

Locating Ourselves on the Re-Thinking Faith Path

Reorienting Faith Class Session One

Ken Wilson, 01/23/22

This class includes four offerings over four monthly sessions, for those of us in a process of rethinking significant aspects of previously held faith perspectives. We come in a state of dynamic tension with previously held beliefs. We may know what we don't believe anymore, and we're in the process of articulating what we do. We may share some common experiences, but each path is also its own.

It can be a gentle, organic, growing experience [Julia]... Or deeply distressing.

Some here today have experienced religious trauma that includes symptoms of PTSD—maybe it's hard to go into a church service of any kind without feeling hypervigilant.

So we want to be mindful of that diversity in these sessions. There's no one-size-fits all here.

Why is this a big deal? The word **religion** is from the Latin, *ligare*, meaning **connections** (ligament, connective tissue.) Religion involves forging connections—with God, ourselves, others, the wider world. Religion/faith/spirituality touches on all aspects of our humanity: relationship, politics, ethics, identity, community, meaning, purpose, birth, life, death, after life, sexuality, how we manage anxiety, depression, mood regulation. When we undergo major transitions in our faith perspectives it can be really unsettling. It's not just an intellectual process, it's deeply emotional, and depending on our background, it can impact our core relationships—strain relationship with a partner, family members, our sense of belonging in a community.

Re-assessing major matters of Christian belief are rocking the Christian world today: views on afterlife, especially the doctrine of hell, approaches to Scripture, matters of gender and sexuality (beyond LGBTQ+) And in the U.S. context, how Christianity has cooperated with, been infected by, and resisted white supremacy.

I wanted to keep this to four sessions for starters: so we'll cover Hell, Scripture, Sexuality over the next three sessions. But today is more about process: offer some tools for locating ourselves in the re-thinking faith path. I get easily disoriented in our local shopping mall. Look for the kiosk with a map and locate the "you are here" arrow. Then I can get my bearing figure out where the Apple store is.

The first is a simple quadrant to get our bearings on the Christian landscape. Developed by Phyllis Tickle, founding Religion Editor at Publishers weekly, foremost secular expert on American Christianity until her death in 2015. Also a closet mystic.

There over 30,000 denominations, but in a very simplified form these can be categorized in four major sub-groups.

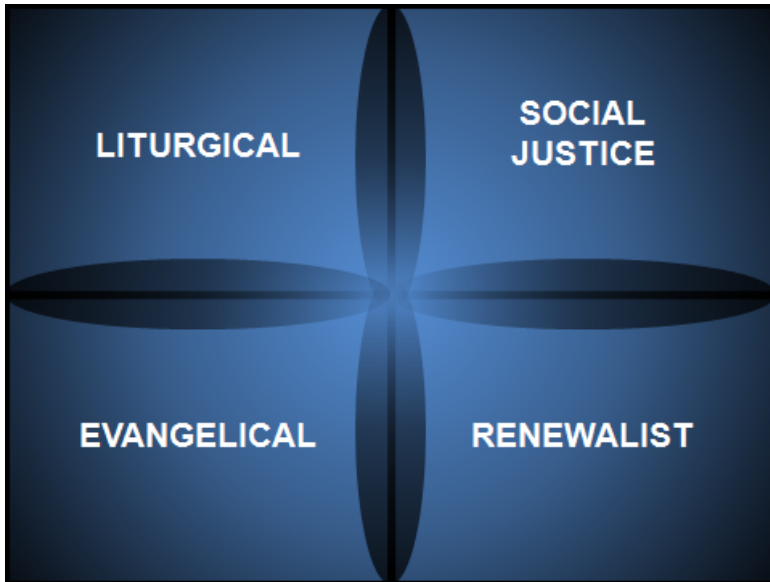


LITURGICAL CHURCHES: Churches that emphasize the liturgy (pattern of corporate worship) as a centering feature of faith. Catholic Mass, Episcopal Eucharistic service, the liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox churches. They can trend conservative or progressive in belief, but the liturgy is always front and center. Make changes in the liturgy with extreme caution.

SOCIAL JUSTICE CHURCHES: Churches that regard social justice as center of Christian message. Includes Black churches that fueled and were the organizing center of the 20th Century Civil Rights Movement. Tend toward political activism today. Includes the anti-war, pacifist churches Mennonite, Quaker, for example. Churches laser-focused on alleviating poverty, human rights, environmental justice, as faith issues.

EVANGELICAL-FUNDAMENTALIST: Focused on the authority of Scripture, regarding every statement in Scripture as infallible (never wrong) properly understood. Emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus, the necessity of conversion (born again experience), including a having a testimony “a before and after story” of faith.

RENEWALIST: Similar to Evangelical-Fundamentalist churches in many ways but with an emphasize on emotion, spiritual experience, expressive worship, the felt-presence of the Spirit, miraculous inbreakings of divine power, healing. The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Globally, the fastest growing sector.



Fifty years ago, these churches tended to exist in their own silos, but since the rise of the Internet, much border blending between the sectors. Liturgical churches that embrace social justice or treat it with suspicion. A great deal of border blending between Evangelical and Renewalist, and so on.



At the same time, in each sector you find what Tickle called corner dwellers—those who absolutize their tradition, as the only authentic expression of Christianity. Tending to view other’s sectors with deep suspicion or other expressions within their sector as illegitimate.

Many of us have migrated around this landscape. Grew up Catholic, joined an evangelical youth ministry in high school or college, in our 30s drawn to social justice tradition.

In general, the re-thinking faith process can be more distressing initially if we were shaped by the more conservative and corner dwelling sectors on this landscape.

So that’s one way to locate ourselves on the re-thinking faith path.

Another is to consider various developmental stage theories. Humans develop over time—what does that look like in matters of faith, belief, spiritual practices and communities?

Richard Rohr a Catholic contemplative offers the simplest: **FIRST HALF OF LIFE** and **SECOND HALF OF LIFE**. Book, podcasts. In the first half of life, we're developing mastery in various realms—figuring out how things work so we can navigate life. What we learn in the first half of life works for developing mastery, but then we face things in the second of life and these strategies don't serve us so well. We have to learn new approaches, strategies, values—and often that means unlearning things that served us in the first half of life. Learning from scratch is simpler than learning new things that require us to unlearn—or loosen or adapt—strategies that served us well in an earlier part of life. So that's one helpful framing.

Brian McLaren has a book, *Faith After Doubt* in which he offers several stage theories. His favorite: SIMPLICITY/COMPLEXITY/PERPLEXITY/HARMONY. We begin with **SIMPLICITY** in matters of faith; over time our simplicity is challenged by increasing **COMPLEXITY** (new data, new experiences that strain our simple framework.) This can lead to a period **PERPLEXITY**. We feel like we've lost our bearings entirely; what's real, what's not, what's reliable. We can get stuck in any of these stages—but if we move from simplicity to complexity into perplexity, we can also enter calmer waters again, a period of **HARMONY**, as beliefs and practices shift to make better sense of our experience, of new data/understandings.

Walter Bruggeman a progressive theologian has another stage theory that he draws from the book of Psalms: **ORIENTATION** (a time of settled perspective) followed by **DISORIENTATION** (aspects of the former perspective stop working for us) and then we adjust and enter a stage of **NEW ORIENTATION**. I like this because it describes a learning process that applies in so many realms: scientific consensus moves from Orientation to Disorientation to New Orientation. Anything that involves learning over a significant length of time (parenting, golf)

One last framing device addresses the question of why there is so much turbulence, so much sorting and sifting in the religious realm today.

Phyllis Tickle in one of her last books, *The Great Emergence* (lots of interviews, articles, talks online) says that at least the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—seem to go through a major rummage sale (we would say garage sale) roughly every 500 years.

500 BCE, Destruction of Solomons Temple and sack of Jerusalem by Babylonians leading to the forced deportation of the ancient Jewish elites to Babylon—initiate a shift in Judaism from temple centered to a text centered worship. During this period Hebrew Scriptures emerge.

500 years later just before and after the destruction of the rebuilt Temple, the Babylonian exiles having returned to homeland, but now under Roman Occupation, you have the birth of the Jesus movement within ancient Judaism and what becomes Rabbinic Judaism.

500 C.E. we see the emergence of Christianity as separate from Judaism. In the West, alignment of Christianity with the Roman Empire, birth of the monastic movement as a response to the corruption brought about by blend of Christianity with Empire.

1000 Tensions between Western Christianity (Roman Catholicism) and Eastern Orthodox Christianity resulting in second major split affecting Christendom (after the split with Judaism)

1500 In the West, Protestant Reformation separates from Roman Catholicism

2017 was the 500th Anniversary of Luther's Reform movement—and we find ourselves in another major transition, that Phyllis Tickled dubbed The Great Emergence

A great rummage sale is underway in Christianity. People going through their household of faith, deciding what's worth keeping, what needs to be sold—searching through the basements and the attics. A lot of work. A lot of soul searching, disruption ... a time of great turbulence and ferment, as seems to be the case every 500 years or so.

Congratulations to us—we get to be part of reshaping a faith adapted to the demands of globalism, climate change, economic justice, equality, and all the backlashes these major trends generate.

MOVING FORWARD, 2 SUGGESTIONS:

If you find yourself in a period of disorientation, find ways to **externalize your internal dialogue**.

Write your thoughts down in a journal or email exchange with a trusted person.

Find an empathetic, non-judgmental person to talk to.

Susan King, Sue Brokaw, Steve Gray, David Wild, Caroline Kittle, Diane Sonda available if you'd like to email connect in other ways.

Externalize your internal dialogue.

Experiment with a new-to-you spiritual practice

The process that led to my running afoul of Evangelicalism, brought me into a new space coincident with a big shift in my praying ways—from standard devotional practice to learning how to do silence, meditative prayer. A new spiritual practice can be a way to dig a new well so to speak.

FOR Q/A, COMMENT TIME:

Use the chat or raise hand so Caroline can call on you.

What resonates? What in your experience illustrates something here?

What have you found helpful along the way?

Resources you like (podcasts, books, etc.)