

RELIGION

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In Search of Humanity

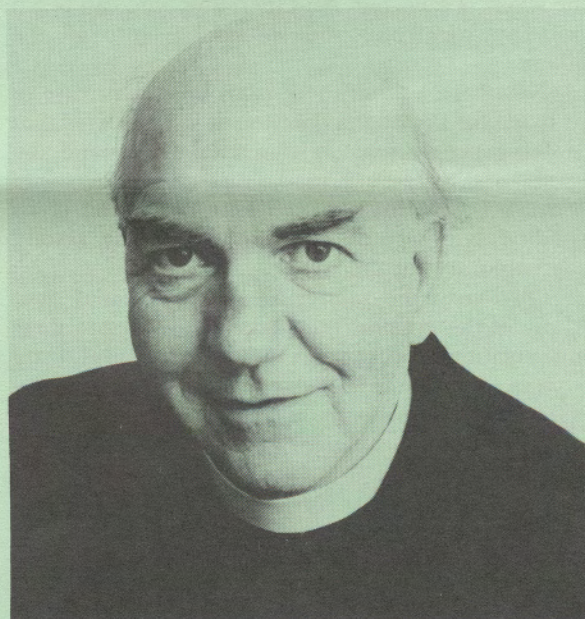
By

John Macquarrie

John Macquarrie, Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, England, delivered the 1984 KSR lecture at the University of Kansas. His lecture was based on his latest book, In Search of Humanity, and is reported here for our readers by Sandra Wiechert.

A leading theologian of our time, Professor Macquarrie was born in Scotland and earned four degrees from Glasgow University as well as the D.D. from Oxford. He is the author of numerous books, including God-Talk, Faith of the People of God, and Humility of God. Later in 1984 he expects the publication of another book, In Search of Diety.

Sandra S. Wiechert is a Wichita native with degrees in education and history from Kansas State University. She is a Vestry member and lay reader at Trinity Episcopal Church, Lawrence. She serves on the board of Episcopal Churchwomen, Diocese of Kansas, and regularly contributes articles to the diocesan newspaper, The Kansas Churchman.



The topic, as we've heard, is "In Search of Humanity" and that actually was suggested by Dr. Lynn Taylor because it's the title of a book I published 18 months ago. You may say, "Why this particular topic?" Obviously in the first instance it's something of tremendous interest in itself. We all want to discover more of what it means to be a human being. Likewise it is an important part of theology because theology is not just a doctrine about God. It's very much a doctrine about the human race, and in fact I'll spend most of my time arguing for the importance of an understanding of the human being, for an understanding of theology.

However, to ask about the human being or human nature is one of the most difficult questions

you could entertain. There is an ambiguity in the word "human" itself. That ambiguity was well brought out in an expression which I heard frequently on the lips of a colleague who used to say that the "business of ethics is making and keeping human life human."

Now at first sight that expression, "making and keeping human life human" might seem like an empty form of words. But it does make sense because obviously the word "human" has two distinct senses in that very phrase. On the first occasion of its use, the word "human" is descriptive. Human life is the life of all those who are biologically classifiable as members of the species, *homo sapiens*. But then on the second occasion, the word "human" has taken on a different sense. Now

it's not merely descriptive; it's evaluative. It means something like truly human, authentically human, fully human. So when you say "making and keeping human life human," you are saying that this life, which we descriptively call human, has got to be made and kept human in the full sense of that word. I think that is important from what it says about the study of the human being, that it cannot be merely an empirical study. It can't be simply psychology which describes human life as it is, but is also here some ideal of what human life ought to be, and therefore it's more like a philosophical anthropology.

Now, coming to the relation between that and theology, one must notice that theology is a whole organism of doctrines, which doesn't consist of a number of separate truths. There is really one single truth which constitutes theology, although our minds of necessity have to break up this truth into separate propositions. It then follows that within theology it ought to be possible to take any doctrine as a starting point—to use that as a unifying perspective from which to move out into the whole field of theological doctrine. If the whole has the organic character which I've suggested it has, then each item belonging to it is like a mirror in which the whole is reflected. And therefore, you can begin from any doctrine, and spread out into all the others.

Now here I think there is an important case to be made for taking the doctrine of humanity as that unifying perspective on which to understand the whole of theology. I make this claim, not only because I have myself been long convinced of its validity, but because we can also see it among contemporary theologians.

Obviously the matter is a controversial one. Many of the greatest theologians have begun their investigations not from the human end, but directly from a doctrine of God. Since theology is, by etymology, discourse about God, then it might seem that these older theologians were correct in this: that if you don't begin from the doctrine of God and from an exploration of our human nature, then you will end up not with a theology, but with a humanism, perhaps tricked out with some Christian terminology but never really finding its way into a genuine theology.

So we find St. Thomas in his classic statement of Christian theology beginning with God and seeking to prove first the existence of God and then to say something about our knowledge of him, God's will and providence, his triunity and so, before he turns to the created order, including the human race. Likewise the most systematic theologian of the Reformation, John Calvin, begins his exposition by acknowledging this close connection between the knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. "Our wisdom . . . consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other." But he continues that a

correct method requires us to begin with knowledge of God, and only in the light of that can we attain a true self-knowledge.

To these classic exponents of Christianity, St. Thomas and Calvin, we may add the greatest Protestant theologian of the present century, Karl Barth. His *Church Dogmatics* began with "The Doctrine of the Word of God" and he is uncompromising in denying there is any way by which the human mind could rise from its finite and sinful condition to any genuine theological insight. Natural theology he dismissed as an arrogant attempt to turn God into an object at our disposal; religion he described as man's attempt to grasp God. He declared there to be no analogy of being, no *analogia entis* between humanity and deity, and Barth believes that this doctrine of *analogia entis* is little short of blasphemous. So one must say that the weight of opinion among the great theologians does not favour that way into theology which stops off in search of humanity.

There was a time when "God" was a word of everyday use. God's commands were thought to determine what was right, and wrong; God's providence was to govern the world's happenings which were then interpreted as evidences of divine favour, or divine disapproval. Prayer to God was the natural response. But God-talk has virtually disappeared, together with the underlying beliefs.

Yet even if the classical approach considered it right to place the doctrine of God at the forefront of theology, it does not follow that this approach remains valid for all time, or that circumstances might not arise when it becomes simply inappropriate. I believe that such circumstances have now arrested us. For the first time in history, we in the 20th century find ourselves living in the age of the godless man. I do not mean we live in the midst of explicit atheism, though there is a good deal of professed atheism, and atheism is the officially supported creed of some powerful countries. I refer to implicit atheism, the fact that the concept of God has faded in large measure from the modern consciousness. There was a time when "God" was a word of everyday use. God's commands were thought to determine what was right, and wrong; God's providence was to govern the world's happenings which were then interpreted as evidences of divine favour, or divine disapproval. Prayer to God was the natural response. But God-talk has virtually disappeared, together with the underlying beliefs. Not only physics, chemistry, and astronomy, but

ethics, history, and human behaviour are discussed, investigated, and "explained" without reference to God. The word "God" seems to have become superfluous. Even those professing to believe in God find it difficult to say what they mean by the word. If there is a God, we do not find him where people once thought they found him. For a long time, God has been retreating into hiddenness; we are now uncertain where to look. We get through the day very well without any thought of, or appeal to, God. There need not be a deliberate denial of God, but for a great many people he has ceased to be a reality.

The Roman Catholic theologian, Dr. Karl Rahner, has familiarized us with the "anonymous Christian," the person who intellectually professes disbelief but who existentially is committed to Christian values and the idea of God. Perhaps we should allow for the "anonymous atheist," the person who does not deny God and may even persist in outward religious observances, but for whom religion has gone dead and God has become an indistinct blur.

If theology aims at expounding Christian faith in a clear, intelligible way, it must take account of the mentality of those whom it addresses. Theology's theme is, and must remain, God (for a theology in which "God is dead" is a mere contradiction). In our godless time, one cannot put the doctrine of God at the beginning, rather the approach must be indirect, or the result will be misapprehension and incomprehension. The mood of godlessness has moved within the Church: God is a problem to the believer as well as to the unbeliever. The distinctions between dogmatic theology, the traditional order that begins from God, and apologetic theology, a theology addressed to the world, have largely disappeared, letting the great Christian doctrines be clearly seen in their own light.

When the Enlightenment was eroding the supernatural revelation idea and questioning the God of natural religion, the anthropological approach to theology first found powerful expression in the work of Schleiermacher. "Dogmas are . . . transcripts of human experience, having only an indirect reference to God." The new direction in his teaching is clear in his treatment of christology. He eliminated or radically reinterpreted the traditional language of descent, of God coming down and becoming man in Jesus Christ. The heart of the new christology is that Christ is the completion of the creation of humanity. The danger that Schleiermacher's man centered approach might make Christianity a purely subjective affair was underscored two or three decades later when Feuerbach argued that God was nothing but a projection of human consciousness, an idealized human nature with an independent existence. Feuerbach's view was taken up by Barth who argued that any attempt to move from the human side to an understanding of the divine cannot arrive at any genuine knowledge of

God but will put in God's place the idolatrous projections of the human mind itself. That is a dangerous game to play! Why should Barth's own thought of God be an exception? He, like all theologians, thought that his idea of God came from God himself. Projectionists would reply that this supposedly revealed God is, just like the others, a fabrication of the human mind, and that Barth's objectivity is an illusion.

Barth, following Calvin, has another reason for believing any move from the manward side of God can lead only to an idol, or false God: Barth's understanding of sin. Even allowing that the being and nature of God might be discernible, it would be impossible for us to perceive this, Barth claimed, because our understanding is blinded and distorted by sin. Sin has infected the whole being, including man's powers of understanding. The image of God in man is totally defaced. To think the mind can rise to the reality of God is not to take sin seriously, he continues. But we must ask what would this mean, "not to take sin seriously"? Sin has been taken in degrees of seriousness at different epochs. During the Reformation, sin weighed heavily on people's consciences; think of Luther for instance. In the 19th century, a time of optimism and 'progress,' the category of sin virtually disappeared in liberal theology. In the first half of the present century Barth, and in this country Reinhold Niebuhr, and others brought back the doctrine of sin. As the 20th century nears its close, this emphasis has been muted (especially by Catholic theologians, I think), and one hears instead talk of hope and human transcendence.

I return to the question, "What does it mean to take sin seriously?" Denying the presence of sin in human life is simply unrealistic, but it does not follow to ascribe to sin that totally disabling character in the tradition running from Calvin to Barth. The scepticism is self-destroying, for if the human mind cannot find traces of God in the created order, how can it possibly recognize the presence of God in Jesus Christ? The revelation itself is made impossible; the idea of incarnation as God's self-communication is ruled out.

The mind shaped in a godless age must have orientation and preparation before it can hear in a meaningful way that word "God," which can be both the fullest word of all, but also the emptiest.

I've spent the time so far defending the search for humanity as, shall we say, an introduction to theology. But I will now turn to the task of saying something more affirmative in its favour.

To begin the exposition of theology from the consideration of human nature is, in a secular time,

a sound educational method. If it is true that the very word "God" has fallen out of serious use and that even nominal believers have only the vaguest idea of what they mean by the word, and live, for practical purposes as if there were no God, and are, as I suggested not too unkindly, "anonymous atheists," then it would seem very odd to expound on Christianity or Judaism or any other religion by talking about the "word of God" or the "revelation of God." These concepts must be encountered in any genuinely Christian or Jewish theology, but only further down the road. The Catholic theologian, Bernard Lonergan, has declared that a presupposition for the study of theology is "orientation to transcendental mystery." His well chosen words do not insist on an explicit belief in God, but an openness to that which transcends our ordinary understanding. The mind shaped in a godless age must have orientation and preparation before it can hear in a meaningful way that word "God," which can be both the fullest word of all, but also the emptiest. As Martin Buber once said, "The word 'God' has become the most misused and heavily burdened of all." To rehabilitate it to its Judeo-Christian sense, we must go to where the secular world has come to the end of its resources and is confronted with a mystery it cannot handle, the mystery we name "God," though without supposing that by naming it we thereby comprehend it.

To explore these situations where faith and theology have their origins is to explore the human condition. This low-key approach to theology begins where people really are, and by using the language that is current among them. This educational device is also theological obedience to the whole notion of incarnation, in which God came into the human condition and stood beside human beings in solidarity, even in their godlessness and sin. This way into theology is compared with a principle recognized by Newman in the Oxford Movement, for which we were celebrating the sesquicentennial last year. This "principle of reserve" reflects something of the divine incognito of the incarnation itself. It is indirect; it is also partial: there is always more to learn. The theologian who employs the "principle of reserve" is not too exhaustive in his treatment of Christian or Jewish doctrine, but holds something back so as to whet the appetite of the learner toward the transcendental mystery. He may lead him into deeper truth and ultimately to the point where it is recognized that the deepest truth is ineffable. Thus the teacher is true to the mystery of God, and is sure he does not profane that mystery. Newman writes, "Religious people are very reserved, if only that they dare not betray God's confidence." Reserve fosters reverence due to sacred things, and is needed when one seeks to speak of the final mystery of Holy Being, the mystery we name "God."

The connection of these remarks with the appropriateness of taking the doctrine of the human being as the vestibule to theology is, I think, obvious. Human nature is a this-world phenomenon and the

question of the nature and destiny of man has become just as urgent as the question of God appears dispensable. Remember the double meaning in the word "human," a descriptive word and also a word that implies some ideal of what a human being ought to be. The empirical investigation of the human being comes against limits where, in sociologist Peter Berger's expression, we receive "signals of transcendence." We note there is hardly a modern philosophical anthropology that has not taken up the theme of human transcendence, the doctrine that the human being is constantly going beyond whatever stage he may have reached, that in his freedom he is reaching out to new forms of being. If the transcendence of God has now become veiled to us, there has been a rediscovery of transcendence at the centre of human existence. There is a wide area of contemporary thought through which this notion of transcendence is diffused. We find it in a new type of Thomism developed by Lonergan and others, called transcendental Thomism. Neo-Marxists speak of transcendence, and if the actual word was not used by Marx himself, something close to the idea was present in his philosophy. Atheistic existentialists—Sartre is an example—have found it necessary to introduce the idea of transcendence into their analyses of human existence. All philosophical anthropologies regard the human person as an unfinished dynamic being. We cannot say what a human being really is. We're confronted rather with beings in stages on the way to the achievement of this ideal humanity. The human being is therefore thrusting toward a fulfillment, both individual and social, that lies indefinitely ahead.

. . . the philosophers I have mentioned have set no bounds to human transcendence. What takes place is not the finitization of transcendence, but the recognition of an openness in our nature that reaches out toward the infinite.

You may ask has human transcendence anything to do with what theologians called the transcendence of God? One may reply, I think, that the philosophers I have mentioned have set no bounds to human transcendence. What takes place is not the finitization of transcendence, but the recognition of an openness in our nature that reaches out toward the infinite. The human being is that finite being who in Schleiermacher's words has the sense for the infinite. What is the mystery of human transcendence if it is not God? Is not this transcendence within ourselves that "orientation to transcendental mystery" of which Lonergan has spoken and which he regards as the *sine qua non* of the theological quest?

Admittedly, the human and the divine transcendence do not precisely coincide. Human transcendence is an intensely dynamic idea—the drive to go beyond, which is the meaning of the very word transcendence. Has not our theological understanding of divine transcendence been far too static? By the transcendence of God, people have understood his otherness and distance from the created order. They have thought of God as a rather static being “out there,” separate from the world. But what if the transcendence of God is also dynamic, God’s *exitus* into the world of the finite? Some such idea is expressed in the writings of a mystic who lived about 500 A.D., Denys, “And we must dare to affirm that the Creator of the universe himself, in his beautiful and good yearning toward the universe, is . . . transported out of himself . . . toward all things that have being, and is touched by the sweet spell of goodness, love and yearning, and so is drawn from his transcendent throne above all things, to dwell in the heart of all things . . . he yet stays within himself.” Now that’s a very interesting picture! This is not the static transcendence of our lordly monarchical God, but the active transcendence of a God of love. The transcendence of God, in dynamic terms, is precisely God’s self-emptying (*kenosis*) and his coming to dwell at the heart of creation. God’s transcendence coincides with his immanence, the supreme instance of the *coincidentia oppositorum* in God.

As I pointed out, the trend of thought for several centuries has been leading us toward taking the world as something grounded in itself. If the natural world has this self-completeness, then there is no God, and even human transcendence is a limited inner-worldly phenomenon. But if there is a reality more ultimate than nature and transcending it, then perhaps there is something in the world that points to it. Surely, we must reply, there is something, and that is the existence of humanity, the being form that has breached nature through its freedom and that points beyond the natural world through its transcendence. There may be other mysteries, but man alone is the irreducible mystery, the place where finite and infinite meet, and so the place where an orientation to transcendental mystery becomes possible.

Let me express the point a third way. From ancient times, the human being has been described as a microcosm, a little world, a little cosmos. He is so because he sums up all the levels of being we can observe in the universe: the physico-chemical, the organic, the sentient, the rational, the personal. The human being as a microcosm was taken one step further by the philosopher Leibniz. In his view, a human being mirrors not only the universe, but as possessed with mind and personality, there is a sense in which he mirrors God himself in his relation to the world. “Minds are also images of the deity or the author of nature himself, capable of knowing the system of the universe and of imitating it through their own inventions.” Leibniz says that each human being or spirit is like a “little god” in

his own world. One may appeal to the Bible with its teaching that the first human couple were made in “the image and likeness of God.”

Except for the last sentence, I have been moving in the area of natural or philosophical theology, appealing to the phenomena and facts open to everyone. The claim that man is the initial datum for theological reflection is strengthened when we turn to the Christian revelation and its doctrine of incarnation. In this teaching, God has made himself known in and through a human person. We could say that in Jesus Christ humanity was brought to that level of transcendence at which the image of God, obscured in our ordinary humanity through sin, has been brought to full realization. Rahner said, “Only someone who forgets that the essence of man . . . is to be unbounded . . . can suppose that it is impossible for there to be a man, who, precisely by being man in the fullest sense, is God’s existence into the world.” This is not far from Schleiermacher’s description of Jesus Christ as “the completion of the creation of man.”

But something remains to be said. Indeed, the antithesis has been set up between adoptionism, the notion that Christ is thought of as a man who is adopted into Godhood, and incarnationism, the doctrine that somehow God has taken human nature in Christ; that antithesis is a false one. These two views are complementary. A human being can manifest the being of God only if God himself has descended into the created order. There can be a divinity in man only because there is already a humanity in God. We can pay Karl Barth his just due, but while he was right in affirming the ontological priority of God, we think he would have done better if he had also recognized the epistemological priority of the human, that in the order of understanding, we move from the human to the divine. If that is indeed so, then there is a legitimate and indeed a compelling way that leads from the search for humanity into the search for the deity.

Human transcendence is an intensely dynamic idea—the drive to go beyond, which is the meaning of the very word transcendence. Has not our theological understanding of divine transcendence been far too static? By the transcendence of God, people have understood this otherness and distance from the created order. They have thought of God as a rather static being “out there,” separate from the world. But what if the transcendence of God is also dynamic, God’s exitus into the world of the finite?

Two Conferences

on
**SPIRITUALITY
AND HEALTH**

September 28-29, Salina
October 19-20, Lawrence

The two parallel conferences on spiritual dimensions of healing for nursing, medical and pastoral people are also open to the public. Leaders are Dr. Alice Young and Dr. Paul Eppinger.

Dr. Young is Dean of the School of Nursing, Washburn University. Dr. Eppinger is Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Topeka.

The conference subject is a sequel to last year's "Ethics & Medicine" conferences which were attended by many nurses and clergy.

Participation in a conference can earn eight units of continuing education credit for nurses and ministers. The Kansas School of Religion has been approved by the State Board of Nursing for this event as a single provider for continuing education credit. For ministers seeking CEU's the KSR issues a statement of their attendance to their respective churches.

For information contact the Kansas School of Religion, 1300 Oread, Lawrence, KS 66045, (913) 843-7257.

Update on Religion in Schools

The National Council on Religion and Public Education will present a seminar describing the national climate surrounding religion in schools December 8. This is during the convention of the American Academy on Religion in the Palmer House, Chicago. Information from the NCRPE, Smith Hall, this address.

If You Are Interested

Responding to questions about the possibility of publishing a collection of Traverse Log editorial essays since their beginning in 1978, we have a request. Persons who would be interested in having such a booklet are invited to squander a 20¢ stamp and send their expressions to *Religion*, 1300 Oread, Lawrence, KS 66045.

Report

KSR Programs 1983-84

Irma I. Smith Hall—While the University provides care and interior upkeep of Smith Hall in return for free use of it, the capital items, exterior maintenance and insurance are the responsibility of the Kansas School of Religion.

RELIGION Journal—A religious commentary essentially for the supporting groups of the School of Religion, the magazine is sent upon request anywhere in the U.S.

Library—The religion library in Smith Hall contains nearly 12,000 volumes. To expand the holdings in selected areas and generally to update with current scholarship, several hundred new titles are added each year. The library has microfilm, fiche, and copying capacity.

KSR Lectureship—The lectureship brings to the Lawrence campus a major religious leader for a principal lecture and other related meetings. In the past, lecturers have been William Sloane Coffin, Martin E. Marty, and John Macquarrie. In 1985 the lecturer will be Eugene Borowitz.

Annual Conference—For clergy and others interested, a popular update experience is conducted in religion skills. In the past year conferences were held in Salina and Pratt; the subject was "Ethics & Medicine." The 1984 subject treats spirituality and healing.

Public Education Religion Studies—This program maintains an extensive reference and resource center which is now used by teachers of Kansas and other states. It conducts workshops on religion in schools. The Center is also the office address of the National Council on Religion and Public Education.

Scholarships for Religion Students—To encourage religious studies, direct grants based on need or scholarship are made to students selected by the religion faculty. The recipients are designated KSR Scholars.

Department Lecturers—This fund brings to the campus scholars in religion during successive weeks of the school year. A mini-conference series was planned by the Department of Religious Studies.

Faculty Development Funds—To encourage attendance by the religion faculty at professional meetings, travel funds are granted to the department. This is supplementary to university travel money, and is given upon application for each trip.

Traveling Faculty Program—To provide leadership for religion study groups beyond Lawrence, this fund takes care of the expense of sending faculty members out. Interested groups request faculty services.

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While continuing to receive income from the trust, a donor may have opportunity for a charitable contribution deduction and avoid capital gains tax.

Designated Trusts

Designating the Kansas School of Religion as beneficiary of a life insurance policy can produce a substantial gift in time. Naming the beneficiary as owner, of course, provides a charitable deduction for the donor.

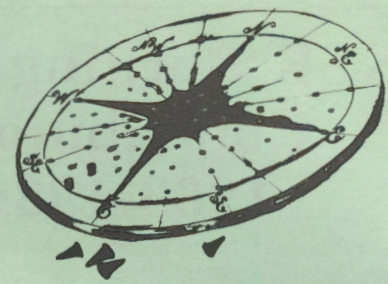
Bequests

A legacy for future use does not affect the current financial picture if it is in a will. A bequest is a way to assure continuing participation in the program.

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Traverse Log



Has anybody noticed: major changes in the economy are accompanied by a religious revival? John Naisbitt, that handy quotable friend to your ordinary modern name dropper, has observed that when the economic pattern shifted from the agricultural to the industrial 150 years ago, there was a revival. And now as America carries its quick trip information skills into a global economy, we have another religious revival. At least we need one. Uncertain change is here; religion offers certainty. So hopefully we can be snug as Linus in his blanket while everything fastened down is coming loose.

True, we breathe easier amid familiar structures and pat answers. Some folks think that is why the old-time religion is a welcome lullaby in various ultra modern media packages. This page is a pitch for resisting the temptation to regard the photogenic electronic bit as a revival, as some folks think it is.

The carefully combed kids in the crooning TV choirs, the handsome ruffled shirted men and artfully coiffured women gracing the electronic pulpits and the whole expertly staged scene are more a production advance than a religious revival. This amalgam has Swiss cheese size holes. The smoothness of a well oiled contraption is not the total picture of religion. There is more to the religious experience than a smiling songster caressing a microphone on a holy hit parade. We may as well appoint a designated swearer on a professional baseball team hoping he will handle the close calls.

What the scene does offer is a line to the past. In times of change we need something to tie to. And the technicolor production gives out answers.

But some of us are still trying to find the right questions—some of us ordinary sinners who sing off key and can't brush after every meal, but who share the pains, the tensions and the joys of living.

From where I sit in the back corner, I suggest that there are at least two religious references to furnish a bearing upon uncharted contemporary change.

1) One piece of data is that we are living in a Baskin-Robbins day. Instead of one party line, there are 31 varieties of religious experience (—well, more or less). As there are multiple options in economics, there are also multiple options in religion. Rather than saying Falwell has the Christian answer, the appropriate statement might possibly be Falwell has *a* Christian answer. Find what speaks to your need.

2) The other point of reference acknowledges our need for something to hold on to when everything else fastened down is coming loose. Really now—the old-time religion is not intellectual assent to a well weathered set of platitudes. It is a process, an experience, a dynamic relationship. The “old time religion that was good for Paul and Silas” was an empirical adventure—even for Paul and Silas, or for Grandpa or even for Abraham who “went out not knowing whither.”

The case stands right here. Its conclusion is: adventure-some faith is what to hold on to!

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