

Christ Consciousness and the Three Ages of the Church

by

Matthew Del Nevo

Christ Consciousness and the Three Ages of the Church

by Matthew Del Nevo

2026

Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2026 by Matthew Del Nevo

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-676-8

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-677-5

Contents

Introduction.....	ix
Part 1: The Three Ages of the Church.....	1
The three ages	1
The Petrine centuries	8
The Pauline centuries.....	10
Spiritual but not religious	15
Advent theology	18
John Wesley, a heart strangely warmed	22
David Hume, a stylish anthropologist for a new age	26
Waking from dogmatic slumbers	35
Further background to the idea of the three ages.....	39
A Christic principle.....	68
Conclusion.....	71
Part 2: Christ Consciousness.....	72
Dethroning Christology.....	82
The Benedictine triangle as Christ consciousness	91
Right meditation as Christ consciousness	100
<i>Jiko</i> or the self selfing the self.....	109
<i>Shikantaza</i> or being still and not knowing, letting self be self, God be God	117
Death and resurrection and the age to come.....	121
Conclusion.....	126
Index.....	128

Le vent se lève! ... Il faut tenter de vivre!

—Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetière marin*

Introduction

“The three ages of the church” is an old idea going back before the Reformation to the prophetic monk Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202). A sense of the three ages of the church is no longer prophetic as in Joachim’s day; it is what we witness with hindsight. The third age of the church is, according to Joachim, and my book also, an age of the spirit, rather than an age of religious authority (first age) or an age of belief-based religion (second age). Spirit may be taken here in its keynote, whether Christian (religiously) or Hegelian (secularly), as the force of freedom or liberty. John’s Gospel says, “The spirit blows where it will” (3:8). We can feel the wind, but we can’t see it. We cannot know the wind as an object before our eyes, and it may blow us along from behind. The spirit, though, is also the Comforter, the power that draws people to Jesus, the force by which humankind might find shelter, peace, and eternity.

The age of the spirit is associated symbolically, spiritually, and in philosophical terms paradigmatically, with the apostle John, the *friend* of Jesus, rather than with Peter or Paul. Peter here is a cipher for the first age of the church, of which the Catholic Church in its heraldry holds the keys; the monarchical church of empire. Paul is a cipher of the second age of the church, the age of theological rationalism, belief, and colonisation (spreading the Gospel); the church of believers and believing. By contrast to Peter and Paul, John is the friend of Jesus, who took care of his mother Mary (symbol of the feminine carriage of religion)

from the time of Jesus' passing (death) and who had earlier, at the Last Supper, laid his head against Jesus' breast, traditionally taken among the church fathers as the symbol of hearing the true heart of the Lord. Peter, Paul, and John stand for three different, paradigmatic ways that historic Christianity, working with the spirit, has comprehended itself and continues to comprehend and present itself to the world at large, and thereby, as three kinds of "Christ consciousness". However, that consciousness symbolised by John is hardly yet known and scarcely yet begun to be embraced, particularly in churches that are defined by the spirit of another age gone by.

Part 1 of this book is a descriptive account of the three ages that I have just summarised. The value of this description is that the distinction between the ages makes a lot of sense in helping us to understand the historical phenomenon of Christianity, its disunity, its discontinuities, especially at the *spiritual* level, the all-important level; and the importance of such understanding is that it gives insight into the possibilities and grounds of Christian unity to come. The three ages represent three different modes of Christ consciousness that, in their strictly religious church-bound form, lie outside one another, like Catholics vis-a-vis Protestants vis-a-vis Pentecostals; but looked at more deeply, one can see their interdependence, and looking deeper again, their interbeing. One can trace the continuities and transversalities between each age and each form of consciousness. Part 1 on the three ages of the church is therefore about spiritual culture and the psychology of spiritual cultures; it is not about ecclesiology.

Part 2 is about Christ consciousness as the chief mark of the third age of the church. Christ consciousness here is not determined by the priest and the spiritual hierarchy (first age) or correct belief (second age), but in terms of spiritual practice. Spiritual practice has existed in all three ages. In the third age of the church the call is to contemplative prayer as the keynote spiritual practice. This is a practice that was sidelined in the second age of the church, but it was the “praying heart” of the churches of the first age. Contemplative prayer was then a tradition alive in silent, cloistered monasteries, and this remains so today. My discussion is focused on Christian meditation. I briefly discuss Christian meditation in external terms with reference to the World Community for Christian Meditation and to Centering Prayer.¹ However, the point of part 2 is to discuss the actual *experience* of meditation.

My book has been influenced by my practical life experience and, on the intellectual side, by some short retreat notes in French by Ambroise Gardeil, OP, *Le Sens du Christ*, translated anonymously by “a preacheress of Caribrook” [*sic*]² entitled *Christ Consciousness*. Along with this important (to me) translation by the anonymous nun, Gardeil’s two-volume study from the 1920s, *La Structure de l’âme et l’Expérience Mystique*, has accompanied me for some decades. I have always gone back to it from much other reading. I am not a Thomist, but I have never seen

¹ I will retain the US spelling for Centering Prayer in this book in light of the American founding of the Centering Prayer movement.

² I assume this is Carisbrooke Dominican priory on the Isle of Wight.

Gardeil's reflections surpassed. Some of my other influences may be ascertained from my references and footnotes.

Overall, this is a book about contemplative practice as the primary signature of the third age of the church, the age into which the Body of Christ is moving. This is not an attempt by me to pose as some spiritual authority; there are enough of this type flooding the internet already. Michael Ramsey, a previous Archbishop of Canterbury, in an address to the General Synod of the Church of England at Lambeth in 1971 said, "I believe Christian history is passing into a new phase". I concur with Ramsey (and not just on this point) and this book picks up on much that has happened since that address and that is happening between denominations and religions on the basis of being able to share spiritual practice without syncretism or compromise. This is something already going on all around the world, among ordinary Christian faithful; and for the Christian it has to do with Christ consciousness, which in the first instance is to do with inner sense and intuitive sensibility, rather than theology or ecclesiology—the apostle John listening to the heartbeat of Jesus.

Part 1

The Three Ages of the Church

Ideas come to us. They do not belong to us. They are not ours. The idea of the three ages of the church floated out of the pages of Franz Rosenzweig's major work, *The Star of Redemption* (1920). Rosenzweig's story is a book in itself. *The Star of Redemption* is a major Western work of religious philosophy of the twentieth century that has been ranked in terms of our modern setting alongside Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* within mediaeval Jewish philosophy.³

Rosenzweig fought in the First World War on the losing side. He sent postcards back from the trenches, where death and mud were daily ordeals, with the text of *Star* written on the cards. After the war, he collated them, wrote them up, and published them. He died a slow death after the publication of *Star*, the after-effects of biological weapons and gas attacks in the war. In the darkest of days, such as those he lived through, sometimes the light shines hardest.

The three ages

The three ages of the church are crucial for Christian self-understanding in the future, because they help situate our present time as a spiritually transitional time and put the

³ See Michael Oppenheim, "Foreword", in Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (University of Wisconsin, 2004), xii.

historical metamorphoses of the church into perspective. Our time is a transitional time for the church because of what has happened: the great wars of the recent past and the Jewish Holocaust in Catholic and Protestant heartlands. These recent great wars exhibited a violence at the heart of Christian denominations that should not have been there. The churches on both sides in the war blessed the respective armies and legitimised sending young men off to fight. The Jewish Holocaust showed how, in the heart of secular Europe, an old Christian mentality going back to the Roman Empire lives on in the spirit. The Nicene Council (325) had regarded the Jews disparagingly, so that, from then on, the “Christian” idea of the Jews as “Christ Killers” gained currency; and this led to the millennial persecution of Jews and their ostracisation (where they were not being persecuted). Understanding the three ages of the church gives us perspective as Christians on that serious part of history that has been a serious disgrace and an anti-evangel.

Georg Hegel, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, said that Christianity is judged by history and, as a spiritual force of Western culture, it was finished; we have seen Hegel’s insight borne out in the last two centuries. However, understanding the three ages of the church gives one a perspective that can see beyond the judgment of history (that so many Christians are oblivious to anyway) to a redemptive power that has been restricted by human folly in the past. The big questions that one can pose to the church are beyond dogmatic theology, but they are not beyond modern philosophy.

Let me say at the outset that I am not talking about a strict chronology here. All three ages exist simultaneously now. However, as the numbering suggests, there is a historical sequence, and the third age did not properly exist before the twentieth century any more than the second age properly existed before Martin Luther.⁴ Once the ages are underway, they begin to impact and influence each other, and this is important to all three ages as a Christian totality.

Rosenzweig distinguishes the Petrine centuries, named after the apostle Peter, from the Pauline centuries, named after the apostle Paul, from the Johannine centuries, named after the apostle John, the apostle Jesus loved. These are the names of the three ages of the church: Petrine, Pauline, Johannine. The differentiation in brief is as follows: Christian culture distinguishes between Scripture and Tradition. Tradition is associated with the church of St Peter, the Roman Church, a monarchical style of church, consonant with the first millennium, the Byzantine Empire, and the Holy Roman Empire. Scripture is associated with the Reformation-based churches that anchored their authority on their interpretation of Scripture, consonant with the invention of printing and the emergence of nation-states. The second age did not see their reading of Scripture as their *interpretation* but as what Scripture was objectively saying. The Word of God was the same thing as the word of God for many. The second age of the church was colonising (evangelising, in their own language) and under-

⁴ The third age was presaged in various ways, as I will explain, well before the twentieth century, but it did not really “come of age” until then.

stood Jesus and the whole “Bible story” through, primarily, Paul’s sketchy metanarratives, which they fleshed out with theology derived from the dogma of the previous age of the church. The Johannine age, the third age of the church, is essentially spiritual, rather than Bible-based or ecclesiastical. The third age finds the sources of Tradition and Scripture in the spirit. The Bible is taken as a product of the spirit rather than the spirit being something referred to in the Bible. In the third age Tradition and Scripture are not defined by ecclesiastical *nihil obstats* or ecclesiastical watchdog bodies. Often, those of the third age of the church might be heard to say that they are *spiritual but not religious*, precisely because of their negative experience of religion as counter-spiritual and as upholding as sacred what is human, all-too-human, and violent. But, as I have said, all three ages are concurrent in our time.

This idea that time has ages is integral to Christian self-understanding. For example, the church distinguishes the old from the new with regard to the Bible: the Old and New Testaments. The church distinguishes the early church from the patristic era, and this from the mediaeval era, and this from the Renaissance, and the Renaissance from the modern age. In philosophy, one distinguishes pre-Enlightenment from post-Enlightenment, taking the Enlightenment from the end of the eighteenth century. The three ages of the church enable the church to make a similar judgment with respect to the religious philosophy underpinning itself and see the shifts and how they then pertain to one’s own church.

The closing of the philosophical school in Athens by the authorities who had become Christian marks the end of ecclesiastical antiquity and the beginning of the ecclesiastical Middle Ages, or in other words: the end of Patristics and the beginning of Scholasticism.⁵

We distinguish antiquity (the Graeco-Roman world) from the Dark Ages (from the sack of Rome in 410 to the ascension of Charlemagne in 800), and we distinguish the Dark Ages (or whatever preferable term may be used for them) from the Middle Ages (when Europe began to take shape and common law in England established a new order) from the Modern Age (the time of nations). And now, in our transition time, we move to a more global situation. Marx in the nineteenth century described the world in terms of feudalism, capitalism, and the move to a new age based on sharing, not self-enrichment, that he called communism, such as they had in the early church (Acts 2:44-45). It makes sense to think in these terms, and so they are part of vernacular speech.

The idea of three ages is not to be confused with replacement theology, the idea that one age replaces the previous one, like the misplaced Marcionite idea that the New Testament replaces the Old, or, even more falsely, that Christianity replaces Judaism. Rather, the three ages of the church are integral to each other, like the two Testaments, and they are providential in the same way (coming together nicely from completely disparate quarters). The “New” cannot be fulfilled without the “Old”,

⁵ Rosenzweig, 298.

and the “Old” is not old without the “New”. For Judaism, there is no New Testament, but there are eras: of slavery in Egypt, of the wilderness, of the patriarchs, the prophets, the two kingdoms, and subsequently of the rabbis and the Talmud. And by the same token, there is a sense that with each age *there is a shift of gear*. An upward shift for the church. A sublation of what *was* into the form of *what is to come* (Hegel)—that is, new wineskins for new wine. At the same time, each age has a retroactive meaning. Just as, for example, the Reformation retroactively affected the Catholic Church. This retroaction is marked in the Catholic Church by the Council of Trent (1545–1563) in the wake of the Reformation earlier that century. That council required the Catholic Church examine itself. The Catholic Church had to think—as it had never thought before—that if it stood by Tradition as well as by Scripture, what exactly did it mean by Tradition? Thomas Aquinas suddenly came to the forefront, and Thomism was born as a kind of official theology of Catholicism. His *Summa Theologica*, an Aristotelian handbook on theology as a whole, was suddenly seen anew as a book that represents Tradition as a whole and as such. Thomas served to represent an intellectual front to the Protestants. This is an example of a retroactive shift. Once consciousness of it sinks in, the third age of the church will have the same effect.

One sign of this is already evident—that is, the recognition that the young are the future of the church. For the old churches, run by elderly men, the question arises of how to get the youth into the church and then how to retain them. And what about girls

and women? What changes need to be made? What do the church ministers have to do? For the Roman Catholic Church in particular, the priesthood is celibate. This is a special high calling. However, it has the power to separate, possibly to alienate, priests from women and children more than it would if they were clergy or ministers married with children of their own. In churches where clergy or ministers are married, which is the original Christian tradition, this naturally poses less of a problem. This problem of women and young people in church is compounded on the Protestant side by biblical fundamentalism regarding male “headship”. It is visible to contemporary educated young people when church ministers use Tradition or the Bible to justify and legitimise male-only leadership. And, by the same token, it attracts the wrong sort of person: the career Roman Catholic or fundamentalist Protestant, thus compounding the problem.

With regard to ages of the church, theology has tended either to be static or linear. The static kind of theology has imagined itself as dispensing a “deposit” of faith (classic Catholicism), or revelation as a fixed form of belief (classic Protestantism). Linear theology, more prevalent in academia, describes a “development”. The Catholic Church picked up this idea of development from John Henry Newman (d. 1890), an English Anglo-Catholic convert to the Roman Catholic Church who wrote the influential work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) and who subsequently was made a cardinal. The static model persisted in the Catholic Church until the 1960s, when it was overturned by Newman’s (neo-patristic)

idea of the development of doctrine, which French “new theology” had been pressing for too as part of a progressive overhaul of theology. The linear approach is more modern and really goes back before Newman to Hegel. Rosenzweig’s idea of the three ages of the church owes much to Hegel, but, unlike Hegel, his is nonlinear. The theory of the three ages of the church is *paradigmatic* rather than linear/ developmental. The paradigm accentuates the *difference* over the seeming continuity.

The Petrine centuries

These centuries refer to the Christianity—the *Christ consciousness*—of the first millennium. These are the Catholic (in the West) and Orthodox (in the East) centuries in which religious and spiritual authority is invested in an individual, a pope or a patriarch, who, like an emperor of an empire, sits enthroned (literally) as the centre of authority. If someone were an ordinary Christian of this age, then the Christ consciousness would seem to reside in this august personage, whom one would regard as semi-divine. In the high Middle Ages, the pope defined himself as the “Vicar of Christ” —that is to say, to all intents and purposes, Christ’s directly appointed representative on earth. He alone knew the mind of Christ, who is God (the two having been dogmatically fused). Christians then would most likely have been semiliterate. They would have had no access to the biblical texts, as there were no books as such, only hand-copied manuscripts, and these were kept by the authorities and read out in church on Sundays and holy days. These almost secret texts plus the ornate setting and grand

Romanesque costumes of those at the altar, who could be seen from afar through the pluming incense, would certainly cow lay people with the spiritual authority of the church.

This situation in Orthodox circles lasted right up into the twentieth century. The famous Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy describes the Orthodox Church satirically in his masterpiece, *Resurrection* (1899).⁶ The church excommunicated him for it. Excommunication meant, from the Orthodox point of view, he was reprobate and his soul would go to hell when he died. The Russian Church was wiped out in 1917 by the Russian Revolution. It has made a comeback under President Putin. One can eradicate the church, but one cannot eradicate Christ consciousness from the heart of the Russian people. Tolstoy certainly had a sense of Christ consciousness, as it will be outlined in this book, from the point of view of an incipient third age. This, as Tolstoy thought of it, would be a new age of the church. Tolstoy's contemporary, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the famous Russian novelist and philosopher, believed something similar, although, by contrast, he believed that Russia would be the source of the regeneration of Christianity, which, as far as he was concerned, in the West, was as good as dead. Something redemptive of world importance would come from the Russian Church, he believed.

In the West, the Catholic Church remains the Petrine church in line with the Middle Ages, the soul of which it has carried from

⁶ Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Penguin Classics, 1966), 180–86.

the thirteenth century—that is to say, the Latin language and conceptualisations of Thomas Aquinas. Recently, in the 1960s, the Catholic Church allowed local churches to change the language of their liturgy from Latin to the vernacular, a move contested within its ranks to this day and largely because of the perceived loss of clerical power that giving ordinary believers more direct access to “the mysteries” is believed to have brought about. The Catholic Church, however, is both unified and plural, with a variety of different charisms (movements of the spirit) and, within this incredible dynamism, who knows what might emerge? Despite the authority of Rome, it is certain that the spirit “listeth where it will” within that great spiritual organisation, or the world could not have had the Franciscans, the Carmelites, the Carthusians, and latterly the Sisters of Charity, the Mercy Sisters, the liberation theologians, and so much that has stood up for social justice and good in the last two hundred years.

The Pauline centuries

The Pauline centuries are the centuries in which intellectual authority was wrested from popes and patriarchs and invested in professors, “the oligarchy of learning”.⁷ No longer was authority external, as in “the religious authorities”: it was interior—the moral law within, testimony to which was the church without. Luther instigated the switch from the Petrine to the Pauline paradigms when he took on the might of the

⁷ John Henry Newman, Sermon VI, “The Usurpations of Reason”, in *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 68.

Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire and said the immortal words, "Here I stand". Later René Descartes, the philosopher, rationalised this stance of the individual, but Luther incarnated it within the Christian milieu. The Middle Ages ended right there, symbolically speaking, and the modern world began, and the Catholic Church itself would have to bend to it, and one day, hundreds of years in the future, popes themselves would be teaching the dignity of the individual and would be hailed as saints for doing so. But Luther was the first in Europe to dramatise this truth and enact it. So, with the Reformation comes a new revelation of the Christian way, not the old way of centralised imperial Christendom, but the new way of community building and the local church instead. Luther was a Catholic friar, but also a professor of biblical studies. Luther coincided with the new age of the printing press and the printed book, and his supporters propagated his message. It was the end of the feudal age of vassalage, secular and spiritual. A new mercantile, urban world was opening up and colonisation was hard on its heels. The spiritual correspondent to economic colonisation was "evangelism" and the Pauline churches, like Paul, were intentionally evangelical or colonising, which amounts to the same thing. *While the Catholic Church had sought to unite the world under one head, the Protestants sought to convert the world to its idea.* Christian authoritarianism became Christian idealism in the new age. The idea of faith went from meaning an *act* and became synonymous with *belief*. Thomas Aquinas discussed the *act* of faith. For the Pauline centuries, faith meant a confession of prescribed belief. The ancient *symbol* of the faith (or creed),

which had traditionally been read and understood conceptually (in the case of Chalcedon) and read connotatively, came to be taken as a *confession* of belief or personal faith (*fides qua*) and taken denotatively as literal beliefs. *This was a paradigm shift.*

Traditionally, the priest, as ordained for the task, had mediated “the mysteries” sacramentally from the altar. The mysteries were acts of faith, certain prayers and words—receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist, for example. This was replaced in the new order by an appointed minister, and the Real Presence of Christ in the here and now became, in the Reformed Church, a historical memory of something Jesus did in Galilee long ago that was ritually repeated in perpetuity in honour of him.

From one paradigm to the other, *Christ consciousness went from meaning mystical consciousness to meaning historical consciousness.* The Word of God was no longer mediated by the priest to the people through his iteration of the teaching and by his holy life; the Word could now be immediately accessed by the new literate class arising as the actual printed words of the new Bible books that were available like more and more goods for purchase. As Rosenzweig says, it was a secularisation, by which he means an intellectual internalisation of the Christian message. No longer is this message encapsulated in huge stone buildings, in statues, painted on walls, lit in stained glass windows, and invested in officeholders (but not the people themselves), but it walks around in human form among human beings. It is as the English visionary poet William Blake said, “the human form divine”. No longer, as in the Petrine epoch, were there two truths, a truth of reason and a truth of faith;

there was one truth that was humanly divine, divinely human, or as Nietzsche would descry at the end of the nineteenth century with a feeling of disaster around the corner, *human, all too human*.

The disaster Nietzsche could smell on the way (as could Robert Musil in *The Man Without Qualities*) was the total collapse of Christendom, Catholic and Protestant, in the First World War, from which the Christian heartland staggered into Nazism, then a Second World War. And that was the end of the second age, the age of Christianity as belief, as a system of ideas with corresponding "practice" (mirroring the Newtonian/Cartesian mechanical science of body/mind split deep in the languages and psyche of Europe).

These paradigms are nonlinear because they are *structures of consciousness*. So we may find people today in the postmodern world functioning in their own little enclosed church worlds with the Petrine consciousness, keeping their rituals and offices, lighting candles, wearing Romanesque or Byzantine costumes, convinced that they represent the one and only Truth with a capital T and are keeping the flame alive in what they believe is an evil age that will one day come around to their way of thinking, they hope. And we may find the Pauline consciousness of the second age of the church, the evangelical impetus, alive and well in American churches; and not coincidentally, the American colonial spirit has been vastly more successful than any other form of national European colonialism. These Protestant Churches still want to convert the world, and in this structure of consciousness, they know God is

on their side. However, these churches are marked by extreme acrimony and sectarianism, and from a traditional point of view, are regarded as sects. A sectarian spirit governs them.

The first age is the Petrine age of the priest and the laity; the second is the Pauline age of the minister and his congregation; the third age is the Johannine age, of the friend of Jesus, in individual intimacy with God through Christ, and more crucially, as this book will bear out, of *individuated* consciousness. If the first age is synonymous with Catholic and Orthodox styles of church, the second is synonymous with Protestant styles of church, and the third age with styles yet to be delineated. Perhaps Pentecostal Churches are setting the stage for something to come, or perhaps the Catholic Church—which is very good at keeping apace of the time—will set the stage anew. In the first age, the keynote was *obedience* to God (i.e., the church), in the second age, the keynote was *belief*. In the third age, the keynote is *experience*. The second age gave rise to the individual, as it was the individual who believed for him- or herself. It corresponded in the political sphere with the rise of democracy at the same time, just as the clerical/lay distinction corresponded with feudal aristocracy and the divine right of kings in the first age. In the second age the believer could not go beyond his or her beliefs; they were his or her limit. The third age has to do with spiritual experience based on spiritual practice. The truth in the first age was authorised by the leadership of an ecclesiastical hierarchy and was ontological (having to do with the order of being) and, in the popular sense,

dogmatic; the truth in the second age, more modestly, was right belief; the truth in the third age is testimonial.

Spiritual but not religious

The idea of the three ages of the church is important to those who would say they are *spiritual but not religious*. For quite different reasons, the idea of the three ages of the church is important for those who are *religious but not spiritual* (which they would never admit). The first of the two sayings is already indicative of the age of the church to come, the third age of the church: the call to spiritual experience. If by religion is meant conformity of belief to those spiritually “above” us, it creates a situation in which obedience is important so that it can seem as if the situation is one in which humankind is made for the law, not one in which the law has been made for humankind. According to the Catholic monk Thomas Keating, from the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, one of the founders of Centering Prayer, being religious but not spiritual is a major problem in the churches today.⁸ He detects among the younger generation a desire for spiritual experience that the church does not seem to provide in a way that engages that desire. Such a desire is the activity of the Holy Spirit.

The three ages of the church align with Keating’s and Basil Pennington’s observations about the new desire aroused today among spiritual or spirit-led seekers in Christian traditions. Old denominational Christians will naturally be on the defensive,

⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNkUcGt4iw>.

seeing their species of religion as perhaps under threat or seriously misunderstood. But good arguments in books will not correct the situation for them. History proceeds by cause and effect at a deeper level than correct arguments and a cerebral grammar of assent (Newman). It proceeds by realisations and recognitions. So, first, I will say something more about the three ages of the church and then I will say something about the importance of this for spirit-led seekers in Christian/Western traditions (who may not necessarily call themselves Christians).

The idea of the three ages of the church is not a typology. *The three ages of the church name a consciousness.* To be conscious is to recognise something. There is no going back from recognition. My description of the three ages of the church is not merely information or some theory I—or Rosenzweig—hold for some peculiar reason; it is written for the sake of a recognition factor. It is a recognition of spirituality. That is where we are going in part 1 of this book.

Backtracking, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas cut new ground theologically by integrating a Latin translation of Aristotle throughout the whole language of faith and theology. It happened to be a mistranslation of Aristotle; nevertheless, it sufficed for his age and his time. Thomas did this work of totally rationalising theology against the will of the church authorities. The bishop of Paris banned Aristotle from the university where Thomas was based. However, subsequently, the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome recognised and ratified Thomas's achievement, canonising him in 1323, then conferring upon him

the honourable title of Doctor of the Church in 1567.⁹ The Catholic Church at that time kept up with the intellectual spirit of the time.

The Galileo case shook the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century. Galileo was a scientist funded by the Medici, the West's richest family, based in Florence and essentially the founders of the European financial system and the Vatican bankers. Galileo followed Copernicus and others who had argued on a mathematical basis that the earth moved around the sun, not the sun around the earth. The church believed to the contrary and found that Holy Scripture and divine revelation backed them up: the earth was the centre of the universe, and the Catholic Church in Rome was at the spiritual centre of the world. The Inquisition looked into the matter and found Galileo foolish, absurd, contradicted by Scripture, and heretical. The authorities in Rome were the power base but they were not the whole church; the Jesuits supported the Copernican theory and were interested in Galileo's research. The incident is symbolic as well as historical. After Galileo, science moved outside the Catholic Church, which had been its home and only patron until then for hundreds of years.

⁹ "Doctor of the Church" is a specific title conferred upon a person who has already been declared to be a saint. There are countless Catholic saints but only thirty-eight Doctors of the Church (so far), though there were a lot fewer than thirty-eight when Thomas was made a Doctor of the Church, in the sixteenth century. Doctors of the Church are regarded as the teachers of the teachers of the Catholic Church, including popes.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote what he called a Copernican revolution of philosophy in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the central text of modern philosophy. If the church had made peace with the earth's heliocentrism, leaving the universe itself virtually unknown (Pascal), then it has had much less success digesting Kant. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the church had not kept pace with the intellectual spirit of the times. The Catholic Church had been constantly reactionary to the point where eventually it had to admit it to itself, and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was held. Although that did not put an end to reactionary forces, the point about Kant is actually more important than the church's battle with Darwin's evolutionary theory, to which the church was vehemently opposed, giving rise to the controversy (science vs God) that most people these days are aware of. This latter debate presupposes popular notions (and misunderstandings) of science and religion, whereas the question of Kant concerns the question of the intellectual grounds of each.

Advent theology

It has been said that religion is where the spirit is. It is the church's job to be *in* or *with* the spirit. (It was Basil the Great [d. 379] who pointed to the importance of prepositions in his treatise on the Holy Spirit.) In the modern period, whole denominations of the church have consistently and historically failed in this regard. Hegel pointed it out, followed by other major intellectual writers such as Nietzsche, Ibsen, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, who, among others, said the same as Hegel, in

their own way, about the failure of Christianity—of the church—to be where the spirit is.

Theology as “faith seeking understanding” gradually ossified into treatises of the Christian faith. As a result of this stifling of faith by dogmatic or doctrinaire thinking, Rosenzweig writes, “Philosophy today requires ... ‘theologians’ do philosophy”.¹⁰ Hegel had already cut the ground here. The word ‘theologians’ is written by Rosenzweig with scare quotes to refer not to what has passed for theologians in days gone by, but to theologians to come, a new kind of theologian. “Advent theology” I call it. Advent theology is the theology that is breaking out of the old moulds. New wine seeking new wineskins. More conservatively, it might be called a continuation of *la nouvelle théologie*, which in France preceded the Second Vatican Council. Here in this book, we are particularly interested in Christology, the central plank of theology traditionally. Christology cannot be done without some sense of Kant’s critique of metaphysics that pointed out reason’s capacity to fall into delusion with respect to itself, in the last part of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1782) and Hegel’s spiritual philosophy. Rosenzweig refers to “a new type of philosopher or theologian, situated between philosophy and theology”.¹¹ Perhaps this is the advent “theologian”.

Certainly, Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* would be somewhere for the advent theologian to start after Kant and

¹⁰ Rosenzweig, 116.

¹¹ Rosenzweig, 116.

Hegel; also Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1964). In Christology, Hans Küng's *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology* (1970) is what I would call advent theology. Thomas Merton's late work in conversation with Asian religions was advent theology of the first order because it acknowledged the fact that ours is the Age of World Religions. The intercourse between religions forces them to raise their game to a spiritual level. This is the level at which genuine dialogue and fruitful exchange is possible between religions, as Merton's *Asian Journal* bears ample witness.

The influence of dialogue cuts both ways. Christians may be becoming more mindful and Buddhists more socially engaged, for example. At the religious, doctrinal, and exclusivist level, of course, no intercourse is even desirable. Old denominations are still grappling with this, advancing and retreating. The fact is, though, that we are already in the Age of World Religions and have been for at least 150 years, and so religious exclusivism, with the best will in the world, is an ostrich stance, head in the sand. Jesus did not have a problem with other religions; in fact, he got on better with them than he did with the representatives of his own religion. And so we see that Christian exclusivism imitates pre-Christian Judaism and would drive Jesus out—even while piously calling his name.

Advent theology is not traditional or progressive. An advent theologian is one who is writing toward the theology and religion to come. This is nonlinear. Martin Heidegger (d. 1976), in the "Dialogue on Language" between a Japanese student and

himself, rightly says, “*the origin always comes to meet us from the future*”.¹² The origin of the “new” comes from the past. For example, Aristotle, at the origin of logic and Western grammar, came to meet the intellectual culture of the Middle Ages out of the future as something “new”; for Aristotle in the Latin of that day (quite different from Aristotle in Greek) would be the theological mainstay of Catholic theology in the Middle Ages and thereafter. Or, for example, John Henry Newman’s harking back to the church fathers in his Anglican writings becomes the future of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, in its recognition of the idea that doctrine develops. Theology coming from philosophical positions after Kant and Hegel, on the basis of them, draws on more ancient origins in Greece, and further East; thus the origin comes to meet us once again from the future. The soul moves in circles, Plato says, and it seems like he is right; but the circular movement forms a helix.

Sine qua non: “To be a Christian does not mean to have accepted dogmas, but to live one’s life under the rule of another life, the life of Christ; and, once this has happened, then to live one’s life solely in the effect of the power flowing from there.”¹³

What contemporary Christian would disagree with this? The third age of the church is, after all, spirituality grounded in

¹² Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (1959; HarperCollins, 1982), 10 (my italic).

¹³ Rosenzweig, 295.

experience, not in academic overcomplications or religious dreams.

John Wesley, a heart strangely warmed

On May 24, 1738, the Church of England clergyman John Wesley (d. 1791) attended a meeting of Moravian Christians in London and famously reported as follows:

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹⁴

This experience of a "heart strangely warmed" became the start of the Methodist movement in England. This form of Christianity, while following classic Reformed Protestant theology of sin and grace (i.e., Augustinianism) laid a special emphasis on experience. *Experience is the keynote of the third age of the church.* The experience of the Holy Spirit that moved Wesley moved Methodism.

¹⁴ Frederick A. Dreyer, *The Genesis of Methodism* (Lehigh University Press, 1999), 27.