

Philadelphia Inquirer Dec. 25, 1988

Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths

By Harvey Cox

Beacon Press, 212 pp.

One of the more painful moments in modern American fiction occurs in Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev* when halfway through the novel the pre-adolescent narrator joins his Hasidic father at the breakfast table. As a requisite part of his training to be an artist, the boy has been sketching Jesus. His father has seen the sketches and turns to Asher in "an uncontrollable rage. I had never before seen him in such a rage. . . . My drawings had touched something fundamental to his being. He kept talking about my drawings of 'that man.' He would not pronounce the name. Did I know how much Jewish blood had been spilled because of that man? Did I know how many Jews had been killed in the name of that man during the Crusades? . . . Did I know that . . . my grandfather had been murdered by a Russian peasant who was celebrating a holiday having to do with that man?"

Although "that man" was himself a Jew and would have wept at these brutalities, Asher's father represents a perverse us-vs.-them hostility that would be equally accurate if redrawn with Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Christians and Muslims in Lebanon, or Hindus and Muslims in India.

Harvard Divinity School Professor Harvey Cox in *Many Mansions* takes a major stride away from a past and present where religious identification drives wedges and weapons between people and steps into a future of possibility where dialogue between religions leads to understanding, mutual respect, and a fuller comprehension of one's own tradition, in Cox's case his Baptist Christianity.

For many reasons, this is an immensely attractive, readable book. Cox's focus is at once global and personal. His travels span the planet, moving from India to Israel to Moscow to Brazil and Japan, engaging Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Russian Orthodox, and Liberation theologians in discussion. Not merely discussion. Dialogue. As Martin Buber insists, depth in spiritual understanding results from proper grasp of relationship. Following Buber, Ira Progoff has articulated how the way to strengthen relationship is dialogue, a meeting of equal persons each speaking with and especially listening to the other as both voice their deepest concerns.

Cox listens. But then his own spiritual work begins in an intensely personal way. He approaches each tradition in full sympathy yet always in a spirit that could be phrased, "Let me see what this tradition can offer to enhance my own Christian understanding."

He finds in his encounters with Muslims, Hindus and Jews that a possible source of Christian distrust or aversion to these traditions is the marked similarity of each to Christianity, how Islam in its early stages was almost "a particular version of Arabic Christianity," how Hinduism shares the central concept of a personal God who becomes incarnate to teach us how to live, how Christianity at its start was a reformation within Judaism. Thus, "we sense the same aversion we might feel toward a twin brother who looks more like us than we want him to and whose habits remind us of some of the things we like least in ourselves."

Cox takes pains to show the injustice of Christians condemning Muhammad while Muslims praise Jesus as a supreme example of what it means to submit to God, the very meaning of the word "Islam." He explains how from Hinduism he learns how much the voices of women, so long systematically ignored, can add to religious dialogue, and how eros is a necessary spiritual complement to agape. After his encounter with a rabbi, Cox acknowledges that his Baptist faith is centered on a Jew, "that Jesus did not reject Judaism and that Christianity began as a tiny movement within Jesus' own ancestral faith," and that Jesus' faith should remain the focus of Christian eyes.

Most interesting of all, perhaps, are Cox's thoughts following his dialogue with Buddhists. Buddhism is on the surface far less theocentric than Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or, in its uniquely flexible way, Hinduism. But the Buddhist tradition shares one remarkable trait with Christianity: a founder so extraordinary that people believed him to be God. The similarity vanishes almost immediately, however, as the Buddha announces he is not God but awake, and spends decades of ministry imparting his awakening.

The Jesus of the gospels is different, Cox points out, and with his gift for poetry and mystery willingly takes on all the titles that men say that he is: heir of David, reforming prophet, Son of Man, then, as if to make a koan of his life itself, destroys their expectations of what each title means and shows that the nature of God is beyond any preconceived images, incarnating the Buddhist message that ultimate reality transcends even our best human concepts. Jesus made men confront him, not what was said about him, however rhapsodic or sublime. That following his death the religion *about* Jesus overwhelmed the religion *of* Jesus is an irony that does not escape Cox.

The eclecticism and openness of his approach extends to newer schools, to Marxism and Liberation theology, and while the particulars of the results differ their outline is always the same: an enlarging of Cox's Christian scope and a confidence that the dialogue has brought people closer together. Once the differences are articulated, what remains is a common core of searching, sympathy and belief.

Cox's final chapter, "The Future of Religion," is his most speculative and among the most provocative. He cautiously cites three failed examples of those who've proven too shallow to sound the bottom of the aftertimes: 1) The French *philosophes*, who thought reason would eventually supplant the religious impulse, 2) The Marxist/Leninists, who thought a more egalitarian world social order would make religion unnecessary, and 3) Freud, who believed his methods would unveil our inner fears and anxieties so we would no longer need to project them onto our vision of the cosmos in religious form. Cox shows how Freud's own favorite student, Carl Jung, turned the master's theories inside out by seeing these inner archetypal projections as our true center (our original face before we were born?) which must be honored and understood; starting in basic agreement with Freud, then, Jung urged that we return to where we started, and know the place for the first time.

Cox's vision of the future of religion shares the same sources as these three imperfect estimates. Like the *philosophes*, he sees a demystifying of that which science can teach us, but without loss to the spiritual impulse toward meaning. Like the Marxists, he sees the need for a less oppressive world where the masses need no opiate. Like Freud, he feels we must reharmonize our basic human personality with a world we can find tolerable to live in. But we must do it ourselves. In a world where Hiroshima "wrote a mushroom-shaped question mark" on our speculations about whether there even is a future, Cox sees as imperative that religion, in the form of compassion and human dignity, become so pervasive

a part of daily life that we no longer even notice our human-kindness as religion. We might become, then, the spiritual equivalent of the Balinese, who “claim they have no art: they just do everything beautifully.”

The final irony of *Many Mansions* is that the global study of religion has led Cox to envision a world in which we do not even see religion, we simply live it. This warmly and gracefully written book studies its subject so perceptively that the subject at last disappears. But then, as Cox says, “Allah works in mysterious ways.”