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The Cultural Exegesis series is designed to complement the Engaging Culture series by providing methodological and foundational studies that address the way to engage culture theologically. Each volume works within a specific cultural discipline, illustrating and embodying the theory behind cultural engagement. By providing the appropriate tools, these books equip the reader to engage and interpret the surrounding culture responsibly.

Entertainment Theology

New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy

Barry Taylor
To everyone, everywhere, I have ever met, thank you.
“Whenever they enter a new era of history, people change their ideas of both humanity and divinity.”
Karen Armstrong

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Introduction

For the times they are a-changin’.
Bob Dylan, 1963

Things have changed.
Bob Dylan, 2000

There is a new mood in the air, a new interest in religion and the nature of belief and their role in what it means to be human. It is a realization, emerging in Western culture particularly, that the old values that have informed and shaped us for the past few hundred years are lacking in their ability to meet the deep yearning of the human heart. It is the recognition that the Enlightenment view (which held that scientific rationalism was the only viable means to the realization of full humanity) is, in fact, sorely limited in its scope and that our commitment to it has left us barren and adrift. It is also an acknowledgment that the balance of power has shifted in the culture. A growing number of people are increasingly unwilling simply to accept the pronouncements of institutions, whether they be religious, political, or otherwise, and are instead looking to themselves, to their peers, and particularly to alternative resource centers, such as Internet Web sites and contemporary media, in order to create new means for grappling with questions of ultimate reality. This is not to say that the day of traditional institutions is over, but it is to say that those institutions no longer have the last word or hold the authoritative sway they once did.

The emergence of a postsecular society (a result of the shift from a modern to a postmodern world) reflects a movement in the broader culture in which the voices of the marginalized and formerly overlooked are
legitimized and power emerges from unexpected places rather than through the traditional avenues that shaped the previous era. As singer Patti Smith declared in the 1970s, the “people have the power.” New technologies have shifted the balance of power in the realm of information. We are, as theologian Leonardo Boff asserts, witnessing the “beginning of the post-television era, as a revolution in which numerical, synthetic and virtual images takes place.”¹ For quite some time I have referred to this process as “democratization,” a term that attempts to capture the trend toward a less hierarchical and authoritarian exchange of ideas, ethics, information, and just about everything else in contemporary society.

Democratization seems to be at work in virtually every area of life today. In fact, in the wider culture there is a new term for this phenomenon: “crowdsourcing.” This phenomenon is outlined in an article by Jeff Howe, titled “The Rise of Crowdsourcing,” in the June 2006 issue of Wired magazine. The subtitle of the article is “The Rise of the Amateur,” which sums up much of what is going on around us. As traditional structures lose their stranglehold, there appears to be an unleashing, a veritable tidal wave of people-powered content. Whether this is a good or a bad thing is not really the point as far as I am concerned; it is the reality we find ourselves in and the one with which we must dialogue. The Internet, and computer technology in general, has been central in this shift—innovations such as YouTube and MySpace have not only flooded the ether with mindless Web pages and homemade videos, they have also aided in the development of new perspectives on life and added yet another layer to the destabilizing of traditional authority and power structures. Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopedia, which is democratic in that anyone can contribute information, is another example of this dynamic.

In a nod toward this emerging dynamic, which appears to be a defining characteristic of our time, Time magazine declared its 2006 “Person of the Year” to be “You.” You, as in me, you, us, all of us. The cover of the magazine features a computer terminal with a metallic, mirror-like screen that reflects the image of the person who looks into it. Terming it the “digital democracy,” Time’s editors overlooked a host of significant events and people in 2006 to acknowledge the growing phenomenon of people-powered culture shaping.

There is really no area of our lives that has not been influenced in some way or another by these new developments. Whether or not these changes are good or bad is not the focus here. Rather than rejoice or bemoan what is occurring, I simply choose to accept these new realities and see them as the setting for a conversation about how, and in what ways perhaps,
we might understand what is going on and thereby further explore how Christian faith might look in such a context.

The focus of this book is the way the aforementioned ideas, as well as other dynamics, have affected the realm of faith and belief. To be sure, the traditional religions still appear to hold a monopoly on the mediation of all things religious, at least on some levels. Religions such as Christianity and Islam still attract billions of followers around the globe and continue to influence and shape much of the world’s religious thought and perspectives. But there is something else going on. What I am attempting to capture in these pages is something of the new religious horizon. It has not completely come into view yet. It is the result of many things: cultural shifts, new opportunities afforded to many of us through technology, the compression of our world by those same technologies. It is not that the world is necessarily a different shape, but rather that we have access to more of it (new mediums for the exchange of ideas, and the list goes on and on). It is also the result of changing attitudes and opinions about the nature of belief itself.

For many people, the old religions no longer offer the comfort and consolation or guidance and insight they once did. The rise of many forms of religious fundamentalism has not helped. More and more people regard traditional religions as a source of conflict. Yet the desire for ultimate meaning continues. There are more and more resources available that offer “religion without the baggage.” Baggage in most cases means the perception of unnecessary and definitely unwanted dogmatics—arcane and archaic views that seem inconsistent with much of the rest of life—and a feeling that the traditional religions are out of touch and incapable of responding quickly enough to the massive social and cultural upheaval that many sense themselves navigating. This mood is heard time and again in the expression, “I am spiritual but not religious,” or words to that effect. What that means exactly will be taken up a little later, but for now, suffice it to say that it reflects a central dynamic of a shift this book focuses on: that the faith quest continues in a revitalized manner in the early years of the twenty-first century, but this faith quest has horizons and parameters that would surprise those who think they understand the dynamics and ingredients that contribute to a quest for meaning.

The spiritual landscape, rather than the religious tradition, has become the arena for theological exploration. And the theological excursion may no longer begin with God and work downward; rather, it will originate in the human experience of searching and seeking and move outward to embrace ever wider horizons of life and reality.²
A revolutionary dynamic is currently at work in the culture. Western culture is in the process of completely reevaluating and revising virtually every aspect of the human condition. As Douglas Rushkoff states, “The degree of change experienced by the last three generations rivals that of a species undergoing mutation. . . . What we need to adapt to, more than any particular change, is the fact that we are changing so rapidly.”

The two lyrics from Bob Dylan quoted at the beginning of this introduction exemplify what I am talking about here. Between the years 1963 and 2000, when those songs were released publicly, much has changed, not only in Western culture but also around the world. When Dylan’s 1963 song was released it was seized on by a generation of frustrated and discontented young people who yearned for change and longed for a new way of being. Disillusionment over the Vietnam War, shifting sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors, and a host of other issues related to such diverse areas as technology, manufacturing, and changing production methods that affected labor were redrawing the cultural landscape. In 1963, the faint stirrings of an immense cultural shift were being felt. The idea that the times were changing was in the very air of the West.

By the time Dylan released his song “Things Have Changed” in 2000, those first faint stirrings had coalesced into a new paradigm in Western cultural history that many term the postmodern paradigm. I have no real desire to engage in a treatment of the modern/postmodern phenomenon; I have done that far too many times and find it an exercise in frustration at best. All things postmodern remain somewhat polarizing and would tend to steer us off track and down philosophical rabbit holes that are not pertinent to the conversation here. I am now more inclined to declare this shift “postsecular,” but that is yet another word destined to divide us unnecessarily. So let me quote Mr. Dylan again: “things have changed.” However it is termed, this is the reality.

It seems that we are entering a new age, a new time, governed by a new ethos and a new desire for meaning. But there is a tension. The titles of the two songs by Dylan seem to reflect a linear progression from changing times in 1963 to realized change in 2000. This is far from true; old ages die slowly, if at all, and new paradigms generally take a long time to establish themselves. However, I contend that things are moving at a rapid pace today, and the consolidation of a new cultural paradigm is emerging at a frantic pace and is quickly defining and delineating itself. It is within the realm of this new paradigm that the present book is set.

_Entertainment Theology_ is an exploration of some of the new directions that faith and belief seem to be taking in our time. It is a look into
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key shaping factors and dynamics in contemporary religious exploration and practice. It also suggests ways in which Christian faith might more effectively engage in the current conversation about religion.

I wish to emphasize the word “current” for it is surely a new conversation, sometimes barely informed by traditional concepts of God, faith, or the nature of belief. The Chinese revolutionaries greeted each other with the question, “Are you living in the new world?” In this book I locate the missional-theological reflection of the Christian faith in this new world. There are many things to explore in the twenty-first century; changes seem to be occurring in every realm of life. This book focuses on what is perhaps one of the more surprising dynamics of Western cultural life today—a return to God. But before we get too excited and gleefully rub our church-growth hands together, as we will see later, this return to God is not a return to premodern concepts and traditions but a movement forward. The return to God is in fact a shift into entirely new understandings of the religious dynamic.

I argue that “spirituality” is the new religion of our times. I sometimes call what is occurring “techno-spirituality” or “postsecular spirituality.” Both terms are attempts to capture key elements of the new state of things, for surely what is going on in the realm of the spiritual is post or after the secular and decidedly influenced by technology of all kinds, from information technology to mass media in all their forms. I also use the term spirituality for specific reasons. Quite often in my conversations with people both inside and outside the church I hear comments such as, “I’m not religious,” or “I’m not into religion,” or “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual.” This “I’m spiritual, not religious” comment represents a shift in approaches to religion and belief. It used to be that if we referred to someone as religious we would also say that they were “deeply spiritual,” highlighting the perception that religion and spirituality were in harmony with each other, but this perception no longer holds true. Some are quite frustrated with the term “spiritual” and dismiss it because they seem unable to get a singular definition for what this means. Nor will they. I don’t think that there is a singular definition, because people use the term in diverse and often contradictory ways. Rather than seeking a singular definition for “spiritual,” we should see it as an umbrella term under which all kinds of ideas and perspectives are gathered. It is a symbolic term—defining the proclaimant as someone who is at the very least neither a raging fundamentalist nor a “boring” church person. I will speak more about this later in the book. The October 15, 2001, edition of the London Times included a report on a recent religious survey in which enough people polled about
their “religious affiliation” answered “Jedi Knight” (a character from the *Star Wars* movies) that future polls will include this option. This might seem comical at first, but it does point to the fact that a growing number of people do not find their spiritual beliefs compatible with many more-traditional faith expressions. And the use of a fictional character from a Hollywood movie also points us toward another key theme in this book, that popular culture is a prime resource for thinking about issues of faith and belief. People not only “find God” in the movies, they also find new ways of believing and expressing themselves spiritually.

On the one hand, to speak of “religion” now is to imply complicity with static tradition, rigid dogma, and quite often conservative fundamentalism. Spirituality, on the other hand, is perceived as a flowing, vibrant, and meaningful term that describes the religious experience. Accompanying this is a shift away from formal expressions of faith such as public worship, prayer, and other communal rituals; the creation of personalized rituals and practices is a growing trend. At present there is a devaluing of form because form represents dead religious observance. This has led many to dismiss the current state of interest in spirituality as all surface and no depth. While I agree that much of contemporary spirituality lacks substance in its many forms, it is too easy to dismiss the entire state of things in the contemporary situation as lacking depth because it does not meet the criteria of religious expressions as they have been traditionally understood.

It is often difficult for those engaged in more-formal religious expressions to cope with the shift in both attitude and practice. How can we take seriously someone who really believes that a Jedi Knight offers spiritual guidance and insight to the questions of ultimate meaning in human existence?! How can all of these seemingly trendy and often vapid personal beliefs really point toward a meaningful shift in the state of religious affairs? Surely it is not possible, so why waste energy discussing it? Fair enough, it is certainly true that in more stable times the link between spiritual observance and formal religious practice seems to have been more consistent, but in these rapidly changing times this is no longer the case. My conversations with students at Art Center College of Design, where I teach, have affirmed my own intuitions about this shift. In six semesters of teaching a particular class on advertising I have polled a total of seventy-two students on their spiritual and religious interests. Of those seventy-two students, fewer than ten associated themselves with any particular religious tradition, but fifty-four regarded themselves as actively embracing the spiritual in their lives. I am certainly not building the entire...
case for my thoughts on a straw poll of a few students, but it does reflect
larger dynamics I see within the culture. Spirituality is the new dynamic,
and it is an often surprising, multifaceted, multidimensional expression
of faith. As Sandra Schneiders says:

Spirituality has rarely enjoyed such a high profile, positive evaluation, and
even economic success as it does among Americans today. If religion is in
trouble, spirituality is in the ascendancy and the irony of this situation evokes
puzzlement and anxiety in the religious establishment, scrutiny among theo-
logians, and justification among those who have traded the religion of their
past for the spirituality of their present.6

Researchers David Hay and Kate Hunt offer this comment from a United
Kingdom perspective:

Something extraordinary seems to be happening to the spiritual life of Britain.
At least that’s what we think, after a look at the findings of the “Soul of
Britain” survey recently completed by the BBC. The results show that more
than 76 percent of the population would admit to having had a spiritual
experience. In hardly more than a decade, there has been a 59 percent rise
in the positive response rate to questions about this subject. Compared with
25 years ago, the rise is greater than 110 percent.7

Within this new dynamic the traditional faiths, particularly the mono-
theistic faiths—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—tend to function as a
subset of the overall religious environment and form a kind of well from
which elements of their tradition are appropriated and refashioned into
new expressions. They are often viewed as simply another resource for
funding new permutations of faith. A pinch of Buddhism, a dash of Zen,
mixed with the Sermon on the Mount, and served up with a heavy layer
of karma or some “teachings” from the Matrix movies. While much of
this inclination can be quickly dismissed as little more than trendy and
shallow, and thus perhaps not worth serious reflection, there are larger
dynamics at work that offer some challenges for Christian faith in the
twenty-first century.

This book reflects on a major issue that characterizes much of our con-
temporary cultural life—democratization, particularly a democratization
of spirit8—that is sweeping through religion today. Democratization is a
key dynamic of our times. I do not mean democratization in a political
sense, although that also seems to be a current obsession. The democra-
tization I refer to is linked to new technologies, computers, the Internet,
the continuing evolution of capitalism, the dynamics of globalization, the continuing rise and influence of popular culture, and a host of other seemingly unrelated issues that combine to forge a new reality. The collapse or loss of faith in traditional forms of leadership and structure combined with virtually unlimited access to information has resulted in an empowering of the masses that is transforming the culture. Spirit, though closely guarded by religious institutions, is not immune to this democratization process. After the modern age, in which spirit was privatized and banished to the margins of culture, becoming a matter of private faith rather than public discourse, new possibilities have emerged in the search for the spiritual. Spirit in this time of democratization is liquid. It is not simply represented symbolically by water, as spirit often has been; it is water, it is liquid, flowing freely, barely contained, carving new channels in the culture.

This is occurring not only in the realm of belief, for virtually every area of life is undergoing dynamic change and much of it can be traced back to the process of democratization. Pop music, for instance, has experienced radical transformation over the last twenty years because of new technologies and an anti-establishment attitude. Inventions such as computer-based recording and CD-burning technologies have transformed the recording process and given more people access to the creation and dissemination of popular music. What once required the resources and technological equipment available only through large record companies can now be produced at home. File-sharing technologies have allowed for the transferring of downloadable music files and have forced the recording industry to rethink the control and dissemination of their product.

On another front, the breakdown in social structures combined with a loss of faith in institutions has led to a reconfiguring of family and social life. The question, “What is family?” is no longer easily answered by reference to bloodline or traditional male/female parental roles. Changes in adoption law and new scientific advances in embryonic research allow for different permutations of what constitutes family. Graham Cray, Bishop of Maidstone and key architect of the Anglican Church Fresh Expressions project, said, “What is taking place is . . . the death of the culture that formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people.”

Admittedly this quote is a more direct reference to British society, but given the high level of cultural and social exchange between the two nations and the similar cultural developments over the past forty years, this statement can easily apply to the United States.

The new dynamics in belief today are populist; they reflect what is largely a collection of broad-based people movements rather than a mediated
set of practices derived from a professional religious hierarchy or clergy. As a populist movement or mood, it is informed and shaped by popular culture. Thus, I use the term “entertainment theology” to point to the relationship between the contemporary religious climate and the popular consumer culture. A key focus of all this is related to media culture of all kinds. Entertainment theology is both a disseminating point and a central dynamic of the new conversations about all things God, derived largely from the intersection of public interest and media creativity.

Entertainment theology highlights the evolution of theology from a didactic or studied approach to the question of God to a more global communal conversation about the sacred in general. Of course, many will argue that this is far from an evolution, but I hope to tantalize the reader and generate enough interest for them to consider a new opinion, and hopefully, a new energized engagement.

These developments in the contemporary religious conversation are driven by a host of developments in media in the late twentieth century: Internet technology, which allows the flow of information and interaction with that material in unprecedented and uncontrolled ways; film, which as a reflector of social values brought the contemporary search for spirituality to the big screen throughout the nineties with films such as Fight Club, The Truman Show, Magnolia, and perhaps most importantly The Matrix and The Sixth Sense; books, which are often dismissed as the relic of another more text-driven time but which remain important to contemporary religion as they have become the primary means of continuing study of one’s spiritual interests in this age of democratization of spirit, whether it be The Celestine Prophecy or The Purpose-Driven Life; television, that most intimate of technologies, which in reconfiguring the layout of family living rooms opened us up to ideas and issues that were once discussed only in public spaces. The debut of the CBS television show Touched by an Angel in 1995—a show with an explicitly religious theme—signaled the emergence of entertainment theology in America’s living rooms and launched the conversation into the stratosphere. The success of that show has been duplicated in shows like Joan of Arcadia and the HBO channel’s Carnivale, which have fashioned the continuing interest in questions of ultimate reality into moderately successful television shows. More recently, Brotherhood, a crime-family drama on the Showtime Network, explored sibling rivalry and family tensions, using a scriptural reference as a title for each episode.11

This new dynamic is also all about fashion. Everything in the twenty-first century is, whether we realize it or not. Religion and spirituality are
a matter of design, as is much of contemporary life. Bruce Mau, a leading figure in the world of graphic design, has recently launched an organization called Institute without Borders and a traveling, ever-evolving art exhibition called *Massive Change*. The simple goal of this venture is to gather together people from virtually every area of study and investigate ways in which design can both help and shape ongoing human existence. It is not simply performance art but rather an attempt to shape a new metanarrative for society built around principles of design!

What we see over the last hundred and fifty years, and in a dramatically accelerated pace over the last fifty, is that design is changing its place in the order of things. Design is evolving from its position of relative insignificance within business (and the larger envelope of nature), to become the biggest project of all. Even life itself has fallen (or is falling) to the power and possibility of design. Empowered as such, we have a responsibility to address the new set of questions that go along with that power.12

Developments in design have followed the shifting climate of cultural change and have emerged as a culture-shaping force. We live in a design age. Virtually everything we consume is the product of fashion and design. We speak of designer homes, clothes, vacations, and even babies. Religion is not exempt; the rise of entertainment theology is a testament to this. It is guided by trends in consumer culture and it is consumer driven. “Shopping for faith” and “cafeteria religion” are terms used to describe the current situation. They reflect an awareness that religion and the consumer experience are inextricably linked. This is not completely new; there has always been an intersection between religious expression, material culture, and the arts:

People build religion into the landscape, they make and buy pious images for their homes, and they wear special reminders of faith next to their bodies. Religion is more than a type of knowledge learned through reading holy books and listening to holy men. . . . Throughout American history, Christians have explored the meaning of the divine, the nature of death, the power of healing, and the experience of the body by interacting with a created world of images and shapes.13

What makes this aspect of contemporary religion different is that rather than employing material culture to give visual support to internal belief, it is itself a *product of consumer culture*. It is informed not from without, by institution or tradition, but from *within consumer culture*. It is, as Graham
Ward argues in his book *True Religion*, the commodification (the commercialization) of religion in the postsecular age. It is the redefining of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Hence there is little issue in the larger culture with a pop singer like Britney Spears, who, before entering into a series of questionable public efforts at self-humiliation and eventual marriage, presents herself as a committed Christian and virgin yet dresses immodestly and presents a stage show replete with images and representations of rampant sexuality.

The religious experience is inseparable from a consumer experience. The consumer experience (consumer therapy) and the religious experience are both desire-driven and aim at immediate satisfaction.

The topics explored in this book stand then as testament to the cultural and social shifts that have occurred in Western culture since the late 1970s and that now represent a significant challenge to the primacy of traditional faith practices. The emergence of new faith expressions thrusts us into a new social and missiological situation. There is increasing evidence that the locus of contemporary religion is not found in the churches or synagogues or mosques, which give little credence to it, or in the largely materialist culture in which we all find ourselves, but it is found in the lives of those who are fashioning vibrant, new permutations of religious belief and practice in our time, in spite of what seem to be tough obstacles to such a dynamic.

There are tremendous implications of all this on the future of Christian faith. Like other ancient faiths, Christianity has shown itself able to stand the test of time and has proven itself to be a viable contribution to the ongoing human search for God. While I am positive about Christianity’s ability to meet the changing cultural contexts of the past, I am concerned that at the present moment Christian faith is losing ground. The Church of England’s report issued in 2004, titled “The Mission-Shaped Church,” notes that people do not come to church because they consider it “peripheral, obscure, confusing or irrelevant.” If this perception is not changed, the gap between a burgeoning spiritual culture and the potential for missional engagement will continue to widen. The purpose of the present book is to explore the shapes and contexts of the contemporary situation and offer a mission-shaped theological response to meet the present challenge.

On a more personal note, I must say that I wrestle with my thoughts and feelings about what is written in these pages on virtually a daily basis. It is complex and often complicated, and there is no “clear” picture, no
one answer to what is happening in the realm of all things spirit and spiritual. There are only shades, glimpses, and occasional patches of light in an otherwise opaque situation.

Some of what I discuss in these pages will be quickly and easily dismissed by those for whom these questions are still easily answered by their own religious and theological perspectives. In fact, there is a good chance that some will think I am a little nuts to talk about how a movement toward something like Asian-inspired home furnishings could possibly relate to “real” spirituality, that it somehow must constitute more than that. But for me, these things do matter, and when they are taken as part of a whole, they point to significant issues that affect the way in which faith is approached in our times.

There are people I respect on these matters who dismiss the current fascination with spirituality as nothing more than an attempt by many to placate their otherwise soulless existences with a veneer, a sheen, of meaning. While I disagree wholeheartedly, I can understand why they think this. In my own explorations of these issues, I have come across people I think just need to get a grip on reality and stop playing around—there are a lot of kooky people out there!

As I write, I am holding a couple of things in tension. What I write about in these pages is largely concentrated on what I think is the next religious horizon—new-edge spirituality—but I also think that much of the locus of religious thought and reflection over the next couple of decades will be concerned with the challenges of mainstream theological issues. The current debates and schisms in the Anglican Church over issues of gender and sexuality, as well as the turmoil in Islam, are issues that will capture and demand our attention as these, and other mainstream faiths, work out their own new relationships and identities in and with the new cultural situations. These issues are probably the subject of a very good book, but they will not be the focus of this one. I believe that the other stuff, the alternative expressions, warrants our attention, particularly if we hold any sort of belief in the missional dynamics of Christian faith.

On a more practical note, the book is divided into three sections. Rather than calling them chapters, I am calling them thoughts because I think it helps to set a different tone when it comes to processing what one finds here—I am thinking out loud, attempting to integrate various thoughts and ideas in some kind of cohesive manner.

The first section is largely foundational, attempting to explore some of the necessary social and philosophical issues that have led to the present situation. For many this will be quite familiar territory and will include
topics they probably will not wish to explore again, so feel free to jump in elsewhere! Much has been written about this sort of thing, and I realize that it could be unnecessary for many readers who are well ahead of me in this area of study. I have tried not to burden the reader with too much preamble, but in order to make sense of what is going on for readers for whom this topic is newer, I will address a number of peripheral issues.

The second section deals with some key rubrics under which I have collected various manifestations of the new spiritual impulses and have attempted to put them into some scheme of vague categorization. This demonstrates how I process much of what is going on for my own sanity. It was born out of a desire to give more clarity to both students and peers about how I “read” the present moment, how I analyze and process what is happening around me in the world of the spiritual. It covers a lot of territory but is by no means meant to be a complete accounting. As I describe in more detail throughout the book, I am trying to capture a “mood” as much as anything else. What does spirituality look and feel like in the twenty-first century? All this talk of alternative beliefs, how does it manifest, where do I look for it?

The final section addresses the present situation from a decidedly Christian perspective. Or rather, I address Christianity from the present perspective, offering a challenge to one particular faith about how it might respond to the times and become a vital part of the cultural conversation about faith. What I write about is predicated on a belief that things need to change. I have done this principally because Christian faith is where I have hung my own spiritual hat for more than twenty years, and it is from there that my forays into the wider world of religious belief of all kinds began and continue.

My relationship with Christianity is admittedly in a state of flux these days, and I find myself increasingly uncomfortable, and not necessarily in agreement, with where much of the church seems to be heading, and this has prompted much of the final section. I believe there is a different way to process and manifest Christian faith, but it will take some stretching on our part. Christianity has enjoyed a privileged position in the Western cultural imagination, but that does not guarantee it a special place in the new spiritual environment that I am convinced is emerging around us. I humbly offer a few ways I think things could be different. Many will disagree, I am sure, and I lay no claim to being right. I am simply trying to respond to the world I live in.

Theology is a great love of mine—it’s rather arcane, I know, but there you have it. And for me, theology, or God-talk, as Phyllis Tickle puts it,
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is all about dialogue and conversation between our lives and our concepts and constructs of the divine.

The prophet Ezekiel once had a vision in which he was led into water. As he followed the direction of his guide he found himself going through stages of increasing immersion: water to his ankles, then to his knees, and then to his waist, all the while going deeper and deeper into the currents of the river until he reached a point where he could no longer touch the bottom and had to swim in order not to drown (Ezek. 47:1–6). I think it is easy to play with God in the shallows where we can feel the current of the river but do not really face the current as it seeks to carry us away. It is much more difficult to move out into the force of the water and feel its almost relentless challenge, its invitation to be carried away by its current.

Interestingly, in the Bible story I just mentioned, when the prophet left the shore to enter the waters, the ground around him was barren and desert-like, but when he returned after his deepwater experience, the land along the river had become lush and verdant. Sometimes what we hold on to prevents us from experiencing the blossoming of new life. I think there is new life for a faith like Christianity, but in order to discover it we may have to let go of other things first and venture into the deep and feel the current of the twenty-first century river. That is the invitation extended through this book.