

2021-22 CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 1

A Religious System in a Changing World

In these chronicles I have often written about systems—in particular economic, political and legal systems. This time I'm focusing on religious systems. In particular one of the oldest—that of the Catholic Church.

But first a word about myself and a bit of terminology. I am a former monk and Roman Catholic priest. Since then some changes have occurred. I am still a Christian but my wife and I practice our faith in a Unitarian Fellowship.

As for terminology: when referring to the pope, cardinals and bishops Catholics tend to use the term “hierarchy”. The word literally means “sacred rulers”. In this chronicle on systems I will use the term “senior management”.

I was inspired to write this chronicle by a photo. It showed an event where a group of Christians were carrying a large wooden cross, their heads bowed in prayer. This event occurred on Wednesday, January 6, 2021 as those religious folks participated in the invasion of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. Encouraged by Donald Trump and several other leaders, the demonstration became violent and ultimately led to the death of five of their fellow Americans.

How could such a situation have occurred in a country that was known worldwide as an example of successful democratic government? That is what I intend to discuss in this chronicle. But first some background.

From Spirituality to a Religious System.

As we are all aware, Christianity was founded by the followers of Jesus Christ who wished to preserve and promote his teachings as articulated in the Bible. During the life of Jesus there was no real Christian religion. There were groups of people who practiced his teachings and got together to pray and share a sacred meal (likely prepared by women).

The first written text of Christianity in the Bible was the *Acts of the Apostles* written several decades after the death of Jesus. It was inspired by the spirituality of the elders who knew him. In the Acts of the Apostles we can see the first efforts to create a religion.

In the years after Jesus' death Christians were persecuted by the Romans. But in the early fourth century Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. By that time there had also been a significant shift in the perspective and leadership of the new religion.

Growth had given rise to a need for structure and system. The religious leadership or senior management was solidified. The pope, cardinals and bishops then saw themselves as the sole interpreters of the Bible. They saw it as one of their first obligations to protect the teachings of the church and stamp out heresies. Thus the spirituality of Jesus became incorporated into what we would call a religious system with an all-male senior management at its head.

The Church and the world

For many centuries the church has cared for the sick, the suffering and the poor. It is doing the same today. But it also has a history of being dogmatic about the nature of Earth and its creatures.

In the fifth century St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, focused on the Old Testament story of Adam, and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He decided that their sin was so significant that it was passed on to all their descendants. It was what he called the "original sin".

As a result, Christians began to believe that the world was a dangerous and sinful place. The role of each person was to be aware of the sinfulness of the world, avoid temptations, live a good life as described in the Bible, and one day die and go to heaven to live with God for all eternity.

Down through the following centuries it was the responsibility of each person to follow senior management's directives. This led to an excess of power concentrated in the church's senior management. One of the major

affronts to that power was the takeover of the Holy Land by the Muslims. This led to the Pope-ordered crusades between 1095 and 1295.

In 1184 and for the next few centuries European countries introduced the Inquisition. This was a campaign to hunt down heretics who were tortured and killed if they refused to confess and reject their “false beliefs.”

In 1493, the year after Columbus discovered America, Pope Alexander VI issued the Doctrine of Discovery. This enabled Christians to confiscate all non-Christian lands, convert the inhabitants to Christianity and punish them if they would not convert. Within the last several years Indigenous peoples in several countries have asked Pope Francis to rescind this decree.

Of special significance during these turbulent times was the case of Galileo Galilei.

One day Galileo looked up into the sky with his telescope and realized that the sun was not going around the Earth as the Bible indicated. Instead, as Nicolaus Copernicus had noted in the previous century, the Earth was going around the sun. Taking a great risk, Galileo published his findings. In 1603 he was called before the Inquisition but managed to avoid punishment. In 1633 he was hauled into court again and sentenced to house arrest until his death in 1642.

The Present Situation.

Though Galileo died many centuries ago, his courage left us a legacy. We now know that spirituality and religion are not static. They must become part of a changing world. Further, in the midst of a pandemic that is the harbinger of a climate changing world, the findings of science can help our belief systems and those of future generations to evolve.

Those Christians who invaded the capital thought they were honouring the God of the Bible. But their actions, if they had succeeded, would have replaced a democracy with a theocracy. They saw Donald Trump as God’s representative even though he had lied continually and discriminated against people who came from “shithole countries”. They had no problem with his government separating children from their parents on the border.

To this day the authorities have no idea of where some five hundred parents of the children are.

Another fairly recent and distressing thing for many Catholics was the abuse of power by the senior management of the American church. I found it quite shocking to read that forty-eight percent of US Catholics voted for Donald Trump, It seems that the word came down from at least some of the leaders to tell their parishioners “If you vote for Joe Biden you are no longer a Catholic.” On one occasion while Joe Biden was attending Sunday Mass, which he does regularly, the officiating priest refused him communion because he has not spoken out against abortion.

The Way Forward.

The way forward must be a way that incorporates the findings of science. There have been a number of steps in this direction. We are seeing the reaction against current systems and efforts to create new systems—systems like the Green New Deal and the Doughnut economy. All over the world communities are trying to create systems to deal with climate change.

Many times in these chronicles I have mentioned Thomas Berry, a priest and cultural historian; Brian Swimme, a mathematical cosmologist; and Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit paleontologist. Though they see the Bible as a significant part of a new Christian spirituality, their primary source of revelation of the Divine is the living Earth and Universe. As Thomas Berry put it, there are two great books: the Earth and the Bible—and Earth is book one.

Scientists have indicated that we have come to the end of the sixty-nine million year history of the Cenozoic Era—the time of the dinosaurs’ death. Berry and Swimme now refer to the New Age as the Ecozoic Era. We are “living in the era of the house of living beings”. They present a vision for this new era that all religions and spiritualities may be able to adopt. That vision is of “*A mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth.*”

And a Final Note.

I would be remiss in my discussion of senior management if I did not make a final comment. Thinking of Earth I have always heard the term “Mother Earth”. I have never heard the term “Father Earth”.

It is way past the time for the Roman Catholic senior management to do away with its sexism. They can start by allowing women to become priests. But whether or not they wish to be ordained, women must take their rightful place in the ranks of the senior management to help guide the church.

Mike Bell, www.comoxvalleyclimatechangenetwork.ca