formal philosophy that deals with the nature of reality; (2) in common parlance, any view or aggregation of views that posit unseen realities (e.g., spirits, ghosts) beyond the everyday world and the ability of the five human senses to detect

Monism (from the Greek *monos* = "alone"; adj. **monistic**)—(1) a *metaphysics** (in the formal philosophical sense) that maintains that reality consists of only one basic element, substance or principle (e.g., matter *or* mind *or* spirit) rather than two (dualism) or more (pluralism); (2) in theology, one model for conceiving Ultimate Reality, namely, as an *immanent** Force, Source, Power, Principle (or Something), as opposed to the Creator God of monotheism, who is *ontologically** distinct from the created order and its constituents; a monistically-conceived deity typically *emanates** rather than creates the cosmos; if the immanent Ultimate of monism is called "God," then that monism may properly be termed *pantheism**

Mysticism (from the Greek *mystikos* = "initiate"; adj. **mystical**)—(1) as a spiritual *orientation*, the intuitive sense that the permanent abode of Ultimate Reality, Truth, or Meaning is within nature and human nature as their very essence, rather than as a transcendent Entity in some other-worldly realm that might deign to intrude or intercede from time to time; (2) as a spiritual *practice*, the attempt to experience identity or union with this *immanent* Ultimate

Ontology (from the Greek *ontos*, a participial form of *einai* = "to be, hence, "being"" + *logia* = "study" or "theory"; adj. **ontological**)—within philosophical *metaphysics**, the specific study of or any theory about *being* in terms of the essence that makes something real *and* gives it its true identity; the adjective *ontological*, then means "essential" (as in "that which makes a thing what it is, as opposed to something else")

Pantheism (from the Greek *pan* + *theos* = "all" + "god"; adj. **pantheistic**)—the theological model that maintains that everything is God, everything is essentially God; or that God is the sum total of everything or the ALL; for all intents and purposes, a form of *monism** in which the immanent Ultimate Reality is termed "God"

Transcendence (from the Latin *transcendere* = "to climb beyond"; adj. **transcendent**)—(1) to go beyond, exceed, or be beyond the ordinary; (2) in theology, the term applied to an Ultimate or Deity that is either (a) [strong sense] *ontologically** other than everything else; or (b) [weak sense] merely beyond human abilities to perceive and comprehend, whether It or He is *immanent** or transcendent in nature; or (c) both

ing parallels, and then been given the title 'Jesus' (savior), which in turn was later taken as a proper name, and his link to his Egyptian prototype was forgotten. Various attempts were made to place his death—originally a crime of unseen angelic or demonic forces—as a historical event at the hands of known ancient rulers" (p. 67). The author's views about the non-Pauline authorship of the Pauline letters and the non-existence of Jesus are presented here as interesting and creative suggestions but without convincing support. Perhaps that is yet to come.

Despite these qualifications, this is a rich and useful collection from a creative scholar. It meets the author's goal of demonstrating the diversity of early Christian life and thought. In my judgment, the book is accessible to informed readers who are interested in the development of early Christian literature.

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but interpreted much more freely and in a larger context that includes science and the world's other great religious traditions. Fowler asserts that adults can reach a state of comfortable "equilibrium" at any of these stages and abide there for a lifetime. Even those open to growth and change, however, rarely reach stage six: it is the point at which the individual (a spiritual adept of the first order) becomes virtually transparent to the Ultimate Reality that (or whom) she or he represents.

The final article of my credo, therefore, while not specifying Fowler's system, does affirm that various types of faith are appropriate to particular levels of maturity and that faith is not a static constant in life, but the dynamic, driving force impelling an exciting, ongoing, and ever-changing existential journey. As already indicated, the final affirmation of the durable right to change one's mind is part and parcel of this dynamic view of the spiritual life, and is a hedge against becoming doctrinaire or absolutist about any particular religion or religious tenet.

Conclusion
A credo like this one will certainly not satisfy every Christian, and probably will appeal only to a few—and perhaps to none of them completely. It does not pretend to present the definitive version of Christianity, but merely offers one possible—and, I think, plausible—interpretation of that faith that is suitable for modern or even post-modern times. Its grounding in a *mystical spirituality* and resultant affirmation of a *monistic-pantheist God* will probably be the main stumbling blocks for those Christians who would reject the credo outright, be they on the traditionalist right or humanist left of the faith spectrum. But even such diverse folks as these might find value in this formulation to the extent that it helps them clarify, if only via contrast, their own understanding of the faith and the spirituality that it reflects or implies. It may have a similar effect on those who find themselves resonating with the spirit of the credo but unhappy with this or that Article. Therefore, my admittedly idiosyncratic affirmation may in the end be more important as a provocative prod than as

a standard around which a crowd of followers will flock. If, on the other hand, it should rally a cadre of like-minded souls, I would naturally be delighted. **4R**

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