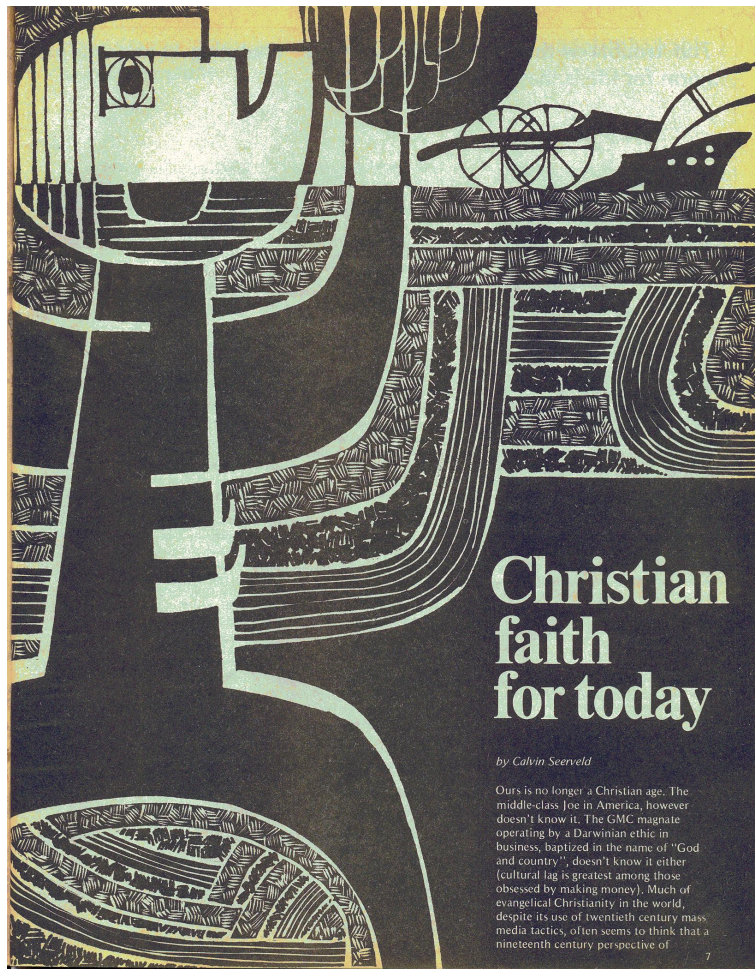


# Christian faith for today

by Calvin Seerveld



Ours is no longer a Christian age. The middle-class Joe in America, however doesn't know it. The GMC magnate operating by a Darwinian ethic in business baptized in the name of "God and country", doesn't know it either (cultural lag is greatest among those obsessed by making money). Much of evangelical Christianity in the world, despite its use of twentieth century mass media tactics, often seem to think that a nineteenth century perspective of "soul"-saving, which lets the body s for itself, is still somehow sufficient; current.

But despite the apparent ignorance of money-makers and much of official Christendom, I agree with men as diverse as T.S. Eliot and Alan Watts, Karl Rahner and Tom Hayden, that we have moved civilizationally into a post-Christian era: what is going on in the streets, in the universities, and in the military headquarters around the world - the three centers of power today - is shaped by some Godless perspective. The dynamic setting the pace, and posing the possible cultural alternatives from which men may choose to act, is a dynamic void of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is a rising generation of leaders who did not go to Sunday School like Bertrand Russell did (and fought it the rest of his life), for whom the anti-Christian militance of Mencken and Inge is purely comical, for whom my confessional statement "That Jew with a hooked nose, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, was the Son of God", is simply nonsense. Like the Dalai Lama telling me, "I am the reincarnated Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara." Nonsense. *Post-Christian*.

It is for this post-Christian world coming of age that the Christian faith has something sound to offer, fitting men's needs today.

### **The Christian Faith**

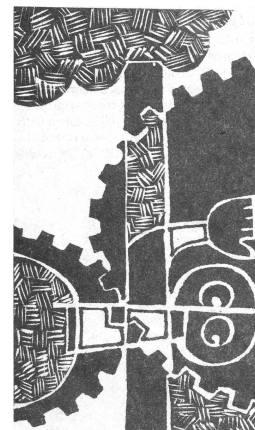
The Christian faith I speak for is a knowing trust in the reconciling Creator of the world, unfolded historically in Jesus Christ, whose directing Word is revealed in the biblical writings and in the way reality is structured. That is, effective Christian faith has Old Testament grit and earthiness as well as New Testament exuberance and certainty; it is the kind of driving, total commitment the earliest Christians practised.

From the vantage point of this living Christian faith, I'd first like to sketch three basic options most men are pursuing to find meaning at the moment, and why I judge them to be futile, dead ends.

#### **Option (1): Trust in Science**

There is the dominant, most respectable option: reaffirm our old-fashioned trust in scientific rationality to bring in the millennium of peace and plenty for all upon this earth, Amen!

Today this option is adopted largely by the Establishment - the military, university and corporate elite. The trouble with this trust in scientific reasoning as the guiding norm for life is that it dehumanizes us.



I'm not interested in showing here that scientific faith doesn't work, that instead of giving us the satisfying answers we need it brings fear, ennui, kitsch and manipulation (that could be documented too). But in demonstrating that when men trust experimental scientific reasoning as the source of meaning, that position reduces a man (and his environment) to an experimentable, machine-like object or operator. This dehumanizes humans because we aren't scientific or analytic machines. And the checkmate is not avoided if you dishonestly allow a few loopholes that put scientific Reason on a standby status now and then.

The Aristotelian lie that man is a rational animal is mocked by the record of history. The

similar contemporary lie that man is a highly complex set of bio-physio-mechanic operations, has not yet found out what it murders, but it kills humankind. For if you treat a man like a behavioral mechanism, get him to shoot and to buy and to take tests like a robot, the, poor scientized fellow still suffers and is lonely as a man.

To trust technological scientific reason to give meaning and direction for life, even if in the name of an emancipated Humanism, is to court gross inhumanity to man. Check!

### **Counter-option (2): Hippie Cult**



Two current, polar options are attracting believers who are desperate to escape the logical-box aridity and repressive tolerance generated by the rational science faith of the secular Establishment. The sincerity of the hippie cult and the fervor of radical left-wing America are catching because they offer genuine alternatives, dropping out of the technocratic rat race in search of a meaningful life. All the more pitiable that the hippie freaks and revolutionaries fracture in an anti-historical nihilism built into their positions.

I know what the gentle ones want. A cosmic sense of peace with every living thing, a sense of being relaxed, at home with rocks and rain and sunshine, without the guiltiness of having to have to go miles and miles before you sleep, but to be simply drifting like a cork bobbing on the ocean waves and troughs of good-and-evil, having any tears wiped away by smiles. Or, as Jerry Rubin inimitably put it:

People will farm in the morning, make music in afternoon and fuck wherever and whenever they want to.

Not a precious Arcadia, but a serious movement to get back to one's natural surroundings that is pre-Christian, pre-Greek; that is a would-be Eastern consciousness. As sensuous and organic as the voluptuous ecstasy enjoyed by figures in early Indian sculpture, richly primitive like tropical foliage and ivy encircling tree trunks.

But there is a rub to the drop-out, turn-on culture. For a Westerner to grow this non-teleological, Orientally peripheral, vegetative sensitivity, is probably more difficult even

than his learning to live a biblical Christian life in our mechanized society. Alan Watts said a long time ago that your western Zen tends to be beat or square unless he is totally converted to the Buddhist faith, rather than latching onto it as a reacting, displaced person.

Yet more critical than truly dropping out of mainline western culture, is the structural matter again. You don't save a man's humanity by getting him to adopt the habit of a sensitive plant. Because man is not a sensitive plant. To try to locate meaning - something that lasts beyond the flux - in human psycho-biophysical activity, whether it be sought in the simple pleasure of eating and drinking, urinating and defecating, the most exquisite sexual delight or an IT experience is a mistake, because human pleasure is necessarily short-lived; the very nerve energy and sensitivity structure in action cannot sustain bursts of pleasure indefinitely. Therefore, to hold onto meaning, if that is where it is, men are busy inducing and ensuring repeated states of organic euphoria, which repeatedly dissipate themselves.

An omen of the "check" and part of the pathos of despair is the easy presence of pharmaceuticals. For pills - taken with or without a prescription - and medicinal injections are sorry surrogates for natural, human sensitivity.

### **Counter Option (3): Radical Left**

The radical Left is a potent counter-option to the old-fashioned trust in scientific success and middle class mores. There is something puritanic, deadly serious, selflessly dedicated about the Maoists and Black Panthers and various militant anarchists' drive for alternate, new communities within the USA. They are committed people, often uprooted, street people who have nothing to lose, who know clearly what they disbelieve in, and who are willing to risk their lives for change. Their commitment to action is what attracts minorities who have been exploited, the disfranchised who can't go home again, the chronically poor, the angry youth and societal misfits. Binding them all together is an apocalyptic sureness that a Judgment Day is coming to help the oppressed.



Although sectarianism has plagued their coalitions, leaders of the radical Left groupings are aware that they need a total program, a totally different way of life to replace the

death-dealing folk-ways of the Establishment. A piecemeal attempt will still be a compromise. And the radical leftists feel in their blood that, given the tyranny of majority rule in America today, to make room for a totally different way of life - "Love it or leave it" - will take violent confrontation. And quite simply, some are prepared to go beyond talk and mimeograph machines to change the status quo and to use, as we all know, guns and plastic bombs. But force, whenever it is made the final, violent authority, only generates more destruction. You cannot build on violence, you can only smash.

And that is the damning checkmate the Left has on its hands: either it is a burlesque instead of a revolution, as Ellul suggests, co-opted by the mass media and by liberal reformers if it wants to get anything positive done, *or*, it believes its rhetoric and religiously fights totalitarian fire with totalitarian fire, breeding predatory animals. But if you hunt and humorlessly affirm the right to kill your neighbor in the name of man, in the name of Humanity, Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood! you ruin in the very neighborhood fabric of human life and destroy the peculiarly human societal relationships and institutional bonds that give shelter to men. When the law of the pack and the jungle runs a man's life, he becomes something less than man; in fact he lives like an armed naked ape. Precisely because man is *not* an animal, he grows a hardened, wanton cruelty no animal is capable of, before he dies like an armed naked ape.

A man wasn't created to hold a gun at the head of his neighbor. To have a gunman be a well-meaning, committed Humanist doesn't denature him any less. "Check" to the human millenium of the right-on revolutionary!

### **Man: A Creature of Commitment**

So far I've demonstrated the relevance of the Christian faith for today by showing, from its perspective, the futility of other major faith options which confront us daily. Biblically-directed faith offers the knowledge - for those with eyes and ears to understand - that certain options to which men give themselves today are *dead* ends in the search for meaning.

Also, in contrast to the troubling dead ends of our civilization, biblically-directed faith has the rich human life to give which men are stupidly computing, dropping out of, or shooting for. The Christian faith does not run stuck on man because it recognizes that

man is not a rational, scientific machine, not a sensitive plant, nor a violent animal, but that man is a creature of commitment. And unless he is committed to the Creator God revealed in Jesus Christ, and responds obediently to His Word, man will miss his *human* calling and denature himself, spoiling whatever his hands try to develop.

### **The Way of Shalom for Today**

The *biblical perspective* is unequivocal: this world is God's creation. As the Psalms put it, the earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord. So there are *no biblical grounds for otherworldliness*. Rather, the Christian faith assumes the integrity and richness of normal created experience and asks us to touch, cultivate and enjoy the earth as God's gift to us. The refrain running through Ecclesiastes - that men are to enjoy the ability to eat and drink and sweat daily *because* it is God's blessing portioned out to them - is gospel truth! Work and slow historical development are not a curse, but God's way to have our cup run over and bring mature praise to Him. When twentieth-century men serve idols, rapes the earth and each other, usually for Profit as god - that is what turns the earth and our creatureliness into an enemy!

Idolatry is called sin in the Bible, but it is not a matter of morality, legality or taboo. That caricature of sin is rightly blamed on the monopolistic church of the Middle Ages and Victorian moralism. But sin, biblically speaking, is rebellion against God's norms, against the ways He wants his creation unfolded. Sin is a waste of creation, thumbing your nose at God who set it up. And those who sin get twisted in a rock-bottom way, no matter how deftly it's carried off, so that only the love of the revealed Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can redirect those creaturely activities towards good.

The biblical perspective asserts that men are specially called to heal created societal relationships by setting them free to operate by God-given norms. No man or association of men may think more highly of themselves than they ought to think, and *no believers in Christ may rest till areas of human life and formative leadership on earth are reformed and conformed to the will of God*. That means Christians expect business affairs, political justice, family, school and cultural institutions all to have a specific task and a certain limited authority appropriate to that task - which no other institution may usurp with impunity. And the normative task of each institution and the serving relationship between them need to be discovered, developed and implemented with Christian sensitivity if we

are to receive a richly interrelated, integrated life; if we are to have *shalom* in society.

This is why certain Christians have started a Christian Labour Association of Canada, whose program includes an open shop clause, multiple union bargaining, and an idea for "co-determination" of policy.

This biblical dynamic also lies behind the existence of Patmos Workshop and Gallery, an institute for Christian art located in Toronto where several excellent young artists beginning their professional careers work in a guild situation with a master European painter-sculptor; trying not to form a fixed Christian style, but helping one another paint with a biblical mind the glory and misery of man.

The same motive drives associations like the Committee for Justice and Liberty in Canada and the National Association for Christian Political Action in the USA. They aren't pressure groups for parochial gain, nor remnants of the old attempt of church dictatorship over non-churchly affairs: they are citizen groups concerned that *justice* (not "blue laws") be administered for *all* men in the name of Jesus Christ, and that somehow the plurality of faith options chosen in a nation be allowed to live and bear civic fruit without repressive discrimination by the majority (Humanist *or* Christian) faith.

It is also critical, I believe, that men everywhere in our post-Christian age understand for the first time, or re-learn what has been largely forgotten since the Protestant Reformation, that the Christian faith is not confined to a moral church-going affair or church-controlled missions or churchly witness in areas of politics and social problems. Biblically Christian faith calls for straightforward, mature, communal obedience by men within their daily vocation so that they make their professional engagement itself something that pleases God.

### **God is in control**

There is one more thing I must say: the *biblical perspective* does not mean idealism, the illusion of getting beyond evil or of ushering in a millennium during our lifetime. Instead, the celebration and joy the Christian faith brings into daily life strengthens men to live comforted in the face of evil - not comfortably like Christian and secular hypocrites since before the day of Christ! But comforted and strong in the presence of real evil!

Horrible wars, incurable disease, "natural" earthquake disasters around the globe do not prove, "Aha! Jesus Christ is not in charge of the world, or He is a devil!" No. You do not have to logically square the circle of life and death to maintain your sanity. The scriptures say, the Lord is the giver of life and death, good and evil, blessing and judgment; and those who are His children may pray, as my wife who underwent Nazi occupation in the Netherlands during World War II still does, "Lord, give us strength now for when the hard times come".

According to the scriptures, God is Lord over evil too, and He picks up the pieces of our brokenness, strengthening those who trust His almighty fatherly hand.

Juxtaposing the competing faith-committed positions men are staking their lives on today *is not* a scholastic exercise. Rather, we are in the marketplace to find out who is to be the Lord of life! Where is the leadership to come from for our daily, frustrated, glorious lifetime?

This option of reformational Christian life is open today for all those who call themselves "Christian"; for those who wish peace that surpasses logic, meaning instead of despair, the *shalom* which is the rich blessing of the resurrected Christ Jesus given to those who become obedient together in repentance and thanksgiving. Then the Lord gives men their humanity in deed.

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