

Faith in America Get ready for

By Oliver Thomas

The tricky thing about present trends is that they never continue. Things change — law, politics, medicine, transportation, all of it. Even religions must change. As soon as a religion fails to meet human needs — or even to connect with its audience — it begins to die. History is strewn with the wreckage of once vibrant faiths that became irrelevant.

So what of today's religious landscape? And what of America's dominant faiths? Seismic shifts are already underway that will affect the future of faith in general and of Christianity in particular. The number of nonbelievers, for example, is upwards of 15% in the USA. In Europe, they are the majority. And, here at home, Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have both outgrown their mainline Protestant counterparts.

So what does the future of faith look like? And can parsing the past help us divine the future?

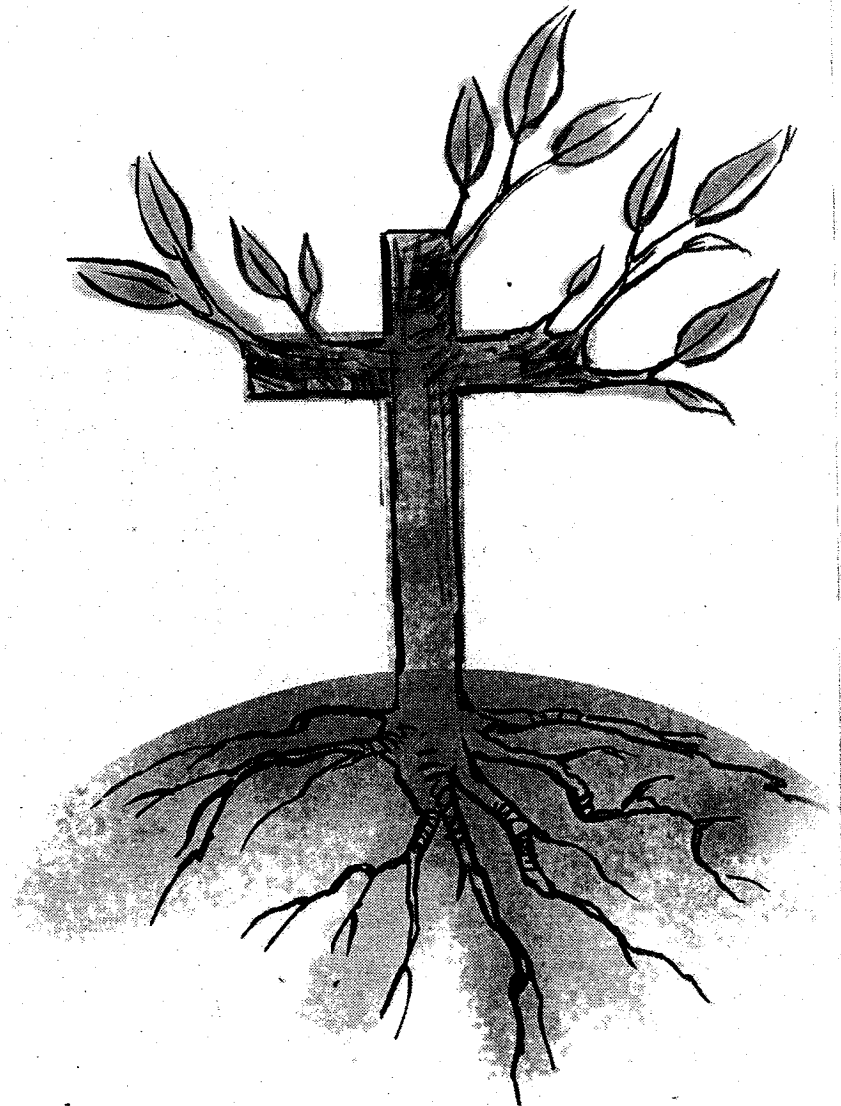
We have a trove of biblical scholarship that was not available just a generation ago to provide insights into the earliest iterations of Christianity, which in turn might help us discern what lies ahead.

A changing landscape

The insights offered here are not mine alone. I am especially indebted to Harvard's Harvey Cox whose book — *The Future of Faith* — is recommended reading to anyone wishing to plumb this subject in more depth. But like it or not, the religious landscape is changing. Those wishing to have a place in that landscape will need to pay attention.

For starters, it appears that faith is becoming less *creedal*. A hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians still preferred spoken remembrances to the cache of writings that would become our New Testament. Think of your own family reunions here. Do you prefer *reading* about your ancestors or speaking directly with those elder friends and family members who actually knew — or could recall stories about — your great-grandfather?

Early Christianity was spiritually fluid, with an emphasis on prayer, worship and acts of charity. It would take several hundred years for this vibrant spirituality — for which thousands



By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

were willing to die — to calcify into the mere assent to a prescribed set of beliefs known as “orthodoxy.” This stodgy elevation of doctrine over ethics has carried the day for centuries, but, alas, its days could be numbered. Exhibit A is the burgeoning number of Americans claiming to be “spiritual but not religious.”

Young adults appear largely uninterested in our denominational joustings over “correct” doctrine. They seek opportunities to worship, serve and become part of a nurturing community that cares deeply for one another. Their God is a big God who is unbound by Scripture or learned scholarly limita-

tions. Instead, they see Scripture for what it is: the witness of fallible humans to God's acts in history.

It will be interesting to see whether a new generation of church leaders can begin speaking about their faith in a way that will appeal to modern audiences. Or will they stubbornly cling to ancient metaphors that were created to reach an audience that no longer exists. The apostles used images of slavery (redemption) and blood sacrifice (atonement) in describing the Christian revelation because the ancients believed that is what God required.

Such common New Testament imagery as “washed in the blood,” for ex-

in America: y for change



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What's the future of religion in the USA? One in which churches are less rigid, creedal and hierarchical. In this evolution, Christianity might just return to its roots.

ample, might have been borrowed from other religions in the Mediterranean world, including the cult of Mithras, in which devotees were literally drenched in the blood of a bull.

Today's congregations are already showing a willingness to worship at different times and places as well as in different ways. Electric guitars, drums and keyboards have replaced pipe organs in many of today's churches. I see no reason why churches can't also change the theological metaphors they employ to convey their ancient truths.

Believing vs. belonging

As a practical matter, clergy are seeing less emphasis on believing and more emphasis on belonging.

As John Ross, the dean of the St. Johns Cathedral in Knoxville puts it, "While the world may still be round to the church, young people know it is flat. They are interested in other religions and cultural expressions of faith and service. They are also interested in what works and are not worried so much about what is religiously proper or acceptable."

Not only will faith be less creedal, it will also be less *hierarchical*.

"Apostolic succession" — the belief that church leaders derive authority via direct succession from Jesus, Peter and the apostles themselves — is largely fiction, according to professor Cox. In fact, there were no professional clergy in the early church. Even the great Apostle Paul was a tent-maker. Women were also in positions of leadership. The Acts of the Apostles refers to four sisters who were evangelists, and at least one woman (Junia) was an apostle. Paul refers to her in the last chapter

of his letter to the church at Rome.

Ross says many of his parishioners don't even know why we have bishops: "Young people attach themselves directly to whatever they attach themselves to and don't need much in the way of intermediaries. Give them the pitch for a hierarchical clergy, and they roll their eyes like teenagers being driven on a date by their parents. They want to experience God for themselves."

Finally, faith is likely to become more countercultural. That is to say it will be less cozy with society's poo-bahs and more willing to criticize government than curry its favor or largesse.

Perhaps not coincidentally, such populist religion appears more in sync with the democratic political winds that are gusting across the planet.

For the first time in history, more Christians can be found in the southern, rather than northern, hemisphere. European and North American religion — with its long-standing deference to professional clergy and adherence to detailed doctrines and be-

liefs — is being eclipsed by a brand of Christianity that is loosey-goosey. It is lay-led, spirit-filled and more democratic in orientation.

Most interesting of all is the fact that what is happening to Christianity might be taking it back to its historic and theological roots. Perhaps the problem with the "old-time religion" was simply that it wasn't old enough.

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On Religion

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