

# Christianity or Churchianity

Another Voice      By Dr. John A. Dick    January 8, 2025

On December 23, 2024, New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan said in an interview that President-elect Trump "takes his Christian faith seriously."

Cardinal Dolan's remark prompts me to begin my 2025 Another Voice reflections, with two brief observations about religion: first, that there has always been healthy as well as unhealthy religion. Secondly, that all religions, including Christianity, go through a 4-stage evolution that often gets repeated more than once. As the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) so often said: *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* (Latin for "the Church must always be reformed.")

## Healthy and unhealthy religion:

Healthy religion is not about using and manipulating people. The historic Jesus did not exercise power over people but empowered them to build bridges between people, promoting mutual respect and support for all people. Unhealthy religion builds walls and creates barriers separating people into qualitative classes. It relies on prejudice, ignorance, and false information, as it promotes hatred and cruelty through racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

Healthy Christianity is about searching, asking questions, and collaborative religious exploration, as people reflect on the Divine Presence in their lives.

## All religions go through a 4-stage evolution.

In stage one, they begin with an energetic, charismatic, and loosely structured foundation phase, in which faith communities develop where people live in the spirit of the founder. In the history of Christianity, we see this first stage in the early Christian communities, characterized by creativity. Men as well as women presided at Eucharistic celebrations and women and men were leaders in early Christian communities. The historical Jesus did not ordain anyone because ordination did not exist in his lifetime.

The second stage arrives when the original disciples begin to die-off and people become concerned about passing-on their faith heritage to the next generation. In stage two, beliefs are written down, sacred scriptures (like Paul's letters and the Four Gospels) take a set form, and specific rituals, like baptism and the Lord's Supper, are more uniformly established.

Ordination is created by the Christian community not to pass on "sacramental power" but as a quality control procedure – to ensure that the leaders were qualified and trustworthy.

Stage three arrives, often many years later. Religious shortsightedness gradually sets in and the institution and its leaders become the focus.

Doctrinal statements, rituals, and church structures that once pointed to the Sacred and sustained people now become, in stage three, narrow restraints and barriers to growth and life.

The church which once pointed to God now begins to point more to institutional leaders. People start being evaluated more in terms of obedience to ecclesiastical authority and unquestioned acceptance of authoritarian teaching.

Richard Rohr (b. 1943), U.S. Franciscan priest and writer on spirituality, has often described what happens to Christianity in stage three: “We morph into “Churchianity” more than any genuine transformative Christianity.”

Then, when enough people see what is happening, we move into stage four: reformation.

Today’s reformation involves all Christian traditions, not just the Roman Catholic tradition. In the current reformation, we need to move from a talked-about religion to a practice-based religion—with the focus on how we live and grow in our relationship with the Divine and with each other.

In our reformation work in 2025, all Christian churches need to focus on: a better understanding of Scripture and Christian history, and a genuine involvement and concern about issues such as human suffering, healing, poverty, environmentalism, social justice, inclusivity, care for the outsider, and political oppression. We need to form critically-observing reform groups, who see, judge, and then act. Big issues await us.

My warmest regards as we move ahead.

Jack

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