

# The Heart of Christianity ©2004

by Marcus Borg

## Chapter 11 Heart and Home

### *Being Christian in an Age of Pluralism*

(Note – most formatting is mine; **I encourage you to read the entire book** – Gary Vollbracht)

Throughout this book I have been suggesting a way of being Christian today. To use the five adjectives with which I have described the emerging paradigm [*Progressive Christianity*], it involves a

- **historical,**
  - **metaphorical, and**
  - **sacramental**
- way of seeing the Christian tradition.***

and a

- **relational and**
  - **transformational**
- way of seeing the Christian life.***

In this chapter, I move from “what” to “why”: from what it means to be Christian to ***why be Christian***. The Christianity of my childhood had a clear and compelling reason: it was the only way to salvation. To put it bluntly, one risked going to hell if one wasn’t Christian. The stakes were high. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful sanction and persuasive motive.

***But I no longer believe that;*** nor do a majority of Christians in North America. Though there is more than one reason, a primary one is our growing awareness of religious pluralism. We know about other religions in various ways, from college courses and television series and increasingly through personal acquaintance with people from other religions. Of course, this is happening in Europe and other parts of the world as well, but I will focus on the North American context. In our setting, why be Christian?

A central claim in this concluding chapter is that ***we understand Christianity most clearly when we see it in the context of religious pluralism.*** Religious pluralism is both a demographic fact in our time even as it also provides a way of seeing religions (and Christianity) anew. When we see Christianity within the framework of religions as a whole, we see Christianity—its nature and purpose—more clearly, and we better understand, “Why be Christian?” My answer has several building blocks: the demographic reality of religious pluralism; a way of seeing religions since the Enlightenment; an understanding of their similarities and differences; and the role of religion in our life with God.

## ***Religious Pluralism***

The religious landscape in the United States is rapidly changing. We have historically been Christian, Jewish, and secular, with the first far outnumbering the second and third. But in the last thirty-five years, ***we have become the most religiously diverse nation in the world.*** This is one of the central claims of an important recent book by Diana Eck, a professor at Harvard and director of the Pluralism Project. In *A New Religious America*, Eck describes the growing presence of religions other than Christianity and Judaism in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The key event that sparked this growth was the ***Immigration Act of 1965***, which opened up immigration to people from nations outside of Europe. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and to a lesser extent Africa. Most of these brought religions with them other than Christianity and Judaism. Together with their children born in the United States since 1965, they have made religious pluralism a fact of life for us today. Eck's statistics include the following:

There are approximately ***six million Muslim Americans.*** There are as many Muslim Americans as Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined, two of the historically most influential Protestant denominations. There are (or soon will be) about ***as many Muslim Americans as Jewish Americans.***

There are ***four million Buddhist Americans.*** Though the majority are recent immigrants and their American-born children, many are American converts to Buddhism. There are more Buddhists in the United States than either Presbyterians or Episcopalians.

In lesser numbers, there are about ***a million Hindus*** in the United States (about as many as the United Church of Christ or the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ). There are about ***300,000 Sikhs.***

Moreover, the phenomenon of religious diversity is not confined to major metropolitan areas. People of religions other than Christianity and Judaism are found in regional cities and rural areas as well. Eck writes about a huge mosque in Toledo, Ohio; a great Hindu temple in Nashville, Tennessee; a Cambodian Buddhist temple and monastery in the farmlands of Minnesota; a Sikh *gurdwara* in Fremont, California; Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist centers in Salt Lake City and Dallas; Cambodian Buddhist communities in Iowa and Oklahoma; and Tibetan Buddhist retreat centers in Vermont and Colorado. Eck comments, "This is an astonishing new reality. We have never been here before."<sup>2</sup>

This is very different from the world of my childhood. Almost fifty years ago, a book on religious diversity in the United States carried the title Protestant, Catholic, Jew.<sup>3</sup>

Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus were not part of the picture. And in the small town in which I grew up, religious diversity consisted of Catholics and Protestants, the latter of whom were mostly Lutherans. But now ***we are experiencing religious pluralism more than any generation of Christians since the early centuries of Christianity.***

A second set of statistics underlines both the fact and impact of religious pluralism. According to a poll taken in the United States in 2002:<sup>4</sup>

Those who personally knew somebody who was Christian: 94 percent.

Those who personally knew somebody who was Jewish: 51 percent.

Those who personally knew somebody who was Muslim: 28 percent.

Those who personally knew somebody who was Hindu or Buddhist: 17 percent.

The poll also included questions designed to measure the acceptance of religious pluralism:

“Should Christians seek to convert people of other faiths or leave them alone?” 22 percent said “convert,” and 71 percent said “leave them alone.”

To the statement “All religions have elements of truth,” 78 percent said yes.

To the statement “My religion is the only true religion,” only 17 percent said yes.”

Of course, ***public opinion polls do not establish truth***; they only report what people think. And this poll not only indicates that many know people of other traditions, but also that most have let go of the notion that only one religion is the true religion.

The fact of religious pluralism in our society creates an imperative to understand other religions and the people who practice them. Understanding other religions is no longer primarily an intellectual interest in religions we’ve heard of but might never encounter, but an immensely practical need. The imperative has been underlined and made more urgent by the events of September 11, 2001.

Moreover, the need exists for more than cultural and political reasons. ***For those of us who are Christians, understanding other religions can enrich our understanding of Christianity and what it means to be Christian.*** Religious pluralism can help us to see our own tradition better.

## ***Three Ways of Seeing Religions***

I widen my focus to how religion has been seen in Western culture in the modern period. In broad strokes, three ways of seeing religion (and religions) have emerged since the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century. Describing these options will also provide a ***concise introduction to the nature and function—the essence and purpose—of religion.***

### **The Absolutist Understanding of Religion**

The absolutist understanding of religion affirms that one's own religion is the absolute and only truth. Most familiar to readers of this book in its Christian form, it also exists in Jewish and Muslim forms, though historically the last two have less often seen their religion as "the only true religion" than have Christians.<sup>5</sup> For absolutists, the truth of one's own religion is grounded in God's infallible revelation: God has disclosed God's will in the scriptures of that tradition as nowhere else. This is essentially what I have called the ***earlier Christian paradigm***, especially in its harder form. Against all other claims, whether religious or secular, this religion—our religion—is the true religion. Within this framework, ***only one religion can be right.***

### **The Reductionist Understanding of Religion**

The reductionist view reduces religion to a ***human invention***. It sees all religions as human constructions, as human projections. They were created by us in part out of ignorance about the way things really are, but also to ***serve strong psychological and social needs***. This is the ***dominant secular understanding of religion***, within both secular culture and the secular academy. The psychological and social factors that generate religions include the ***desire or need for:***

- ***Explanations*** (religion as "primitive science")
- ***Protection from vulnerability and death***
- ***Reinforcement of the social order by giving it divine sanction***
- ***Meaning***

And perhaps other desires could be included as well, such as the desire to sing and dance in praise of creation. But whatever the complete list of factors might include, ***the final truth about religion is "we made it all up."*** Religion is reduced to a human psychological and social construction. Thus, for the reductionist view, the religions are all built on a mistake, for there is no God, no sacred, no "More."

Though the reductionist view rejects the foundational claim of the religions, **reductionists can be appreciative of religion**. Some admire its contributions to thought, wisdom, ethics, art, music, architecture, and so forth. Other reductionists are dismissive of religion, whether politely or contemptuously. To be colloquial, for some it's "just a bunch of crap." But for appreciative and dismissive reductionists alike, **none of the religions is right, none of them is true**. They are all mistaken, no matter how beautiful and elegant and compassionate they might be.

**Much of the conflict about religion in the Christian West in the modern period has been between absolutist and reductionist views of religion**. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Christians felt threatened by the emergence of secularism and responded by insisting on the absolute truth of Christianity. In the nineteenth century, many Protestants began to affirm the Bible's infallibility, and the Roman Catholic church explicitly affirmed the infallibility of papal authority. **Both absolutism and reductionism are the products of modernity**. And to many modern people, they seem like the only two options.

### **The Sacramental Understanding of Religion**

There is an alternative to the first two ways of seeing religion. Within modernity, a third view of religion and the religions is emerging. It sees **religions as sacraments of the sacred**. As sacraments, the religions are not "absolute." Rather, like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, they are **finite products, finite means, of mediating the sacred**. This is the sacramental understanding of Christianity that I have been describing in this book [*i.e.*, *Progressive Christianity*].

Though not always named in this way, this way of seeing religion is shared by many scholars of religious pluralism, others within the religious academy, and increasingly within mainline churches. **Seven statements describe this understanding of religion and the religions**.

1. First, it **sees religions as human creations**. In this, it is like the second option, the reductionist view. The scriptures, teachings, doctrines, rituals, practices, and so forth, of all the religions are human products. To express this widely accepted view with a phrase from Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, religions are "**imaginative human constructions**."<sup>6</sup> Here "imaginative" does not mean "fanciful" or "fantasy," but "creative," filled with images that come from and address the human imagination—that faculty within us within which our images of reality reside.
2. Second, unlike the second option, it affirms that religions are human constructions **in response to experiences of the sacred**. Although they are human constructions, they are not simply mistaken human projections generated by psychological and social needs. Of course, they have been shaped and sometimes distorted, often in very destructive ways, in order to

serve human desires, but they are not ultimately built on a mistake. Religions are human products created in response to the sacred in the particular cultures within which each came into being. Thus the sacramental understanding of religion **robustly affirms the reality of God, the sacred, “the More.”** Without “the More,” there would be nothing to mediate.

3. Third, religions are “**cultural-linguistic traditions,**” a phrase used by Yale theologian George Lindbeck to express another widely accepted notion.<sup>7</sup> As I understand the phrase, it refers to both the **origin and function of religions.** Each religion originates within a particular culture and uses the language of that culture to express itself, even if it might also be challenging dominant convictions of that culture. Even more important, the statement refers to the function of religion; namely, a religion that survives over time becomes a cultural-linguistic tradition in its own right, and to be part of that religion is to live within the cultural-linguistic world created by that religion. It means to **live within**
  - **its scriptures,**
  - **its language,**
  - **its stories,**
  - **its vision,**
  - **its rituals,**
  - **its practice—****in a comprehensive sense, to live within**
  - **its ethos.**

To use an only partially apt analogy, as I suggested in the previous chapter, being Christian (or Muslim or Jewish, and so forth) is a bit like being French (or Korean or Ethiopian, and so forth). Being French involves knowing French as a language, but also much more: there is a cultural *ethos*, a cultural-linguistic world, involved in being French. So also **being Christian means living within the ethos of a Christian cultural-linguistic world.**

4. Fourth, the enduring religions of the world are “**wisdom traditions,**” a phrase from Huston Smith, perhaps today’s best-known historian of religions. Wisdom and knowledge are not identical. Wisdom is more foundational. It is about the two most important questions in life: “**the real**” and “**the way.**” **What is real? And what is the way—how shall we live?** Deeply rooted in the past, the religions that have stood the test of time are repositories of such wisdom. Though they contain the ideas of a much earlier time, some of which from our point of view are mistaken or no longer applicable, they also **enshrine the wisdom of the past about “the real” and “the way.”** They articulate a vision that can deliver us from the partial and provincial view of “flatland” modernity.<sup>8</sup>

5. Fifth, religions are *aesthetic traditions*. All of the enduring religions have valued and created beauty: in their *music, poetry, stories, art, architecture, worship*, and *rituals*. They *see beauty as a mediator of “the real.”*
6. Sixth, religions are *communities of practice*. All of them provide practical means for *living the religious life*: the *“thin places”* and *practices of worship, prayer, deeds of compassion*, and more specific spiritual practices.
7. Seventh, and directly connected to the sixth, religions are *communities of transformation*. Religions are *“means of ultimate transformation.”*<sup>9</sup> They have the very practical purpose of *transforming the self and the world*—the transformation of *the self from an old way of being to a new way of being*, and the *transformation of the world through compassion*. These two transformations [*i.e., transformation of the self and the world*] are central to all of the enduring religions.

All seven of these aspects are included in seeing religions as sacramental. *Religion’s purpose is to mediate the sacred and, by so doing, to inform, engender, and nourish a transforming relationship to “the More.”* The enduring religions share these characteristics in common. Each is a massive and magnificent sacrament of the sacred, a finite means of mediating the sacred, a “treasure in earthen vessels.”<sup>10</sup>

This realization helps us to understand religious pluralism, even as it also helps us to understand Christianity. Each of the enduring religions is a *mediator of “the absolute,” but not “absolute” itself*. Applying this understanding to being Christian, the point is not to believe in Christianity as the only absolute and adequate revelation of God. Rather, *the point is to live within the Christian tradition as a sacrament of the sacred, a mediator of the absolute, whom we name “God” and who for us is known decisively in Jesus. Christianity is not absolute, but points to and mediates the absolute.*

## Are All Religions Thus the Same?

There is an easy, almost nonchalant acceptance of religious pluralism in some quarters in our time. Some say, “The religions are all the same—just different roads to the same place. It doesn’t matter what you are.” Rightly understood, the statement contains some truth. But as commonly understood, it’s too simple. It is sometimes made by people to whom religion doesn’t matter very much; for them, there’s no point in spending much energy on whether one religion is better than another or in being part of any religion. And the “place” to which the various religions lead is often thought of as “heaven,” and so they are all thought of as ways to “the next world,” not really as being about “this life” and transformation in this world.

The statement is too simple for another reason as well. ***Religions are not all “the same.” Though the enduring religions of the world share many common elements, they are very different in important respects.*** To be very elementary and basic, they are both alike and different. It is important to recognize both.

Their similarity in terms of sacramental function has just been described. Here I provide a compact fivefold summary of their ***most central similarities***:

1. ***They all affirm “the More,” “the real,” “the sacred”;*** and they all affirm that the ***sacred can be known—not known completely or exhaustively, but known in the sense of being experienced.*** The religions are grounded in glimpses and visions of the sacred, experiences of seeing and reconnection.
2. ***They all affirm a way, a path;*** and the paths are all recognizable variants of the same path, the same way. As suggested in Chapter 6, the way of the cross, the way of Lao Tzu, the way of the Buddha, the way of Islam, and the way of Judaism all speak of the ***same path: the path of dying to an old identity and way of being and being born into a new identity and way of being.*** All refer to the ***same transformation of the self.***
3. ***They all provide practical means*** (the practices of worship, rituals, prayer, and so forth) ***for undertaking the way, living the path, undergoing a sacred journey.***
4. ***They all extol compassion as the primary ethical virtue of life.*** We see this not only in their teachings, but also in the saints of the various traditions who are consistently embodiments of compassion.
5. ***They all contain a collection of beliefs and teachings.*** These typically include ***scripture***, what Christians commonly call “doctrines,” as well as ethical teachings. To put this point most simply, the religions are all “put into words.”

***Yet they are not all the same. They’re very different, as different as the cultures and histories that shaped them.*** Each is a distinctive cultural-linguistic world with its own stories, rituals, practices, and ethos. Worshiping in a Hindu temple or a Jewish synagogue is a very different experience from worshiping in a Muslim mosque or a Christian church.

As a way of thinking about the similarities and differences among the religions, I suggest three complementary approaches. All are expressions of the same point of view.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James includes some comments about the world’s religions. Based on his study of religious experience, he concludes



that the *religions of the world are most similar in the experiences they report, the path they teach, the practices they commend, and the behavior they produce, the “fruit” of compassion.* These are the first four of the similarities I suggested.

*They are most different*, he concludes, *in their beliefs and doctrines* (our fifth point). When one thinks about it, this is only what one would expect, for beliefs and doctrines are what are most affected by the particularities of culture and language. What is most affected is what is put into words. For James, their *words differ, but their views of reality and the lives they mediate are similar.*

Along with others, Huston Smith uses the phrase the “*primordial tradition*” as a key concept for thinking about similarities and differences among the religions. The “primordial tradition” is a *set of core understandings underlying all the enduring religions.* These core understandings are *twofold.*

The first is a *multilayered understanding of reality*: what is real includes *more than the space-time world of matter and energy.*

The second is a *multilayered understanding of the self*: we are *more than our bodies and brains*, and *open out in our depths into the sea of being that we name God, Spirit, Allah, and so forth.*

The enduring religions are all different expressions of this primordial wisdom; it is the core underlying their different forms.

A third and closely related way of expressing the same point is the *language of “internal core” and “external form.”*

The *internal core*, the *heart of religion*, is the *experience of the sacred, “the real,” “the More.”*

The *external form* is the *particular expression of the religion*: it includes the particularities of what is done in worship, the particular words (*scripture, stories, teachings*) in which the tradition is articulated, the particular practices enjoined, and so forth.

*Religions are similar in their internal core, different in their external forms.*<sup>11</sup>

To return to the statement “The religions are all the same—just different roads to the same place,” we are now in position to see its truth as well as its limitations. To use the metaphor of paths going up a mountainside, the *enduring religions are all paths up the same mountain.* Envision a mountain, broad at the bottom, narrow at the top, the peak finally disappearing into air, space, emptiness.

*At the bottom, the paths are farthest apart (the external forms). But as the paths lead higher, they become closer together until they converge on the mountaintop. And then, of course, they disappear.*<sup>12</sup>

*And the place to which they lead, the mountaintop, is not “heaven,” but “the sacred.” The religions are not primarily about the next life, not about paths to an afterlife, but to life centered in the sacred in the here and now.*

Significantly, the external forms matter. Serious religious pluralism (as distinct from nonchalant pluralism) involves recognizing that the external forms of religions are quite different. Respecting the integrity of the “other” involves such recognition. Though we might affirm that “human beings are all the same” in some important sense, to refuse to recognize that being French or being Iraqi is different from being English or American is to fail to recognize the distinctiveness of the “other.” So also among religions: to be Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist or Christian involves being different from one another. Not only are the religions different; we might even learn to appreciate and relish their distinctiveness. The world is richer because of its distinctive cultural-linguistic traditions.

Additionally, the *external forms matter for both a negative and positive reason. Negatively, when the external forms are emphasized*, then the differences between religions are more apparent than their similarities. When the external forms (especially scripture and doctrines) are absolutized, as they are in religious fundamentalism, then religious exclusivism is the inevitable result. *Authentic dialogue becomes impossible*, conversion is the goal, and conflict is often the result. *Our time is such a time, “a clash of fundamentalisms,”* as the title of a recent book puts it.<sup>13</sup>

*Positively, the external forms matter because they are sacraments of the sacred. They mediate the sacred, and they mediate the path. In a primary sense, they are the path: practical means for living life with and in God.*

This point is important because of a common contemporary contrast between spirituality and religion. Most of us have heard people say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” We know what they mean: they have a spiritual interest or sensitivity, but they’re not part of any particular religion. And the contrast often contains *a value judgment* as well: *spirituality is “good”; religion is “bad,” or at least unnecessary.* The first is seen as personal, the second as institutional, and we live in a time when many don’t think much of institutions.

In an important sense, religions are “institutions.” Their external forms—their scriptures, rituals, teaching, practices, organization—are to a large extent “institutionalized.” They are “traditions,” and traditions are intrinsically “institutions.” *Religion is “organized religion.”*

***But the contrast between spirituality and religion is both unnecessary and unwise.*** To use an analogy I owe to Huston Smith, religion is to spirituality as institutions of learning are to education. One can learn about the world, become educated, without schools, universities, and books, but it is like reinventing the wheel in every generation. Institutions of learning are the way education gets traction in history; so also religion (its external forms) is the way spirituality gains traction in history.<sup>14</sup> ***Religion—its external forms—not just spirituality, matters. Its forms are vessels of spirituality, mediators of the sacred and the way.***

## ***Why Be Christian?***

I return to the question with which I began this chapter: “Why be Christian?” For centuries, the conventional Christian answer has been that Christianity is the only way to salvation. In the Catholic church, it has been expressed in the Latin phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*, “Outside of the church there is no salvation.” The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) moved away from this position, though recent developments in Rome have moved back toward it.

From their birth in the Reformation, Protestants have rejected the Catholic church’s claim to have a monopoly on salvation. But they have nevertheless most commonly claimed a Christian monopoly: “Salvation is only through Jesus, and we’ve got Jesus.” ***Most pre-modern and many modern Christians affirm some version of “Christian exclusivism”: only through Jesus can one be saved.***

But taking religious pluralism seriously calls Christian exclusivism radically into question and, in my judgment, negates it. ***It is impossible for many of us to believe that only Christians can be in saving relationship to God.*** Knowing about other religions and especially knowing people of those religions have made it impossible. Moreover, there is a “commonsense” reason for rejecting Christian exclusivism. When we think about the claim that Christianity is the only way of salvation, it’s a pretty strange notion. ***Does it make sense that “the More” whom we speak of as creator of the whole universe has chosen to be known in only one religious tradition, which just fortunately happens to be our own?***<sup>15</sup>

And there is a specifically Christian reason for rejecting Christian exclusivism: the ***classic Christian emphasis on grace. If one must be a Christian in order to be in right relationship with God, then there is a requirement, and we are no longer talking about grace,*** even though we might use the language of grace. ***If our relationship with God is based on grace, then it is not based on requirements, not even the requirement of being Christian.*** Of course, deepening the relationship depends upon paying attention to it, but the relationship is not about requirements.

And so ***my reasons for being Christian have nothing to do with it being the only way.*** I am convinced, as one who sees Christianity within the emerging paradigm, that ***God, the sacred, “the More,” is known in all of the major religious traditions,***

**not simply in our own.** Indeed, **if I thought I had to believe that Christianity was the only way, I could not be Christian.** Moreover, it seems to me that seeing the similarities between Christianity and other religions adds to the credibility of Christianity rather than threatening it.

When Christianity is seen as one of the great religions of the world, as one of the classic forms of the primordial tradition, as a remarkable sacrament of the sacred, it has great credibility. But **when Christianity claims to be the only true religion, it loses much of its credibility.** The similarities, it seems to me, are cause for celebration, and not for alarm.

Within this framework, **what happens to the passages in the New Testament that proclaim Jesus to be “the only way”?** We should remember that they are **relatively few.** Moreover, passages in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament suggest a larger view of God’s presence and accessibility. But the “only way” passages are there, most famously **John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to God except through me.”** Also well known is **Acts 4:12, which says about Jesus, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”**

**We can understand these as expressions of both truth and devotion.**

**Truth:** the path seen in Jesus is the way—the **path of death and resurrection, that path of dying to an old identity and way of being and being born into a new identity and way of being that lies at the heart of Christianity and the other religions.** This is **“the way” expressed in Christian form. For us as Christians, Jesus is the way, even though not the only expression of the way.**

**Devotion:** to say **“Jesus is the only way”** is also the **language of devotion.** It is the **language of gratitude and love.** It is like language used by lovers, as when we say to our beloved, “You’re the most beautiful person in the world.” Literally? Most beautiful? Really? Such language is “the poetry of devotion and the hyperbole of the heart.”<sup>16</sup> Poetry can express the truth of the heart, but it is not doctrine. And such language, when not hardened into doctrine, can continue to express Christian devotion. To echo Krister Stendahl again, **we can sing our love songs to Jesus with wild abandon without needing to demean other religions.**

**So why be Christian?** Here I offer my own reasons, my own “testimony.” I suspect it is shared by many.

The first is the **importance of being part of a religious community and tradition of practice.** This is really a set of reasons that would also be motives for being deeply involved in any of the enduring religions. Though one can be in relationship with God apart from participation in community and tradition, community and tradition matter. They mediate and nourish the relationship.

***We need a path.*** We are lost without one. ***Community and tradition articulate, embody, and nurture a path.*** They provide practical means of undertaking the path, not as a requirement for entering the next world, but as a ***path of reconnection and transformation in this life.***

Religious community and tradition ***put us in touch with the wisdom and beauty of the past.*** They are communities of memory. There is value in being in touch with the past. Not only does it contain wisdom, but it can deliver us from the provinciality of the present, our limited way of seeing that we seldom recognize as a form of blindness. There is much to be said for being part of a tradition centuries old rather than one made up yesterday.

And, though all the traditions have their monsters and have at times been distorted in brutal directions, ***they also have incubated lives remarkably filled with compassion, courage, and joy. The saints of the traditions are the most remarkable people who have ever lived.*** The vision of life articulated by the traditions is both appealing and important, not only for us as individuals but for us as sharing the earth.

***All of these are among my reasons for being Christian, even though they are not reasons for being specifically Christian.*** Rather, they are ***reasons for being religious***—for being part of a community of memory and practice. It is important to be part of a tradition and to live more deeply into the life that it mediates.

When a Christian seeker asked the Dalai Lama whether she should become a Buddhist, his response, which I paraphrase, was: “No, become more deeply Christian; live more deeply into your own tradition.” Huston Smith makes the same point with the metaphor of digging a well: if what you’re looking for is water, better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep. ***By living more deeply into our own tradition as a sacrament of the sacred, we become more centered in the one to whom the tradition points and in whom we live and move and have our being.***

A Christian is one who does this within the framework of the Christian tradition, just as a Jew is one who does this within the framework of the Jewish tradition, a Muslim, within the framework of the Muslim tradition, and so forth. And I cannot believe that God cares which of these we are. ***All are paths of relationship and transformation.***

***So why be Christian?*** In my case, for all of the above reasons and more.

***The Christian tradition is familiar; it is “home” for me.*** I was born into it and grew up in it. Its stories, language, music, and ethos are familiar. It nurtured me, even as I have had to unlearn some of what I was taught.

***In adulthood, I have grown to appreciate its extraordinary richness:*** its antiquity and wisdom; the beauty of its language and music and forms of worship; its passion for compassion and justice; the sheer goodness of its most remarkable lives. Its worship nourishes me; its hymns move me; its scripture and theology engage my imagination and thought; its practices shape me. ***For me, it mediates the good, the true, and the beautiful; and through all of these, it mediates the sacred. It is for me a sacrament of the sacred.***

***And it is home.*** It is familiar to me in a way that no other religion could ever become. I know that other religions could have been home for me; ***had I been born a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Jew, for example, I am quite sure that I would still be one.***

And I am aware that some who grew up Christian were so abused by the experience that Christianity could never seem like home, except as a home that one needs to escape. For them, another way of being religious may be necessary. ***But for me, Christianity is “home” like no other tradition could be. For me, the ethos of Christianity—its vision and way of life, its scripture, worship, language, music, thought, vision, and so forth—is home.***

And ***we do not need to feel that our home is superior to every other home in order to love it.*** A twentieth-century hymn, “This Is My Song,” expresses this love of home very powerfully. To the wonderful melody of Sibelius’s “Finlandia,” it sings of the love we have for our homeland:

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,*

*A song of peace for lands afar and mine.*

*This is my home, the country where my heart is;*

*Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;*

*But other hearts in other lands are beating*

*With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country’s skies are bluer than the ocean*

*And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;*

*But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,*

*And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.*

*O hear my song, O God of all the nations,*

*A song of peace for their land and for mine.<sup>17</sup>*

We need only substitute the word “religions” for “nations,” “lands,” and “country.” Of course, in terms of syllables, the substitution doesn’t work, but in terms of affirmation, it does. ***Religions are homes, and Christianity is home for me.*** And home is about more than familiarity and comfort. We sometimes sentimentalize home. “I’ll be home for Christmas,” “There’s no place like home for the holidays,” “Home, sweet home.” Home is that.

***But home is also about growing up, about maturation, about learning and living a way of life that one takes into the larger world. Christianity is a way of life; that is its heart. To be Christian means living “the path” within this tradition. At the heart of Christianity is the way of the heart—a path that transforms us at the deepest level of our being. At the heart of Christianity is the heart of God—a passion for our transformation and the transformation of the world. At the heart of Christianity is participating in the passion of God.***

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<https://itun.es/us/NmxRv.l>