

Reforming Desire: a Theology of Incarnation
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I would like to preface my remarks with the confession that the desire for divinity, shaped and mediated by devotion to Christ, is an endless joy in my life. And yet I feel I must begin this reflection on God and Human Flourishing by acknowledging some of the ways in which my tradition has deeply undermined both healthy individual desires and the common good. But then I will take up the more pleasant task of considering what about the Christian message can speak to the reformation of desire by looking at the idea of Incarnation. I will conclude by thinking about practices that might contribute to a reformation of desire.

Part I

“He Feeds on Ashes” (Isaiah 44:20)

The Bible as well as Christian communities, liturgies, and traditions are virtually infinite resources for reflecting on and transforming desire. These sources inspire a vision of justice and mercy that naturally expresses itself in an ever more universal and intense compassion. They suggest the unsatisfactory character of excessive attachment to the goods of the world and the destruction to which we are vulnerable when we ignore the requirements of justice. As we reflect on the catastrophic pace at which our environment is being destroyed and the misery of millions, perhaps billions, mired in poverty and danger, and the distortions of desire by an omnipresent, meretricious consumer culture it is natural to look to Christianity as an ally. The prophetic wisdom of the Hebrew Bible and the emphasis on love in the Christian writings would suggest that this tradition would be an outspoken critic of every form of violence against creation. It would nurture a fundamentally different world-view: a different sense of the future, of inter-relationship, of non-utilitarian beauty, and always and everywhere a desire to alleviate suffering. And yet we know Christianity is deeply implicated in the difficulties our planet is facing. It may be as resolute as any single cultural force in creating obstacle to humane responses to economic, environmental, social, ethical, and spiritual problems that beset humanity. Of course “Christianity” is itself so interiorly plural that there is in a sense no such thing as a Christian response: the Sojourners and godhatesfags websites both are inspired by Christian tradition and yet, except that they are produced by carbon based beings, it is difficult to find much else in common between them. My critical remarks are not directed at Christianity in its entirety but rather to strands that seem to inhibit desires for human and planetary well-being.

There is a dominant narrative through which the Christian message has been expressed. A divine monarch created the world for good; perversely its original humans rebelled; bound by His Honor and His law, the King was obliged to cast humanity into an abyss of endless suffering. Pulled back by the Divine Love, He instead sacrificed his Son to expiate and atone for this sin. This message of salvation is mediated to humanity through a church, its clergy, creeds, and scriptures. Individuals who believe this

and participate in a church community secure (more or less) the grace which protects human beings from destruction. Those who do not believe this narrative and participate in this institution are guaranteed the endless Auschwitz of suffering necessary to recover the divine honor and justice.¹

There are a few things about this narrative that are important in the formation of desires. It is deeply individualistic. The locus of salvation is the individual in the isolation of her or his private conscience. In contrast to Schleiermacher or Tillich (among many others), the idea of the individual related to others in any organic or necessary way is occluded or even rejected in this vision.² Formed by this story about ultimate reality, Christians envision the world as eternally divided into saved and damned, chosen and rejected. This metaphysical claim finds expression in Christian hostility or indifference to religions and cultures other than its own, in hostility to sexual minorities. I quote an eighth grader at a Presbyterian private school who responded to the suicide of teenagers who suffered relentless bullying: “they were gay weren’t they?”³ Death seemed to him a reasonable penalty for same-sex desire. Christians are also hostile to those across the political divide. Like Athanasius long before them, they see in efforts to find common ground a fundamental betrayal of God.⁴

Gary Laderman notes that religion is a primary though not exclusive fomenter of hatred as a principle of political action: “The notion that religion contributes to the social emphasis on hate and plays a role in the effervescent energies devoted to stirring up hateful sentiment is elementary to many students and observers on the subject. In the US hate is a driver constantly shaping and reshaping the religious landscape.”⁵ The individualism of salvation and the confidence that the divisions between oneself and one’s enemies will be eternally upheld school the imagination in an idea of community that depends upon opposition, boundaries, and hostility. This means a disconnection not only from the beautiful tapestry of human culture but also from the interior plurality of Christian piety.

When salvation is primarily related to belief, there is no particular religious reason to think of human suffering as important to Christian faith. The religious imagination rarely entertains the suffering caused by racist and arbitrary criminal justice and immigration systems. If it does, the predominance of juridical metaphors for divinity and the myth of punishment protect it from conceiving of “lockdown America” as a concern of Christians.⁶ When divine concern is removed not only from other (non-Christian) humans but also from plants and animals, running streams, and the ocean where the leviathan sported in the sea there is little reason for Christians to concern themselves about environmental degradation.

There are in addition quieter, more subtle ways in which Christianity works against the reformation of desire and the common good. One takes on the identity of sinner, if perhaps a justified one, whenever one participates in a Christian liturgy. We hear a good deal about forgiveness – our need to receive and to give forgiveness. These are not obviously helpful images for rape victims, or those terrified by a violent neighborhood or abusive parents, or struggling with illness or addiction. The internalization by women of the message, delivered explicitly or implicitly, that they are secondary persons in the divine kingdom, is yet another spiritual assault that is normalized by Christian liturgy and theology. The demonization of the African culture makes Christianity a mixed blessing for many Christians of African descent.⁷ The exodus of gays and lesbians from churches toward suicide or secularism or perhaps Buddhism or social justice work reflects another failure of Christian language to speak to many of Christ’s lovers. For the lost, the afflicted, and the marginalized, liturgical language often reinforces violence done by a larger society.

Christianity exerts an even more subtle violence in the triviality of its teachings. The earth-shattering intensity of the gospel is lost to petty morality. The abysmal mystery of God is abandoned in

favor of reified images of fathers, judges, and kings. This nearly universal violation of the second commandment makes the worship of stone idols look like a paroxysm of theological wisdom by comparison.

Puerile Christian theology is combined with anti-intellectualism that defrauds Christians of their own spiritual inheritance and existential depth. Christianity imposes on believers a stark choice between believing the revealed word and attending to evidences of science, argument, or experience. If one must choose between a stark materialism or the vitality of a religious life it is not surprising many choose the latter. But that the choice exists at all is a demoralizing testimony to the failure of Christianity to articulate the richness of human mind, the multi-valiancy of religious truth, and the difference between acts of cognitive assent and the transformation of the heart. Contemporary Christianity is not doing a good job of countering secularism's one-dimensional pictures of humanity, reason and truth. Anti-intellectualism, ideology, and thoughtlessness fall into the vacuum that is left when Christianity is emptied of its dimension of depth and mystery.

These are serious difficulties and they touch the heart of Christianity as it is lived in this country. It is divisive, sexist, trivial, obsessed with belief and neglectful of the depth of the human heart and the mystery of divine reality. These impose on Christians who are concerned with the common good and the radical love witnessed in the gospel a discouraging task. We see the spiritual, social, and environmental ravages of ideology and unrestrained consumerism but we cannot simply deploy Christianity as a corrective. Christianity must reform egocentric desires and divisive habits of mind that it has helped to generate. We must seek our own healing even as we try to speak a healing word to the world.

Part II

Wisdom is Justified by all Her Children: the Incarnation and the Reformation of Desire

It is perhaps my Calvinist roots that make me such a harsh judge of my own tradition. Notwithstanding my discouragement over the Christian Church, I believe the gospel is a beautiful and powerful in-breaking of divinity into this world. For me, it is necessary to go back to some first principles and reason out this vision of Incarnation anew in order to rediscover ways in which Christianity can speak to a world perennially laboring under the logic and power of empires. When Christ came and went, he did not undo the victories of might. He was less than a footnote in the annals of Rome. But the doctrine of the Incarnation provides us a vision of life that offers a way to live in dark times with courage. It is a vision that has the power to speak to us in our most impossible personal, communal, and global destitution. It is a vision that erodes the antagonism between the individual and the common good not by demanding an austere self-sacrifice but by inviting us into the joyous compassion of the divine life.

The *Via Negativa* and the Reformation of Desire

Jesus is understood to be the Incarnation of the divine. It is therefore crucial to begin with reflection on the nature of divine being. The ungrounded, abyss-like source of the godhead teaches us important things about the Incarnation but also about the nature of desire.

Virtually all theistic traditions include the awareness that all of our ideas, concepts, symbols, even religious traditions themselves are inadequate to express the depth and mystery of divinity. “We cannot know what God is only what God is not,” as Thomas reminds us before specifying the divine attributes.⁸ Marguerite Porete, his near contemporary, echoes this point: “everything one can say or write about God, or think about him, God who is greater than what is ever said, everything is thus more like lying than speaking the truth.”⁹ Our speech is at best loving lies. The first element of the Trinity preserves awareness this ungrounded, nameless source and telos. Negative theologians labor to dissolve the mental constructs which seduce us into thinking that the names of God somehow really attach or that some particular set of names are privileged to bear the identity of the God we worship. Negative theology orients us in the direction of ultimate reality. De-cluttering our minds of images and concepts, we make a little more room for living divinity.

The negative way is one of the most potent medicines available for the reformation of desire. Training mind and heart to rest in this abyss transforms faith from certainty into desire. Desire is the proper attitude toward the divine, not only because the Good is so desirable and draws us with its great beauty and not only because to taste the sweetness of the infinite Good is honey in our mouth. Desire is the proper attitude because the Good Beyond Being has no name, no thought captures it, no emotion represents it. Desire expresses the yearning for what we cannot possess. If we could possess it, it would not be God. This is painful news for the anxious, restless ego. We wish we could have some medicine for the ache of our existence, for certainty against the complications of our world, the dark shadows of doubt, the meaninglessness of suffering, the terror of death. But this wish, however understandable, is alien to faith. Faith, if it is to expose itself to the ungrounded abyss of God-head, must eschew everything that can be possessed, everything that is certain and reliable and fall into the divine nothingness. But what is bad news for the anxious ego is good news for the apophatic heart where the hunger for good is met with infinite Goodness.

The *via negativa* transforms the structure of desire so that its stinging ache for possession and satiation is no longer so existentially insistent. It is not that we love a different object but that desire itself is less structured by the ego’s addiction to pain and pleasure. Training to love the non-dual, non-conceptual Abyss begins to recover the erotic structure of desire; egocentrism begins to forego possession for the deeper satisfactions of longing. The erotic structure of desire forever reaches for what it never possesses. With Anselm, we can pray for the daily increase of love and knowledge but in the meantime, “Let my soul hunger for it; let my flesh thirst for it; let my whole being desire it, until I enter into thy joy, O Lord.”¹⁰

It is not, of course, that the claims of embodied and psychological existence cease to be felt but they are integrated into a deeper and more gracious desire. In this reformation of desire capacities for generosity, compassion, and delight flow more freely. Maintaining the creative tension between naming and negation is not merely an intellectual act or a theological method; it is the essential substance of faith. Learning to love the names of God with detachment allows faith to open toward the abysmal heart of divinity. Remembering that the first “person” of the Trinity is not a father but “unapproachable intensity” and “inexhaustible ground” enables faith first to tolerate and then rejoice in the nothingness of the Divine Eros.¹¹ This erotic joy is directed outside of the ego and provides an antidote to its preoccupations with pain and pleasure. As desire eases the painfulness of egocentrism, isolating pleasures, fear and hostility, ideology and scape-goating begin to lose their attractiveness.

Incarnation and Creation

The Incarnation rests in two moments of divine embodiment. In the beginninglessness of divine reality, the *Ungrund* expresses itself in a second person. Good beyond Being articulates itself as existence. It places itself under the constraints of being so that unfathomable Goodness can become something in particular. First this particularity is simply itself, Goodness manifest as particularity. Christian, Jewish and Greek lovers of the divine use metaphors of mind to name this manifestation of unspeakable Goodness: Wisdom, *Nous*, Logos. Wisdom is the “breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty.” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:25). “The fully achieved engenders: therefore the eternally achieved engenders eternally an eternal being...This greatest, later than the divine unity, must be the Divine Mind.”¹² “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” (John 1:1). A second moment of Incarnation is the embodiment of Wisdom in Jesus of Nazareth. But in the Gospel of John the intermediate point between these two is creation.

Christians tend to dissolve the Word into Jesus without remainder so that the eternal quality of the second person is occluded. When this happens Incarnation is not so much the recognition that in Christ we have to do with the eternal wisdom of divinity. Rather, limitless Goodness collapses into a Palestinian man of the first century. The entire cosmos and the rest of human history and prehistory are denuded of the divine presence. This is a way of conceiving of Christ that not only reflects the tragic curvature of the ego in on itself but transforms it into a sacred duty. But devotion to Christ as the bearer of divinity can also unbind the ego from this cruel confinement. Meditation on Incarnation is a way to reform desire so that it opens to a common good, a common humanity, a common ground with all creation.

The Incarnation hinges in two directions. It hinges backward toward ungrounded divinity. The mind follows it backward to the source, leaving behind the concrete images to which we form such loyal, if unworthy, attachments. It hinges forward toward creation, toward the cosmos: a moving image of the infinite Good, as vast as the creative power of the Trinity. In the idea of a second person of the Trinity Christianity has an enormously powerful device for reconstructing desire and yet, oddly, it rarely takes advantage of it. “And without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of humanity.” (John 1:3-4) This is not egocentrism writ large. It invites us to contemplate the vastness of creation as the garment of the Good: seen and unseen, shooting stars, galaxies beyond count, tiny earthworms, bizarre creatures living their own lives at the bottom of the ocean. The almost inconceivably tiny existence of humanity is circumscribed by this wild, useless beauty. Even compared to the pre-history of humanity, the culture in which Christianity arose is almost unthinkably small; compared to life on the earth all of humanity is hardly a sneeze. The earth itself is little more than a may-fly dancing for an instant on an endless expanse of time and space. We seem to ourselves to be the whole of creation. Our worries and joys make up our whole world. We extend the importance of our lives to include the larger institutions in which we find ourselves: our nation and neighborhood, our religion or at least the party with which we agree at church. Augustine and Calvin are among those who derided this confusion of our ego with reality itself as pride. But for all the destructiveness of egocentrism, it seems less a colossal sin than the natural effect of being embodied, psychologically

fragile little scraps of existence in an often terrifying and not automatically meaningful world. The Incarnation does not so much condemn the in-turned ego as free it.

Holy Wisdom “reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and she orders all things well” (Wisdom of Solomon 8:1). Meditating on Wisdom, we recognize that creation is so unutterably vast that we shrink to insignificance. But we are not insignificant. Like everything else from exploding galaxies to quivering electrons, we are part of the glorious generosity of the Good, expressed through the Wisdom Word as creation. Meditation on Wisdom reorients desire, reigniting its erotic structure. Self-centered awareness is natural: all sentient beings seek to secure their own welfare and avoid harm. This instinct inherent in sentience need not be despised but we might recognize that it presupposes the illusion of egocentrism and causes suffering. Drawing our attention to creation places us in a larger context. But as religious people we see this larger context as the effect of Wisdom manifesting the eternal Good. We lose our place as the center but discover ourselves to be an integral part of a beloved cosmos. Like Julian of Norwich we can spread our minds to the vastness of creation and yet see it as a mere nothing, smaller than a hazelnut. “I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothingness.” But she also sees that “It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.”¹³

Wisdom stretches our minds to see the smallness of what we have clutched so tightly and the fragility and nothingness of the entire cosmos. And yet, Wisdom shows us that smallness and fragility are sustained by the nearness of divine power and love. Desire opens onto a vastness that nothing could possess (not even Cecil Rhodes who would possess the stars if he could). It stretches desire so far its impulse toward possession breaks open onto an eros for the non-possessable beauty of creation. And desire learns also to desire and cherish this cosmos as a mere nothing, too fragile to remain in existence. Consider the lilies of the field. God clothes them more gorgeously than Solomon in all his glory, though they are alive today and are thrown in the oven tomorrow: such beauty yet so useless, so temporary. We learn to love it according to its true nature: precious and fleeting. But we also learn to love ourselves according to our nature: precious and fleeting. We are not bottomless pits of need but beautiful and precious beings woven into the great tapestry of creation. Our good cannot be separated from the good of the whole any more than “I” can be warm if my feet are cold.

This reformation of desire has obvious implications for our current crises. It is not only enlightened self-interest that might drive us to moral action with respect to the economy or the environment. We have come to feel the presence of the divine in every molecule of creation. It is not only that we have obligations to other things because God created them. We participate in one another. The wounding of the world is in some mysterious sense a wounding of Wisdom. This does not mean that the world is in a literal sense God’s body. It means that the divine presence and power is woven into creation and if we despise creation or think of it as a utility or resource only for ourselves we despise God. Indifference to the land and water, to the wind and to living creatures is its own kind of atheism. It rejects divinity as, in some mysterious sense, the source and ground of creation. Despising creation is a much more complete rejection of God than is the idea of evolution. Who knows in any specific way how divine power unfolds into cosmos? This is not information available to human beings. Evolution is a possible model for the luring of creation toward beauty and complexity. From a religious point of view it does not really matter whether the earth is four thousand years old or ten billion. It matters that we weave our consciousness of cosmos into our consciousness of God. Refusing to see the radiance of

divine creativity in cosmos and to treat creation as something precious betrays the first sentences of John's gospel and of the Bible itself. The reformation of desire, by contrast, awakens us to the useless beauty of creation. Individual desire need not be repressed. It is resuscitated. It wakes up to the nourishing beauty woven into the world.

Wisdom and Human Solidarity

If we think of Wisdom as the creative ground of all things it is natural to think of not only the world and the cosmos but humanity itself as an object of divine creativity and providence. It is a common habit within Christianity to think that God cares only for Christians, or at least Christians like us. But if nothing was made without Wisdom all humans and the cultures that sustain them are reflections of divine exuberance. Wisdom refracts throughout creation, using every human language and every religious tradition to speak the infinite Goodness of the divine nature. When we encounter other people and other traditions we are encountering another face of divine Wisdom. How could infinite Goodness speak in only one language? How could eternally self-manifesting Good constrain itself within a single symbolic order? How could ungrounded Love confine itself to a single historical strand? I have envied musicians who enjoy a kind of magical pass-card to move around from place to place, finding in other musicians the common bond of music.¹⁴ Devotees of Wisdom might be like musicians, recognizing in other lovers a similar devotion expressed in different melodies and tones. Musicians seem delighted to extend their music by listening to others. Lovers of Christ would seem to be more rather than less devoted when they recognize Wisdom clothed in novel forms.

Christ is like a prism which refracts the invisible light of Wisdom into visible form. We Christians love the visible form available to us through the Incarnation of Wisdom in Jesus of Nazareth. But I do not believe that we are to be attached to this visible form as if it exhausted the divine reality. Rather, we might use the visible form to look backward toward the divinity that is manifest in it. We look forward at creation and see it back-lit by the divine presence. This movement from visibility to invisibility and back again is another sense or method for retraining desire. If we think of our faith in the divinity of Christ as salvation, as a healing of what alienates us from divinity and from one another, we find in our faith an increased power to recognize Wisdom in Her many forms. The awareness that the infinity of the Good requires a great plurality of concrete forms alerts us to the intrinsic good of plurality. We might say, for example, that beauty is a name of God. Beauty expresses the delightful quality of the Good in aesthetic forms: the stirring grandeur of nature, the harmony of music, the vitality of dance, the special loveliness of a beautiful soul. But it would be wrong to so identify beauty with the Good that justice, for example, were excluded. Justice is quite different from beauty but it is a name of God because the desire to provide an environment in which every being is able to express its own good in relation to the good of others is also a fragment of the Good. That is, plurality is essential to the expression of divine goodness in concrete form.

The various forms of good are splinters of the infinity of Good. We human beings seek symbols and practices to orient ourselves to this Good. Christianity itself is splintered into pluralities that, at their best, capture different aspects or dimensions of Christian wisdom: contemplative luminosity, a striving for social justice, the centrality of scripture, the importance of community, the preservation of individual conscience, the need for reform, the need for continuity, and so on. What is true about the plurality of Christian wisdom is true about religious wisdom more generally. The different religions of the world

capture different aspects of Wisdom that do not reduce to one another but neither can any single expression capture the entirety of Wisdom – any more than Beauty can displace the importance of Justice. Devotion to the Incarnation of Wisdom is a kind of pass-card which allows Christians to recognize and enjoy the various expressions of Wisdom. This retraining of desire so that it is able to enjoy plurality becomes the basis for recognizing the common ground we share with all humanity. We are all held together by the intoxicating generosity of the Good, manifest in Wisdom, concrete in the great variety of human wisdoms. Plurality is the ground of our common humanity. We are connected not by sameness but by the Good that is the source of our good and every good.

Because Wisdom is the source of our commonality, Christians are immediately connected to all human beings. Concern about suffering of all others is not a moral obligation. Morality stands in when our experiential awareness of connection remains mutilated. But faith is the healing of this mutilation so that the reality of connection becomes more spontaneously obvious. All religions have some way of expressing the way religion overcomes the illusion of separation. In Buddhism there is a metaphor of a burning hand – when your hand is in the fire, you pull it out not because you have an ethical obligation but because it hurts unbearably. The bodhisattva recognizes that the burning hand is always mine: the suffering of another provokes an immediate, heart-felt desire to alleviate it. As the Dalai Lama says, compassion is the unbearable quality of another's suffering; *karuna* or great compassion is the unbearable quality of the suffering of every being. A Christian version of this awareness is in the famous parable of Matthew 25. It is Christ himself that suffers in every poor, sick, naked, imprisoned person. We are in hell as long as we are unable to recognize Christ in the faces of those around us. Heaven is precisely this heart-felt urge to console every suffering person as if it were Christ himself.

Here, too, there are obvious concrete effects of this retraining of desire as Christians face political and social decisions. If we recognize every person as Christ, if the source of our connection is not tolerance or pity but Wisdom Herself, if we become aware of the suffering of every being as in a sense our own suffering, it is impossible not to wish for social mechanisms that alleviate suffering wherever possible. Inhumane working conditions, socially generated poverty, the anguish of refugees would become intolerable to Christians. Withholding health care from sick or injured people would be like withholding care from one's own child – excruciating and impossible. Global economies are too complex for decisive understanding. There is no simple line between universal compassion and particular political policies. But awareness that there is no separation anywhere gives energy and direction to our engagement with these issues.

Part III

“Working on a Building, a Holy Ghost Building”

The question before us is what Christianity might contribute to human flourishing when market-generated desires and individualistic values seem oblivious to the global catastrophes that have already begun. I have suggested that Christianity is a substantial part of the problem. It's individualistic, other-worldly, divisive, and belief oriented understanding of salvation makes it at best irrelevant. The voting majority of Christians seem to think the idea of common good is an offensive and dangerous expression of socialism. The “new atheism” expresses a legitimate horror at the harmful and irrational tendencies

of Christianity. But it is hardly equipped to provide the spiritual formation, the radical compassion, or the eros for ultimate and penultimate truth for which the heart aches.

That religion and in particular Christianity should fail to speak a good word in our great need is heart-breaking but also predictable. Under the conditions of finitude everything is distorted and corrupted, lacking the ability to realize its inner greatness. The wisdom of Christianity will remain ever ambiguous and fragmentary, when it does not careen more directly in the direction of the demonic.¹⁵ But as theologians and people of faith it remains our joy and our duty to imagine the best of our faith and to attempt to integrate it into our understanding of our cultural moment. I have tried to suggest that Christianity has enormous theological resources for transformation of individuals and communities. In this last section I would like to think more directly about Christianity and desire at this moment in our history.

The transition to a consumer culture has transformed cultural space into a vast and ingenious mechanism for titillating desire. It intensifies the great illusion against which Plato, Buddha, Boethius and every great sage cautions. The material world cannot satisfy a spiritual hunger. Consumer culture not only generates desires but teaches us that consumption is the path to happiness and the future is as innocuous as the next down-load.¹⁶ The identity of a 13 year old girl is expressed by the kind of sneaker she wears, the tightness of her jeans. We are what we buy. This rate of consumption cannot be sustained by the planet and we are headed toward disaster. But because awareness of disaster would interrupt the wealth produced by the flow of goods, the media does little to alert us of this and politicians are unable to speak truthfully or prophetically about our actual situation.

Christianity has not provided a great deal of guidance in helping us understand the dynamics of desire. Christians are largely silent about consumer culture and in fact are for the most part full-on supporters of global capitalism. When it does take up the question of desire it redirects our attention from burning social issues toward private, patriarchal morality. In the face of the tragedies of teen pregnancy, the anguish of bearing more children than a woman's bank account and body can support, and HIV/AIDS Christians make the astonishingly unrealistic demand that people abstain from sex. This makes Christians seem alienated from basic truths of human nature. But this approach to desire is not only naïve, it is death-dealing. Many more children and women die because of lack of birth control or health care than because of abortions and yet Christians are not only indifferent to these deaths, they energetically demand policies that perpetuate them.

Christianity is failing us in our deep need is because it is as likely to speak lies as truth about desire. In looking for practices that might assist us in reforming desire, we might begin by looking outside of Christianity. Many contemporary Christian or post-Christian women are forging new forms of spirituality, not unlike the beguines of the 13th century. In small groups in or outside churches, women meditate, do yoga, camp, walk, and engage artistic practices. Others are finding resources for political engagement and personal renewal in environmental causes or in nature spirituality. Their impulse to justice and the common good is fed by practices that the church ignores or rejects. My colleague Noel Erskine's work on the Jamaican Rastas underscores the alienation people can feel from Christianity. Rastas perceive the church and even Jesus as "in bed" with a government that holds people in poverty and brutalizes them with police violence. By contrast, music touches and inspires the poor in a way that "no other medium, including Christianity, ever did."¹⁷ Dharma centers welcome gays and lesbians, disheartened women, the traumatized, the alienated, the spiritually mal-nourished. Shelly Rambo notes

the inability of Christian theologians to speak about trauma in general and the trauma of veterans in particular. Theories and practices that speak to these maimed psyches come primarily from secular sources.¹⁸ We can be disdainful of women's spirituality, of eco-retreats, reggae music, the triumph of the therapeutic, and the attractiveness of Buddhism. But they testify to creative ways people reconnect to the natural world and to their own bodies. They alert us to Christianity's inadequacies in the face of afflictive suffering, contemplative desire, and the generation of universal compassion.

If Christianity is going to be more successful in countering the distortions of consumer desire it will be because it reaches deeply enough into the human heart to reform desire at its core. Only desire casts out desire, as Augustine observed. I don't mean a moralistic desire for God that rejects the world. I mean that Christianity must find ways to break open the terrified and numbed heart and reconnect it to the ungrounded beauty and goodness of the Good Beyond Being if it is to be relevant. When desire is reformed so that it delights in the plurality of Wisdom's creative power and enjoys the uncertainty of a faith suspended twenty thousand leagues over the deep, connection to a common good becomes intuitively obvious. Grounding desire in the groundless Divine Eros provides resource to open the heart ever more widely in sympathy and compassion for the suffering and imperiled world. Any number of concrete practices might be integrated into Christianity, including any of those mentioned in the previous paragraph. But I would like to conclude by proposing three dimensions of faith that might promote such a reformation: eros for truth, for compassion, and for joy.

By truth I am not referring to the trivialized model which Christianity has taken over from science: correct sentences, presumed to be inspired by a literal-minded Holy Spirit. That religion has handed over the content and structure of truth to science is an unspeakable impoverishment of the human spirit. Extra-scientifically, truth refers to the multi-dimensional openness of mind to reality. At the deepest level, this means a desire for the apophatic depths where our being and divine being are "oned." The desire for truth in this sense is an ability to tolerate the fact that divine being is different from created being and we are aware of this reality in a different way than we know things in the world. Prayer, especially contemplative prayer, is a useful practice for training desire to desire what it cannot possess. But other practices can also be useful. Art and music are ways in which mind opens onto the non-discursive dimensions of faith. They are concrete and yet they take awareness beyond conceptual understanding. Emphasizing the importance of art and music for faith enriches it beyond the obsession with cognitive contents of belief. Allowing the beauty of the earth to become a Christian spiritual practice has positive environmental consequences but it also opens mind toward reality in ways we had forgotten. Practices like this are not merely purgative, that is, clearing out attachment to unworthy concepts of God. By encouraging non-discursive modes of awareness, the non-conceptual depth of divinity may become more of a living reality for faith. They school the mind in aesthetic aspects of reality and remind us of the non-utilitarian quality of beauty. The soul nourished on beauty may find courage to defend it as well. Faith that rests on the deep may find the painfulness of our time less paralyzing.

An eros for truth is a kind of courage. If "truthiness" is a commitment to ideas because we wish them to be true, an eros for truth is the courage to accept reality as it comes. Simple facts like global warming and metaphysical reality like the gap between our thoughts and divine reality can be difficult to bear. We wish it were otherwise. But as a Christian practice, the desire for truth presses us to accept difficult truths with courage and compassion. It should be a Christian practice, that is, something we do as Christians, to find out the facts about environmental deterioration. It should have been a Christian

practice to care whether there were in fact weapons of mass destruction in Iraq or not. It should be a Christian practice to discover the appalling statistics that reveal the high incidence of incarceration and execution of innocent black men. Loving truth more than ideology and caring enough to find out what is really going on in our world is a spiritual practice that should be a core religious discipline.

Because the deep root of Christian faith is “fellow feeling” with Christ or a heart connection to the ultimate reality we call God, the eros for truth is provided with the courage required. To the extent we are grounded and rooted in the stability of divine Goodness, the sorrowful and frightening truths of our current situation are more bearable. They are bearable not because they are trivial or because we believe everything will end up ok because God is in charge. They are bearable because even the most horrifying truths are held in the deep womb of divine Goodness and neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:37-39). The ability to accept this consolation in lieu of confidence that history will right itself is the courageous dwelling in ultimate and penultimate dimensions of truth.

Radical compassion is a second practice through which desire is reformed. The narratives, parables, and sayings of Jesus indicate that he was blind to the social divisions that are so obvious to everyone else but saw with great clarity the luminous beauty of each person. The farewell discourse in John identifies love as the power of Incarnation. It is what unites Jesus to the first person of the Trinity. It is what unites the disciples to one another and to divinity. According to the Johanne epistles, it *is* divinity.

The author of the *Didache* was wise enough to know that the radical compassion commanded in the early teaching tradition of Jesus requires a significant expansion of our normal capacities. Christians are apprentices, training in the “way of life.” The author proposes concrete methods for retraining desire so that the anger, fear, and selfishness that inspire ungenerous actions are gradually neutralized. Practices include praying and fasting for enemies, turning the other cheek, giving to those who ask for something.¹⁹ These are not merely moral guidelines but visualizations that work with the imagination so that the possibility of responding with compassion to someone who is frightening or enraging becomes more realistic.

The insight of the *Didache* that compassion can be deepened by technique is echoed in recent research on compassion meditation.²⁰ Research being done at Emory University and elsewhere indicates that meditation intensifies responses of compassion. Using compassion meditation in a group home for foster children made possible reconciliation among estranged family members as well as reduced symptoms of stress and trauma. Christians do not think of love and compassion as things that can be practiced. When they are interpreted as external commands, and impossible ones at that, a paralyzing gap remains between the radical love to which we are called and the habits of fear, hostility, and indifference. Perhaps the insistence that we are saved by belief alone reflects despair that Christianity is a religion that could be practiced. But meditation, visualization, mindfulness practices are ways in which we can enhance our capacities for love and compassion. These practices eschew repression in favor of restructuring the mind. These are practices that reorient desire so that one genuinely wishes for the good of other people, even those one might have found disgusting or infuriating. As this wish becomes stronger, it is natural to put in practice compassionate actions and relationships.

A last practice to mention is joy. I do not remember hearing a great deal about joy in the Presbyterian churches in which I was raised. But on the night of his arrest, Jesus talked to his followers about joy. After identifying love as the means of mutual presence between humanity and divinity, he adds: "these things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:11). Jesus was talking about the practice of joy as soldiers gathered to arrest and execute him. Joy is a counter-cultural practice of a kingdom always within and among us, if never realized in history. Joy defangs the meretricious promises of a consumer culture. When we carry joy with us we turn less often to consumption to sooth our troubled souls. Joy is deeply, radically interpersonal. It is like perfume that wafts off a person, to the delight of those around her. Joy abolishes the contrast between individual desire and common good. It is not separate from compassion; it is the spontaneous joyousness of relation. Even if someone we love is suffering there is a joy beneath our sympathy in the very fact of our love and connection. It feels better to connect to one another than to remain in isolation. The threads that connect us are threads of joy, even in this difficult world where there is so much pain.

I believe there are within Christianity deep resources for truth, for radical compassion, and for joy and that these are crucial antidotes to the distortions of desire and the dangerous individualism of our current culture. But my thoughts turn often to Jeremiah who was a kind of Israelite Cassandra. He was cursed to speak the truth but not be believed. He lived to see everything destroyed. His city sacked, pillaged, ravaged. City leaders were dragged away, the king blinded and led like chattel after watching his sons butchered. The temple, which was the source and center of religious life, was reduced to rubble. It seemed as if nothing was left of the promise of election, promises to Abraham and Sarah of unwavering fidelity and to David of a kingdom that would last forever. I am always amazed that from this seemingly total destruction new forms of faithfulness and worship sprung up. A similar catastrophe struck the Jewish people at the end of the wars with Rome when they were again brutalized, executed, enslaved, exiled, a tear-drenched wailing wall the only reminder of their magnificent temple. And yet the finality of this end was belied by the genius of rabbinic Judaism which survived and continued to witness to the sweetness of God in the midst of history, in the midst of persecution. These stories of seemingly total destruction seem like good ones to remember now. We may be coming to a time, if we are not there already, when the fig trees fail to blossom and when there will be no fruit on the vine. Will we be able to say, like Habakkuk: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation, my strength, who makes my feet like hind's feet and sets me on high places? We are apprentices of holy desire. May we witness to the joyousness of this desire as we engage our social and political problems with whatever wisdom we are afforded.

¹ A Gallup Poll dated November 16, 2010 found that 92% of weekly church goers believed in hell and thus some version of this narrative.

² Schleiermacher rejects the idea of hell in part because the universal love and sympathy that accompanies perfected God-consciousness would find it intolerable. (*Christian Faith*, Section 163 Appendix). Tillich takes up the question of theodicy and predestination in relation to “the point at which the destiny of others becomes our own destiny. And this point is not hard to find. It is the participation of their being in our being.” (*Systematic Theology* Volume 1, p 270). He extends this sense of interrelatedness to include the world itself. “Does the ‘world’ refer to the human race alone? Is it possible to separate the nature which belongs to him through his body from universal nature?” (*Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, p. 261).

³ This was conversation occurred between my nephew and a school mate in the aftermath of the rash of suicides of gay teenagers.

⁴ Athanasius at one point explained that he did not have theological reservations about Trinitarian formulations that included a broad consensus but he opposed them because they did not exclude his opponents. The mere fact that those he deemed his enemies could accept it made it unacceptable. Gaddis, *There is No Crime For Those Who Have Christ*, 60-61. I discuss this theology of division in the first chapter of my forthcoming book: *Gathering Those Driven Away: a Theology of Incarnation from the Margins*.

⁵ Gary Laderman, “Hate, an American Vote Value,” *Religion Dispatches*, October 31, 2010.

http://www.religiondispatches.org/..archive/atheologies/3650/hate%2C_an_american_voter_value

⁶ Mark Lewis Taylor’s *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* is a disturbing reflection on this phenomenon. The film, *Dhamma Brothers*, describes the prison chaplain’s effectiveness in shutting down meditation training that had proved efficacious in working with prisoners sentenced to life without parole.

⁷ The difficulties of this anti-African bias in Christianity is thematized in Noel Erskine’s work *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* and Dianne Stewarts work, *Three Eyes for the Journey*.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 3.

⁹ Marguerite Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, Chapter 119.

¹⁰ Anselm, *Proslogium*, Chapter XXVI.

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p 250.

¹² Plotinus, *Fifth Ennead*, I.vi.

¹³ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Chapter 5, p. 183.

¹⁴ Don Saliers evokes this sense of community in the book he wrote with his daughter, Emily, *A Song To Sing a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*.

¹⁵ I have been reading Tillich and find his language creeping into my own!

¹⁶ Any number of resources underscore these points in much more detail, including Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion*, Neil Post.... *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and the film *Advertising and the End of the World*.

¹⁷ Noel Erskine, “Bible and Reggae: Liberation or Subjugation,” 13, an (at this time) unpublished paper. A longer exploration of these themes occurs in *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology*.

¹⁸ Parts of this argument are present in Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: a Theology of Remaining*.

¹⁹ The *Didache*, 1:4-5.

²⁰ <http://www.tibet.emory.edu/research/>;

<http://shared.web.emory.edu/whsc/news/releases/2008/10/compassion-meditation-and-stress.html>. Stanford and the University of Wisconsin are among other universities engaging in this kind of research.