NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

10 Minutes with ... Harvey Cox

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Oct. 1, 2009

For more than four decades, Harvey Cox has been one of America's most influential and provocative theologians.

In his new book, The Future of Faith,*" Cox argues that Christianity is moving from an "Age of Belief" dominated by creeds and church hierarchies to an "Age of Spirit," in which spirituality is replacing formal religion.*

Cox, who is retiring from Harvard, spoke about why he believes creeds are divisive, religion on campus, and why Pope Benedict XVI didn't invite him to lunch.

Q: What's the difference between faith and belief?

A: I think of belief as having to do with subordination to ideas or doctrines, a kind of mental assent. Whereas faith is far more deeply rooted in life orientation. It comes from the Latin word "fides," which means "loyal to." I think the confusion of faith as loyalty or adherence to ideas or propositions is a mistake.

Q: Why do you think Christianity is moving away from an "age of belief" towards an "age of the spirit"?

A: A lot of the book grows out of my years of careful observation of religious groups and movements around the world. I couldn't help but notice that more and more people think Christianity is about the way one lives one's life. Doctrinal questions are just as not as important.

Q: But don't lots of denominations still recite creeds, and consider them foundational?

A: Yes, but who in the denomination emphasizes doctrine? Even in churches that have formal creeds and recite them, people sit rather lightly on these creedal affirmations and think of them more as poetry or a symbolic statements rather than a catalogue of doctrinal compositions.

Q: Do religious communities need unifying ideas?

A: They certainly need something, but they really don't need as much as had been imposed. A lot of the creed-making turned out not to be very productive. As soon as one creed came out, they had to issue another one to clarify the first one. It didn't work as unifying device. In fact it was a divisive. Instead of welcoming others, people were walled off because of not having "theological correctness."

Q: Don't some scholars say that religious movements with "high walls," or that require a lot from believers, actually are growing quite fast?

A: I know that argument, and for me it's not persuasive for this reason: look at the charismatic Pentecostal movement. What in the world is growing faster than that? In Africa, in Latin America, in China -- those

movements are indigenous, non-creedal, and non-hierarchical.

The distinction is not between groups with high walls or explicit rules. It has to do with a yearning people have for a taste of the sacred. I think about the students here and what brings them into religious expression. It's meditative practice, or prayer groups, or religiously motivated social action. It's experiential and existential. People are growing suspicious of taking something on someone else's authority, and I think that's healthy.

Q: Have the students changed much since you started teaching at Harvard in 1965?

A: Four decades ago, if you were a religious person, you kept that to yourself. There was no religious studies program at Harvard College, the divinity school was a shrunken little outfit, students were not notably active in churches or other religious institutions. Now, someone did a study that showed students are worshipping more than ever in Harvard's history. We can't organize courses in religion fast enough to meet the need. Part of the interest is intellectual curiosity no doubt, but a good deal of it is also a personal searching for something of meaning and value.

Q: Your epigraph is a T.S. Eliot poem that says history can be either liberating or imprisoning. How can early Christian history be liberating

A: The phenomenal discoveries in the last few decades of all these hidden documents and scrolls show that the first 300 years if Christianity were enormously more diverse than we had been given to believe. There was no central creed; it was all centered on following Jesus. It wasn't until Constantine in the fourth century, who decided he needed ideology to sew together a fragmenting empire, that a whole new thinking was created about what made a Christian, with an emphasis on belief instead of experience.

Q: You visited Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, in 1988. But he didn't invite you to stay on for lunch. Do you ever wonder why?

A: I tried to start with innocent questions and then work my way up to "Why did you revoke the teaching license of Hans Kung? Why did you silence Leonardo Boff?" He remained cordial but there was a barely detectable change in his response. Then an aide came in and that terminated the conversation. I don't know whether he has a little button under his desk that says "Get this guy out of here." I'm not sorry I brought up those issues, though. It was probably more enjoyable than just having some pasta and Chianti.

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