

Pastor's Book Review  
By: Pastor Jim Melvin

Pastor's Picks and Pans  
"The Future of Faith" by Harvey Cox  
by Pastor Jim Melvin



In the past five years I've read countless books documenting what their revered authors think is happening and will happen to Christianity. As you might suspect from the almost universal decline in the number of people joining and attending churches, most of those books have sounded a pessimistic note. Many people in Western Europe and North America even go as far as to say that the church is dying, echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's famous "God is dead" proclamation from way back in the nineteenth century.

Harvey Cox, influential religious author of the 1965 bestseller "The Secular City," strongly disagrees. To paraphrase Mark Twain, rumors of God's death have been greatly exaggerated. Cox contends, in fact, that the world is experiencing a great upsurge in religious interest and seeking. As part of this reawakening, however, what it means to be religious or Christian is changing dramatically.

Even more surprising than Cox's contention that religious activity is thriving, is his belief that fundamentalism is dying. Most of us would probably suspect fundamentalisms are the only religious groups that are growing. Instead, he sees fundamentalist activity in the world today as the death throes of old religious ideas in response to the true vitality of developing faith.

With regard to the development of the Christian church, Cox identifies three distinct ages:

- *The Age of Faith*: the first three centuries of Christianity which sought to follow Jesus' teachings
- *The Age of Belief*: extended from the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire to the 20<sup>th</sup> century during which time the church focused on orthodoxy or the right belief in doctrines
- *The Age of the Spirit*: began about 50 years ago and signifies a shift in the breaking down of barriers and Christians ignoring dogma and challenging the doctrines of the institutional church

Cox's book is at the same time threatening and hopeful. It is threatening to those who seek to hold on to cherished beliefs and traditions. The church "as we know it" may be at the edge of

extinction. It is hopeful in the sense that Cox is certain that the Spirit is at work in this process and that something new and meaningful is rising to replace the old forms. He points to the vibrancy of the church in developing nations and that it more closely resembles the Christian church of the first three centuries than the last seventeen. Cox is in a good position to make this analysis. His 1965 book “The Secular City” marked the beginning of his career-long analysis of the development of Christianity in our time.

In addition to reading “The Future of Faith,” you are invited to engage in a discussion of Cox’s book and related topics by attending a two-part discussion as part of the Faith Outside the Box series. See details elsewhere in the Progress.