CHRISTIANITY: ACTIONAL AND CONTEMPLATIVE

Walter H. Capps, Ph.D.
Director, Institute of Religious Studies
University of California at Santa Barbara

When one looks at the Christian tradition with an interest in the topic that is the focus of this conference, he finds a rather ambivalent situation. We are concerning ourselves with religious motivation, or, more precisely, with motivations from religion toward behavior. The ambivalence in Christianity on this point can be expressed as follows: the entire history of the Christian religion can be characterized by a kind of back-and-forth movement, a dialectic, a contrast, an opposition between the mode of action and the mode of contemplation. And this intrinsic dialectic has great bearing upon the Christian understanding of motivation for behavior.

We are referring to the matter in historical terms. But we can also approach it in contemporary terms, for the transition from the one mode to the other is occurring all around us in very dramatic terms. And this is the key difference: in the past it has sometimes taken generations for the alternation to occur; but within the past few years we have seen both tendencies vividly expressed, side by side. The middle and later sixties were marked by the actional tendency; we refer to it as the rebirth of "the social gospel." More recently, the actional mode has given way, more and more, to the contemplative tendency. This has been made visible in the current interest in mystical religion, in the practice of meditation, in contemplative experience and the like. At the present time, the Christian religion is trying to give place to both of these modes, both at once. But because they are contrasting modes, they seem to be in a clash with one another. This is the subject to which I would like to address my remarks. I know of no better way to deal with the subject of religious motivation.

I will start with an illustration, a story first told me by Emil Fackenheim. It is the story of a rabbi who thought that he knew when the Messiah would come. So, the rabbi went to the city of Jerusalem, booked a room in a hotel, wishing to be at the exact spot and at the right time. He had been waiting for some days when early one morning, shortly before dawn, he heard trumpets sounding from the direction of the Mount of Olives. He knew that this was the appropriate signal; but he didn't know that some pranksters had gone up there and were blowing away on some horns. From his vantage point, everything was right. It was the right time, the right place, the right time of day,

and the right sounds. So, he went to the window of his hotel room, raised the shade, looked out, and on the street below he saw a donkey driver beating his donkey. He put down the shade in disappointment, saying, "if the donkey driver is beating his donkey the Messiah has not yet come."

I tell this story because it illustrates a recent religious mood, and not simply within Christianity. We refer to the temper of the sixties. It was a time of the social gospel (in Christian terminology). It was a time in which it was appropriate to say that there is no salvation for everyone. There was great reaction against treating salvation, whatever salvation means, in private terms. There was an attempt, as it was said, to "de-privatize" salvation, indeed, to "de-privatize" religion. There was determination to link the aspirations regarding the coming of the kingdom of God to aspirations regarding the betterment of society. All of this was directed toward problems: toward the abolition of poverty and hunger and economic inequality and the plight of the underprivileged in whatever form. The mood was given strong theological support, particularly through "the theology of hope." The actional mode was regulative.

Accordingly, there was no place for quietism. Thus, when one talks about motivation for behavior in this setting, the words one uses are words like "involvement," "commitment," and engagement." Such mottos articulated very well with the interests students had in changing society.

I remember talking with the German theologian Hans Küng in 1965. When asked by students, "What should we do now?" Father Küng replied, "Support the unrest wherever you find it." The amplification read: support the revolution; recognize the necessity of the social and cultural transition; accelerate the change; be upsetting! Criticize the status quo! This was the mood.

A very different mood occurred shortly thereafter, and seems to be very prominent today. I can illustrate this one by drawing upon my experience as a teacher at U.C.S.B. I was teaching a course entitled "From Augustine to Luther" one year, early in the seventies. Since the course material covered the era in which St. Francis of Assisi was prominent, the class elected to make contact with some of the Franciscans in the Santa Barbara community. The class journeyed to the Old Mission, then followed this visit with a session with the sisters living in the Monastery of Poor Clares. I have described the incident in greater length in my book Hope Against Hope (1976); I'll simply focus on the central point in my remarks here.

It happened that after nearly an hour of discussion, one of the students asked the sisters a set of questions about their own religious motivations. The questions dealt with the reasons the sisters had taken the religious vows they had. In response, one of the

sisters said, "We understand ourselves to be living at the very center of the universe; and nothing happens at the periphery or on the edges which doesn't reflect back to the center."

The statement became fixed in my mind, for it brought me close to some of the suggestions Mircea Eliade has made, particularly in his book, The Sacred and the Profane, about the nature of religion. He talks about religion in terms of space and time, margins and centers, etc. The students, too, were affected by the statement. All of us, I believe, realized that the statement has turned things around for us. We had come to the monastery more or less assuming that we knew where we were, and that the sisters were somewhat out of touch with reality as we know and understand it. But the statement indicated that the monastics believed themselves to be "in the center." This upset the boundary situations we had taken to be self-evident. Robert Lifton has more to say about the phenomenon of "boundaries" in a book with that title.

Shortly thereafter I read a book within which there was an article by James Dittes, Yale psychologist, which began as a book review of Kenneth Keniston's The Uncommitted. Keniston had analyzed tendencies among youth, and had concluded that youth were exercising an attitude of uncommitment. He interpreted this as meaning that the youth saw nothing large or compelling enough to capture and sustain their commitments. In other words, there was nothing on the horizon for which they would choose either to live or die.

Dittes believed Keniston's point to be sound when taken at face value. He recognized, too, that commitment is on a down swing. But he interpreted the matter differently. He saw it as a deliberate attempt to find an alternative to commitment, and he referred to the stance of "positive disengagement." It is disengagement because it means pulling back, a withdrawal of sorts. But it is "positive" because those exercising this option were striving to find a way not to feel guilty about what they had done, or were attempting to do.

The West hasn't honored "disengagement" very highly, regarding engagement, commitment, and involvement to be obvious virtues. But Dittes saw that what was happening at the time, particularly among the students, was an attempt to disengage in virtuous terms. It was a desire to find a positive way to withdraw, to retreat, or pull back. We recall, of course, that we are talking about religious sources of motivation.

I put this together with the fascination with monastic life and mystical life and realized that that is what the monks have been doing all along—positive disengagement. And then I got involved reading Thomas Merton. Merton talked about positive disengagement, although he didn't quite talk like this, as a means of social reform. For the Western mind there's conflict there. Most people would think that

social reform is an active process. But Merton makes it very clear that social reform is a product of offering a viable alternative. And the viable alternative needs to be an alternative way of being.

Through that kind of recognition of the switch from action to contemplation has come an interest in recovering the contemplative tradition within Christianity. And this is the ferment of the moment within religion as I see it. I know that somebody else might say that the big ferment is in the conservative side of Christianity, the Billy Graham movement and all those other things. I'm not so much interested in that, so I think my analysis is probably biased, because I didn't take this into account very much; my interest lies elsewhere.

It seems to me that the great intrigue within the tradition now is in recovering the contemplative aspects of the Christian religion. It is a direct product, a wonderful fallout in a way, of the exposure to Asian religious traditions. I don't think there was a mind for spirituality in the West. The mind was for doctrine, for belief, for ideational things, for intellectual things. But then this wonderful coming to awareness of Eastern modes of spirituality created the motivation on the part of Westerners to look within their own tradition to see if they could find some kind of parallels. There does not seem to be any contest going on there, because there is such a rapport between contemplative materials in the West and contemplative materials in the East. There is a kind of unanimity. But it's a tradition that has been so much underplayed within Christianity, because of the over-stress on the actional, Calvinist, work-ethic, commitment and engagement. And now we are seeing the turn-around. What makes it interesting to me is that it has come very fast. The time when action was at its peak was less than ten years ago. At the moment, although I can't base this on statistics, it has switched to spirituality, to contemplation.

This would lead then to some predictions about where things will go from this point forward. Thus, I want to spend the rest of the time at my disposal to sketch some of the developments I believe we can expect in the days and years ahead. I believe there will be a greater convergence of religious tendencies in the West, and maybe East and West converging in certain respects.

First of all, I believe the religion we can expect to see will be manifestly more feminine than masculine. These are loaded words, I recognize. So, I will take cover in an analysis provided by David Bakan in his book The Duality of Human Existence, a book which focusses on the distinction between agency and communion. Agency, the attempt to take things into one's own hands and set a certain line of action in motion, runs in direct contrast to communion, a mood or disposition which rests upon one's sense of the oneness of all things. One cannot do this swiftly or without qualification, but there are ways of correlating the one disposition with masculinity and the other

with femininity. It has been said, for example, that life is something men seem to need to work out, while life is something that happens to a woman, something that tends to flow through and be bestowed through woman. This is the distinction I have in mind. And I am surmising that the great tendency in the West, to link religion with masculinity, will give way, little by little, to the corresponding tendency.

Of course, suggestions of this sort draw upon the work of scientists like Robert Ornstein with their analyses of the two sides of the brain. They also focus on the role of scientific method, and with this the fate of the Enlightenment period. There is very good reason to think that the Enlightenment period is about over. Daniel Bell says that it is dead. There are people who want to keep it going, particularly scholars with vested interests in scientific method. But if it isn't over, one thing we can be sure of is that it is being understood. The Enlightenment presuppositions are being recognized now for what they are. We are becoming more and more self-conscious about the assumptions in scientific method. I think that one of the clearest current examples of that is E.F. Schumacher's book, A Guide for the Perplexed. It starts with the recollection of being in Leningrad. He walks through the streets of Leningrad following a map and he gets to a corner in the city. He knows where he is, but he is lost because the map doesn't correlate with what he sees. He asks some passerby to help him and he says, "This is where I should be." And the passerby says, "Well, that's where you are." And he says, "That can't be where I am because the map doesn't show it. Where I am there's four churches here, one on each corner, but these churches aren't on the map." And the woman said, "That's the way it is. We don't register churches on the map any longer." But he says, "One of them is here, but it's a museum." And she says, "Well, that was a church, but now that church has become a museum."

Schumacher concludes that all his life he has believed in things that never appeared on anyone's map. And the scientific method is able to map all kinds of things, but it doesn't map everything. And I think there's greater and greater interest in those things that don't get scientifically mapped. I think we are going to see this manifested in criticism of problem solving. It is coming in all fields. The problem-solving technique has very many weaknesses and limitations. We have even used problem-solving in religion. I think you can look at TM that way. You can look at transactional analysis that way. You can look at bookstores. All the how-to-do-it books: how to build garages, how to fix things, how to make love, how to become right with God. That is prominent now, but that is going to be criticized along with the criticism of the scientific method, along with the criticism of problem solving. I think it is directly related to the kind of shift from the one lobe to the other, from criticism of the analytic, discursive mind, to appreciation for the intuitive, insightful, holistic way of going about things.

The second point with respect to the future is in line with the first. There will be a greater emphasis within the Christian religion—but that's getting so broadly defined now that we're not talking about it in very narrow terms—a greater emphasis upon non-rational factors as over against rational factors. This is a corollary to the first point. With this it will be much more polytheistic than monotheistic. I don't think I mean that in traditional theistic terms. But I mean there will be a greater sensitivity to the presence of spirits, of living personages, who, as Christians would say, are in the "invisible company of the saints."

I cite an example just to illustrate the point. In that same course that I offer year after year, I try to keep track of the interests of the students. We always read Anselm. Anselm has a number of fine books that we read. We read the book, Cur Deus Homo, "Why the God-Man," "Why did God become man?" A few years back we would spend all our time analyzing the arguments. Nowadays, although I still do that, the discussion predictably focusses on the role of angels. Anselm says a lot about angels. The students are interested in whether or not there are angels. "Do you think there are angels?" they ask me. I say, "Yes, I think there are angels." Then we get into a lot of speculation about angels.

At one level it may be superficial; that is, interest in the spirits that may be among us, or that life that may be around us in different form. But in another way it is very profound. Archetypes are back in. The great interest in archetypal reality is coming into Christianity in a way that has not been present before. Or if it has been present before, I missed it. There's an attempt to recover that side of the Christian religion.

But to return to the sustaining theme: what seems to be unique to the Christian religion at the present time is that the two contrasting modes, action and contemplation, are both strong and prominent at one and the same time. In the past, it seems, there has always been a greater emphasis upon one or the other of them, and at times, the emphasis becomes too great and stimulates a counter response. "Otherworldliness" seems to become excessive, then is corrected by a tendency toward "this worldliness." But at the present time the two currents seem to be running in such close correspondence that they have become visibly interdependent. When we speak about "religious reasons for motivation," I believe the most significant fact about the Christian contribution to the larger world scene is the following: now, perhaps for the first time, it may be possible to understand a little more clearly how the process of alternation (action and contemplation following each other) works. If this can be understood, there is a chance for a fullness of expression that has not been possible before. Similarly, when the process is understood, persons involved need not be victimized by this trend or that tendency any longer. One is enabled to place the chapters within the sequence

into clearer perspective. In a sense, then, this is a control element. Knowledge of the workings of the process will enable those affected by it to insert an element of deliberateness, or, if this be an inappropriate word, an element of design. The Christian religion has always sought to allow each mode to serve as inspiration for behavior. Because the modes are contrasting, they have been placed antithetically. When they are seen as complements, the picture changes. And this is the change that seems to be in prospect today.

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