

CHRISTIANITY

An Introduction



Denise Lardner Carmody • John Tully Carmody

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Preface

We conceive of this book as a comprehensive introduction to the Christian religion. It derives from courses that we have taught, both together and singly, at state institutions and also at church-affiliated schools. Keeping in mind the special needs of today's undergraduates, we have stressed a well-defined pedagogical format, concrete prose, and numerous contemporary examples. For each chapter we provide an outline, a summary, and study questions. A moderate number of references show some of the major sources for each chapter, and a rather full glossary at the end of the text offers help with technical terms that appear in boldface in the text. Finally, a fairly extensive annotated bibliography offers the more industrious reader many further resources.

We have been moved to write this book because none of the texts we used in teaching the Christianity course proved sufficiently comprehensive. Specifically, none met the need we felt to present the Christian worldview, and the Christian history, and present-day Christian religious experiences. The hallmark of our text, then, is its threefold, comprehensive format of worldview, history, and description of current religious experience. Insofar as students need to know all three, we hope our text will prove especially apt to meet students' needs.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Religion
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Summary

Religion

The correlation of ordinary reality, “the way things are,” with mystery marks a religious approach to understanding worldly affairs, for religion finds mystery at the core of human life. Contrary to science, which limits its sure pronouncements to what the senses can verify, religion opens onto realities beyond the senses. Contrary to **secularism**,* which takes the world bounded by space and time as its full horizon, religion recognizes portions of human experience that exceed the world of space and time. T. S. Eliot expressed a part of this religious attitude when he spoke of “the still point of the turning world.”¹ There are moments when human beings experience more than what science can measure, and spill over the containers of secularism. Times of love, creativity, deep prayer, and bedrock suffering all give insistent evidence that human beings are *more*.

Mystery is closest in such moments when human beings are *more*. At those times another dimension seems to fill out. Who would deny that the space between two people who are in love is fuller, more energetic, richer than the space between two straphangers on the subway? The time when the artist or scientist enjoys the flame of creativity is qualitatively different from the time when she takes coffee or reads her mail. If you have ever come upon an old person lost in prayer at the back of a chapel, you know that deep prayer has something unworldly about it. If you have ever been forced down to your bedrock by suffering, you know that you have scraped away many false portions to get to your true self.

There is a qualitative intensity or richness in these experiences that human instinct refuses to dismiss. If science or secularism has no place for them, then so much the worse for science or secularism. Our loves, creative works, deep times of prayer, and bedrock sufferings are some of the most important things about us. Certainly they say more about who we are than does our body chemistry or our stock portfolio. And a major reason why these qualitatively intense experiences say more about who we are is that they evoke mystery. Each and all, they reveal that the

*Terms in boldface appear in the glossary.

human person lives out into a fullness, an at least potential *All*, that holds the key to his vocation. When we are struck down by suffering or raised up by beauty, we step outside the bounds of science or secularism and ask questions more personal, more compelling, more directly tied to what being human entails. We ask questions about why we are here on this earth, why we have been given this lifetime, why we so often have to suffer evil and see the defeat of good.

The significance of these questions lies not only in the answers they evoke but in the orientation they give. By raising questions about her origin or destiny, a person confronts the mystery at the core of human existence. Human beings are the only animals who can ask where they came from, where they are going. We are the only animals who have a reflective consciousness interested in grasping our full situation. From this reflective consciousness come the **cultural** developments that distance us from other highly developed animals. However bright, chimpanzees and dolphins have not generated art, science, architecture, drama, or economics. Whatever rudimentary similarities zoologists can find in higher animals' work or play, a chasm remains between humans and other animals. Because of our orientation toward the whole, the full horizon of **being**, the human species has added another layer to evolution. Over the physical layer of life, the biosphere, we have spread a layer of thought, the **noosphere**.

It would take us astray to describe the contemporary advances of the noosphere that communications are making today. It might also distract from this section's main point. For most aspects of today's communications are quantitative, whereas the main point in this section is qualitative. At the heart of human experience there is a still point, a quiet center, where the reflective personality finds life mysterious. When challenged, this personality realizes that life is more than a problem. A problem is something we think we can solve. It is a matter of acquiring more or better information, of applying new or better analytical techniques. A genuine mystery occurs in another order. It is too rich for our minds to grasp, too full of meaning or being or implication. The human person is a genuine mystery. None of us has ever understood ourself or another human person utterly, in the way we can understand a theorem of Euclid's. The universe is a genuine mystery. No matter how far scientists probe into space, or how deeply they descend into subatomic matter, there is present a richness of organization, an immensity of power, that boggles their minds.

The religions turn on mystery. Calling it God, Brahman, Tao, and other names, they have organized all human life by reference to mystery. This is true for traditional Christianity, so we try to keep the mystery before us as we explore Christianity in this introductory text.

The Format of This Book

Let us now describe how this book is organized. In brief, it proceeds in three parts: the Christian worldview, Christian history, and contemporary faces that Christianity shows.

The main reason for beginning with the Christian worldview is the likelihood that readers will pick this book up assuming they know what Christianity entails. Readers who live in lands that many call Christian may well expect to find familiar notions between these covers. But chances are this will not wholly be the case. The original message of Jesus and the fullest development of Christian culture clash with modern Western belief and practice. Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish **existentialist** noted for his penetrating thought, encountered a similar situation in his day. In trying to explain the implications of radical Christian faith to his fellow Danish burghers, he found that their “official” Christianity had inoculated them against virtually all the strong strains of Jesus’s message. Anything that upset their personal comfort or civic peace they considered “un-Christian.”

To confront this problem, we begin by discussing the Christian worldview. In fact, we start the confrontation in the next section of this introduction, by attending to the criticisms that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a **prophetic** Christian and Nobel-Prize-winning Russian writer, has made of American capitalist society. From there, the entire first part of the book will attend to the challenging ideas that lie at the heart of Christian thought.

The second part of our text traces the historical origins of the Christian worldview. How has it developed from Jesus to the present? Where has the Christian faith spread to, how has it fared when it has come into secular power, why has it greeted warmly some forms of **pagan** culture (like philosophy) and opposed bitterly other forms (like modern science)? In a limited space, we describe the major events that spread the Christian influence from the first band of Jesus’s followers to a major portion of the Western world and beyond.

The third part of our text presents scenes from diverse dramas of Christian faith being enacted in different parts of the world today. As the history will have made clear, Jesus’s followers split into three basic groups. For the sake of convenience, we now separate Christians into great sub-families called Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox. Catholic Christianity is especially vital today in Latin America, so we shall describe recent events there. Protestant faith and theology have been especially sensitive to the implications of modern science and politics, so we shall examine these implications as discussed at a recent conference of the World Council of Churches on Faith and Science in an Unjust World. Orthodoxy takes an especially intriguing form in Greek and Russian **monasticism**, so we shall describe the strong impact monasticism continues to make on the Orthodox. Finally, to introduce two other members of the Christian family that do not fit any of the above categories but are especially dynamic today, we have included chapters on black American Christianity and current feminist theology. The book concludes with a summary of the heart of the Christian matter.

Our format, then, moves from discussion of the Christian worldview through Christian history to some of Christianity’s current faces. To get our discussion of the Christian worldview off to a provocative start, let us consider the impact that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn caused when he brought his Christian philosophy to Harvard University.

Solzhenitsyn at Harvard

In June 1978, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn delivered the principal address at Harvard University's 327th commencement. He had been forcibly deported from the Soviet Union in 1974, for a long series of prophetic attacks on that country's leaders and policies. Coming to Vermont, where he continued to document the horrors of the Soviet regime and especially of its infamous prison camps in the Gulag Archipelago, Solzhenitsyn soon made his American hosts realize that their culture also was far from passing muster. The address at Harvard impressed this realization on a broad segment of the academic community.

A prophet is one who speaks a word of judgment that he thinks comes from God. In the biblical tradition, the prophet is a vehicle of the Word of the Lord, which calls human beings to repent of their evils. Solzhenitsyn does not describe himself as hearing speeches from God or witnessing divine visions; nevertheless, he works at the core of the prophetic task, which is warning human beings that they are failing to meet divine standards.

Where did Solzhenitsyn get his sense of having such a mission? From a dramatic happening in his own life. Having been released from the Gulag, he found himself struck down by cancer. In December 1953, he was given only three weeks to live. But, miraculously, he did not die. His cancer, actively malignant and long neglected, went into remission and then was cured. Considering this "act of God" with his experience of the prison camp, Solzhenitsyn developed the conviction that his life was no longer his own. Thenceforth it belonged to the special work God had in store for him.

"Like the *starsy*, the wandering 'God folk' of Old Russia, Solzhenitsyn made of himself a living witness, an incarnate testimony against the secular legions of evil. He would stride the land, harried, persecuted, a leprous beggar if need be, to cry out the truth against the black wind of lies—above all, against oblivion, that obscene amnesia whereby the indifferent or numbed generations of the present-day Soviet state have forgotten the millions and millions of victims."²

Thus the great spokesman of truth, thickset and bearded, strode onto the Harvard stage and declaimed to the West. His message was no collection of comforts. The same combination of personal suffering and **Orthodox** faith that had made Solzhenitsyn the enemy of Marxism-Leninism gave him a perspective on American culture that upset many in the Harvard audience. Happy when he had championed the truth against Soviet Communism, applauding when he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature, many Americans—especially academicians—turned to stone when they heard his Harvard address. In it many of them met vigorous Christian faith for the first time.

To begin, Solzhenitsyn remarked on Western cowardice: "A decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today."³ Second, he said the West has lowered its cultural goals to concentrate essentially on its own material well-being. Third, he claimed Western societies have

become legalistic, with results more noxious than they realize: "Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relationships, this creates an atmosphere of spiritual mediocrity that paralyzes man's noblest impulses."⁴

Solzhenitsyn went on to say that by an abuse, or a misunderstanding, of freedom, the West has sanctioned the rise of overt criminality, sometimes to the point of bending over backwards to protect terrorists' rights. "This tilt of freedom toward evil has come about gradually, but it evidently stems from a humanistic and benevolent concept according to which man—the master of the world—does not bear any evil within himself, and all the defects of life are caused by misguided social systems, which must therefore be corrected. Yet strangely enough, though the best social conditions have been achieved in the West, there still remains a great deal of crime; there is even considerably more of it than in the destitute and lawless Soviet society."⁵

The attack went on, blistering the press, the superficial fashions in Western intellectual circles, socialism, capitalism, power-politics, and more. Nonetheless, it was not simply a scathing indictment. Strong as Solzhenitsyn's criticisms were, little inclined as he was to sugarcoat his medicine, there was a palpable strain of compassion in his words. He said he was not surprised to find weakness in his land of exile: anyone reading the signs of the times would have expected it. But the degree of Western sickness that Solzhenitsyn diagnosed, and the cause he assigned blame to, surprised many of his hearers. He said the sickness was near to crisis, and he pinpointed its cause as the rejection of Christianity, with its "great reserves of mercy and sacrifice." He alleged that in modern times Western states have turned away from Christianity to materialism. They have achieved many human rights, but at the price of dimming a sense of responsibility to God and society. "All the celebrated technological achievements of progress . . . do not redeem the twentieth century's moral poverty. . . ." Thus spake the prophet Aleksandr, as a multitude grumbled in Harvard Yard.⁶

The Challenge of Traditional Christianity

Let's briefly look at some of the tenets of Solzhenitsyn's traditional Christian faith that he feels have been forgotten in the West. In traditional Christianity, technological riches cannot compensate for moral poverty. Traditional Christianity sees as its real treasure the holy God. With right relation to the holy God, a person is full of riches. Without right relation to the holy God, a person is inconsolably deprived. Christians have long confessed that the first commandment is to love God with one's whole mind, heart, soul, and strength. The second commandment is like the first: To love one's neighbor as oneself. Solzhenitsyn makes these views the cornerstone of his ethical construction. Unless we understand this, his opinions are likely to seem self-consciously virtuous or antiquated.

In the mainstream of Christian tradition, love of God and love of neighbor are at the heart of being human. God is the creative mystery that makes all things be.

One's neighbor is an image of God, just as one's self is. Nothing is more essential to good order, both personal and social, than acting on these two truths. For Christian thinkers, both the individual personality and society unravel when the first commandment is disobeyed. Human beings start to think of creation as a matter of happenstance. Before long they regard it as a tissue of evolutionary accidents having no rhyme or reason. Neglecting the second commandment brings parallel disasters. If human beings are not reflections of God, they easily become dispensable, abusable. At first hand, Solzhenitsyn has seen a society that disposes of human beings when they protest its murders. To his mind, the Gulag Archipelago results directly from Marxist-Leninist atheism. These are judgments typical of traditional Christian thought.

Traditional Christian thought regards the center of human existence as a mystery beyond our control. *God* names a reality, a power, that is not at our beck and call. Rather, we should be at the beck and call of God, because we derive completely from God's creative love. Modern Western culture has largely cast off these Christian convictions, Solzhenitsyn notes. From the Renaissance, the West has exalted human autonomy. With the rise of modern science, we have gained impressive control over nature. Discoveries in astronomy, biology, and psychology have demolished the centuries-old view that the earth is the center of the universe. No longer can one believe that creation occurred as depicted in the first chapters of Genesis. No longer does the wisdom of the Church seem equal to the problems of our times. Solzhenitsyn does not do justice to these causes of the modern revolt against traditional faith, and he fails to mention the religious wars, bigotries, corruptions, and dishonesties that fed the fires of revolt. When the final accounting is made, religious institutions will have to pay dearly for the damages to humanity that have occurred in modern times. They made faith all too easy to despise.

On the other hand, orthodox Christianity will not absolve modern human beings of guilt, any more than it will absolve the churches. In the Christian view, human beings are more than ignorant; they are also sinful, freely choosing to do evil. East and west, north and south, we can avert our faces from God, refusing to grant our neighbors justice. There is nothing inevitable in a Gulag Archipelago, any more than in a Dachau, Auschwitz, or torture chamber in Brazil. Like the genocides in Cambodia, Nigeria, and Armenia, they tell a shocking story of human malice.

Out of personal experience, Solzhenitsyn tells the West that its quarrel with traditional Christianity is superficial. Line up all the legitimate grievances against Christian religion, he says, and they will not overbalance the need human beings have for a God and a strong moral code. For Solzhenitsyn agrees with his predecessor Dostoevski: If God does not exist, everything is permitted. Negatively, if God does not exist, there is no ultimate judge who will punish the wicked and reward the good. Positively, if God does not exist, we are drowning in moral chaos, unable to find deep joy or peace. In traditional Christianity, God the judge is finally less significant than God the treasure on whom our hearts have been set. Without a fullness of being, light, and love, human existence is hellish.

The orthodox way is more positive than negative. Show people the beauty of God, it says, and you will solve half the problem of making a just society. The other half of the problem will remain. Bad will and selfishness will continue to cause awful suffering. But people will no longer live in a madhouse—a society denying itself the one source of its health. Walk the orthodox way and you will leave the company of fools. Solzhenitsyn insists that life is deeper, better, sharper than what godless fools can fathom. It is more exciting and more demanding. Where Wall Street and Madison Avenue lead to spiritual mediocrity, orthodox wisdom leads to the traditional dictum: “God’s glory is human beings fully alive.”

Faith as a Horizon

A religious faith like Christianity is a horizon against which the believer sets his or her experience. Just as relativity theory or quantum mechanics serves physicists as an interpretational framework, so a religious faith serves believers as an interpretational framework. We establish deep convictions and make choices about nature, society, the self, and ultimate reality based on our interpretational framework or horizon. Part of Solzhenitsyn’s quarrel with Western culture is with its unwillingness to make explicit the interpretational framework behind its spiritual lethargy. If it were made explicit, a **dialectic** could be established.

A dialectic is a juxtaposition of differing interpretational frameworks. Lining up the two points of view, one compares them on pivotal questions and attempts to clarify their respective truths. In the first part of our book we pave the way for such a comparison. By explaining the Christian worldview, we provide the understanding necessary for the reader to compare Christianity dialectically with other faiths. Behind our work is the assumption that a liberal education encourages dialectics. We assume that encouraging a clash of faiths is part of a college’s or a university’s commitment to pursuing truth. It is not our task here to compare Christianity with all other faiths. It is our place to explain the Christian worldview clearly enough, and make enough comparisons, to get the process going.

Perhaps an example of conflicting worldviews will make the idea of establishing a dialectic easier to understand. The main characters in Margaret Atwood’s novel *Life Before Man*⁷ stand in marked contrast to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Where he is quite certain of his central values, they are centerless. All three of these main characters—Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje—contemplate suicide, because all three feel empty and depressed. Whatever faith they had, religious or secular, has slipped away. As a result, they stand naked against the winds of aging, loneliness, and failure. The novel depends on our identifying with Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje. Were they not typical contemporary Westerners, we would put the book down after a few pages. But they *are* typical, so we study them as we would study people who live in our own apartment building, or people we see each morning in the mirror. By and large, contemporary Western society has lost a coherent faith. Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje are representative in having work that usually bores them and love

affairs that fail to satisfy them. The horizon against which they set their daily experiences is murky and minimalist. They expect only enough light to make it through the day, make it to the grave.

Of course, not all contemporary Westerners are faithless, any more than all contemporary Westerners are Christians like Solzhenitsyn. It is also true that not all irreligious contemporary Westerners contemplate suicide, and that many contemporary Christians disagree with Solzhenitsyn significantly. But all contemporary Westerners live in a milieu that is defined by the dialectical clash between faith and non-faith. Unless we live in a bomb shelter, the issues of life's meaning bubble on our stove every day. Such issues may not be explicit, but they certainly play implicitly through all our decisions and moods.

Solzhenitsyn stands by his analysis of contemporary Western culture because it best squares with his deep convictions about the human spirit. Going to the center of the human spirit, he finds it meant to embrace honesty and love. Then, looking about for the faith that best matches this conviction, he chooses the Christianity of his native Russian culture. By contrast, he rejects Marxism-Leninism and its basic atheism as a system of dishonesty and hatred. In the person of Lenin, he sees a sort of Anti-Christ—a father of lies and destruction.⁸ Without scruple, Lenin would change his positions to suit his advantage. When one writes that principle large, one has a state like the Soviet Union.

The “faith” of Western materialism is almost a non-faith, in that it is confused on so many points. Still, it has a certain instinctive coherence, insofar as rejecting God, exalting science and technology, and acknowledging only a material reality go hand-in-hand. As in examining the Soviet system, the question is whether this Western materialism is in harmony with the human spirit. Can one be radically honest and radically loving on its terms? Or do radical honesty and radical love burst the bonds of materialism, insisting and demonstrating that reality is *more*?

That is the sort of question one must keep in mind when evaluating any faith, Christian, Marxist, Humanist, or Hindu. How well does it accommodate the inner postulates of the human spirit, the human drive to know and to love? How deeply does it illumine the human condition, how powerfully heal human ills? Keeping this question in mind, we explain Christian convictions, history, and current movements so as to make them competitive in the dialectical search for truth. In the tradition of liberal education, we ask what light and healing Christianity offers. We hope the result is a study that could change a life. It has changed our lives, giving us what we hope is a sure footing in both the university and the church.

Summary

Mystery is at the core of religion. The best way to begin our study of the Christian approach to mystery seemed to be to take up the Christian worldview. Challenging readers' assumptions that they already know what Christians think, we hoped to get a good start on the Christian approach to life's most profound issues. We will deal

with that topic in more depth in the next part. Following that, we promised, will come a sketch of Christian history and a survey of some of Christianity's contemporary appearances.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's speech at Harvard served to articulate the challenge that traditional Christian faith puts to the modern West. In attacking Western materialism, Solzhenitsyn showed the quarrel to ripple out from the Christian conviction that God, not human self-satisfaction, is the center of a sane worldview. We then took this quarrel as an instance of a dialectic, the clash between different horizons, and suggested that dialectics serve liberal education well.

Study Questions

1. Why is mystery at the core of religion?
2. What is your impression of Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address?
3. Is the traditional way, rooted in the primacy of God, as logical as the materialistic way of the contemporary West? Why?
4. How does faith function as an interpretational horizon?

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," line 62, in *The Four Quartets* (Harcourt Brace and World, 1947).
2. George Steiner, "Books," *The New Yorker*, August 25, 1980, p. 94.
3. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart" [Harvard address, June 8, 1978], in his *East and West* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 44.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
6. Our colleague Michael Kalton, who was at the 1978 Harvard commencement, informed us that another multitude praised Solzhenitsyn's courage. Kalton's analysis of this praise is intriguing. He sensed that it was impossible for Solzhenitsyn or anyone else to offend many Harvard academicians. They have become people capable of absorbing any challenge and trapping it in the bland realm of the "interesting." Beneath this attitude, however, likely lies the pernicious faith that nothing finally matters very much. For Solzhenitsyn's own impressions of the reactions to his Harvard speech, see *The Mortal Danger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 64–67.
7. Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).
8. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Lenin in Zurich* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

NICENE CREED

(THE NICAEO-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN PROFESSION OF FAITH, 381 C.E.)

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God. Born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father: through whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary: and was made man. He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven: and is seated at the right hand of the Father. And he will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. And of his kingdom there will be no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father. Who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified: who spoke through the prophets.

And in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the world to come. Amen.
