

# AN INTERVIEW WITH HARVEY COX

*Harvey Cox, Harvard Professor of Divinity, is most noted for THE SECULAR CITY: SECULARIZATION AND URBANIZATION IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, published in 1965. The book departs from the usual commentaries in celebrating rather than lamenting life in the modern city. Professor Cox argues that urban anonymity and mobility free man, and withdrawal of God makes him take responsibility for his own well-being. In both secularization and urbanization we can see Providence leading men toward greater maturity. Christians must accept these tendencies, Professor Cox says, and work to create the more humane existence toward which God, acting in the troubled events of our times, is pointing.*

*DIALOGUE interviewers Chase Peterson and Richard Bushman met Professor Cox in Hayes-Bickford, a cafeteria across the street from Harvard Yard. He often meets people there, he explained, students particularly, because they speak their minds more freely in the informal atmosphere. For the sake of a clear recording, the interview eventually moved to a formal academic office where Professor Cox nevertheless managed to speak his mind freely.*

*Dialogue:* By way of background, how would you compare your views to those in the death-of-God movement?

*Professor Cox:* Well, I've had some very strident arguments with the death-of-God theologians. They think I'm kind of a stick-in-the-mud because I don't agree with them. I think when all the sound and fury is past, what they're saying is that some of the conventional images and pictures of God that we've inherited don't seem to be plausible in our time and that we need a new understanding of God. I wish they had said that much more plainly because they have scared people unnecessarily with their strident rhetoric

about the death of God. In some ways they have initiated a useful conversation within theology; in other ways they have hampered it.

The problem is that in theology for the last fifty years we have concentrated on two major areas — on Christology and ecclesiology, that is, on an understanding of Jesus Christ and on what the Church is. We've had some very good work on Christology, a lot of attention to the figure of Christ and the significance of Christ; and we've had a lot of interesting work on the Church, the Church of the modern world and the *aggiornamento*, and all of that, but there has been very little recent constructive work on the doctrine of God. As a result, this movement caught us more or less unprepared.

There are a lot of problems with the doctrine of God; theologians have just not been doing their homework properly. And insofar as this movement is a stimulus to rethinking some of the things we mean about God, it's useful. You know, the Soviet cosmonauts fly around and come back and report they haven't seen any divine beings up there — which is about the level on the side of atheism that corresponds to the kind of simplicity about ideas of God that many believers have.

But our children can't possibly grow up with that kind of belief. I have a seven-year-old boy who knows the names of all the planets and knows about rockets and has theories about outer space. We can't possibly hope that he can hold the kind of simple, uncritical spatial point of view of God as being "up there" somewhere. It's not possible. But my own conviction is that when we get rid of that kind of three-decker universe world view, we'll come to an understanding of God eventually which is much closer to the biblical view of God — the God whose locus is his involvement and participation in human history. So, I'm not a death-of-God theologian at all. But I don't think they should be read out. They have exaggerated, or their rhetoric may have been unfortunate, but I think they raised a good point.

*Dialogue:* Nevertheless, your book can be read to say that God is withdrawing from an active role in the world, and that it really is not important to believe any more. Is there any value in maintaining faith in God?

*Professor Cox:* Yes, there is. When I talk about God's withdrawal, I mean something rather paradoxical. God is really most present in the world, in my point of view, where he is seen in weakness and suffering and man's assumption of responsibility. I start from the very Christological point of view, with the crucifixion as central in my thinking. And this is a disclosure of God as one who is among us, as one who gives us our freedom even to crucify him, even to misuse the freedom to that extent. So that God's power in the world is the power of suffering and love and that power is *present*, from my point of view, luring man to some sort of exercise of responsible concern for his fellow-man.

Now there's another point, however, at which I think the belief in God is very important and that's establishing the grounds on which we have any basis to hope for anything, hope for the kingdom of God, hope for a world with less racial animosity, less war, poverty, and hunger. That's really where the difference between the secular humanist and the Christian appears. That

is, I think a person who operates out of the framework of biblical faith keeps working at things, in part, because he believes that there's a certain direction to the whole historical and cosmic process — that it's not just an accident; that there's a ground for his belief that man is really here for a purpose and that the purpose is worked out; that he's not alone in working out this purpose; that there's something happening so that he has a basis for hope other than simply man's somewhat limited ability to solve all of his problems.

I think if I really thought that we had to rely on the wisdom, generosity, and compassion of men alone to solve all of the problems we have, I'd be a cynic or an existentialist or something. But the basis of Christian faith today is that it provides you a basis for hope. You can keep going when the evidence, the *empirical* evidence, indicates there is not much point in going any further. I'm very impressed with this with the poor people I've met, the black people who have to ask themselves really week after week, "What's the point? Why should I try it again?" And it's some kind of vision of what is possible in human life which is grounded in something other than man's own proclivities. So that's where the belief in God, for me at least, is still, and as far as I can see always will be, pretty important.

*Dialogue:* I guess you would say the same thing about prayer as a specific example?

*Professor Cox:* Yes. Prayer is an example. And I think there are all kinds of prayer. I don't limit prayer just to what you say on your knees in church or something like that. Prayer is in some ways a way of life; it's a recognition that there is another reality that we have to deal with. Especially important, I think, is that prayer is future-oriented — that is, prayer is the way in which we keep open to the future and recognize that reality is not totally defined by the empirical probabilities.

*Dialogue:* How do you feel when you hear "We Shall Overcome" being sung?

*Professor Cox:* Well, I think that's a kind of prayer.

*Dialogue:* Five years ago it was a very moving prayer. Now it makes some a little embarrassed or discouraged, because the "overcoming" is slow and incomplete. If God is useful because he's not around and not bothering us, who is doing the Lord's work?

*Professor Cox:* Well, I think that prayer is being answered. I'm made a little uncomfortable by that song because it came out of a particular period in the civil rights movement which now seems a little archaic, I guess, but if you recognize the way in which the overcoming is happening, it's different from what many of us anticipated. The overcoming is a growing feeling of black dignity, and black culture, and black pride, even with its degree of separateness. There is a sense in which something extraordinarily important has happened, *is* happening among black people in this country, which, in my point of view, is largely very positive — that people are getting a sense that they really are important, that they really have a place in the world, that they don't have to be ashamed or apologetic that they're black, because black is beautiful. So I think that it's a very good example that a prayer which seemed

appropriate five years ago or five hundred years ago may not be appropriate today. The intention remains constant but the articulation of the intention changes.

*Dialogue:* The reason some people feel uncomfortable with the song is that somehow the religious dimension of it is being drained, the militant movement seems so political and so insensitive to the tradition of black Christianity which has been a source of power for black people for so long.

*Professor Cox:* Well, I'm not really sure that that's entirely true. Tomorrow at Boston University there's a consultation on the black church with about fifteen leading black ministers and people coming together — Nathan Wright, Benjamin Paton, Albert Clegg, Joe Washington, Dick Hood, Vincent Harding, a whole group of people who are really struggling on a new level with the significance of black people and Christianity. In fact, I notice one of the addresses of Al Clegg is "Can a Black Man Be Christian and at the Same Time True to His Heritage?" Now, that's the question; that points it very well, and most of the militant people, the Christians, I know, say, "We think we can, but we don't know how yet."

I don't think many of us have been able to think through and see clearly enough the racist assumptions in so much of our Christianity. *We* haven't been able to see the racist assumptions in other aspects of our lives either, but they are so much deeper and more pervasive than we've been able to see. The kind of Christianity we have taught to black people in North America is a white Western version of Christianity. Now there are other versions. In fact, you've touched on a kind of sensitive point with me because I'm going to be giving a course next semester on black religion in America and its impact on American culture.

One of the things I've been looking into is the ancient black church of Africa, the Ethiopian Church. A lot of people don't know about these churches. I'm collecting some films and slides and things. It's astonishing when people see that there were black Christians a thousand years before Columbus discovered America. So I think it may be that black people in this country will reject most of what we identify as Christianity. But that doesn't mean they are rejecting the gospel. In fact, maybe you've noticed the fascination that most of the Black Muslims have with the figure of Jesus. The minister of the Black Muslim Temple here in Boston talked one time at a meeting I was attending, and he was quite candid about that. He said, "Mohammed is the man who brought us the Koran, but Islam means to *do* the word of God, and the man who actually *did* the word of God is Jesus." Now that's a funny kind of Islam from an orthodox Islamic point of view, but I think that it illustrates that we may find emerging a type of Christianity for which we don't have any precedent, which isn't very easy to classify in one way or another.

I think the vigor and power of Christianity is precisely its capacity to take on new cultural forms and to enter into new kinds of social organizations and culture. It has done this throughout all these years, and I'm relatively hopeful on that and very interested in the people who are working on it.

Reverend Albert Clegg, who is speaking at this conference, is a minister of the United Church of Christ in Detroit who is trying to de-Caucasianize the whole liturgy and curriculum so that people are in the presence of black faces and black figures, and he's doing this in a very interesting way. He's probably correct too, incidentally. I mean the people we usually see pictures of in the Old Testament and the New Testament are much darker than we are. They certainly didn't look like Solomon's head of Christ.

It is true that certain kinds of religious dimensions of the black movement have been left behind. No doubt about that. But I think others are emerging which are equally interesting.

*Dialogue:* What are the conventional Christian churches to do about this new emerging black Christianity?

*Professor Cox:* Well, I think the conventional Christian churches are involved in a very serious crisis; they're just not aware of the fact that they're in that kind of crisis. For example, I think the denominational Christianity that we have here in North America is slated for extinction. It's not going to last much longer.

We're divided into churches along lines that emerged with problems which no longer interest anybody. Who's interested in Presbyterian versus Episcopal forms of polity, or interested in whatever it was that divided Baptists from Congregationalists? It's all absolutely irrelevant — a little like the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. My students at Harvard Divinity School are just completely uninterested in these denominational divisions. This includes Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox and Baptists and Lutherans. It's not just that now they're extraordinarily interested in what Christianity has to say, what Jesus Christ can mean for us today, what significance the Kingdom of God has, how one experiences the holy (mysticism is very important today); they're also interested in world religions, which was not the case when I was a seminary student fifteen years ago. Courses in Buddhism and readings in the Bhagavad-Gita and so on are very important, so I think there'll come a time, perhaps rather soon, when we as white North American Christians will see that we have many problems too with the kind of Christianity we've inherited and that we're a rather small minority of people in a largely colored, non-Christian world.

The major things that Christianity has to deal with in the next one hundred years will be first how to be a *minority* with the disappearance of Western dominance — how to live as a minority people — and second how we learn from and influence these great non-Christian religious traditions without moving toward some kind of cheap syncretism. I don't personally believe we're going to have a single great world religion and I'm opposed to that myself. I am convinced that human life is sufficiently complex and varied that we need options of life styles and cultural orientations and religious commitments; I would rather see a real pluralism. But I think we've got to cope with that and the theological resources for coping with that are still not entirely at hand.

*Dialogue:* You say that ministers and certainly theology students are in-

creasingly prone to blur denominational distinctions. Are their congregations apt to be as pliant?

*Professor Cox:* Well, I think for many people the fact that they belong to a Presbyterian or a Baptist congregation is an accident of birth and location. We've done sociological studies and we know that most people, when they move to a new town and decide they want to go to church, go to the church most convenient. Only people with a strong, somewhat sectarian tradition will seek out a church of that particular denomination even if they have to go miles to get it. Most people will not. Now a Roman Catholic probably won't join a Baptist church or something like that, but even that may begin to happen. But I think people want something from the church. Man is a religious being and he is a social being and he will continue to put those things together. I don't see the church disappearing. But I think denominationally designated congregations in which that designation has any real significance are really fated for a kind of fadeout.

*Dialogue:* And to the extent that it does there will be a lot of sorting and reshuffling?

*Professor Cox:* Yes, I think some people prefer a more liturgical form of worship. For instance, my wife is very much turned on by the very high Anglican service, with incense and chants and medieval vestments. I must admit I like that sort of thing, too, once in a while. I've spent most of my life studying the history of Christianity, and it's very nice to be able to go to a church and find yourself right back in the thirteenth century, especially one that does it well like the Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill where I was last Sunday. But you can also find this in a Catholic church, and if your liturgical interests are different you can find a satisfying form of worship in a variety of churches.

*Dialogue:* Do you still feel that suburban churches should become involved in inner city life? How can they best help black communities and black congregations?

*Professor Cox:* I think the major thing now is black people exercising leadership and making real decisions in black communities. The role of white churches is to help that happen, which could mean a couple of things: It could mean financial support and other kinds of support. It could also mean doing the kinds of things one has to do in the white community so that something real can happen in the black community. But I suppose the major thing we have to do in white churches is to ask ourselves really what went wrong with Christianity in North America that we allowed ourselves for so many years the luxury of racism, much of it sanctified by our religious doctrines.

As a kid I went to a church where we didn't allow black people, and nobody even thought it was strange. There must be something wrong with our understanding of the gospel that that happened for so long without our being — well we've been made aware of that, I think. This is one of the great things that's happened. There isn't a thoughtful Christian of any denomination who doesn't recognize that there's something really wrong

about this view of the gospel. But there's a deeper theological and ecclesiological issue that we have to ask about — how we were able to deceive ourselves — and this is really perhaps the major thing we ought to be doing.

*Dialogue:* That raises the question whether there are blind spots remaining.

*Professor Cox:* Yes, I was thinking about that: What are they? What are the blind spots remaining?

*Dialogue:* One might be the increasing intellectual and political alliance of the liberal Anglo-Saxon protestant and the black man that leaves out the blue collar ethnic man — the Poles and Greeks and Italians. Mr. Wallace derived considerable support from the alienation of these people. Is it religious alienation as well?

*Professor Cox:* That's interesting because the one thing the Black man and the Anglo-Saxon have in common is their religious tradition, an evangelical protestantism, whereas the people you mention were largely from Catholic ethnic background. This shows that these things still make — at least the cultural tradition which bore them makes — a difference to people.

Now my own feeling is that a large factor in the following of Wallace is a sort of covert racism. But a lot of it is something else, that is, the authentic, legitimate feeling on the part of a lot of people that their participation in the polity has been stolen from them, has eroded, and they don't have any way of controlling or shaping their future. And they're desperate. They see the society as a very highly organized, centralized bureaucracy — which it is becoming — and that's the characteristic which is shared by the church and the schools and the government. Everything they touch seems to be an unreachable bureaucracy where you deal at the lowest levels, so at this point in my own thinking I'm leaning very much toward the people who talk about the need for decentralization, or the relocalization of certain aspects of our society. Now I realize quite well that there are many things that cannot be done except on a regional or national level. You can't fight air pollution and you can't plan mass transit on a local level. But if you think of the tasks that we have as a society, there are some — and more than we think there are — that can be done more appropriately at lower levels of organization. It's interesting to me that all the presidential candidates in the election have said something like that. Some have said it in a very sloganeering way: give the country back to the people, and all that stuff.

*Dialogue:* Proof of what you say lies in the fact that a lot of Kennedy people have become Wallace people. This makes no sense in political ideology, but it makes great sense in terms of their feeling of political alienation.

*Professor Cox:* That's right.

*Dialogue:* Then you favor local control of schools, for instance.

*Professor Cox:* Well, I favor a large share of participation by parents and local people in the determination of school policies. I am not in favor of total local control of schools, but it's gone so far the other way that I'm now involved, in fact in a couple of schools, trying to increase parent participation. And in this case it's not the parents who don't want to participate, but it's the people who run the schools who are afraid of what will happen if the parents *do* partici-

pate. I think there are other areas where we have tended to believe that a higher level of social organization could solve the problems better, but, as a matter of fact, the local level of organization might be able to do it better. I think there's a danger there, an enormous danger, but I think it's time to start thinking about things in that direction.

*Dialogue:* Are you at all aware of the structure of the Mormon Church?

*Professor Cox:* Not very much. I know there are the Apostles. Is it a kind of bureaucratically organized church?

*Dialogue:* It's a peculiar kind of organization that in some ways accords with what you have suggested here. The major policies are made at the center by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency, but the administration of the Church is entirely decentralized. That is, there is no paid ministry. The head of each congregation, the Bishop, is appointed from among the laity for a period of from three to five years, on the average, and since he retains his regular occupation, he is compelled to foster, and the Church strongly encourages, the widest possible distribution of responsibility throughout the congregation. Every active Mormon has some kind of church job — running one of the auxiliaries, teaching a Sunday School class, or visiting members.

*Professor Cox:* No mere observers, right?

*Dialogue:* None at all. As soon as a ward, or congregational unit, gets to a particular size it divides so that there are still leadership roles for everyone.

*Professor Cox:* That's been the pattern in some other churches, you know, especially churches in so-called missionary areas, and I think the notion of inflicting on the Church a particular Western notion of a paid professional clergy is a terrible bit of cultural provincialism.

*Dialogue:* One problem presently concerning Mormons is whether or not our congregations can move outside Church boundaries and be of use within the city at large. For example, our women's auxiliary, the Relief Society, is expert at taking care of the poor and the needy within the congregation. But many congregations are now affluent enough that these critical occupations do not fully take up the time and energies of the Relief Society, and some groups resort to making quilts and to other projects that are relatively superficial. There is quite a bit of thought about how we could be of more help outside our own bounds.

*Professor Cox:* You mean the people that the Relief Society takes care of are other Mormons?

*Dialogue:* Yes, in most congregations, strictly other Mormons.

*Professor Cox:* Well, what possible theological grounding is there for that?

*Dialogue:* Simply that that's where first responsibility lies.

*Professor Cox:* Why?

*Dialogue:* Well, why do you take care of your own children before you take care of others?

*Professor Cox:* Oh, do you? I frankly think there's just no biblical basis for the idea that you should take care of people in your own congregation first. It's precisely the *stranger*, it seems quite clear to me in the New Testament,



the one you don't know — the one who is the foreigner, the Samaritan, the stranger — to whom you owe the first responsibility, to bind up his wounds and care for him.

If you're making quilts because you can't find any more people to take care of, it seems to me your service has already turned in on itself and you're not seeing the kind of deprivation and suffering that Christ saw when he talked about the man on the road to Jericho. This was not a man whom anybody knew as part of the congregation or the whole final judgment scene. No, it seems to me the *first* business is that Christians, of whatever denomination, have an obligation to serve the suffering man, whoever he may be.

But another question, I think, is how, if we're concerned about the poor, do we help the poor? It seems to me that a more difficult question is how do you help the poor not to be poor? So much of our Christian ethic of poverty depends upon having some poor people around so that we can feel good because we're taking care of them, fulfilling our theological obligations. But real care for the poor means social change, I think unavoidably. A Christian conviction that one should be concerned about the poor, I think, invariably drives you into some kind of political participation, so that the unjust distribution of the resources of a society can be more equitable. Now this may not give you actual opportunity to engage in direct kindness to the poor, but I think that's where we've got to start moving, very quickly, away from the Christmas basket notion of how to take care of poverty, towards a society in which the distribution of God's gifts is more in accord with his intentions.

*Dialogue:* You would buy pluralism even there, wouldn't you? Certainly complicated social political maneuvers to eliminate poverty would appeal to some people and be possible for some people. Other people need a more simple expression of generosity, and they're going to have to rely on the Christmas basket.

*Professor Cox:* No. Starting with the Christmas basket is a way of starting people to think about why it is that I'm giving you the Christmas basket instead of the other way around: What is it about our whole deformed polity that puts me in this position in preference to you and how can we really be brothers rather than benefactors?

So I would accept some degree of pluralism here; but I would want to say that a more mature and thoughtful Christian approach would suggest that maybe with a high school youth group or junior high group you could use Christmas baskets, but by the time they're in college they ought to be a little more sophisticated and aware of the dynamics of inequitable distribution and the irresponsible use of power.

*Dialogue:* Then the problem arises, how does a church engage itself in problems on that level?

*Professor Cox:* Here I would give the same kind of answer that I gave for the whole question of decentralization. There are certain issues that a national denomination can do something about but that a local congregation cannot do very much about. There are other issues that have to be handled by a local congregation or by a combination of congregations in an area, let's say,

and there are still others that I think the church as an organization should not become involved in but that Christians should become involved in, individually, through political processes, electoral offices, pressure groups, political education, whatever it is. And I find myself hard put to give illustrations.

I think you can think of issues that are quite obviously issues on a national scope. I think it's good, however, for a local group, occasionally, to have to decide as a congregation about some very difficult moral issue, the Vietnam war or the bombing halt or the Civil Rights Bill or something like that — that is, a public issue which is obviously moral, or has moral overtones. To force a congregation — that's a strong word — but to make a congregation ask, "What does our faith have to say to this issue as a congregation?" And then to argue it out. It strains the congregation sometimes. But if we really believe that the unity of the body of Christ is not the fact that we happen to agree with each other on some things, but there is, you might say, a supernaturally granted community here, then we can trust each other and we can do things which are controversial and we can discuss things which are decisive without feeling that we're going to blow the whole thing apart. If it can be blown apart by that, then it's not worth keeping together.

*Dialogue:* That would be a test case for the whole society, too. If you learn it on the congregational level, then you can agree to disagree nationally.

*Professor Cox:* That's right, but so many times in local congregations it's "Don't bring that issue up!" When you talk about something, "Not that — it will divide the Church." And yet I've had experience, and friends of mine who are members of churches have also, where we say, "Let's see what would happen if we discussed this," and we took each other seriously, and continued to stay together, even though we disagreed.

*Dialogue:* What would you say about the university in those terms? Same answer?

*Professor Cox:* No, not exactly, because I think there are some premises and rules of the game in the university that at this stage are not subject for further discussion. That's my point of view. I don't think that certain things the university has developed so that various views could be presented with the protection of free speech and free argumentation are up for debate. Some of the rubrics of the university are for me sufficiently precarious that they are not subject to emendation or revocation at this point, and we don't discuss them. I'm a little conservative on that issue.

*Dialogue:* What would you say to the argument that modern pastors become so concerned about large social issues that they no longer minister to individual souls?

*Professor Cox:* I don't think that's true. Some of the men I know who are most concerned about what we call social issues are also the people who are most competent and compassionate in their ministry to individual persons.

Last night I spent the evening with Mr. Harold Frey, who is a minister of Elliot Congregational Church at Newton and who has been one of the most active people in the peace movement. And he's done a lot of things his congregation disagrees with, has presided at services where people have turned in

draft cards. Although he doesn't approve of that particular act, he feels that we owe support to people whose consciences have led them in this direction — things like that. And everybody in his congregation will say, "Even though I disagree with Harold Frey on this and that, when it comes down to being a pastor, to people who need him, he's always there." And when you ask him he says, "Well, I can do both because they are not conflicting." In my point of view, it's a mistaken notion of theology that on the one hand we have individual pastoral problems and on the other hand we have social problems. If it is true that one finds Christ at least in part in the suffering neighbor, and if the task of the minister is to help people to be healed by encountering Christ, then helping them to be sensitive to the suffering neighbor is not diverting them from their soul's salvation; it's really contributing to it, I think.

I don't restrict the presence of Christ entirely to the suffering neighbor, although there's very strong evidence in the New Testament that this tends to be the major way in which we meet God in the world. I'm not terribly influenced religiously by sunsets and things like that. I think it is in *persons* that God comes to man — other persons, especially persons who make a claim on us, for our mercy or our interest or our compassion. This is one of the ways in which we are addressed by the world of God, by the presence of Christ, if you only recognize it — if you *can*. We expect it in other ways — God always seems to come in unexpected guises, at unexpected moments. So I don't think that's a serious problem. I think the best minister is the one who is able to see his ministry as a total package and to help his people to overcome some of these dichotomies that we have perpetuated.

